

KEY PROCEDURE #1

CONDUCTING A FAMILY IMPACT ANALYSIS OF RULES, LEGISLATION, LAWS, OR PROGRAMS

1) Select a policy or program and decide what components will be analyzed. Selecting a topic for analysis derives from one's personal expertise and experience. Another critical consideration is timing. The likelihood that a family impact analysis will be used depends, to a large extent, on whether the conditions are right for social change on the issue. For example, when a policy issue is politically and economically feasible, policymakers are willing to invest their time, energy, and political capital because their efforts may pay off (Kingdon, 2003). Assessing political feasibility and organizational readiness often entails consulting with policymakers, advocates, organizational staff, or those who track family policy.

Once the rule, legislation, law, or program is selected, decide what components to focus on in a family impact analysis. As detailed in Key Tool #6, this often entails a broad consideration of related programs or policies, relevant laws or court decisions, regulations, appropriations, administrative practices, and implementation procedures (e.g., staffing, accessibility, coordination with other programs, family-centered practices, etc.). Family impact analysis can be a preliminary process conducted at an early stage when a policy or program is being designed or launched, at an interim stage when a policy or program has been implemented, or at a later stage when being evaluated or reauthorized.

2) Determine which family types might be affected. Policies or programs may have different effects on diverse family types. Family impact analysis should consider various aspects of diversity such as family structure (e.g., birth family, adoptive family, step family, family of origin, extended family), family life stage (e.g., families with young children or elderly dependents, aging families), geographic locale (e.g., rural, suburban, and urban), heritage (e.g., specific cultural, racial, ethnic, or religious backgrounds), presence of special needs (e.g., cognitive, emotional, and physical needs), and socioeconomic diversity (e.g., income, education, number of wage earners). Key Tool #5 presents various contexts and aspects of family diversity to consider.

3) Select a family impact checklist and conduct the analysis. The general family impact checklist can be used for almost any policy or program. In addition, there are a number of specific family impact checklists that are targeted to particular institutional settings, programs, or purposes (see <http://www.familyimpactseminars.org>). After selecting the checklist, identify the principles and questions that are most appropriate for the issue at hand. Not all principles and questions will be relevant for every issue. The checklist questions sound simple, but they can be difficult to answer. The principles and questions are not rank-ordered and sometimes they conflict with each other. Depending on the issue, one principle or question may be more highly valued than another, requiring trade-offs. Cost effectiveness and political feasibility also must be taken into account.

To conduct a family impact analysis, expertise is generally needed on (a) families, (b) family impact analysis, and (c) the specifics of the policy or program. The analysis can consist of conducting an in-depth empirical study or computer simulation. Typically it is a more qualitative process of drawing from existing evidence to estimate likely consequences. Conducting the analysis may involve such tasks as collecting new data, interviewing informants, reviewing relevant research, consulting with experts, and so forth.

4) Disseminate and apply the results. A family impact analysis seldom results in overwhelming support for or opposition to a program or policy. Instead, the analysis identifies several ways in which a policy supports families and others ways it does not. After completing the analysis, policy implications can be drawn regarding the likely effects of the policy and its implementation on specific types of families and particular family functions. These implications raise issues that policymakers and practitioners may wish to take into account in their decisionmaking, and sometimes reveal conflicts between competing principles or varying impacts for different family types. These value judgements typically are made by policymakers on behalf of their constituents or by program administrators on behalf of their boards and the families they serve.

After the analysis is done, a plan should be made for disseminating the results to those policymakers or professionals who are in a position to apply them to policy and practice. The results may generate interest in and the momentum for developing policies and practices that are more responsive to and supportive of family well-being.