

Group Parent Support in Home Visiting Programs

The Home Visiting Applied Research Collaborative

The Home Visiting Applied Research Collaborative (HARC) aims to advance the use of innovative methods in home visiting and translate research findings into policy and practice. This brief describes findings from a survey, distributed through HARC to network programs, examining an understudied element of home visiting programs, group-based parent support services.

Why Look at Parent Groups in Home Visiting Programs?

Research and evaluation on home visiting programs focus primarily on the home visit component. These programs, by their very name, are focused on the service delivery mechanism that brings people into the homes of young children and their families. However, many home visiting programs also deliver different forms of group-based activities. These groups provide an additional way to deliver program content, as well as create opportunities for family engagement with program staff as well as with other parents.

There is, however, surprisingly little research on what is considered effective practices in group-based parenting programs in the early childhood period. Through an online survey distributed via the HARC practice-based research network, this study investigated the use of parent groups in programs that provide intensive home visiting as their primary service provision to parents with children prenatally through age 5. This research provides a baseline for further study by offering a broad look at how parent groups in home visiting programs are generally implemented as well as initial insight into best practices.

The survey collected information on the purpose, implementation, benefits, and challenges of group-based services. Program managers across 30 states participated in the survey, with 93 responses complete enough to include in the analysis. A variety of program models were represented, with Parents As Teachers, Healthy Families America, and Early Head Start the most commonly noted.

Survey Components

The survey collected information on ground level views of the purpose, implementation, benefits, and challenges of group-based services. At the heart of it, the researchers strove to understand how programs themselves conceive of quality group programming. The survey looked at the quality and utility of these parent groups by collecting data on:

- group frequency
- attendance rates
- content of group
- education and experience of group facilitator
- perceived benefits and challenges of implementing groups.



What Did the Survey Tell Us about Parent Groups?

Content of Parent Groups

Most responding programs (79%) offer more than one type of parent group (average of three), the most common being parent-child interaction groups (69%), as well as more-broadly conceived parent education groups with (73%) or without children present (67%). Programs report as the primary purpose of their groups promoting parent-child interaction (82%), providing a space for socialization and social support for parents (76%), and engaging in activities that promote child development (63%). In contrast, fewer programs offer prenatal or birth preparation groups (33%).

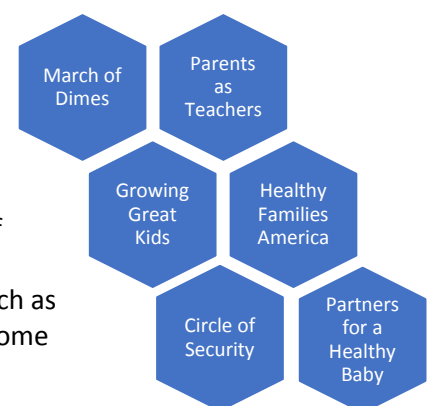
Implementation of Parent Groups

Groups are primarily facilitated in English (91%); however, over a third (45%) of programs also offer groups primarily or partially in Spanish, and 8% of groups include languages other than English or Spanish.

Only half of the programs surveyed rely on a specific curriculum, program model, or facilitation guide for their parent groups. Although the majority of those (65%) are based on the program's home visiting model, programs also specifically name 34 different curricula. Almost three quarters (73%) of the programs that do use a particular curriculum note that they use it flexibly, often making changes or individualizations and adapting to their own needs.

For the majority of programs (75%), group participation is not a requirement of parents, but it is strongly encouraged. Many different strategies are used to increase the likelihood that parents attend groups. Some are more tangible, such as providing meals (76%) or distributing materials/resources for parents to take home (70%). Others are more abstract, such as, explaining the benefits of groups for themselves as parents (68%) or for their child's development (62%).

Top mentioned curricula



Facilitation of Parent Groups

Most group facilitators (63%) have three or more years of experience conducting group sessions and about half (54%) hold a bachelor's degree. Most facilitators (69%) are also home visitors. Many programs (60%) report that facilitators receive specialized training specifically for groups; however, this training is most frequently noted as focused on promotion of parent-child relationships (77%) and child development (75%), content not specific to group facilitation. Most programs (82%) note that facilitators receive supervision on at least a monthly basis, with 32% receiving supervision at least weekly. Monitoring of actual facilitator practice is much less frequent, typically only once or twice a year. Monitoring is primarily through parent satisfaction survey (66%) or unstructured observation (45%).

Evaluation of Parent Groups

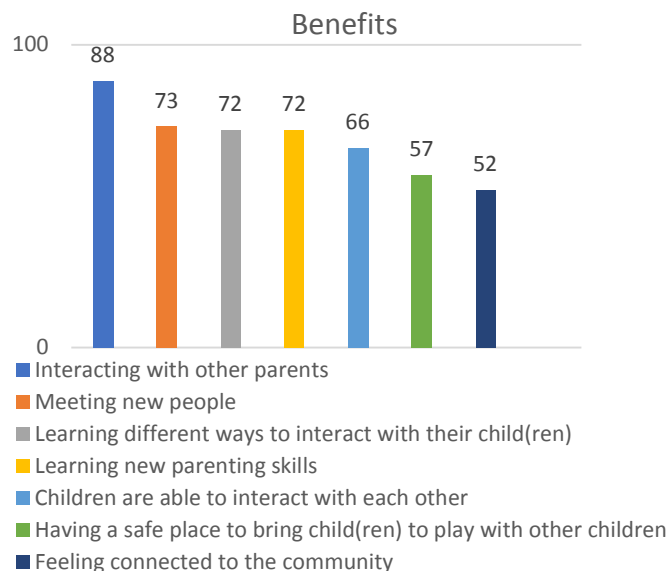
Formal evaluation of group service outcomes is rare. Almost all programs do track attendance of group sessions (96%) and collect some kind of parent feedback about the group sessions (83%), most frequently

focusing on satisfaction with the group, suggestions for improvement, or future topics. This data is collected often through informal conversation with parents (62%) and parent surveys at the end of each session (55%) and is used mostly to plan for future groups.

Benefits and Challenges of Parent Groups

Programs note that families have reported a series of benefits from attending parent groups, with the most highly reported benefit (88%) being the opportunity to interact with other parents (see figure for other benefits).

Despite these benefits, programs report that common challenges that families give for not attending groups are time pressures and transportation challenges. This likely contributes to programs reporting low attendance (57%) as the most common challenge to running parent group sessions. Programs report groups are typically attended by eight families or less, and only about half of enrolled families (51%) attend at least one group during the year.



Implications for Research and Practice

The results from this study highlight the importance of group services in many home visiting programs. Because programs without group services did not participate in the survey, the current study cannot answer *to what extent* HARC programs provide parent groups on top of home visiting services. Still, almost half of the program members in the HARC network at the time of the study completed the survey, suggesting that is a fairly pervasive component.

Although programs seem to be investing supervisory and training resources into maintaining and improving the quality of group services, continuous monitoring of *what* happens in groups and *how* it happens (i.e., the quality of group facilitation, the effectiveness of the groups) is inconsistent. Direct observation of practice using structured tools would likely help to capture the diversity of family experiences across groups and to capture important elements of service quality.

While group programming appears to be an important part of service provision for many home visiting programs, with multiple benefits noted for families, the typical number of parents attending and the level of overall participation in groups is not robust. How to increase participation in groups and better monitor their processes in supporting families are important further areas of study.

Similar to the often-stated goals of home visiting, parent groups aim to increase child development knowledge and promote parent-child interaction. A key difference between these services is the social element of parent groups - a chance for parents to connect and learn from one another.

The Faculty Innovation Fund at Erikson Institute funded this project. Jon Korfmacher was the principal investigator, with Helen Jacobsen as project director and Rebecca Harles and Cristina Gonzalez del Riego assisting. Our thanks to the HARC programs that participated in the survey.

