

Parents as Teachers Research and Quality Improvement Technical Assistance Brief #1

Intensity Matters: Unpacking Personal Visit Frequency

This is part of a series of Technical Assistance Briefs published by the Parents as Teachers national office and designed to address emerging issues around quality improvement, measurement, and evaluation of the Parents as Teachers evidence-based model. These briefs will inform and be informed by technical assistance efforts, feedback from stakeholders, and discussion within Parents as Teachers learning communities.

Why does visit intensity matter?

The development of trusting relationships with families is paramount to achieving positive outcomes and requires sustained, ongoing interactions between home visitors and the families they serve. Research evidence on the impact of home visitation on parent and child outcomes, as well as recommendations for best practice provided by home visitation experts, has culminated into an improved understanding of the importance of adequate levels of home visit intensity.

Through rigorous evaluations of several home visitation programs, it has become increasingly clear that poor quality implementation, including low frequency of visitation, leads to few to no beneficial effects for families (Family Strengthening Policy Center, 2007). Although a precise minimum number of visits required to create change is yet unknown, studies suggest that families receiving more contacts benefit more (Gomby, 2003). For example, Kahn and Moore (2010) reported that positive impacts were found among programs that lasted for more than one year and averaged four or more home visits per month over that time span.

While programs may be designed to provide services at a high level of intensity, it is important that programs work to ensure that families actually **receive** an appropriate number of home visits. It is not uncommon for families to receive only half of the intended number of visits (Gomby et al., 1999). Ensuring that families receive the desired amount of services to create measurable change may best be achieved through increasing the number of home visit attempts made, increasing the frequency of home visits for high-risk populations, or both (Jones-Harden, 2010).

What is the current essential requirement for personal visit frequency?

In December 2009, Parents as Teachers established essential requirements for Parents as Teachers affiliates. These essential requirements cover organizational design, training and professional development, family-centered assessment and goal-setting, the Parents as Teachers model components, and evaluation and continuous quality improvement. In March 2012, the essential requirements were updated to provide clarification and additional information requested by the field. One of the essential requirements that was clarified relates to the frequency of personal visits provided to families.

The current essential requirement is:

Families with 1 or fewer high needs characteristics receive at least 12 personal visits annually and families with 2 or more high needs characteristics receive at least 24 personal visits annually.

In addition to making the above change clarifying the definition of “families with greater needs,” the qualifying high needs characteristics were refined. Tightening the high needs characteristics resulted in an increased focus on high needs that the field agrees are related to families who should be given priority for services.

How do we measure up on the personal visit frequency essential requirement?

Parents as Teachers recognizes that the essential requirements will not be met 100 percent of the time for 100 percent of the families. Therefore, the measurement of personal visits on the annual Affiliate Performance Report asks for the number of families that received at least 75 percent of the required visits. In addition, the benchmark for an acceptable level of fidelity for visit frequency calls for **60 percent of families** to receive at least 75 percent of the required number of visits. Note that this is a *minimum* benchmark and is in line with studies that have found positive results with implementation levels around 60 percent (Durlak & DuPre, 2008). This benchmark level also acknowledges that flexibility in the measurement of this essential requirement is needed to give programs the ability to tailor the frequency of visits to meet families’ individual needs and circumstances.

How can an affiliate follow the essential requirement on personal visit frequency while still being responsive to individual family’s needs?

Typically, families with 2 or more high needs characteristics receive at least twice-monthly or weekly visits, while families with 1 or fewer high needs characteristics receive at least monthly visits.

Following an initial period of weekly or twice-weekly personal visits (e.g., 6 months), there may be individual circumstances that warrant adjusting the frequency of visits provided to a particular family. For example, a family may have achieved or made significant progress toward their goals, may be involved with multiple service providers, and may express interest in staying with Parents as Teachers but receiving somewhat less frequent services. (It is important to note that visit frequency cannot go below monthly visits for any family unless they are transitioning out of Parents as Teachers services.) It can also be appropriate to increase the frequency of visitation for a family whose needs or circumstances change. For example, a family that has been receiving monthly visits prenatally but whose baby is born at a very low birth weight (under 3.3 lbs) could benefit from the support provided by more frequent visits.

These represent just two examples of family scenarios that might prompt adjusting the frequency of personal visits. Determining whether adjusting the personal visit frequency is appropriate for a particular family is a collaborative and documented decision made by the family and parent educator and approved by the supervisor.

Additional Resources

It is important for affiliates to design their operations to meet the personal visit frequencies stated in the essential requirements. Doing so allows parent educators to provide families with an optimal number of personal visits.

Following are several resources to help affiliate supervisors and managers effectively design their operations and services.

- The Parents as Teachers Essential Requirements
- Affiliate Update: Guidance for determining caseload size for your affiliate
- Parents as Teachers Budgeting Tool

References

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