

# Mommy and the Home Visit

by Kathy Torgerson

I don't know about you, but if I know someone is coming to visit me at home, I go into a frenzy. Picking up, cleaning, freshening up the house, making something to offer as refreshments, sweeping the front porch - what can I say? I'm a Southern girl. If we don't work ourselves into a panic in order to be able to say, "Why, I didn't go to a bit of trouble!", then we lose our rights to say "y'all".



So, when I was told that my daughter, who was born with Down syndrome, would be eligible for therapeutic home visits from three or four different agencies, my panic went into overdrive. I quickly learned to put that aside, relax, and enjoy the experience.

What do home visits mean to a parent? Although our home visits took place almost 20 years ago, I think the same would be true today. A home visit is help. A home visit is hope. A home visit is someone who understands your questions and doesn't think you are crazy for asking them. A home visit is a lifeline.

When our daughter, Joanna, was born, early intervention was a new, cutting edge approach to working with children with special needs. I sought it, making numerous phone calls before finding agencies which would provide help to her. Now, for most parents, this help is offered immediately. The child is put into the "process" almost from day one. What a wonderful development this is! And for most of these helping agencies, the home visit is one method of working with the child. While for some of Joanna's services, I took her to the therapeutic site, now the services come to the child, in the child's environment, removing the stigma and fear of going to an office setting. Joanna's 4 year old brother often had to tag along with us for some of her therapies. Now, with more home based services, siblings' freedoms are less infringed upon. And for anyone who has ever packed up an infant and all the necessary paraphernalia to go anywhere, it's easy to understand the relief of the parent who can let the services come to them.

As I said earlier, however, some of Joanna's services were available to us through home visits, and we did take advantage of that opportunity. For several months, when she was between 6 and 18 months of age, an occupational therapist and physical therapist would work with her in our home. We were able to show them the resources we had for her, and they were able to make practical suggestions as to how best to use them. They could observe her in her natural surroundings. She could relax and be more herself, an important factor for a child who was greatly intimidated by strange surroundings. And her big brother was often brought into the act by the therapists, as they showed him things he could do through constructive play that would help her to learn and develop. He was so convinced of his effectiveness in this role, that in a first grade essay, he modestly wrote that "I taught Joanna almost everything she knows"! I feel sure that the home visits instilled that confidence into him.

The best result of Joanna's home visits for me was the sense of peace I would have afterwards, the sense that I was capable of doing the best I could for her. The therapists were wonderfully adept at building that confidence and enabling me to be an important part of the team working towards Joanna's achievements. Milestones met were causes for celebration for them and for our family. By the time the home visits ended, we truly felt that Joanna's therapists were extended family.

A few years later, I experienced home visits from the other side. As the family coordinator for several federally-funded grant programs through our local university, I accompanied the therapists and interventionists on numerous home visits. I was blessed to be working with extremely caring and gifted therapists and educators, who needed no reminding from me to keep the families' needs first and to be sensitive to the environment they were entering. But it was enlightening to me to be the visitor and not the visatee. It reminded me once again of the importance of familiarity to make the child, and the parent, feel comfortable and at ease. Although on one home visit I was greeted by a goat nibbling on my skirt (!) while I waited for the front door to be answered, the majority of home visits were eagerly awaited and greeted.

I would sum up the lessons I learned about home visits, both receiving and giving them, in three points:

- \* As the parent, relax, enjoy, and learn from the experience. The people coming to work with your child are there for that purpose, not to judge your home furnishings or your cleaning abilities (unless, of course, they are detrimental to the health of your child).
- \* Involve siblings and other family members who are there, if at all possible. Let the whole family be a part of the child's "team."
- \* As the professional coming into the home, be sensitive to the feelings of those in the home. Explain procedures in the simplest terms possible, if necessary. Be sure the parent knows why this is important for the child's development. Don't make assumptions about what a parent does or doesn't know. Try not to be judgmental.

My daughter is almost 21 years old. She graduated from high school last year. She is an accomplished singer, having performed solo for numerous events, she is a horseback rider, she has a busy social life, and she has a job. In a couple of years, I anticipate she will be living semi-independently. My husband and I don't take the credit for these achievements. She has been blessed throughout her life by caring professionals who worked hard to help her achieve her highest potential. And some of my fondest memories of these special people are of the home visits they made - once I got over my Southern girl hospitality panic and was able to welcome them as part of Joanna's team.

*Kathy Torgerson is the proud mother of David, a law school student, and Joanna, a social butterfly. She helped start two support groups for parents of children with Down syndrome. She wrote the parents' component of a state-wide assessment manual for the state of Tennessee. She holds a bachelors'*