

# The Relationship Between The Parent and The Home Visitor

by Carol S. Klass, PhD

At the core of home visiting is the relationship between parent and home visitor. In this article, we will examine components of the parent-home visitor relationship which maximize the chances for promoting parent development. In turn, the parent's development enhances the parent's relationship with the child – the foundation of the child's development. A basic premise of this article is that *development occurs through and within relationship* – relationship that consists of patterns of interaction over time. Just as the everyday patterns of parent-child interaction are the most powerful influences on infant and child development, the parent-home visitor relationship is pivotal to parent development.

The parent-home visitor relationship is a dynamic process that varies both in nature and in effect as a result of the personal characteristics of parents, the personal characteristics of the home visitor, and the dynamics of the larger environment. The personality, values, and attitudes of parent and of home visitor affect their relationship. Further, the parent-home visitor relationship is influenced by characteristics of larger social systems, such as the parents' neighborhood, and the race, ethnicity, schooling, and social class of the parent and home visitor. All these factors are working as parent and home visitor co-create their relationship.

In this article, we first will discuss key elements in forming the parent-home visitor relationship. Second, we will examine the progression of the relationship. Third, we will discuss the meaning and significance of the personal relationship for the parent.

## Forming the Parent-Home Visitor Relationship

In home visitors' work with a family, four elements are central and are made explicit in effective initial contacts with a family. The first is **expectations**. In forming a relationship, it is important for home visitors to state clearly their expectations, and to invite parents to share theirs. Effective home visitors in family support programs assume that *parents are the experts in their child's development* and aim to support, affirm, and promote the parents' relationship with their child. Some parents may assume that the home visitor is the "expert," and is coming into their home to teach them the "right way" to parent. In these situations, home visitors may need to be very specific about their approach. During the initial phase of home visiting, they can encourage parents to express their expectations for their infant or child. They can ask the parents about their priorities and about how they would like to use their time with the home visitor.

The second central element is **agenda**. Among the first tasks of home visitors is to understand clearly the agenda of the program in which they work and describe it to the parents. It is impossible to pay attention to everything that is going on with the family. Regardless of the agenda, nothing can be accomplished until first a trusting relationship is formed.

The third central element is **roles**. In the initial phase of home visiting, home visitors and parents clarify their roles – those behaviors associated with a specific position of parent and that of home visitor in their relationship, based on mutual respect and partnership between them. The effective home visitor in family support programs is an empathic listener, consultant, resource, guide, advocate and partner. If the child's sleeping is the home visit topic, the home visitor learns how the infant or young child is sleeping, how the parent assists the child's sleep, and the parent's priorities related to sleep. Then the home visitor shares information and strategies as related to the lived experience of the parent and child. The parents have the role of the experts in their child's development, active participants in the home visit, and the final decision makers with regard to nurturing their child. Home visiting thus is a helping relationship defined by collaboration between home visitor and parent.

Effective home visitors are able to work on two levels at the same time. On one level they are completely engaged in interactions with the parent and child, and at the same time, they track the process, that is, observe the interactions during the visit and are aware of their own reactions and feelings. Sometimes unpredictable intrusions within a visit can be very difficult to manage. When home visitors can relate to the family, and at the same time, be aware of their own feelings, and make decisions based on these feelings, they are more likely to be successful. Cynthia illustrates this working on two levels at the same time.

*For over two years, I have been working with Marquisha and her large family, her sister, and their twelve children, between two and twenty-two years old. I was sitting on the couch with Marquisha. Her 18-year-old daughter stood next us with several envelopes in her hand. She took the envelopes and held them up to the light and read the dollar amounts. Well, then it occurred to me, they were welfare checks, and she was looking at hers and reading the amount – and her mother’s and her aunt’s and her cousin’s. Her mother was very embarrassed. She said, ‘Rashonda, stop doing that. Quit reading other people’s mail.’ But Rashonda kept doing it.*

*By that time, I was aware of my own feelings. I was irritated with the 18-year-old. It’s like, “Why are you doing this? Why are you embarrassing your mother? Rashonda, go in the back of the room, and just leave us alone.” And she kept doing it; and then she’d look at me and say, “I’m not opening the mail, am I, Cynthia?”*

*Well, at this point, I was aware of feeling baited. “Okay, Cynthia, what are you going to do about it? How are you going to handle this?” In my head, I knew I had to decide “What am I going to do?” I know I have a good relationship with this family, a decent relationship; but it’s not the strongest in the world. I am being challenged by the 18-year-old. Her mother is embarrassed. So what do I do?*

*I just stuck with what I know best, which is to be myself. I answered honestly, but I was conscious of “don’t let your anger show—just be honest.” So what I said to Rashonda was, “Nope. You are not opening up the envelopes, but you still are invading people’s privacy.” And that is all I said.*

*Then I turned back to her mom, and we continued our conversation. Rashonda put the envelopes down. She didn’t leave the room. She sat down, and just kind of listened and played with her baby. By the time I left, it was okay. We were back on track.*

Cynthia feels secure in her relationship with this family. As a professional with twenty years experience in work with low-income families across ethnicity, she has developed confidence in trusting her judgment, even when everything seems to be falling apart. Had she scolded the daughter, the daughter probably would have fled the room enraged. Her honest, respectful reply not only ended the daughter’s behavior, but gave her permission to remain and be in a position of possible learning. This two-level process is a high-level skill, and grows over time, with experience and ongoing supervision.

The fourth central element is the **setting**. Home visitors enter into a family’s private space, a space that many families experience as protective. In addition,

parents may not have sought out the home visit program and may not understand why their home visitor is there; thus, they may not feel safe. Home visitors can help parents feel comfortable when they themselves are relaxed, genuine, and able to find common ground during the first contact. Once there has been a relaxed exchange, home visitors can describe their role. Effective home visitors take cues from parents; for example, asking the parents’ permission before touching or picking up their baby, or refraining from entering other rooms of the home unless invited.

## **Progression of the Relationship: Boundaries**

Each home visit program has its own goals, agenda, and time limitations. Since the role of home visiting is relatively new in our society, there can be a blurring of the appropriate boundaries of parent-home visitor interaction.

Once parents feel they have a trusting relationship with their home visitor, within the privacy of their own home, they may extend the discussion beyond the explicit goals and tasks of the home visiting program to include personal problems that are preoccupying them. These topics may involve family conflict such as with spouse or parents, internal stresses such as depression, or external problems, such as housing or inadequate income or employment.

Some home visitors have a hard time distinguishing what they can do and what they are unprepared to handle. Some visitors try to solve others' problems when they do not have the expertise; doing this would violate the family support program goal of empowering parents. Home visitors can listen empathetically, and when appropriate, strive to help the parents seek other services in the community to meet their needs. Home visitors also can seek advice from peers and/or supervisors, a sign of a mature professional aware of his or her professional limitations.

## The Personal Relationship between Parent and Home Visitor

Whether or not they know it, parents make decisions every moment they interact with their infants and young children. Home visitors are in the home only an hour a week or a month. So, it is not what we tell the parent or the decisions we think are best for the child that in the end will make a difference. The child will be affected by the decisions the parent makes in the morning, at bedtime, when the television is on, at the store, when the new baby is born, and so on. When home visiting programs are successful, parents' new understanding and skills allow them to be *informed decision makers*, when making deliberate decisions such as what kind of toys do I buy for my child, and everyday decisions that become habitual and taken-for-granted, such as what do I say while I diaper and feed my infant. Parents' informed decision making emerges from their extended interactions with their home visitor, from their *personal relationship*.

## Shared Delight

When home visitors show they enjoy playing with a child or when they delight in a child's new skill, parents experience this enjoyment as affirmation of themselves. One home visitor named Janice consistently expresses her delight in an infant's or young child's achievement. As Erin easily puts together a puzzle, Janice tells her mother and father, *"I can't tell you how exciting it is to see how she just does it, with such ease, for her young age!"* After one visit, I commented how Janice seems to delight in Erin's play. Janice unhesitatingly replied, "But it is fun!"

In meetings with me, Janice speaks of how important it is that parents know that she enjoys their child; and she sees this enjoyment as helping them feel closer to her. When she has her final visit with each family, Janice shares her pleasure and appreciation with parents.

When parents consistently experience a home visitor's enjoyment and delight in their child, they often enjoy telling their home visitor stories of happenings between visits. This sharing and joint pleasure is reminiscent of grandparents' and parents' shared joy in their children. Several parents have told me they always are eager to tell Janice stories about their child, for they never feel like they are bragging — they know Janice really cares.

The process of developing relationships is different for different people. We have tried to pull out some common themes across people. Most significant is the development of a personal relationship in which the parent can trust the home visitor and feel affirmed. Developing a relationship can be messy and always takes time. But once a personal relationship between home visitor and parent is developed, the parent speaks of her home visitor as special friend, and even part of the family.

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