

Relationships Between Parents and Home Visitors

Highlights from a Qualitative Exploration of Parent Retention and Engagement in Early Childhood Home Visiting

An extensive body of research has linked home visiting programs with a wide variety of benefits for children and parents. These benefits are strongest when there is regular and frequent contact between the parent and the home visitor and full implementation of the curriculum. However, many eligible parents do not enroll in home visiting, while others drop out of services, or receive fewer visits than recommended. In 2014, as part of their federal Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) funding, the Minnesota Department of Health contracted with Wilder Research to explore issues related to parent engagement and retention in home visiting.



Prior research suggests that the relationship between the home visitor and the parent is a key factor that may influence the effectiveness and quality of the home visiting program, the delivery of program content, and parent engagement and program participation. Additionally, a better quality relationship may be associated with better outcomes for children.

While previous research suggested the relationship between the parent and the home visitor was an important factor in parent engagement and retention in services, most research drew this conclusion based on staff perspectives; very few included the parents' perspectives on the relationship. This brief explores how parents and home visitors describe their relationships and how they build strong relationships with each other.

This brief summarizes information from interviews conducted with 320 parents, and with 98 home visitors and supervisors. A full description of the project methods can be found in the project Methodology Summary.

She is a very good person. She gives me advice. She's always smiling and is very positive. I like the most that she talks and gives me examples on how to be a good mother. She shows me how to be a good mother. I feel good when she talks to me about that. I feel that she's listening and supporting me with my life. – Parent

Each nurse is unique in their ability to establish the relationship, but it's about listening and making the client feel supported and heard. Some will use humor or different attributes of their own to engage a client when they're first building that trust. But all use active listening and empathy and general curiosity for their client. That all helps start and build the relationship. – Home visitor

- **Professional.** Home visitors talked about the importance of being a professional resource. They felt that they offered something unique to parents, in terms of their knowledge and expertise. Parents also said this was a major benefit for them, with 31 percent saying that having access to an expert helped them decide to enter home visiting. Home visitors intentionally try to balance professionalism with hands-on and friendly support.

I'm careful to be friendly and open but also it's a professional relationship. I'm not their best friend. I don't step over that professional line. I don't do their laundry or give them rides. But I try to find people who will help them with those things. We're friendly and open but professional. – Home visitor

- **Friendly.** Friendliness was also mentioned as an important component of a strong relationship between parents and home visitors. Parents and home visitors alike talked about being outgoing and approachable. Forty-four percent of the interviewed parents described their home visitor as friendly, upbeat, happy, or outgoing.

I would say she's really friendly. When I first met her, I thought it was going to be somebody who was real stern, but she's really outgoing and happy. She makes me feel comfortable. – Parent

I would say friendly - it's a professional relationship but that's how you're real to them. If you want to keep them engaged, just be normal. Just shoot the breeze with them, joke with them. – Home visitor

- **Non-judgmental.** Parents and home visiting staff both talked about how important it was that home visitors be open and non-judgmental. Almost half of the home visitors (47%) talked about the importance of parents not feeling judged by their home visitors. They noted the importance of honesty and encouragement.

I was young and pregnant and scared. I couldn't really talk to my parents about it because everybody was judging me for having a baby so young. So I think it was that sort of support that I was seeking. – Parent

I felt like she cared what happened with me and my daughter. She was a good friend and wasn't judgmental. She didn't judge my experiences. I cherished the relationship and I felt like it was a safe space. She was an easy person to talk to. Even if I told her bad things, like I feel like I've been really sad or if my room wasn't clean, she wasn't judging me. She understood. – Parent

[Parents] see [home visitor] as the person they can trust and ask questions and they won't be judged. – Home visitor

- **Consistent and reliable.** The importance of consistency was also referenced, with 54 percent of the home visiting staff saying that being consistent and following through was an important aspect of relationship-building. Consistency took several forms in these relationships. Some staff talked about consistency in terms of setting expectations for visits, such as showing up reliably. Others talked more generally about the importance of home visitors following through on things that they said, such as remembering to bring promised resources to sessions.

I like the best that she's always on time. I have a busy schedule, watching my son 24/7. She needs to be on time and on schedule so that I can have my busy schedule and meet my stuff. – Parent
[It's important to] just be consistent, following through when you say you're going to do something, responding to texts, and just showing concern for them. – Home visitor

- **Positive and strengths-based.** Some home visitors reflected on the importance of taking a strengths-based approach with parents, with 28 percent identifying this as an important relationship-building strategy. Similarly, home visiting staff often talked about the importance of being a positive source of support to parents. Parents echoed this as a major benefit for them. Many parents and staff talked about how important it was for the parent to have a consistent and positive support person outside of the family.

[Home visiting helped] strengthen the parenting skills that we didn't realize we had. Just acknowledging what we did have [by] just giving positive reinforcement and commenting on what she had seen me doing that was good - because I didn't know if it was good or not. – Parent

It is important to be strength based - drawing out their strengths, accentuating positives. Praising them for what they're doing well. I choose words carefully for areas of improvement, doing that in a mindful way that's not demeaning. – Home visitor

She's friendly and has patience with me and all my problems. She sees that I am stressed and overwhelmed with my family life, and she understands what we're going through. I like the way she keeps me going with her encouragement. – Parent

- **Partnership.** Parents and home visitors talked about their work together as a partnership, rather than home visitors coming in as the “experts.” Some home visiting staff emphasized the importance of working together with parents to prioritize goals or identify areas of support.

The relationship is professional. I have lots of confidence now in her and the work she does. She does not think she's above me and treats me with dignity and respect. We are learning together as we go along and we can both see and feel that. – Parent

We are a partnership. I am the person who supports them in doing what they want to do. I tell my parents at every visit that they are the expert and that I am only there to support them and provide new information and they can do with it what they want. – Home visitor

- **Respectful.** Parents and home visitors talked about how important it was that home visitors were respectful to families. Some home visitors referenced the importance of having respectful interactions in general, while others specified showing respect for homes they visit. A few home visitors mentioned showing respect for parents' cultural backgrounds as critical to forming positive relationships.

What I like most about her is that she is very respectable, courteous and nice. She is kind and has good manners when she arrives at my house. She's very good and she has made me feel very comfortable around her. – Parent

It's more guiding and supporting, but also learning from them and their family culture and beliefs. You need to respect that, and know that as a home visitor you are looking through a different lens. – Home visitor

Case study: Home visitor relationships with teen parents

Minnesota Visiting Nurse Agency (MVNA) Teen Hope is a large home visiting program located in urban Hennepin County, Minnesota. The program focuses on serving teen parents. Maintaining strong relationships with teen parents seems to be particularly important for a number of reasons.

- Staff report that many teen parents do not have strong relationships with trusted adults. Establishing a trusting relationship with teens is essential to their success with home visiting.
- Teens need to know that their home visitors are thinking about them. As such, staff stress the importance of communicating with teens more frequently than they may need to communicate with adults. Staff communicate with clients in the way that is most convenient for teens. Right now, that means frequent texting.

MVNA uses some unique practices to support staff's ability to build and maintain strong relationships with teens:

- Keep a strong focus on high quality supervision and staff retention. High staff retention means less turnover and more consistency for clients. As noted above, this is especially important for teen parents who may not have a consistent, strong relationship with another adult in their life.
- Give teens practical supports that they need. For example, having supplies at the ready helps teens know that their nurses are always there to support them.
- Build strong relationships where teens spend time, in school. MVNA has established relationships with 36 schools in Hennepin County. Home visitors typically have multiple parents who are enrolled at the same school. Home visitors communicate frequently with the school social workers and nurses. MVNA staff described how important it is to help school staff understand that they are partners with the same goal, helping the parent/student succeed. Home visitors often meet with students at a time that is respectful of their school schedule, such as lunchtime. Home visitors also frequently make referrals to school for parents who have disengaged from school. This can be an incentive for schools to partner with home visiting programs.

Continuing to promote positive relationships is an important aspect of strengthening recruitment and retention in home visiting. To learn more about strategies for promoting enrollment and long-term retention in services, please see the other briefs in this series: Referral process, Parent perceptions of program benefits, and Promoting retention in home visiting.

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