

Parent Perceptions of Program Benefit

Highlights from a qualitative exploration of parent retention and engagement in early childhood home visiting

Home visiting has emerged as a promising prevention strategy for young children and their families. Designed primarily to prevent child abuse and neglect, home visiting has been associated with not only prevention of child maltreatment but also a wide variety of child development and parenting outcomes. While home visiting is associated with a number of positive outcomes, these benefits are most likely to occur 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 programs, while other parents enroll but drop out of home visiting prematurely, or receive less than the prescribed quantity of services. 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.

Parents are more likely to enroll and remain in home visiting if they receive useful information and ongoing tangible benefits. This brief describes parents' reasons for enrolling in home visiting services, their perceptions of the benefits of services, and recommendations for strengthening their understanding of program services and benefits. The findings come from interviews with 320 parents and 98 home visitors and supervisors. A full description of the methods can be found in the project Methodology Brief.



Findings

Parents value the parenting information and resources they receive from their home visitors

Home visiting has been associated with a variety of positive outcomes for children. While parents may be motivated by a desire to see their children grow and succeed, most of the interviewed parents focused on the more immediate benefits that they experienced as parents. When asked why they enrolled in home visiting, and the benefits that they experienced after enrolling, most parents talked about the information and resources they received from home visitors. Several themes emerged in their comments.

First, at a general level, parents appreciated having **someone to go to for advice** whenever they needed it. Twenty-three percent of the interviewed parents said that the most helpful aspect of home visiting was having someone knowledgeable to answer questions. They appreciated having someone besides health care providers to talk with when they had questions about their pregnancy or about their child.

Just having that person that could answer any questions about the child or the pregnancy - things that sometimes you don't feel comfortable talking to a doc about. She made me feel really comfortable and that's what I liked. I had someone I could connect with. – Parent

I have a professional for advice that is accessible instead of having to go the hospital all the time or call for every question that I had concerning my pregnancy. – Parent

Second, parents, especially first-time parents, valued **learning how to take care of a baby**. Parents enroll and continue in home visiting because they are interested in having support in their new role as parents. More than half of the parents (54%) said that information about parenting was the most helpful aspect of home visiting services. Some parents also appreciated access to resources, such as car seats and diapers.

I wanted to do this program because this is my first child. I wanted to learn more about having a child. I knew that we would get professional help and advice. – Parent

I'm a first time mom and I wanted to give my child the best resources that I could get. I didn't want to have to struggle through parenthood. I wasn't really raised the best so I wanted better for my kid. – Parent

Every day she introduced me to something new. I learned a whole lot, for example baby eczema, swaddling, changing babies. She also prepared me for future things like for teething. She brought me the gates and other things to baby proof the house. – Parent

Third, parents found it helpful to **learn more about stages of child development**. Parents stay in the program because they value the ability to recognize age-appropriate behaviors and to promote their child's development and learning. Many parents appreciated recognizing that they can be a teacher to their child.

The program topics are most helpful, because it helps me learn how to tackle situations and recognize attitudes with the child's behavior and to know how to react to that. The child is not an adult. You have to take care of them differently depending on their age. – Parent

The educational part— I know different ways of talking to my son. She brings parent journal articles about a 20 months old child, like this is what they're doing. If I hadn't gone through this program, I'd just tell him, no. But instead, having her help me, she would teach me how to tell him no without saying no and explaining things in detail to help him. – Parent

Some of the activities opened my eyes to how she was developing and how I could help her make the most of that stage and age in her life. – Parent

Fourth, parents valued having someone else **monitor their child's development**, to ensure the child is physically and cognitively on track. Many parents enrolled and remained in the program for the reassurance that their child is healthy and growing.

They helped me know when things are normal for baby to do, like rolling and crawling and milestones... when to be worried and when not be worried about baby's health. – Parent

Knowing that we are on track is one of the biggest benefits because one of my worries with him was his not gaining weight. My [home visitor] will come up once a week to weigh him so then I don't have to go all the way down to the doctor. So that's helped. – Parent

Parents also see home visitors as a source of emotional support

When home visitors were asked what they thought parents see as the greatest benefit of services, they most frequently highlighted emotional support. They felt that parents most valued having access to a caring, reliable, and positive support person.

I think it's a person they can trust, especially if they've had a lot of loss and chaos in their upbringing. Sometimes we're the first person that's been there for them and hasn't gone away. Some moms I see are so isolated. They have no social contact with people. They look forward to visits, having someone come in and focus on them. – Home visiting staff

I think what they see is that somebody is really invested in them and supporting them. It makes them feel empowered. They may not use that word but they feel like they can do this and they can be a good mom. – Home visiting staff

For a lot of families we serve, they don't have consistent support in their life. Because of our longevity, they're getting a taste of what a healthy relationship is like. – Home visiting staff

While parents did not highlight this emotional support as frequently as the home visitors did, many (24%) did report that **emotional support** was an important program benefit. They often described their home visitors as caring and positive. They also appreciated having someone who will really listen and talk with them.

It built up my confidence to a place that I knew I could do it on my own, even though it started really rough for me. She helped remind me that I was strong enough to do it. – Parent

In my family, I feel really pressured by my boyfriend, his family, and my family about keeping or placing the baby. [The home visitor] is an unbiased person I can go to. [Home visitor] just gives me the facts and information if I'm worried, is an ear that's just there to listen if I need to talk to, and is just really understanding and a really nice person. – Parent

The emotional support. I was very depressed during my pregnancy, but the nurse helped me get over it. I was thinking about my relationship with my boyfriend and other stressful things in my life. I don't feel that way anymore. She would listen to me and cared what happened. – Parent

An emphasis on program benefits can strengthen strategies for engaging parents in services

The home visitors interviewed for this project described a number of strategies that they use to engage parents in services, encourage enrollment and retention, and strengthen outcomes for families. These strategies are closely linked to the benefits described by parents. Based on the input from home visitors and parents, the following strategies should be considered:

- **Describe how home visiting can enhance parenting skills.** When talking to parents, emphasize how the program can enhance parenting skills, provide referrals to other services, and promote child development. These benefits should also be emphasized when parents are showing signs of disengagement.
- **Provide examples of what happens in a home visit.** In outreach, staff felt that parents often did not have a good understanding of home visiting, making them reluctant to enroll. Providing examples of home visit activities and resources gives parents a clearer idea of what to expect.

When I explain the program, I try to give specific examples on what they're doing - like homemade toys and how that's tied to development. Sometimes I bring out the book we use with curriculum to give them a concrete idea. – Home visiting staff

- **Demonstrate ongoing benefits throughout the program.** Using a strength-based approach and offering ongoing positive reinforcement helps reduce anxiety and build confidence with new parenting skills. Celebrating milestones and reassuring parents that they are doing well are also strategies that resonate with parents.

Parents decide to continue with services for the benefits and reassurance that they are doing a good job as a parent. – Home visiting staff

- **Ask for feedback regularly.** Some parents may find visits to be less helpful over time. Check in frequently with parents about what is helpful and what is not helpful. When asking parents about their feedback, or exploring why they may have missed visits, it is important to be understanding and non-judgmental.

If I think they are just not interested in the program I will talk to them about it directly. If they are canceling last minute, sometimes home visitors might have said something that offended the family without realizing it and it's important to talk about it. – Home visiting staff

- **Know how to connect parents to local resources.** Home visitors should know what resources are available, including county-specific resources as well as services that are more widely available, and how to help families access them.

If they like the information, the resource information sharing is something that they might not want to let go of. – Home visiting staff

- **Build strong relationships with families.** Staff consistently talked about the importance of being non-authoritative and letting parents lead as foundational to a strong parent-home visitor relationship. Using a parent-centered approach, taking a genuine interest in families, and understanding parents' specific goals and needs can help home visitors tailor programming to each family.

I focus on the relationship. I tell them "I care about you, I know your history," and I follow up on things. For example, "A couple visits ago you were really sad, so I'm following up to see how you're feeling today." Let people know that they're on our mind. Let them know we care about them and not it's not just pity. If I know that someone is interested in a certain topic, I may mail it to them before I come in next time. Personalize efforts based on what's going on with the family. It's so much about professional connection. – Home visiting staff

I would say being authentic with families through listening, caring, and just being who I am has a positive engaging relationship with parents. People feel I am genuinely interested in them, which I am. I find it to be easy for me. – Home visiting staff

- **Stay accessible as someone with expertise to share.** Some parents may become disinterested when a home visitor appears to be less present or have no new skills or knowledge to provide. Staying attentive to what parents are interested in, and regularly providing opportunities to ask questions, can help home visitors share resources relevant to parents' changing needs over time.

When I go out, it's just focusing on resolving their problem and I don't expect anything back. When you're flexible to help them solve issues, and there's no one else who can, you become an asset and a partner. – Home visiting staff

Case Study: Mower County – Healthy Families America

While all parents can benefit from increased access to resources, it is especially important for parents in rural Minnesota. Rural parents interviewed for this project were slightly more likely than parents in more urban areas to say that access to resources was an important benefit of home visiting services.

To explore how rural home visiting programs recruit parents, we talked to home visiting staff in Mower County. Solutions used to address issues in Mower County are appropriate not only for rural programs, but can also be applied in urban settings.

Mower County is located in rural Southeastern Minnesota, with a population of about 40,000 and a poverty rate higher than the state average. Mower County's home visiting program serves families from various cultural groups and also single and teen parents. In Mower County, the health department and the human services department are merged. Home visiting staff share offices with county social workers and financial workers, and they have built good working relationships.

Being in a rural setting poses the challenge of isolation and a lack of resources for county residents. Many of the families in Mower County's home visiting program do not drive, which makes it hard to make appointments and access other resources such as services, food, or social opportunities. To address the issue of isolation, Mower County developed a monthly socialization program where families can come together to participate in an activity, such as carving pumpkins for Halloween. Through this socialization program, they have seen friendships develop. They also changed their policy around transportation so that nurses can transport clients in county vehicles. With this change, Mower County has seen new families participating in social activities who never did before.

Parents who participate in home visiting services identify a number of important ways in which services improve their parenting skills and provide them with needed emotional support. Emphasizing and promoting these benefits may help strengthen initial engagement in home visiting, as well as long-term retention. To learn more about parents' experiences in home visiting, and strategies for promoting long-term retention in services, please see the other briefs in this series: Home visiting referral process, Relationships between parents and home visitors, and Promoting retention in home visiting.

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DECEMBER 2017