



# Engaging Families in Virtual Home Visiting: Perspectives From the Field

## Introduction

Home visiting faced major disruptions early in the COVID-19 pandemic, requiring local agencies to modify the ways they partner with families. While many programs quickly embraced virtual connections and creative strategies to continue offering services, family engagement remains challenging. Even before the pandemic, research showed that families often withdrew from home visiting programs early and/or received fewer visits than expected (Duggan et al., 2018).

The COVID-19 pandemic has further challenged family engagement by exacerbating families' social and economic stressors and altering how services are delivered. Eighty-eight percent of programs responding to an April 2020 survey from the Home Visiting Applied Research Collaborative said they had been required to stop in-person home visits. Most programs reported using telephone calls and interactive video conferencing to conduct visits (O'Neill et al., 2020).

This brief examines chat messages from a selected group of webinars hosted by the Rapid Response-Virtual Home Visiting collaborative (RR-VHV) to explore the following questions:

- ✔ What are emerging challenges and solutions to recruiting and enrolling families in home visiting?
- ✔ What are emerging challenges and solutions to families participating in home visiting?
- ✔ What are emerging challenges and solutions to families maintaining skills gained through home visiting?

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### Defining Family Engagement

Family engagement is not consistently operationalized or measured by the home visiting literature, although stakeholders are working to advance a common definition. For example, the Coalition for Research on Engagement and Well-being recently conceptualized engagement as, “a continuum comprised of social norms and acceptability, recruitment, enrollment, participation, and maintenance of skills of the parent/client in the program which ultimately leads to successful retention in and completion of the evidence-based home visiting program” (Guastaferrero et al., 2020, p. 2).

Measures of family engagement typically focus on dosage, such as the frequency or number of home visits received, length of program enrollment, and amount of home visiting services received relative to the intended amount (Korfmacher et al., 2008). There is also growing recognition of other constructs, such as the level of participation in home visits. Acknowledging these varying definitions, this brief includes themes related to the (1) recruitment and enrollment of new families, (2) level of participation of enrolled families, and (3) maintenance of skills among participating families.

## Methodology

In April 2020, leaders in the field of home visiting formed the RR-VHV to create and help disseminate free resources on virtual family interactions. RR-VHV also hosts a weekly webinar series to help home visitors and supervisors maintain connections with families. The webinar platform includes a chat feature for participants to connect, pose questions, share responses, and discuss current challenges and strategies with one another.

For this brief, the NHVRC examined themes that emerged in the chat feature during four RR-VHV webinars related to family engagement:

- [\*Engaging Families in Virtual Visits: A Protective Factors' Approach\*](#) (April 8, 2020)
- [\*Parent Groups in a Virtual World\*](#) (August 12, 2020)
- [\*Parent-Child Groups in a Virtual World\*](#) (August 26, 2020)
- [\*I Can Parent Too! Engaging Virtually with Families Who Learn Differently\*](#) (September 9, 2020)

Attendance ranged from 838 to 3,198, although not all participants entered comments into the chat feature. Attendees typically included home visitors, supervisors, and program administrators, among others. We reviewed the chat records and webinar recordings to identify common themes, which we categorized based on phases of family engagement. We also selected chat messages that highlighted participant challenges and solutions.

# What Are Emerging Challenges and Solutions to Recruiting and Enrolling Families in Home Visiting?

Webinar participants used the chat feature to report several challenges and solutions to recruiting and enrolling new families in virtual home visiting services during the COVID-19 pandemic. Exhibit 1 organizes their messages into several key themes: identification of eligible families, promotion of program events, and relationship building.

**Exhibit 1. Recruitment and Enrollment Challenges and Solutions by Theme**

Challenge	Solution
<b>Identification of eligible families</b>	
Decreased referrals from partner agencies <i>"We have been receiving less referrals as our outreach efforts are less, however our enrollment rate is higher than ever."</i>	Encourage family member referrals <i>"Invite a family to bring a friend to a virtual visit to meet and greet."</i>
<b>Promotion of program events</b>	
Uncertainty promoting virtual events and meetings <i>"[One challenge is] Advertising to families so they know when and how to access the groups."</i>	Advertise virtual meetings through social media groups <i>"We've also started a [Facebook] group called [Name of home visiting program] Neighborhood for our managers to interact with families. Each week we put up polls for them to select a story we will read and an activity. We're hoping if they become familiar with us it will increase virtual parent group participation."</i>
<b>Relationship building</b>	
Difficulty establishing rapport and forming a new relationship in a virtual environment <i>"Trying to establish trust is more difficult virtually."</i>	Acknowledge the challenges and opportunities of the adapted home visit approach with families <i>"This is different and awkward for both of us so in a weird way, it helps us connect and pushes us to be creative and individualize the support we are offering to each family."</i>

Webinar participants described difficulties identifying and recruiting eligible home visiting families due to decreased outreach activities and referrals from partner agencies. But participants also noted that enrollment rates were higher than ever. These comments suggest that family interest in home visiting remains high, even as programs struggle to reach new families.

Some home visiting programs are overcoming the stated challenges by asking enrolled families to refer their family and friends and/or by advertising home visiting services through email and social media. Others expressed that families are willing to push through the initial awkwardness of virtual visits to make them work.

## What Are Emerging Challenges and Solutions to Families Participating in Home Visiting?

Webinar participants used the chat feature to report several challenges and solutions to enrolled families participating in virtual home visiting services during the COVID-19 pandemic. Exhibit 2 organizes their messages into several key themes: technical capacity, competing demands, and distractions in the home environment.

**Exhibit 2. Family Participation Challenges and Solutions by Theme**

Challenge	Solution
<b>Technical capacity</b>	
<p>Lack of stable internet access and/or tablets, webcams, or computers</p> <p><i>"We serve many rural areas with a very weak connection or no internet at all . . . Also, many do not have laptops, and have to use their phones, with which they may be on a plan with minutes, and, of course, the visits use up their minutes and data."</i></p>	<p>Use mobile phones</p> <p><i>"You can support them [families] in creating a make-shift stand and positioning the phone in a way that you can see the family and their environment."</i></p> <p>Host socially distanced outdoor visits at home or in parks</p> <p><i>"We are still hosting outdoor visits as weather permits."</i></p>
<b>Competing demands</b>	
<p>Many families busy working and/or taking care of children</p> <p><i>"I have some families that have school age children that are overwhelmed with homeschool (Zoom) from 9-12 and are just not wanting to do virtual visits. They . . . are worn out and stressed."</i></p>	<p>Conduct virtual visits while family participates in daily activities</p> <p><i>"Some families are bringing me into every day activities (getting ready for work, clean up time, making dinner) so we can talk about how to make that different activity more developmentally supportive."</i></p>
<b>Distractions in the home environment</b>	
<p>Noisy and/or chaotic settings with other children and family members at home</p>	<p>Schedule meetings during nap time</p>

Challenge	Solution
<p><i>“One of the challenges is all family members are at home now and it’s hard to do the virtual visit due to lots of interruptions.”</i></p>	<p><i>“We are hosting Nap Chats. We say put your child down for a nap, grab a cup of coffee and join us. So far we played COVID bingo and What’s in Your Diaper Bag. Both these games have led to some great discussions.”</i></p> <p>Plan activities that include siblings</p> <p><i>“I also include other siblings and [plan] them an activity also. They love it. They can’t wait to see what I brought for them to do.”</i></p>

Multiple webinar attendees relayed challenges getting enrolled families to participate in visits. One wrote, “Getting families engaged is harder to do when you are not there in person. It’s much easier to avoid a phone call or video chat than it is to [not] answer a door.”

Limited technical capacity emerged as another major challenge to participation. Webinar participants reported that many families do not have stable internet access and/or access to tablets, webcams, or computers. These issues align with results from the Home Visiting Applied Research Collaborative’s 2020 survey, in which more than half of respondents indicated that families not having tablets, webcams, or computers was a “major challenge.” Webinar participants shared that families relying on their cell phones to chat virtually with home visitors often struggle to simultaneously manage the video and interact with their children. Emerging solutions include teaching families how to make a stand for their cell phone and scheduling outdoor, in-person visits if weather appropriate.

Other challenges included competing demands among families and distractions in the home environments. Implementing creative, flexible solutions, such as talking to families while they are making dinner or during a child’s nap, may make it easier for them to participate during stressful times.

## What Are Emerging Challenges and Solutions to Families Maintaining Skills Gained Through Home Visiting?

In the chat feature, webinar participants reported several challenges and solutions to helping families build on the information and strategies learned in home visits. Exhibit 3 organizes their messages into several key themes: need for virtual activities, changes to privacy, and importance of continued connections.

**Exhibit 3. Maintenance of Family Skills Challenges and Solutions by Theme**

Challenge	Solution
<b>Need for virtual activities</b>	
<p>Challenges finding developmentally appropriate virtual activities for young children and families</p> <p><i>"[Families} can't do the hands-on activities they are used to in a face-to-face group."</i></p>	<p>Provide materials to use during virtual visit</p> <p><i>"I leave a packet with handouts and a book in a zip-lock bag at doorsteps a week before the virtual visit."</i></p>
<b>Changes to privacy</b>	
<p>Difficulty discussing sensitive topics (e.g., intimate partner violence) when other family members are home</p> <p><i>"A challenge is maintaining privacy and boundaries of staff and participants because we are also home with partners, children, and roommates."</i></p>	<p>Be attentive to privacy concerns</p> <p><i>"I have a printed card near my computer that says, 'Are you able to speak freely right now?'"</i></p> <p><i>"Have parent wear headphones with their device when asking sensitive questions."</i></p>
<b>Importance of continued connections</b>	
<p>Feelings of disconnect between families and home visitors who cannot meet in person</p> <p><i>"Lack of parent interest in virtual options. Missing the interpersonal relationships."</i></p>	<p>Mail postcards to families</p> <p><i>"In addition to leaving activity packets on families' porches, mailing postcards to each family touching base, and showing we care is a great way to stay connected!"</i></p>

The COVID-19 pandemic has brought new challenges to helping families maintain and build on skills introduced in earlier home visits. While home visitors and families may overcome the logistical hurdles of virtual visits, many still struggle with delivering appropriate content and activities in the new format. Webinar participants reported obstacles to discussing sensitive topics with families and finding developmentally appropriate activities for young children.

In light of such challenges, home visiting professionals are finding creative ways to make virtual home visits work for families. One participant wrote that virtual visits provide an opportunity to be "a consistent support and source of information during difficult times. . ."

## Summary and Implications

Home visiting has been demonstrated to improve maternal and child health and well-being, yet its potential impact can be limited when programs struggle to enroll and retain families. Declines in family engagement may occur for a number of reasons (e.g., long-distance moves, changing

family circumstances), leading programs to use a range of [strategies to engage families and overcome obstacles to participation](#).

The COVID-19 pandemic has exacerbated the myriad challenges to engaging families in home visiting services and prompted a new wave of solutions. The RR-VHV webinars have given participants a platform to share their concerns and innovations with others in the home visiting community.

This brief raises important implications for research and practice:

- ✔ More research is needed to inform best practices engaging families in virtual home visits, as programs have had to rapidly adapt their service delivery in response to the pandemic. Researchers and programs may look to previous [innovations in adapting technology for home visiting](#) as a place to inform practice.
- ✔ The home visiting workforce needs continued support as its members aim to serve families while facing their own pandemic-related stressors. Home visiting programs need to implement strategies to [reduce stressors and support home visitors](#).
- ✔ Creating ongoing, virtual opportunities for home visitors and supervisors to share their innovative practices may support professional development nationwide.

Many organizations and groups have come together to build resources to support home visiting programs during the COVID-19 pandemic. Additional resources can be found via the following:

- [Rapid Response-Virtual Home Visiting Resources](#)
- [Early Childhood Connector: COVID-19 Community Group](#) (registration required)
- [Health Resources and Services Administration: Important Home Visiting Information During COVID-19](#)
- [ZERO TO THREE: States Modify Home Visiting Services in Response to COVID-19](#)
- [National Alliance of Home Visiting Models: Model Guidance in Response to COVID-19](#)
- [Child Trends Blog Series: During the COVID-19 Pandemic, Telehealth can Help Connect Home Visiting Services to Families](#)

## Conclusion

Engaging families in home visiting services is essential for achieving positive outcomes, but programs have historically struggled to recruit, enroll, and retain families. The stressors associated with the COVID-19 pandemic have both exacerbated challenges to family engagement and emphasized its importance. A series of webinars organized by RR-VHV has given the home visiting community a means to share challenges and solutions related to family engagement; more research is needed, however, to inform best practices and continue supporting the home visiting workforce.

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