

Purpose of This Guide

This guide is written specifically for people who want to evaluate a school or district's implementation of the *Second Step* program, but are not trained in program evaluation and are not working with a professional evaluator.

This isn't a general guide to evaluating school-based programs—it's written specifically with the *Second Step* program in mind.

Why Evaluate?

People evaluate their use of the *Second Step* program for a variety of reasons. In general the goal is to show that the resources put into the program are paying off, so one of the most common audiences for evaluations is funders. Another important audience is parents and community members.

Many people choose to evaluate the program to see how it's working. Evaluation evidence can increase staff motivation and commitment to implementing the program fully and well. Evaluation can also help schools see how implementation might be affecting outcomes and how it might be improved to ensure students are benefitting fully from the program. Evaluation is also useful for tracking progress toward desired program goals and outcomes over time.

Evaluating Implementation

What Am I Evaluating?

One of the keys to successful, effective evaluation is to be sure you know just what you're evaluating. Every school and district purchases the same *Second Step* program, but what students actually receive can vary widely. You can make your *Second Step* evaluation more powerful and useful by looking at how the program is being implemented in your school or district. Remember, you're evaluating the intervention your students actually get, which, depending on implementation, might be more or less like the exact program you purchased.

What Information Should I Gather?

What would a school need to know to be able to include implementation in its evaluation? Assessing implementation primarily means gathering information on how the *Second Step* program is being taught in your setting or settings. In particular:

- How many students are receiving *Second Step* lessons? All students? Only certain grades? Only certain classrooms?
- How many of the lessons are being taught?
- How closely are lessons being taught to how they are written?
- Are students doing Daily Practice Activities?
- What else is being done outside formal lessons to reinforce *Second Step* skills, both in the classroom and throughout the school?

How Do I Gather It?

Collecting data on what students are receiving typically involves having staff complete a simple survey that asks the questions listed above. Some surveys for this purpose are available on SecondStep.org:

- The Implementation Preparedness Survey assesses implementation readiness, whether for support purposes or for checking back later on possible implementation problem sources
- The Lesson-Completion Checklists for teachers and counselors are short surveys for assessing implementation of the entire program post-implementation and cover dose, fidelity, and reinforcement
- The Implementation Survey briefly covers the full range of implementation readiness and actual implementation

Surveys should be filled out by the relevant staff. For example, in some schools the program is taught by classroom teachers, while in others counselors teach most of the lessons. However, teacher input will always be required to find out how much and what parts of the *Second Step* program students are actually getting, since teachers are responsible for skill reinforcement outside the lessons, even when the lessons are taught by counselors.

What's Implementation Fidelity?

Surveying staff on how the program is being taught can also go beyond examining how many students are receiving how many lessons. Implementation evaluation

can also look at the “fidelity” of implementation. Fidelity basically means the extent to which the program is taught as written.

A full implementation ideally means students are receiving all the lessons in order and all the content in each lesson. For a variety of reasons, staff sometimes only teach parts of lessons and skip others, teach lessons out of order, or change some of the content. These are all examples of low fidelity. Obviously it’s possible to change lessons in ways that don’t harm or might even improve outcomes, but it’s also possible to change lessons in ways that reduce program effectiveness. Committee for Children recommends implementing the program with as much fidelity as possible, and it can be useful in an evaluation to know the fidelity with which the program was taught.

Types of Evaluation Design

It might be helpful to think about your *Second Step* evaluation as falling somewhere along a spectrum of evaluation rigor. The most rigorous approach is an experimental design, in the middle is what is called quasi-experimental design, and the least rigorous approach is a non-experimental design. Each of these designs and their pros and cons are described below.

Experimental Design

One of the main challenges in program evaluation is determining whether any effects you find were in fact caused by the program you’re evaluating. In any given classroom, school, or district, the *Second Step* program is only one of many factors affecting students’ attitudes and behaviors. The purpose of an experimental design is to increase your confidence that changes you find in students were caused by their exposure to the *Second Step* program.

This is primarily accomplished through random assignment. Random assignment means you determine which students will be involved in the study (your study population), and each of those students has an equal chance of either being taught the program or not. Random assignment is a powerful way to create two groups that are as likely as possible not to be significantly different. This goes a long way toward ruling out differences in outcomes being due to initial differences in the students being studied.

For complicated technical reasons, random assignment for evaluating a program like the *Second Step* curriculum requires assigning entire schools to either implement the program or not (the ones that don’t implement serve as non-intervention controls). In addition, for statistical reasons, a large number of schools must be involved in the evaluation. Scientifically valid experimental design evaluations of the *Second Step* program commonly involve thirty to sixty or more schools in one study. A study this large is typically not feasible for a school district to carry out, and since experimental design requires randomizing entire schools, this approach cannot be done by an individual school.

Quasi-Experimental Design

Quasi-experimental designs are a way to try to assess program effects when random assignment isn’t possible. Rather than a randomly selected control group, a quasi-experimental design includes a comparison group. Comparison groups are made up of students who are not receiving the program. The key to creating a good comparison group is attempting to match the students as closely as possible to those receiving *Second Step* lessons. The more alike the two groups are, the more useful the comparison group data will be. The most common way to match comparison group students (or classrooms or schools) to those getting *Second Step* lessons is by using demographics, such as age, race or ethnicity, gender, income, etc.

The drawback to the quasi-experimental approach is you ultimately have less certainty that the students in the two groups you’re comparing are alike to begin with than with random assignment, and differences between the two groups that don’t have to do with the *Second Step* program may be part of the cause of differences you find in outcomes. However, this approach is a reasonable way to increase the strength of an evaluation.

Non-Experimental Design

A non-experimental design means gathering data on children who receive the *Second Step* program only, without any control or comparison children involved. This approach is often the most feasible for many schools and districts. Just keep in mind that it can’t tell you whether any outcomes you find were actually caused by the *Second Step* program. This method gives you relational findings that tell you how related your outcomes are to the *Second Step* program, but not what is causing that relationship. For example, it may be that the

Second Step program is causing the changes you find, or it could be that schools using the *Second Step* program are also doing other things that benefit children and cause the changes you're finding.

The clear advantage of not including control or comparison groups in your evaluation is that it's simpler and relatively inexpensive.

The primary approach used in non-experimental *Second Step* evaluation is to collect data before and after the program is implemented. This information is often called pre- and post-test data. Getting this information typically involves surveying students and/or staff in the fall and again in the spring.

Although it's difficult to know how much of the change (positive or negative) from fall to spring was caused by the *Second Step* program, there are ways to make this evaluation approach stronger and more informative. Keep in mind that student behavior typically changes from the beginning to the end of the school year, regardless of what programs you're implementing. The simple pre/post evaluation approach can be tricky, because students often start the school year out on their best behavior, but by the end of the year their behavior can look worse than they did at the beginning—even if you implement the *Second Step* program and it's working. It may be that students are having more conflicts and problems by the end of the year, but without *Second Step* lessons those increases would have been much larger.

One way to tease out these types of effects that strengthen a simple pre/post evaluation is to collect data across multiple years. It can be particularly useful, once a fall baseline is established, to collect data each spring. It often takes time for staff to become familiar with the program, so implementation quality can improve over time, yielding better outcomes when the program has been in place longer. More importantly, tracking data across multiple years allows you to see the cumulative effect of students receiving a larger dose of the program. The *Second Step* program isn't intended as a one-year intervention. It's carefully designed so each year's lessons build on those that came before. Collecting data on outcomes across multiple years allows you to capture that growth.

A final way to strengthen a non-experimental approach to evaluation is to look at implementation. In some

schools and districts, implementation will vary—some students will get more lessons than others, some staff will implement the lessons more fully than others, and some staff will reinforce skills more than others. If you're collecting data from staff on implementation, you may be able to compare outcomes for students who received different amounts, or doses, of the program. If students who received more lessons or more reinforcement show better outcomes, that can help you see how to increase outcomes for more students.

Evaluation Surveys

It's important to choose carefully developed and tested tools for your *Second Step* program evaluation. The basic approach to looking at data from surveys is to compare averages across surveys administered at different times.

The following are survey measures we recommend you use. More information can be found on SecondStep.org.

Devereux Student Strengths Assessment: *Second Step* Edition (DESSA-SSE)

The DESSA-SSE is a behavior rating scale for Kindergarten through Grade 5 students that assesses their skills related to social-emotional competence, resilience, and academic success. It's designed to be completed by parents, teachers, and after-school staff. The DESSA-SSE can be used to measure individual child outcomes, too.

Panorama Education

Panorama's Student Perception of SEL for Grades 3–5 is designed to help educators measure students' social-emotional learning and use data to inform instruction and interventions. Self-reflection topics include social-emotional skills such as self-management, social awareness, and growth mindset. Additional self-reflection topics explore student-teacher relationships and students' sense of belonging. Panorama's survey and platform enable educators to explore data at the individual, class, grade, school, and district levels.

Strengths and Difficulties Questionnaire (SDQ)

The SDQ is a brief behavioral screening questionnaire for use with 3- to 16-year-olds. It asks about 25 attributes, some positive and some negative, on five different scales: emotional symptoms, conduct problems, hyperactivity/inattention, peer relationship problems, and prosocial behavior.

Using School Data for Evaluation

Schools collect data as part of their everyday operations, and this data is often used as part of a *Second Step* program evaluation. Probably the most commonly used school data is on disciplinary referrals. Many schools look at their disciplinary referrals over time as a way to see whether implementing the *Second Step* program has resulted in fewer problem behaviors. One of the advantages of this approach is that schools can often compare the number of referrals for the year before they implemented the *Second Step* program to the number once the *Second Step* program is in place.

In addition, it's possible to track referrals over time to see whether the program results in fewer students having behavioral problems once it's been in place for multiple years. Just be sure to check the *Types of Evaluation Design* section for information on how different evaluation designs affect the strength of the connection between the *Second Step* program and any outcomes you find.

Although it's possible to look at other types of school data for evaluation purposes, disciplinary referrals are the most common and safest source of information on *Second Step* outcomes. Things like attendance, grades, and test scores can be affected by the program, but its effect on those outcomes is less direct and can be harder to see.

Using Evaluation Findings

Positive Outcomes

Congratulations! Your evaluation has shown that your *Second Step* implementation has improved outcomes for your students. This is the time to ensure that your school or district continues to teach the program and supports what students are learning in *Second Step* lessons throughout the school day and the school environment. Remember that the ongoing support for the program by building leaders has been shown to be the number one factor that drives continued successful implementation over time.

Share the good news with school staff, district staff, parents, and the community so your efforts continue to be applauded and supported.

Poor Outcomes

With No Implementation Evaluation

If your evaluation suggests students are not benefitting sufficiently from the *Second Step* program, a natural place to look for reasons is implementation. As discussed in the *Evaluating Implementation* section, how the program is implemented is very important and has been shown to affect outcomes. If you haven't examined *Second Step* implementation as part of your evaluation, doing so may provide you with ideas for how to strengthen the program and improve the effect on students.

With Implementation Evaluation

If your evaluation included information on implementation, then poor outcomes indicate the importance of looking closely at how the program is being implemented to see where there is room for improvement that may increase program effects.

Keep in mind that high quality *Second Step* implementation goes beyond teaching the lessons. Just like with academics, what students learn in the *Second Step* program has to be reinforced and practiced in order to be mastered. Look for ways staff can cue students to use *Second Step* skills throughout the school day and school environment, and find ways to reinforce students' skill use.

If it appears that *Second Step* implementation in your setting has been done well, it can be harder to know where to turn if you're not finding sufficiently positive outcomes from your evaluation. Keep in mind that a truly rigorous evaluation requires random assignment of a large number of schools, and that quasi- or non-experimental evaluations can make it hard to separate *Second Step* effects from other factors in your setting. Also recall that positive program outcomes may be lost in a one-year pre/post evaluation, because behaviors typically worsen from fall to spring. A lack of findings may result from changes in student behavior across the school year despite positive program effects.

If your one-year evaluation produces disappointing results, remember that the program is designed to have a cumulative effect across multiple years, and that teaching it, like anything else, takes time to master. A one-year evaluation does not necessarily capture program effects well, and it may be that data collected across more than one year will tell a different and more positive story.