



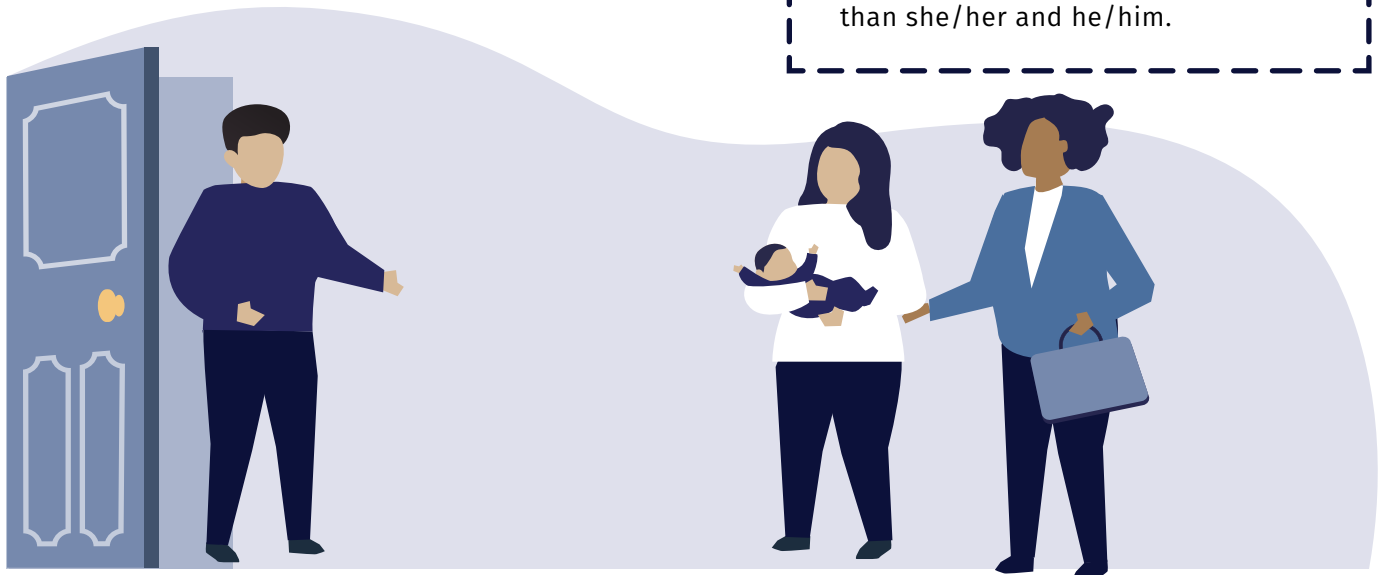
Engaging Fathers in Home Visits: Strategies to Strengthen the Nurse-Client Relationship

Many home visiting programs historically have engaged and enrolled pregnant individuals or new parents who identify as women and mothers, as well as their infants. Many of these index clients have partners who identify as a father to the child. Some fathers may not feel welcome or comfortable taking part in a home visit. When all parents participate, families are more likely to achieve better outcomes. This practice guidance outlines ways for public health nurses to strengthen the nurse-client relationship when working one-on-one with clients. Strategies specific to fathers, including being flexible and inclusive, allows for thoughtful engagement of fathers.

Home visiting is for all parents! Fathers may have a false impression that home visiting services are not for them, and only for mothers. Use direct and intentional communication when implementing the following strategies¹:

- 1 Specifically invite fathers
 - a) Be clear that the father (or partner) is welcome to be involved. Tell fathers their participation is valued.
 - b) If dad is in another room, you can invite him to participate by stating “Dad, it would be great if you join us.”

Although this guidance focuses on strategies and the evidence related to engaging fathers (he/him) in home visiting, it is important to acknowledge that there are many different types of family structures. Infants and children may be raised by one or two parents, grandparents or other caregivers. There are also children who are raised by parents/caregivers of the same gender or by parents who may use pronouns other than she/her and he/him.



2 Explain benefits of father participation

- a) The whole family benefits if fathers are engaged
- b) Specifically share the benefits of fathers taking part in home visits



Practice note: The safety of the client and their child(ren) is a priority. If the mother does not consent to their engagement or feels unsafe in the presence of the father (partner), then it would not be appropriate to promote the engagement of the father.

3 Provide anticipatory guidance

- a) If parents haven’t taken part in home visiting programs, they may not know what to expect. Explain home visiting services clearly and emphasize the importance of both parents’ involvement.
- b) At the beginning of each visit, explain the purpose and planned activities.
- c) Fathers may have had negative previous experiences with health care providers. Take time to answer their questions and clarify any misperceptions.

4 Genuinely include fathers in each visit and conversations

- a) Address fathers directly. Ask “how would you like to be addressed?” and use that title often. You may be surprised to learn that you more often direct conversation to mothers first.
- b) Make eye contact with dad. Ask questions directly to dad so he knows you expect him to participate.
- c) Ask fathers directly about their needs and parenting goals.

5 Follow up and connect if father misses the visit

- a) If dad is not present at the visit, use strategies to ensure he knows he was missed.
- b) Leave a note for dad, or text him to see if he will be available for the next visit. These intentional strategies can help fathers know they are valued and feel engaged.

Indirect participation

Even if fathers are not present at a visit, they may still want to be engaged in the program. Fathers may be participating indirectly and supporting mom in ways other than by attending visits. Indirect ways dad can be involved in the program²:

- Discuss the home visit with their partner.
- Learn about home visiting content from their partner or child.
- Practice lessons or activities with their child, and support new parenting skills learned during the visit.
- Leave questions for their partner to ask at the next visit.

Home visitors can support the engagement of fathers in indirect ways. Try alternative ways to involve dad:

- Work with mom to help her understand the benefits of engaging dad in the program. Mothers have a strong influence on the father's role. Encourage talking to dad about the visit if he was not present.
- Leave a book dad can read to his child(ren).
- Leave a note summarizing the outcomes of the visit. Text dad to let him know you have left this for him.

Be flexible and inclusive

1. Ask about, consider, and work around father's schedule
 - a. Families may stagger work and school commitments, or trade off childcare duties. These schedules can make it hard for both parents to participate in home visits.
 - b. Offer visits outside of normal business hours if possible.
2. Use technology to offer 'hybrid' approaches to home visits.
 - a. Speaker phone or video calls can include parents who are not present.
3. Make father-friendly referrals
 - a. Keep an up-to-date list of services that you can refer fathers to.
 - b. Examples include job or education programs, fatherhood programs, male-friendly health and mental health services.
4. Involve fathers through hands-on activities
 - a. Some fathers may be less comfortable talking and might prefer to learn by doing.
 - b. Invite fathers to participate in all activities, not just those that reflect traditional roles played by fathers/men.
 - c. Encourage fathers to participate in a life history timeline, child development assessments, infant feeding support, and childproofing the home.

Build relationships with fathers over time

- Engage fathers at the earliest opportunity. Initial communication should include both mom and dad. Collect contact details from both parents. Assume both parents are going to participate.
- Don't give up. Building relationships takes time. Be consistent, even if fathers are not responsive right away. Continue to offer support and encourage dad to participate.
- Be prepared to try different types of engagement strategies. Fathers may participate in indirect ways. Directly ask dad if you can support him in any other way.
- Provide opportunities for connecting with other fathers. Fathers may feel alone in their parenting struggles. Be knowledgeable about and refer to local fatherhood programs.

The therapeutic relationship is always at the heart of a home visit

- Respect their knowledge. New parents have different levels of knowledge and experience with parenting. Explore what dad already knows and does for his partner and/or children, offer praise, and build on his strengths.
- Promote partnerships in parenting. Father engagement in home visiting programs promotes stronger communication between parenting partners. Work to support mom and dad and enhance the co-parenting process
- Celebrate fatherhood. Share information on their unique role in promoting their child's health and development. Remind parents about the benefits to the whole family.
- Thank dad for his contributions. Positively reinforce the importance of his involvement in the home visiting program, and that he is valued.

References

- ¹ Bellamy, J. (2020). Engaging Fathers in Home Visiting Programs. [Information Brief.] National Responsible Fatherhood Clearinghouse. www.fatherhood.gov/research-and-resources/engaging-fathers-home-visiting-program
- ² Osborne, C., DeAnda, J., & Benson, K. (2022). Engaging fathers: Expanding the scope of evidence-based home visiting programs. *Family Relations*, 71(3), 1159–1174. <https://doi.org/10.1111/fare.12636>
- ³ Sandstrom, H., & Lauderback, E. (2019, April). Father engagement in home visiting: Benefits, challenges, and promising strategies. National Home Visiting Resource Center Research Snapshot Brief. Arlington, VA: James Bell Associates and Urban Institute.

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