

Kari Robideau: You evaluate your program. You gather input from all of the youth participants. Maybe you even collect data from their parents or guardians or other volunteers working with the program. But then so many of us as youth workers say to ourselves, I work with kids, not data. My name's Kari Robideau and I'm an extension educator with the University of Minnesota Extension Center for Youth Development. And this is the Youth Development Podcast Series. I am joined today by Sam Grant, our Center for Youth Development Evaluation Director, who I will say somehow always makes talking about and reporting data and evaluation fun. Thank you for joining me today, Sam.

Sam Grant : Thanks for having me back. And I do. I promise this is going to be fun, even though we're talking about data and numbers today.

Kari Robideau: Every time I'm a skeptic, I'm like, oh, we're talking about evaluation today. We're talking about we report our numbers to others. Everyone's going to just fall asleep. No one's going to listen to the podcast. And then you come through with your stories and ideas that always keep us excited about reporting what we've learned from our programs. Let's start with this. I recently read your blog post that is called The Best Way to Share Numbers. It's in our youth development insight blog. And in that, you give helpful tips on ways to better use and share numbers. But before we jump into all of this and you're going to share some big ideas that you have to help us be more comfortable with reporting how important our programs are and the impact they're making, you shared a story. So I want to start with a story here, because I always love Sam's stories, of a set of books that you and your daughter are reading and how you intertwined that, how it made you think about evaluation.

Sam Grant : Of course, because evaluation is part of my everyday life. Doesn't everyone think of that when they're reading Humphry books with their third grader. So my daughter ... No?

Kari Robideau: No, I'm sorry.

Sam Grant : Say no. So Humphrey is the classroom hamster and you follow along all of their classroom drama through the eyes of the classroom hamster and they are the sweetest books so please check them out if you have a third or fourth grader at a home. And in the Humphrey book we were reading, someone came into Humphrey's fourth grade class and lectured on statistics. Now who booked that guest speaker? I do not know. But Humphrey explained that statistics were harder than any tricky vocabulary words the class had ever practiced. And it just made my heart sad as I was reading it to my daughter because those numbers people were getting a bad rap, even from the classroom hamster. But it was a perfect example of how we associate numbers with being really hard and that you have to be really smart to understand them. So the things I'm going to talk about today are about how we can make numbers understandable to even

Humphrey's fourth grade audience. So you all, let's make Humphrey proud and do some better reporting of our numbers.

Kari Robideau: You've got me hooked. So let's hear some of your big ideas. I believe you have three for us today of how we don't need to be so afraid of numbers. We don't have to not like numbers. Maybe math class wasn't your favorite class, maybe statistics, working with all of the numbers wasn't your favorite thing to do as a student, which is why you went into social services, youth work, working with people. I didn't plan on to work with numbers. Give us some big ideas to help us feel more comfortable and to love this like you do.

Sam Grant : All right, we might not get to love, but curious, love your points.

Kari Robideau: Like. Strong like.

Sam Grant : Strong like. Numbers sometimes do make us feel stupid or they feel too complicated or too hard to work with. So like you said, I think let's blame ninth grade math teachers for that. We are not talking about ninth grade math. I have an eighth grader and I'm like chicken pecking through math assignments with her and telling her you're never going to use that, do the assignment, but you're never going to use it or do math that way. So let's just say that numbers kind of have a bad PR problem. That we look at numbers and we say it's too hard so we run away. When I teach classes on communicating effectively with data, I'm talking about how it's not the numbers problems. Let's stop blaming the numbers. We have a communication problem here.

And when I ask participants, are you a storyteller or are you a numbers person? And the youth workers will be climbing over each other to get to the storytelling side of the room because there's a very small group of people who live in the youth work sphere who think that numbers are the best. And that's probably true in a lot of different career trajectories. So it's a communication problem though, because the reality is in youth work, we have to use numbers. We use numbers all the time in our daily life, whether it's the numbers on your scale or the numbers on your speedometer, in your car. Numbers are a part of how we live and make sense of our world. But we sometimes just want to run away from them rather than making numbers part of how we communicate about our programs. So am I starting to at least convince you that it matters and these numbers aren't so bad and scary?

Kari Robideau: I am. And I'm visualizing Sam standing over here in the numbers corner, going everybody come back, come back. We can tell stories over here too.

Sam Grant : Right. And numbers are part of the stories. We're going to talk about that. But I want to start out by saying that the numbers should be as simple as possible. So think about those fourth graders in Humphrey's classroom. Whenever you can communicate your data that you've collected for your program in the most basic

terms, it's going to get more and more sticky. So tips for that are use whole numbers. Don't say 25.68% of kids felt a certain way. Say 25%. Round up full numbers, to big numbers that are more sticky. So if it's 24, round up to 25. If you can, reduce numbers to one to five. So if you can say 3 out of 4 kids had this experience, that's stickier and way easier for a fourth grader or an 88 year old reading your report to understand. So think about how can you bring numbers down to some of the most basic levels. And I want to share an example.

I've been reading, I read books on numbers, but this is a great book. It's called Making Numbers Count by Chip heath and Karla Starr and it's a new release. It's really good. If you haven't read any of the Heath brothers works, they have a lot of great books. So there's my plug for the Heath.

Kari Robideau: Nice.

Sam Grant : But they share here, "Percentages are one great way that you can bring numbers down." So they share an example of 40% of US adults do not always wash their hands after using the bathroom at home. True and disgusting. And 40%, that's fine. It's an even number. It like hits all my rules that I just gave you. But now look at how much stickier this is. "Two out of every five people you shake hands with may not have washed their hands between using the toilet and touching your hands." That is super gross and really sticky, and you're going to think of that Kari the next [crosstalk 00:08:29].

Kari Robideau: Wow. Yeah. I'm going to remember that.

Sam Grant : Right. So did you see how they took a basic number and put it into context and made that number tell a story that sticks in your brain. That's what we're trying to do.

Kari Robideau: Yeah. And that's what I was going to say is all of a sudden there was a story to it. I'm actually picturing all of the people I shake hands with rather than just that 40%, which I think is what we usually go towards, isn't it? I mean, we report this percentage of kids change their behavior because of this.

Sam Grant : Right. And now we can think about, instead of saying, 70% of kids can do this thing. One thing we use in 4H often is 3 out of 4 kids in 4H volunteer in their community. Or this year three out of four kids made their communities stronger. So just the different ways you can take that 75% and repackage it into something really simple, numbers less than five, that's really easy for your brain to stick and remember.

All right. So the second tip is to really know who your audience is when you're communicating numbers. Again, this is all about communication when you're thinking about numbers. Sometimes we think if we've collected all this information, we've done research or evaluation that we have to use really

technical terms. We have to talk about P values or standard deviations. Nobody in the real world wants to know this information.

Kari Robideau: Yeah. Save it for journal articles.

Sam Grant : Right. And I think sometimes the journal, if you ever like read a journal article, they'll share all that meaty information. But the part that everybody is the discussion, where they make sense of all those numbers and the so what of those numbers and carry those numbers in into a context that makes sense. So it's important to know is your audience fourth graders? Is your audience funders of my program? Is your audience future parents that I want to be part of this program? And so the more that you know your audience and know what they care about, you can target the messages and the ways you package the numbers in ways that make sense to that audience.

Kari Robideau: In the development work that I do with online learning, that is where we start, who is your primary audience? Who might be secondary audiences that would read this? And so often that sounds so elementary, so simple and so obvious, but it really does change how you write when you know this is going to parents. What do they want to know about the numbers in this evaluation that I did?

Sam Grant : Right. And it feels really basic. It's the most important step, and it's a step to do at the beginning, and I also think it's a step to do at the end because what sometimes happens is we collect numbers and we're very proud of those numbers. And we want to show how very smart we are. And this is where numbers are getting their bad rap. Then we'll put very complicated numbers into our presentations so we look smart. So we look like we did due diligence in our scientific process, but we end up losing our audience unless they really understand and are so like focused and such a content expert that they can't even hang with your message. So if you were thinking of how standard deviations or P values in any of your external communication, please drop them. I, this last week have been working on our federal report for youth development. And that goes to our national funders, a government organization, and so it tends to be really heavy on numbers.

And I was trying to tell a story about youth leaders and all of the great learning that our youth leaders had this year. And so I had percentages coming out of my ears. 78% did this and 90% did this. And I finally stood back from what the story I was trying to tell, and the numbers were clouding up what was happening because what I was sharing is that in our program, youth have fantastic leadership experiences that result in impactful changes in who they are as a leader, how they connect with people.

And so I dropped all the numbers because it didn't fit the story. So I realize that I'm talking to you today about numbers, but knowing your audience sometimes means knowing the data, knowing what's behind the messages. But sometimes

it's dropping the data out and putting it in the cliff notes or putting that at the end of the report so the people like me, that's like, how did you get there, can skip to the end of the report and read that page. But I'm probably the only person that's going to read that page. Everyone else is going to skip to the discussion and never look at your methods.

Kari Robideau: I mean, you really make a great point because when we do about evaluation, we get numbers. That's what I immediately go to, to report. And I just really appreciate this discussion about, but what is the story? And as you said, the so what? Why do I care? What does this mean for my young person or the young people I'm funding right now in your program? What does it mean? What changes have been made? How is it creating impact?

Sam Grant : Right. And it's hard when you have that information to turn away from it. But in writing, they'll talk about writing the mom paragraph. It's basically that paragraph you could shoot off to anyone that knows nothing about what you're doing and they would understand what happening. And there's a lot of times in our youth work that that's what we have to focus on. And there can be numbers in that, but there doesn't always have to be, depending on what it is and who's going to be reading it.

All right, so transition into the third tip, which started to show up when you know your audience. We sometimes think that numbers and stories are two different kinds of people and two different pieces in our reports. And numbers and stories should come together to really make the point come home. So numbers on their own aren't always especially sticky, but stories stick with us because they pull on our heart strings, they connect us to what's happening in program. So marry data and stories wherever you are able to.

So if your finding is that three out of four youth in this program gave back to their community, then share a story about one young person who learned deeply through service learning, what they did, what kind of impact they felt like they had in their community. That helps the data to stick by having the two pieces together. It also draws in the two different kind of brain stakeholders that are often reading your reports. There's always the people that like want the proof and want the data and want the numbers. And then there's the people that are like, so what? Why does it make a difference in our world? So when you put them together, you please both of them at the same time, which makes your job that much easier.

Kari Robideau: As you're explaining that, I'm thinking to myself, this has great implication for how we develop our evaluation strategies.

Sam Grant : Right. Because I'll often work with teams and say, what do you want to be able to say at the end of this project? What's the story you want to be able to tell? And that's not to say that I'm going to influence the kind of data that we get

collected. Because we maybe want to say that youth learned important skills in this project, but then we collect the evaluation data and we're like, hold up. They actually didn't gain those skills. They gained some other things and we can communicate about that. But yeah, it helps you, especially as we were talking about before, on the front end planning, think about what is some of the data or stories that you want to be able to share with stakeholders. And then backwards plan to say if we want to be able to say that, we have to ask questions about that certain concept, otherwise we won't have any data about it.

Kari Robideau: Who's your audience? What do they want to know? How do you ask questions in your evaluation so you get there?

Sam Grant : Right. You got the evaluation cycle figured out Kari. And add numbers in, that is like your sprinkle on top.

Kari Robideau: And I'm having fun.

Sam Grant : Think about sprinkling in those numbers, wherever they can.

Kari Robideau: Sprinkles. So you've got me hooked. You've got me thinking about my audience, my evaluation, how I'm going to report it, using stories to make sure that when I do report our findings, that people remember them and it connects with them. So question for you, how do I get better at this? What are some like resources or who can I use? Or how do we use peers to help us improve our skills in this area?

Sam Grant : I think a lot of this takes practice. So it's sometimes for me, just getting out a blank piece of paper, and if the evaluation finding that I want to talk about feels complicated, I start writing it down. And then I do some of what we were just talking about with the example, write it as a percentage, write it as a three out of five, write it without the number in it at all. Like start to play with the different forms that you can have it in. And then because we're youth workers, I'll often run things by my kids or other youth in the program to say, does this make sense? If you're trying to write it so it makes sense to someone who is a fourth grader, typically we try to write so things can be understandable to someone at a fourth to sixth grade reading level. They're a great group to say, do you understand what I'm saying when I phrase my information like this?

The other big tip I can give you is to not feel like you have to talk about all the data you collected and everything in your report. So when I was telling you, I take out my notebook, I take out one data point at a time because how I want to talk about one piece of my findings might be really different than the next. And so it feels really overwhelming when you're looking at 20 different points. But if you say, here are my top three. How could I write these in a couple of different ways? And play with the different ways, and especially if you develop them in like a slide format, you can pick and choose those different ways that you wrote

it, and use them for different stakeholders and different types of reports. So the process of generating the best example might give you some good examples that you can use with different audiences.

Kari Robideau: Thank you for those. I especially like having the young people read the report and getting feedback from them. You can't see me in this podcast, but my eyes lit up. Like that's a great idea.

Sam Grant : Right. Or have them present. Youth are really good at making sense of data too, because they often don't carry all the baggage that we have from ninth grade geometry into the ways that we look at numbers. And so they really quickly go to the so what matters? And then you can fill in to say, this stakeholder actually does care about the numbers. So thanks youth for helping us think about what matters. And now I'm going to plug in that three out of four kids are able to do that. And then you can tell a story about how you built the skill that we were talking about in our evaluation. So yeah, they can be a great part of the process.

Kari Robideau: A great part of telling the story.

Sam Grant : Exactly.

Kari Robideau: In addition to those ideas, you also have a website that I want you to share with everyone. And tell us a little bit about what they'll find there.

Sam Grant : Yeah. So I have content on a website about evaluating education programs and the web address is z.umn.edu/evaluatingprograms. It's also available through the University of Minnesota extension webpage. You can find resources on there. And there are resources on pretty much every step in the evaluation process. So there's things on evaluation planning, there's content on specifically evaluating with youth as your audience for all you youth workers out there. There's things on data visualization, which we didn't talk about, but definitely goes with, as you're talking about numbers and you want to visualize those numbers, head over to my website and look at some of those examples to make your charts that much more meaningful.

Kari Robideau: Great, thank you so much Sam. You really helped us identify ways that we can present and share those numbers from our programs in ways that are more understandable, that are more interesting, more fun. And you encouraged all of us to tell the story of our program and not to get caught up in those numbers. So thank you for being a part of today's podcast.

Sam Grant : Thanks for having me and good luck everyone sharing your numbers.

Kari Robideau: Thanks Sam. And as we conclude this podcast, I want to encourage you to go to our website. As Sam had mentioned, it is at www.extension.umn.edu/youth, and you will find not only evaluation resources, but other resources for youth

This transcript was exported on Feb 08, 2022 - view latest version [here](#).

development professionals and information out upcoming trainings on a variety of topics related to youth development programs. You can also learn about the Minnesota 4H program if you aren't already involved. Also, after listening to this podcast and you made it all the way through, didn't scare you away with all the evaluation talk at the beginning, go to our youth development insight blog and read and comment on Samantha's blog called Best Ways to Share Numbers. And I will put that link in the description for this podcast. Thank you again for joining this podcast Sam.

Sam Grant : Thank you.

Kari Robideau: This is Kari Robideau from the University of Minnesota Extension Center for Youth Development. Please tune in again soon.