Setting Goals With Families

The tool kit, Setting Goals with Families, incorporates the concepts of motivational interviewing and solution-focused theories. These step-by-step processes are based on the understanding that “motivation for change is a state that can be influenced.”

The aim of goal setting is to have parents
- identify the need for change
- increase their belief in their ability to change
- develop concrete plans to change

The challenge for home visitors is “to not just give advice, but to motivate parents so they will develop a course of action toward change.” Using the Exploring Family Goals – Questions in Appendix I, home visitors are able to facilitate goal-setting discussions. Home visitors are encouraged to follow the step-by-step process and document the process using the Goal-Setting Worksheet in Appendix II. Documenting the step-by-step process will assist families and home visitors to evaluate and adjust goal-setting activities.

Step 1: Create a Vision

Home visitation is an early intervention service. Parents are the focus for change that impacts children. Commitment and motivation to stay engaged in home visitation is enhanced when services are meaningful to a family. Begin by exploring a family’s reason for engaging in home visitation.

Ask parents to describe how they became involved in home visitation and what is occurring for the family at this time.

Tell me how you found out about home visitation.
What is happening at this time that brings you to consider the services of a home visitor?

Parents may say it would be helpful to have someone to talk to or their nurse said home visitation would be good for their family. Understanding the initial reasons for engaging in services provides important clues about what stage of change parents are at and what will motivate them to stay engaged.
Create a focus for change

Ask parents to describe what they hope will be different.

*What would you like to be different as a result of your involvement with home visitation?*

*What do you hope will change due to your involvement with home visitation?*

For some parents these will be difficult questions to answer. When parents have difficulty stating a vision for change, the home visitor may use the ‘solution-focused’ strategy of asking the ‘miracle question’.²

One version of the miracle question is,

*If you woke up tomorrow and a miracle occurred, what would be different for you and your child?*

Rose described waking up and not worrying if she had enough money to feed her child. Susan described feeling less alone and less depressed. Linda described giving her child a family environment that is very different from her childhood with her alcoholic parents.

The miracle question helps to move the focus away from struggles and problems to a place of possibilities. Creating a vision of future possibilities helps parents to understand and believe in their ability to work with a home visitor. A parent’s description of how things will be different is important for informing the family’s outcome(s) for home visitation.

Home visitors tell us that having a parent write out their “why” at the beginning of home visitation can be a huge motivator which helps parents stay engaged in home visitation even if things get tough. Parents may begin to question their ability to change, and/or question their continued involvement in home visitation. Revisiting their “why” stories may help them to focus on their hopes and desires for their family and less on the struggle of creating change.

Appendix III is a worksheet for parents to write out their thoughts and ideas about why they would like to be involved in home visitation. Offer this worksheet for parents to consider and reflect on between home visitation sessions.

Step II: A Parent’s Vision and the Outcomes of Home Visitation

The vision parents create is likely to be reflected in the broader outcomes of home visitation. If a parent’s vision does not fit with home visitation, it is important to complete the process of goal setting. There should also be a clear understanding that the home visitor will assist with a referral to the appropriate com-
munity service or resource. Completing the process of goal setting will increase the likelihood that the parent will follow through with a referral. The outcomes for home visitation include the following:

- parents have positive parent–child relationships
- parents demonstrate knowledge and skills related to child development and safety
- children meet development milestones
- families are connected to community resources and services

When parents are not aware of the need to change

Some parents will enter home visitation not expecting to change or they may not be aware of the potential for change. Prochaska, Norcross, and DiClemente (1995) identify these parents as precontemplators. The role of home visitors with precontemplators is to help parents recognize that change may be necessary to develop nurturing and safe environments for their child. Parents in the precontemplation stage need information and feedback to raise their awareness of the importance of safety, child development, positive parenting, and community services.

Information sharing and feedback to raise awareness

Home visitors may need to create opportunities to share information and feedback.

Providing parents with information and feedback to raise their awareness is a central role of home visitors. Choosing the right time to share information increases the likelihood that parents will hear and retain the information. There will be opportunities when parents are looking for answers.

For example, Lisa expressed her frustration about not being able to get her infant to settle for the night before 11:00 p.m. In this example, the home visitor was able to share information about the importance of routines and child development. After sharing some brief information the home visitors asked if Lisa would be willing to work on this issue:

Would you like to see if we can get Jason to bed by 9:00 p.m.?

Lisa agreed that getting Jason settled around 9:00 p.m. would be great.

Home visitors often create opportunities to share information. A good guideline is to ask permission first. For example, home visitors may introduce the topic of home safety by saying,

A lot of first time parents benefit from information about safety at home. Would you be interested in knowing more?

OR

Dan, ever since I started visiting you, I have noticed that you are a concerned and caring parent. I thought that you would be interested in knowing the latest information about child safety in the home. Can I share some of this information with you today?
Home visitors may also provide information by sharing their own experience and solutions:

- *I found this really worked well with my son.*  
- *OR*  
- *After my first child, I felt more confident as I got information about caring for an infant.*

After sharing information with a parent, ask how the information fits with their experience or current situation.  

*Would having more information help you?*

**Step III: Rationale for Change**

Parents will move into the *contemplation stage of change* when they are aware of an issue that home visitation can help to change. In the contemplation stage, parents begin to think about the possibility of change, but are unsure about how to make change occur. *Ambivalence* is the hallmark of the contemplation stage.1

The role of home visitors is to facilitate discussions that invite parents to “express concern about a behaviour” or an issue.1 The desired end result is that parents state the need for change.1

Home visitation is a voluntary service. By its nature it is easy for parents that are unsure about home visitation to leave the service. Exploring and reinforcing a parent’s desire for change strengthens a parent’s motivation for change and commitment to home visitation. *Reflective listening and summarizing* are key skills for strengthening a parent’s motivation for change. The aim is to have parents identify and express

- their concerns and worries  
- the positives and negatives of change  
- the positives and negatives of no change

Begin by using *open-ended questions* to have parents identify the good things and the not so good things about a situation or behaviour.

- *Susan, what are the good things about not having a support system?*  
- *What are the not so good things about not having a support system?*  
- *What concerns do you have about not having a support system?*

Rollnick and Miller (1983) stress that it is important not to rush these discussions. Using simple open-ended questions and reflective listening may feel inefficient, but it is the most effective method for engaging parents in the decision to make a change for themselves and their child.4 It is important to match your language to that of the parent; do not use words like “problem” or “concern” unless the parent does.4
Home visitors are encouraged to use the worksheet, Exploring the Pros and Cons of Change in Appendix IV. Exploring the positive and negatives of change is a motivational interviewing strategy that highlights the decisional balance that must occur before a commitment for change is made. For example, Susan identified the positive consequence of being involved in a parent support group as she met a few new friends she could call when she was feeling down. The negative consequence was that she would have to take the risk of letting others into her life.

Exploring the positive and negative consequences of a change helps parents to make decisions about which consequence they are most willing to accept for themselves and their child. Asking parents future-oriented questions is also an effective strategy for assisting parents to weigh the positives and negatives of making a change in their lives.

Tell me what you think things will be like for you in six months if you do not develop a support system for yourself. What will things be like if you do develop a support system?

Step IV: Create Optimism

A parent’s confidence in his or her ability to change is a central factor that influences the development and achievement of goals. One of the main principles of motivational interviewing is to support the individual’s self-efficacy. Self-efficacy is parents’ belief in their ability to create a change in their life. Bandura (1991) identified four sources of information that affect one’s confidence or self-efficacy to change:

- performance accomplishments
- vicarious experience
- verbal persuasion
- emotional arousal

Performance accomplishments (most powerful influencer)

“Performance accomplishments are the most powerful sources of information for positively influencing confidence to change. Performance accomplishments are based on authentic experiences.” Using solution-focused language, home visitors develop and reinforce optimism for change by focusing on past successes.

Home visitors are encouraged to spend time understanding the specifics of how a parent made a change occur in their past. It does not matter what the situation was. The point is to explore the success and the steps taken to create change. Home visitors may have to work hard with some parents to find an example of past successes. Examples from their youth or childhood may be useful for creating optimism. The aim is to identify and amplify any authentic positive outcomes they have successfully achieved.

Amplification of a parent’s experience is accomplished by exploring the details of
how they made the change occur.

_Tell me how you made the decision to change. What happened that made you realize you had to do something different? Once you knew you wanted to make a difference, what were the first, second, and third things you did? How did you stay focused on the change you set out to make?_

These examples illustrate the use of solution-focused or strength-based language that invites parents to reflect on their successes and skills to create change.

Another strategy for reinforcing parents’ beliefs in their ability to change is to have parents identify any knowledge or skills they possess that will support their vision for the future.

**Vicarious experience**

_Vicarious experience can be influential, but is less effective than performance accomplishments._

Vicarious experiences occur when parents have observed the success of others who they view as having similar attributes as themselves. Role modeling is based on the process of vicarious experience. If parents are truly unable to find an example of their own successes, the home visitor may share stories of how other parents have achieved their goals in spite of difficult situations.

**Verbal persuasion**

_Verbal persuasion is not a particularly powerful method of enhancing an individual’s sense of confidence to change._

The difficulty with verbal persuasion is that parents may experience the stated confidences as contradicting their performance accomplishments or vicarious experiences. If they are unable to access stories of past personal success, verbal persuasion will have little meaning to their life experience.

**Emotional arousal**

_Emotional arousal can have the opposite effect on creating optimism: reducing a parent’s confidence._

Emotional arousal may cause parents to experience anxiety and fear due to past threatening experiences or failures. Focusing on threatening or past failures may lead parents to believe they are vulnerable and not able to manage the home visitation experience. Creating fear of possible negative consequences is not a recommended strategy for creating change and setting goals. It has the power to reduce a parent’s confidence to change.

**Step V: Set Goals**

_Establishing goals occurs when parents have moved to the ‘preparing for action’ stage of change._ Parents in this stage are more committed to the idea of change than not changing. They are ready to take action.
If parents are not committed to the idea of change, revisit the motivational interviewing techniques of:
- practising reflective listening
- expressing empathy
- developing discrepancy
- exploring positives
- weighing the negative consequences of change and no change

A parent’s commitment to change will be influenced by a wide range of factors that will either strengthen or weaken their commitment.

Parents preparing for change may require the assistance of home visitors to determine what action(s) must occur to accomplish the desired outcomes. Home visitation goals reflect specific changes to knowledge, beliefs, and/or behaviours. Home visitation goals must:
- be linked to the larger outcomes of home visitation
- be realistic for the parent and family
- clearly present one change
- specify the time for accomplishment

Establish goals with parents when they are more committed to the idea of change, than ambivalent about change.

Home visitation goals reflect specific changes to knowledge, beliefs, and/or behaviours.
Examples of Goal-Setting

**Outcome:** Rose will achieve food security for her family.

**Goals**
- Rose will be knowledgeable about the food bank resources in her community by the end of April.
- Rose will establish contact with the food bank to have her family’s needs assessed by mid May.
- Rose will be knowledgeable about the option of securing child support payments from her child’s father by the end of May.
- Rose will be knowledgeable about the requirements for securing child support payments from her child’s father by mid-June.

**Outcome:** Dan will provide a home environment that is safe for his children.

**Goals**
- Dan will be knowledgeable about the importance of safety in the home for his children by the end of October.
- Dan will complete a safety evaluation of the strengths and needs in his home by the end of November.
- Dan will implement changes to address the needs identified in his safety evaluation by the end of December.

**Outcome:** Lisa will establish a daily routine for her child.

**Goals**
- Lisa will be knowledgeable about the importance of daily routines and child development by the end of February.
- Lisa will assess the strengths and needs in the daily routine she is currently following by the end of March.
- Lisa will implement changes to her daily routine based on her new knowledge and self-assessment by the end of April.

**Outcome:** Susan will develop and maintain a positive social support network.

**Goals**
- Susan will be knowledgeable about parenting support groups in her community by the end of September.
- Susan will attend two parenting support groups by October 15.
- Susan will explore the counseling resources available in her community by November 15.
Step V: Determining the Evidence of Change

Reviewing and reflecting on progress is essential for sustaining a parent’s motivation to achieve a goal. Prior to working toward a goal, it is important to determine what parents would consider as evidence of their success. Home visitors must determine whether parents are working from an all-or-nothing view and see that small steps add up to larger changes. Parents that have an all or nothing view may be easily discouraged.

Breaking up the evidence of a parent’s success into smaller steps will help parents to understand that change is a process that requires sustained activity and effort over time. Using percentages to determine smaller successes is an effective strategy for reinforcing that small steps are important.

What would be a sign that you have achieved 10% success with getting Jason settled before 8:00 p.m.?

Give many examples and provide your feedback in percentages to model that small steps are important. For example,

Lisa, I noticed the last time we had a home visit you had changed Jason’s bedtime routine by at least 20% by feeding him before 7:00 p.m. What else will you do to change his routine by another 20%? Have you considered bathing him every evening rather than in the morning?

Step VI: Identifying Obstacles

Obstacles can be fears, people, beliefs, feelings, and ideas that interfere with the accomplishment of parents’ goals. Obstacles have the potential of discouraging parents and reducing their commitment to the goals and activities that are required to create their desired change. These obstacles can occur at any stage in the process. It is important for both parents and home visitors to be aware of potential obstacles. This awareness allows home visitors and parents to use problem solving to reduce the influence of potential obstacles.

Step VII: Reflection

Once parents have achieved a goal, it is important to reinforce and strengthen their goal accomplishment. Using reflective listening, home visitors can invite parents to remember what things were like before the change and what things are like now, with the change.

Writing about the steps that parents engaged in to achieve their goal is also a helpful strategy for supporting and sustaining changes. Some parents may find that journaling or writing short notes is helpful as they incorporate new knowledge, beliefs, and/or behaviours. Ask them to incorporate their reflections about
their goal accomplishments —both successes and failures—in their journals. At the reflection step it is also useful to review the short-term and long-term consequences of returning to old behaviours and habits.

Appendices

Appendix I: Exploring Family Goals – Questions
Appendix II: Exploring Goals Worksheet
Appendix III: Why I Would Like to be Involved in Home Visitation
Appendix IV: Exploring the Pros and Cons of Change

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Appendix I

Exploring Family Goals - Questions

Goal setting is a process which involves motivating and sustaining motivation for change. Discuss and assist parents with each of the following questions to set the stage for, and to accomplish, family goal setting. A variety of questions has been included to facilitate goal-setting conversations. Use what works best for you and the parent.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Vision</th>
<th>What would you like to be different with your involvement in home visitation?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What do you hope will change due to your involvement with home visitation?</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>For parents that do not have a vision of what they want to accomplish, ask the 'miracle question: “If you woke up tomorrow and a miracle occurred, what would be different for you and your child?”</td>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Rationale</th>
<th>Why did you choose this vision?</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What worries do you have about parenting and/or your family?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>What concerns do you have for your child and family?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Do you want to parent the same way or differently than your parents?</td>
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<td>What are the positives and negatives of not working toward your vision?</td>
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<tr>
<th>Outcome</th>
<th>What will things be like when you reach your goal?</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Will you have more of anything?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Will you have less of anything?</td>
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<tr>
<th>Create Optimism</th>
<th>What past success have you had with this or a similar situation?</th>
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<td></td>
<td>How did you make this happen?</td>
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<td>Tell me about the specific steps you took to change the situation.</td>
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<td></td>
<td>How much time did it take to change the situation?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Tell me about the knowledge and skills you already have to support your vision.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Goals</th>
<th>What would it take to make your outcome happen?</th>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>What needs to happen first, second, and third?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>What specific goals can you set that will help you achieve your vision?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Is there any information you will need to gain in order to achieve your vision?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Are there any new skills you need to gain in order to achieve your vision?</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Are there any new behaviours?</td>
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<tr>
<th>Evidence</th>
<th>How will you know that you are moving towards success with your goals?</th>
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<td>What would be an indicator that you are not moving towards your goals?</td>
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<tr>
<th>Obstacles</th>
<th>What could get in the way of achieving your goals?</th>
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<td></td>
<td>What daily action will prevent you from reaching your goals?</td>
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<tr>
<th>Reflection</th>
<th>What are the consequences of not following your vision and goal?</th>
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<td></td>
<td>What positive changes will result if you do follow your plan?</td>
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## Appendix II
### Exploring Goals Worksheet

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<th>Vision</th>
<th>Rationale</th>
<th>Outcome</th>
<th>Create Optimism</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(Record the parents’ ideas using the words and language they have used to describe their vision.)</td>
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Appendix II (Cont’d)

Exploring Goals Worksheet

Goals

Evidence

Obstacles

Reflection

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Appendix III

Why I Would Like to be Involved in Home Visitation

As a result of my participation in home visitation, I want to

____________________________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________________

This vision is important to me because

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Appendix IV

Exploring the Pros and Cons of Change

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<th>Positives of working towards my desired outcome:</th>
<th>Negatives of working towards desired outcome:</th>
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<th>Positives of not working towards desired outcome:</th>
<th>Negatives of not working towards desired outcome:</th>
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References


