

Using Home Visits with a Family-Centered Approach

By Siobian J. Minish & Laura S. McCorkle



Home visits help to establish partnerships.

long educators. This perspective is important in having a family-centered approach because educators can understand and appreciate the wealth of experience and knowledge that a family has about their child that the educator does not (Dunst, 2002; Dunst & Espe-Sherwindt, 2016; Gonzalez, Moll, & Amanti, 2005; Tomasello, Manning, & Dulmus, 2010).

The roots of a family-centered approach can be traced to Bronfenbrenner (1979). We

As the beginning of the school year approaches, Grace, an early childcare teacher of an infant/toddler classroom, prepares to set the school year off on a good note. She understands that working with families is a priority and considers the use of home visits to deepen her understanding of their specific needs, as well as how to support their children's transition into her classroom. In her professional development opportunities as an early childcare teacher, she has learned about two tools in partnering with families, the Routines-Based Interview (RBI) and Reciprocal Approach. Grace believes that both may be useful and decides to implement them with two families of children enrolled in her classroom.

In the fields of early childhood education (ECE) and early childhood special education (ECSE), educators, such as Grace, must work to find ways to partner with parents and caregivers in an attempt to create a bridge between the student's school and home. Throughout the process of creating this partnership, families and childcare providers must work together to build upon each child's individual strengths and areas of need. Establishing partnerships with families enrolled in early childhood is important so that families view educators as positive collaborators from the onset of their child's education.

Moreover, families are the constant in a child's life and their life-

recognize the child as a part of a family rather than just a part of a classroom and school. In using this approach, the educator and/or program acknowledges each family has strengths (Rouse, 2012; Swafford, Wingate, Zagumny, & Richey, 2015), "supports the abilities of families to meet the needs of their children," (Allen, & Petr, 1998, p. 4) and makes adaptations within the classroom and/or program to reflect the values, goals, and culture of the family (Hamilton, Roach, & Riley, 2003). Although decades of research support the use of a family-centered approach (Hiebert-Murphy, Trute, & Wright, 2011; Rouse, 2012), the process of implementing a family-centered approach may sometimes be unclear for early childhood educators (Vilaseca et al., 2019).

Both the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) and the Division for Early Childhood (DEC, 2014) support the use of a family-centered approach through its standards, position statements, and recommended practices. In their 2009 position statement on developmentally appropriate practice in early childhood programs for children birth to age 8, NAEYC emphasizes that "development and learning occur in and are influenced by multiple social and cultural contexts" (p. 13) and that educators should view each child through the sociocultural context of the child's family. Additionally, one of the guidelines given for providing a developmentally appropriate classroom is that educators "establish reciprocal relationships with families" (p.22).

Similarly, the family strand of DEC's Recommended Practices (2014) states "family practices refer to ongoing activities that promote the active participation of families in decision-making related to their child... or support families in achieving the goals they hold for their child and the other family members" (p. 10). Further, DEC Recommended Practices identifies three themes: (a) family-centered practices, (b) family capacity-building practices, and (c) family and professional collaboration as essential for practitioners in partnering with families.

Educators are encouraged to form a collaborative partnership with the family as a way to learn about who the child is, work together to provide positive outcomes for the child, and to promote the capacity of the family to make decisions that work best for their child and the entire family. Though home visits are not explicitly stated as an avenue to form this relationship, visiting a family in their home provides a space where they are comfortable and "have the high ground," so to speak, as well as being more flexible for families that may have scheduling challenges.

As our professional standards encourage the use of home visits, and an increase in enthusiasm for the provision and quality of home-visits is rising (Hughes-Belding et al., 2019), understanding approaches to providing home-based visits is pertinent to the professional development of our field. Therefore, in this article we discuss the importance of home visits, particularly for professionals working with children under the age of five and their families, and ways to use supports such as the routine-based interview (McWilliam, Casey, & Sims, 2009) and reciprocal approach (Woods & Lindeman, 2008).

The Importance of Home Visits

In 2017, the American Academy of Pediatrics issued a policy statement on the importance of early childhood home visiting and defined home visiting as "an evidence-based strategy in which a professional or paraprofessional renders a service in a community of private home setting" (Duffee et al., 2017, p. 1). Through the use of home visits, professionals may support families in a number of ways, including:

- (a) promoting overall child development,
- (b) monitoring for child abuse and neglect,
- (c) monitoring possible maternal depression, and
- (d) connecting families with social and economic support programs.

This policy statement proposed several benefits of home visiting programs such as laying a foundation for academic success, physical health, and economic stability for at-risk families.

In addition to the aforementioned benefits, home visits can give the family and the educator a chance to get to know one another and build a relationship around the child. Often, children enter a classroom having never been in out-of-home care or interacted with anyone other than their parents or caregiver. Home visits allow educators the opportunities to witness firsthand how children and families interact with one another during typical daily routines (Hughes-Belding et al., 2019).

Educators who have visited children in their homes have reported seeing their students in a more positive context and gaining empathetic feelings toward the families (Lin & Bates, 2010). In fact, the home visits allowed the educators to better "understand the struggles, prejudices, and stereotyping their children encounter in their daily lives" (Lin & Bates, 2010, p. 182) and to have more appreciation and understanding for families of diverse backgrounds and lifestyles. Having this positive viewpoint of the families they work with can help educators be more open to a family's needs and allow them to include parents in the planning for the classroom.

Scheduling and Practical Considerations

Often, one of the first questions that an educator has about completing home visits is "When will I have the time to do this?" Some programs, such as Head Start and early intervention programs funded through the federal or state government, require home visitation; therefore, educators and practitioners are provided time within their schedule to make these visits and are compensated. Educators in home child care centers or privately funded group child care centers typically do not have flexible work hours or paid time outside of the center hours to encourage them to make home visits. This can be a difficult hurdle to overcome, especially if a center is hesitant to allow for teachers to meet with families outside of the classroom. However, it is worthwhile to have a conversation with a center director or supervisor to see what accommodations can be made. Creative measures have been used, such as finding a substitute teacher to come in to the class to allow the educator to leave and meet with the family or allowing an educator to leave early one day to make up for time they spent doing a home visit after center hours.

Another consideration is how to schedule the home visits. At enrollment into the program, educators should determine the best method of contacting the family (i.e. email, text, phone call). Emails are often the easiest way of providing multiple options for timing and explanation of what the visit will entail. In composing emails to families, educators should state: (a) their availability to meet, (b) an explanation for why the classroom uses home visits, (c) what the family can expect, and (d) other options if the family chooses or cannot meet in their home. If a family is more comfortable using text communication, educators can use a handout to provide this information. Educators may also consider scheduling the first home visit through the use of a welcome letter to families prior to their child's entry into the program or school. *Figure 1* provides an example for educators to use when scheduling the first visit with a family.

Figure 1. Sample Letter

*Hello Ashley and Nathan,
I want to take a minute to welcome you to the CDL Infants 228 classroom! Rachel and I are so excited to have Preston in our class and cannot wait to meet your family! I know that you probably have a ton of questions to ask and many concerns you would like to discuss. In our classroom, we do voluntary home visits each year. This is not for us to check out your house and see how clean you keep things! We use this*

as a chance to meet with you in an environment that is most comfortable for Preston and for you. During this time, we discuss any questions or concerns that you have, discuss our Infant Program handbook (which details the specific guidelines and policies regarding the infant classrooms), and learn more about your family. We want this transition to be as smooth as possible for Preston and for you, so getting to know your individual needs is very helpful in allowing us to care for Preston in a way that is as close to home as we can get. Below is a list of dates and times that Rachel and I have set aside to meet with families. Please choose two times that would be most convenient for your schedule. I will schedule the visits as you reply and there is a high probability of us having your first choice open. If none of these times work, Rachel and I are happy to meet with you over the weekend or at another time. Also, if you would prefer for us to meet with you at the CDL or another venue, we can do that as well. These visits are completely voluntary, so please let us know if you would prefer not to have a home visit.

Thursday, July 20: 9:00-10:00 am
10:30-11:30 am
12:00-1:00 pm
1:30-2:30 pm
3:00-4:00 pm
4:30-5:30 pm
6:00-7:00 pm

Friday, July 21: 8:30-9:30 am
10:00-11:00 am
11:30-12:30 pm
1:00-2:00 pm
3:00-4:00 pm

Tuesday, Aug. 1: 12:00-1:00 pm
1:30-2:30 pm
3:00-4:00 pm

Rachel and I are looking forward to meeting your family!
Siobian

When scheduling a home visit, it is always important to stress that the purpose of the information gathering is to better partner with the family in caring for and educating their child. Educators should be mindful that some families may choose not to participate in home visits and should never be forced to comply. Therefore, educators should not make judgments or decisions about the family if they choose not to participate. In situations in which it is not possible to have a meeting in the family's home, the visit does not go as planned, families are reticent to share information and/or are less forthcoming than anticipated, there are a variety of other means of collecting information from and forming a relationship with the family. Some strategies an educator may use, include: (a) creating a questionnaire that allows families to answer similar questions to the home visit, (b) having a "Getting to Know You" time where the family visits the classroom for a specific activity, (c) sending home a blank "My Family" book where the family

writes down some of their favorite things about their home life, or (d) scheduling a phone call in place of a home visit. If these are not feasible, educators can utilize drop-off and pick-up times to informally share and gather information and form a relationship.

Beyond scheduling concerns, educators should consider their goals and outcomes for the home visit. During a home visit, the educator can use the allotted time to learn as much as they can about the child and their family through the use of family-centered practices as they engage in conversations with the family and observe children in their natural environment(s). While professionals should always gather information from families about their child's likes/dislikes, as well as information about the child's overall development, home visits may allow an educator to combine information gleaned from more formal parent reports with their own knowledge of child development for a more holistic picture of a child's development. Topics to discuss can include: (a) what a typical day for the child looks like, (b) activities that the family enjoys doing at home, and (c) any challenges the family faces in regards to daily routines. Learning about routines at home provides educators the opportunities to assess a child's language, academic skill, and social skill development (Spagnola & Fiese, 2007). The following approaches can be considered in structuring the format of the visit.

Routine-Based Interview

One approach that caregivers may consider in order to learn more about a family's typical day is the RBI. Although the term "routine-based interview" is the formal name used for this approach in gathering information from a family, a conversational approach should always be used in helping create a comfortable environment. Knowledge of child development across domains and good interpersonal skills are helpful in using the RBI (Boavida, Aguiar, & McWilliam, 2014). When implementing the RBI, educators must be cognizant of their non-verbal communication skills, while being attentive and responsive during interactions with the family.

Specifically, when facilitating the interview, the educator should remember that the focus is on the family and create a space where the family is comfortable sharing about their life. Sharing anecdotes about one's own family or other families one has partnered with takes the focus off of the family, and is not recommended; further, the educator should use discernment about making evaluative comments that reflect the educator's belief system. The goal of an instrument such as the RBI is to gain information and not evaluate the family.

Finally, a thoughtful interview may take one or two hours and should always be conducted in the family's native language. If the educator is not fluent in the family's native language, arrangements should be made to use a professional interpreter in conducting the interview.

In using the RBI, an educator or team member asks the family about their daily routines, what the family and child does during the routine, and the child's levels of engagement, inde-

pendence, and social relationship within the routine (McWilliam et al., 2011). For example, the educator may start by asking the family to describe what happens first in the morning and learn about their routines for getting their child dressed, fed, and any other interactions that may occur before moving on to other activities within the day such as community outings, naptime, and play activities.

During the interview, educators may find it helpful to follow the family's general sequence of routines as they typically occur throughout the day and ending when the child goes to bed. While asking about these routines, the educator should use open-ended questions in order to gather a more comprehensive understanding of what is happening during the routine. Specific questions could include, but are not limited to: (a) asking how the child is communicating during the routine, (b) how the child interacts with others present during this routine, and (c) who is present during the routine.

The family may also be asked about their level of satisfaction within the routine. It may also be helpful to ask the family to rank on a scale of one to five, how satisfied they are with the routine. By comparing rankings across routines, the family and educators may identify the routines that should be prioritized as needing the most support and address those immediately (McWilliam et al., 2009). See the sample below of an RBI interview.

Grace: Tell me about Emma's morning routine. When does she wake up and how do you know she is awake?

Brent: Emma typically wakes up around 6 or 6:15. I usually hear her because she likes to push her toy to make it play music. Some mornings she may be babbling and kind of talking to herself. I go into her room to get her out of her crib and change her diaper.

Through the use of the RBI, an educator or team member can assist the family in identifying routines that the family would like support in facilitating their child's level of development and participation within the routines. Moreover, the family selects functional goals or outcomes to address upon completing the interview (Boavida, Aguiar, McWilliam, & Correia, 2016; McWilliam, 2012). As a result of completing an RBI with a family, a classroom educator is also able to determine how a child generalizes developmental skills across different settings. The use of the RBI can create a context in which families and classroom educators can compare observations of how a child is functioning across environments and set goals accordingly.

Reciprocal Approach

Another approach for gathering information to work with families involves the use of a reciprocal approach, such as the framework put forth by Woods and Lindeman (2008). Within the context of using a reciprocal approach, educators or other team members provide information to a family on topics such as how to embed strategies within daily routines while also collecting information from the family about their concerns and the child's natural environment. This can be done in a similar way to completing an RBI (McWilliam, et al., 2009).

Three principles used in the Woods and Lindeman (2008) framework are: (a) the provision and collection of information in a concurrent manner, (b) the recognition of uniqueness in each family and child, and (c) the creation of an individualized plan for the provision and collection of information relevant to the family. Specifically, the reciprocal approach values that each family is different and what works for one, may not work for another. During the home visit, the educator will work with the individual family to problem solve and find ideas that can easily be embedded into their daily routine. Attention should be given to times of day or highly preferred activities of the child. Throughout the visit, the educator provides information about places in the community and different strategies for learning, all while carrying on a natural conversation with the family. For example, if a parent explains that they do not have an area where their child can practice gross motor movements, the educator may suggest the park that has already been discussed as a place that the child likes to go. Additionally, the educator can point out ways that the family has already been helping their child to learn. The key of the reciprocal approach is for both the educator and the family to be sharing information from their expert points of view.

Within this framework, there are five strategies that may be used during a reciprocal approach. The first is for educators to create a context for a conversation, though the educator can take notes for later reference. Many families may be uncomfortable with providing information in the formalized setting of an interview where the educator is viewed as the "expert" and the parent/caregiver is responding to their questions. In creating a level of comfort and establishing a rapport with the family, the educator could begin a conversation about the child and continue to ask questions and collect information. This approach is framed more as an informal conversation with both the parents and the educator providing and receiving information.

With the reciprocal approach, the educator is acknowledging that the parent is their child's expert and has the important role of being their child's only constant advocate (Graves & Graves, 2014). Additionally, rather than spending their time completing paperwork, which could lead to decreased interaction from the family and reduced individualization in planning (Woods & Lindeman, 2008), the educator is providing an opportunity for the family to feel that their input is important and they may provide more information about their child.

Educators may also use strategies such as questionnaires and checklists, such as Squires and Bricker's Ages and Stages Questionnaire (2009) or others used by the child care program, during the conversation. These questionnaires provide the dual context of providing the child care teacher with topics to discuss as well as providing information about the developmental norms. It should be noted, however, that these questionnaires and checklists do not take the place of a conversation with the family and should not take up the majority of the home visit.

Finally, the reciprocal approach suggests a "mapping strategy" (Woods & Lindeman, 2008, p. 280). During this time, the educator and family discusses opportunities for learning beyond

school and home. The goals that the family has for the child are reviewed and community resources to help achieve these goals are shared. This could be a local park where the child can practice gross motor skills on large play equipment or a grocery store where the child can practice using language. The example below highlights this interaction.

Grace: "What kinds of things do you like to do with Matteo while you're at home?"

Gloria "I like to take him to the park. He loves to go down the slide and watch the ducks. We also read before bed. Usually a book or two. Joseph plays chase with him."

Joseph has been very quiet during the visit and has only given one or two-word answers. In an attempt to draw him out, Grace says to him, "Tell me more about this chase game you guys play!"

Joseph: "Oh, it's just the usual. He crawls around the house and I chase after him on my hands and knees. When I catch him, I tickle him to make him laugh. Then, we do it again."

Home visits can easily turn into what looks like a traditional parent-teacher conference, with the educator giving information to the parent about what they "could" or "should" be doing (Whyte & Karabon, 2016). Instead, through the giving and sharing of information that occurs when using a reciprocal approach, families and providers are able to identify simple strategies that can easily be embedded into everyday routines.

Educators can use home visits as an opportunity to allow themselves to shift into the role of a learner and gain as much information about the family and child as they can. These home visits can provide a glimpse into the family's everyday life. Using a reciprocal approach allows for more dialogue between the classroom educator and the family involved. When there is more dialogue, the educator understands more about the child and the family and has established the groundwork for a solid and respectful foundation (Brown, 2017).

Building Rapport Through Body Language

Using strong interpersonal skills is critical in demonstrating to the family that the educator is interested in what they have to say. Therefore, the consideration of non-verbal gestures and body language plays a key role in expressing this interest and conveying the educator's interest in creating a space where the family feels comfortable sharing details about their family's routines. By using these skills, family members understand that their concerns are a priority; thus, they feel respected and heard.

Creating this safe environment is done by thoughtful questioning techniques and awareness of one's body language. This involves asking open-ended and follow-up questions, as well as repeating and/or paraphrasing the family's comments back to them when documenting information to make sure that the educator has captured a true representation of the family's routine. In addition, when considering one's body language, the educator should establish and maintain eye contact, use

an open-body posture, lean forward to indicate interest in the speaker, use gestures such as nodding one's head, and be mindful of maintaining an interested expression on one's face throughout the home visit. Further, turning off and putting away technology such as a cell phone or other personal devices should occur automatically when interacting with young children and families.

Using Information Gathered to Support the Child

With the use of the RBI, reciprocal approach, or other intake methods, such as questionnaires, direct observation, and interviews (Spangola & Fiese, 2007), educators can use this opportunity to learn of the child's strengths and challenges. At this point, the educator and family can work to create an individual plan of care, or an Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP), based on the parents' preferences, requests, and needs. In developing a plan of care or IFSP, the family, educator(s), and other team members (e.g., speech-language pathologist, physical therapist, audiologist) create a blueprint for services to support both the child and family (Bailey, Raspa & Fox, 2012).

A large part of a plan of care or a family's educational plan is the use of goals created by the family and educator to support the child and family's needs. In creating these goals, a collaborative discussion should take place in which the parents and educators identify specific challenges to address (Salazar, 2012). Collaborative discussions about goals include an operational definition of the goal agreed upon by all team members, as well as the identification of opportunities and routines in which the child and caregiver use strategies to meet the specified goal. Additionally, discussing which services may be needed to meet the goal and where services will take place are included in the plan.

By working with families to create these specific definitions and plans for meeting a goal in advance, the likelihood that the goal will be accomplished increases. Families can see that the educator is making every effort to help their child meet goals set forth in the plan of care. During collaborative goal setting, using reflective listening skills is key to ensure that both parties feel heard. Through the implementation of these strategies for effective home visits, childcare providers are able to let families know they value this partnership.

Conclusion

There are many home visits models but the primary role of the educator is to establish a working partnership with the family which begins upon the child's referral or entry into a childcare program. Since the home visiting models vary, the authors recommend more research on the frequency and length of home visits. Routine-Based Interviews and the Reciprocal Approach are both methods that help build and maintain this family-educator relationship particularly during a home visit. Both tools, incorporated with strong non-verbal and reflective listening skills, may be effective and provide a context to gather information from a family and develop collaborative partnerships between families and childcare providers.

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