



Parents as Teachers Technical Assistance Brief

Intensity Matters: Unpacking Personal Visit Frequency

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

Why does visit intensity matter?

The trusting relationship that parent educators develop with families is paramount to achieving positive outcomes. Building that relationship requires sustained, ongoing interactions between home visitors and the families they serve. Research on the impact of home visitation on parent and child outcomes, as well as recommendations for best practice provided by home visitation experts, demonstrates the importance of personal visit intensity. Intensity refers to how frequently parent educators visit families as well as for how long the family is enrolled in the program. Through rigorous evaluation of several home visitation programs, it is 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 the precise minimum number of visits required to create change is unknown, studies suggest that families receiving more contacts benefit more (Gomby, 2003). For example, Kahn and Moore (2010) reported that programs that provided services for more than one year and averaged four or more home visits per month had more positive impacts.

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 personal visits. It is not uncommon for families to receive only half of the intended number of visits due to many factors outside of the parent educator's control (Gomby et al., 1999). Increasing the number of personal visit *attempts* can help increase the number of personal visits *provided* for high-risk families (Jones-Harden, 2010).

What is the current essential requirement for personal visit frequency?

The 11th Essential Requirement states that 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. By using the high needs characteristics to determine the minimum intensity of service, Parents as Teachers affiliates can give those families priority for services.

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

Many Parents as Teachers affiliates choose to provide at least twice-monthly or weekly visits to families with 2 or more high needs characteristics, and at least monthly visits for those families with 1 or fewer high needs characteristics. Other affiliates find that following an initial period (eg. 6 months) of weekly or twice-weekly personal visits, there may be individual circumstances that warrant adjusting the frequency of visits provided to a particular family down to once a month. For example, a family may have achieved or made significant progress toward their goals, or they may be involved with multiple service providers. 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 could benefit from the support provided by more frequent visits after the baby is born.

These are 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.

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.



References

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