Technology in Home Visiting: Strengthening Service Delivery and Professional Development Using Virtual Tools

Introduction

Home visiting programs face numerous barriers related to geography. Working in isolated areas may require home visitors to travel long distances between appointments or to wear multiple hats when communities have limited resources. Similarly, home visitors in rural areas may not have the same professional development opportunities as their peers. Rural counties accounted for half of counties served by the Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program (MIECHV) in fiscal year 2016. Families enrolled in home visiting may also move outside of a program's service area, preventing the consistent delivery of services. MIECHV identified military families as a high-risk priority population due to frequent moves.[1]

Technology can help home visiting programs reduce geographic barriers to service delivery and professional growth, along with issues related to transportation, scheduling, and family engagement preferences. This brief explores four home visiting initiatives that use virtual tools to deliver home visiting services, connect parents to resources, and facilitate home visiting supervision and professional development.

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[1] *Michalopoulos C., Lee, H., Duggan, A. Lundquist, E., Tso, A., Crowne, S., . . . Knox, V. (2015). The mother and infant home visiting program evaluation: Early findings on the maternal, infant, and early childhood home visiting program (OPRE Report No. 2015-11). Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.*

Parents as Teachers @ USC Telehealth

About: The University of Southern California Telehealth Clinic (USC Telehealth) is piloting the use of an online videoconferencing platform to deliver the Parents as Teachers (PAT) home visiting model. Available services include online home visits and "group connections," which are activities promoting parent-child interaction, increased knowledge of child development, and social connections with other families. Home visiting professionals can also use the platform for staff supervision and training. Client navigators assist users with scheduling needs and technical issues.

Goals and Purpose: The initiative's goal is to demonstrate comparability between PAT services delivered in the standard format versus those provided via online videoconferencing. Priorities include home-based parent support services, telehealth technology, family engagement, and workforce development.

Who is Involved: The USC Suzanne Dworak-Peck School of Social Work launched USC Telehealth to provide secure mental health services online. In 2015, USC Telehealth partnered with PAT to provide online videoconferencing home visiting services to 15 families the following year. The project has since expanded to 65 families.

Accomplishments: Parents as Teachers @ USC Telehealth reaches families who would not be eligible for standard PAT services due to location, scheduling conflicts, and/or not meeting high-risk requirements. Tablets and Internet access are provided to families as needed to ensure access to technology. Early results show successful engagement in group connections, with families often attending for more than an hour. The initiative's connection to USC Telehealth also streamlines the referral process for free mental health services provided by the clinic.

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Implications: Delivering services via online videoconferencing can expand the reach of home visiting services to families who are outside of program service areas or uninterested in receiving in-person home visits. It can also reduce challenges associated with travel, family mobility, transportation, childcare, and facilities costs.

The USC and PAT research team is compiling the project's initial results and plans to disseminate followup results in the next 6 months. PAT is considering options for augmenting traditional services with online videoconferencing groups or visits.

For More Information: Visit the [Parents as Teachers @ USC Telehealth](#) web site, or email Dorian Traube (traube@usc.edu) at the USC Suzanne Dworak-Peck School of Social Work or Angela Rau (Angela.Rau@parentsasteachers.org) with PAT.

FOCUS-EC Virtual Home Visits for Military Families

About: A team of researchers at the University of California Los Angeles (UCLA) is assessing a virtual version of Families OverComing Under Stress for Early Childhood (FOCUS-EC), a home visiting program designed for military families with children aged 3–5. FOCUS-EC seeks to help families overcome challenges related to a parent's military service by strengthening resilience and promoting positive parent-child interaction. Services are delivered to families through online home visits using a videoconferencing platform and Zoom technology.

Goals and Purpose: The initiative's goal is to explore the efficacy of virtual home visiting by completing a randomized control trial of the virtual version of FOCUS-EC. Families are assessed 3, 6, and 12 months into their enrollment in the study.

Who is Involved: UCLA researchers began the randomized control trial in 2013. Of the 200 civilian-dwelling military families enrolled in the study, half receive virtual FOCUS-EC home visiting services and half receive web-based information.

Accomplishments: Results of a pilot study indicate that virtual delivery of FOCUS-EC helped parents practice skills and lead parent-child interactions during home visiting sessions. The pilot study also found that overall parent engagement was higher in the virtual program as compared to a blended program with virtual and in-person visits. For example, parents were less likely to cancel virtual appointments due to illness or weather.

> *The pilot study found that overall parent engagement was higher in the virtual FOCUS-EC program as compared to a blended program with virtual and in-person visits.*

Implications: If the study shows that virtual home visiting provides many of the same benefits as in-person interventions, it will support a new method for providing high-quality services to military families and families living in isolated areas. Positive results could also have cost-savings implications for programs with limited resources.

UCLA will complete the randomized control trial in 2018.

For More Information: Visit the NHVRC Reference Catalog, or email Catherine Mogil (cmogil@mednet.ucla.edu) at the Semel Institute for Neuroscience and Human Behavior at UCLA.

Parentivity Virtual Home Visiting System

About: Parentivity is a web-based platform that serves as a virtual parent support system by offering customized content to caregivers of children up to age 5. Users engage with interactive online tools to identify their families' needs, establish goals, and access customized action plans. The resulting personalized dashboards include a range of relevant information available through learning activities, videos, games, quizzes, live chats, and podcasts.

Goals and Purpose: Parentivity aims to reduce family risk and optimize resourcefulness and resilience among caregivers who do not qualify for in-home visits. Targeted outcomes include—

- Improving young children's health and development

- Preventing child injuries and maltreatment

- Improving school readiness and achievement

- Reducing domestic violence

- Increasing family economic self-sufficiency levels

- Improving coordination with other community services

Who is Involved: Parentivity emerged from a public-private partnership between the Iowa Department of Public Health and Quality Assist, an early childhood education company based in Atlanta.

Accomplishments: Parentivity extends access to parenting information, resources, and supports to parents across Iowa regardless of risk. The platform is adaptable and customizable to individual interests and needs. Home visitors report that Parentivity allows them to respond to emerging needs during visits and provide relevant followup via interactive resources.

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Implications: Parentivity presents a virtual solution for providing universal support to families with young children. Aggregate user data can inform programmatic and policy decisions by providing insight into family needs and interests.

For More Information: See the Parentivity web site, or email Kim DeMars (kdemars@parentivity.org) at Quality Assist or Janet Horras (janet.horras@idph.iowa.gov) at the Iowa Department of Public Health.

Parents as Teachers Virtual Communities of Practice

About: PAT is one of several home visiting models using virtual communities of practice (CoPs) to bring together home visiting professionals for mentoring relationships, workshops, and more. Sample activities include uploading videotaped home visits for observation and accessing online training materials.

Goals and Purpose: PAT CoPs aim to connect home visitors to online professional development opportunities, regardless of location. Offerings focus on the use of research-supported practices to promote positive parenting behaviors.

Who is Involved: The CoPs reflect a partnership between PAT; the Utah Office of Home Visiting; Wyoming Office of Home Visiting; and Utah State University professors Lori Roggman, Ph.D., and Mark Innocenti, Ph.D.

Accomplishments: CoP organizers have created a virtual space where home visitors feel comfortable engaging with mentors and sharing videos of their interactions with families. Box, a content management platform, ensures compliance with institutional review board (IRB) guidelines and the Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act (HIPAA).

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Implications: Virtual CoPs provide an alternative way for programs to observe home visitors in the field. By sharing videotapes of their home visits, participants can receive valuable feedback to refine their skills and strengthen their techniques interacting with families. Using a virtual platform also allows home visitors in more remote areas to connect with other professionals.

For More Information: See the NHVRC Reference Catalog, or email Lori Roggman (lori.roggman@usu.edu) or Mark Innocenti (mark.innocenti@usu.edu).

Summary

Virtual tools can help home visitors overcome common challenges to delivering services and pursuing professional development. Potential benefits include—

- Expanding the reach of home visiting services to rural communities, military families, low-risk families, and more

- Increasing efficiency in service delivery

- Offering nonintrusive services through virtual service delivery platforms

- Enhancing professional development through recorded home visits

The technological innovations discussed in this brief are implemented through collaborative efforts among states, universities, and national home visiting models. These collaborations are paving the way for increased funding for virtual services, augmentation of existing models, and implementation of universal parenting support.