

A. Home visiting: a unique relationship

Home visiting has some advantages over the work you do with families in your office or family center. You can:

- Reach families who wouldn't come to your office
- Work with more of the family members
- Work with families in their own setting, where they are apt to be more at ease
- Gain greater understanding of the family's life and strengths

To begin to understand home visiting, it helps to think about the people who visit your home:

- relatives
- friends
- family members' friends
- caregivers for children or family members with disabilities
- neighbors
- repair people
- members of a group you or another family member belongs to
- clients (if you or a family member has a home business or profession)
- members of a religious or spiritual group you belong to

These are all people you or a family member has invited into your home. If they are in your home to conduct some business (like repair an appliance), the relationship is clear. They are providing a service, you are paying. A caregiver for your children or for a family member with a disability is there to give you time away to work or relax. You are cordial, appreciative, and clear about your expectations (and you may become friends over time). If you or a family member conducts a business at home, the people who come are there to get their hair cut, take music lessons, or obtain whatever service you provide. People from a religious or spiritual organization you belong to might visit you for fellowship or to help out if someone in your family is sick or dying. Relatives, friends, fellow members of voluntary groups, are in your home as your guests. Your role is to help them be at home and enjoy your time together. Most likely you visit in their homes, too.

These are traditional reasons for visiting someone's home. You both have a pretty good idea of what to do (and what not to do). Everybody in the family knows not to put their feet up when Aunt Mary visits; your son knows he must be on time when he goes to his guitar teacher's house; your babysitter knows it's okay to watch TV but not to have her boyfriend over.

Some families also call people to their home during an emergency, such as the police during a family fight, or an ambulance attendant following an accident. In these situations, families are highly stressed, looking for protection or help, yet may be scared of the person making the "home visit." The family member making the call wants help, fast, but doesn't want to form an ongoing relationship with the "home visitor."

Relationships between agency home visitors and families are less clear-cut. The people you visit might not know whether to treat you like a guest, a repair person who has come to fix their problems, a trusted friend, or an enemy. They may not have asked you to visit in the first place. They are probably more nervous than you are, and eager to make a good impression on you. If you are visiting families in their homes, you are in a unique relationship. You will need to establish the purpose of the visiting relationship, set a mutually respectful tone, and help the family set and reach goals for the visits.

B. A family development approach to home visiting

Many agencies make home visits, but not all agencies use a family development approach. Today's home visiting is founded on the nineteenth century tradition of nurses and teachers making home visits to "the poor," a tradition built on the deficit model. Although many modern home visiting programs have tried to incorporate some empowerment and family support principles, in reality many current home visiting programs are a mixture of deficit and empowerment orientations.

The skills you've learned in other chapters will help you make effective home visits using a family development approach. You've learned how to develop a vision for your work, and create a support system for yourself. You've learned how to build mutually respectful relationships with families, maintain confidentiality, and help families assess their situations and set and reach goals. You've learned how to communicate effectively with families and co-workers, and how to increase your cultural competence. All of these skills are vital for home visitors. In this chapter we will not repeat these skills, but will focus on practical ways to apply them in the unique role of home visitor.

Home visiting programs with a family development approach often employ home visitors who live in the community where visits will be made, or at least come from the same cultural background and speak the same language.

C. How to enter a family's home respectfully: the first time, and on future visits

Your first visit establishes the tone for your ongoing relationship with a family, so it is worth some advance thought. Your approach to a first visit with a family who is expecting you differs from a visit in which you show up "cold" at their door. A family may be expecting your visit after meeting you at a clinic, group meeting, or place they go frequently (like a church, school, or senior center). They may have met you, heard about what you can offer, and agreed to your visit at a specific time. They may expect your visit after a referral from someone

else. They may have requested your visit. In any of these circumstances, your entry into their home is eased by their agreeing to your visit because the family had a choice about whether to have you visit.

Preparing for the visit

It helps to confirm the date, time, and purpose of the visit ahead of time. You could give or send the family member a small, friendly-looking card with your name, agency name, address, and phone number, plus the date, day of the week, and time of the home visit. Write "home visit" on the card so they understand that you will come to their place. Add, in your own handwriting, "Please call if you can't keep the appointment." If the families you visit speak languages other than English, your agency should print cards and brochures in those languages.

Ask the family member for directions as well as the home address. Ask for any landmarks, and where to park (or which stop to take if you're using public transportation). Ask if there's anything else you should know, like whether there'll be a dog, or if you'll need to announce your arrival through an apartment building intercom and wait to be let in by the family member. When making your first visit, leave yourself extra time to find their home.

Send a friendly-looking, easy to read letter confirming the purpose and time of your visit. Avoid jargon. Say, "I'd like to talk with you about ways we might help you with your heating bills", not "We want to determine your eligibility for a federally subsidized weatherization initiative for low income households." Give your name and office phone number, asking them to call if they want to cancel or reschedule the visit.

The clothes you wear for home visiting help form an impression of you and your agency. Your clothes should be clean, professional-looking, but not fancy. Wear clothes suitable to what you'll be doing with the family. For example, if you'll be sitting on the floor with preschool children, dress comfortably. If you'll be doing physical activity or therapy, wear clothes that allow you to move easily. Wear comfortable, sturdy shoes. If you have expensive (or expensive-looking) jewelry or purses, leave them at home. We do not suggest that you hide your personality, but advise you to help yourself fit easily into a family's home environment.

If you arrive unannounced

It's much harder to get your "foot in the door" when you arrive without any prior arrangements. Since violence has become so widespread, many people are reluctant to allow a stranger into their home, or even answer the door unless they're expecting a visitor. We strongly encourage home visiting agencies to do initial outreach in public settings where families already go and to vigorously network with others in the community who are in a position to make referrals. When you do end up at a family's door unannounced, there are several things you can do to increase your chances of being invited in. Carry your agency's brochure in your hand.

Have a name badge with your name, photo, agency name, and phone number. Knock, ring, or buzz. When the person answers, say, "Hello, I'm Betina Lacross from the Community League. I'm walking (or driving) through your neighborhood today to talk with people about ways to get help insulating their homes and paying their fuel bills. If you'd like me to come in to talk, I'd be glad to. It will take about twenty minutes. If you want to call the

Community League first to verify who I am, that would be fine. Or, we could make an appointment for another day if you'd prefer." Then wait for the family member to invite you in, call your agency, say, "No, thank you," or make an appointment for another day.

Asking a respected community member to accompany you is one way to increase your success rate on "cold" calls. For example, a religious leader who is concerned about elderly community members' difficulty paying winter heating bills might be willing to accompany you on first home visits. Alternatively, they might be willing to ask a respected congregation member to accompany you. People in the neighborhood will open their doors to this person, who can then introduce you: "Good morning, Mrs. Taro. How're you doing? I'd like you to meet Ms. Lacross, from The Community League over on Bushwick Avenue. Ms. Lacross and I are visiting with older people in the neighborhood, to talk about ways to get their apartments insulated, and get help with fuel bills. Is this a good time for us to come in?"

Meeting outside

In warm weather, you might conduct many of your "home" visits outside, in people's yards or on porches or stoops. Be aware of the family's privacy by using a quiet voice (unless you or a family member has a hearing impairment), and creating a "zone of privacy" around you and the family member through body language. Ask, "Do you feel comfortable meeting out here, or would you rather meet inside or at our agency?" Families have many reasons for meeting outside, which may range from convenience and comfort while children are playing outside on a hot summer day, to a hostile family member asleep or drunk inside. Follow the family member's lead.

Keep good notes of your attempted visits, even if you don't connect with the family. Note people who were not home, or who seemed interested in a visit but were not ready to invite you or make an appointment at that time.

The first visit

It sends an important message of respect when you arrive on time. Approach the home in whatever way is customary in that region and community: knock, ring the bell, buzz and then announce yourself over the intercom or (in a warm climate where windows are always open, for example), call out. If you're announcing yourself within earshot of the neighbors, use your name, not your agencies, to preserve the family's privacy. "Hello, Mrs. Taro. It's Betina Lacross." Then, allow a moment for the family member to invite you in. If she doesn't, ask, "Is this a good time for me to come in?"

Every home visitor hopes the family will remember the appointment, be at home, and welcome her in. Experienced home visitors know that doesn't always happen. Maybe you'll need to remind the family member of the purpose of your appointment. "It's nice to see you again, Mrs. Taro. I'm Betina Lacross from the Community League on Bushwick Avenue. I enjoyed talking with you at the senior dinner last Thursday, and now I've come to visit as we agreed. I brought the information about insulating your apartment, as we talked about.

The Community League helps older people get their homes insulated and makes arrangements for help with fuel bills if that's needed. Is this still a good time for me to visit?"

While some families do have urgent reasons for not being home when you arrive for an appointment, many others use this as a technique for avoiding having to deal with you or make changes in their lives. Often someone else is pushing them to work with your agency, they feel they can't say "no", but they are not really very eager to have you come.

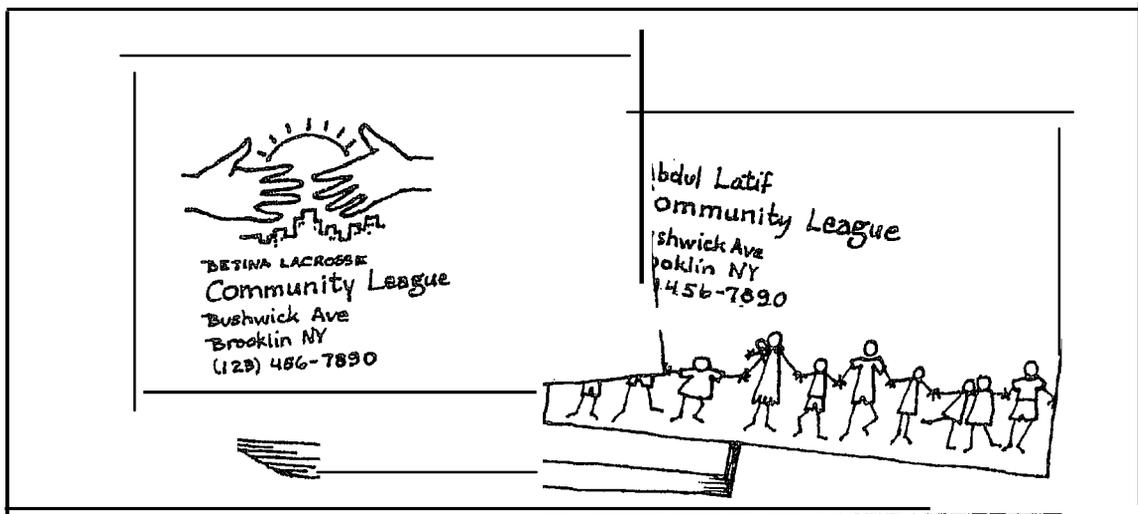
Be polite, persistent but not pushy. If the family member doesn't seem to remember the appointment but is willing for you to come in, proceed with the visit. If she doesn't want you to come in, offer her a flyer about your agency's work, saying she is welcome to call for information or to schedule another visit. (Your agency should have an easy-to read flyer, and you'll need to have it in your hand-not buried in the bottom of your purse or briefcase, or out in the car.) Leave the door open for future contact, but don't push yourself on the family. The family development approach only works if a family is ready to take some initiative and responsibility for their own progress.

If the family member allows you to come in, ask her where she would like you to sit. She may motion you to a particular spot, or may reply, "Oh, anywhere."

At a focus group, a worker talked about paying attention to where people sit so she can judge their comfort with physical closeness, which can vary in different cultures:

We go into their homes and a lot of times we ask them, 'Where would you like us to sit? What's most comfortable for you?' If [they] hesitate, I'll ask, 'Where do you sit the most?' and then I'll choose another chair. Or I'll notice, once I've sat down, where they sit down, how far away they sit from me. It's important to respect those boundaries.

Family members often apologize for the messiness of their house, especially if they weren't expecting you. You can say something to put them at ease such as mentioning something positive about the family's home: "Are those pictures of your grandbabies? What beautiful children!" or "Did you crochet this afghan? It's so colorful!"



D. How to establish the purpose of the home visit

Once you've introduced (or reintroduced) yourself, are inside (or have "created space" outside for a visit),

And have said something positive about the family or its home, get right to the point of why you're there. For example:

We want you to be warm, and to afford to pay your heating bills this winter. I have information here about saving money through insulating your home, and about ways to get help with high heating bills. [If the person seems to be from another country where insulation isn't common, you'll need to explain what insulation is.] Heating bills can be an average of \$per month lower once a house is insulated, although the actual amount varies according to how much insulation you already have, how you heat your home, and what kind of winter it is.

The Community League receives money from the federal government to pay for insulation, and to pay workers to put it in. The government knows that insulating homes is a good bargain, because it keeps people in their own homes instead of having to move to subsidized housing. So, our League helps people figure out if they are eligible, and if they are, we arrange a convenient date for our workers to come to your home to measure how much insulation will be needed. Then, they come back later to put it in. We may also be able to help pay part of your heating bill if it gets too high. Are your heating bills a problem?

It is not always easy to decide who to include in the home visit. Sometimes when you arrive, several people are there, and others may drop in during your visit. If you have the name of one person from a referral, and have located that person and been allowed in the door, ask him or her who to include in the visit.

Mrs. Taro, is there another family member or anyone else you'd like to include in our conversation? Your son helps you with maintenance on your house? Shall I explain this all to you, and then leave you with information you can talk over with your son? If he has questions, I could come back to talk with you both, or you or your son could call me with any questions.

E. Safety issues

Home visitors need to be alert to personal safety. It is likely that you will go into some unfamiliar or risky neighborhoods. You may be entering homes in which not all family members welcome your visit. You may be alone with families much of the time. There are practical steps you and your agency can take to increase your safety.

If you drive to home visits, your agency should consider supplying you with a cellular phone, which you can carry with you into the home if you're going into a neighborhood where you might want it for safety, or where the phone is in danger of being stolen from your car. Program 911 (or the local emergency number if your area doesn't have 911 service) into your phone's autodial memory, so you just have to push one button to get help.

Carry only what you'll need today in your bag; leave your credit cards, checkbook, and other personal valuables at home. Don't carry a big bunch of keys to your office or home with you. Put a single car key on a key ring or chain, and keep it in your pocket, easily accessible if you need to leave quickly. Keep your car in good repair, with a full gas tank. Use a bathroom in a public place like a gas station, diner or community center, before going out on a home visit.

Park your car so you can head out easily and quickly if necessary. For example, back into a driveway instead of planning to back out at the end of your visit. Lock your car door before going into a home to visit. This is especially important if you carry confidential records in your car. Older children or neighbors may be curious (or in some neighborhoods, drug addicts or other people looking for something to sell may break in). If you feel embarrassed about locking your car door, thinking it sends a message of distrust, you can mention that it is agency policy.

Checking in with others

Many agencies ask home visitors to provide a designated person in the agency office with a detailed itinerary for each day when home visits will be made, including:

- planned departure times
- planned arrival times at each family's home
- address (and phone if available) for each family

Home visitors are asked to check in with their office by phone after visits, either routinely after each visit, or after visits they designate as potentially risky. If the office staff doesn't receive each check-in call, they alert another staff person or the police who then search for the home visitor. Other agencies feel that such a stringent system is not necessary in the areas where they work, but still supply home visitors with a car phone to increase safety and let home visitors know of canceled appointments called in by family members. Other agencies pair up workers making home visits to risky neighborhoods or homes, so home visitors doesn't have to go into potentially dangerous situations alone.

Once you and your program become accepted in a neighborhood, you might find that people you used to worry about can become your allies. Once the guys hanging out on the street get to know you and your work, they may help you out. "Hey! Monique's not home. She started having pains this morning, and went to the doctor."

Defusing "hot" situations

The skills learned in Chapter 4, Communicating with Skill and Heart, can help you de-escalate situations that are beginning to feel "hot." It is a good idea for agencies to provide extra training for home visitors that is specific to nonviolent conflict resolution, so they will be skilled in defusing (instead of escalating) potentially violent situations. In many communities, dispute resolution or mediation programs can provide such training; in other communities, nonviolence training is provided by Quakers, the Alternatives to Violence Project, or other like-minded groups.

Using your intuition

While it is important for agencies to have policies like these to help protect home visitors, your most important safety resource is your own intuition. If you have a "funny feeling" when you are approaching a family's home, stop and listen to your own inner voice. Too often people ignore these warnings because they are supposed to be at a certain place at a certain time, and just keep going. Pay attention. Put your own safety first, even if it means canceling an appointment for what seems like "no good reason." You can always reschedule at a time when you can take someone else with you. If you are worried about a particular family (for example, if you see a weapon or drugs in their home), ask them to meet you in your office or at a community center where there will be other people around.

If you begin to feel uneasy as you enter the home, sit between the door and the family so you can get out the door quickly if you need to. If you feel you need to leave quickly, you can ask the family member you trust most to walk with you to your car to get something you want to give her (it could just be a brochure from your agency). If you have to, just look at your watch, say, "I have to go now," and leave, even if you're in the middle of a sentence or activity.

Putting yourself first

If someone in a home you visit acts in inappropriate ways (for example, if a woman's man friend puts his arm around you or asks you for a date), use "messages" to let him know that you don't want to get involved in that way: "I'm here to work with Sandra and the children. If you'd like to join in our story-reading, you're welcome to. But I can't get personally involved with you." These kinds of advances are usually a demonstration of power rather than a true misunderstanding of appropriate roles. He may be uncomfortable with the changes Sandra is making as a result of your home visits (like going back to school, or getting out of the house more), and wants to demonstrate that he is still in charge. If he answers the door but there is no sign of Sandra, don't go in. Ask him to have her call you to reschedule the appointment. If he threatens you or says something like, "I raped two of Sandra's friends," get out! Always keep in mind that your own safety is more important than whatever you're doing with a family.

F. TV, dogs, and another cup of coffee: handling the practical matters of home visiting

Experienced home visitors have developed many sensible strategies for handling the practical challenges of home visiting. In many of the homes you visit, there will be a TV on when you arrive (although the family won't necessarily be actively watching a program). TV is a distraction on many home visits. Don't hesitate to ask them to turn it down or off. Describe this as your need, not something wrong with them. Say, "I wonder if you'd be willing to turn the TV off (or down). I'm not as good as you are at concentrating when it's on. "if they're actively watching the TV each time you come, say, "I've noticed there's a program you seem to like on TV each Thursday when I come at 2:00. Is there a better time for me to come? I'm also available Mondays at 1:00, or Fridays at 10:30." Your client may like to watch her "program" every day at 2:00 but be too embarrassed to tell you. Or, she may be used to keeping up with the lives of the TV characters while carrying on other conversations.

Other family members

Interruptions from other family members, visitors, and phone calls can make it hard to keep your focus.

Remember that what seem like intrusions from your point of view are part of the family's daily life. Try to look at them as potential opportunities to get to know other family members, and to build on family strengths. When the family member you're working with comes back from answering the phone complaining about her nosy sister, you could say, "We were talking about your plans to try to get a job. Do you think your sister would help in any way?" If a woman's husband or man friend hangs around the edges of your meeting (or stays in the next room, listening), ask her permission to invite him in. Say, "Frank is usually here when I come. Shall we include him in our conversation? I think he might have some good ideas about how you could get down to the job training center." If she agrees, you could say, "Frank, it seems like you really care about Joyce and the kids. It's hard for most families to make ends meet these days, so a lot of families are trying to get as many of the family members as possible to have good jobs. Joyce said she's willing to take the job training program for computer operators down at the job training center on Peach Street. Right now we're talking about how she'll get there, and we thought you might have some good ideas."

Dynamics often change depending on who is home. You might be working successfully with a teen mom and her baby or toddler, when her mother arrives home. When you explain the program to her she may voice (or silently convey) her concerns, causing the teen to withdraw or become defensive. Try to support the teen mom's choices, while conveying respect for her mother's home and opinions.

I respect your goal of staying in school, Monique. You'll be able to provide better for your baby and yourself in the future, if you finish school now. You also want your baby to have a relationship with his or her father, so you want to keep seeing Fred. He says he's willing to help support you and the baby if he can have visitation rights.

. I also understand your viewpoint, Mrs. Martin. Monique is a big help with the younger children in the family, so it's nice to have her at home. You also resent the fact that Fred got her pregnant, so you don't want him around. And you haven't seen him follow through on any promise he's made so far.

Monique, you have some important decisions to make, which will have a long-term effect on you and your baby. Mrs. Martin, your support is so important to Monique right now. It's obvious that you love her and your other children, and that you'll love this new baby, too. I'll be happy to try to help you find solutions that make sense to all of you.

Often when you're trying to work with an adult, children become very curious, and find ways to shift the attention to them. Consider carrying a small "goody bag" containing crayons, educational coloring books (for example on good foods to eat), puzzles, and other inexpensive but safe toys, to offer to the children.

Animals

Dogs and other pets can present a major hurdle to home visitors. Some families keep guard dogs who are encouraged to bark furiously at strangers, or even to bite if not called off by their owners. Many other families keep dogs that they don't perceive of as threatening ("Oh don't mind him", they'll say about the dog snarling around your feet). Don't hesitate to ask a family member to call the dog off, or even put him in another room or tie him up outside. Put your request in a positive light, as a way the family member can help you (instead of implying there is something wrong with the family for keeping such a dog). "Your dog does a great job of Guarding your family! I'm not as used to dogs as you are. Would you mind putting him in another room, or tying him outside, while I'm here? I would appreciate it so much!" Some home visitors carry dog biscuits in their pockets to offer to the dogs they encounter.

Other pets can interfere with home visits, too. If you're allergic to cats or dogs, you'll need to work out an arrangement with your agency (and the families who keep cats or dogs) so another home visitor can work with these families. In rural areas roosters, goats, and other farm animals can be aggressive as you make your way to the house or trailer.

Food

Families often offer home visitors something to eat or drink. Sometimes what is offered is not what you would normally eat (for example, highly sugared donuts), or doesn't seem clean. Sometimes you are simply "coffeed out." Other times you worry that you may be taking food the family desperately needs.

Do you accept every offer in order to build a rapport with the family? Do you establish a policy of never accepting refreshments? Most experienced home visitors find a balance between these two extremes. You may want to accept food or drink offered by a family on the first home visit saying, "Oh, thank you, that would be nice. I don't usually eat anything at home visits because if I did it all the time, I'd weigh five hundred pounds!"

(Or, in the case of coffee, "My nerves would get so jittery I'd fly away!"). But since this is my first visit in your home, I'd love to." Particularly if the family has prepared a cultural specialty, it may be worth it to accept "just a taste" and then rave about the food's and the cook's positive qualities (without overeating).

Or you might reply when offered a cola or coffee, "Thanks so much, but what I'd really like is just a glass of plain water. I get thirsty from so much driving." Be practical: If you accept this offer, you'll soon have to find a bathroom, and the family might be ashamed of the cleanliness of their bathroom, or (in a rural area) might not have indoor plumbing. Also, in a rural area, the family might not have running water.

There are other ways to establish rapport besides sharing food. You can comment positively on children, photos, crafts, trophies, or any effort the family member has put into making a good life:

- "Your children are so lively and sociable."
- "I enjoy seeing the children's art work up on your fridge. You obviously have some artistic talent in your family!"
- "It's not easy for seven people to live in a two-bedroom apartment. I'm very impressed by the way you have things organized."
- "Look at those beautiful geraniums. Did you grow them yourself?"

It is often your "vibes" and body language that tell families whether you can be trusted and whether they should open up to you. Showing genuine interest in what they are sharing can go a long way.

As a program supervisor said at a focus group:

I find one of the most important things when I go visit a family is to sit there and listen. You have to be able to listen and to speak the language; even when some young people are speaking, I have to work to understand the words they use.

But it helps to not be just pushing your agenda but to sit and listen.

It is a skill to be able to take some time to listen and also to be efficient, not taking up too much of your time or the family's.

Another supervisor said:

I think there's a real skill to conducting an effective home visit. The workers that are best are those who are comfortable doing home visits-aren't frightened or intimidated, but who can also maintain boundaries. They can be open and listen, and speak in the client's language, but they are also there for a purpose and not to have a coffee klatch with the clients. And that's a skill.

Phone Contact

Communicating with families who don't have a phone presents another hurdle for many home visitors. Even when families give you a phone number (or a referral source provides one), the phone may have since been disconnected for a variety of reasons: not enough money to pay the bill; a move; an attempt to avoid contact with bill collectors or estranged partners. When you first make contact with a family (at a clinic, for example), ask if they have a phone, note the number if they do, and then also ask if there is a friend or relative you may call if you have trouble reaching them on this number. Each time you visit, ask, "Is 234-5678 still your phone number?" Since this has become a routine practice in doctor's offices and other places families visit, they will probably take your question in stride.

If a family member tells you they don't have a phone, ask if there is a friend, neighbor, or relative you can leave messages with. Be very clear about the dates and times of your appointments, and emphasize that you will appreciate it very much if they will call your office when they need to change an appointment for a home visit. Tell them that they might not reach you directly when they call—they might have to leave a message with another person. If the agency phone is often busy, let them know good times to get through.

Setting up a regular weekly time to visit helps families remember when you're coming. You could say, "It looks like Wednesday at 10:30 is a good time for both of us. I'll come every week at that time so we can work together on the goals we agreed upon. If you ever know you aren't going to be here at that time, or it's not a good time for me to come, please call my office to let me know. The number is here on this card 234-5678. Please call by the day before if you can, it will save me a lot of time. When you call, Liz will answer the phone. If I'm there, she'll call me to come talk with you. If I'm not there, or I'm with another family, please tell Liz your name, and the message you want her to give me."

At a focus group, a family member talked about prioritizing the family's schedule when workers plan times for home visiting:

I think [it's important to take] that into consideration when they're scheduling programs, and even when they're scheduling their home visits, in terms of meeting the parent's needs, rather than their own needs.

G. Home visits in child protection or other domestic violence situations

Calling on a family that has been reported for possible child abuse or other domestic violence is among the most challenging home visiting situations. Your own safety may be in question. You have to determine whether it is safe to allow the child, children, or adult to remain in the home, and if not, to withdraw them (and yourself) in the face of distrustful, often angry or violent family members. Whether or not you remove someone from the home, you need to try to begin the process of opening the door to future positive contacts.

Your safety comes first

Your safety, and the safety of the child or adult you have been called in to help, is most important. You'll need to pay careful attention to the safety guidelines listed above for all home visitors, plus you may need some extra protection. Child protective case workers and domestic violence workers can usually rely on agency agreements with law enforcement officers to accompany them or at least back them up. If you do this kind of work and your agency has not yet established working relationships with law enforcement agencies in your community, ask your agency director to initiate such an arrangement. Where possible, participate in cross-agency family development training with law enforcement officers and other agencies who also serve the same families you work with, so you'll all have a similar approach.

Using the family development approach

While it is difficult to establish a mutually respectful relationship with a family when you've been sent to their home to investigate reports of abuse (and possibly to leave with their children), it is not impossible with the family development approach backing you up. The skills you learned in previous chapters will help you convey respect (even if there are certain behaviors—like child abuse—that you cannot let continue). For example, if a family member starts shouting and cursing about no-good social workers as soon as you explain the purpose of your visit, you can say, "I've met some social workers who take a hard line approach, too. I have a different approach than most social workers. I want to work with you to figure out how to keep your children safe and healthy."

It's always important to avoid bureaucratic jargon in your work with families, but especially so when emotions are running high and someone's safety is at stake. Don't say, "I'm here from the Department of Social Services Child Protective Service Unit to investigate a report of alleged child abuse." Instead say, "I am Rhonda Brown from the County Child Protection office. I was asked to come here to see if there are troubles keeping the children safe. I imagine you want to keep your children safe and healthy, and I want to find ways to work with you to do that."

This approach doesn't mean that you neglect your responsibility to vigorously and skillfully investigate report of child abuse. When a child is obviously in danger, your job is to get that child to safety as quickly as possible, without risking your own safety any more than is necessary. That is still your first responsibility.

Looking beneath the surface

Most reports of child abuse and neglect are not that clear-cut. Some families are repeatedly reported for abuse or neglect, investigated, and their cases closed, when in fact these families' major problem is often poverty. They can't afford good child care, so they leave their children unattended at too young an age, or they

Leave the children in the care of slightly older siblings or other inappropriate caregivers. They can't afford medical care, and so may avoid taking children to the doctor until a serious illness develops. They often live in crowded, inadequate housing lacking safe, pleasant play areas. The parents often lack good education, and have a hard time getting or keeping good jobs. The stress of raising children without much support often results in children who appear to be or are neglected, and it sometimes leads to abuse.

These are the families you are most likely to be able to help create more positive environments for themselves and their children. But it is hard to do once they've pegged you as an enemy trying to take away their children and cause the family trouble. That is why it is often worthwhile to use the family development approach, especially when investigating a child abuse report in which you find a situation that is not clearly unsafe.

This approach encourages rapport between you and the family, built on the presumption that you share a common goal, which builds trust.

H. On-going visits

In some home visiting situations, you'll only make one or two visits, but most home visitors establish a rapport and then work with a family for several months. The Family Development Plan you learned about in Chapter 6, Ongoing Assessment, is an important tool for keeping ongoing visits productive and focused on the family's goals. If you have not introduced the Family Development Plan during the first visit, be sure to make it the focus of your second visit. Establish a pattern of reviewing and updating the plan at the beginning of each visit (or at every second or third visit, if your visits are devoted to specific tasks like physical therapy or parent-child activities).

For example, you could say,

Your goal was to keep your children out of foster care. I'm very impressed with the way you use the skills you're learning in your parenting classes to change Antoine's behavior when he starts to hit or yell. I noticed you've made a "time out" spot over there by the chair, and that you send him there for three minutes when he starts to throw things or biting his sisters. I really like the way you tell him what he can do, instead of telling him what he shouldn't do. And you said that his new child care program is going pretty well. This is real progress toward meeting your goal. Congratulations on all your hard work! Now that you're going to parenting group on Wednesdays, maybe I could start coming every other week. Shall we try that for a month and see how it goes? How does that sound to you?