Home Visiting and Fathers
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NMAIMH competencies addressed
Direct Service Skills
- Responding with empathy
- Advocacy
Working with others
- Building and maintaining relationships
- Supporting others/mentoring
Reflection
- Contemplation
- Self-awareness

After my oldest son was born my wife and I made the decision to each work half-day and take shifts caring for Joseph in our home. Being at home with my young son part of the day was a joy and I look back on those days as “golden.” However, being a father at home during the workweek with his young child was not a very common arrangement at the time. One particular day stands out in my memory as the day I was reminded that fathers were not expected to stay home with their young children.

On this day, when Joseph was about two years old, we drove to the local Target one afternoon. I helped him out of his car seat, positioned him in the child seat of the shopping cart, and then proceeded toward the store. An older woman was walking in the opposite direction and remarked, “Oh, you must be babysitting today.” The statement caught me off guard, but my response came quite naturally, “No, this is my son.”

How does one “babysit” their own child? My interpretation of what the woman meant was that it’s not a father’s role to shoulder the responsibility of caring for his young child. Since that time I believe more fathers are choosing to be stay-at-home dads, or are sharing child care responsibilities. However, I believe this still is the exception to the rule, as traditional values, attitudes and practices seem to linger in our society around the roles and responsibilities of fathers and mothers. Families need the flexibility to
determine what arrangements work best for them, and society needs to support them in their decisions and accept and honor the choices they make.

How does this translate to our home visiting work? One area to explore is our own expectations about fathers and their children. As supervisors, managers, TA support persons, and home visitors, our values, beliefs and past experiences can impact our work. For instance, in my family of origin, child rearing was my mother’s responsibility, along with my grandmother’s, as she lived with us. Some of the reasons for this can be attributed to the era I grew up in, as well as our Italian roots. As I offer my contributions to the field of home visiting, I need to have an awareness of these personal experiences and how they may affect decisions I make. Reflective supervision provides me an opportunity to examine these experiences in the context of my work. Some of the questions I might explore include, “Am I keeping fathers in mind in discussions about parent-child relationships, or am I only thinking about mother and child?” Or, “As the professional development team, are we including in our on-line trainings opportunities for home visitors to think about the particular needs of fathers?”

The same can be true for home visiting supervisors. What are your beliefs about a father’s relationship with his young child? As you provide reflective supervision for your home visitors, are you asking about the father? If the father does not attend the home visiting sessions, in what ways can you encourage home visitors to support mothers in sharing information provided in the visit with fathers? And for home visitors, are they exploring the possibility of conducting a home visit at a time that the father can be present?

In order to get to a place where we are considering these questions, we have to be aware of our thoughts, values and feelings about the role of fathers in their child’s life. This is where opportunities for reflection come in. Through reflection we inform our practice by exploring (and being conscious of) what we bring to the table and how that might impact our actions and reactions. In this way we can increase our effectiveness with families as we collaborate with them along this journey we call home visiting.

Questions to encourage discussion and reflection…

- As a supervisor is there flexibility in your agency to encourage staff to offer some home visits in the evenings or on weekends to provide opportunities for fathers to participate?
- What outreach efforts can you develop to engage fathers (such as a fathers support group)?
- How do you challenge your home visitors to keep fathers in mind if they cannot attend the home visits?