

The Teacher's Playing at My House This Week!

Marion Fox-Barnett and Tamar Meyer

*"When can you come to my house?"
"Will it be my turn next week?" "My
mom says you can come any time."
"I know just what we'll do when you
come to visit me!"*

These are some of the excited comments and questions from a group of 20 four-year-olds attending the Early Childhood Research Center (ECRC) at the State University of New York at Buffalo. During the school year our children had the opportunity to schedule a home visit with their classroom teacher and serve as host or hostess during the visit. Many anticipated and unanticipated effects have convinced us that this child-centered approach is more than worth the effort. Specifically, this project contributed to increased parent involvement, enhanced the children's self-esteem, supported the curriculum, and helped alleviate communica-

tion difficulties for some bilingual families at the center. Although at the ECRC we made home visiting an important part of our year-long program, it can be done in inner city and other settings, too.

Home visits in early childhood programs

Home visits have been shown to be effective activities for enhancing family-school relationships. Even before the time of Margaret McMillan, the founder of nursery education *per se* early in this century, teachers of young children have visited homes as a means of involving parents in the educational process of their children (Seefeldt, 1980). Teachers and caregivers are often encouraged to visit the homes of newly enrolled children. Meeting in a comfortable, relaxed environment opens communication between parents, child, and teacher, and can set the tone for a positive home-school relationship (Hildebrand, 1980).

Home visits in the form of teaching programs, social calls, conference times, and child-welfare moni-



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Home visiting has been a central part of working with families and their young children in many programs all around the country, all through the century.

toring have been included in many model early childhood programs. Home Start is an example of a teaching program. The Mother-Child Home program, developed by Levenstein's Verbal Interaction Project, has trained staff "toy demonstrators" who schedule weekly visits to the home to model language interaction with children in a play situation (Cataldo, 1983).

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Young Children • July 1992

teacher. Some enjoy playing a short game, reading a favorite book, sharing personal treasures, or deciding which parts of the visit to talk about in class the following day.

Following this child-oriented time, parents may offer some refreshment or enjoy a short conversation with the teacher. Parting after an hour is sometimes difficult for the child, so rituals such as "when I leave, choose between a handshake, a hug, or a kiss" or exploring the inside of the teacher's car before departing can help prepare for the separation.

Extending the home visit to the classroom

The day following the visit, the child brings a favorite toy, game, or book that was shared at home with the teacher to show at circle time. The child becomes the center of attention for about 10 minutes as the teacher spins a brief story about the visit. The story might begin, "I got in my car, took out my map, and after a long drive I arrived at . . ." The stories work well if each one is told the same way. Children then have the opportunity to recall details of their home visit as they listen to the stories of their friends' home visits. Maintaining a ritual that is repeated with each child at the time of her visit enhances classroom circle time. During circle time, the child may also talk about the parts of the home visit she liked best. This enriches the experience for the child and provides an opportunity to communicate her importance to her peers. She may describe the games she and the teacher played together or the food

they shared, or she may want to write a story about the experience. All of the stories can become part of the classroom library.

Travelling to different homes gives the teacher opportunities for curriculum enrichment. Aquarium experts, green-thumb gardeners, spectacular seamstresses, and different cultural food restaurateurs are some of the resources we discovered. Parents, having shared with the teacher personal interests in their own environment, may find it easier to come to school and show the class a special skill or hobby.

Keeping the pressure out of home visits

A child-oriented home visit can be successful in involving parents when there is no pressure.

- A child-centered home visit is not a teaching time. Parents are parenting in their own way and

A prearranged time for the visit and some preplanning for it between teacher and child ensure a brief, positive visit.

should receive unconditional respect when a teacher is a guest in their home or is visiting with them at a location they have selected.

- The teacher is not in the home to see what is wrong. All life experiences and life-styles are different and have their own uniqueness and interrelationships.

- The purpose of the visit is not to help or counsel the family. If parents choose to turn to the teacher

for guidance, the teacher can arrange a separate format or make a more appropriate referral.

Perhaps the most essential element for a successful home visit is an ability to accept family behavior and conditions that are different from what the teacher has experienced (Gestwicki, 1987).

Evaluating child-oriented home visits

Benefits for parents

Although our home visit model is primarily child centered, there are positive aspects for parents. The visit affords parents an opportunity to communicate with the teacher without the territorial barriers of an institution. If the visit is not judgmental, instructional, or critical, but is open, informal, and characterized by careful listening on the teacher's part, the parents may feel that school is a more ap-

proachable place should they need contact or help in the future. A home visit allows busy parents, who find visiting the school impossible, the opportunity to become involved in their child's educational process. After they have witnessed a teacher's concern with their child during a home visit, parents may feel less adversarial if conflicts should occur. The home visit is perhaps one of the most effective ways of creating a sense of partnership with parents (Gestwicki, 1987).

When our parents were asked how the home visit benefited them, some confirming comments were I felt even closer to the teacher and the program and so thrilled to think that

An essential element for a successful child-centered visit is the teacher's ability to accept different homes and families and to focus on enjoying the child.

she had taken that extra time to share with my child.

It made me happy to see my child so thrilled and made me realize that my child is really a multifaceted little person with her own agenda.

It positively reinforced my feelings about being a good mother because the teacher said we were a very loving family.

It helped me communicate with my child about the caring teachers she has. In 20 years of schooling I never had a teacher visit me!

Pros and cons for teachers

Home visits take time, and scheduling them is often complicated and frustrating.

A teacher may need persistence in arranging a schedule to accommodate parents. This can, however, be an indication to parents that you perceive this activity to be a valuable contribution to your classroom. Part-day or part-week programs offer staff the greatest opportunity for undertaking a home-visit program. Full-day programs need the support of an administrator who recognizes the educational value of home visits and is willing to offer a teacher compensation in some form.

Because the home environment provides much of a child's learning experience, it is important for a teacher to observe this part of a child's life (Gestwicki, 1987). Teachers need to know everything about a child, and home visits are one area of home-school relations in which parents can contribute (Hymes, 1974). Morrison (1978) reinforces the conviction that home visits, when focusing on the child, help the teacher "to appreciate why

Young Children • July 1992



Hildegard Adler

Parents usually appreciate the genuine interest shown by the teacher in their child.

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" (Morrison, 1978). In addition, child-centered visits can take the pressure off novice home visitors who are inexperienced and apprehensive about talking with parents.

Benefits for children

The teacher was wonderful in spending the time with my child and doing whatever she [the child] wanted to do. Somehow through this visit she has become more confident. (a parent)

When our parents were asked if and how the home visit benefited their child, we felt that the responses confirmed the value of this project. Many parents reported that their children had been thrilled by the visit and spent a great deal of time preparing and planning for the teacher's arrival.

Parents told of their children's increased self-esteem and a new willingness to share information about school. As the stories of individual home visits were told in class the following day, children gained new information about classmates and their families. Some parents mentioned that their children retold these stories in great detail! Parents felt that their children enjoyed showing their home and personal property to the teacher and spoke of a new sense of trust and openness in school after the visit.

Prior to visiting this class of 20 American children, the teacher in our center had made over 300 visits to the homes of kindergarten children in Israel. The visits were made to low-income and wealthy homes, to intellectual and working-class families, and within different cultural groups. Results have always been the same. In strengthening the relationship with each child in the classroom, teachers found children to be more open

and trusting in most situations (especially in situations involving problems). Parents, in many cases, felt free to approach the teacher on any subject of importance to their child's emotional well-being and sometimes their own (Meyer, 1990).

One parent confirmed our resolve to repeat this project by commenting

Please continue doing this. It really makes a child feel important and special. It also continues my feeling about her school as a "family away from home" and further reinforces the tie between family at home and the "family feeling" at school.

For further reading

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Health and Safety Tips

Preventing Food Poisoning

To prevent food contamination, food prepared on the premises or brought from home should comply with state requirements for food service preparation. If the state does not have food preparation requirements, the center should strive to comply with NAEYC's Guidelines for Food Preparation and Service (see *Accreditation Criteria and Procedures of the National Academy of Early Childhood Programs*, rev. ed. [1991], p. 71).

or

To prevent food contamination, all food shall be from health authority approved sources, and shall be transported, stored, prepared, and served in a sanitary manner and approved by regular inspections from local health authorities.

the kitchen shall be so constructed and arranged as to be easily cleanable, and shall be kept in good repair.

Staff health and safety

- Cooks and assistant cooks shall meet state or local medical requirements.
- All staff shall wash hands before and after handling and/or preparing food.
- Cooks and assistant cooks shall refrain from smoking during food preparation and serving.
- All staff shall wash their hands with soap and water after using restroom facilities.
- Cooks and assistant cooks shall wear hair restraints as necessary.

Refrigeration and storage

- All readily perishable or readily contaminated food or drink shall be refrigerated at or below 45° F (7° C) except when being prepared or served.
- Frozen foods shall be stored at 0° F (-17° C).
- Prepared foods shall be stored in plainly labeled and dated containers.
- All containers and utensils shall be stored off the floor. Dishes and utensils shall be stored in closed storage space. Cupboards shall be clean.
- All refrigerators, stoves, and other equipment used in connection with the operation of

Vermin control and sanitation

- Kitchen facilities shall be maintained in a sanitary condition, free of dust, flies, vermin, rodents, overhead leakage, condensation, sewage backflow, residual pesticides, and other contamination.
- All chemicals and potentially dangerous products, such as medicines or cleaning supplies, shall be stored in original, labeled containers in locked cabinets inaccessible to children.

This safety and loss prevention tip is offered as a service of CIGNA Care Providers Insurance, which brings you the Safety Group Program endorsed by NAEYC.