



CONTINUOUS QUALITY IMPROVEMENT FOR ENHANCING POST-PERMANENCY PROGRAMS

The purpose of this product is to provide an overview and definition of continuous quality improvement (CQI), its key features, and the difference between CQI and program evaluation. It also explains why CQI is important for post-permanency programs, provides examples of what is needed to implement CQI processes and offers additional resources for continued capacity building related to CQI.



What is CQI?

CQI is a process for making ongoing improvements in the way programs and services are implemented with the goal of achieving better outcomes. It involves establishing feedback loops that tell you if the intervention is being delivered as intended and achieving desired outcomes, how barriers to implementation can be addressed, what strengths are helping advance program goals, and differences in outcomes and experiences by different population groups.

Implementation experts and researchers generally agree that CQI involves “identifying, defining, and examining strengths and problems and then testing, implementing, learning from, and modifying the solutions (Capacity Building Center, 2022, p. 6).” The Capacity Building Center for States describes the process as:

- **Data-driven:** Making decisions based on collection, analysis, and interpretation of evidence
- **Systematic:** Using specific processes in a standardized manner

The expansiveness of CQI varies. Some approaches to CQI include identifying and understanding a problem (e.g., post-permanency instability), developing a theory of change, researching solutions, and developing an intervention. This type of CQI encourages a holistic approach that involves examining many systems and processes at the same time. Readers can learn more within the Capacity Building Center for States' [CQI Training Academy Handbook](#) (2022).

Below, we describe the importance of CQI for states, tribal nations, and territories (hereafter, “sites”). We focus on the CQI steps for sites that are already modifying, enhancing, and/or expanding their array of post-permanency supports and services.

Why is CQI important for post-permanency programs?

Given the challenges experienced by many children and families following adoption and guardianship, ensuring continuous improvement in post-permanency programming is essential. Through CQI's systematic data collection, analysis, and feedback mechanisms, program leaders can assess whether program activities are implemented as intended, whether the capabilities that undergird post-permanency supports and services are in place (see “pillars” in box), if all types of post-permanency families are being reached, and if well-being and stability are improving. Using CQI processes enables sites to identify areas of strength and opportunities for improvement, fostering a culture of continuous learning and innovation. Moreover, by engaging all voices—including practitioners, program managers, community partners, families, and others with lived experience—in the CQI process, sites can increase collaboration and ensure services are meeting families' needs. Ultimately, by engaging in the CQI process from the outset, sites can increase the likelihood of positive outcomes for children and families' post-permanency.

Sites working to build or strengthen their post-permanency arrays of services can ensure, through CQI, that the five pillars of a comprehensive, intensive post-permanency continuum are in place:

- 1. Available and accessible**
- 2. Engage families over time**
- 3. Focused on parent-child relationship**
- 4. Able to assess family outcomes**
- 5. Culturally responsive**

CQI can also ensure that all provider staff are adoption competent—the key to a strong foundation for a post-permanency program.

How is CQI different from program evaluation?

CQI is sometimes confused with program evaluation. While both processes use similar terms and activities and involve collecting and using data to guide decision-making and/or assess client outcomes, they differ in their focus, scope, approach, timeframe, and goals (see Table 1 below). CQI seeks to improve processes and systems. Program evaluation (sometimes called “outcome evaluation”), on the other hand, focuses on assessing the overall effectiveness, efficiency, and impact of a program or intervention and whether it is making a difference in the lives of its target population (Urban Institute et al., 2022). Evaluation findings build the evidence base for the effectiveness of a component of post-permanency service array. Evidence of positive impacts suggests the value of continuing the service or replicating it in other areas.

Strong CQI sets the stage for rigorous evaluation and helps ensure that—before evaluating—the program can be implemented in a stable and consistent way so that:

- Measures of program fidelity can be specified,
- The target population can be reached and engaged,
- Family well-being and stability show signs of improvement as families progress with services,
- Service provision and family participation and outcomes can be measured and tracked (Capacity Building Center for States, 2022), and

- Equitable outcomes can be achieved.

Keep in mind that positive findings from an evaluation does not mean that a program works well for everyone; it means that the program is—on average, across the target population—more effective than other services to which it was compared (or better than no services, if that is how the evaluation is designed). Following an evaluation, ongoing CQI can inform further improvement to the program and/or adaptation for certain populations or contexts.

Table 1. Comparison of key aspects of CQI and program evaluation

Aspect	CQI	Program Evaluation
Focus	Ongoing improvement of a specific type of post-permanency service or support	Assessment of the effectiveness, efficiency, and impact of a specific type of post-permanency service or support
Scope	Broad, encompassing various aspects of operations including processes, systems, and practices	Comprehensive, (e.g., assessing theory of change, program design, implementation fidelity, and outcomes) using a variety of research methods and designs
Approach	Proactive and adaptive, emphasizing ongoing learning, experimentation, and adaptation	Consistently systematic and structured over the course of the evaluation, with findings and learning typically taking place at the end of the evaluation
Timeframe	Ongoing and continuous, with iterative cycles of improvement repeated over time	Conducted at specific intervals, often retrospective or longitudinal in nature
Outcome	Continuous enhancement of component processes and practices to achieve better results over time	Determination of whether the program is achieving its intended outcomes and making a difference in the lives of clients

How is CQI carried out?

The Post-Adoption Center recommends using a “**plan-do-study-act**” approach to CQI, focusing on a single type of post-permanency service or support at a time. If multiple changes are made simultaneously and improvement is observed, identifying which change(s) were effective is not possible.

- 1. Plan:** Use data to identify whether families are making the progress expected for supporting their long-term well-being and stability. If not, a site should specify a change to the intervention activities or to the resources available for the intervention. Next, the site should determine how they will objectively assess whether the modification resulted in the desired improvement, again using data.
- 2. Do:** Carry out the modification and collect relevant data. Because it is not yet known at this step whether the change will be effective, do not implement it intervention-wide. Instead, test the change with several families—or test it in a small geographic area.
- 3. Study:** Examine the findings from the data collected for evidence that the modification resulted in improvement in the operationalization of component activities, outputs, and/or short-term outcomes.
- 4. Act:** If findings suggest that the tested change is, in fact, effective, implement the change program wide. For example, a site might test, with a small group of families receiving in-home services, whether regular 5-minute virtual check-ins might be helpful. If families felt more satisfied and less stressed, the site might expand the virtual check-ins to be available to all families receiving in-home services. Such an expansion could require training all in-home provider staff on how to carry out the sessions and ensuring that families and staff have access to any needed technology.

Additional resources—such as additional staff time or a subscription to a secure, virtual meeting platform, may be necessary. Not all modifications require additional resources. Sometimes sites might drop a particular activity that does not seem beneficial. What data are needed for CQI, how are the data examined, and what questions can the data answer?

Questions addressed

Data collected, analyzed, and reviewed during the planning stage (step 1 in the plan-do-study-act approach) of CQI addresses questions about whether:

- Families in need of the services are reached (outreach)
- The services are aligned with families’ needs (assessment)
- The program activities are being implemented as intended
- Families are participating in and completing services (service uptake and engagement)
- Outcomes are being realized (measuring family satisfaction with services, family well-being and stability/discontinuity)

Information about each of these will inform strategies to continuously improve a service or support.

Specific strategies may involve not only modifications to service or support activities provided; they could involve addressing other barriers. Examples of barriers could include service providers lacking adoption competency—a key foundation for any post-permanency service or support. Missing or weak capabilities (see “pillars” in the text box) may pose barriers. For example, services may be of high quality, but are too expensive, too far away, or have a long wait list. Additionally, the service may not be culturally responsive. External barriers such as, local or state policy, inadequate funding, families having a negative impression of the child welfare agency and/or of a service provider, or families being unable to take time off from work to participate in services, may also exist.

Data

As with the implementation of any new program, service, or model, a variety of **data** will be integral to conducting CQI. Measures should include whether service or support

activities, outputs, and outcomes are occurring as depicted in the service or support’s logic model. (This [Logic Model Tip Sheet](#) from the Family and Youth Services Bureau of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services provides a brief explanation of logic models. Please see the Post-Adoption Center’s Post-Permanency Program Model Manual found in the resource library for a sample logic model.) Because CQI can occur at a rapid pace, program administrators need to identify short-term indicators of success; family satisfaction with services is a common proximal indicator.

Data may come from sources such as:

- Parent and/or youth satisfaction surveys
- Provider data on families’ participation in and outcomes of services
- Feedback through structured conversations with providers and/or families
- Provider checklists to ensure each relevant activity is carried out for each family

Often, sites will need to develop data collection plans. Many child welfare information systems are not useful data sources for CQI due to the time required to obtain the data in a useable format or the frequency of data entry. However, an increased number of agencies are developing information systems with better capacity for use with CQI and other program improvement approaches.¹

Table 2 provides examples of the types of questions that can be answered through CQI for post-permanency services, types of data needed to answer the questions, and how to examine the data.



1 The Comprehensive Child Welfare Information System Final Rule (CCWIS) provides guidelines for a case management information system that state and tribal title IV-E agencies may develop to support their child welfare program needs. CCWIS systems enable leveraging technologies that will enable them to share data between multiple systems. https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/cb/ccwis_faqs.pdf

Table 2. Example questions, data elements, and methods of examining post-permanency service data

	Example Questions to Ask	Examples of Data Needed to Answer the Questions	Examples of How to Examine Data Collected
Outreach	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Is the program reaching the intended population (i.e., adoptive/guardianship families)? • Are families from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, and underserved communities aware of the program? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of parents aware of post-permanency support services and where to get help • Number of families connected to services/supports • Demographic information on families/children served (e.g., race/ethnicity, age, gender, location) • Feedback from families 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Compare the demographic characteristics of families served to the target population, by service or support type. • Analyze feedback from families to understand perceptions of the program’s accessibility and relevance.
Assessment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are families and children assessed to determine need for post-permanency services? • Are the services aligned with the specific needs and preferences of families? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of assessments completed • Results of needs assessment • Feedback from families on needs and preferences 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Calculate the proportion of families for whom assessments are completed. • Compare the results of needs assessments to the types of services available and utilized. • Analyze feedback from families to understand the degree to which available services meet their needs.
Program activities	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are the services provided aligned with the program or intervention as the developers intended? • Are modifications needed for different populations? • Are modifications needed to ensure cultural and linguistic competence? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Program implementation checklists • Observation and/or service logs • Case notes • Staff training and certification records • Demographic information on families and children served 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Compare observation and/or service log records to program implementation checklist to gauge whether staff are implementing each model component. • Examine differences in program fidelity by demographics of children and families served.

	Example Questions to Ask	Examples of Data Needed to Answer the Questions	Examples of How to Examine Data Collected
Service uptake and completion	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are the intended families interested in services? • Do these families participate in the services? • Do the families complete services? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Number of families enrolled in services (e.g., start and end dates) • Service use (e.g., duration, number of sessions attended) • Number of families completing services • Demographic information on families and children served 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Compare the demographic characteristics of families served to the target population, by service or support type. • Calculate service completion rates (e.g., proportion of families that complete services of those that start services), by service or support type and family demographics.
Measures of progress and satisfaction	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Are families satisfied with services? Are families feeling supported? • What short-term outcomes for children and families result from participating in services (e.g., improved parenting skills)? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Satisfaction surveys • Family assessments (e.g., baseline and follow-up) • Case or progress notes • Feedback from families regarding perceptions of progress and perceived changes in outcomes 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analyze satisfaction surveys by service or support type and family demographics. • Compare results of family assessments at baseline and follow-up to determine whether families are progressing in the desired direction. • Analyze feedback from families to identify barriers to achieving desired outcomes.
Monitoring child and family well-being and instability/discontinuity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • How are children and families faring? • Are families experiencing instability / discontinuity? 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Administrative data (e.g., maltreatment reports, foster care entries) • Service referrals • Child or family well-being assessments • Follow up with families 6 months after ending service provision to check on well-being and stability 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Among families receiving services, track the proportion of children who enter (or re-enter) foster care. • Track the number of families requesting a change in caregiver on adoption/guardianship subsidies. • Compare child- and family well-being at assessment and at discharge. • Analyze data from well-being assessment for signs of instability/discontinuity not captured elsewhere.

A note about fidelity

Program fidelity refers to implementing a post-permanency service or support as intended. If a site is newly replicating a program that has been implemented elsewhere, program developers may provide documentation that specifies fidelity measures—observable, measurable criteria used for testing whether and which specific intervention activities are being carried out as intended. Often, challenges to implementation fidelity can be a reason anticipated outcomes are not emerging. However, CQI is also important when implementing evidence-based interventions, as adaptation may be necessary to effectively serve the population in a particular state, tribal nation, or territory, or for specific subgroup of the population.

Considerations regarding equity and cultural responsiveness

To promote the stability and well-being of all families, be sure to incorporate the voices of individuals with lived expertise. Engaging youth and adults who have been adopted or obtained guardianship, as well as adoptive and guardianship parents, is essential to ensure services are responsive to post-permanency families' unique needs, preferences, and perspectives, ultimately promoting their empowerment, agency, and positive outcomes. Sites should include individuals who have

received post-permanency services, as well as those who have not. In addition, the group of lived experts providing guidance and feedback to sites should be diverse in characteristics such as race, ethnicity, culture, LGBTQ2S+ status, urbanicity, type of permanency arrangements (foster care, private, international adoption; guardianship), and age at permanency. Accordingly, the Capacity Building Center recommends that the process be:

- **Inclusive:** Include community and system partners and families and youth served by the child welfare agency, including insights from persons with lived experience

Sites should also assess whether services need to be modified based on child and family characteristics (e.g., racial, ethnic, or cultural characteristics or geographic location). To do this, during step 1 (planning), examine data findings separately for different subgroups of the population. Sites should ensure that all families are benefitting from services regardless of, for example, their race, primary language spoken, LGBTQ2S+ status, type of permanency arrangement, or geographic region. If a specific group seems to not be reaching equitable outcomes, strategize on a program modification to make the service or support culturally responsive, or remove a barrier specific to the group of concern.

Be sure to include lived experts in all steps of the CQI process. Through ongoing communication with a diverse group of lived experts, you may be able to identify specific problems even before you begin a CQI cycle.

Additional resources

CQI is an important component for sites working to enhance post-permanency support for adoptive and guardianship families. [The Post-Adoption Center](#) provides universal and on-site technical assistance and other resources to support sites as they develop, implement, and sustain comprehensive, culturally responsive, and accessible post-permanency services. For sites that engage in technical assistance opportunities, the Post-Adoption Center will help the site conduct CQI for post-permanency services.



Listed below are resources to learn more about how to implement a CQI process:

[CQI Training Academy: Using Data to Implement Change](#)

- The Capacity Building Center for States facilitates the CQI Training Academy, which is a series of interactive, self-paced e-learning courses that provide details—free of charge—on how to carry out each component of an effective CQI process. The Training Academy is accompanied by a comprehensive [CQI Training Academy Handbook](#).

[Post Adoption and Guardianship Instability Tracking Toolkit](#)

- Developed by the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, the [Post Adoption and Guardianship Instability Tracking Toolkit](#) is designed to help child welfare agencies develop a systematic way to track instability for children who exit foster care through adoption or guardianship. The *Toolkit* includes a User Guide and Excel tracking workbook and is accompanied by a webinar describing how to use the *Toolkit*. The User Guide also includes an example of a wellbeing letter that sites can use to engage with and monitor the living situation, health, and wellbeing of adoptive children and families.

[Engaging People with Lived Experience to Improve Federal Research, Policy, and Practice](#)

- The Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation developed [this series of briefs](#) aimed at increasing capacity to engage people with lived experience, including emerging strategies to equitably identify, recruit, and engage lived experts.

[Quality Improvement Center on Engaging Youth in Finding Permanency \(QIC-EY\)](#)

- The QIC-EY is charged with advancing child welfare programs and practice to ensure that they are authentically engaging and empowering children and youth in foster care. While the main focus of the QIC-EY is involving young people in finding permanency, they provide a variety of resources on how to best engage those with lived experience to ensure that they feel empowered and have a voice and choice about their futures. For example, [this page](#) explains principles for authentically engaging youth.

[Assessing the Racial and Ethnic Cultural Competence of Youth Support Services](#)

- An important aspect of CQI is assessing the degree to which services meet the needs of families from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds. AdoptUSKids created [this tool](#) to help agencies reflect on the cultural relevance and responsiveness of their services. The tool provides guidance for how to prepare and complete the assessment, understanding assessment results, and action planning.



To delve further into this topic, check out the Post-Adoption Center Resource Library:
www.postadoptioncenter.org/resource-library



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