Home Visitor Safety

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January 22, 2021



Feeling safe — and knowing how to maintain personal safety — is essential for home visitors. Home visitors who are anxious or fearful will have trouble creating a comfortable and emotionally safe environment for families during their visits. Feeling safe is crucial to a home visitor's effectiveness. Achieving this takes careful attention and good planning.

You can work with other program administrators and community resources to implement policies, procedures, and strategies that can contribute to home visitors' and families' safety in unsafe situations. As you put safety plans and measures in place, keep the following concepts in mind:

Sometimes situations, such as crises, arise that pose some degree of risk to the safety of family members and home visitors. The potential for physical harm exists in any emotionally charged crisis. Staff should never overlook or discount that potential.

Home visitors' skills in handling a potentially dangerous situation shape intervention decisions. Sometimes home visitors find themselves faced with, or caught up in, a family situation that is too complex or too dangerous for them to address directly. At such times, it is critical to recognize that the situation is beyond their intervention abilities and to discuss alternatives with their supervisor.

The best predictor of impending danger is behavior. Safety measures are called for if a family member's current or past behavior includes violent/abusive acts, threats of harm, criminal activities, the use of addictive substances, signs of a serious emotional disorder, or threats of suicide. These measures are needed at several points in the intervention process: before face-to-face visits with the family, during face-to-face visits, and as part of referral and follow-up services.

Home visitors must always be aware of behaviors and situations that signal danger. Some violent incidents may be predicted, but many helping professionals fail to recognize signs of potential violence. Signs of loss of control and impending danger include expressions of anger and hostility. Staff may also sense that a situation is dangerous; know the family has access to guns or other weapons; be aware of violent acts or threats by family friends or relatives; and recognize mounting tension, irritability, agitation, brooding, and/or limit testing in family members.

Home visitors must be and feel safe if they are to support families. Home visitor safety can and must be addressed at many levels. The threat of violence does not occur only in the homes of families or in high-crime neighborhoods, but also in seemingly secure workplaces. Work conditions favorable to violence prevention require action at management, supervisory, and personal levels.

Some general strategies that you may consider include the following:

- Have home visitors work in pairs, particularly when they go to more dangerous neighborhoods. Accompany home visitors, if needed.
- Forge a relationship with the local police department. When police are aware of home visitors' presence in the community, they may be able to provide protection such as self-defense training and alerts as to potentially hazardous events in the community.
- Provide cell phones, beepers, or other communication devices. Work with finance and other program staff to ensure the budget covers this equipment.
- Involve families in home visitor safety. They often know of potential safety hazards in the neighborhood (e.g., high-crime areas, gang activity) and can inform home visitors of the safest way to travel through the area.
- Work with program administrators and community resources to develop crisis protocols and make sure home visitors are aware of them. Provide opportunities for home visitors to review and practice implementing protocols. Topics may include child abuse/child neglect, substance misuse, violence in the neighborhood, and the presence of a contagious disease.
- Make sure that you or another administrator is "on call" whenever a home visitor is in the field, including after hours and weekends, so that home visitors can get an immediate response when needed.
- Make sure you know home visitors' schedules. This should include family names and contact information, date and time of visit, and when to expect the home visitor to return.

In addition, you might encourage home visitors to do the following:

- Trust their instincts. If they feel something is not right or see something in the home that makes them uncomfortable (e.g., physical or verbal violence, alcohol/drug use, evidence of firearms, or the presence of an acutely intoxicated individual), follow established protocols and leave, if necessary. Encourage home visitors to say to the parent, “Maybe this isn’t a good time for a visit. Let’s reschedule.” Before going on future visits, encourage home visitors to talk with you about how to ensure their safety in the home. Work with home visitors to talk with the parent about the issues that made them feel uncomfortable and to make referrals if needed.
- Wear comfortable shoes.
- Get clear directions to the neighborhood and the home or apartment building, especially for new visits. Take a practice drive to make sure the directions work. Confirm how to enter the home if it is a duplex or apartment.
- Ask families where it is best to park, and park as close to the home as possible. Always park in well-lit areas. If it is not possible for the home visitor to park in a safe place, discuss other options, such as meeting the family in another setting or being driven and picked up by a co-worker.
- Put any important or valuable items in the trunk of the car before arriving for the visit. Avoid carrying and wearing expensive items.
- Contact parents before a visit so they can be on the lookout for the home visitor.
- If no one answers the door, sit in the car or drive around the block rather than wait at the door. Make sure to specify the amount of time home visitors should wait if a family is not home as part of your home visit protocol.
- Make sure home visitors’ cars are in good working order and that there is plenty of gas in the tank.
- Organize belongings so they do not have to take time to search for them. For example, when they leave a home visit, they should have their keys in hand.

Read more:

- Home Visiting
- Positive and Goal-oriented Relationships

  Safety Practices

Resource Type: Article
National Centers: Early Childhood Development, Teaching and Learning
Program Option: Home-Based Option
Last Updated: January 6, 2025