Effective home visitation practices must include connections to the community and community services. Partnerships are essential to assist families with issues such as family violence, addictions, health, mental health and financial concerns. These issues go beyond the scope of home visitation. So, how do we best work together with community partners to meet the needs of these families and their children?

Effective partnerships embrace the diversity of each partner. Differences in perspective, expectations and expertise are both a strength and challenge of partnerships. Strong partnerships fall somewhere in the centre of a continuum between strong opposition and strong agreement, and are characterized by a working consensus. In this situation, members agree to a strategy that may not be best for all partners, but, ultimately, is best for at-risk children and families. Working consensus is achieved by focusing less on what agencies do and more on specific goals for children and families. That’s easy to say, but the reality is that each partnering agency has policies and procedures that inform its work. The following steps can help move partners toward a working consensus.

**Steps to a Working Consensus**

1. **Identify the common goal or purpose of the partnership.** Begin with a shared goal. Problems arise if partners are working toward different ends. This initial stage is typically characterized by optimism and hope.

2. **Identify the common ground that partners share.** Understand the shared values and vision of each partner. This will help to ensure a viable partnership. Through this process, the group may decide to invite other partners to the table; alternatively, agencies may decide not to participate.

3. **Identify the benefits to children and families.** Remain focused on the ultimate goal so that partners do not singularly focus on what is best for their agency. At the same time, emphasize the benefits agencies and organizations will derive from achieving consensus.

4. **Identify the diversity that each agency or organization brings.** A “storming” phase occurs when partners begin to negotiate their differences. Differences may relate to perspective, expectations, expertise, policies and procedures, and legal issues. Understand and acknowledge these differences and challenges, while remaining focused on the goal, in order to open up space to develop workable solutions. By remaining open, partnerships become vehicles for creative and innovative solutions.

5. **Document and communicate the common goals, benefits, strengths and challenges of each partner.** Partnering agencies and their staff must be informed about the terms of the partnership and any protocols between partners. Develop key communications that all partnering agencies will share with staff. Keep staff informed of the partnership process so they have an opportunity to share ideas or concerns and be part of creative solutions.

6. **Develop written protocols for partnership-based activities.** The “working” phase of an effective partnership is to develop protocols. These are the agreements that agencies reach to achieve shared goals. Protocols specify the ‘who, what, where, when, why and how’ of partnerships. See sample templates under “Resources” [www.ahvna.org](http://www.ahvna.org)
7. Review and evaluate the effectiveness of protocols. If a protocol is not working, partners will need to understand why and make revisions. Revisit the original goal and be sure to give special attention to the differences and challenges that each organization and agency brings to the partnership. Effective partnerships require effective facilitation skills to move partners to a working consensus.

Partnerships take time and individuals may become discouraged. Remember to acknowledge accomplishments and milestones while focusing on change. Partnerships require a commitment of time, flexibility and integrity. With this commitment, partners are able to pool resources and expertise and to practice wisdom to create viable strategies for at-risk children and families.