

Our Virtual Voice Café

Experiences of Virtual Service Delivery
In the Wake of the Coronavirus Pandemic
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Parents as Teachers®
State Office

A glimpse into virtual home visiting

Parents as Teachers is an evidenced-based parent support program that provides in-home visits, group connections, resources, and child screening for new parents and their babies. The goal of the program is to improve parenting practices and increase parents' knowledge of early childhood development as a way of providing early detection of concerns and improved readiness for school.

In the global pandemic that began in January of 2020, stay-at-home orders eventually forced social services like Parents as Teachers (PAT) into a virtual environment, most without having ever planned for such a scenario. As the need for physical distancing continues, PAT needs to consider virtual delivery not only as a temporary emergency response but as a new way of doing business, potentially even after the pandemic is under control.

If Parents as Teachers is to continue offering virtual services, it's time to take inventory of what's happening, to document lessons learned, and to identify lingering problems.

The Virtual Voice Café sessions in August 2020 were intended to take that inventory and this report details the findings. As these pages will summarize, there have been many successes, a few stumbles, and some ongoing challenges that will be important to consider as planning goes forward. It is hoped that this information will prove useful for strengthening the Parents as Teachers program further.

Background

Despite the commitment to in-home visiting, Georgia Parents as Teachers programs had to abruptly move to virtual home visiting in mid-March of 2020. And, as these pages will show, they made it work, addressing problems as they came up, inventing new modes of operation, and above all actively caring for the families they serve.

Now that people have had a taste of what is possible in a virtual environment, the Georgia state office is considering what, if any, aspects of virtual home visits should be an ongoing option for the program. Georgia Parents as Teachers commissioned this study to learn directly from parent educators and their supervisors how virtual visitation has been going and to gather their thoughts about how to ensure its effectiveness.

To that end, Georgia Parents as Teachers ran eight focus groups in the month of August 2020, listening to the voices of 27 parent educators (PEs) in 6 groups and 9 supervisors in 2 groups (3 of the supervisors are also parent educators). Except for one male supervisor, all of the participants were women. Additional demographics can be found below.

The conversations were conducted virtually in Zoom, recorded, and transcribed. They were facilitated by Catherine Lombardozi, Ed.D., an independent consultant, who also analyzed the data and authored this report. The questions that shaped the conversation were identified by the Georgia Parents as Teachers team, with recommendations about wording and flow contributed by Catherine Lombardozi.

These conversations about working in a virtual environment produced 9 hours of recordings, resulting in 685 lines of data totaling over 62,000 words. (Line and word counts do not include facilitator’s questions and comments). The data was then analyzed for themes around the primary areas of exploration: how the service has been delivered, the experience and challenges around technology, the changes in supervisory practices, and advice for PAT going forward.

As a qualitative study, the data in this report is by definition anecdotal. Our intention is to give voice to the parent educators and supervisors who have lived the experience of virtual service delivery over the five months prior to these conversations. Therefore, the report features the words of the parent educators and supervisors prominently. Some sentences are bolded to highlight comments deemed important by the researchers. Quotations are edited for length and clarity and are not attributed to preserve a degree of confidentiality. As might be expected, there are some contradictory opinions in the data, sometimes driven by widely differing experiences with families based on the circumstances of the people in their caseload.

Demographics

RACE	Number	Percent
American Indian or Alaska Native	0	0.0%
Asian	1	2.7%
Black or African American	21	58.3%
Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander	0	0.0%
White	11	30.5%
Multi-racial (two or more races)	2	5.5%
Prefer not to answer	0	0.0%
Other	0	0.0%
No Responses	1	2.7%
Total	36	100%

AGE	Number	Percent
18-29	2	5.5%
30-39	11	30.5%
40-49	11	30.5%
50-59	7	19.4%
60-69	3	8.3%
70+	0	0.0%
Prefer not to answer	1	2.7%
No Responses	1	2.7%
Total	36	100%

ETHNICITY	Number	Percent
Hispanic/Latinx	3	8.3%
Non-Hispanic/Latinx	32	88.8%
Prefer not to answer	0	0.0%
No Responses	1	2.7%
Total	36	100%

REGION (of PAT program)	Number	Percent
North Georgia (Counties: Catoosa, Pickens, Whitfield, Gordon, Bartow)	2	5.5%
Metro Atlanta (Counties: DeKalb, Fulton, Gwinnett, Rockdale, Clayton, Butts)	15	41.6%
South/West Georgia (Counties: Lowndes, Dougherty, Muscogee, Troup, Bibb)	12	33.3%
East Georgia (Counties: Elbert, Morgan, McDuffie, Wilkes, Augusta)	6	16.6%
No Responses	1	2.7%
Total	36	100%

COMMUNITY TYPE	Number	Percent
Rural: population < 2,500	2	5.5%
Small town: population of 2,500+	8	22.2%
Suburban: An identifiable community which is part of a larger urban area	7	19.4%
Urban: Densely settled area containing at least 50,000 people	15	41.6%
Major city: Total population of 500,000+ people	3	8.3%
No Responses	1	2.7%
Total	36	100%

The Experience of Virtual Service Delivery

“Sometimes, I just want to hear what’s going on in their family. I think that’s just been a really nice buffer for them. They just want to be heard.”

The most important question for review in this inquiry is how virtual delivery of Parents as Teachers services compares to the in-person home visiting model.

There seemed fairly universal agreement that all modes of delivery can be made to be effective. The sense is that face-to-face meetings are optimal, followed by video meetings, then phone meetings. At the same time, the parent educators recognized that **the best family visits are those that actually happen**, so they have learned to be flexible with the technology and work within the limitations of accessibility and functionality on a case-by-case basis.

In individual instances, virtual delivery is the best way to be in touch with a family because they have so many other commitments that home visits would be difficult. All would applaud having virtual delivery as an option, but they didn’t want to see it be the only way home visits are conducted.

There is no common assessment of virtual home visits; their impact and effectiveness depend on the circumstances and the specific people involved. To some parent educators, the virtual visits feel more “*chaotic*.” Many found that they did not always stick to a typical home visit flow but instead spent time talking with parents about their individual situations and challenges, which seemed to be far more important.

Mine is a lot of just sitting back and listening to them and their fears. And then you throw the rioting in there and all that. Sometimes, I just want to hear what’s going on in their family. I think that’s just been a really nice buffer for them. They just want to be heard.

While it would seem that having a visual would be crucial to some parts of the Parents as Teachers visits, it was not as simple as that. Attempting to coach parents through interactions with their children was difficult when the angle of viewing on the computer wasn’t wide enough or parents were trying to juggle smart phones and engage with a child at the same time. Caregivers were more distracted by background activities and other concerns. Parent educators said that they have learned to be more “*patient*” and “*creative*.” Some said parents would get distressed at times when children would “*run away or wouldn’t want to interact*” during home visits, but PEs would encourage them to not “*feel stress that the kids aren’t doing*”

what they typically do when we were in the home” because the truth is “children are just busy and they're everywhere” regardless of the venue.

► What is lost in virtual home visits

Most parent educators keenly feel the loss in no longer working with parents in their homes. They miss little things like giving the families books and being greeted by children excited to see them and to find what was in their bags. They report that the children, too, “just want to know when are you gonna come play.” One PE lamented, “one of my parents the other day sent me a picture of her son. He looked so different now I didn’t even recognize him.”

“That real interaction is kind of lost [by] hopping on a computer and doing it. It’s cool, but you [are] easily distracted by something that’s going on around you. Versus me being face to face with you and able to really connect with you.”

The PEs recognize that they are “only seeing a little piece of what’s happening” in the home. That not only limits their observation of parent-child interaction and assessment of milestones, but it also raises concerns about their ability to discern more nuanced issues like family tensions and depression.

Whether I’m doing it virtually or over the phone, my challenge is listening for the information so that I have documentation. And so I’m having to open my ear and having to stay very, very focused. Part of the energy that I focus on the family that I’m serving is now going into this.

As most people are discovering, virtual connections have been very important during the pandemic, but nonetheless, something personal seems to be lost in the electronic medium.

That real interaction is kind of lost [by] hopping on a computer and doing it. It’s cool, but you [are] easily distracted by something that’s going on around you. Versus me being face to face with you and able to really connect with you, really seeing your body language. Are you receptive to what I’m saying? [Is] something making you uncomfortable? [Can I] really hold your attention versus me trying to walk through an activity with you and they have a kid over here who’s screaming in a corner. But with the clients I think seeing us still being able to offer a service to them and them getting to see us; it shows that we really are here to help you.

It may be hardest to connect with new families even though they only have only experienced the virtual environment.

I think one of the biggest things is you get that connection with somebody when you’re there and you’re meeting them in person and they can see you and know you. When people are first coming in, they’re not too keen on ‘okay, let’s jump on a video call together;’ they seem a little bit more apprehensive about that. So as far as new visits coming in and just being solely virtual, that’s been a little bit difficult connecting.

► Virtual visits by phone

Conducting home visits by telephone has distinct advantages and disadvantages. For many families, it was the only way to stay connected to the program, as they did not have the technological capability to support video conferencing. Allowing phone

visits kept these parents engaged. Parent educators were able to catch parents for brief meetings when they were at work or on the go.

But the lack of visual connection was a real drawback. They can't read body language nor really see what's going on.

It's a little difficult because you are wondering if they are listening to what you're saying. Sometimes, I'll go back and I'll ask something about what we've talked about, just to see if they're really listening to what I'm saying and talking about. But sometimes I just think if they're at somebody's house, they're not listening to anything I say. They're having too much fun being away from home.

I don't feel like I get as much information on the phone calls as I do if I'm virtual, especially if trying to do my depression screening or get my health records.

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Parent educators also expressed concern that they don't know if they are on speaker phone and how much they need to be careful about what they say or ask.

► Length of visit

A number of PEs commented on the length of the visits being different when comparing different modes, but there wasn't necessarily agreement on the resulting impact (longer or shorter).

Mine's gotten considerably less; mine can go 30-45 minutes now which is amazing. I think it's just because they're just fitting us in but you just got to make sure you're giving them the meat in that. And tell them you value [their] time. I thank them for fitting me in [tell them] that I know and I understand and I get it. I really do get it.

I feel like the visits have become very [much] longer and sometimes you don't even notice they're longer until you really look at the time. Like, oh my goodness, I'm almost to hour and a half on one visit.

Circumstances mattered. Some parents and children don't like a particular technology and keep the visit short; some found they could be more flexible when using a virtual tool and they would extend time.

For example, one PE said phone calls were longer than video:

They seem to want to talk more or share more than they would if they were on the video call. I feel like it's probably because they walk away from the baby when the activity is over. There's more family well-being [conversation] that lasts a little bit longer on phone calls, than it does with the video.

While another PE said:

Parents don't want to spend a whole lot of time on the phone. Before, when you go to their home, they might just want you to linger around a little bit longer. But it's something about being on the phone or on a video that they don't.

► What is gained with virtual home visits

The parent educators are grateful to continue to provide services in the pandemic. They recognize that safety is the number one driver here, and that virtual delivery is necessary. And they are finding other advantages.

I feel like I'm putting a little bit more accountability on my families, you know, such as gathering those materials, even some of my mom's create their own activities. I think that's a plus. It is giving them power. You can do it.

*I think we can be a lifeline; I think we can hear tones and we can hear despair and we can hear fear and [that is just] as important right now. You know we're just doing the best we can. For me, man I'm telling you without it I would just be horrified to think that they're out there on their own. **I would like to think that they're getting the best practices that we can give them right now.***

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Details of Service Delivery

The typical Parents as Teachers' visit contains several elements: a parent-child engagement exercise, a discussion of child development, and a check on family well-being. The parent educators also work to connect families to other support services that may be needed. The PEs were asked how well they have been able to continue to educate parents in these areas through the virtual model.

► Engaging parents in the program

Parent educators have worked hard throughout the pandemic to keep families engaged in the program. They have done what they can to adjust schedules and to focus on present needs rather than the normal specifics of a visit. For clients who have been in the program quite some time, the PEs are "like family" and their calls and support are welcomed.

In the educators' views, there are a number of causes for parents being less responsive or dropping out altogether. Families are "having to triage" because they are overwhelmed with circumstances. If there are other children in the home, it can be difficult for caregivers to keep up with all the responsibilities of full-time care throughout the pandemic's lock-down. If children are in school, parents are also contending with the need to monitor their schoolwork, and those children need the available bandwidth for their own video calls leaving none available for a PAT call. "Parents are not going to have as much time for us unless we move it to later on that afternoon when they're done with the school-age kids."

*The priorities are different. I can do an hour to sit down and play and engage and maybe two hours. Now I have a house full of kids. I have to cook. I'm doing three meals a day, I have to do laundry, **the priorities are different.***

Many parents are working from home, adding yet another stressor to the mix. All this might leave people with “Zoom fatigue” – an unwillingness to engage in any more video conference calls after work and school and keeping up with family all online. As well, some parents have had to contend with family members or themselves becoming sick with COVID-19.

*Families who have many stressors, they're probably out there falling in line for food, still trying to get transportation, make sure WIC is gonna come to the house, those type of things. So I am not sure if we are a priority, and that has affected the engagement level. And that's okay. That's okay because **what's important to them should be what's important to us**. So we've had to find ways to slip in those visits, slip in those phone calls.*

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To support families through these challenges, parent educators have instituted new work practices. They call to check in more often. “*And you know they really enjoy that someone is calling to check up on them.*” Educators make their own schedules as flexible as possible, connecting with families on evenings and weekends.

With virtuals, I can spend more time with your family. Sometimes my schedule is going to [accommodate] her schedule. For example, if my client says, ‘hey, I can do it today’ or ‘I can do after five.’ We can talk about this. Or maybe today at 8:00 in the morning, I do it. I have the ability to work with them to the best schedule for the families.

Educators have also tried to ease the burden by providing resources for keeping older kids occupied and by sharing other community resources to address emerging needs.

I tried to get games that include the family. That way, the other ones won't feel left out because there was feeling like all the attention is to the baby or to the little one. That also helps mom because instead of having to do everything to show the child, the older ones know what to do.

Families have dropped out of the program for a variety of reasons: “*families that speak limited English,*” and no longer had immediate translation services, or others who were “*just in a program to get what they could,*” such as diapers and wipes. Others are simply overwhelmed with all the responsibilities and worries brought on by the pandemic – job losses, home schooling, sick relatives, financial stresses, and more; the program sometimes ends up at the bottom of the priority list.

I do have a couple families who would probably be able to do a virtual but they've just been so like turned off by that and how difficult it is. I know a couple of mine have even stopped therapies, because it was just so overwhelming for them to try to do that with two toddlers.

► Parent-Child Interaction

The parent-child interaction element is the most hands-on one, and therefore the one that needed the most adjustment for the virtual environment. To make it work, parent educators did a lot of preparation, including dropping materials and supplies for parents, and they had to work out how to best observe the parent engaging in

the activity. Because parents and children were inside the house for weeks, they also helped parents find interesting activities to do with children of all ages.

*My parents are wanting engagement and the parent-child interaction because they've been in the house for four months with the kids. And I think my moms are just running out of energy to keep up with, 'oh my God how do keep them engaged?' I know it's a lot. **I feel like I've been doing a lot more mental health coaching.** Sometimes it's 'Mom, you know we're going to get through this pain. Let's go outside.' Typically, we wouldn't be outside. So I'm trying to give parents other [things like] virtual field trips.*

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Preparing for a virtual visit

Facilitating parent-child interaction and teaching parents to do activities in a developmentally appropriate way often requires materials and hands-on interaction. Parent educators also routinely take handouts with them to home visits.

In the virtual environment, PEs needed to get activity directions and materials to parents in advance. This was facilitated by email, texting, "no contact" drop-offs, and mailing packages to parents (sometimes through a vendor such as Walmart). Some have made "a notebook for the family with activity and parent handouts" while the parent educator keeps a similar notebook so they are on the same page. "That way the parent will be on top of things and the whole session will go a lot smoother, just because they know what's going to be discussed in this visit."

As well, some PEs videotaped themselves demonstrating how to make props and how to conduct the activity with the child and sent that to parents as a visual guide. "In the video you get to see exactly what it's used for, how to do it, just in case you might be confused on how to make it."

Another change they made was to involve "the bigs" – siblings of the child in the program so that they could be part of the effort instead of a distraction. Some have learned to be ready with contingency plans. "I keep books on my desk in case the visit starts going the wrong direction. I'll read them a book or sing songs with the little ones."

Observing parent-child interaction

Observing parents interacting with their children has not always been easy in video calls. Camera angles were often awkward, especially when parents were using cell phones. A number of parent educators gave families phone tripods so that they could more easily set up the phone to show what they were doing with their children.

When talking with parents only by phone, parent educators worry that they can't see what the parent is doing. They asked parents to send pictures or videos of the activity in order to understand how the parent is interacting with the child. Otherwise, PEs have learned to ask a lot of questions to ascertain how the activity is going.

I ask mom [from] time to time, 'how is your child doing, is he doing this?' I know what he's supposed to do. If he's not doing that, she will encourage him to do [it].

I always like to ask questions to see if they're really doing what they're supposed to be doing. Because being on the phone, you don't have a clue if they're really following through with what you have asked of them. And that's the only thing about phone visits, you just don't know. You just have to take their word for it and go from there.

Without in person coaching from the parent educator, planned interactions don't always go as expected.

Sometimes they misinterpret what that activity page actually says, and they do something different and I just go with it. I'm like, 'Oh, well at least we're doing an activity.' And then I just tell them what they can learn from that particular activity.

“Doing it virtually really takes the parent educator out of it and kind of forces you to sit back and observe and allow the parents to do it because you can't really interrupt or the child's not asking you to do the activity with them because it's mom there.”

Encouraging an active parent role in selecting activities

Parent educators were excited to report that the **virtual environment forced parents to take a more active role**, to become more accountable for deciding on activities, preparing manipulatives, and interacting with their children. In a live environment, it was too easy for parent educators to spend more time demonstrating than parents spent doing the activities themselves. Instead, parent educators are now “*making them be the leader like you know they should be.*”

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*Since I'm not there and bringing out the actual toys and stuff for what they need, they're actually incorporating different things in the house, kind of spicing it up, making it their own. Which is good – they're taking responsibility. 'Okay I don't have this, I can use this, and I can make a different song' or however it may be. **They're just being really creative with activities.***

Planning more actively

The parent educators noticed that they were doing “*more intentional*” planning for visits than they had done in the past. Since they needed to send directions or drop off materials, they had to know further in advance what needed to be prepared. Some educators were dropping materials for multiple visits at one time.

So that's been kind of a challenge, but what also has been good is that you know the parents are being held accountable for planning the visits in a way. We have to know what kind of supplies they have, they have to gather all the stuff, so it's been more of a team effort of us getting the activities together. It empowers the parents a little bit more because they were so used to us bringing the supplies. So I feel that's a good thing.

It's a lot more work all at once, with the planning. I'll take two days to plan. I'll just take one day and drop off everyone's pack and I'm doing that twice a month. The driving hasn't really changed except for I do it all in one day, so it

takes a really long time. And then planning, it feels overwhelming sometimes because I'm doing so many in a row. But I've tried it different ways and that's just what works out for me.

► Family Well-Being

In the context of the pandemic, the home visit element that focuses on family well-being has taken greater precedence. *"The anxiety level is different."* The parent educators have been actively informing parents of support resources and dispelling myths about the coronavirus. They have also tried to keep their clients focused on effective parenting even in the midst of a sometimes chaotic environment.

"You have to touch [on] COVID-19 at the end of your visit. You have to always be informative, make sure you educate them what's going on so you will be able to eliminate confusion."

I found it better to just ask about everything in the beginning. 'How's your family doing, you know, has anyone been sick or been around anyone? What are your needs? Do you need anything?' That just worked better for me – to just do it in the beginning of the visit.

Parent educators are asking questions about the family situation, *"hitting all these different points dealing with the health of the family,"* and trying to get them resources where they can. They send information to families in the mail and walk-through specific resources when they meet with families. They also send out announcements of new resources via text and email.

You know, I work with a lot of Hispanic low-income families so there's more need. They were relying on the school lunches and the school breakfast. I'm glad that our county and community is able to provide them with a lot of that stuff. But I do see the language barrier with the mom, the stress on the moms because they're trying to help their kids through all this virtual school and communication with the teachers. They're trying to figure it all out.

*I try to focus on different things and inexpensive **things that moms can do to relieve stress because if they're stressed, then how are they going to be able to focus on the development of the child** or focus on many other things.*

You have to touch [on] COVID-19 at the end of your visit. So we can understand what's really going on, is anything getting better, especially [for] parents who are not reaching out to [get] news, they will not know what's going on. You have to always be informative, make sure you educate them what's going on so you will be able to eliminate confusion.

► Development-Centered Parenting

Regarding development-centered parenting, the PEs are continuing to monitor milestones with the caregivers and sharing advice on parenting behaviors that are appropriate for the child's age – they often *"talk to the mom about what techniques she's trying."* Specifically, PEs mentioned talking to parents about *"keeping their regular schedule with the kids making sure they still go to bed at the certain time," "encouraging daily book reading,"* and *"doing online field trips."* In addition to customized selections for parents, some offices are doing group connections that focus on specific aspects of parenting.

I have been able to receive a lot more feedback when it comes to developmentally centered parenting. They're more open to hearing suggestions and tips and the community resources as well. Not only are they more accepting of it, but also offer what they have noticed [about] what is going on in the community as well. So it's more engaging, more tit for tat when it comes to sharing. I do like to email them so they can read over it beforehand and that leads to better conversations.

Even though we have something in preparation for that [development-centered parenting], it can become parent-led DCP or parent-led well-being. I'm finding that right now they need us the most and we have to be that ear for them to express all of their concerns. You can also look at their file review and see where they were at prior to the pandemic and you can still follow up on those things. But it's also good to allow that family to share because we don't know minute to minute what [situations] the family will be in.

“The relationship assessment tool is a hard one. There's going to be a lot of babies or a lot of divorces.”

I took over a caseload. So they're almost about to graduate and it's just you can tell they have just kind of got to where we've talked about almost everything. So it's almost been like a refresh, like we have all these great things and great extra resources now. For us, I put it in the pack and make sure that I print it or we have some really good handouts from DPH about COVID and what to do now if you're positive, so I make sure I put something like that, every time I take a packet.

► Screening

Parent educators indicated that they were continuing to do screenings but were **concerned about their accuracy**. The screenings are being done more cooperatively, with parents (hopefully) answering candidly as an educator walks through screening questions, sometimes using screen share. The PEs are concerned that they can't see for themselves, both because of the possibility that parents are not completely candid, and because their experience tells them parents sometimes don't notice details. The fact that PEs “*can't read the body language as well*” also raises doubts that they are noticing everything they might have in a face-to-face environment.

The relationship assessment is of concern because it's not able to be conducted in a private setting; speaker phone and video is not optimal when there are others possibly in earshot. The PEs have tried to find ways to get that questionnaire filled out privately. They do worry there is a lot more domestic violence and depression than they are able to discern through virtual connections. One commented that the pandemic would result in one of two things: “*a lot of babies or a lot of divorces*” **meaning that the pressures on couples can reach critical levels.**

Well, the relationship assessment tool is not an easy one to do over the phone when the husband's in the room. So that's something that I'll put in the pack if I know it's coming up. And I'll have them fill it out. And then they'll take a picture and send me a picture, or they'll call me and let me know what the answers were on it. Everything else seems to go pretty well virtually. [But] that's just been the most difficult and I don't know if that's one that should even be done virtually.

► Connecting to resources

Connecting clients to support services and resources is a big part of the Parents as Teachers outreach efforts. Depending on their location and sponsor, educators described differing situations. Some noted that their county had limited resources to share. Others described a range of new resources that have sprung up to support people through the pandemic.

Some of the services that they were getting are now [on] hold a bit, just because the agency or the office might be closed. So things are at a standstill. “

The maze of varied agencies also needs to be navigated.

In order for them to get the help they need, they have to be connected to an organization like the program that we run. The same parents go to all these different places and get different help and you have some of them who don't know these places. They have it in a system now where if you go this place you cannot go to the other place because a lot of them are connected. So they're not getting the help that they need.

“If you know somebody that knows somebody, that's how we've been able to find resources from them.”

Indeed, it isn't easy to know and find needed resources. In fact, there were multiple instances in these sessions where **parent educators shared details about resources that were becoming available**, programs that their peers had not yet heard about.

The parent educators are a conduit for getting out information related to food banks, Salvation Army, help with utility bills, help with housing, and more. The educators often share website links and help to “walk them through it” so they can apply accurately. PEs and their supervisors will also often follow up more directly with the agency to advocate for their clients.

If you know somebody that knows somebody, that's how we've been able to find resources from them.

Once they filled it out, then my supervisor could go in and have a direct line to them in person and say, I have a client who put in for help in [such and such] town. But if they haven't done their part, it's hard for us to follow through.

Here's one illustrative comment about what needs to be navigated.

One issue is WIC providing Formula. The hospital used to at least give you enough formula until your WIC appointment, usually two or three days post-partum. Well now they're mailing out the vouchers, or they contact the families over the phone and then they fill out the vouchers. Well the mail is taking about 8-10 days.

So I've been trying to stock up on formula for my pre-natal moms. [I tell them,] make sure you ask for formula or get some formula because there's going to be a delay in getting that WIC. I don't know if the Health Department thought about that.

I had a one of my parents show back up at the hospital because her kid was crying, and she didn't know what to do. She was like 'my baby is hungry.' And she was so fearful of getting a DFAC's charge simply because she didn't have food for her baby.

COVID has just changed the way some of those things that we've taken for granted [work]. I have parents trying to get over-the-counter medicines, because they can't just go to the doctor now because the doctor is only treating you with COVID and have limited schedules. Doctors would take the kid's temperature. You can't walk in and take your baby for sicknesses anymore. You can't just walk in the ER or the urgent care anymore without being pre-screened, and if you don't have a fever, they don't want to see you.

My younger moms don't have the money for over-the-counter medicine. Which normally they could have gotten that through Medicaid and the doctor would give them a prescription or ibuprofen or prescription for Tylenol they wouldn't have to buy that. Now they're having to buy things they normally would not have to buy.

"I found that it's very hard to cut off especially for the ones that's really in need. So, you find that it's hard to turn away from them when they call you after hours."

▶ Adjustments to service delivery

Parent educators made a variety of adjustments in the way they deliver services in order to meet the needs of families during the pandemic. These are discussed in the service delivery section above. But there were additional adjustments they made that are worth noting.

Offering time flexibility

The circumstances that families are experiencing have led to parent educators being far more flexible with their schedules and with the time they spend with parents.

I'm just more flexible. You know, I even did talk to one of my moms on Sunday, which I would not have done if it wasn't in this model because we're not allowed to work past [set] times [in my organization].

I found that it's very hard to cut off especially for the ones that's really in need. So, you find that it's hard to turn away from them when they call you after hours.

We split our telephone calls throughout the week. We'll do maybe 15 minutes today and they'll give me the little basic stuff like if the baby had a doctor's appointment and they needed weight and what happened with the appointment and stuff. We'll do that, then another day we'll catch up again with another couple minutes. Or sometimes they'll just call right when they're driving to work. It has worked out for me that way.

I just try to check in with them more than I usually do. I'm just like I said, be more engaged with them to kind of keep them interested and keep them remindful of what we have going on.

Supporting emerging needs

Parent educators also noted that they were doing their best to support emerging needs – from delivering diapers and wipes, to dropping off books, to providing information about COVID, to finding resources for emergency financial concerns.

We also have quite a lot of families that are not able to work because of the pandemic and we have quite a lot of companies that also stepped up to the plate to help those families with their utilities and their rent. So my supervisor would

really make sure that a lot of them get taken care of as far as getting them the help they need.

Technological supports and challenges

As can be discerned from the full report, parent educators have been grateful to be able to remain connected to families even as physical distancing requirements precluded at-home visits. They feel they have been a lifeline for some families and have fulfilled an important role even above and beyond the particulars of the Parents as Teachers program, and modern technology has made that possible. But it has not been without complications.

"I feel like they give us a limit to what we can do and that's what's driving us crazy the most - just [knowing] you don't have a choice. That was draining us every single day."

► Technology challenges

Even while technology has been invaluable, adopting various technologies for PAT purposes has raised significant challenges in working with families. The programs adopted new tools and policies that went through changes and revisions quickly. It was sometimes frustrating for parent educators to be limited when they knew there was technology available to help.

"They [PAT] were looking for what is working and what is safe. But at this point, we are looking for what works."

Settling on appropriate tools

For most funders and programs, the original videoconferencing tool of choice was Zoom. Unfortunately, Zoom initially proved to have significant security flaws and many PEs were required to use Webex instead. Webex required families to have an email address and to download files to run the platform, and for some clients, this was a barrier that could not be overcome. Additionally, some families did not have computers or smart phones, or web and data plans that could support videoconferencing connections.

PEs and families would prefer to use familiar tools such as Facebook or WhatsApp, but in some instances, these tools were discouraged, much to the dismay of both educators and parents.

*I feel like they give us a limit to what we can do and **that's what's driving us crazy the most** - just [knowing] you don't have a choice. That was draining us every single day. When you even [have] parents complaining to you, like, 'can you guys try this?' and you're like, 'I can't.'*

*We always [gave] them some ownership. I feel like now we're not, because **we're telling them you must do it this way for us to be able to service you**. And I think that some for some families that is just not okay right now. They're dealing with so many other things that they have no control over. They could count on us to be there and now we're having to tell them no, and for them on their end, you know, maybe that no really doesn't make sense. 'Why, why can't*

you do another platform or why isn't it okay if I send it to you this way? What if I call you, can't you just pick up or can't you join my link if I send it to you?'

Parent educators would have liked to see families supplied with equipment, free Wi-Fi, phone card minutes, and other necessary materials. In some instances, funders, vendors, and other philanthropists did indeed donate the needed services and supplies, but it was limited and scattered rather than a comprehensive effort.

*Each family has their different needs. **One tool does not work for each family.** It leaves me to pretty much problem-solve each family's visit completion, making sure that I'm very flexible – flexible beyond measures – [to] try to pull tricks out of my hat. It's very challenging.*

I work with refugee families and virtual [service delivery] has become the biggest challenge for me. The technology is not something that my families are comfortable with. We can use either Webex or phone. But if I'm in African communities, they are more aware of using WhatsApp and other types of video [platforms] that [our funder] does not find very safe to use. But I always figured out how to make it work no matter what. [You] still have to be connected with your families, especially in this time where they need you the most.

“There's just been a lot that's changed lately. Even for me as a parent educator, I'm dealing with working virtually and system changes and then we're doing Zoom and then we're doing Webex.”

Not only were PEs and families being asked to switch to digital platforms, they were also contending with changes to some of their record-keeping systems.

*We've done an update [to our data system], where we're using [one system] for planning guides and now it's all in [another system], so it's different. More things to learn on top of the virtual stuff. **There's just been a lot that's changed lately.** Even for me as a parent educator, I'm dealing with working virtually and system changes and then we're doing Zoom and then we're doing Webex.*

To further get parents comfortable with the technology, parent educators have sent out text reminders just before virtual visits and helped parents through Q&A and live coaching.

Call minutes, Wi-Fi, and bandwidth

The population served by the Parents as Teachers programs varied greatly in terms of their technological readiness for the switch. While some had appropriate technology (smart phones, laptops), others cannot afford more than the most minimal phones. For those who were not already set up technologically, the barriers for continuing to be engaged were significant. Those included:

- Telephone and Wi-Fi service interrupted for failure to pay bills on time
- Limited data plans that make them wary of using video services or downloading software for fear of running out of minutes before month end
- Inexpensive internet services available only for a short time
- No computer in the home
- No smart phone, or one smart phone shared among adults in the household
- Limited or weak Wi-Fi service, or limited cell towers for phone service
- Multiple people in household needing Wi-Fi service for video at one time (for work-from-home and school)
- Delay in sending multimedia back and forth on outdated phones

Some of the educators themselves ran into these concerns. Some live in rural areas and are “not offered internet” at home. Another talked about the impact on her own data usage expenses and “had to increase the internet bill” to get the data she and her family now need. One educator shared that the office gave her a small camera because her computer camera was not functioning properly.

► Training

The abrupt change to videoconferencing required training and practice with new tools. Additionally, just as PEs and families had figured out Zoom, they were told to switch to Webex – again requiring training and practice to obtain proficiency.

PAT offered training on the new products, and PEs also got help from children, spouses, coworkers, and others.

Parents as Teachers had a lot of webinars for us that we were able to get information from, and then I'm working with my supervisor [who] was very, very supportive. She found other resources for us to look over and get used to.

*My supervisor practiced with me before the group connection. And the other co-workers, **we took time to practice with each other.***

Families, too, faced the challenge of coming up to speed on technology. To support families, PEs did “a lot of walk-throughs.” Parents had a wide range of experience with technology, as evidenced by the dueling quotations below.

All of our parents are pretty much computer savvy and can figure stuff out and even can help me troubleshoot stuff too. So, [when] things go awry, sometimes they can help me figure out how to get things back.

Some of my families have that same issue with data and they don't know how to really navigate the web, downloading the apps and all that.

When asked what additional training they would need, little came immediately to mind. Several did say they would benefit from additional training on the webinar technology.

► Good advice

When asked what they would advise someone who is new to conducting visits online, the parent educators were quite encouraging. They cautioned that people may need to temper their expectations, be much more flexible, and practice patience.

Working with families in virtual environments

Virtual conversations can be a bit awkward, and the veteran PEs’ recommendations advised how to turn that around a bit.

“Some of my families have that same issue with data and they don't know how to really navigate the web, downloading the apps and all that.”

Ask as many questions as you can until you are able to get into the home and get to know the family.

I like [to have] some questions if the conversation gets kind of stale for families that aren't very talkative. It's good to have some ideas already to talk about.

As noted earlier, parent educators need to plan ahead to select activities and drop off materials in order to have both parents and PEs ready to engage when the videoconference begins. They may also need to record video directions to make sure the parents can put together props and otherwise prepare for the visit.

Technology

With regard to learning the technology, one parent educator gave this advice to those new to the job:

Learn the systems. Do trial and error. If you can, do some work with one of the best that have already been doing this. Ask as many questions as you need to.

Organization

They had advice for future educators about how to organize themselves.

When I first started, I was like, 'Oh, I can do back to back to back to back to back to back,' not giving myself time to do the data. And now I have to put time [in] during my day because I only can work these hours.

Don't space your visits so close together that you don't have time for them to figure [the technology] out – like 15 or 20 minutes.

It's okay to tell families, 'these are the hours that I work.' It was hard to not be available all the time because I want to be, but it was taking a toll on me. So I would tell them turn your phone off at a certain time.

Ideas for other technology supports

Several parent educators observed that people have grown used to having instant access and choice in online shopping experiences and being able to access a lot of resources on demand through simple internet search. They recommend that Parents as Teachers work to set up that kind of online presence, with “digital handouts,” “virtual engagement” activities (in both text and video form), developmental information, scheduling, “fillable forms,” and other details related to the program.

We live in a digital world the way we shop, the way we order our clothes. Anything that you're doing online, you're entering your information and you are toggling. This type of software has not been developed for agencies like ours. The parent has to have a choice of what works for them. I know when I'm on an app, whether that's a dating app, whether I'm looking at weight loss. I want to choose my goals. I want to choose what I'm working on, I want to choose my colors. We're having a transformation and a shift. And we have to really look at how people interact. These days we all interact by choosing and by selection. And if you try to group everybody in this as 'oh they're so needy,' you're going to miss out on the self-sufficiency. And so I'm thinking about reaching towards how can we make home visiting be more of a software application to where that

“We live in a digital world the way we shop, the way we order our clothes. I know when I'm on an app, I want to choose my goals. I want to choose what I'm working on. We're having a transformation and a shift. And we have to really look at how people interact. And so I'm thinking about reaching towards how can we make home visiting be more of a software application to where that parent is choosing.”

parent is choosing and then how can we give them ownership again. It is their visit; it's not our visit.

▶ Parent Educator Perspective: Final Thoughts

As was noted at the onset, the PEs would keep virtual home visiting as an option.

I would rather take a phone call visit and have the visit, if I'm not going to get one in, I would like to get that connection at any cost.

It is important to them to go back to home visits, however. Even while understanding that the virtual strategy it is keeping them “safe,” they are disappointed that the virtual visiting is going on as long as it has. To at least one, it seems a contradiction of core tenets of the program.

*I just think we're exposing kids to technology too much and asking them to sit there for to talk to me for an hour is kind of absurd. **We were always encouraging parents take away that screen time and now we're asking them oh increase the screen time.***

Some do miss the consistency of work hours, the camaraderie of the office, and the hugs from their families. And some of them feel like they are working a bit more.

*I just feel like I'm doing more because I have more phone calls and scheduling. Whatever the meetings, the visits online, you have to send the email. **It seems like a lot of work, more work.***

Transferrable learning from the virtual environment

Parent educators feel they have become more organized and more flexible in approaching the work. The concentrated time for lesson planning and organizing materials for visits has proven to be valuable.

I'm so organized, more than I used to be. I think it's because I'm not running around as much, back and forth to visits, maybe just hope I can keep these organizational skills still going.

They have been proud of the role that parents have taken in leading the visits – determining parent-child interaction activities, making do with materials in the home, and having an agenda of concerns to discuss. The resilience of parents in the pandemic has reminded PEs that caregivers can be self-sufficient, and they can be given more control over the flow of a visit.

They've grown so much. It makes them independent during that visit. They've really done a good job taking the lead on the activities and everything. And I feel like they're reading the handouts more with me, dropping them off and expected to do a virtual visit so I wouldn't want to lose that either.

I'll let the parents take more control of planning the visits and release some of my A personality of trying to control everything.

Have the lesson planned way in advance. At the beginning of the month we [parents and I] sit together [to] pick our two days. She would be like, I want to focus on the writing. So we work as a team - you come up with your ideas [and]

"I'm so organized, more than I used to be. I think it's because I'm not running around as much, back and forth to visits, maybe just hope I can keep these organizational skills still going."

here's my PAT activity. I [look at it to see], how can we merge it together. So I will definitely keep having the parents very vocal on what activity and how the activity will look and what will work for her because what works for one may not work for the other.

As well, parent educators are providing more family-oriented activities and activities that mom and baby can do with older siblings as well. They want to continue to be a conduit for those kinds of ideas.

Before COVID I was only focusing in on the [youngest children]. And now like the others have said, now that you guys can do family games and everything. I still want to instill that piece. I'm trying to keep that piece going for families that have multiple children, making sure that I'm not just focusing on that one child, making sure that we're incorporating everybody.

“Visits are sometimes kind of shaky because you have parents that are trying to work, or you have the parents that stay at home and they have multiple kids in the house and trying to do a virtual meeting when you have three, four, five kids, little kids running around and you hear them hollering in the background, it's kinda hard for them to focus.”

The Supervisor Perspective

Parents as Teachers supervisors have had a close view of the adjustments to service delivery and of the pandemic's impact on their teams. In their Virtual Voice Café sessions, they reiterated the service experiences described by the team but also gave a perspective on how remote working has impacted team dynamics, work habits, workload, and more.

► Virtual service delivery

The supervisors had many of the same observations about virtual service delivery that the parent educators themselves expressed. When asked to compare the three modes of delivery (face-to-face, videoconference, phone), the supervisors concurred that the most effective mode depends as much on circumstances as on each mode's advantages and disadvantages.

Virtually is probably preferable maybe to phone but phone does have an advantage for some of our families and they can drive and talk to you at the same time so they don't have to worry about missing a visit.

[The different modes of delivery] probably all provide a value somewhat. Some things are better talked about face to face where you can have a better discussion when you're not trying to manage the kids and family, cook dinner, whatever it is you're trying to do at that particular moment. You can still talk about those things and address them through the phone, but you don't have that total face to face interaction. One of the things that the families mentioned is you don't have a lot of that small talk that you normally have especially in the beginning when you're doing your catch up and some of those miscellaneous conversations. And as a result, we've also noticed some of the calls go about 45 minutes, so they don't actually go a whole hour.

I can see when I observed a visit virtually and it seems like the kids are more free – they're more comfortable. I don't know if it's because this generation is a

technology generation, but they're more free to act at will. Sometimes it can be a bit challenging like someone said earlier when they have other kids and you know they get distracted.

The parent educators are noticing the uptick in stressors that make having a successful visit difficult.

Visits are sometimes kind of shaky because you have parents that are trying to work, or you have the parents that stay at home and they have multiple kids in the house and trying to do a virtual meeting when you have three, four, five kids, little kids running around and you hear them hollering in the background. It's kinda hard for them to focus. And then also if they want to talk about something that maybe is more personal you can't have those kind of personal conversations during the meeting when you got other people to include. .

One of the things that makes it difficult with the virtual visits are the other children in the background, other kids running around. Another dynamic I hadn't thought about is some of the parents are self-conscious about their homes, about the background. And you know other people seeing, you know what's behind them on camera. So that's been two of the challenges.

“One of the constraints is that our funders look at PAT Model implementation guidelines and [are] being very black and white and concrete about it when we're trying to explain these are different times.”

Elements of a Parents as Teachers visit

The practice of ensuring that each visit contains parent-child interaction, childhood development discussion, and a well-being dialogue is not being strictly adhered to (for good reason in their minds). “We're able to get most of the deliverables out, [and] if we miss one you have to go back to it later. But you can get two; not all the time will you get all three.” Part of the reason for being less likely to complete all three elements is that the visits are “a little more rushed.” “Parents aren't on the phone that long.”

The kids start getting aggravated looking at a computer or a phone screen for that long, and it's hard to really capture the essence of what a visit is whether it's virtual [video] or over the phone because your time is really cut in half.

To combat the time crunch, many parent educators have started to “split one longer visit [into] a couple of visits.” They have gotten some concern from funders regarding that strategy.

One of the constraints is that our funders look at PAT Model implementation guidelines and [are] being very black and white and concrete about it when we're trying to explain these are different times.

In this rapidly changing environment, supervisors say the parent educators are meeting families where they are and touching on those areas that are most important to them. Different parent educators are putting different focus on the elements. One supervisor said, “We try to focus on the parent child activity because that is the core of what we do.”

Another, whose team has a different demographic case load observed:

For us, it's actually opposite. We have families with extreme high needs so we don't get to parent-child interaction. We spend a lot of time on family well-being

and doing rental assistance and utility assistance and making sure the family has food.

And another concurred, *“We really try to help with a lot of technical assistance and just going through the paperwork with our families and that takes a lot of our time during our visits.”*

The supervisors also echoed the PE’s observation that parent-child interaction activities were sometimes difficult to communicate to parents in the virtual environment – until they learned to email directions and *“figured out how to use Webex to their advantage, where they could actually show themselves doing the activity to the parents.”* They also noted that parents were taking a more active role in the activities. *“They have no other choice but to take over the activity or the interaction and take control themselves instead of the parent educator doing most of the work.”*

“Because everyone is at home it’s hard for us to see if a child is being neglected. We’re not going to see that as much. So once we are able to go back into the homes I have a feeling we’re going to really start picking up on how the child was treated.”

In addition to typical programs and services, some PEs have been trying to come up with new activities that can be supportive to parents, for example, a “Parent Corner” that brings new moms together virtually and a “journaling club.”

Assessments

One clear drawback to virtual delivery in the supervisors’ estimation is uncertain assessments because they can’t actually see the home and observe the children extensively. *“A lot of times they won’t be honest with you and tell you we need this or need that, so while we’re in the home we’re able to observe and assess and possibly find a need.”*

The other thing I think home visiting is better for is some of the screenings. You can’t see the whole home, so you don’t know what is going on so it’s hard to do that particular assessment. ASQ’s and things still have to be done. Unfortunately not all parents are totally truthful when they’re doing some of the screenings. We have a few that are trying to get their child on SSI so they’ll tell you my child can’t do this but you know good and well because you saw the child do it.

You kinda want to keep your eyeball on some little lingering things. You can’t do that virtually. It kind of gets to the point where you know I’m concerned, but how concerned am I to lead it to a DFAC’s report.

Because everyone is at home it’s hard for us to see if a child is being neglected. We’re not going to see that as much. So once we are able to go back into the homes I have a feeling we’re going to really start picking up on how the child was treated. So it’s going to be a closer connection with DFACS and I’m not sure if DFACS is ready for that big number, because I feel like it’s going to be a really big number of children who have been neglected this whole time.

Supervisors continue to see in-home visits as *“by far the best”* for the organization.

*Well, it has been an adjustment. Everyone doesn’t have access and those who do have access, **that doesn’t mean that it’s adequate access or good access to be able to participate in virtual learning or virtual visits.***

Retention

Supervisors have noted a variety of outcomes regarding keeping families engaged. While some families have been “more accessible virtually than they would be face to face,” others have been more reluctant to engage.

Some of my folks have even mentioned it's a little bit easier getting a hold of them [the parents] because you can schedule the meeting with them ahead of time.

Our families seem to be harder to reach now that we are trying to schedule Webex meetings or phone meetings. It's always not a good time. We've lost quite a bit of families, since swapping over to this virtual home visits. They are very apprehensive about doing virtual at all, so any visits that we are getting in are pretty much [by] phone.

Some families seem to be more engaged with the virtual visits. Possibly because we're being so very flexible. For other families. It's not effective. For whatever reason, some families that were very engaged prior to going virtual have really dropped off the planet. We can't find them and we were trying every method possible. So it's more effective for some families and less effective for others is the only observation I can provide.

Retention is also being impacted by incentives, or lack thereof.

The feedback that I'm receiving is that because moms aren't receiving anything, they don't want to really connect or participate. So that's been a huge challenge with my team that we were trying to comb through and figure something out.

I have this worry, we see our families slipping away, even if we do this or that. And we've been doing a lot of mailing so they'll prep their visit and they'll send little activity things in the mail so they can have the stuff that they need. But we still just see families kind of just, 'yah I can't I have this going on.'

I can sense down the road, or in the near future because we can sense it with our parents right now with school going on, some of them are doing school virtually, most parents are doing work virtually, and it's almost becoming a nuisance to do the visiting program. It's just like another thing on top of another and you can kind of tell that they're getting aggravated.

Grace under pressure

Supervisors expressed pride and support for parent educators for “their ability to adapt to the new norm” and continue to provide valuable services through the pandemic.

They are on it. I always try not to forget that they are parents and have families, too. So the way that they just adjusted... And a lot of my parent educators are going through the same thing, they have kids, they are virtually working, the kids are virtually doing school. It really is a lot! You've got emails coming left and right all day every day so it can be really really challenging. They're very strong-willed and they can maintain their time. They're just awesome. So hats off to them.

The parent educators are “learning how to deal with stressful situations. We've also trained on Trauma 101 since that's what we're going to see a lot of.” While working

“[Parent educators] are on it. I always try not to forget that they are parents and have families too. So the way that they just adjusted... And a lot of my parent educators are going through the same thing, they have kids, they are virtually working, the kids are virtually doing school.”

out how to deliver services virtually in a stress-filled community, PEs were also confronted with internal systems and protocol changes so their ability to adapt has been thoroughly tested.

► Work habit changes

Like the parent educators, supervisors have noticed differences in the ways that PEs complete their work (aside from the obvious switch to virtual). *“They have learned to be more creative in how they are doing their work;”* they have *“really, really had to pick up their game”* when it comes to technology; and their work hours are different.

They've had to shift their visits to later into the day and into the evening, [and] you know they have families as well. And families are contacting them 24/7.

Some have taken on additional responsibilities due to the pandemic.

We're also at the health department. So we're also being called to respond to COVID response. My team is very likely extremely multitasking and trying to manage everything [and] take care of themselves. So once again, just a little overwhelmed with all the things going on.

In more mundane matters, in pre-pandemic times, the Parent Educators were *“paper-dependent.”* It took a bit of time to work out strategies for getting information out to parents, whether through email or other tech-enabled services.

Continuation of virtual service delivery

The supervisors think that virtual delivery of services is an important option *“with extenuating circumstances,”* but *“it's important to see the mom, to see that the baby, see the dad in person.”* Some supervisors would like to continue with virtual even after regular in-home contact is restored as they see a value in *“a menu of options.”*

I do like it as an option, like a hybrid model of PAT. I think that would be beneficial and give the families a little grace and the parent educators a little grace as well to complete those visits.

Having virtual delivery as an option *“makes our job better, easier.”* Supervisors feel the parent educators *“have done an excellent job just adapting to what's going on.”*

That said, they are anxious to go back, and one supervisor has even created *“safety packs”* for the team containing shoe covers, masks, and gloves so that they will be ready when the time comes.

*Even though our public health department is not recommending that we return to face to face visits yet, we are looking at [it] with a small number of families that can meet outdoors and maintain physical distance from one another because they really, really are **needing that physical support.***

“I do like [virtual visits] as an option, like a hybrid model of PAT. I think that would be beneficial and give the families a little grace and the parent educators a little grace as well to complete those visits.”

► Supervision in the virtual environment

The physical distancing required by pandemic safety precautions has also changed the dynamics of supervising a team. Although in many programs supervisors have always been supervising people who are not tied to an office, they have found the need to adjust some of their supervisory practices.

Reflective supervision

Supervisors were quite comfortable with how reflective supervision is occurring in a virtual environment. *“In some ways, I feel like our reflective supervision has been better because there seemed to be less distractions.”* Some expressed a preference for engaging with direct reports on video rather than phone.

We started off doing it by phone and still got all the information in, just not with the face to face. We switched to virtual and so we can actually see each other. It’s nice because you can share your screen with different things that come up.

The supervisors had varying experiences with the intensity of those conversations.

I’m really hands on with my case managers so I try to ask every day, ‘what is a complicated case that you’re working on, or is there something I can help with?’ So I do way more reflective supervision than I’m supposed to, just so that I can show that I’m really keeping up with their cases and they don’t have to get burned out.

But another supervisor’s experience has not been as rich.

One of the things I do [miss] is learning more about the family dynamics and characteristics in their case load.

Team meetings

Team meetings are relatively unchanged. Some teams have space in which they can meet together (following health safety protocols), and others have simply transitioned to a virtual environment. That said, one supervisor noted, *“we would also go out to eat all together every Friday, so that’s something we kind of miss.”*

One found the virtual team meeting as a good opportunity for training and development: *“I had each one of them host the meeting just so they could get used to using Webex and the different angles of it. So, they’re all taking a rotation of hosting different meetings.”*

One supervisor related a specific adaptation regarding meetings that has been quite positive.

We always had a weekly staff meeting in person. And sometimes those meetings will run long because we had a lot to talk about. But now we have broken out smaller meetings. We’ll have a case management meeting every other week and we’ll have a fatherhood meeting every other week. For me, it’s greater accountability. [Microsoft] Teams [allows us to] to add meeting notes and those sorts of things. What I’m hearing now is that we have too many meetings. And

“I’m really hands on with my case managers so I try to ask every day, ‘what is a complicated case that you’re working on, or is there something I can help with?’ So I do way more reflective supervision than I’m supposed to, just so that I can show that I’m really keeping up with their cases and they don’t have to get burned out.”

the truth of the matter is, when we weren't having the smaller meetings, you would go from week to week and nothing was accomplished.

Other adjustments include small tweaks such as: sending out agenda and handouts in advance of meetings, more often calling partner agencies to get help to particular families, and expanding the role and accelerating the training of a lead parent educator.

Team communications

As might be expected, the big adjustment that needed to be made was in the ways that the team communicates with one another. Having relied on in-person meet-ups (both formal and informal), the directive to remain physically distant has been hard, even for teams that have had some appropriately distanced in-person meetings.

“The three of us have been working together for 20 years and you can just naturally start taking things for granted. This crisis has caused us to get back in touch with one another at a different level than we were. Because we've been concerned about each other.”

We work strongly on in-person communication so adjusting to virtual has just been a big adjustment for us. On Mondays, we meet in a big room and we really make that day the time that we connect and really do the important things that we do. So it's gotten better with that kind of option. We can still [satisfy] that need and keep people accountable as well to get on calls and emailing and having to think and work differently. [I think] it's actually bettering us because then we're overall better, but it's just been an adjustment to more of the virtual platforms and virtual communication.

I've learned to rely on my team more, especially with life circumstances and just things. They've been telling me to lean on them, and more. So I had no option to because I was out for a month. I've learned how to be more trusting and rely on them more and ask for help.

They very much missed certain elements of team camaraderie.

Not having that interaction, not having that where you're getting up, walking to somebody's office or informal meetings over the coffee, the kitchen counter, getting a cup of cappuccino. People are sitting more and not realizing how much time they were actually [sitting], so they were tired, mentally drained. I think it's like that because of that difference in the interaction.

Team relationships

Despite the challenges, it would seem teams have grown closer in adversity. Where previously they only passed each other in halls or shared quick phone calls and texts, now they are relying on one another more to share ideas, discuss stresses, and gather ideas for addressing parent issues.

My team is much closer. They're really relying on each other; they're pulling on each other for different pieces; they kind of bounce each other's case-loads off of each other, to kind of say, well this is what I have going on and I need to know what's how you would deal with it. It works.

*The three of us have been working together for 20 years and you can just naturally start taking things for granted. **This crisis has caused us to get back in touch with one another at a different level than we were.** Because we've been concerned about each other.*

One team has the unique experience of seeing more of each other rather than less. It is part of a government agency that remained open during the pandemic, so they were coming into the office. Prior, they would almost always be out in the community. It gave them opportunities for collaboration that weren't there before.

Now we're just all here so we do see each other a lot. We're already really close, but I feel like they're bouncing things off each other a lot more now because they're sitting there with each other.

► Support

For the most part, the supervisors have felt they received the support that they needed to navigate the changing times.

I would say [we have had] support from Parents as Teachers, the state level staff of Parents as Teachers, the MIECHV staff and the UGA staff. They've been able to keep us on track [with] new resources and trainings that maybe we would not have known about. You run into problems of course you can always pick up the phone and call them for that. Other resources [that] have come through a lot – we are a family connection site here in Georgia so we have the consortium with over 80 plus formal [and] informal partners. We're all in the same boat together so we're all supporting each other with what we need to make it work for the families, so that's been a big help.

There's so much out there that you can use, that you don't realize that maybe you need it right now until somebody, something pops up and say you need it. Right now I'm letting them go out on the different websites and just pick, look at some trainings they would want to enhance what they're doing type thing.

One supervisor brought up that her direct supervisor didn't have the kind of experience to provide concrete advice related to getting support for families.

My supervisor came from [an unrelated field]. So a lot of the times she still comes to me and [asks] what do you do in this situation? So I'm limited on what I can get from her.

► Workload

The supervisors have noted increases to their workload and to the workload of the parent educators. This translates into working longer hours, and more erratic hours than before.

*I feel like now that we're kind of here and don't have anywhere to go per se, **they just keep giving us more things to do**, I just have more things to do now than I ever did before.*

The trainings and stuff that comes from Parents as Teachers, things that come from other communication resources, community resources the fatherhood programs, Safe Sleep, breast feeding, because of breast feeding month. It's like everybody who we are partnered with [has] a different training every week that you can sign up for. So we're signed up for trainings so much per day on top of being a supervisor. I get those and I have to do the regular reports and I'm also

"I feel like now that we're kind of here and don't have anywhere to go per se, they just keep giving us more things to do, I just have more things to do now than I ever did before."

*doing everything else that I have to do so **it's like through the day I barely get two minutes.***

One supervisor expressed a particular concern and recommendation for PAT leadership and partners to notice overlapping changes and directives – and perhaps coordinate them better.

*There's a lot of changes taking place even now and sometimes it can be overwhelming. There have been changes going on with the home visiting [data systems]. I don't know if all the collaborative partners are speaking to one another, I know somebody mentioned the breastfeeding, the fatherhood program, there's just a lot going on at one time. For me to try to keep up with all of that and implement all of these things in the program to make it a quality program, **it just has your head spinning.** And then, now that we're virtual you have to make sure that you're getting all this information out to your parent educators and it's a lot, it doesn't stop. The emails don't stop, the training [doesn't] stop, so it's really a lot. It just seems like it's all over the place. It's a lot.*

► In closing from supervisor perspective

The supervisors presented a very positive view of the impact of working virtually. Even as they expressed concern about what they might be missing and the level of stress and workload on themselves and their teams, they were proud of their teams and optimistic about the impact Parents as Teachers continues to have.

Bottom Line

As was pointed out at the onset, this kind of narrative study can provide nuanced insight, but it does not help you to draw hard conclusions. The parent educators and supervisors who shared their experiences and views were candid and generous, though, so this report gives a window into working with families over the last five months in a primarily virtual environment.

At this report's conclusion, it's appropriate to underscore two points that do seem clear from the data.

1) The experiences of virtual work vary from person to person, client to client, technology to technology, and day to day. There is no one right way or one right option. The ability and willingness for parent educators to adapt the approaches during these extraordinary circumstances has made a difference in the lives of those families who truly need this kind of support.

2) The conversations here do not necessarily reveal “best practices.” However, they do reveal a number of adaptations that could be more deeply explored and made available as part of a common set of community practices. Supervisors and parent educators can learn from one another's experiences and further adapt them for novel situations they encounter.

“None of us is as smart as all of us.” ~ Ken Blanchard

Appendix: Virtual Voice Café Discussion Guides

Note: Data was not reported in the order the questions were asked; responses are reported thematically, not by question. Some questions were not asked in every session.

Parent Educator Discussion

Introduction

1. Please introduce yourself and add - if your background image on Zoom were reflective of how your summer has gone so far, what would it look like?
2. Before we dive into a lot of detail questions, what do you want us to know about how virtual service delivery has been going? (How are phone calls going? How are video conferences going?)

Experience of Virtual Service Delivery

Purpose: Explore whether they feel virtual delivery is the same service, and how valuable the modes are compared with each other.

3. How does the experience of virtual service delivery compare with live service delivery? Is it the same service or different? What makes you say that?
4. Let's compare the value of the different ways we deliver services.
 - Is virtual home visiting as valuable as in-person visits? What's different?
 - To what degree are telephone visits effective? What is lost/gained?
 - To what degree are interactive video conference visits effective? What is lost/gained?
5. Tell me about what adjustments you have made that have been helpful for virtual visits. What have you been doing a bit differently in order to make virtual visits work?

Specifics of Virtual Delivery

Purpose: Given the specifics of the program, can these be effectively delivered in virtual format?

6. One of our values is to develop relationships with our families. To what degree have you been able to connect with families and keep them engaged in the virtual environment? (What's working? What gets in the way?)
7. How have you been able to support parent-child interaction with virtual service delivery? Any changes or limitations on kinds of activities you suggest? How impactful do you feel you have been?
8. How have you been able to support development-centered parent and family well-being in the virtual environment?
9. What has been your experience with conducting screenings using virtual services?

10. How have you helped connect families with needed community resources during the pandemic? What are the challenges?

Technology and Support

11. Tell me about challenges with using technology for virtual PAT services.

12. What would you tell a PE that is starting virtual visits for the first time? What would have been helpful to know at the start?

13. What support did you receive that was most helpful?

14. What support do you still need? Training?

Final Questions

15. What, if anything, would you change about virtual home visiting?

16. If allowed by the model, would you want to continue with virtual service delivery by IVC? By phone? By text? (Why / Why not? If not already clear from previous answers)

17. When you go back to in-person visits, what do you want to “take with you” from virtual visits?

18. Optional if time permits:

What have you learned about families through virtual home visiting?

What have you learned about yourself as a parent educator?

What has been surprising to you about virtual home visiting?

19. Is there anything else you'd like to share about your experiences with using virtual service delivery with PAT?

Supervisor Discussion

Introduction

1. Please introduce yourself and add - if your background image on Zoom were reflective of how your summer has gone so far, what would it look like?

2. Before we dive into a lot of detail questions, what do you want us to know about how virtual service delivery has been going?

Service Delivery Observations

3. What are you hearing from your team about the experience of virtual service delivery?

4. What is your impression about the effectiveness of virtual delivery? Of phone calls? Of video conference visits?

5. To what degree have your parent educators been able to connect with families and keep them engaged in the virtual environment? (What's working? What gets in the way?)

6. To what degree do you think we are delivering on the three area of emphasis in virtual home visiting?
7. What, if anything, would you change about virtual home visiting?
8. If allowed by the model, would you want to continue with virtual service delivery?

Supervision in the Virtual Environment

9. What has been your experience with conducting reflective supervision using interactive video conferencing? How has the virtual environment impacted your relationship with your direct reports? Impacted how you supervise?
10. What has your experience been like monitoring staff service delivery? Service documentation?
11. Tell me about what adjustments you have made to your supervision that has been helpful.
12. Tell me about your experiences with staff meetings.
13. What have you learned about parent educators through virtual home visiting?
14. Optional if time permits
 - What have you learned about yourself as a supervisor?
 - What has been surprising to you about virtual home visiting?
 - What support did you receive that was most helpful?
 - What support do you still need? Training?

Final Questions

15. When you go back to in-person visits, what do you want to “take with you” from virtual visits?
16. Is there anything else you’d like to share about your experiences with using virtual service delivery with PAT?