



The Role of Home Visiting in Addressing Diaper Need

Introduction

Home visitors interact frequently with families vulnerable to diaper need—i.e., not having enough diapers to keep an infant or child clean, dry, and healthy. According to the National Diaper Bank Network (NDBN, 2021), 1 in 3 families in the United States experiences diaper need, with myriad effects on children and parents.

Home visitors can help alleviate diaper need because of their frequent interactions with families of young children. Through partnerships with local diaper banks, home visiting programs can help distribute supplies directly to parents and caregivers. Keeping infants and toddlers clean and comfortable can improve their physical and developmental health, their parents' mental health, and even their family's economic well-being. This brief summarizes existing research to address key questions:

- ✔ What is diaper need, and who experiences it?
- ✔ How does diaper need affect children and families?
- ✔ How can home visiting programs help address diaper need?
- ✔ What are the implications for research and practice?

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- **Diaper need** refers to “the difference between the number of diapers an infant requires to stay clean and comfortable less the amount of diapers a family can afford without cutting back on other basic essentials” (Porter & Steefel, 2015, p. 141).
- **Diaper banks** are community-based, nonprofit organizations that collect and distribute donated diapers to families (Smith et al., 2021).

What is Diaper Need, and Who Experiences It?

The average family with a child in diapers uses 6.3 diapers a day, with newborns and young infants needing nearly twice as many. Diapers are a basic necessity and can be difficult for many families to afford (Porter & Steefel, 2015). The annual cost of diapers is roughly \$1,000 per child (Raver et al., 2010). The cost is often higher for families with low incomes who lack transportation and rely on convenience stores instead of buying in bulk from big-box stores that are harder to access. Families typically need diapers for the first 3 years of early childhood, although some children may need them longer than that. Schum et al. (2001) found that boys gave up diapers at 39 months of age, on average, compared to 35 months of age for girls in the United States.

Few options exist for families who need financial assistance to obtain diapers. Many public benefit programs—including the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC)—do not cover diapers (Randles, 2017). Diapers can be purchased using Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) cash benefits, but only 23 percent of families living below the federal poverty level receive cash assistance through TANF (Center on Budget and Policy Priorities, 2021). Early Head Start and Head Start programs provide diapers while children are in program settings but not during their time at home. Due to limited federal funding, Early Head Start reached only 7 percent of income-eligible infants and toddlers in 2018 (Chaudry & Sandstrom, 2020).

As of press time, U.S. lawmakers have not decided whether to advance proposed legislation that would support diaper distribution to families. We believe this brief will be valuable to home visiting programs and staff, regardless of the outcome.

Evidence shows that diaper need cuts across family structures, parent education levels, and employment status. A nationwide study conducted by NDBN and Huggies (2017) found that of those families experiencing diaper need, 65 percent were married, nearly half had a bachelor’s degree or higher, and two-thirds were employed. Most respondents struggling to afford diapers were under 45 years old, although the research evidence on mothers’ age is mixed (Smith et al., 2013). According to Randles (2017), diaper need is the “often hidden consequence of American poverty” (p. 66). Yet—given the overall high cost of diapers and differences in family dynamics (e.g., family size, local cost of living)—diaper need can affect many families across income levels (NDBN & Huggies, 2017). Diaper need disproportionately affects families experiencing material hardship and children of color (Raver et al., 2010; Smith et al., 2013). Spikes in unemployment,

loss of income, and material hardship during the COVID-19 pandemic has made diaper need a greater reality for many families.

How Does Diaper Need Affect Children and Families?

Diaper need can have serious effects on child health and development, parental mental health, and family economic well-being:

- ✔ **Child health problems.** Eight percent of mothers report stretching the time between diaper changes to make supplies last, which can lead to urinary tract infections and diaper rash (Smith et al., 2013). Untreated diaper rash can progress to a secondary infection and even require hospitalization. Other health concerns include oral-fecal contamination and skin infections (Porter & Steefel, 2015).
- ✔ **Developmental disadvantages.** Most early care and education programs require infants to have sufficient clean diapers to participate. As a result, some parents keep children home from childcare programs, early intervention appointments, and therapy visits (Porter & Steefel, 2015; Smith et al., 2013) when supplies are low. Children kept home from these early childhood programs may miss out on long-term developmental and educational benefits (Garcia et al., 2016).
- ✔ **Parental mental health concerns.** For mothers in particular, diaper need is associated with poor mental health (Raver et al., 2010; Smith et al., 2013; see sidebar). Austin and Smith (2017) found that diaper need was significantly associated with maternal depression and could even be considered a risk factor. Parental depression and stress can negatively impact parent-child interactions, which, in turn, affect child development. Children of parents with high stress and depression are more likely to have social, emotional, and behavioral problems than their peers (Smith et al., 2013).
- ✔ **Threats to family economic well-being.** Diapers are the fourth-highest expenditure for families with infants, who report spending 11 percent of monthly income on diaper products on average (NDBN & Huggies, 2017). To afford diapers, families must often sacrifice other basic needs (Massengale et al., 2020). Three-fourths of families in diaper need report spending less on other essentials, such as food, to purchase diapers (NDBN & Huggies, 2017). Families experiencing diaper need are more likely to be food insecure than those who are not (Belarmino et al., 2021), and they often struggle with other forms of material hardship, such as access to transportation, housing, utilities, and healthcare (Massengale et al., 2020; NDBN & Huggies, 2017). Diaper need can reduce parents' ability to go to work or school. More than half (57 percent) of parents in diaper need report missing work or school because they lacked sufficient diapers for childcare (NDBN & Huggies, 2017).

Diaper need may contribute to poor maternal mental health more than other forms of material hardship because there is a lack of structural support—including federal safety net programs—for families experiencing it (Austin & Smith, 2017). Mothers who struggle to afford diapers may become embarrassed, withdrawn, and uncomfortable in public for fear of judgment that they are neglecting their children (Porter & Steefel, 2015; Raver et al., 2010).

How Can Home Visiting Programs Help Address Diaper Need?

Home visitors are an important resource for families with infants and young children, many of whom face diaper need. Four promising strategies can help home visiting programs address this important issue:

- ✔ Training home visitors to identify and talk to parents about diaper need
- ✔ Establishing partnerships with local diaper banks
- ✔ Using federal funds from the American Rescue Plan (ARP) Act of 2021
- ✔ Ensuring families access public benefits to offset expenses

Promising Strategy 1. Training Home Visitors to Identify and Talk to Parents About Diaper Need

Home visiting programs can further educate home visitors on the signs of diaper need, how to assess for it, and ways to discuss diaper need with families. Home visitors should familiarize themselves with local resources to help connect families when they can, and routinely assess whether those connections are helping families meet their needs.

Box 1. Healthy Families COVID-19 Diaper Drop-Off Campaign

In Massachusetts, Family & Children's Service Healthy Families home visiting program launched a campaign to help local families during the COVID-19 pandemic. The campaign sought to meet families' immediate diaper needs, enroll eligible families in home visiting, and connect them to community resources (Record staff, 2020).

Promising Strategy 2. Establishing Partnerships With Local Diaper Banks

Massengale et al. (2019) found that, across states, between 0 and 17 percent of children under age 4 in families with incomes at or below 200 percent of the federal poverty level received diaper bank assistance. Community partnerships between home visiting programs and diaper banks can help collaborators better leverage donations and funding to facilitate diaper distribution. In a recent webinar hosted by the Rapid Response-Virtual Home Visiting collaborative, diaper bank representatives from Missouri, Texas, Washington, and Pennsylvania shared how partnerships with local home visiting programs helped families receive diapers on a regular basis from a trusted source. They also reported distributing more diapers since the COVID-19 pandemic began and emphasized the importance of partnerships for connecting

families to additional supplies, such as baby wipes, toiletries, and clothing (Smith et al., 2021).

Box 2. Minding the Baby and The Diaper Bank of Connecticut Partnership

As part of their program's partnership with The Diaper Bank of Connecticut, Minding the Baby home visitors delivered diapers during visits and educated families on diaper rash prevention, the appropriate frequency of diaper changes, and diapering as an opportunity for parent-child bonding. A pilot study of the partnership found that providing diapers to home visiting participants increased family engagement with home visitors (Sadler et al., 2017). Home visitor diaper delivery also reduced transportation barriers and associated stigma.

Promising Strategy 3. Using Federal Funds From the American Rescue Plan Act of 2021

For the first time, awardees of the federal Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) Program can use funds to purchase and distribute diapering supplies directly to eligible families. The allowance stems from the [\\$150 million awarded to MIECHV through ARP](#). Awardees must coordinate with local diaper banks to the extent possible when using funds to provide diapers.

Promising Strategy 4. Ensuring Families Access Public Benefits to Offset Expenses

Although most public benefit programs do not provide assistance for diaper expenses, they can supplement the costs of food, healthcare, rent, utilities, and childcare. Home visitors can help families determine eligibility and apply for programs, and maintain enrollment during recertification periods. They can also help participants enroll for and receive payments through the [Child Tax Credit](#), which provides up to \$300 per month for each child under age 6, and up to \$250 per month for each child age 6 and older.

What Are the Implications for Research and Practice?

This brief offers promising strategies that home visiting programs can use to better support families experiencing diaper need. Researchers and practitioners can use this information to support needs around—

- ✔ **Strengthening the evidence base to better inform policy.** Available research indicates that diaper need is a public health issue that requires greater attention. Diaper need has detrimental effects on not only child health and development, but also on parental mental

health, economic well-being, and connection to the labor force. Conducting research on these associations, including studies of families with different demographic backgrounds and circumstances, can further build the evidence base and highlight the scope of the problem.

- ✔ **Evaluating the implementation of strategies and their outcomes.** Little research exists on partnerships between home visiting programs and diaper banks, and on other state and local efforts to address diaper need. Future research can explore the effects of these partnerships on child and family outcomes, and report on implementation successes and challenges. For example, can home visitors help reduce the perceived stigma of seeking donations by delivering diapers directly to families? Researchers can also evaluate how ARP funding has been used to reduce diaper need, both through the purchase and delivery of diapering supplies to families and via partnerships with diaper banks.
- ✔ **Addressing diaper bank shortages.** Home visitors' ability to deliver diapers depends on them having a stable supply of resources. More effort is needed to promote awareness of diaper banks to help build their supply and distribution.

Conclusion

Diaper need is a widespread issue with impacts on the physical, developmental, mental, and economic well-being of children and families. Diaper need affects many types of families, including those served by home visiting. Home visitors can play an important role identifying families experiencing diaper need, connecting them to resources, and collaborating with local diaper banks. Home visiting programs can use ARP funds to expand their capacity to help families most affected by the COVID-19 pandemic.

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