Home Visits: A Child-Centered Approach to an Old Concept

by Tamar Meyer

Making home visits is not a new technique for helping children by improving family-school relationships. It is certainly not new that cooperation between parents and teachers is essential in the education of the very young: "the whole adult population is friendly, and the nursery holds them by strong ties through the love both places have in common for their children" (McMillan, 1919). Beller (1969), for example, found that the teacher's respect for the family was associated with a child's readiness to gain from educational experiences in the classroom. As one of the means of involving parents in the educational process of the child, teachers have visited in homes.

Traditional visits, however, have been conducted primarily as an exchange between teachers and parents in the home. These visits have taken a variety of forms. Before school commences, teachers sometimes make contact with families through an introductory home visit. A house call might be made further on in the year to explore with parents possible causes for behavioral problems or to summon their assistance. Programs have been created where educators go into homes of the children to teach parents how to be better parents or to model ways of helping children to develop cognitively. The objectives of Home Start, for example, are to strengthen in parents their capacity for facilitating the general development of their children. Jobs and activities which may be included in this program are helping mothers with a household chore or showing parents books on child rearing in libraries. Many other programs, such as the "Infant Stimulation Through Family Education" program in Albany, New York (Ligon, Barber, & Williams, 1971), Head Start, Lev-

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enstein's Verbal Interaction Project (1970), and Toy Demonstrators, to name a few, focus on working with the parent rather than the child (Honig, 1975).

The role of the home visitor in the Child and Family Resource Program (CFRP) in St. Petersburg consists of two roles: one as a modeler of behavior and the second as a counselor and helper to the family (Morrison, 1978). In Richmond, Virginia, at the Southside Day Nursery, Ade and Hoot (1976) developed the Parent-House Curriculum with the assistance and guidance of parents. In this program, home visits were made to photograph the family as they simulated various activities that parents actually used in teaching their children. Ideas of parents were shared by both teachers and parents and served as vehicles to encourage "parents to maintain their status as active implementors of their child's early education and [to] develop mutual respect and trust between the two primary teachers of the young child: the day care teacher and the parent" (Ade & Hoot, 1976). While useful, all of the above programs are conducted as an exchange between teachers and parents in the home. The paragraphs which follow describe the potential of home visits which focus upon the teachers and the child.

Over the past ten years as a kindergarten teacher in Israel I developed a home visit model which I believe can be beneficial to the children, act as an aid for the teacher, and open more meaningful communication with parents. Unlike traditional visits, however, these visits are made with the child rather than the parents.

Introduction to Home Visits

The program begins with the first open house meeting of the year, where the teacher explains the purposes of the program. At the first open house (a fall meeting, which is often before school commences), the purposes and expectations of the home visits are described. It is explained that the teacher wants to visit the child for fun and to develop a personal side to the teaching relationship. The visit is not to check out the home or the parents. Parents

are asked for permission for the teacher to visit their children. If there is any objection, the idea is dropped. The opportunity to decline serves as a reminder to the teacher that the parent has the prime responsibility for the welfare and education of his or her child.

Purposes of the Home Visit

Before entering the child's home as a guest, the teacher should consider some of the reasons for the visit.

For the Child

1. To develop a personal relationship with the teacher. For one hour the teacher is the child's visitor.

2. To reinforce the child's feelings of uniqueness and of being worthwhile.

3. To encourage the child to develop initiative as a host.

4. In sharing personal treasures and secrets with the teacher, the child is able to learn that giving of herself or himself is acceptable, lovable, and fun.

For the Parent

1. This is personal time with the teacher on "home ground." There are no barriers of institution or authority.

2. The parent(s) can relax with the teacher and is able to witness that the teacher's prime concern is the child.

3. If the teacher is not judgmental or critical but is open and listening, the parent(s) may learn there is someone to talk to in the future. This is a chance to initiate productive communication with the parent(s).

For the Teacher

This is a chance to:

1. Listen and observe.

2. To learn the language of the child within the family setting.

3. To learn and share different cultures.

4. To open communication with the family. This will help in understanding, accepting, and broadening horizons. One can remind oneself that each child is an individual and why.

What the Child-Centered Home Visit Is Not

Although the home visits can be fun and a learning experience for the teacher, notes of caution are in order. Keep in mind that the child-centered home visit is not:

1. *A teaching ground.* Parents are doing their job of parenting in their own, individual way. The purpose of the visit is to listen, observe, and learn about the child.

2. *A judgment or criticism hour.* The teacher does not go to the home to see what is wrong. Rather, the purpose is to understand the child better. All life experiences are different, and every family has an individual and different way of doing things, regardless of its socioeconomic status or structure (i.e. single-parent, multi-family, or nuclear-family units).

3. *A counseling session.* The purpose of the visit is not to help out the family. If the parent(s) chooses to turn to the teacher for help or guidance, a separate format can be arranged or a more appropriate referral can be made. While visiting the children's home, the teacher must be continually aware of the ethical concerns regarding the teacher-parent relationship. Information received while in the child's house is confidential. It is to be used only by the teacher and the school's staff to improve the quality of life for the child (Seefeldt, 1980). A home visit should be a learning experience for the teacher, an "I am important/this is fun" experience for the child, and an opening of communication for the parent.

When to Schedule Home Visits

For the home visits to be effective, they should be made after the children have started to know their teacher. If one wants the visits to be lighthearted, easy, and fun, they should be made when knowing each other is easier. Therefore, the teacher would begin scheduling with the parents a few weeks after school begins.

Follow-up in the Classroom

There is a follow-up in the classroom with the children after each home visit, when the teacher shares the experience with the rest of the class.

1. The day following the home visit, the child brings a favorite toy, game, or book shared with the teacher at home, to show the children in class.

2. Something important and intimate (such as the pattern on the sheets of the child's bed or favorite sleeping toys) is shared with the class if the child desires it.

3. A brief "story telling" description of the visit is shared with the class the next day so that:

The child is able to remember the events of the visit as the teacher talks (very often the child would want to tell the story to his or her friends but doesn't quite know how or is shy).

The other children can learn to listen to a friend's experiences and may also begin to formulate in their minds their own plans of a visit with the teacher.

The story may begin with "I got in my car and took my map, and after a long drive, I arrived at ..."

The experience of the home visit may be reinforced with rituals. For example, parting after an hour is sometimes difficult for the small child, and so choosing between a handshake, hug, or kiss, looking at the teacher's car or allowing the child to explore inside the car before departing can help with the separation. Each teacher may arrange his or her own separation rituals.

Program Benefits

Through my work as a kindergarten teacher in Israel and the United States, I have made over 350 home visits in different areas and neighborhoods. They were made with both poor and wealthy people, intellectual and working-class people, and with a variety of cultural groups. Yet the results have always been the same:

In strengthening the relationship with each and every child in the classroom, I found the children to be more open and trusting to me in most situations (especially in situations involving problems). The parents, in many cases, felt freer to approach me on any subject of importance to the emotional well-being of their child and sometimes of themselves. In focusing on the child in the home visit, there is a direct way to communicate to the family that their child is my prime concern. Entering the home as a visitor and not as an "educator of parents" gives the parents more willingness to share themselves.

George S. Morrison (1978) reinforces my conviction that with home visits, particularly when focusing on the child, you can truly come to appreciate why children are as they are and the power and influence parents have over their children. By experiencing this process first-hand, teachers become more compassionate and tolerant of children. Perhaps they would also be more willing to provide individualized programs of instruction for children rather than demanding that all children accomplish the same activities in the same way.

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