



KANSAS  
HOME VISITING



[www.kshomevisiting.org](http://www.kshomevisiting.org)

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## Home Visiting in Kansas: Home Visitors Share Joys and Challenges

### Kansas bolsters home visiting to support at-risk families

To ensure that Kansas' most vulnerable families have the support they need to help their children thrive, the Kansas Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) Program was launched in 2011 to increase the number of pregnant women and families with children birth to age 5 who receive voluntary evidence-based home visiting services.

The MIECHV program, funded by the Health Resources and Services Administration of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and administered by the Kansas Department of Health and Environment (KDHE), targeted two high-risk communities: urban Wyandotte County and rural southeast Kansas starting with Montgomery, Cherokee, and Labette counties and, in 2015, expansion to Neosho and Wilson counties. These communities face the state's highest rates of poverty, child abuse, domestic violence, teen and single parenthood, and unemployment. Kansas MIECHV has added 36 home visitors and caseloads to serve families in these areas delivered by three evidence-based home visiting models: Early Head Start, Healthy Families America, and Parents as Teachers. Also, in Wyandotte County, a "promising approach" model, Team for Infants Exposed to Substance abuse (TIES), has been implemented.

### Home visitors share insights on the home visiting model

KDHE, in partnership with the Center for Public Partnerships and Research at the University of Kansas, wanted to better understand the relationships that develop between the home visitors and the families they serve. Specifically, were relationships fostered or hindered by programmatic elements? In what ways did home visitors see home visiting as having an impact on families' lives?

To help us answer these questions, we interviewed home visitors across the three evidence-based home visiting models, as well as the promising approach model. In total, 18 home visitors participated in interviews. This Brief details themes that emerged from these interviews.





## 1 Overcoming families' misconceptions and tackling paperwork took time but was worth the investment.

**The purpose of the program was misunderstood.** It took a while for many families to fully understand the purpose, goals, and format of the home visiting program, home visitors across all programs reported. Misinformation about the program led some families to believe home visitors wanted to help because they were bad parents or there was something “wrong” with their child. Once the families better understood the role of the home visitor, they relaxed and fully participated.

**Paperwork is time-consuming and sometimes uncomfortable.** The home visitors noted that it was hard to balance the additional screenings and data collection expectations of MIECHV during home visits and still have time to interact with the parent and child. Some home visitors worried that these additional expectations, along with family information required by their home visiting model, might decrease family participation.

However, the home visitors also shared that they developed strategies for dealing with the challenges. For example, some said they framed the families' expectations by explaining that “everyone has to go through the questions” and that it is an important way to get information that will help inform their work together. Others added that they blended the gathering of information into the conversation, making it feel less cumbersome and administrative. The home visitors indicated most of the families took it all in stride.

**The information gathered provided home visitors with valuable data that helped them work more effectively with families.** Some of the home visitors reported the additional data gathered was very beneficial and made them more effective at their jobs. Getting lots of data up front eliminated wasted time and guesswork, helping the home visitors know how best to work with the family, what kinds of resources they needed, and what issues they might need to address.

Even though they sometimes felt awkward asking questions that dealt with sensitive topics, home visitors reported that doing so showed the family that they were free to talk openly with their home visitor. They found that some of the families were reluctant to answer sensitive questions at first or gave false answers, but once families began to trust their home visitor they opened up and were honest.

The developmental screenings they were asked to conduct were very helpful, the home visitors added. Home visitors were able to use screening results as a tool for guiding important discussions about children's developmental progress, identifying goals and activities related to achieving and supporting developmental milestones, or assisting in providing appropriate referrals for additional services. Some of the home visitors sought consultation from their supervisor to get additional input on how to best help the family.

## A HOME VISITOR'S STORY

### *Baby facing developmental delays does turnaround*

*A mom I was working with was distressed when a screening showed her son was significantly behind in his development. I determined all her son needed was more time spent with his parents engaged in stimulating activities. I educated mom on ways to assist her son in accomplishing age-appropriate skills, and she practiced the activities while I was there to offer input. On his next assessment, her son scored significantly higher and was well on his way to reaching his development milestones.*

## 2 Building a good relationship is key to success.

**It takes time to gain a family's trust.** The most important ingredient of a good relationship with the families is trust, the home visitors report. It can take awhile for the families to trust the home visitor, but when they do the team makes great progress toward meeting the family's goals. If you fail to develop a close, trusting relationship with a family, the home visitors found it's hard to make much progress on the goals.

They also shared that once a strong relationship is established, it can weather difficult circumstances, like if the home visitor has to report suspected abuse or neglect.

**To work well with families, home visitors must possess positive character traits.** Several home visitors said it was important they appear non-judgmental with the families. An example is when they go into a home that is extremely dirty, or they witness the family making decisions they don't agree with, they do not criticize and put the family on the defensive.

Home visitors said it was essential to be a good listener. Once the families felt safe to talk about sensitive issues, the home visitor must listen and, if the parent had something she wanted to share that was off-topic, the home visitor needed to let her talk.

Sometimes home visitors needed to talk with families about things that might be difficult to discuss, like domestic violence, mental health concerns, or mandatory reporting of child abuse or neglect. However, the home visitors thought being honest was a key part of their responsibility so they did not shy away from the hard conversations. One home visitor said this led the families to respect their home visitor more.



Having a positive attitude and being a “cheerleader” that celebrated the family’s progress was also important. “You may be the only positive person in their week,” one home visitor shared.

## A HOME VISITOR'S STORY

### **Mom flees domestic violence at home visitor's urging**

*When I arrived for a home visit, I noticed bullet holes in the windshield of the mother's car. I used Motivational Interviewing questions and active listening in hopes mom would share more about the possibility of domestic violence in the home. Mom finally shared that the father of the children had destroyed her phone and pointed a gun at her. I urged her to contact a domes-*

*tic violence shelter, but mom was not sure she wanted to. I tried to follow up for several weeks, and was finally able to reach her when her phone service was reinstated. I was happy to learn she was in a domestic violence shelter, getting the help she needed.*

It's important to set boundaries. Families develop very strong bonds with their home visitor and feel like they can tell them anything. As a result, home visitors found that the families can misunderstand the nature of the home visitor-family relationship, believing that it is personal, not professional. As a result, the home visitors said they worked to find the balance between being open and available enough for the families to trust them and setting clear personal boundaries the families were not to cross.

One area where families occasionally overstepped, the home visitors reported, was in texting or calling outside of agreed upon hours or for non-urgent issues. Home visitors found that communicating upfront about their availability was key to setting appropriate expectations and getting things off on the right foot.

Some families also overstepped by thinking the home visitors were always available for them. They canceled and rescheduled appointments frequently expecting the home visitor to be free whenever they wanted them. Home visitors responded by being flexible and accommodating the families' schedules when they could, but explained to the families that their flexibility had limits and the families had to respect the home visitors' time.

## 3 Home visitors said ongoing training and support will help them be more effective.

**Home visitors said they wanted more training on issues they encounter frequently.** Home visitors said many families have mental health issues and thought training on how to spot signs of mental illness and how to work effectively with people who are mentally ill would be beneficial. Many home visitors said they would like to employ Motivational Interviewing (MI) and requested more opportunities to learn and practice MI skills. Home visitors expressed a need for training in how to recognize signs of developmental delay in children and how drug abuse in families impacts children. Most shared they would like to know more about community resources available to help families with issues like domestic violence and substance abuse. Some said they needed training in how to develop and improve relationships with families.

**Home visitors valued getting support for the challenges of their job but varied on the best way to do so.** Reflective supervision was very helpful to most of the home visitors. They liked being able to touch base with a supervisor to “vent” and explore solutions. Connecting with other home visitors through cross-program reflective supervision groups to share experiences was also helpful for both information gathering and their own emotional support.

Other home visitors said that carving out time to meet with a reflective supervision group added more stress. Those in rural areas said it could take two hours to half a day to drive to the meetings. Some home visitors said they were uncomfortable sharing their families’ stories, citing concerns that in their small communities where home visitors and families frequently cross paths confidentiality might be unintentionally breached. Others expressed discomfort at sharing their own personal issues with their colleagues in a group setting as they prefer to maintain boundaries between their personal and professional lives.

#### 4 Some differences between home visitors and families are easier to overcome than others.

Home visitors and the families they work with often share similarities yet can be very different from one another, too. They believed that some of these similarities and differences impacted their ability to work effectively with families while others did not.

**Parenthood was helpful but not essential.** Some home visitors said they believed it was beneficial for the home visitors to be parents themselves. Being able to share personal experiences about their own children helped them gain legitimacy and develop a bond with the families. Other home visitors believed it wasn’t necessary to be a parent themselves to form a strong relationship with their families, clarifying that home visitors who were not parents drew on data and best practices when making recommendations, and that families trusted their guidance.

**Race and culture did not present a barrier.** Most home visitors said they didn’t have much trouble establishing a good working relationship with families from a different country, ethnicity, or race. Most families seemed receptive when the home visitor suggested they modify their behavior, even when the parenting technique seemed to be a pattern of behavior in their peer group. But some home visitors reported that



families sometimes dismissed their suggestions explaining that the home visitor didn’t understand because she was from a different race or ethnic group.

**Language was a big challenge.** Home visitors who did not speak the same language as the parents said the inability to speak directly with the parent resulted in a communication gap that made it more difficult for them to reach program objectives. Some parents relied on their children to act as interpreters which made it difficult for the home visitor to ask sensitive or complex questions or engage in more than rudimentary dialogue.

Most home visitors requested interpreters but found that it was difficult to secure them and that the quality of the interpreters varied greatly. A less skilled or amateur interpreter could make the home visit ineffective at the least, and potentially destructive at the worst. Home visitors believed some of these challenges could be rectified if the interpreters received professional training on home visiting and fully understood their role in the visits.

On the other hand, some home visitors shared that a skilled interpreter could benefit the home visit by helping the home visitor understand cultural norms and values.

#### COMMUNICATION CHALLENGES: THE PROBLEM WITH INTERPRETERS

Home visitors who worked with language interpreters were often frustrated by the experience and saw the interpreter as a hindrance to progress rather than a benefit. Their chief concerns included:

- Some interpreters didn’t interpret every word the home visitor said, selecting only what they believed was important, which the home visitors said changed the discussion and diluted the effectiveness of the visit.

- Other interpreters added their own comments and opinions to the home visitor's words, changing the focus or content of the discussion.
- Some breached confidentiality and gossiped about the family's issues with people outside of the home visit.
- Some had personal sidebar conversations with the parents and did not stick with the home visitor's agenda.

## 5 The system of setting and achieving goals has a bearing on their success.

**Home visitors differ on the role they believe they should play in goal setting.** While all the home visitors believed the process of setting goals should involve collaboration between the family and the home visitor, the role they play in this process varied family-to-family, session-to-session.

Most home visitors felt it was important for the parent to identify areas they wanted to work on. Then, it was the job of the home visitor to facilitate the creation of action steps and to check progress toward the goals and update them as needed. Home visitors should support the family's goals even when they disagreed with those goals, some home visitors said.

Home visitors clarified that, at times, families struggled to identify goals. In these cases, home visitors may suggest goals for the family to consider. Based on their professional experience, previous conversations with the family, and the results of assessments, home visitors may suggest goals to address an identified developmental delay, a program-specific curriculum requirement, or even a family's casually mentioned interest, such as going back to school. Home visitors present these goal ideas to the families and, through collaboration, tailor them to meet their needs.

### A HOME VISITOR'S STORY

#### **Teen mom gets the coaching she needed to achieve her goals**

*One of my moms, a teen mother still in high school, told me her biggest goal was to complete high school and get her diploma. Through our visits, I tried to keep her mind on her goal as opposed to relationships with friends and boyfriend. She persevered and graduated with honors. As a result of her grades and also a business project she did while at high school, she was offered and accepted a full scholarship to a local college and is currently attending full time while also working part time.*



**Home visitors must challenge the families and celebrate every success.** When working toward goals, the home visitors said it was important to set high expectations for the families and let them know you believe they can reach them. They live up to your expectations, one home visitor said. The home visitors also said it's important to be flexible on the goal achievement timeline, adjusting when a family is having trouble meeting their objectives.

Some parents were offended when their children had low scores on developmental screenings and disagreed with the home visitor's recommendations. Home visitors found that when they used the developmental screening results as a conversation starter, not a test that parents were afraid to fail, they were better able to engage parents in solutions.

Home visitors said it's very important to celebrate what the family has already accomplished and to applaud each step they take toward their goals, encouraging them every step of the way.

## 6 Home visitors love the rewards of their jobs.

Consistently, the home visitors said they loved their jobs. They enjoyed getting to know the families and to see them take positive steps toward change. They also enjoyed seeing the children learning, playing and laughing, and seeing parents appreciate their children and love them.

The home visitors also liked the feeling of satisfaction when they accurately assessed a family's challenges and developed a plan that resulted in positive outcomes.

Many of the home visitors said they liked being able to spend time out in the community visiting families instead of being in an office all day. They enjoyed having flexible schedules and that every day was different.

# 985

# pregnant women and families with infants and young children served 2012-2015

## MIECHV PROGRAM AIMS:



**Increase school readiness**



**Improve maternal and child health**



**Reduce child injuries, child abuse and neglect, and domestic violence**



**Promote family self-sufficiency**



**Improve linkages with other community resources**

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