

COLLECT MEANINGFUL DATA: Data Quality Tips and Tools

Purpose: Data can be frustrating, and data have not always been used in positive ways, especially for those of us from marginalized communities. Data can also feel limiting, especially when the focus is on numbers, which we know leaves out a lot of the story. The good news: data can be more than this! It can be empowering and help programs understand what is and isn't working so staff can make decisions that better serve their clients. This is only possible, though, when the data are high quality: complete, consistent data. In this handout, we explore why data quality matters, and provide some tips and tricks for collecting high quality data. *For tips on checking data quality with Excel, see the **Data Quality - Excel Tips and Tricks** emPower Tool.*

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Missing/Low Quality Data

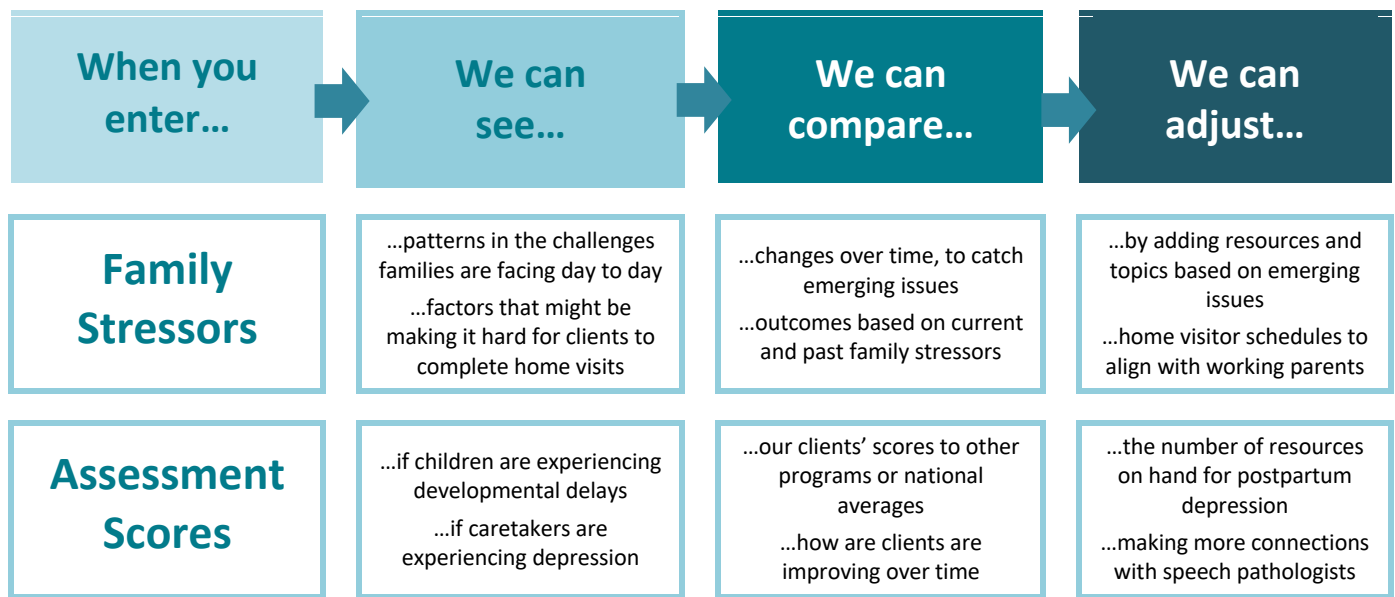
- Make it harder to demonstrate how/why your program is or is not working
- Make you reactive, rather than proactive, when patterns emerge
- Make you risk losing current funding, and create barriers to future funding

High Quality Data

- Enable you to show and tell the story of your hard work
- Help your programs improve, to better meet the needs of your clients
- Help your programs recognize patterns and trends as they are happening



High quality data make our programs better, and make us better supports to our communities



When data are missing, we have an incomplete story, making it harder to advocate for our clients

High Quality Data Are:

- CONSISTENT:** No matter who enters it, or when, you can count on the same words/phrases meaning the same thing
- ACCURATE:** The information in your data matches reality—the correct spelling, date, details, etc.
- COMPLETE:** All of the applicable information has been entered into to the database, with no missing details
- ORDERLY:** Data are in a consistent format & structure (examples: dates in same format, notes written in same order)
- UNIQUE:** One data record per person, or visit, with no duplicates (duplicate records distort numbers)
- TIMELY:** Data is collected and entered in a very timely manner, and is corrected as soon as an error is discovered

How Do We Get There?

- DEFINE:** Clearly define everything and make sure everyone is on the same page, so data can be consistent
- TRAIN:** Set up the expectation from the beginning that high quality data are mandatory and valuable
- CHECK IN:** Consistently check in with staff to ensure data quality is maintained—do not take it for granted
- FOLLOW UP:** Share the data and analyses with staff so they can see how and why their data entry matters

🔑 Collect + Enter High Quality Data! 🔑

1 Be Consistent

Come up with a process or system and stick with it:

- Use the same word or phrase the same way each time, so you know what you meant (ex: “visit” = completed home visit)
- Be mindful of how and why you are scoring assessments to be consistent each time

📄 Copy + Paste

If you find yourself entering the same information again and again, keep the text stored somewhere handy:

- Use the Copy + Paste function to save yourself time and ensure accuracy
- Prewrite complex notes in Word for spell check, then Copy + Paste into dataset

🚩 Flag Questions

If you are unsure of how to collect or enter something, have a system for flagging the question and returning to complete the task:

- Use post-it notes or flags for paper forms
- Use “comment” functionality in electronic documents
- Be sure to follow up! 😊

📅 Make it Count

Funders and models often have strict deadlines:

- Some will not accept data if it is incomplete or entered late (even when an assessment was done on time)
- Plan ahead to complete ALL of your forms, screenings and documents on time
- Enter data and notes into database ASAP

1 Supervisors: Set Your Staff Up for Success!

- Make sure all staff have the **training + dedicated time + info** they need to collect and enter data well.
- Make sure all staff have the same understanding of **frequently used words and phrases**. Include this in training.
- At staff meetings, have **dedicated time** for staff to share tips and tricks for data collection and data entry. Include time to ask clarifying questions, share information and make sure everyone is on the same page.
- Thoroughly train staff to complete assessments and screenings **consistently** with themselves and each other.
- Check your **processes and policies** to make sure definitions are clear and processes are not tedious.
- Create a **culture** where data are valued, quality data are expected, and ideas on how to improve data-related processes are welcomed.
- Create **feedback loops**: share data with staff so they can see the value of the data, and how their work matters!
- Consider **incentives** to reward high quality data.
- **Fix processes** when you notice issues repeating themselves (*It's the process, not the people*).
- Have a **glossary** of common acronyms easily accessible and updated.

🗨️ Share Ideas

- 👂 Do you have a colleague who seems to get everything done well and on time? **Ask her to share her tips and tricks!**
- 👂 Are you the one with the good ideas and/or organization skills? **Share your favorite tips and tricks** with your colleagues!

🕒 Schedule Data Entry

- **Designate time** in your regular routine to do your data entry, such as a particular time of day, or a day of the week.
- Make it a time when you can do your data entry **thoroughly and consistently**.
- Make sure you have **everything you need** on hand before you start the data entry work.
- If you aren't sure about something, **ask**. Be sure everyone on the team has the same understanding.
- **Minimize distractions** as much as possible; interruptions disrupt the flow of your work and cause errors.

📁 Use Case Notes + Comments

- ✍️ Numbers don't tell the whole story! Use **case notes** and **comment boxes** to fill in the gaps
- ✍️ Consider having the team use **code words** to be consistent, and more easily use the data after it's entered

Example: Have home visitors write “GOALS” then write notes about the client's goals

- ✍️ Consider using an **acrostic** to keep notes consistent, and complete. Acrostics are easy to remember!

Example: MAGIC home visits include:

- **M**ilestones (updates on milestones)
- **A**ctivity (which activities you used)
- **G**oals (updates on client goals)
- **I**nteractions (update address, income)
- **C**hallenges (current stressors)