



Re-visiting Home Visits

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Introduction

'A Day in the Life of an Early Years Educator' BINGO		
snack time	read 'The Very Hungry Caterpillar'	sand and water play
set up role play areas	home visits	circle time
outdoor play...whatever the weather!	sing nursery rhymes	wet paper towel first aid!

As early years educators, I am sure lots of us could call 'Bingo' on this card! Many of our day-to-day pedagogical choices have been part of practice for so long they become known as reliable, neutral and child-centred tools of our trade. The purpose of this guide is not to create a checklist of things to 'tick off', nor is it intended to throw familiar approaches 'out with the bathwater'. Rather, it's an opportunity to pause, reflect and question what we do, why we do it and whether we could do it differently to better meet the needs and aspirations of all the children and families in our unique settings. In this guide, we take a deeper look at 'home visits' to reflect on and consider:

- *Affordances of home visits*
- *Problematifying traditional home visits*
- *Re-thinking the home visit*
- *Alternative approaches to home visits*
- *Critical reflection prompts*

Affordances of home visits

In England, we have become accustomed with the terms 'partnership working', 'transition' and 'inclusion' which are referred to within statutory policy and government advice (DfE, 2024a; 2024b) and explored further within comprehensive guidance by the sector (Birth to Five Matters, 2021). By acknowledging the interconnectedness of practice, we can recognise how meaningful relationships between settings and homes underpin authentic partnership and high quality transition. Traditionally, home visits have been used as a tool to initiate relationships between educators and families in an informal environment where children feel a strong sense of belonging and safety; usually their own home. By getting to know one another, exchanging key information and having the opportunity to ask questions, it is hoped this initial meeting supports a smooth transition between homes and settings.

Home visits privilege us with unique insights into children's lives which our colleagues in other key stages are often denied. As a reception teacher, I appreciated the days of home visiting from a professional development standpoint. I felt incredibly fortunate to be welcomed into the homes of our new families and released from the 'hustle and bustle' of school with another colleague for hours at a time. This afforded us time, space, distance and permission to slow down (Clark, 2023), reflect and engage in critical dialogue in-between visits. Interestingly, on return to school the interest of senior leadership would be piqued which helped to keep attention to early years on the whole school agenda.

It is important we attend to the importance of traditional 'home visits' to sustain the practice as an integral part of our role. There have been and continue to be barriers which can prevent this valuable transition process from happening at all; changes in policy priorities, financial and logistical difficulties of covering staff or unprecedented crises such as the pandemic in 2020. However, by revisiting the concept of home visits with an inclusive lens (Lowe and Kilgour, 2024) we can shift from an over-reliance on the perspective of well-intentioned educators and consider how the traditional home visit model can be adjusted towards a more equitable experience.

Problematising traditional home visits

Home visits create first impressions which can have a lasting effect on the direction of relationships going forward. In busy settings, home visits may be organised with efficiency and effectiveness outcomes in mind, meaning the logistics of visit timings and agendas may be pre-determined by the setting. This not only constrains what we are able to find out on visits, but also denies parental agency to choose when, where and how these meetings take place. When information shared during visits are focused around the setting's expectations, the transition process is at risk of becoming a superficial tick list geared towards getting children 'school ready'.

Essentially, our very presence and behaviours within homes, forms part of the 'hidden curriculum', where unspoken and unexamined values, assumptions and biases can give way to unintended privileges and inequalities. Despite our good intentions and open-minded stance, we must acknowledge two critical tensions when entering the private lives of families. Firstly, we bring with us the authority of an educational institution which immediately places us in a position of power. This risks families feeling marginalised, uncomfortable, judged and perhaps accepting a home visit out of a sense of obligation. Another significant tension lies within ourselves and the baggage we carry.

We all have diverse life histories which shape our identities, values and perspectives. This deeply affects our interpretations when engaging with children and families, which are never 'neutral'. We could unconsciously pre-judge situations based upon perceived similarities or differences to our own lives, prior knowledge of families or stereotyping by postcode, occupations, and lifestyles. As Dr. Stella Louis and Hannah Betteridge, affirm; "We all have biases" (Louis and Betteridge, 2024). It is critical we push through the discomfort of self-reflection to address these biases.



Re-thinking the home visit

Adjusting the way we approach home visits could make the experience more accessible, equitable and valuable for all stakeholders. Re-thinking home visit processes will differ from one setting to another, but a useful starting point could be to review your home visit policy and consider whose voices are represented. The inclusion of Parent Voice can support us to address diverse needs, experiences and aspirations of families. What do families want to gain from the 'getting to know you' transition experience? Current and previous families are a powerful resource for new families as they have recent, relevant and unique experiences to act as experts and translators of educational jargon, processes and procedures. By listening to families, respecting their agency and creating opportunities for ongoing collaboration, the home-setting partnership becomes more democratic.

Typically, information exchanged during home visits incorporates a set of 'All About Me' questions and key organisational information about the setting. It is worth thinking about sending this information out prior to the visit for parents and children to consider in advance. The inclusion of open-ended prompts such as *tell me some stories about your daily life, mealtimes and bedtimes*, instead of relying on closed questions, could generate alternative information. Discussions could be steered by what feels comfortable and meaningful for families rather than educators assuming the lead. This allows time and space during the visit itself for authentic conversation centred around children's unique interests, experiences and cultures.



Re-thinking the home visit

It is so important to learn how culture is expressed in students' lives, how students live their worlds. We can't make assumptions about these things. *Only a part of that child is present in the classroom.*

(González et al., 2005, p. 81, emphasis added)

Thinking with an inclusive mindset, the notion of traditional home visits may not always be the best fit for every family we work with in our diverse settings. Do we make it clear that the offer of a home visit does not have to be accepted? If families decline a home visit, are alternative transition arrangements offered? Perhaps meeting families in neutral spaces in-between homes and settings would be welcomed. The language we use in our communications is key to ensuring parents' right to choose is made explicit, is genuinely respected, and that options are made accessible for all families.



Alternative approaches to traditional home visits

Rather than a one-off event, transition is regarded as an on-going process (Early Years Coalition, 2021a, 2021b). High quality transition processes attend to the multiple ways children navigate horizontally between home, their main setting, and other caregivers on a daily basis as well as on the vertical trajectory (such as the current focus on school readiness for children in reception). Thinking about these multiple connections, we begin to realise children's lives are not contained within the home, but are entangled and embedded deeply within diverse communities of people and places. The space in-between settings and homes then becomes a rich site of possibility for shared experiences and renewed relationships between families and educators. This section considers ideas for meeting families in the in-between or 'third space' (Tatham-Fashanu, 2021) which are intended to complement the home visit approach as part of a tailored transition.

Some examples of third spaces

Many settings are already offering alternative, appealing and accessible options for their families. These include garden visits, beach and park gatherings and meetings at local coffee shops. Community centres are also a convenient location for families and educators to get to know one another as they offer an informal, familiar, yet neutral space. SureStart centres were ideal hosts for transition events when I was a reception teacher. Educators from a range of settings, healthcare professionals and other agencies would join families for presentations, crafts and other interactive activities.

These collaborative events and 'third spaces' can help to ease people gently into conversations and playful interactions as they facilitate a flattened hierarchy of power. An unexpected outcome of working in this way is the shift in how interactions unfold and are interpreted. As an educator, I felt more present and in the moment with the child in front of me. I could authentically meet the child where they are, instead of succumbing to a reductive 'schooling' lens.

Alternative approaches to traditional home visits

A recent research project I conducted explored another 'third space' when I joined families of nursery children as they walked from home to the setting. This positioned children as the leaders and experts and me as the learner and their privileged guest. Although unfamiliar at first, this shared experience facilitated meaningful communication, the development of reciprocal relationships and opportunities to discover different knowledge otherwise hidden within the confines of the classroom. I was able to accept children's invitations to enter their world and to learn what matters to them from their own perspective. By paying attention to the subtleties of everyday experiences, I could recognise and respect children's authentic concerns and interests.

Furthermore, through getting to know siblings and wider family members, I could appreciate the value of intergenerational input and could detect ways to weave this rich knowledge into the curriculum back in the setting. Coupled with knowledge of families, another bank of knowledge for me as an educator, came from exploring the geography of the locality through the child's perspective. For educators who commute to their settings, walking with families is a productive way of finding out how projects we lead in settings can involve, represent and benefit the wider community.

There are so many possibilities for exploring a 'third space' with children and families. Collaborating with families can happen anywhere, as long as we make it accessible for all. Thinking of innovative ways of using familiar places, such as shops, museums and galleries or making use of more unusual spaces such as yurts or old building-site cabins could open up untapped opportunities in your unique contexts.



Critical reflection prompts

Although we probably feel there are never enough opportunities to reflect on practice, an ideal time to consider our transition and home visiting processes could be around Easter, avoiding the hurry and haste of forthcoming summer and autumn terms. The mid-point of an academic year allows for both reflection on what has transpired for current families and forward-thinking for new children joining the setting.

Reflecting on Relationships:

- How well do we know the children at this point in the year? Do we know all children equally? Is it easier to learn about some children and more problematic for others? What do we think the barriers could be and how could we minimise their impact?
- How well do we get to know parents/carers, wider family members and the local community of our setting? Have we utilised additional resources to support us to connect with all families? (e.g. translation mediation, online communication tools, open-days).
- How well do families and children get to know us? How do we know? Has Parent Voice been used to gain diverse perspectives on the home visit/transition process?



Critical reflection prompts

Home Visits Audit:

- Does your setting have a home visit policy? A rigorous policy can help to validate the importance of transition processes by informing stakeholders of the values and rationale underpinning chosen approaches and secure support for much needed resources, time and staffing to carry out our roles effectively.
- When are home visits conducted? Shifting between the summer and autumn term could support the creation of quality time with families. Are transition offers also extended to mid-year admits?
- Do you inform families of the reasons for the home visit before you arrive? Do you usually have an agenda and is this shared with parents? (e.g. Sharing key setting information or a list of 'All About Me' questions). What kind of information might we miss when relying on a standardised list of questions?
- Have all colleagues conducted home visits before? Has CPD around home visits been conducted in a safe space with sufficient opportunity for colleagues to engage in open reflection and dialogue?



Critical reflection prompts

Thinking Beyond the Home Visit:

- Did all current families access transition or other home-school events? Do you know which families have not accessed these offers? If parents did not accept a home visit, were they offered something different? Are choices on offer equally accessible to all with no hidden implications of making the 'wrong' or inconvenient choice?
- What aspirations do parents hold for their children? What do children make of us entering their private lives? The inclusion of Parent and Student Voice helps to respect families' agency and capacity to be active participants in the home-school partnership.
- Are you able to discover children's unique interests, skills, knowledge and experiences beyond the setting? What else could we do instead of relying on the benefits of a traditional home visit? Considering 'third spaces' in your context could create novel and meaningful ways of connecting with families equitably.



Finally

The practice of home visiting acts as a valuable start to the home-school partnership journey when an inclusive lens supports us to adjust our approach towards more socially just practice.

This guide is intended to be considered in conjunction with further reading to understand and respond to the interrelated responsibilities of inclusion, safeguarding, and anti-racist practice.

Furthermore, this guide has suggested the development of meaningful relationships can be continued throughout children's time with you through shared experiences in-between homes and settings. The exploration of 'third spaces' can empower families and educators to learn about and from one another in authentic and joyful ways.

Where could the journey take you and your families?

...in taking *time* to understand the unique and specific strengths, 'funds of knowledge' and challenges within a community, schools can develop strong relationships with parents and families that will benefit all parties and especially the children.

(Levy, 2024, p. 31, emphasis added)

References and further reading

References

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- Tatham-Fashanu, C. (2021) 'A third space pedagogy: embracing complexity in a super-diverse, early childhood education setting', *Pedagogy, Culture and Society*, 31(4), pp. 863-881. doi: <https://doi.org/10.1080/14681366.2021.1952295>

Further Reading

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Tapestry Guides:

'A Beginner's Guide to Anti-Racism' by Liz Pemberton (The Black Nursery Manager)

'A Beginner's Guide to Belonging' by Siya Mngaza

'A Beginner's Guide to Establishing Meaningful Relationships with Families' by Jaziea Farag

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