



Elevating Parent Voice in Home Visiting: Preparing for Authentic Parent Partnerships



Introduction

Home visiting is a time-tested, evidence-based pathway to fostering healthy families with school-ready children and confident parents. Home visiting began in the early 1900s when “upper-class women,” guided by Mary E. Richmond’s *Friendly Visiting Among the Poor: A Handbook for Charity Workers*, were deployed to tenements to advise “poor mothers.”¹ While Richmond encouraged home visitors to understand the structural impacts of labor laws and disinvestment in neighborhoods with families of lesser means, she also gave prescriptive advice for how best to parent—from offering highly specific feeding tips to encouraging visitors to form relationships with the teachers of the family’s school-age children.

With the long lens of history, Richmond’s guide provides a signpost to document how far home visiting programs have come in working to establishing respectful, culturally sensitive relationships between caregivers and visitors. Yet despite this progress, home visiting, like so many social service programs, is still characterized by a built-in power imbalance between provider and participant, where the home visitor is the expert and the parent is the student. Services are predicated on the

The Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) Program supports voluntary, evidence-based home visiting services for at-risk pregnant women and parents with young children up to kindergarten entry. Home visiting helps prevent child abuse and neglect, supports positive parenting, improves maternal and child health, and promotes child development and school readiness.



[Visit the MIECHV Program website to learn more!](#)

assumption that poverty (or another eligibility factor) diminishes the abilities of parents to care for their children; core home visitor responsibilities, such as the continuous monitoring of child-parent interactions and risk factor screenings, unintentionally reinforce the idea that parents need to be watched carefully to make sure they are not a danger to their children; and there remain persistent differences in levels of education, social class, and race between far too many home visitors and parents.²

One important way to begin to correct these inequities is to center parent voices. Parents must be at the table, meaningfully informing home visiting programming at all levels, from local implementing agency (LIA) decisions about day-to-day activities to awardee decisions about development and funding. Agencies are making great strides in this area and the numbers of parent leaders within the home visiting field continue to grow. Yet, too often, programs rely on the input of those parents who are most comfortable sharing their thoughts and opinions and assume that these opinions reflect the needs and priorities of the mostly silent majority. Many also rely on subjective assessments of “leadership potential” to determine which parents to groom for leadership positions—assessments which are often colored by unexamined biases. The unfortunate result of these approaches is programming that fails to reflect the collective needs of parents.

This tip sheet offers awardees and LIAs a framework for welcoming and recognizing *all* parents as valuable and equal partners. It explores three critical opportunities for improving the quality of parent engagement:

- **Ready the table:** How can we prepare awardee and LIA leadership to meaningfully partner with parents?
- **Think cohort:** How can we foster a cohort of parents who advocate jointly for shared needs, rather than relying on individual parent voices?
- **Convene meetings that matter:** How can we create meetings that are welcoming and inviting for all parents?



Ready the Table

“Readiness” describes the degree to which an agency is willing and prepared to act on an issue. Without readiness, any effort toward change is doomed to failure. Readying the table for authentic parent partnership requires awardees and LIAs to think critically about three main questions:

- **Why** is it beneficial to partner with parents?
- **What** has prevented these partnerships from being realized in the past?
- **How** can we prepare for meaningful involvement?

Answering these questions can reveal why parents may be reluctant to become involved in home visiting activities; how staff misperceptions, biases, and assumptions may have shaped past partnership efforts; and the types of resources you will need to dedicate to engagement efforts.

Defining the Why

For most awardees and LIAs, forging a partner relationship with another professional—individual or agency—starts with a robust internal discussion about the value of the relationship to both the agency and the potential partner. Yet when it comes to defining the why of parent engagement, our reasoning is often vague. We say things like “parents’ voices are important” or “parents need to be at the table.” And while both statements are true, imagine partnering at the LIA level with a local pediatric group practice—no one would substantiate the partnership by simply saying, “pediatricians’ voices are important.” Instead, we point to evidence supporting the importance of well-child visits for school readiness and we describe how a collaboration with the local practice will help families prepare for these visits.

Articulating the benefits of parent engagement is equally important—but doing so may take some work, requiring a shift from thinking of parents as “participants” to parents as “partners.”



But articulating the why will not only build buy-in for broader parent engagement but will also move parent voice from the sidelines to the heart of planning processes. And being able to clearly communicate to parents why their voices are important is key to increasing participation and maintaining involvement over time.

Some questions to help you articulate *why* include the following:

- What are the benefits to the agency of partnering with parents?
- What can parents' lived experiences and perspectives mean for your work?
- How does partnering with parents align with the goals, values, and mission of the agency?

Understanding the Why Not

As you begin to explore the value of parent engagement and the ways you hope to involve parents as partners and thought leaders moving forward, it may be helpful to look at what may have prevented these partnerships from being realized in the past. For many awardees and LIAs, this may mean examining deeply held biases and misperceptions about who parents are and the value of their contributions.

Some questions to consider include the following:

- **What biases do leadership and staff hold about parents who are served by home visiting programs?** How can these biases be addressed and dismantled?
- **How do leadership and staff discuss participants with one another?** How do these conversations shape perceptions of parents' intelligence and abilities?
- **Who is considered a subject matter expert?** How does this align with leadership's views of parents? What work needs to be done to recognize the value of lived experience and parents as subject matter experts?



Consider engaging an outside coordinator or facilitator to help you define clear goals for parent engagement and examine potential biases.

Dedicating Resources

Like any new initiative, centering parent voice takes planning. Engaging parents as partners may require a shift in thinking, but it will also likely require a shift in how decisions get made and work gets done. When planning for parent engagement, consider the following:

- **Recruitment procedures:** How will you identify potential parent partners? What criteria will you use to identify them? How will they be recruited and by whom?
- **Parent orientation:** What should parents know about the organization in order to contribute meaningfully? What should they know about their potential responsibilities?
- **Parents' roles and responsibilities:** What will parents do? Is this work rewarding? Will it make a difference? What are the expectations for fulfilling parents' responsibilities? Are they written down? Have they been clearly communicated?
- **Payment policies and procedures:** How will parents be compensated for their time? What is the source of this funding? Is it sustainable? If they will be paid, how often will they be paid? What steps will they need to take to file for payment?
- **Staff support:** What financial or staff resources are needed to sustain ongoing partnerships?

Tracking Progress

Prior to partnering with parents, think about how you will measure and record ongoing progress. Tracking *how* you engage parents will allow you to test individual components in the process (e.g., recruitment, training, and support efforts), see if they were implemented as planned, and modify them as needed. Documenting *what* you accomplished (i.e., the changes resulting from parent partnerships) will help you build support and grow your program.



Think Cohort

Cohorts of parents advocating for shared needs are enormously effective at enacting change. Parent cohorts such as Mothers Against Drunk Driving were instrumental in bringing national attention to the consequences of driving while intoxicated. At the local level, parents are routinely involved in keeping countless playgrounds safe and clean and schools filled with enrichment activities. The lesson is clear: when parents in similar circumstances come together in pursuit of a shared goal, change is inevitable.

Though home visiting programs might seem to comprise a natural parent cohort, this is not often the case. Home visiting is, by design, an intimate relationship: home visitors work with individual families to advocate for the needs of the parent(s) and their child(ren). Subsequently, when home visiting agencies think about parent engagement, they tend to think in terms of individuals: the home visitor identifies a few promising leaders among the parents with whom they work, and these parents are typically the ones who are most comfortable speaking up and/or advocating for their own needs.

There are several downsides to this individualized approach. First, only select parent voices are heard. Second, these voices rarely represent the broader caregiver population. Third, opportunities for leadership



development tend to be limited and subjective. And perhaps most importantly, parents don't have the chance to get to know or learn from each other.

An alternative to this individualized approach to parent leadership is to develop and nurture groups or cohorts of parents. The benefits of having a representative and engaged cohort of parent leaders at the table is invaluable in fostering equity and better outcomes for both parents and children in home visiting programs.

Developing Parent Cohorts

Parents who are connected to one another, and who understand the importance of their voices to the organization, are more likely to step forward, take risks, and remain engaged. For parent leaders, providing an opportunity to work with and learn from other parents while working to advance collective needs provides a sense of community and responsibility to a united cause. For the agency, broader participation will lead to more responsive and equitable programming, and thus stronger outcomes. It also eliminates the pressure on one or two parents to participate in everything, and the awardee or LIA will have a team which they can rely on to have at least some parents present at every opportunity.

To encourage parent leaders to connect as a cohort:

- Invite *all* parents to participate in meetings; this will prevent preferential access to leadership opportunities.
- Support parents' efforts to recruit new parents to the leadership cohort.
- Identify parents' interests and develop work groups based on those interests.
- Provide equitable financial support to parents for transportation and childcare expenses, along with stipends for participation.



Identifying a Parent Liaison

Building a successful cohort of parents is not possible without dedicated staff support. Too often, soliciting parent feedback and engagement is a task that is added onto an already full workload of an awardee or LIA employee. Creating a parent liaison role to support the development of a parent cohort is key to building a sustainable relationship with a large group of engaged parents, rather than relying on the voices of a few. A parent liaison is a designated staff person who is responsible for recruiting parents to the cohort, fostering leadership skills, and encouraging parents to advocate for a shared agenda.

The parent liaison should think of themselves as a “servant leader” rather than an “expert.” They should be able to:

- Welcome parents warmly into leadership by providing an orientation to the organization.
- Work effectively with a variety of personality types.
- Communicate “big picture” goals of the LIA or awardee in plain language so parents can understand how their voices will make an impact.
- Translate multiple parent perspectives into a few commonly held viewpoints.
- Clearly explain the value of a parent cohort and build consensus among parents around shared needs that an awardee or LIA can address.
- Help parents identify and advocate for shared solutions.
- Identify and/or create ongoing opportunities for parents to develop leadership skills such as speaking at conferences or meetings or participating in professional development opportunities.

Recognizing the importance of building a cohort of parents, and dedicating staff time to support that work, are instrumental to understanding the shared needs of a wide cross section of parents.



Convene Meetings That Matter

For most awardees and LIAs, meetings are where valuable work gets done—where staff come together, emerging issues are identified, data is shared, work groups are convened, and strategic plans are created. Meetings hold such a clear value that it's with good intentions that awardees and LIAs frequently invite parents into meetings, assuming that the very act of including parents signifies partnership. Since these well-meaning invitations rarely result in increased parent partnership, it's worth considering how meeting spaces can either support or discourage parent involvement, and how we can purposefully create meetings that are welcoming to all parents and offer a valuable and rewarding experience.

Creating a Welcoming Environment

While it's easy to assume that every parent is fluent in the norms and practices of professional meetings, doing so may unintentionally discourage some from participating as partners. Parents in MIECHV home visiting programs represent a wide range of education levels and professions. Some may be very familiar with formal workplace meetings, while others may not. It's therefore important to make sure that parents without prior experience in work meetings feel welcome by ensuring that meetings are friendly and accessible and that parents feel prepared to contribute meaningfully.

Central to this effort is determining which meetings are appropriate for parents to attend and/or if the meeting agenda may need to be modified to be more inclusive for parents. For example:

- **Consider developing a meeting agenda that is “task-focused” rather than a “report-out.”** A task-focused agenda can include opportunities for parents to participate, while a report-out tends to focus more on staff.
- **Encourage agency leadership team to use plain language and avoid acronyms during meeting discussions.** This will help to ensure that parents

Some ideas for making meetings more accessible and task-focused include:

- Have everyone introduce themselves with their experience or expertise rather than their titles (e.g., “I’ve had 10 years of experience doing home visiting in this community” or “I’ve been a parent for eight years”).
- Develop shared agreements for how the group will work together (i.e., indicating disagreement, demonstrating respect, employing attentive listening, and defining consensus).
- Use a variety of formats and processes to meet different learning styles (e.g., individual reflection and small group discussions).
- At the end of every meeting, celebrate what was accomplished.

understand the issues and what is being asked of them. Or, if acronyms are used, create a shared agreement that anyone in the group can signal a pause so the acronym can be explained. (This approach doesn't leave the responsibility with just the parents.) A written guide to commonly used acronyms may also be helpful.

The parent liaison can spearhead these discussions with leadership and staff. They should also take the lead in preparing parents for participation by, for example:

- **Sharing the meeting agenda** through a variety of channels (e.g., email, text, or flyers distributed by home visitors) to ensure that all parents feel welcome and know what will be discussed.
- **Meeting with parents prior to the meeting** to explore issues that will be discussed and identify shared perspectives.

During the meeting, the parent liaison should:

- **Greet parents** when they arrive, **stay with them** during the meeting, and provide a **debrief** afterward.
- **Be alert to parent dynamics** and **provide opportunities** for parents to share perspectives by pausing the meeting to solicit parent feedback.

Even with these changes, it's important to recognize that meetings aren't the only place for parents to come together; they cannot be the only opportunity for parents to voice their opinions. The parent liaison can make sure that parents who aren't comfortable (or able) to attend meetings have opportunities to contribute meaningfully.



Endnotes

- 1 Richmond, Mary E. (1889). *Friendly visiting among the poor: A handbook for charity workers*. Urbana, Illinois: Project Gutenberg. Retrieved July 13, 2021, from <https://www.gutenberg.org/cache/epub/24841/pg24841.html>
- 2 Terry, S. (2016). At the crossroads of TANF and early childhood policy: The impact of devolution and health advocacy networks on progressive policy choices. https://digitalrepository.unm.edu/pols_etds/1