



## Family Visits Benefit Teachers and Families—and Students Most of All

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*“The more you know about a child’s family, the better you can meet the child’s needs, and the best way to learn about the family is to be there with them.”*

—Gayle (a primary school teacher)

*“It [the family visit] gives me an opportunity to talk to you. It informs, and instead of being right in the school and feeling closed up or whatever—I like being at home.... I mean I feel like we have a good verbal communication, and with the home visits I think I know everything that’s going on with him at school, and I hope that you all feel comfortable with him, with what’s going on here.”*

—Ann (a parent)

This teacher and parent are sharing their insights about the value of family visits as a way to open communication and work more closely together to support student learning. There is a great deal of national conversation about the need for children and older youth to feel connected to adults who care. In today’s large bureaucratic schools, teachers often find it impossible to meet the demands of their classes and know their students as individuals with specific needs and gifts. Families have become increasingly busy, and they often reflect structures different from the traditional two-parent, two-children prototype. New media and technologies emerge almost daily, affecting family time and communication in ways we had not imagined even 20 years ago. These societal changes can be viewed as positive and progressive. Most schools, however, have continued to operate in traditional ways by delivering instruction that has little to do with students’ present or future lives. Thus, the disparity between home and school continues to widen.

Creative minds are beginning to tackle this issue in different ways, and this brief offers one: connecting meaningfully to students’ families. Schooling in the 21<sup>st</sup> century *must* be different than in recent decades. Teachers must see their work as educating the whole student, rather than as merely delivering facts. To educate effectively, teachers must reach out to students’ families in ways not traditionally imagined and help bridge the ever-widening gap between home and school, so that students realize they are known, cared about, and expected to achieve.

Researchers at CREDE have been studying the academic and social development of rural and urban children of Appalachian descent in Kentucky in the context of the curriculum and instruction they receive at school and at home. Teachers participating in this project, “Appalachian Children’s Academic and Social Development at Home and in Nongraded Primary Schools: Model Programs for Children of Poverty,” have visited with their students’ families on a regular basis, and have discovered the power and benefits of such visits, including the development of caring connections between students and adults. All the families visited have been positive about the experience as well.

As students’ first teachers, parents and families have much knowledge to share with classroom teachers. When parents are respected as experts about their children, they tend to share willingly. Teachers who arrange for several family visits over the course of a school year can learn a great deal about their students, the students’ families, and the communities. They can use this knowledge to inform teaching and build a connected and caring classroom community.

### Learning from Families

Key to a child’s school success are the relationships established between the teacher and student, and the teacher and the student’s family. Family visits offer a good way to develop these relationships on safe, “home” territory. Research has shown that one of the keys to successful teaching and schooling is creating personal connections with students inside and outside of school (Epstein 1998; Heath, 1983; Moll, Amanti, Neff, & González, 1992). Knowing the students’ outside interests, families, and home routines, and then using this information to connect in meaningful ways can have huge rewards in helping to construct happier, healthier, and smarter kids.

At the same time, school personnel must support these efforts in order for them to be effective. When principals support family visits, more teachers can become involved in the process. Principals have facilitated family visits by allocating faculty meeting time for visits or by including family visits as a professional development option. Some teachers have shared non-confidential, helpful information with other teachers, so that both students and the school community can fully benefit from the family visit experience.

Teachers and researchers participating in this CREDE project have developed the guidelines below for successful family visit experiences. Prior to a visit, consider the following recommendations:

1. Make appointments in advance and follow up with reminders. Try to schedule visits when key family members can attend.

2. Plan to make visits brief, but let families lead on how long to stay.
3. Be prepared for unexpected occurrences, such as:
  - ◆ Cancellations
  - ◆ New situations and surroundings
  - ◆ Sharing of emotional and troubling information
  - ◆ Views different from the visitor's own
4. To gain the most benefit from a family visit experience, consider the following:
  - ◆ Concerning the children, parents and family members are experts.
  - ◆ Personal sharing may be appropriate at times.
  - ◆ Observing and listening can lead to insights, as well as asking and answering questions.
5. Successful home visits have brief agendas, but are flexible and responsive to issues that the family might raise. Good questions to guide discussions, especially during first visits, include:
  - ◆ What are your child's interests and favorite activities?
  - ◆ What has your child done this summer that was a learning experience?
  - ◆ What are your child's strengths?
  - ◆ How does your child handle stress?
  - ◆ What have you noticed that your child can do now which s/he could not do when school was out?
  - ◆ What do you think your child needs to work on most?
  - ◆ What does your child want to learn about most?
  - ◆ How does your child interact with other children?
  - ◆ What have you helped your child learn?
  - ◆ What have you discovered about how your child learns best?
  - ◆ What does your child already know a lot about?
  - ◆ What are your goals for your child this year?
  - ◆ Would you like to visit or volunteer in your child's classroom?

## Conclusion

Family visits offer invaluable insights about students. They can provide new understanding about students' learning styles. For example, some students may work better alone rather than with others, or they may like an active environment more than quiet time. Visits might also reveal the emotional and social needs and behaviors of students. It is helpful to know if they react to problems with tears, anger, or withdrawal, and how they socialize with peers. Through family visits, teachers can identify students' latest interests or concerns, such as a new hobby, an upcoming trip, or a change in the family. One teacher reported that by observing parent/child interactions, she learned discourse styles that helped her in the classroom. The family members often spoke to each other in direct commands (e.g., "Clean up your place.") when they expected something to be done at a particular moment. The teacher, however, often made indirect suggestions to children (e.g., "Don't forget, we always clean up after ourselves when we go out to play."). Realizing that this style was not working with some of her students, she changed her own discourse style to match the families'. These adjustments to instruction may have huge rewards for students academically, as well. For example, many of our students in this study surpassed the expected achievement in mathematics by achieving beyond one grade level for each year in school (McIntyre, Kyle, & Hovda, 1999).

Teachers who know a great deal about their students and families find they can make meaningful connections in instruction. Many teachers who conduct family visits have created instructional activities explicitly designed to tap into the knowledge that students bring to school from home. For one class, this might mean using agriculture as a theme; for another, it could be using knowledge about the local town community. Some connections may be more incidental. For example, a teacher may inadvertently use a book on a topic that is of particular interest to students because they have learned about it at home. In each instance, instruction can connect to what children already know and, in the process, help students construct new understandings and expand that knowledge.

## Resources on Family Visits

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- Heath, S. B. (1983). *Ways with words*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
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- McIntyre, E., & Stone, N. (1998). Culturally contextualized instruction in Appalachian descent and African American classrooms. In T. Shanahan & F. V. Rodriguez-Brown (Eds.), *47th Yearbook of the National Reading Conference* (pp. 209-220). Chicago: National Reading Conference.
- Moll, L. C., Amanti, C., Neff, D., & González, N. (1992). Funds of knowledge for teaching: Using a qualitative approach to connect home and classrooms. *Theory Into Practice*, 31(2), 131-141.

For additional details on successfully conducting family visits and more information on the research behind this practice, write Diane Kyle ([diane@louisville.edu](mailto:diane@louisville.edu)) or Ellen McIntyre ([ellen@louisville.edu](mailto:ellen@louisville.edu)) at the School of Education, University of Louisville, Louisville, KY 40292, or call (502) 852-0572. For a description of this CREDE project, visit [www.crede.ucsc.edu/Programs/Program5/Project5\\_5.html](http://www.crede.ucsc.edu/Programs/Program5/Project5_5.html).