

What makes a good digital home visit?

Summary

Charities like Home-Start HOST are changing the way they support people as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Home-Start HOST had normally provided home visiting from a community volunteer workforce, but in recent times have had to support vulnerable families using phone or video calls. This makes it harder to start new relationships with families and more difficult for volunteers to pick up the cues that help them help families. Volunteers are less able to see the effects of their work. This is creating problems recruiting and retaining volunteers. As we know, Covid-19 has also impacted on relationships between the charity's coordinators and public sector services like health visiting and social work. These relationships play a vital role in families getting the help they need from the system.

We held a series of events in November 2020 as part of the ESRC Festival of Social Science which explored the impact of digital delivery on volunteers and families, charity co-ordinators, public sector workers and community services. Participants' stories from home and work life in the context of Covid-19 were gathered in four locality workshops (Oldham, Tameside, Stockport & Bolton). Professor Deborah James of Manchester Metropolitan University facilitated these exploratory sessions, which centred on a role play video of a zoom call which showed an initial meeting between a mum and a Home-Start HOST worker. We recorded the discussions around the role play film in each workshop and these recordings were analysed by a team of researchers from Manchester Metropolitan University and Lancaster University. The findings were presented at a dissemination event to a wider audience three days after the locality workshops.



The Film

The main point of discussion in the locality workshops were reflections and analysis on a short video created by Deborah James, Laura Chatterton and Ellie Fletcher-Robbins. The film explored interactions between a mum at home (“Bex” played by Laura) and a Home-Start HOST worker (“Ellie” played by Ellie). In the workshops, we used the film to explore how the opening between “Bex” and “Ellie” was crafted in this initial call.

All the work leading up to the events was done online, which provoked some strong feelings from Ellie, “My predominant reason for working on this project was fear: Fear of digital working blocking and hindering the fundamental need to fully connect with fellow human beings within a care setting. Laura and myself felt vulnerable in undertaking an improvised piece of role play over a digital setting. We had not and still have yet to meet in person. However, by taking the decision to engage in this project and sharing our honest thoughts on the process ahead a bond of human connection was able to develop between us over a digital space.”



The research

After the locality workshops, the research team analysed the data that was collected in these workshops. Each member of the team presented their research at the dissemination event just three days after the initial locality discussions. Here is a brief overview of what they found:

Professor Deborah James found that micro stories in research interviews often contain the essence of broader themes that are the biggest concern to participants.

“Bex”, the mum in the film, began to open up to the worker over the zoom call and this opening was most visible when she depicted events from family life. “Bex” talked about having a picnic under the kitchen table. Deborah drew the value of these depictions from home life, not because of their representation of truth, but rather as invitations into the life-world of the family.

She surveyed the transcripts from the four locality meetings to find micro stories that the participants used to talk about their practices with digital working. Their pictures showed that good digital home visiting practice was rooted in values-based work, supported and enacted by quality supervision.

In the workshops many participants raised concerns about not being able to see the family. Deborah highlighted the fact that remote working takes workers out of the community and also asked participants to consider the impact of not being able to *sense* the family in the context of their community.

Professor Deborah James

Manchester Metropolitan University

“The short film at the heart of this project was a result of us drawing on our experience and relationships. We made this film by swapping roles related to our prior experience, and this work, behind the scenes, is what brought this film to life. Being able to trust others with our stories is one thing - being able to step back from our stories, rotate and exchange narrative perspectives to support others to see things differently is quite another.”



Dr. Emma Swift from Manchester Metropolitan University reviewed the recordings of the locality workshops and presented her analysis. She drew out eight ideas that participants had explored as being useful when considering “What makes a good digital home visit?”



Set the environment - Consider the framing of your camera; does it look warm & inviting? Consider any visuals; a cup of tea, pens, note pads as props. Consider your posture and non-verbal communications; try to relax. All these things can help break down hierarchy.



Listen for openings - Enable parents to paint a picture of their world; ask them to describe things. Listen to the pictures they are painting themselves and have them clear in your mind. Try to make the unconscious conscious - try to pick up on the little things.



Be flexible - You can offer telephone or video calls. Some families may not want to have their camera on, but could you leave yours on to build a connection? “Families don’t want to do video calls, they just want to do it over the phone”.



Build confidence - It is important to build your own confidence and that of the family you’re working with. Have confidence in the technology you are using. “Anything you can spot that’s positive is really good and that’ll give mum so much confidence”.



Create time to talk - Use mirroring and non-verbal communication over video calls, provide affirmation or reassurance over the phone. Offer to call back at a time that is more suitable if the parent appears unable to talk for some reason.



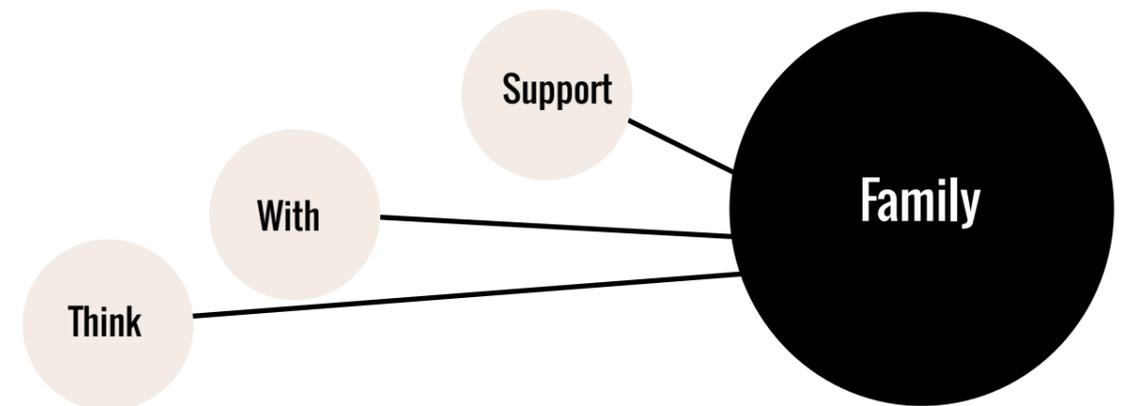
Self care - “You have to work out how to best protect yourself as well...if you’re speaking to 3, 4, 5 families, you can hear many traumatic stories from each of them...you can’t go from one call to the next if you’re not able to recover”.



Consider yourself the welcome visitor - Consider yourself as a ‘welcome visitor’ for the family whether in person or on digital visits. You can try to replicate the welcoming interaction that you would have face to face in an online context.



Support each other - Keep in contact with families and colleagues both formally and informally. Have regular team meetings. Have regular meetings with a manager. All of these reduce pressure and provide reassurance in these challenging times.



Dr. Luke Collins from Lancaster University used a form of linguistic analysis known as ‘corpus linguistics’ to analyse the occurrence and frequency of language in the locality sessions. Corpus linguistics is an approach to the study of language that uses computers to analyse millions, or even billions of words of data to look for patterns of usage that we might not see otherwise. He used corpus linguistics to explore any differences in narratives around family work that existed in the four different local authorities. Luke’s analysis showed that each locality session provided different insights into what they felt was important, although there were some common themes.

The analysis highlighted the importance of ‘active listening’, both when using digital tools and other technology, such as speaking on the phone. Furthermore, it was clear that participants felt using digital technologies has distinct challenges when compared to a face-to-face interaction.

Feedback



After the dissemination event we collected feedback from the attendees, here are some of their thoughts:



It made me realise how difficult it can be for families actually taking that first step to agreeing to digital delivery.



It was very reassuring and affirmative - especially the bits about knowledge being partial. and adapting good communication practice to a digital space. I know I can do it, actually.



Lots of great ideas about highly sensitive and responsive ways to work with families from diverse disciplinary perspectives.

Key contacts

If you would like to know more about the different aspects of the project please get in touch:

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Research team

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Resources

[Link to powerpoint slides from dissemination event \(please click here\).](#)

Acknowledgements

Thank you to Dr. Laura Breen, Dr. Louah Sirri, Dr. Kate Wicker and Dr. Ryan Wilkinson for supporting the various stages of these events. Also thank you to Ellie Fletcher-Robbins and Laura Chatterton for their fantastic work in producing the film.

