

Home Visiting Programs Provide Opportunity for Enhancing Health Literacy

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Parents in home visitation are new healthcare decision makers for growing families. As a population, they are characterized by poverty, low education, low literacy, and limited access to care—a recipe for low health literacy.

Typically, health literacy is described as the ability to understand basic information needed to make appropriate health decisions (1), and measured as ability to read medical words and documents.(2) Limited reading skill is associated with adverse healthcare outcomes (3), but the pathway linking reading skills to outcomes remains unclear.(4) To increase understanding of the problem and elucidate the range of possible responses, leading researchers call for re-considering the meaning of health literacy, and better measures that reflect how people use health information in their lives.(5)

To that purpose we used a health promotion model that defines health literacy as the ability to use information and services to maintain or enhance health.(6) Our study population was 2,572 parents of infants and toddlers who participated in one of six programs representing different models of home visitation (eg, Early Head Start, Healthy Families America). Designed to be integrated into established program models, the intervention consisted of home visitors using a reflective approach to develop parents' interactive and reflective skills. Home visitors completed the Life Skills Progression (7) instrument at initiation of service, every six months, and at closure. We analyzed data on use of health information and services, and health behaviors and parenting practices, such as maintaining safe environments, to estimate parents' health literacy.

Parents achieved significant improvement in health literacy scores after six months of home visiting, regardless of reading level, and scores continued to improve over time. Teens started at a significant disadvantage but improved quickly to achieve parity with their older counterparts. Parents with the lowest reading skills made the greatest gains. These findings support enhanced home visitation as an

effective channel for empowering parents to better manage personal and child health and health care. The intervention is recognized as a Quality Innovation by the Agency for Healthcare Research and Quality and National Commission for Quality Assurance. To learn more see www.innovations.ahrq.gov/content.aspx?id=2533. 

Sandra Smith, PhD, MPH, is a health education specialist and a national expert on health literacy. Her current research addresses links between health literacy and depression and the role of reflection in empowering healthcare consumers.



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