Leveraging the Parents and Children Together (PACT) Program for Increased Parental Engagement in the United States

Researchers:

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Sector(s): Education

Location: Chicago, Illinois, United States of America

Sample: 169 parents

Target group: Parents

Intervention type: Digital and mobile Early childhood development Nudges and reminders

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Research Papers: Using Behavioral Insights to Increase Parental Engagement The Parents and Child...

Parents may invest too little time in their children's early education if they undervalue the future gains for their children, relative to the present time and effort required. Researchers evaluated the impact of providing small behavioral tools, including a goal-setting website, text message reminders, and social rewards, to parents to encourage their participation in the Parents And Children Together (PACT) program. These behavioral tools more than doubled parents' reading efforts, with the greatest effect among parents who scored lower on a test that measured parents' patience levels.

Policy issue

Recent research has provided evidence on the importance of early brain development for later success.[1], Because children spend a substantial amount of time with their parents early in life, parental engagement with their children can be important for future economic and social outcomes. However, parents may invest too little time in their children's early education if they undervalue the future gains for their children, relative to the present time and effort required. Parents with lower incomes and less education, in particular, often spend less time on educational activities with their children than their more wealthy and educated peers.[2] This may contribute to the substantial disparities between the skill development of children from different backgrounds that emerge before the start of formal education and persist throughout schooling. More research is needed toidentify effective strategies for increasing parental engagement in educational activities with their children.

Context of the evaluation

This evaluation recruited parents of children aged 3-5 enrolled in one of eight subsidized preschools in Chicago. The average household income of these families was US$20,850. The average household contained two children and more than two adults, though 61 percent of participating parents reported to be single and 92 percent were female. Nearly two-thirds of households spoke English at home. Two-thirds of parents identified as Hispanic and one-third identified as African-American. More than half of parents had some post-secondary education, while 28 percent did not hold a high school diploma.



Parents and their two children using a tablet to access a streaming website for educational games.

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Details of the intervention

Researchers evaluated the impact of providing small behavioral tools to parents to encourage their participation in the Parents and Children Together (PACT) program. For six weeks, the PACT program lent 169 parents an electronic tablet with a pre-loaded application (or app) that included children's books in English and Spanish. While open, the app automatically audio and video recorded the parent and child reading. Within each preschool center, researchers randomly assigned half of parents participating in PACT to a treatment group that received a more intensive version of the program designed to encourage parents to use the tablet. The other half of parents served as the comparison group.

For parents in the treatment group, researchers added to the PACT program three behavioral tools—goal setting, reminders, and rewards—and information that aimed to encourage reading among parents. To foster commitment, each week parents recorded on a website an individual goal for how much time he or she would spend using the reading app during the next week. Every weekday, parents regularly received text messages reminding them to work toward their time goal and stressing the importance of reading. At the end of the week, parents learned how their actual tablet use compared to their goals. To reward success, parents who met their weekly goal received a congratulatory text and all parents received a text announcing the tablet number of the parent who read the most to his or her child, an anonymous form of social recognition. In addition, the tablets included information, in the form of PDFs and videos on the importance of parents' reading to their children.

Parents in the comparison group did not set goals or receive any text messages from researchers, and their tablets included information on hygiene instead of reading.

To measure the impact of the PACT program on parents' reading efforts, researchers used data collected by the app on the time spent reading and the number of books completed. Researchers also surveyed parents on their parenting beliefs and administered questions that measured parents' patience levels.

Results and policy lessons

The behavioral tools and information increased reading efforts among parents in the PACT program, particularly for parents who scored lower on a test that measured parent's patience levels. Within the treatment group, 96 percent of parents used the app at least once, compared to 84 percent of parents in the comparison group. Over the six weeks of the PACT program, parents in the treatment group spent 88.3 more minutes reading and completed 16.6 more books with their children than parents in comparison group, who spent an average of 63.3 minutes and read 14.8 books.

The behavioral tools had a greater effect on parents who scored lower on a test that measured parent's patience levels. For lower-scoring half of parents, the behavioral tools and information increased time spent reading by 124.5 minutes, almost three times as much as the effect for higher-scoring parents. This suggests that behavioral tools might be particularly useful for parents who believe that spending time reading with their child is important, but choose to delay investing in these activities.

Overall, the results suggest that behavioral tools such as goal setting and reminders can be relatively low-cost means to motivate parents to engage often and productively with their children. Researchers estimate that if the parents sustained the increase in reading encouraged by the behavioral tools children's reading scores would increase by 2.5 percent of a standard deviation over the following year and 0.25 standard deviations over ten years, which could help close the learning disparities that exist before formal schooling.

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1. Knudsen, Eric I., James J. Heckman, Judy Cameron, and Jack P. Shonkoff. 2006. "Building America's Future Workforce: Economic, Neurobiological and Behavioral Perspectives on Investment in Human Skill Development." Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences 103(27): 10155-10162.

2. Guryan, Jonathan, Erik Hurst, and Melissa Schettini Kearney. 2008. "Parental Education and Parental Time with Children." Journal of Economic Perspectives 22(3): 23-46.
Kalil, Ariel, Susan E. Mayer, William Delgado, and Lisa Gennetian. "How Parents Feel When They Parent: Explaining Education Based Differences in Time Spent with Children." Unpublished paper, Harris School of Public Policy, University of Chicago, Chicago, IL, 2015.