



# Understanding the Needs of ParentChild+ Staff and Families Participating in Virtual Home Visiting

Erin Bultinck, Katy Falletta, Pilar Stoeppelwerth, Sarah Crowne, and Danielle Hegseth

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# Introduction

ParentChild+ is an early childhood home visiting program that partners with historically marginalized people and underserved communities. The program's home visiting method<sup>1</sup> focuses on supporting parent engagement and interactions with their children through information and tools to promote children's healthy development and school readiness. The ParentChild+ National Center ("the National Center") partners with school districts, social service agencies, housing authorities, immigrant aid, and faith-based and other community-based organizations.

Already struggling under the huge weight of systemic racism, the communities that ParentChild+ works with have been disproportionately affected by the COVID-19 pandemic. The trusting relationships between Early Learning Specialists and families, and the program's strong connections to community resources, enabled program staff to swiftly adapt their delivery to respond to families' changing needs during the crisis. With an understanding that virtual home visiting will remain in place even post-pandemic, the ParentChild+ research team partnered with Child Trends to investigate the implementation of virtual visits and to explore a hybrid model for future practice.

The study team focused on the following research questions to develop interview, focus group, and survey protocols for the study:

1. What changes were adopted for virtual home visiting compared to the in-person model?
2. How are staff and families experiencing virtual visits?
3. What is working and not working (barriers and advantages)?
4. What are the resources and supports needed for virtual visits?
5. What are the determining factors in choosing between virtual visits and in-person visits?

The goal of this brief is to describe how three ParentChild+ sites in California made the transition to virtual home visits and how they adapted their virtual service delivery model in response to families' needs, and to offer considerations for establishing a hybrid model in the future.

## ParentChild+ One-On-One Model<sup>1</sup>

ParentChild+'s most valuable assets are the Early Learning Specialists (ELs) who typically share a community, linguistic, and/or cultural context with the families they support. Early Learning Specialists meet one-on-one with caregivers and their 16-48 month-olds twice a week for 46 weeks. Each week, they bring a book or educational toy as a gift and facilitate reading, conversations, and play activities designed to enhance parent-child interactions and develop language, literacy, numeracy, and social-emotional skills. Additional information on ParentChild+'s service population can be found below.<sup>2</sup>



16  
States



148  
Local  
Agencies



575  
Early Learning  
Specialists (HV)



6,208  
Families



32  
Languages



104  
Countries of Birth

<sup>1</sup> ParentChild+ (2022). Our One-on-One Model. Retrieved from <https://www.parentchildplus.org/one-on-one-model/> in November 2022.

<sup>2</sup> National Home Visiting Resource Center (2022). ParentChild+ Model Profile. Retrieved from [https://nhvrc.org/model\\_profile/parentchild/](https://nhvrc.org/model_profile/parentchild/) in November 2022.

# Methodology and Data

## Equity framework

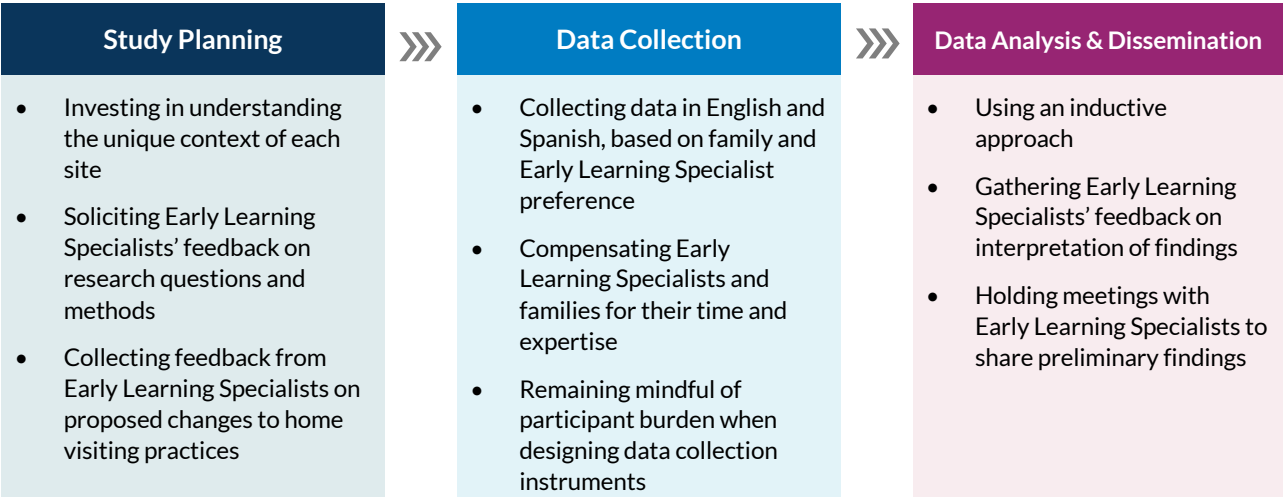
The study team used an equity framework throughout the study. A commitment to diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging guided all phases of the evaluation process, including planning, collecting data, analysis, and dissemination. Inductive methods were used to center the lived experiences and voices of Early Learning Specialists and families.<sup>3</sup> See Figure 1 for additional study activities to enhance equity.

At the beginning of the study in June 2021, the study team held calls with coordinators of each of the three ParentChild+ sites to hear more about their community, context, culture, and family needs. In August 2021, the study team engaged Early Learning Specialists in virtual site visits to provide an overview of the study, build study buy-in, and gather feedback directly from staff to inform the study design and research questions.

### ParentChild+ Equity Framework

ParentChild+'s equity-centered approach is rooted in an internal 2018 organizational inquiry that revealed the majority of families served self-identified as immigrants (70%) and people of color (92% of children served in 2021 were children of color). These data informed a new commitment to an equity framework based on two essential components: 1) a commitment to using global south perspectives of child development and family support (e.g., no longer relying on tools to classify and measure children and families that are racist, heteronormative, ableist, etc.), and 2) a commitment to an inductive approach in its research and evaluation work by building rapport with research participants and involving them in research activities.

Figure 1. Activities to enhance equity throughout the study



## Data sources and analysis

Staff at each site helped the study team recruit currently enrolled families, and for some data collection activities, families who had recently graduated from the program (Table 1).

The study team conducted focus groups with 15 Early Learning Specialists and interviews with 23 families in the fall of 2021. In December 2021, the baseline survey was administered to staff and families. Almost all

<sup>3</sup> Gálvez, A. (2018). Critical understandings of children's rights: an inductive approach. *International Perspectives on Practice and Research into Children's Rights*. (pp. 19-34). Centro de Estudios en Derechos Humanos. <https://doi.org/10.17863/CAM.37168>

staff completed the survey (14/15, 93% response rate). In total, 89 families signed up for the study, and 62 families completed the baseline survey (70% response rate).

The study team presented findings from the 2021 data collection activities to staff and the National Center to gather input on possible changes to test to improve service delivery. The National Center developed a coaching framework to improve service delivery and support staff, and provided trainings in June and July 2022. This is described in further detail in “Supporting Early Learning Specialists and families,” below.

To gather feedback from staff and families on the implementation of changes in visits, rapid surveys were distributed at two time points in August and September 2022. Post surveys were distributed in October 2022 and included questions similar to those in the baseline survey to allow the team to compare responses over time. The surveys were available to families in English and Spanish, and they were compatible with both computer and cellphone internet browsers.

**Table 1.** Study participants

Data Collection Activities		
<b>ELS Focus Groups – September-October 2021</b>		<b>N</b>
Early Learning Specialists		15
<b>Interviews with Families – October-November 2021</b>		<b>N</b>
Graduated families		8
Currently enrolled families		15
<b>Baseline Surveys – December 2021</b>		<b>N</b>
Early Learning Specialists		14
<b>Baseline Surveys – December 2021</b>		<b>N</b>
Families		62
<i>Currently enrolled</i>		52
<i>Recently graduated</i> <sup>4</sup>		10
<b>Rapid Surveys – August-September 2022</b>		<b>Survey 1 N</b>
Early Learning Specialists		9
Families		42
<b>Post Surveys – October 2022</b>		<b>Survey 2 N</b>
Early Learning Specialists		12
Families		44

Source: ParentChild+ Study Data Collection Activities, 2021-2022, Child Trends

Table 2 provides information on family demographics. The majority of families were Spanish speaking (60%) and identified as being of Hispanic, Latine, or of Spanish origin (85%). The majority of families (71%) had been enrolled in the program for over 6 months.

**Table 2.** Family survey respondent information

Survey: Family Demographics	%
<b>Language</b>	
English	40%
Spanish	60%

<sup>4</sup> Due to the small sample, survey responses from recently graduated families are not reported in the findings of this brief.

Survey: Family Demographics	%
<b>Race and ethnicity</b>	
Asian	12%
Hispanic, Latine, or of Spanish origin	85%
White	3%
<b>Length in program</b>	
6 months or less	29%
7 months to 1 year	45%
Over one year	26%

Source: ParentChild+ Study Data Collection Activities, 2021-2022, Child Trends

## Findings

Study findings are organized in the following sections: 1) the transition from in-person to virtual home visits, 2) supporting Early Learning Specialists and families through new practices, and 3) implications for a future hybrid model option.

### Transition from in-person to virtual home visits

Unsurprisingly, the COVID-19 pandemic has been challenging for families. In interviews, almost half of families described experiencing unemployment or reduced hours (42%). About two-fifths felt an impact on their family’s mental health, largely due to their isolation (38%). This isolation felt by families motivated many to join ParentChild+. Families reported the program and their Early Learning Specialist were a source of support during the pandemic.

Overall, the majority of families reported that virtual visits were going well in 2021. Families reported their children enjoyed spending time with their Early Learning Specialist and learning new skills, and families appreciated their Early Learning Specialists’ personalities, describing them as kind, attentive, and patient. Additionally, families appreciated the regular contact with someone outside of the home, without worrying about contracting COVID-19. Similarly, all Early Learning Specialists reported that virtual visits were going well and were helpful to families.

“Our visits have been going very well because I feel supported and guided by our ParentChild+ ELS. She helps me understand ways I can help my child learn.”

**-Parent receiving a combination of visit types, Baseline survey**

Families reported receiving visits across three modalities, with most families receiving virtual visits only, followed by a combination of virtual and in-person visits (see Table 3).

**Table 3.** Visit modalities

Baseline Survey	N	%
Virtual visits only	24	46%
In-person or in-home visits only <sup>5</sup>	11	21%
Combination of visit types	17	33%

Source: ParentChild+ Baseline Survey, 2021, Child Trends

<sup>5</sup> At the time the baseline survey was administered in December 2021, only one of the three ParentChild+ sites had returned to providing in-person visits.

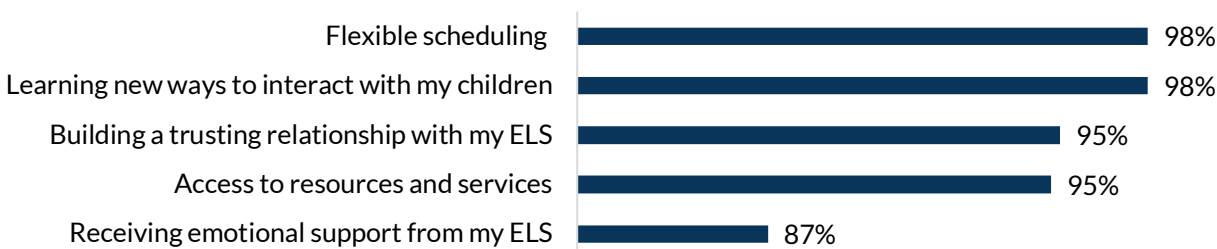
## Successes and challenges experienced in virtual visits

Families were asked to reflect on what they like about virtual visits and reported many successes (Figure 2). Nearly all families reported the flexible scheduling that virtual visits allowed was a key success (98%). For example, families appreciated the ability to participate in visits from anywhere, or without having to leave the comfort of their home. Another top success reported by families was the opportunity to learn new ways to interact with their children (98%). Nearly all families also reported successfully building a trusting relationship with their Early Learning Specialist during virtual visits (95%).

"The benefit of participating in virtual visits can be somewhat challenging but my child always learns something new and it amazes me how she created a bond with her ELS even through virtual visits."

**-Parent receiving virtual visits only, Baseline survey**

**Figure 2.** Families' reported successes of virtual visits (n = 41)



Source: ParentChild+ Baseline Survey, 2021, Child Trends

Early Learning Specialists also reflected on some of their successes while providing virtual visits. Staff overwhelmingly reported effectively supporting parent-child interactions (100%) and building relationships with children and parents (100%). They also reported creatively using resources to maintain child engagement during virtual visits, including music, movement, and puppets (100%).

"Virtual home visits are still useful and relationship building is possible. Families have expressed that they are convenient."

**-Early Learning Specialist, Baseline survey**

Families were asked to reflect on the challenges experienced during virtual visits, and Early Learning Specialists were asked about families' experiences of these same challenges (Table 4). Families' top reported challenge was interruptions from other family members during virtual visits, particularly younger children (33%). Half of Early Learning Specialists agreed this was a challenge for families. Access to technology, such as tablets and computers, as well as reliable internet were also challenges during virtual visits (33% and 26%, respectively). Half of Early Learning Specialists also reported access to reliable internet was a top challenge for families. A small percentage of families reported receiving emotional support from their Early Learning Specialists as a challenge, though this was reported to be more of a challenge for families receiving only virtual visits, compared to those receiving a combination of visit types. In interviews, families shared that virtual visits tended to be shorter and more focused, while in-person visits allowed for more opportunities for families to talk with their ELS about personal topics.

**Table 4.** Challenges of virtual visits for families

	Families (n = 41) (%)	ELS (n = 14) (%)
Interruptions from other family members or children	33%	50%
Access to technology such as tablets and computers	33%	36%

	Families (n = 41) (%)	ELS (n = 14) (%)
Access to reliable internet	26%	50%
Keeping my child engaged during visits	22%	50%
Unfamiliarity with technology	18%	36%
Receiving emotional support from my ELS	15%	N/A

Source: ParentChild+ Baseline Survey, 2021, Child Trends

Early Learning Specialists were also asked about challenges they have experienced while conducting virtual visits (Table 5). The top challenges reported included maintaining parent and child engagement during visits (e.g., keeping them in view during visits), repeated visit cancellations by families, and finding a quiet space to work. Less than a third of staff reported their access to technology and internet was a challenge for conducting virtual visits (29%).

**Table 5.** Challenges of virtual visits for Early Learning Specialists (n = 14)

	ELS (%)
Maintaining parent and child engagement during visits (e.g., keeping them in view during visits)	57%
Repeated visit cancellations	57%
Finding a quiet space for you to work (at home or in the office)	57%
Technology or internet access	29%

Source: ParentChild+ Baseline Survey, 2021, Child Trends

**Overall, families reported many successes of virtual visits, including flexible scheduling and learning new ways to interact with their children. A few key challenges were also present, however.** Families reported interruptions from other family members, often younger children, as a key challenge, along with keeping children engaged during visits. Some families also reported challenges receiving emotional support from their Early Learning Specialist. Similarly, Early Learning Specialists' top reported challenge was maintaining parent and child engagement. Families reported challenges around access to technology and internet, however Early Learning Specialists reported that their ParentChild+ sites were actively working to provide families with necessary technology and connecting them to local hot spots to access free internet.

## Supporting Early Learning Specialists and families

### Developing a broader framework of coaching, goal setting, and reflection

Rather than prescribing specific solutions to each challenge identified in this study, the National Center envisioned broader conceptual tools to help staff and families co-create solutions during their interactions and support relationship building. They developed: 1) the Best Practice Principles (BPP) for Coaching and Supervision to be used between Early Learning Specialists and their supervisors and 2) the Reflection Record, a guided debrief between Early Learning Specialists and families to be used during the last five minutes of visits to reflect on family goals, observations made during the visit, caregiver's strengths, as well as to co-create strategies to support caregiver-child interactions and address challenges experienced in visits. These new practices also included sending a motivational text message to families in-between visits.

## Meeting families' needs

Families overwhelmingly indicated they felt supported by their Early Learning Specialist and had a positive experience with the new practices implemented beginning in mid-August 2022. After two months, all families agreed that their relationship with their Early Learning Specialist was rewarding, and they felt comfortable talking with their Early Learning Specialist about parenting challenges. All families agreed that their Early Learning Specialist listened to them; responded to their questions, concerns, and needs; and communicated with them in multiple ways (e.g., through phone, texting, email). Nearly all families agreed that Early Learning Specialist provided them with positive feedback during visits and also encouraged them outside of visits (98% for each item). Additionally, nearly all families agreed that their Early Learning Specialist helped them reach the goals they set together and recognized their strengths in visits (96% for each item).

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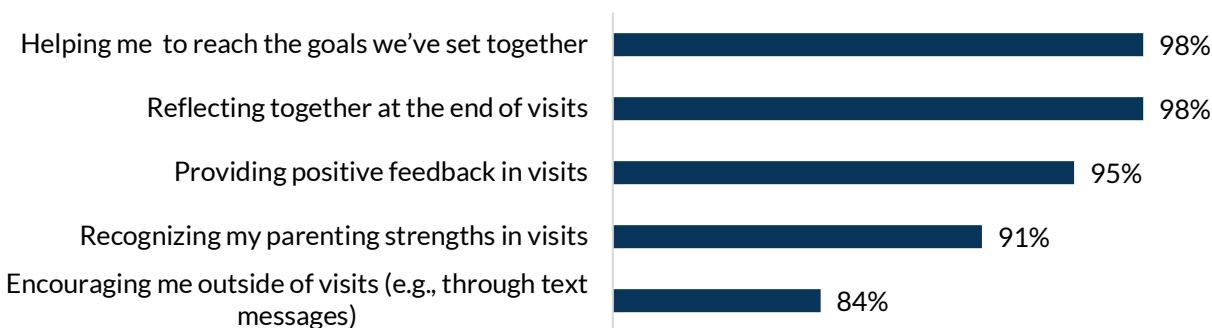
“My ELS often sends reminders and feedback after our visits acknowledging what I did during the visit. It feels good to see that other people recognize the effort you are making when you are doubting yourself.”

- Parent receiving virtual visits only,  
Post survey

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In October 2022, families were asked to reflect over their last two months and indicate whether they felt more or less supported by their Early Learning Specialist through certain actions (Figure 3). The majority of families reported an improvement in support across items; no families indicated feeling less support. Almost all families reported feeling more supported in reaching their goals (98%), through receiving positive feedback in visits (95%), and reflecting together at the end of visits (98%). Most families also reported the recognition of their parenting strengths as an improved support (91%).

**Figure 3.** Families' perceptions of support (n = 44)



Source: ParentChild+ Post Survey, 2022, Child Trends

Early Learning Specialists also reported on how well families responded to the changes in their visits, and the majority of Early Learning Specialists reported changes were received positively. All staff reported that motivational text messages were received well by families across rapid surveys in mid-August and September 2022. Early Learning Specialists also reported that strengths-based observations were received more positively over time (an increase from 71% to 100% between the rapid surveys). Goal setting was not perceived as positively, and decreased over time (from 83% to 71%).

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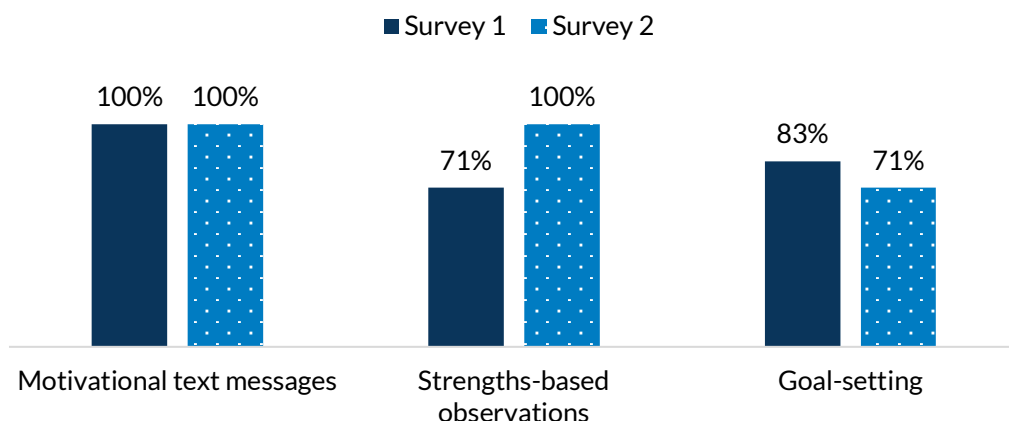
“I think with the Reflection Record, families are more involved and engaged with their kids. Now when they are playing or doing a certain activity with their child in the back of their mind, there is a purpose or goal. During the parent-child interaction, it's a learning moment for the child and teaching moment for the parent.”

-Early Learning Specialist, Rapid survey

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**Figure 4.** Early Learning Specialists' perceptions of how positively families responded to changes



Source: ParentChild+ Rapid Surveys, 2022, Child Trends

Early Learning Specialists were asked to reflect on how their work has changed since implementing the Reflection Record. The majority of Early Learning Specialists felt their work was more challenging than before, and they felt that their responsibilities had increased (83% and 83%, respectively). Of the staff that responded to this survey question across rapid surveys, a quarter indicated that their responsibilities had increased between the first and second time points (25%). Staff also found implementing these new practices to be time-consuming. The majority of Early Learning Specialists reported spending more time preparing for and conducting visits (83%), along with submitting paperwork and following-up with caregivers following visits (75%). Only a quarter of Early Learning Specialists reported that implementing the Reflection Record had been “easy” (25%); however, a third of Early Learning Specialists indicated using the Reflection Record became easier over time (33%).

Despite these challenges implementing the Reflection Record, Early Learning Specialists reported many positive experiences while implementing the new practices, as well as an improvement in how they support families in visits (Figure 5). Three-fourths of Early Learning Specialists reported an improvement in understanding families' preferences and expectations in visits, as well as their comfort talking to parents about challenges they are experiencing (75% to each item). A similar percentage of Early Learning Specialists reported increased confidence in identifying family strengths (73%), supporting parent-child interactions (67%), and an improvement in their ability to develop strengths-based texts to send to families (67%).

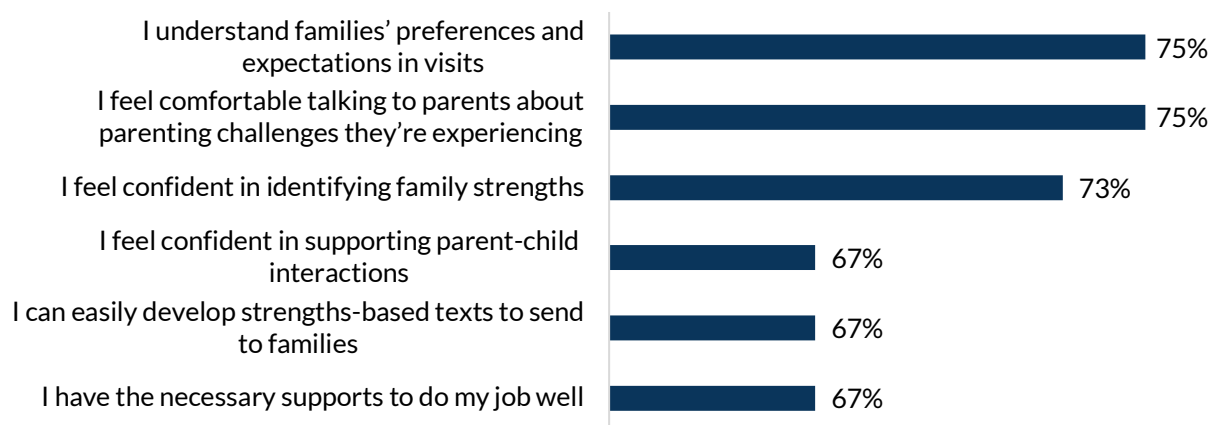
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“I enjoy seeing the progress of a child and it is a very fueling experience to be part of a child’s growth, and knowing that I am planting a seed and seeing it bloom.”

**-Early Learning Specialist, Post survey**

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**Figure 5.** Early Learning Specialists reported improvements in supporting families (n = 12)



Source: ParentChild+ Post Survey, 2022, Child Trends

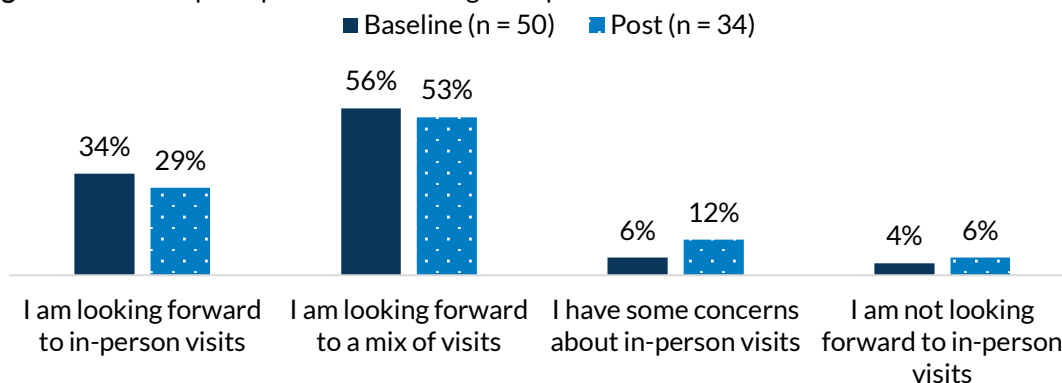
**In response to the identified challenges experienced in virtual visits, Parent Child+ implemented a framework for coaching, goal setting, and reflection.** Families reported many positive experiences working with their Early Learning Specialists during this time, and reported feeling more supported in goal-setting, receiving positive feedback and recognition of their parenting strengths, and reflecting together at the end of visits. Early Learning Specialists reported an improvement in how they support families through these activities in visits, as well, though they were burdened by the increased work and responsibilities.

## Future of a hybrid home visiting model

Over the course of the study, the pandemic has persisted, and families' needs and preferences for home visiting services have evolved, as well. By fielding surveys with families in both 2021 and 2022, the study team has been able to identify some of these changes over the past year.

In both surveys, families were asked about their interest in returning to in-person visits (Figure 6). In the more recent survey, most families reported that they are looking forward to a hybrid model approach mixing in-person and virtual visits (53%), which was consistent with their preferences at the baseline time point. While less than a third of families (29%) are looking forward to the return to in-person visits, less than a quarter of families reported having concerns about in-person visits (12%) or were not looking forward to in-person visits at all (6%).

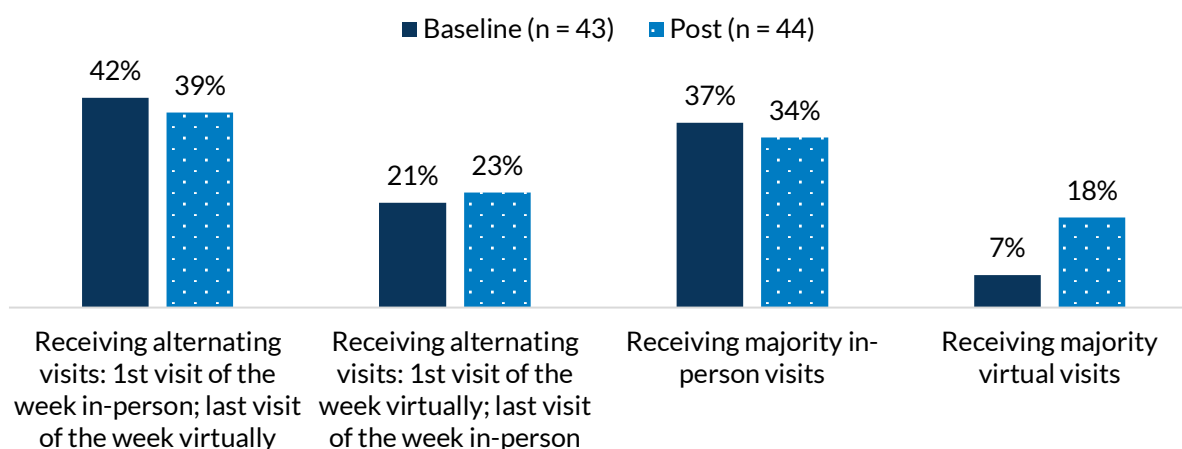
**Figure 6.** Families' perceptions or returning to in-person visits



Source: ParentChild+ Baseline and Post Surveys, 2021-2022, Child Trends

Families were asked about their interest in different hybrid model options (Figure 7). The majority of families were interested in receiving alternating visits, where the first visit of the week occurred in-person, and the last visit of the week occurred virtually (39%); this variation of a hybrid model was also the most popular at baseline (42%). Over a third of families were interested in receiving a majority of visits in-person (37%); this was also consistent with baseline findings (34%). The most notable change compared to baseline was the increase in families interested in receiving a majority of virtual visits (from 7% to 18% over time); however, this consistently was the least popular model.

**Figure 7.** Families' interest in hybrid model options



Source: ParentChild+ Baseline and Post Surveys, 2021-2022, Child Trends

## Activities and family contexts best suited for a hybrid model

Families and Early Learning Specialists were asked about activities that are best suited for virtual or in-person visits (Table 6). Early Learning Specialists largely reported the activities listed would work in either type of visits. Families reported more mixed results, and were more likely than Early Learning Specialists to identify activities as working best in-person. They shared that reading books, along with music and movement activities, would work best in-person, or in either visit type. Additionally, families reported that arts and crafts and hands-on activities would work best in-person.

**Table 6.** Activities best suited for different visit modalities

	Families (n = 43) (%)			ELS (n = 12) (%)		
	In-person	Either	Virtual	In-person	Either	Virtual
Reading books/storytelling	44%	44%	12%	8%	92%	0%
Music and movement	49%	47%	5%	17%	67%	17%
Arts and crafts	58%	40%	2%	17%	83%	0%
Hands-on activities (e.g., games, puppets, play-dough, etc.)	60%	33%	7%	18%	73%	9%

Source: ParentChild+ Post Survey, 2022, Child Trends

Families and Early Learning Specialists were asked about how they prefer to receive or provide various supports by different visit modalities (Table 7). Both families and Early Learning Specialists indicated that most support can be provided virtually or in-person (e.g., referrals to social services, resources for their child, information on their child's development). However, both families and Early Learning Specialists expressed a preference for emotional support to be delivered via in-person visits rather than virtually.

**Table 7.** Supporting best suited for different visit modalities

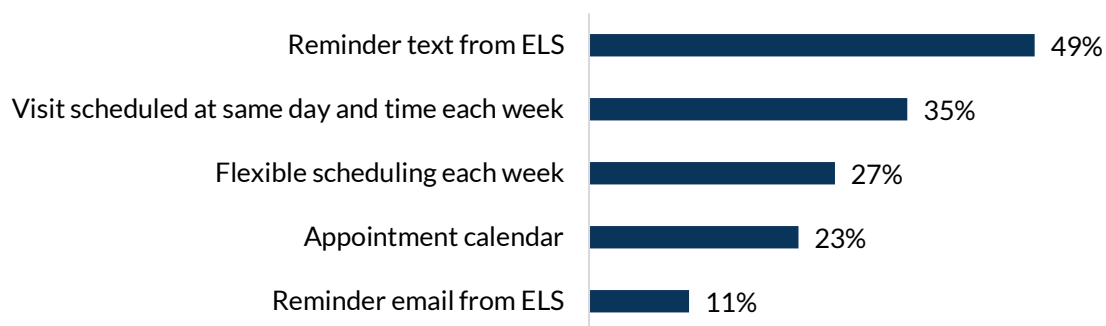
	Families (n = 42) (%)			ELS (n = 12) (%)		
	In-person	Either	Virtual	In-person	Either	Virtual
Referrals or connections to social services	31%	60%	10%	17%	75%	8%
Referrals or resources for my child	40%	55%	5%	42%	50%	8%
Emotional support	48%	43%	10%	42%	50%	8%
Information on children's development	28%	59%	13%	8%	83%	8%

Source: ParentChild+ Post Survey, 2022, Child Trends

Early Learning Specialists were asked to describe the types of families, family characteristics, or situations they think virtual visits would work well for. The majority of Early Learning Specialists described that virtual visits would work best for working parents (67%) and families who need general flexibility to accommodate families' needs (e.g., working around families' schedules, appointments; 50%). A third of Early Learning Specialists reported that virtual visits would work well in certain situations, as well, such as when families have an ill family member or are concerned about contracting COVID-19 (33%). A quarter also shared that virtual visits would work for families with limited space (25%) and families with multiple children or who have multi-generational households (25%).

Families were asked about additional supports needed from their Early Learning Specialists that would assist them in keeping their scheduled visits (Figure 8). Almost half of families reported a reminder text would be a helpful support (49%). About a third of families reported a set schedule would be helpful (35%); families receiving in-person visits only reported to be more interested in this support compared to families in other visit types. About a quarter reported flexible scheduling would be preferred (27%). This underscores the importance of taking a fluid approach and adapting the program to meet families' needs.

**Figure 8.** Additional supports for families (n = 46)



Source: ParentChild+ Rapid Surveys, 2022, Child Trends

The majority of families are looking forward to a hybrid model or mix of in-person and virtual visits. When asked about different hybrid model options, the majority of families shared interest in receiving alternating visits, where the first visit of the week occurred in-person, and the last visit of the week occurred virtually. Although a third of families reported interest in receiving a majority of visits in-person, families did share some concerns with in-person visits, including decreased flexibility in scheduling and the possibility of contracting COVID-19. Few families are interested in receiving a majority of virtual visits. Families and staff shared mixed reviews regarding which activities would work best in different visit modalities.

## Discussion of Findings

Much like other home visiting programs across the country<sup>6</sup>, our study team found that the three highlighted ParentChild+ sites in this study smoothly made the pivot to virtual home visiting and have effectively met the needs of their families. During this critical period, Early Learning Specialists were a constant contact for families, providing essential services. Families appreciated the ability to learn new ways to interact with their children from the comfort of their homes and reported successfully building trusting relationships with their Early Learning Specialist. Similarly, all Early Learning Specialists reported that visits were going well and were helpful to families during this time.

In an effort to adapt the ParentChild+ model in a way that reflects the current needs and preferences of staff and families, the National Center designed an enhancement that focuses on engagement, particularly on strengthening and supporting the relationship between Early Learning Specialists and caregivers through goal-setting and intentional reflection. In a short time period, Early Learning Specialists implemented these changes successfully. Although there were some challenges with implementation, and more support might be needed for staff, families benefited from a pointed change in service delivery to better meet their needs. ParentChild+ should continue to explore the Reflection Record and identify ways to reduce staff burden.

The success of this enhancement bodes well for the future of ParentChild+, as we emerge from the pandemic and look to strengthening the model, though more work is needed to develop and test effective hybrid models of home visiting. This study supports the notion that Early Learning Specialists and families value the flexibility of virtual home visiting and agree that virtual visits are here to stay, even post-pandemic. These insights from staff and families are critical for future research that continues to build and test the effectiveness of a hybrid model. Specifically, considerations for family and staff preferences for home visiting activities best suited for different visit modalities, and Early Learning Specialists feedback on family characteristics will contribute to the content development of a ParentChild+ hybrid model. Continuing to apply an equity framework in this work will ensure the voices of families and staff are prioritized.

## Acknowledgments

This brief was funded by Tipping Point Community and developed in collaboration with the ParentChild+ National Center, including the following staff: Cesar Zuniga, Sarah Walzer, You Zhou, Whitney Evans, Sandra Saldana, and Jessica Faith. The project team would like to acknowledge the individuals who made this work possible, specifically the Early Learning Specialists who participated in focus groups, surveys, trainings on the implementation of new practices, and many meetings to provide valuable input. Additionally, we would like to thank the families in California that participated in interviews and surveys for their time and thoughtfulness.

In addition to this brief, an internal report with recommendations for the eventual development of a hybrid service model will be shared with ParentChild+.

### Suggested citation

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<sup>6</sup> O'Neill, K., Burrell, L., Chute, D., Korfmacher, J., & Duggan, A. for the Home Visiting Applied Research Collaborative. (November 17, 2021). COVID-19's Continued Impact on Home Visiting. Report of Results from a National HARC-Beat Follow-up Survey of Local Home Visiting Programs.