



How Do Home Visiting Models Define and Operationalize Virtual Home Visits?

Home visiting programs face the huge challenge of safely providing services to families during the COVID-19 pandemic. Nearly all programs moved away from in-person meetings in spring 2020, as stay-at-home orders, masking policies, and social distancing recommendations made such visits inadvisable. As a return to in-person visits proved uncertain, home visiting models and other organizations like the Rapid Response-Virtual Home Visiting collaborative offered guidance and support for delivering services virtually. Models also began to develop guidance on what “counts” as a home visit for data collection and reporting.

A Note About Terminology

This report uses the phrase “virtual home visits” to convey how programs remotely provide real (rather than simulated) services to families in need. Some models and programs may use alternate terms, such as “telehealth,” “remote visitation,” and “interactive video conferencing.”

This summary considers the following questions using home visiting model data:

- ✔ How many models developed guidance for reporting and what factors did they consider in determining what “counts” as a virtual visit?
- ✔ What are commonalities and differences among model definitions of virtual home visits?

The NHVRC is a partnership of James Bell Associates and the Urban Institute. Support is provided by the Heising-Simons Foundation and previously was also provided by the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. The views expressed here do not necessarily reflect the views of the foundations.

Suggested citation: Thomson, A., Joraanstad, A., & Meisch, A. D. (2021, August). How do home visiting models define and operationalize virtual home visits? *National Home Visiting Resource Center*. James Bell Associates.

Our review found that models considered many factors when determining what counts as a virtual visit, including technology used and mode of delivery (e.g., video conferencing, phone). Many models included guidance about what content programs must cover for an interaction to be considered a virtual visit. After reviewing written guidance from 20 models,¹ we found that—

- ✔ Eighteen models developed written guidance on or definitions of virtual home visits.
- ✔ Of the 18 models defining virtual home visits, 17 specified the use of phone and video technologies (see exhibit 1). The remaining model defined virtual home visits as one where home visitors and families are not in person, without mentioning specific technology.

Exhibit 1. Model Definitions by Type of Technology

Technology used	Number of models
Phone or video	7
Video preferred	7
Video required	3

A number of models further distinguish virtual home visits from regular check-ins or other types of contact with families. For example—

- ✔ Four models specify that text messages do not count as virtual visits.
- ✔ Eight models indicate that a virtual visit must cover content typically included in a home visit.

Home visiting programs may continue offering virtual visits long after the COVID-19 pandemic as a way to engage with families. [Virtual visits can improve access to families in rural communities](#), those with high-risk medical conditions (e.g., immune deficiencies, cancer), and those experiencing inclement weather. Programs can benefit from clear guidance on what constitutes a virtual visit as they continue to refine virtual service delivery.

Selected Key Points from [Healthy Families America Guidance](#)

Phone and video visits can count as virtual home visits. Texting cannot.

In special situations, a virtual home visit via phone (Skype, FaceTime, or other video technology preferred) “. . . can be counted when documented on a home visit record and the goals of a home visit are met including some of the focus areas.”

¹ We asked 25 home visiting models to provide their definition of virtual home visits, if they had one, as part of our data collection for the 2021 *Home Visiting Yearbook*. Twenty models responded and provided written guidance or definitions. The team used content and thematic analyses to code the written documentation.