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Research Article

Health visiting in the UK in light of the COVID-19 pandemic experience: (RReHOPE) findings from a realist review

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Plain language summary

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Health visiting services are a core part of child health programmes in the United Kingdom. Health visitors provide support to all new babies and families, helping every child to have the best start in life. The COVID-19 pandemic disrupted these services, changing the support families received. Our project aimed to understand how health visiting services across the United Kingdom adapted during the pandemic, and how this affected families and health visiting teams.

We reviewed the literature on health visiting during the pandemic using an approach called 'realist review'. We studied 118 documents that gave us useful information about how health visiting services changed. Findings were grouped into three themes: health visiting contacts, health visiting connections and the health visiting workforce. When pandemic restrictions made it harder for health visitors to conduct their usual assessments, they were concerned about missed needs among families. While remote contacts were sometimes useful, face-to-face interactions were seen as crucial for building trust and understanding family contexts. Disruptions in community services and in connections between different services affected how families accessed wider support. They also made it harder for health visitors to do their job. The pandemic placed greater workload and stress on health visitors.

Our recommendations emphasise that when health visitors meet with families it is a chance to learn about their needs, offer all-around support and connect them with other helpful services. We suggest there should be enough staff and time to provide these services, especially via face-to-face home visits. More research is needed on how health visiting services are organised and delivered in different places, and the implications for staff and families. Health visiting has a vital role to play, particularly during and after a pandemic, in keeping children healthy and safe. Our findings can be used to inform policy, practice and future research.