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

The Orientation Home Visit: Orient as a verb means to “find direction” or “give direction”. As home visitors, everything we do during our first home visit with a parent is geared toward helping the parent understand who we are, why we are there, and creating an opportunity to reflect with them about the direction we might travel together over time. It is also our first glimpse into who this parent and baby are, how they are with each other and what they might need and want from us. In thinking about the ways in which we prepare for and approach the initial home visit, it’s important to have a clear vision of what we hope to accomplish. It is equally important to be realistic about what may not happen during that very first meeting, due to time constraints, the comfort level and expectations of the parent, and other factors that could potentially impact how things go. Fortunately, we can approach orientation as an ongoing process - one that is refined over time. This gives us ample opportunities to share and revisit information in a thoughtful way without rushing parents, or flooding them with too much information.

Getting Started: During the first home visit, we have typically have lots of information we need to provide to parents about our programs. This may include paperwork and forms to fill out, assessment tools to discuss, curriculum materials to review, etc.

How we share this information is critical. Sharing requires sensitivity to a parent and their baby with respect to the timing and amount of information we want to give them. We can also build in opportunities to allow parents to reflect on this information and ask questions as we go, creating a dialogue. This sets the stage for our ongoing work with parents, and is an important beginning in helping parents experience the ways in which we will be talking and relating to and with each other. Jeree Pawl said “how you are is as important as what you do”. Never is this truer, than during the first home visit. How a parent
experiences us the first time we meet with them can open the door to our ongoing relationship, or shut that door – quite literally! Creating a safe environment where trust can evolve, usually begins with our very first encounter with a family. This is our opportunity to begin establishing the holding environment that will support a working alliance with us and the parent. The relationship developed between us and the family ultimately supports the relationship between the parent and the baby, and has powerful implications for how our work together will evolve over time.

**Keeping the Mother and Baby Central:** When we get caught up in the flurry of paperwork and other information we need to get through during the first couple of visits, it’s easy to forget to focus on the most important aspect of the work – the parent and child relationship. Orienting a parent from the beginning about how you will be exploring the various aspects of this relationship together, creates a context for future home visits. Emphasizing that much of what we do together will be related to the interactions between them and their child is key in helping a parent understand our reasons for being there. If we notice ourselves losing sight of this as the central focus during the orientation visit, we can be intentional in remembering periodically, to circle back to the parent child relationship again during the conversation. This will hold true in subsequent home visits as well.

**The places we can get stuck:** Just as a parent is getting to know us and trying to figure out who we are and why we are there, as home visitors we experience the same process with a new parent. It is important to recognize what we bring to the initial interaction. We need to have the self-awareness to notice our own triggers & associations, and be able to see what might get in the way of our ability to be objective. In the same way that a parent’s view of us may be clouded by their past experiences, our perceptions of parents will be influenced by our own histories, both personal and professional. Recognizing that this is normal and to be expected, helps us to pay wise attention to this process and can provide us insight into the places where we might potentially get stuck.

Finally, we can think of orientation as ongoing process. With time, as our relationship with a family deepens, our shared understanding of the work deepens and changes meaning. Reorienting, redefining and renegotiating how the work will go, is an integral part of this process.

**Questions to encourage discussion and reflection…**

- How can the orientation visit become a conversation, rather than a series of checklists, forms or a downloading of information?
- Are there ways that we can use the required tools, materials and paperwork during the orientation visit as a springboard to create a dialogue that links back to the importance of the parent/child relationship?
- How can we manage our own feelings of urgency around all of the tasks that need to be completed during orientation? Are there ways to slow things down if needed? Can the orientation happen over a series of home visits?
- What are the ways in which we can weave the parent/child relationship into the conversation? How do we keep this as the central focus of the orientation visit?
- How can we start to help a parent think about what is most important and meaningful to them in relation to their parenting? How can this become a starting point for our work together? Can we support them in articulating their expectations of us and of our program?