Orienting Families to Home Visiting
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NMAIMH competencies addressed
Working with Others
- Building & maintaining relationships
- Collaborating
Communicating
- Listening
- Speaking
- Writing

If someone were to ask any of the families that you serve what the New Mexico Home Visiting program is about, how would they answer that question? They might start by describing what their home visitor does with them during home visits. They might also talk about the goals they are working on with the help of their home visitor. The foundational interaction that can help each family fully understand what the New Mexico Home Visiting program is about is the initial parent orientation.

In the same way that we focus on orienting new home visitors and home visiting supervisors to their roles, orienting parents to the services we provide will set the stage for everything that comes next. It is critical that the home visitor and the family have a shared understanding about what will happen during home visits and what the family can expect from their home visitor. It is just as important that the family understands what their role will be, especially around their participation in a reflective approach to home visiting and in discussions about their relationship with their child.

In the same way parents can bring their past experiences, values, and sometimes misperceptions to interpretations of their child’s behavior, they will also bring their past experiences, values, and misperceptions to their expectations of the home visitor (and by extension, the home visiting program). And with home visiting being somewhat of a unique service, their frame of reference may be quite limited. What might they compare home visiting too? Teaching, counseling, social work? There might be some elements of each of these services in home visiting, but at the same time, home visitors in the NM Home Visiting program are not acting as teachers, counselors or social workers. And if a parent were expecting any of these services from their home visitor, there would definitely be a mismatch of expectations.
An orientation can take the form of a discussion with a parent (or parents), optimally on the first visit. It would help to have written material that can be used as a guide so that important points are not missed. This could be in the form of a list of bulleted orientation items. This written overview can then be left with the parent for future reference after the more extensive orientation discussion. It can also be used to help the parent describe the program to their partner, or other family members who were not present at the orientation visit. This visit can also incorporate an opportunity for the family to decide if the program sounds like a good match for them, and if they choose to agree to accept the services. If an assumption is made that the family will automatically want the home visiting services described to them in the parent orientation, then you run the risk of proceeding full steam ahead with a family that may have silently decided that this is not for them. This might play itself out as a series of no-shows for appointments, or other behaviors that can be interpreted as resistance or non-compliance.

The orientation process actually begins prior to any “official” orientation visit. It begins with the literature you provide about the program, what you have written on your website, and when the family makes that first call to inquire about home visiting services. It’s in these information-sharing opportunities where you might want to create a succinct description of the program, including essential key elements. There may not be a need to share all of the details in these early communications because that level of detail can be covered later at the orientation visit.

It can also be helpful to refer back to the initial orientation as you move ahead with services, after the family has agreed to participate. As the home visitor begins to implement elements of the program, he/she can point out things that were touched on in the orientation. For instance, when the home visitor brings the Ages and Stages assessment to complete, she can remind the parent that this is one of the assessment tools that she had mentioned in the orientation and why it is part of the program. Or, as she comments on an interaction between a mother and her baby, she can explain that this is what she talked about when she described focusing on parent-child interactions and the parent-child relationship.

Then there is always the possibility that even after a complete orientation, and references are made back to the orientation as you implement aspects of the program, some families may still have misperceptions about the home visitor’s role. It is in these instances that a re-orientation would be appropriate. Not a total “re-do” of the initial orientation, but just a review of the information that was shared at the orientation that can be revisited to remind the parent about an aspect of the program where there seems to be a misunderstanding. For instance, a home visitor might remind a parent, “Remember during our first visit when I explained how we will be focusing on you and your child doing things together (parent-child interactions), well we’re not able to do that if you leave me to play with Samantha while you work on washing the dishes.”

In summary, orientation to home visiting services begins at the very onset of communication about your program, through the literature you share, your website, and
through initial parent inquiry. Focusing on orientation in a first visit will help to set the stage for mutual understanding and mutual expectations. And if a parent makes a request that is outside of the scope of work of the home visitor, then the home visitor can revisit orientation information as a re-orientation.

Talking points for supervisors

- In situations where a home visitor is having difficulty connecting with a parent, ask them to describe the initial orientation visit, what they covered, and how that went.
- Meet with staff and brainstorm about what might go into a bulleted list of orientation items that can be given to a family after the orientation discussion.
- Think about how you explain the objectives and overview of the home visiting program to your staff when they are interviewing for the job of home visitor and during their orientation to the program. Are they provided with all the information they need to adequately orient new families to the program?

References/Additional Resources