



Behavioral Insights and Parenting Lab

The PACT Study

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THE CHALLENGE

Reading aloud to children has many benefits, but underprivileged families in the United States often struggle to find the time.

Research shows that cognitive development in early childhood is best promoted if parents create learning opportunities for their children in the home environment, particularly reading aloud. Unfortunately, many young low-income children in the United States are not read to on a regular basis. Many parents find it challenging to carve out time each day to engage with their children in educational activities, and parents' busy lives make it hard to create and stick to a routine of reading and other learning activities.

THE STUDY

The PACT (Parents and Children Together) Study was a six-week experimental intervention developed for English- and Spanish-speaking parents with children enrolled in Head Start programs in Chicago. Participating parents borrowed an electronic tablet with an application called A Story Before Bed, a recordable storybook app with over 500 books in its digital library.

The parents who were randomly assigned to the experimental group set weekly goals for the amount of time they intended to spend reading a book from the digital library to their children. They received daily text message reminders of their goals. At the end of each week, experimental group parents received visual feedback on the actual time they spent reading in the prior week via a goal-setting app on the tablet.

Experimental group parents received recognition for meeting their time-use goals in two ways: personally on the tablet and among their peers via group text messaging. Control group parents received the tablet with A Story Before Bed and instructions for how to use it, but none of the behavioral "nudges" (i.e., the goal setting, text message reminders, feedback, or recognition). A total of 169 parents participated in the PACT intervention.

FINDINGS

DURING THE INTERVENTION

2.5x

more time spent reading among the experimental families compared with families in the control group

152

average minutes the experimental group parents read from story books over the six-week intervention, compared to control group parents who spent 63 minutes reading on average

89

minutes was the mean difference between experimental families and the control group. This is statistically significant at the 1 percent level, clustering by center. The effect size represents a treatment impact of one standard deviation.

The PACT intervention's treatment impact was greater for parents who are more present-oriented than for parents who are less present-oriented.

AFTER THE INTERVENTION

Follow-up periods three weeks after the intervention was removed and then again following a three-month hiatus suggest that parents in the treatment group continue to spend twice as much time reading to their children as compared to those in the control group. Results from this follow-up suggest a persisting difference in the amount of time parents spent reading to their children, though they are inconclusive due to the smaller sample size.

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WHO WE ARE

The Behavioral Insights and Parenting Lab at the University of Chicago Harris School of Public Policy studies the parental investments that promote children's success and how behavioral tools can leverage these investments to increase their return. Research shows that a variety of low-cost, light-touch "behavioral tools" can successfully change behavior in a number of key arenas of life, including health and financial savings behavior. Part of the Center for Human Potential and Public Policy at Harris, the BIP Lab is dedicated to experimental research to investigate whether these approaches can make a difference in parenting strategies to promote children's development in low-income families. The BIP Lab was founded in 2014 by Harris professors Ariel Kalil and Susan E. Mayer.

DIRECTORS

Ariel Kalil, PhD, is a professor at Harris Public Policy, where she also directs the Center for Human Potential and Public Policy. She is a developmental psychologist who studies economic conditions, parenting, and child development. In addition to her work at the BIP Lab, her current research examines the historical evolution of income-based gaps in parenting behavior and children's cognitive and non-cognitive skills.

Susan E. Mayer, PhD, is a professor and dean emeritus at Harris Public Policy. She has published numerous articles on the measurement of poverty, the effect of growing up in poor neighborhoods, and the effect of parental income on children's well-being. In addition to her work at the BIP Lab, she is engaged in a number of studies of intergenerational economic mobility.



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