

Preventing Dropout and Promoting Retention

Highlights from a Qualitative Exploration of Parent Retention and Engagement in Early Childhood Home Visiting

An extensive body of research has linked home visiting programs with a wide variety of benefits for children and parents. These benefits are strongest 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, while others drop out of services or receive fewer visits than recommended. 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.



The recommendations 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 Summary.

Findings

Most parents discontinue services for practical reasons

Among parents who stopped services early, most did so because of practical barriers to participation. Very few parents stopped services early because they were not satisfied with the program or with their home visitor. In fact, many wanted to continue the program.

The most common reason parents stopped services early is because **they were too busy to participate**. Thirty percent of parents said they could not fit home visiting into their busy schedule. An additional 18 percent of parents said their lives were too chaotic, or they were going through a crisis situation. A few parents also said that they were too busy with other programs, or that the program was too similar to something else they were already enrolled in to make time to participate.

I started school and I also started working. I could not find time, I would've loved to continue. – Parent

I got so busy, so I stopped. She would text me for 3 months after the last visit, 'Does this week work?' and it just didn't. My schedule meant I was back and forth between 2 houses--the baby's father and my place. – Parent

I called her and said for right now I was too overwhelmed with everything that's going on and told her for the time being that I was going to cancel the appointments and stop the program until I could get a better handle on things. – Parent

Another practical barrier to continuing the program was **moving**. Twenty-one percent of parents said they did not continue the program because they moved. Many program staff described strategies they use to keep parents engaged when they move, including referring them to home visiting programs in their new area. However, staff noted that it can be difficult to transition parents to new home visitors, and that sometimes staff cannot locate the parent after they move. Moving may also put additional strain on already busy parents' schedules.

I was moving. When she was coming, I was homeless so I was meeting at a temporary house. So once I was getting ready to move, I just ended up stopping so I could get ready for that. – Parent

Some parents feel they no longer need the program

Thirty percent of parents who stopped services early said they felt **they no longer needed the program**. Some parents said they did not need the program anymore because they had all the support they needed, or because the program helped them meet their goals. In fact, 19 percent of parents said they left early because they got everything they needed from the program. Staff also said that some parents have met their goals and are doing well when they leave the program.

My baby got older and I told her that I would call her if I needed her. I felt like I could handle things as the baby got older. – Parent

I didn't really need the help at that time. I still had classes I was taking that was all about the same things, like making goals and what to do about taking care of the baby. – Parent

I was living at home and had help at home. But if lived elsewhere and not at home, I would be more exhausted and need more help. – Parent

Some parents wanted to continue or re-enroll or did not want to stop services.

I wanted to get the number. I actually lost the number to contact them and I have got a new number and I was actually going to call to see how I can reach them again. It was just not a stable home at that point. It was a lot going on. – Parent

My first nurse explained that if I missed the next appointment her supervisor told her I had to be dropped from the program. I definitely would have liked to continue. With the scheduling, she would come over on Fridays or Saturdays. Saturdays were my only day off from work and I just didn't want to be bothered. I was working full time for the full 9 months. – Parent

Strategies for improving retention

Find ways to accommodate busy parents

The most common reason parents leave home visiting programs early is because they are too busy to participate. Programs will need to find creative ways to accommodate busy parents to improve program retention.

Many parents who left the program early suggested that **more flexible scheduling** would have helped them stay enrolled longer. Some suggested meeting in the evenings or on weekends, meeting less frequently, or taking a temporary break from visits during busy times. Some programs have found ways to accommodate these suggestions. However, sites acknowledged that flexibility with time of day can be challenging, because they operate through county public health agencies, and modifying job descriptions to include these hours can be difficult.

I think flexibility [is important], and I think most people do that. Some agencies do not allow overtime and keep all visits during work hours, but that's difficult. – Home visiting staff

With those that are shutting down, just be as flexible as possible. Be client-oriented. We're flexible with our schedule, and I do late visits, but we miss those nights with our families. Sometimes I drive 1.5 hours one way to visit clients. If that happens it's cumbersome but you accommodate if they're willing to meet. – Home visiting staff

Sometimes I've been able to meet with them on a more limited basis. Like, if you know that you have a job that you have a day off in the middle of the week, can we try to meet once a month to reserve a time where I can come see you? If you have a school vacation or school break is it possible to meet with you during that time? – Home visiting staff

Help parents understand program benefits throughout the program

Some parents leave the program early because they feel they no longer need it. And while some parents may truly have all the support they need, others may benefit from longer participation. It may be helpful to talk with parents about the parenting skills they will learn at various stages of their child's development.

If they're truly not interested, I don't try to get them to stay in the program. If they are truly informed of the program and know what they're saying no to, then that's ok. But if they don't seem to understand the program, I try to explain that and be flexible and try to work with them on it. – Home visiting staff

Continue to leverage strong parent-home visitor relationships

Thirty percent of parents said they continue in home visiting programs because they like their home visitors. Nearly all parents had very positive things to say about their home visitors. Staff talked about very intentional strategies they use to build these relationships, and said this strong relationship is a major contributor to retention. For example, staff talked about making sure visits are client-centered and interesting to parents, show parents genuine interest and care, provide positive reinforcement, celebrate milestones, and build relationships with other family members.

I think there's belief that the curriculum can make all these impacts and it can move people in different directions, but we have to remember it's not just the curriculum itself. It's the relationship you have and the trust and the nurses who are administering the program. I have a strong view that the curriculum is a tool, we are the catalyst for change. – Home visiting staff

Targeted communication strategies may help when parents disengage

Staff discussed several strategies for ways to communicate with parents both on an ongoing basis, and if they have missed visits.

Personalize communications to families. Staff talked about how customizing their outreach shows that they are interested in parent's lives, and creates opportunities to reach out when parents may be disengaging.

Be persistent with the family and try to remember things about them - I might even look up their academic calendar and say hey I noticed it's finals week, hang in there! I try to be creative and remember things from the last visit and mention things I know mom likes to do with baby. I always send mother's day cards and birthday cards. It's just a little something to say, I like being in this relationship with you learning about your baby. I have had people text back; I had a teen mom tell me that she'd never gotten a birthday card in the mail before. – Home visiting staff

Reach out to referral sources or emergency contacts. Some programs create data sharing agreements with referral sources and other social services programs so that they can find parents who have missed visits. Some programs notify referral sources when they are looking for a parent, so that the referral source can ask the parent to contact the home visiting program.

Sometimes, we don't know where parents are, like if they moved and we don't know how to contact them. Sometimes we flag their WIC chart to try and connect with them. Or we notify the clinic and ask them to have the client call. – Home visiting staff

Be consistent and persistent. Many staff talked about how important it is to routinely reach out to parents who may be disengaging. Some more experienced staff and supervisors said that new staff may be surprised at the level of intensity of outreach efforts, and may need support to get over the feeling they are being overly intrusive.

If we're having trouble connecting with them, I still reach out weekly even if they have been canceling or not responding. I text, call, or send a note to remind them I'll still like to see them. I let them know that even if they're going through stress, I'm still here... and I'm not going to drop them or not see them anymore because they're having trouble reaching out to me. – Home visiting staff

Remind families that the program is voluntary. Parents and staff alike talked about how important it was for parents not to feel judged by their home visitors. Staff said it helps to remind parents that the program is voluntary, and they are welcome to participate if they want to.

Sometimes it's good to just swing by their home when there hasn't been any contact from them at all. We just remind them it's voluntary. People usually say yes they want to continue. Stopping by someone's house can feel intrusive but when I give it a try it's not too bad. For many of the families we serve, it feels different. We leave notes on doors. – Home visiting staff

Use the communication method that parents prefer. Staff said that most parents prefer texting. Many programs gather release forms from parents so they can use text messages.

I use text messaging a lot. If I have not seen a mom or can't contact her, I'll text her, "Hey it's been a while. I'd love to set up a visit. Let me know if you're available Friday." A lot of our younger clients are not listening to voicemails or responding to calls, but texting is much more effective. I think it's less threatening to the generation we are working with, it helps a lot to bring them back in and reconnect. – Home visiting staff

Case study: Quin Community Health Services

Challenges in a rural setting

Quin Community Health Services' (CHS) home visiting program faces a few challenges being a smaller program in rural Minnesota. With a small team, staff take on several roles in addition to trying to maintain the flexibility to meet clients' needs. Similar to other programs in a rural setting, Quin CHS also experiences a large amount of travel time between the several towns they serve. Nurses could be out of the office for an entire day, spending most of that time traveling between each appointment. Their client population is mobile and tends to move frequently from home to home. Text messaging has been effective in helping home visitors stay connected with their clients.

Strategies to meet challenges

Having reliable, dedicated, and committed home visitors is essential to making this smaller program successful. The ability to be flexible and individualize the program to meet clients where they are at, and allowing clients to determine what works for them, has been helpful to retaining clients. Home visiting nurses need to be skilled with planning and prioritizing, and to be strategic about scheduling appointments in different parts of town.

The flexibility is one that I think they go above and beyond and rescheduling those appointments time and time again...It's just trying to meet up and get those appointments, and I think they really do a good job at making themselves available to whatever the client is available to do. – Home visiting staff

Quin CHS is committed to supporting home visiting staff and giving them the tools they need.

I think the best advice is to be persistent and give nurses support that they need...because it is a tough job. We work out there and sometimes we feel like we're all by ourselves so just make sure your staff feel like they're supported and talk about what they're doing and celebrate those big deals that they've retained a certain number of people. We have to celebrate every victory. – Home visiting staff

Parents typically leave home visiting programs because they are too busy to participate, because they feel they no longer need the program, or because they move. Continuing to promote positive relationships is an important aspect of long-term retention, but programs will also need to focus on creative solutions to practical barriers to participation. To learn more about strategies for promoting enrollment and long-term retention in services, please see the other briefs in this series: Referral process, Parent perceptions of program benefits, and Home visiting relationships.

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