
Family Connects + Health Care Providers = A Strategy to Improve Outcomes in the 4th Trimester

Family Connects is a rigorously researched intervention delivered in the home to newborns and their families by registered nurses. Nurse home visits are offered to all families in a community to assess family health and well-being at about three weeks postpartum. The nurses provide health education and community referrals tailored specifically to the needs and preferences of each family.

The American College of Obstetricians and Gynecologists recommends that all women have contact with their OB/GYN or other clinician within the first three weeks postpartum. The authors specifically mention nurse home visitors as alternative providers of this visit, citing research on Family Connects outcomes. In the United States, most birth mothers have independently navigated the postpartum transition until the traditional postpartum visit at 4–6 weeks after delivery. As many as 40% of them do not attend a postpartum visit at all, and attendance rates at postpartum appointments are even lower among those with limited resources, such as unstable housing, communication challenges or transportation barriers. Universal home visits can help to directly combat these disparities by assessing for postpartum illnesses that require immediate care and linking all mothers to the routine follow-up care they need, as well as making connections to address resource challenges such as those cited above.

Nurse home visiting is also a natural, effective extension of the newborn's medical home with the potential for coordinated anticipatory guidance, improved early detection, and enhanced community involvement. The American Academy of Pediatrics recommends co-locating home visiting programs like Family Connects in pediatric offices and requiring coverage of home visiting by payers, including Medicaid and Children's Health Insurance Program. Newborns face numerous risks in the first month of life, including breastfeeding difficulties, jaundice, and dehydration, all of which can emerge between pediatrician appointments. Parents also face challenges in learning how to safely care for their newborns. Family Connects nurses reinforce education on feeding, safe sleep, and appropriate responses to crying through motivational interviewing techniques. As needed, they connect families to community resources that can help a family long after the home visit has ended.

Key health areas covered during a Family Connects nurse visit include:

- Physical exam for mother and infant
- Reinforcement of connection to the medical home for mother and infant, to reduce unnecessary Emergency Department visits
- Breastfeeding support, as recommended by Step 10 of the World Health Organization's Baby-friendly Hospital Initiative
- Perinatal mood disorder screening
- Postpartum care, including scheduling postpartum appointment as needed
- Tobacco cessation referrals
- Safe sleep and SIDS prevention
- Parent-child interaction assessment and coaching
- Intimate partner violence screening and referrals
- Assistance with obtaining health insurance coverage, child care, and social services

Implementation data from Durham (over 10,000 families visited since 2009) indicates:

- 95% of Durham families have nurse-identified risks/needs
- 1 in 5 have not scheduled a 6-week postpartum visit
- 55% do not have a regular medical care provider
- 1 in 3 Durham moms have mild or significant depression

The Family Connects model, based at Duke University, has been carefully studied in two Randomized Controlled Trials. The outcomes of the trials include:

- Infants had 50% fewer emergency room visits and hospital overnight stays in the first year of life
- Mothers were 28% less likely to report possible clinical anxiety
- Community connections increased by 15%
- Home environments were rated higher quality and safer by blinded observers

Supporting literature

ACOG Committee on Obstetric Practice. (2018). ACOG Committee Opinion #736: Presidential Task Force on Redefining the Postpartum Visit. Retrieved from <https://www.acog.org/Clinical-Guidance-and-Publications/Committee-Opinions/Committee-on-Obstetric-Practice/Optimizing-Postpartum-Care#18>

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