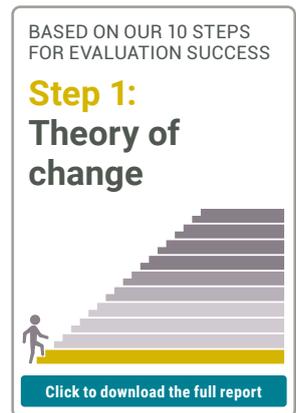# How to develop and confirm your theory of change

The theory of change

A theory of change works by capturing some crucial details about why your intervention or service is necessary, and what it aims to achieve. More specifically, a good theory of change should be able to answer three related 'why' questions:
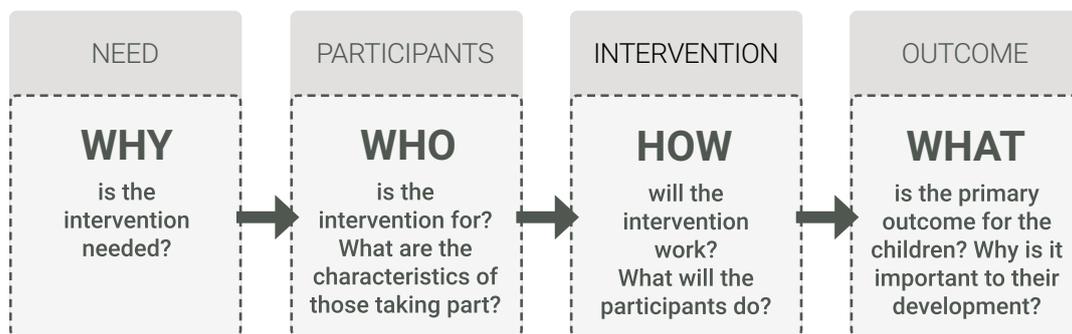
- What is your primary intended outcome, and why is the outcome important from the perspective of children's development?

- Why is it needed?

- Why will it add value over what is currently available for children and families?

We often rely on our own experiences to answer these three 'why' questions. However, it is best to ground the answers to these questions in the evidence of what we know about children's development, so we remove unfounded assumptions from the theory of change.

Below is an example outline of a simplified theory of change, showing the different elements and how they come together:

The basic elements of a simplified theory of change

NEED	PARTICIPANTS	INTERVENTION	OUTCOME
WHY is the intervention needed?	**WHO** is the intervention for? What are the characteristics of those taking part?	**HOW** will the intervention work? What will the participants do?	**WHAT** is the primary outcome for the children? Why is it important to their development?

As well as answering the three 'why' questions above, the theory of change outlines who the intervention or service is for, and what it is. Below we summarise how to go about developing the theory of change using the evidence base, and how to confirm it.

1. Finding the evidence to develop your theory of change

Regardless of whether your intervention or service is under development or already established, we recommend that you aim to answer the following seven questions, in the order prescribed below. This will provide you with enough information to develop a fully-informed theory of change.

1. What is the primary intended child outcome?

2. Why is the primary child outcome important? (and what is needed to achieve it?)

3. Why it necessary?

4. Why will it add value (over current provision)?

5. Who is it for?

6. What will it do?

7. How much of it is required?

The model below illustrates how these seven questions fit into and help develop a theory of change. You will notice that at each stage in the theory of change below, the assumptions or outcomes presented are based on the evidence. You can download a blank template to help you develop your own theory of change: **https://www.eif.org.uk/files/pdf/eif-theory-of-change-template.pdf**

Developing your theory of change
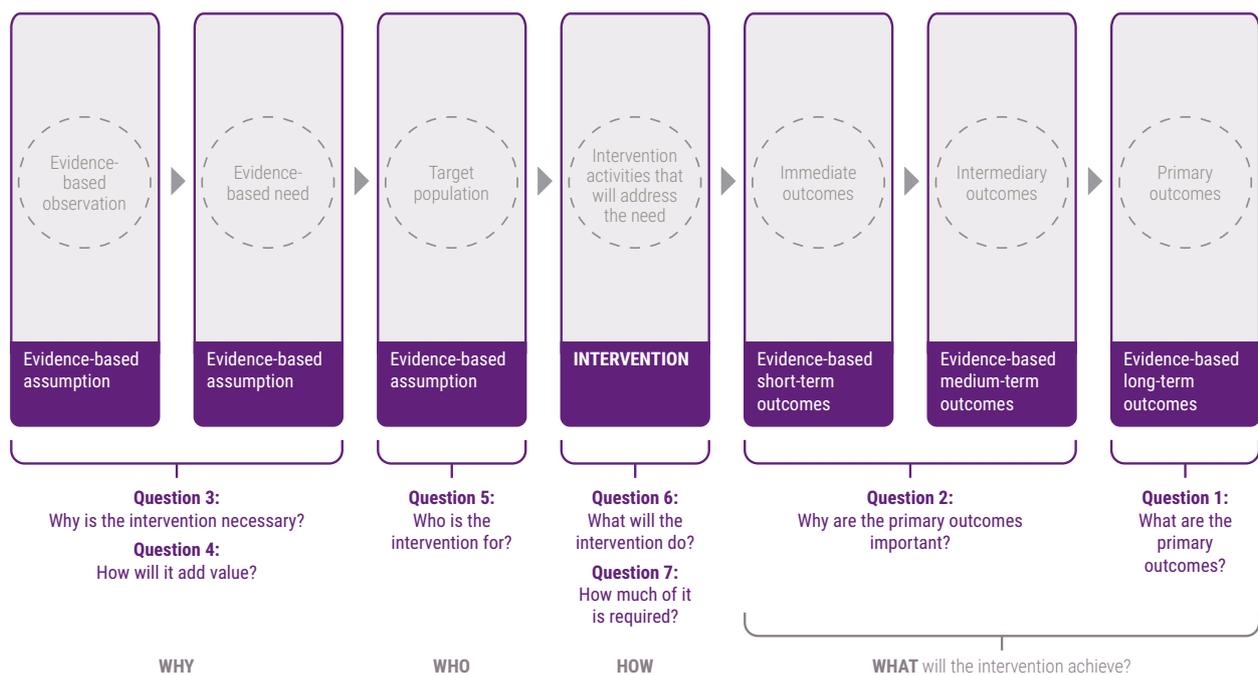
For system-level evaluation, it can be quite challenging to know where you are starting from, which makes answering some of these questions more difficult. Therefore, we recommend you start by undertaking both a needs assessment and a system mapping exercise.

Undertaking a **needs assessment** will help you to identify the current and future needs of the population and those receiving early help, and consider pathways of need. **System mapping** will help you to understand the elements of the system, how they relate to each other, how these are likely to change, and how all elements of the system contribute towards your outcome. This will help you to identify why the system is necessary and why it adds value.

As discussed earlier, it is not enough to answer these questions by relying on your experience; by doing this you risk building in assumptions that are unfounded or wrong. Instead, it is important that you rely on the evidence base. Additionally, for interventions or services that are already established, you should use the seven questions above to gather information from people currently involved in the development or delivery of the intervention or service. This will ensure that the views of all the stakeholders involved are considered, alongside the evidence base.

For information about how to go about answering these questions, and what sources of evidence to use, please see our resource on Finding the evidence: **https://www.eif.org.uk/files/pdf/ehub-1-toc-finding-the-evidence.pdf**

2. Confirming your theory of change

If your intervention or service is not yet established, you should write up the theory of change and share this with representatives for all key stakeholder groups likely to be involved. One way of doing this is to bring representatives together for a participatory workshop. This will allow for consensus building and help to confirm the final theory of change. This helps to provide a shared understanding of what the intervention or service is, and is not, trying to achieve and why.

If the intervention or service is already established, you may want stakeholders to be more involved in the process of developing the theory of change from the outset. In this instance we recommend you use participatory methods from the outset to develop and confirm the theory of change. For a comprehensive approach to the participatory model, please see EIF's five-phase participatory model for confirming a science-based theory of change on page 124 of our resource 10 steps to evaluation success.

This summary is based on two EIF guides:

- *10 steps for evaluation success:* **https://www.eif.org.uk/resource/10-steps-for-evaluation-success**
- *Evaluating early help: A guide to evaluation of complex local early help systems:* **https://www.eif.org.uk/resource/evaluating-early-help-a-guide-to-evaluation-of-complex-local-early-help-systems**