

# Visiting Each Other’s Homes: Four and Five Year Olds Begin Important Conversations

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As educators, we are committed to understanding one another in our community as we explore our diversity. The home visit unit of study represents one of the earliest examples of “student research” done at our school, which serves children in pre-kindergarten classes through grade eight. A home visit is a field trip during which a group of five students (children who are four and five-years old) travel with their teacher as “researchers” to the home of one of their classmates, “the host,” and receive a personal tour. In the spring, each child in the class hosts one visit to his or her own home, guiding a group of four other students and a teacher. Over the course of three months, each student visits five different homes, creating a “report” (i.e., drawn pictures) for each one.

What turns a field trip into more than just a one-day event is the preparation and follow-up. The home visit provides the “research material” for many lessons and discussions throughout the year. For example, when a group returns, the travelers discuss their experiences in the classroom with their peers. They share their reports, which they made during the visit, about what they saw and heard during travel and at that home. The home visits help children discover commonalities between families and learn to cherish differences. The visits form a foundation in which children begin to think and speak about some complex aspects of society, such as class, race, gender, languages, family constructs, and access to resources in the community.

Even if arranging home visits is not possible at your school, you could adapt many of the ideas in this unit for your student population. For example, students can choose as a “research site” the home of a relative or friend, as no two homes are exactly alike. (See student handouts in the **Pullout** that accompanies this article. It’s in the center of the journal, following page 16.)

## Preparing Students for Home Visits

The preschoolers at Manhattan Country School (MCS, see sidebar on page 16) begin their year with a study of themselves as growing and changing humans. Teachers encourage students to reflect on one another as members of a classroom community. Gradually, through discussions and storytelling,

they learn about each other’s lives outside of school.

For example, early in the school year, Osita, the class teddy bear, “visits” (goes home with) a different child each night. The next day, it is that child’s turn to draw and write about his or her adventures with Osita and share journal entries. This is an important introduction to our home visit program, because children begin to imagine similar safe travel adventures for themselves.

The units of study prior to the home visits all play a part in how we learn about each other. In the winter we do a study of babies and toddlers, learning through photographs and oral and written anecdotes how each of the children has grown and changed since birth. Our young students also take a series of walks around the school neighborhood in order to discuss and understand the people and places important in making up a neighborhood.

The five home visits expand on the lessons about human growth and the neighborhood walk. They are a culmination of the theme “getting to know each other as members of our community.” Through these trips, we learn about one another’s families, neighborhoods, modes of transportation, and home culture. (See the **Pullout**.)

## Preparing the Parents

At the start of the school year, we meet with all of the parents and tell them the story of how the home visits with these young children began 40 years ago. We discuss and answer questions about the logistics of the visits. We clarify that the home visit is not a play date, but an occasion for research for the children, who themselves are to lead the trip as much as possible. Children talk with their parents about the visit to their home and choose a special snack to share with their visiting classmates, taking any food allergies into account. The parents’ role is to facilitate discussions with their own child prior to the visit and then to become observers, watching their child lead her classmates on a tour of their home. Afterwards, they will have happy memories to share.



### **Making a Record of an Event: The Trip Sheet**

Near the conclusion of a home visit, children fill out a trip sheet, a form composed earlier by the child who is hosting her classmates. No two trip sheets are the same. Before each visit, a teacher interviews the child and asks what she wants to show us about her home and neighborhood. Many of the resulting questions on the trip sheet concern transportation routes, pets in the family, what kind of bed they sleep in, special collections, or family gathering places, and even meaningful places in the neighborhood such as a playground or store. Many children are most enthusiastic about showing their favorite toys. But some visits are unusual. For example, on the trip to Joe's home, he wanted his classmates to find the instrument that his father played. It was not hard to find. Joe's father, a well-known jazz pianist, was at home, and he played one of the students' favorite sing-along songs. (If your students use the pages of the Pullout as trip sheets, they should feel free to customize them when they play the role of host.)

### **The Excursion Begins**

On the morning of a home visit, we gather to have our usual morning meeting and start the day by seeing who is in school. Children do not know whether they're included in any particular field trip until the teacher announces the names of the travelers during this meeting. This timing helps moderate children's emotional reactions to such news (anticipation over an upcoming visit, or disappointment over discovering that you're not going to a particular friend's home).

As the five travelers are readying themselves with jackets and coats, we offer a quick reminder of the purpose of the visit. "We need to listen to our student leader and learn as much as we can about her home today, so that we can report the information back to the rest of the class when we return to school." The children who are not part of this particular field trip continue the meeting and brainstorm questions for the travelers to answer when they return.

Teachers plan the journey so as to replicate the host's experience traveling to and from school each day. As we ride a city bus or walk down a street, children observe neighborhoods and

residences (houses or apartment buildings) that are different from their own. They explore different modes of transportation (i.e. subway, bus, car, walking) and also visit the homes of children with whom they may not have played outside of school.

The child who is the host of the visit explains how to commute to her home, telling us how to get to the bus or subway and calling out the correct stop to get off. (Of course, the teacher is there to help if the child—whose parent may be waiting at the home for the party to arrive—is unsure about any portion of the trip.) As we travel, teachers spark discussions, pointing out interesting buildings, landmarks, or signs along the way. For example, a teacher might ask whether children think they will be traveling through Central Park or around it, or ask the children to keep track of the subway stops. Children love pointing to familiar sights, especially when they pass something that they see on the way to their own neighborhoods.

### **A Look Inside**

Once inside a child's home, the leader will show and tell about a variety of important things in her home life. The visitors may greet family pets, look at family photos, and explore favorite toys or activities. Sometimes the group participates in experiences that the family shares together (e.g., a brief scene from a favorite video, a short dance party, or making a special snack together). At the end of the tour, students pause to fill out their trip sheets and share a snack. The snacks have been as simple as fruit, cheese, or cookies, or else traditional family favorites, such as fried chicken or meatballs and, on one occasion, basmati rice at the family's beloved neighborhood Indian restaurant. If the child requests, we always try to stop at a neighborhood playground or park for a quick run around, because these are among the most important, familiar places to that child.

### **A Visit to Eliza's Home**

On one home visit, a teacher and five students rode to Morningside Heights on a city bus. Eliza was a good tour guide, introducing us to the doorman of her apartment and then to her neighbors. Eliza made sure to point out the canopy above her bed and her grandfather's artwork throughout the apartment. She invited her classmates to pet her large dog and cluster together in his (newly laundered) bed. Because both of Eliza's parents teach at the university nearby, we took a walk with Eliza's parents and dog over to the campus, saw where her parents work, and threw pennies into the wishing fountain.

### **Sharing Memories of the Visit**

Upon our return to the classroom, the children greet each other and gather to share their research notes about the home visit. (Rarely do children of this age mention details having to do with material things, such as whose house is larger or who lives in a wealthier neighborhood. Those types of observations and conversations begin to occur among seven and eight year olds.) The discussions with four and five year olds are based



on concrete observations of similarities and differences. They take special notice of each other's bedrooms, pointing out whether the child sleeps in a regular bed, bunk bed, or another variation (loft beds and trundle beds seem especially exciting). An important part of the discussions is who shares the bedroom and which family members share the child's home. Family, and the activities in which they participate together, are often the focal point of the discussions.

## Manhattan Country School

Manhattan Country School (MCS) was founded in 1966 by Gus and Marty Trowbridge who were inspired by Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the civil rights movement, and by other progressive schools. A founding principle of MCS is a strong commitment to equity and diversity design: there is no racial or cultural majority, and tuition is based on a sliding scale. This notion eliminated the idea of "scholarships," creating a more equitable system for this small school that offers preschool (for four-year-olds) through the eighth grade.

In keeping with a progressive educational approach, social studies is at the core of the curriculum and forms the basis by which MCS's diverse community is honored and explored. From the time they first come to MCS, families take part in the community in myriad ways and, most importantly, as key contributors to the curriculum. Learn more at [www.manhattancountryschool.org/about-us](http://www.manhattancountryschool.org/about-us).

These conversations lay the groundwork for later conversations that go into more depth about issues of class, race equality and inequality. Children seem to find the unique qualities of each home visit and are equally enthusiastic about learning about how each and every child in the class lives. Those who stayed at school ask questions, and the visitors are responsible for reporting the details of our travels and explorations. After each visit, photos and trip sheets are put together and added to our "Home Visit Book." Children and parents enjoy looking at this book, learning about their classmates' homes, and remembering their own visits. This book travels with children as they move up to the grade 1–3 classrooms, where the interest seems to persist, as students re-live and share memories from these visits, often reenacting experiences through block building and dramatic play.

## Involving the Whole Family

Often, during parent meetings at the start of the year, parents are rather quiet, as they take in all of the information about an innovative piece of curriculum in which all of the students' families will play an especially important role. When the home visit unit was first introduced years ago, parents needed convincing that the visits were worthwhile and that the children would gain an understanding of one another. Then and now, parents sometimes express concerns about their children traveling to unfamiliar neighborhoods and using

*continued on page 17*

different modes of transportation. An unnamed concern is that children will judge one another's homes based on material possessions. Parents are also concerned about the appearance of their home and, with humor, one parent suggested that she might quickly re-paint the apartment before her own child hosted a visit.

The children go through similar discussions before we begin the visits. We ask the students to think about why we should visit each other's homes. Many children respond by saying that it is important for us to really know each other by knowing about our families, where we live, and what we play with in our homes. After each visit, students begin to notice the distinctions between various travel arrangements and family constructs. They particularly notice distinctive neighborhoods or when they hear other languages being spoken. On Eliza's visit, for example, we had a discussion about the new green taxis that are seen in some New York City neighborhoods. Another visit took us to Ana's home in Brooklyn. Ana travels by subway but lives in a two-story house with a backyard. Ana's family raises chickens and has fruit trees in the yard, and shares the house with her aunt and cousins. On the visit, her aunt prepared a traditional Colombian snack of *arepitas*. The children were most excited to discover an actual house with a backyard in the midst of New York's typical concrete skyscrapers. On this visit, the children concluded that not all New York City homes are alike.

### Lasting Memories

I have often spoken with older children, parents and even alumnae who, years later, have very vivid recollections of their own home visits. For instance, one child, now in high school, recounted the names of the children who visited her home, the special Ecuadorian snack that she offered to her friends, and how she gave a short piano recital.

On one memorable home visit 16 years ago, we visited the home of a boy whose parents were multiethnic, Italian- and African-American. At 10:00 in the morning, for our snack, we sampled the favorite family recipe of meatballs, while following their tradition of bringing out all the pictures of the "ancestors" and listening to a recording of Dean Martin singing "That's Amore." Over my 13 years teaching these young children, I have been on approximately 200 home visits. Each visit is memorable and has taught me some of the myriad ways that make each family distinct. Through participation in the visits, the parents and children see themselves as an integral part of the school's mission to be an inclusive community. 🌍



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### Visiting Homes and Enjoying Cultural Diversity: Selected Picture Books for Four and Five Year Olds

- Emberly, Rebecca. *My House/Mi Casa*. Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1990.
- Keats, Ezra Jack. *Apt. 3*. New York: Macmillan, 1971.
- Richardson, Justin and Peter Parnell, *And Tango Makes Three*. New York: Simon and Schuster, 2005.
- Scott, Ann Herbert. *On Mother's Lap*. New York: McGraw-Hill, 1972.
- Sonneborn, Ruth A. *Friday Night is Papa Night*. New York: Viking Press, 1970.
- Tsutsui, Yoriko. *Anna's Secret Friend*. New York: Viking Press, 1987.
- Williams, Vera B. *A Chair for My Mother*. New York: Greenwillow Books, 1982.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *Cherries and Cherry Pits*. New York: Greenwillow Books, 1986.