



Training & Technical Assistance Center for  
Florida's Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters

## Overcoming Challenges to Engaging HIPPY Families

### Introduction

HIPPY (Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters) is a home-based, early intervention program that helps parents teach skills important to school readiness and success to their three, four, and five-year-old children. Based on the home visiting model, HIPPY is delivered by paraprofessionals who visit parents in the home and role-play the HIPPY curriculum of parent-child activities with them. Parents, in turn, spend time with their child each day implementing HIPPY curriculum activities. Through HIPPY's systematic program of role-playing, curriculum activities, and group meetings, parents learn to engage in learning activities with their children and to view themselves as active agents in their children's education and schooling. Because the delivery of the HIPPY curriculum to the child is dependent upon the interest and participation of parents, the ability of the paraprofessional to engage parents in HIPPY is extremely important. Paraprofessionals, however, report numerous challenges in getting and keeping parents involved in the HIPPY program.

### Purpose

The purpose of this brief is to describe some of the challenges paraprofessionals face in engaging families in HIPPY, and some of the ways they seek to overcome these challenges.

### Method

This research brief is based upon data extracted from the Six Sites Study. The Six Sites Study surveyed and interviewed staff from six HIPPY programs in Florida as part of an evaluation effort to investigate how HIPPY works, and to provide feedback for quality improvement. Thirty paraprofessionals completed surveys and participated in 120-minute focus groups. Information provided by paraprofessionals was reviewed and reported using descriptive and qualitative analysis methods.

### Research Questions

- What challenges do HIPPY paraprofessionals experience in trying to engage and motivate parents to participate in the HIPPY program and its activities?
- How do paraprofessionals overcome these challenges?

### Findings

#### **What challenges do HIPPY paraprofessionals experience in trying to engage and inspire parents to participate in the HIPPY program and its activities?**

- Role-play presents a significant challenge for paraprofessionals. 48% of paraprofessionals indicated that parents have to be convinced to participate in the role-play, and 53% indicated that they work with parents who are uncomfortable doing role-play.
- Scheduling home visits also poses difficulties for paraprofessionals. A number of paraprofessionals agreed that they spend a lot of time waiting for parents who don't show up, and they also spend a great deal of time trying to track down parents; 38% of paraprofessionals have a parent not show up for an appointment at least once every few weeks, 14% have a no show at least once a week, and 40% reschedule at least one appointment every week.
- 20% of paraprofessionals find that some of their HIPPY parents have difficulty understanding the HIPPY activity packets.
- Another very concrete challenge for paraprofessionals is parents with limited literacy. This can be particularly difficult for paraprofessionals because, as one paraprofessional stated,
 

*"Some parents are ashamed about not being able to read and this is not admitted or discussed—yet they want to do HIPPY."*

- In some cases paraprofessionals face the additional hurdle of working with non-English speaking parents who may also have literacy difficulties in their primary language, but wish to do HIPYPY with their children in English so that the children will know English before they get to school.
- While paraprofessionals felt that most families enjoy participating in HIPYPY, 20% of paraprofessionals indicated that some HIPYPY families still feel uncomfortable with paraprofessionals visiting their homes.
- Paraprofessionals felt that some of their parents prefer other programs or day care to HIPYPY because, as one paraprofessional noted, “With HIPYPY, parents have to assume some responsibility and do something.”
- Other paraprofessionals suggested that parents think school programs (versus home or community-based) and programs that charge a fee are more valuable to their children’s education.
- Paraprofessionals frequently contend with the challenges of their families’ home environments. According to paraprofessionals, distractions are a normal part of home visits. Often there are multiple children in the home seeking the attention of either the parent

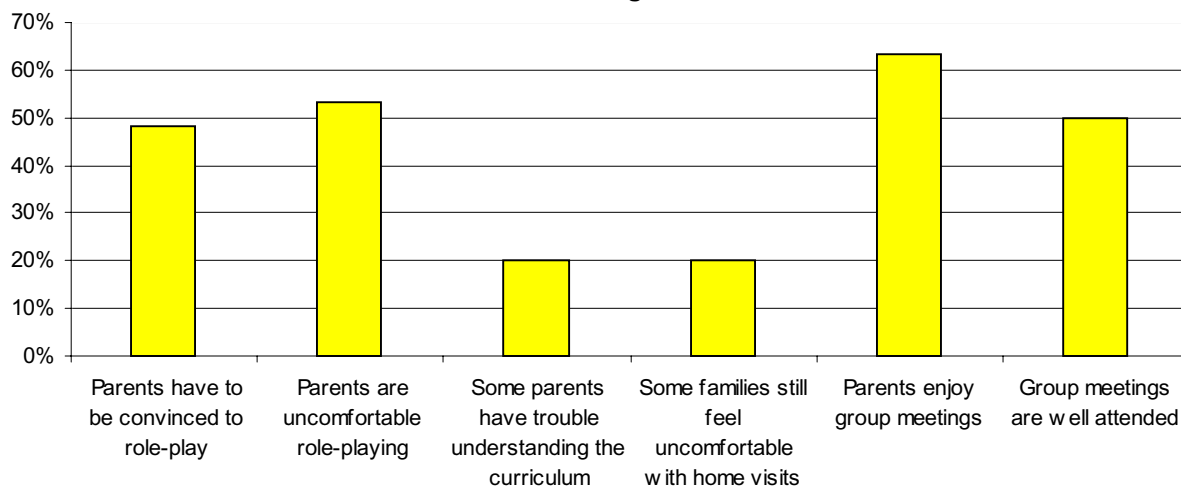
or the paraprofessional, or who are simply curious and excited about the HIPYPY lesson. Television and telephone calls are distractions also experienced during home visits.

- Paraprofessionals also find that they often must deal with significant emotional and personal struggles experienced by their families. *“Sometimes we have significant non-HIPYPY issues to deal with,”* noted one paraprofessional.

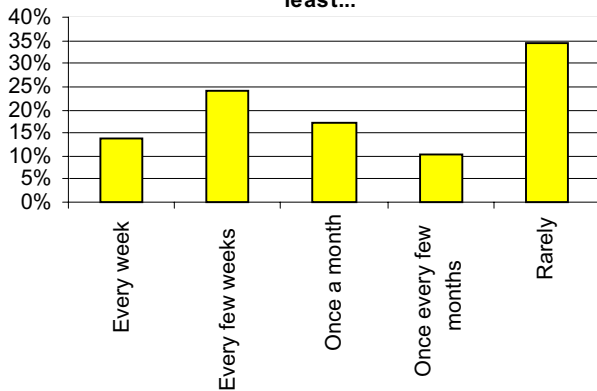
*“If the parent has a pressing concern that is emotional, we need to deal with that first, diffuse the emotion a bit, otherwise the parent will not be able to concentrate at all. We (have to) help parents... because we are often the only person they have. If their mind isn’t on the lesson, HIPYPY will be a waste of time.”*

- Finally, group meeting attendance poses a challenge for some HIPYPY programs. Though some sites reported somewhat better group meeting attendance than others, across the sites only 50% of the paraprofessionals agreed that group meetings are well attended and only 63% agreed that parents enjoy group meetings. Paraprofessionals’ ratings of parent enjoyment of group meetings tended to correlate with meeting attendance.

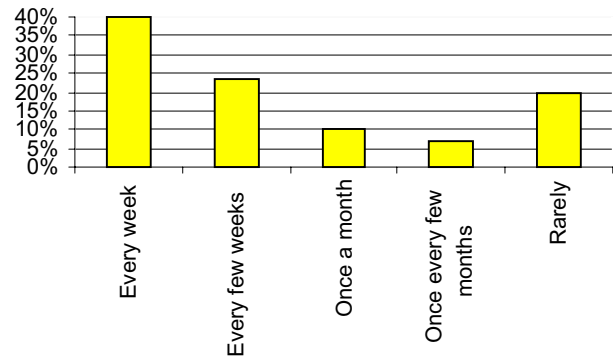
**Percent of Paraprofessionals who agreed or strongly agreed with the following statements**



**Percent of paraprofessionals who have parents fail to show for appointments at least...**



**Percent of paraprofessionals who have parents reschedule appointments at least...**



### How do paraprofessionals overcome challenges?

HIPPY paraprofessionals are generally comfortable with their ability to develop trusting relationships with their families (see research brief # 4), and, in fact use the strength of these relationships to increase family engagement. It is also through these relationships that paraprofessionals work to overcome some of the more difficult challenges they face when working with their families.

- Increasing parent interest and enthusiasm for HIPPY by reminding them of the benefits for their children was suggested as the best way to improve parents' comfort level with role-play and attendance of home visits and group meetings.
- To address problems with parent literacy and ability to understand the curriculum, paraprofessionals seem very comfortable and willing to spend extra time with parents who have literacy issues, either teaching them to read or reviewing the activity packets repeatedly until the parent memorizes them.
- Paraprofessionals tended to describe distractions in the home as positive, though at times frustrating, experiences unavoidable in a home-based program. Paraprofessionals felt these problems were generally comfortably handled by having activities, such as coloring or videotapes, on hand to prevent disruptions from children.
- The strength of the communication and trust between the parent and paraprofessional is vital for the paraprofessional to help parents address emotional and personal problems that interfere with their ability to focus on role-play and spend time with their children.
- Paraprofessionals have developed strategies for dealing with lack of support from a spouse or boyfriend. Sharing information about HIPPY and

the purpose of home visits with other members of the household was suggested as the best way to deal with this type of situation:

*"It is important to talk with the husband, boyfriend, or other family members to show and explain HIPPY to them while the mother is getting things ready. Other members of the household need this information, otherwise they may not be supportive of the home visitor and the time the child is spending doing HIPPY with the mother."*

## Implications for Research & Practice

Engaging and retaining families is a continuing challenge for home visiting programs, with most programs reporting high attrition and difficulty completing the scheduled number of home visits (Gomby, Culross & Behrmann, 1999; Kisker, Love & Raikes, 1999). HIPPY paraprofessionals face numerous challenges to engaging parents and keeping them involved. Paraprofessionals are making strides in overcoming challenges by working to accommodate the individual needs of families during home visits.

### Implications for Research

Since role-play is at the core of the HIPPY model, further research seems warranted to explore the function of role-play, and parental resistance to role-play and ways to overcome it. Possible questions include:

- How do the paraprofessional's attitude towards and level of comfort with role-play affect parental attitudes and behavior regarding role-play?

- How does parental level of participation in role-play affect their interactions with their child during HIPPY curriculum activities?
- What parent characteristics are associated with resistance to role-play and with acceptance of role-play?
- What suggestions do parents have to make role-play more acceptable to them?

### Implications for Practice

- In-service training and supervision sessions should directly address the challenges identified by paraprofessionals through discussion, sharing of ideas and materials, and provision of concrete strategies.
- Programs may want to consider inviting HIPPY parents from previous years to meet with staff to discuss their ideas for overcoming challenges and to solicit their feedback and reactions to specific strategies.

### References

Gomby, D.S., Culross, P.L., & Behrman, R.E. (1999, Spring/Summer). Home visiting: Recent program evaluations—analysis and recommendations. *The Future of Children*, 9, 4-26.

Kisker, E.E., Love, J.M., & Raikes, H. (1999). *Leading the way: Characteristics and early experiences of selected Early Head Start programs. Volume I: Cross-site perspectives* (U.S. GPO: 2000-519-425/94725). Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office.

**This Brief was prepared by Kirsten Cuenca and Diane Powell from data collected by Lois-Lynn S. Deuel for the Florida HIPPY 6-Sites Study.**

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### About Florida HIPPY

Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youngsters (HIPPY) is a home based, parent involvement program designed to help parents provide educational enrichment for their three, four, and five-year-old children.

The Florida HIPPY Training and Technical Assistance (T&TA) Center, based at the University of South Florida (USF), works in collaboration with HIPPY USA's National Office in New York to provide training, technical support, and guidance to all of the HIPPY programs in the state of Florida.

The Florida HIPPY T&TA Center, in conjunction with USF, HIPPY USA, and Florida HIPPY sites, began this research initiative to evaluate the efficacy of the HIPPY model, measure and describe changes in program participants, and provide evidence-based support for HIPPY programs.

Data from selected Florida HIPPY programs have been collected and analyzed. The purpose of these research briefs is to share knowledge on topics of interest with HIPPY stakeholders. Findings from this research may be used to develop "best practices" in service delivery, for program improvement and enhancement, to describe program functioning and impact to stakeholders, and to support program sustainability.



**For more information please contact:  
Mr. Dabaram Rampersad  
Florida HIPPY T&TA Center (813) 974-2177  
or visit our web site at  
<http://floridahippy.fmhi.usf.edu>  
(click on Research & Evaluation)**