Early Childhood Interventions: Large Scale Multi-Site Impact Evaluation: Lessons Learned Through Implementation

Nicole Kenton, Public Health Agency of Canada
Harry Cummings, University of Guelph & Donald Murray, Harry Cummings and Associates
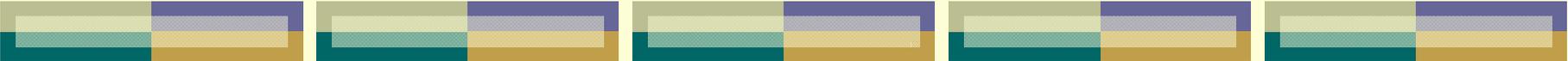
The Community Action Program for Children

- Federally funded ECD Program brought in to address Child Development Initiative (1990, United Nations)
- Provides funding to community-based organizations
- Targets vulnerable children (0-6) and families
- Regionally administered and jointly managed by federal government, provinces and territories (JMCs and Advisory Committees)
- 464 projects across Canada
- Close to $60 million annually
- Based on community development principles

Why: Early Intervention Makes a Difference

- For children 0-6

- Focus on cognitive, social skills and language development

- Results in improved general development, school readiness, educational performance and employment prospects. (Bennett, 2008, Brooks-Gunn, 2003)
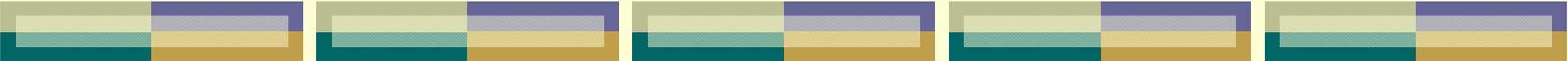
CAPC in Ontario

- 89 CAPC projects serving 445 different communities
  - 41 are Non Aboriginal
  - 44 are Aboriginal
- Ontario CAPC Objectives:
  - Improved infant and child nutrition
  - Improved parenting skills
  - Reduction in child abuse
- Serve approximately 6,000 participants per month
- Programs delivered via a combination of drop-ins, home visiting, parent education, support groups and child-focussed activities
- Project specific evaluation budgets
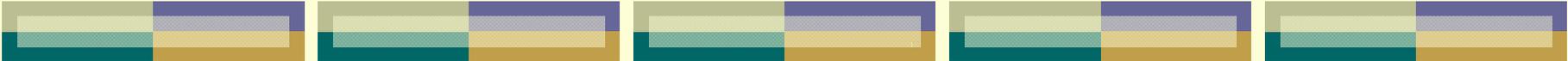
CAPC Impact Evaluation

STEP 1: Logic Model Development & Training

- Series of workshops engaging program stakeholders in participatory process to develop logic models for their projects.

- Developed evaluation capacity and enhanced skills
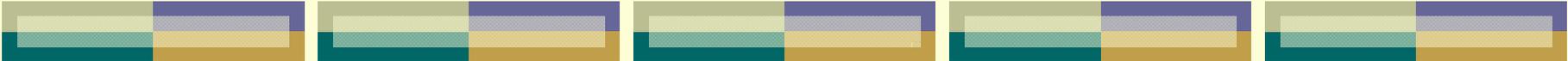
CAPC Impact Evaluation

STEP 2: CAPC Regional Evaluation Toolkit

- Created to help projects assess their ability to achieve the outcomes identified in their logic models
- Attempt to save projects from searching for tools or creating their own
- Inclusion of tools based on need for strong psychometric properties AND appropriateness and feasibility
- Common template for local evaluation reports
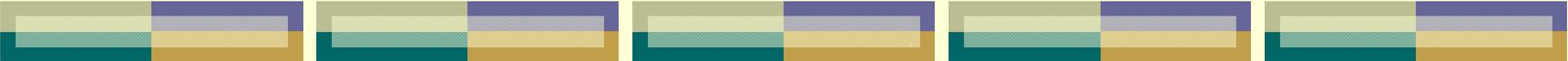
CAPC Regional Evaluation

STEP 3: Common Tools

- Small number of required measures chosen to ensure evaluation needs were met at the regional level

- Core measures to be used by projects which have identified in their logic models the outcomes these tools are designed to measure.

- Evaluation combined a pre-post design with comparisons with other databases.

- Mandatory measures ensure comparability across projects and allow for a region-wide picture.
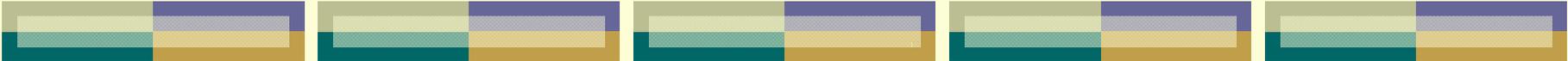
CAPC Regional Evaluation

- Projects implemented the common tools with participants new to the program and at 9 months follow-up or program exit.

- Common tools were entered by a central body into SPSS database

- Projects implemented additional tools from the toolkit which were of interest and submitted a local evaluation report to the PHAC.
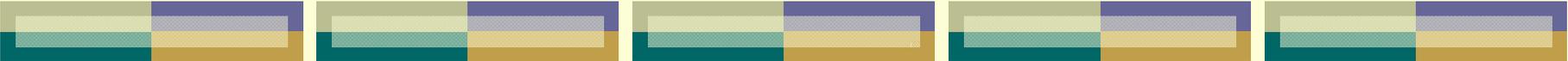
Data Analysis

- Sample size for each tool was sufficient to provide a 95% level of confidence (+/-5%) in the results (assuming representative sampling)

- Reliability testing: good to adequate

- Paired sample t test used to determine if observed changes in parent and child behaviour/attitude were statistically significant

- Regression analysis used to identify the most important predictors of change
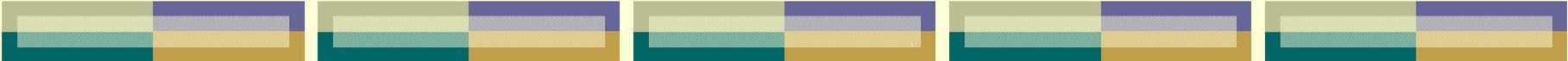
Key Finding

- CAPC Non-Aboriginal programs and services have been successful in contributing to improved outcomes for families and children.

- Participants in CAPC programs experienced an overall improvement in all four core outcome areas…
  - Attachment for infants and child development
  - Parenting skills
  - Social support
  - Knowledge and ability to access services

…and many of the improvements were statistically significant.
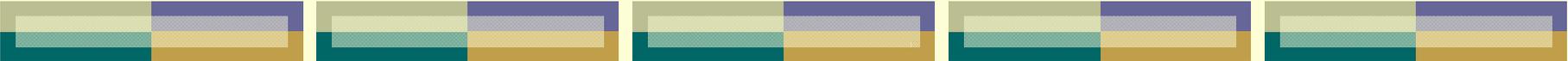
General Findings

- A strong relationship exists between the base condition of the participant and their level of improvement at program exit.
- Participants at program entry who perceived…
  - they had low parenting competence
  - they had a low parent to infant attachment
  - they had a low level of social support from family/friends
  - their child had more problematic behaviour

…experienced the greatest improvement in outcomes at program exit ($r = -.5$).
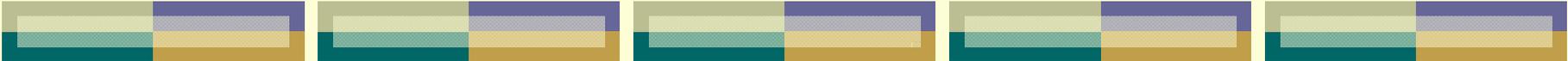
General Findings cont.

- The most important predictor of change in participant outcomes is the base condition of the participant.
  - Participants with greater challenges at program entry are likely to experience the greatest improvements in outcomes.
  - Country of birth does not appear to be a factor in explaining differences in participant outcomes.
  - Other independent variables not identified in the research (e.g. income, highest level of education, etc.) should be explored to determine the extent to which these factors explain the observed changes.
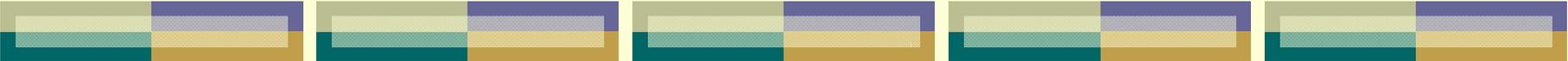
General Findings cont.

- CAPC programs appear to be particularly beneficial to newcomers to Canada in terms of increasing their knowledge of and ability to access community services.

  - Home visiting programs appear to be particularly beneficial in this regard.

- CAPC appears to playing an important role in responding to the needs of newcomers as this population is not accessing other non-CAPC programs to the same extent as those born in Canada.
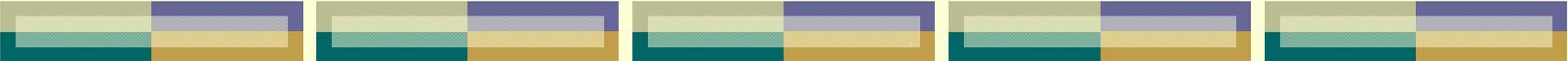
Evaluation Success Factors

- Hired an external evaluation consultant or hired a staff person specifically for evaluation
- Staff training and follow-up training at a local level
- Developed an organizational system for tracking participants
- Developed a culture of evaluation

Inhibitors of Evaluation

- Variation in the resources available at different sites to assist with the evaluation – resulted in greater burden on staff in some sites
- Fidelity of program delivery
- Difficult for projects to get "buy-in" from partners administering the programs
- "Buy-in" from participants was also difficult
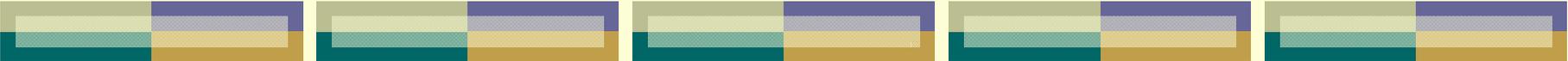
Inhibitors of Evaluation cont.

- Appropriateness of questionnaire content
- Attrition rate
- Difficult to implement the evaluation in informal drop-in programs
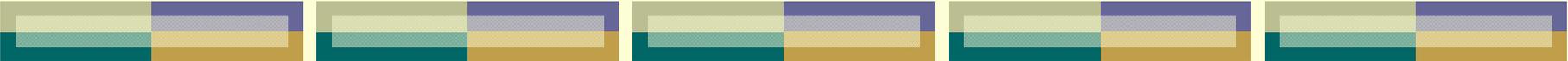
Recommendations / Lessons Learned

- Use common tools to allow for a region-wide picture of the outcomes
- Use a uniform 7 or 5 point scale on quantitative questions to better facilitate the calculation of average scores.
  - A larger scale will enable the detection of small changes over time
- Allow for a sufficient period of time for follow-up with participants to demonstrate significant life changes
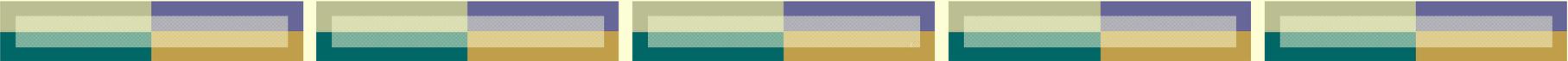
Recommendations / Lessons Learned cont.

- Increase capacity to conduct evaluation across all project sites – provide evaluation training including program logic model development and survey instrument design and administration
  - Ensure that relevant staff (including all program delivery personnel) in each site participate in the evaluation training
  - Consider hiring an evaluation consultant in each site to assist in guiding the evaluation process and assess progress

Recommendations / Lessons Learned Cont.

- Establish an evaluation Advisory Committee which is representative of all project sites and programming
  - Ensure that members remain engaged/active
- Establish a formal structure for informing all projects of the evaluation related decisions and rationale
- Establish a centralized body for data entry to produce a comprehensive, clean, database
- Need to be sensitive to ongoing evaluations taking place in individual sites
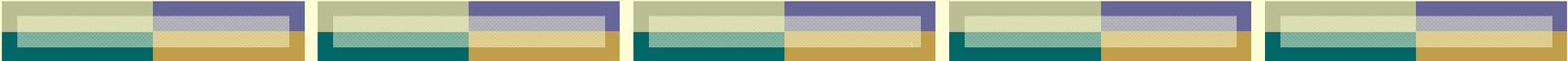
Conclusion

- "*the first thing that needs to be acknowledged is that evaluating such programs is never simple. They tend to be multi-level, multi-faceted, and uneven in conception and delivery and implemented in different contexts with varying levels of resources. Thus….no two projects look alike. This makes definitive evaluation extremely difficult and complicated*" (Irv Rootman, forward of CAPC National Evaluation Report)

Promising Practices for Evaluating Multi-site, Community-based Programs

- Participatory

- Capacity building

- Dedicated resources centrally and within projects (money and people)

- Centralization with standardization and flexibility

- Data collection tools with high respondent acceptability (quantitative and qualitative)
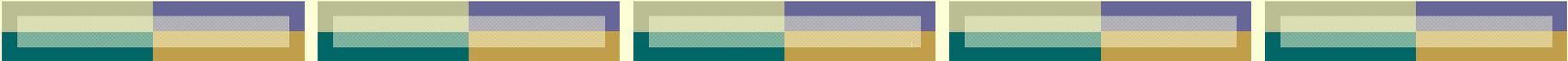
Contact Information

- Nicole Kenton, Evaluation Consultant, Public Health Agency of Canada

  Email: nicole_kenton@phac-aspc.gc.ca

- Harry Cummings. University of Guelph & Don Murray, Harry Cummings and Associates

  Email: hca@web.ca