

Conversations in Home Visiting: What Does “Community” Mean to You?

National Home Visiting Network

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The National Home Visiting Network was formed in 2018 to create space for critical conversations that are needed across practice, policy, and research to continuously refine and advance the field of home visiting so that more families with young children can benefit from this evidence-based service.

The National Home Visiting Network Advisory Committee has been pondering the question—*What does “community” mean to you personally and professionally?* This surfaced in November 2023 when we were meeting on the lands of the Catawba Indian Nation, immersed in their community of spirit, space, and place. One of us asked, “When we say ‘community,’ what do we really mean?” Over the next few months, we each did our own informal research to talk with people close to us to gather their thoughts about the word based on their context.

We were struck by the differences that emerged.

Personally, we tend to think of “community” as the people we turn to and who we know have our back no matter what. Maybe it’s our besties who know when to listen and offer a hand. Maybe it’s the parents of our children’s friends who we connect with arm-in-arm to journey through the adventure of parenting. Maybe it’s our neighbors who are helping with yard clean-up after a storm. Or, it might be “communities” that we share a racial, ethnic, religious, gender identity or sexual orientation with – those that have experienced similar paths or discriminatory challenges. Across these examples is a sense of belonging, relationships, a shared social characteristic, and maybe even a sense of responsibility and accountability for one another.

Professionally, it may be the groups with whom we associate – the research “community” for instance. Or, it might be those with whom we collaborate with on a shared goal or project.

In the early childhood home visiting realm, we think of how the rules and regulations define this term, most often in a geographic sense (e.g., municipalities, cities/villages, islands, districts, zip codes) – and the characteristics of those geographies (socio-economic, racial, educational attainment levels, access to resources, etc.). We do our work -- our research, our program implementation, our

policymaking -- with this narrower definition in mind, because that is often what our funders require. Because of this, our needs assessments and the data we use to make the case for resources tend to have a deficit focus, missing the inherent strengths of the community as defined by those who access home visiting services.

So it seems that there is a difference in how the term “community” is understood and used. And is that bad? Only if it limits us from understanding the families we serve.

Our exploration of how community and family context shapes the health and well-being of children and families revealed that identifying challenges and getting them out there in the open for transparency and discussion is a critical first step. Then we need to be curious and consider other perspectives and especially the perspectives of those who are accessing home visiting supports. We need to be open to different views and opinions and recognize that those are rooted in our individual histories. And when we can be more open, more curious, and more flexible, we might be able to more easily support families enrolled in home visiting and the broader early childhood continuum of services.

During the August 2024 meeting of the Network Advisory Committee, Allison Parish summed up the conversation: “Without a shared definition or understanding of the term ‘community,’ we need to be sure to either define first what we mean if that is necessary, and/or give space for the community to define for themselves what they mean by the term.” And Mimi Aledo-Sandoval opined, “Let’s focus on giving space and grace.” By doing so, it may be possible for us—supporting characters in the home visiting field—to better understand “community” within the eyes of those we serve and the informal supports that families say they have or need to thrive. That’s about putting families at the center and focusing on the “community” connections that are important to them, and how THEY define their community.

"Community, to me as a mom and a parent leader, is a tapestry of support and shared experiences, woven together by understanding and compassion. It's a space where we uplift each other, celebrating our triumphs and navigating challenges side by side. Together, we create a nurturing environment that empowers families and fosters growth for everyone involved." -Cullbi Orock

Thoughts? We'd be eager to hear your ideas and to know if you have specific suggestions for ways that home visiting programs, policy, and research can better approach the use of the term “community.”