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Home Visiting: Developing an Effective Approach in Delaware to Provide Parent Education and Support with Young Children

Over the past two decades, advisory reports on infant mortality, teen pregnancy, and family services have repeatedly recommended that Delaware develop a coordinated system of parent education and support services for families with young children (Unger & Brown, 2001). To date, several important steps have been taken to develop home visiting programs as a critical component of such a system. However, home visiting programs in Delaware will need more training, supervision, education, and increased funding with a long-term commitment to fully address the recent recommendations of the Delaware Home Visiting Advisory Committee (Unger, Brown, et al, 2001)

In Delaware, home visiting has been the primary model of service delivery chosen by the state government to provide parent education and support. By bringing services into a family's home, visitors overcome many obstacles such as transportation, need for childcare, or distrust of social services, which have limited or precluded participation in other programs. Home visiting programs have the added benefit of being flexible in how services are offered, allowing them to tailor the program to a family's strengths, needs, and desires. Programs throughout the state employ visitors with varied educational and professional training. Some home visitors are nurses, social workers, and parent educators while others are paraprofessionals who have many practical life experiences and are typically recruited from local communities.

Delaware's researchers and the Home Visiting Advisory Committee recognize that home visiting programs must be of high quality to be effective. Significant benefits have been reported for both parents and their children when well-trained people provide services and education that addresses the multiple factors that influence the development of a healthy family. These factors include a focus on: maternal health, competent care of the child, developing and maintaining famiyl and friend support, personal development and planning for the future, and linkages with needed health and human services (Olds, et al, 1999).

Keys to developing quality home visiting services:

A positive, respectful relationship between the family and home visitor is essential to the success or failure of home visiting (Hiatt, Sampson, & Baird, 1997; Kalmanson & Seligman, 1992; Musick & Stott, 1990). Once this relationship has a solid foundation, the home visitor can provide emotional support, model communication and parenting skills, and assist families to reach their goals. In their efforts to achieve this type of visitor/family relationships, home-visiting programs must address many factors, including:

Focus on information relevant to the family

Visits should focus on information related to parenting and family needs. Information should cover, at a minimum, the following topics: maternal health, competent care of the child, maternal life skills and goals, family and friend support, and linkages to needed health and human services.

Supervision and oversight

For a home visiting program to be effective, good supervisors are essential. These supervisors devote a significant amount of time to supporting their staff and need a variety of skills, including:

- Knowledge of reflective supervision. Reflective supervision promotes motivation, learning, and quality performance aimed at reducing burnout and stress in home visitors. This model also gives supervisors an opportunity to better understand the needs and concerns of home visitors (Almonte, 1994).
- Setting standards for performance based on recommended practices.
- Providing support to home visitors to maintain standards.
- Ensuring an organizational structure that supports the work of home visitors.
- Providing adequate training and education.
- Establishing cooperative relationships with

How should a home visiting program be evaluated?

For a home visiting program to be successful, an effective method of evaluating its services is essential. Evaluations help program supervisors and visitors see what their specific strengths and weaknesses are, allowing for services to be improved. An effective evaluation has several requirements:

- Agencies must first establish an ongoing, useful data collection and evaluation system that will monitor daily participant and staff activities, as well as short and long-term program goals for both the parents and the child. These goals should be clearly defined before a program is started.
- Agencies need to establish an outcome evaluation process. This evaluation will allow an agency to determine if their programs are having the intended effect. Kouneski and Erikson (1996) suggest some minimum requirements that must be met for an outcome evaluation to be useful:
  - Specific services that are provided, as well as how these services are provided, need to be clearly defined. There must be a direct connection between these services and the desired outcomes.
  - Programs need to formalize their methods of recruiting and enrolling participants. This will allow for clear record keeping of who is involved in the program and the services they are receiving.

Flexible services

Home visitor services need to be flexible so they fit with a family's schedule. Also, a variety of services should be available so that services can be matched with a family's needs, preferences, and available resources. Families should be actively included in determining the services that would be most beneficial to them.

Knowledge of Human Development, Skills and Attitudes

Home visitors have a wide range of responsibilities that require very specific knowledge, skills, and attitudes. These include:

Knowledge of infant, toddler, and child development

Parents need to have age-appropriate expectations about their children's development. To provide this, home visitors must understand child development and how parents' childhood experiences and culture influence their parenting beliefs. Home visitors also need well-developed observation and inquiry skills to determine if the child is growing and developing appropriately.

Knowledge of life-span and family development

Home visitors need to understand how the family and quality of the parenting partnership (e.g. married, divorced, or never married; mother-grandmother) affect the development children. With such knowledge, home visitors can encourage and support the personal development of parents, particularly teen parents.

Knowledge of what promotes optimal parent-child interactions

Home visitors need to be able to model and teach appropriate parenting techniques, including how to read infants' and children's' emotional cues in an appropriate and consistent manner and how to ensure a child's health, safety, and nutritional needs.

Development of a trusting relationship

To establish a trusting relationship, home visitors need training in developing a nonjudgmental attitude and using good listening and effective communication skills. To be effective, home visitors must demonstrate warmth and empathy for children, parents, and families while maintaining appropriate professional boundaries.

Psychosocial assessments of a family's needs and strengths

To conduct a thoroughpsychosocial assessment os a family, home visitors must first have good observation and injury skills. They need to know what to look for, what questions to ask, and the indicators of child abuse and neglect. Home visitors also need training in various assessment methods and how to effectively communicate the results to the family. Finally, assessment should be an ongoing process whereby the visitor constantly reassesses a family's needs and strengths and adjusts goals accordingly.

Skills for completing required documentation and a commitment to evaluation and program improvement

Home visitors should view record keeping as a chance to document and reflect on the progress of the families they work with. Sound record keeping is necessary for program maintenance, improvement, and program evaluation.

Maintain professional relationships with families

Home visitors must adhere to client confidentiality, encouraging parents and families to feel comfortable giving out personal information. Home visitors must also be constantly aware that their actions and behaviors are likely to be repeated by the parents with whom they work. In addition to serving as a role model, home visitors must also help parents develop skills that allow them to access services that meet their needs and to identify potential sources of support. These skills will allow families to begin to develop a support network based on their needs and desires.

A keen interest in one's own professional growth

Home visitors should actively seek opportunities to continue their education, such as regular attendance and participation in professional training sessions. They should also actively seek advice and guidance from their supervisors. Home visitors should view supervision as a resource to foster their professional growth and an opportunity to learn more about the services they are providing. They should develop a list of professional goals, which are used to guide their career and can be modified to reflect changes in interest.

Have self-nurturing skills and maintain a healthy support system

While being a home visitor can be fulfilling and rewarding, it can also be overwhelming to work everyday with families who have a variety of needs. Therefore, it is important that home visitors maintain a healthy way to handle demands from both home and work life. This includes using appropriate stress management skills to manage personal and professional stress and knowing when to seek emotional support from supervisors or other agency personnel.

- Programs need to clearly define what constitutes a "participant" in the program. Often, parents participate in ways that were not designed to be part of the program. By defining participation, programs will be able to clearly document when services begin and end.
- Programs need to collect information about the needs and characteristics of the community and participants. This allows for comparisons to be made between people who receive services and those who do not, and assists programs in determining the effectiveness of the services being offered.
- In order to provide a successful evaluation, programs need to continually update information about their participants. This requires establishing record keeping procedures and providing staff with appropriate resources and time to continually update information.

What types of outcomes can be measured to determine the effectiveness of a program?

The Home Visiting Advisory Committee in Delaware has identified several short and long term outcomes that would provide a range of meaningful information about the effects of home visiting (Unger, et al, 2001). The specific outcomes of a program, however, should be closely matched with the program's particular objectives.

Short-term outcomes

Short-term outcomes include an evaluation of services provided in one year.

- Increased identification and meeting of daily living needs of children, parents, and families involved in the program, including food, clothing, housing, and developmental needs.
- Increased Proper medical care
- Increased parent knowledge of child development, parenting skills, family communication, family problems, and family social support
- Increased awareness of community resources

Standardization of data collection and storage procedures, based on an overall client-based data management system that includes both participant and community needs and characteristics for recruitment, enrollment, program operation and evaluation.

Long-term outcomes (two or more years after start of services):

- Long-term outcomes include an evaluation of services provided two or more years after services were begun.

Child Issues:
- Reduction in child neglect and abuse
- Increased number of children who remain living in their home with their family
- Increased school readiness
- Increased receipt of routine medical care

Parent Issues:
- Increased amount of time between births
- Decrease in amount of unplanned subsequent pregnancies
- Attainment of high school education / equivalency.
- Increased employment

Family Issues:
- Healthier family lifestyles
- Self-sufficiency
- Families staying together
- Reduction in parenting and family stress

Community Issues:
- Coordinated service delivery in parent education and support services

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