

The PACT Study

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The Challenge

Research shows that cognitive development in early childhood is best promoted if parents create learning opportunities for their children in the home environment. In particular, reading aloud to children has many benefits. Unfortunately, many young low-income children in the U.S. 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 is a six-week experimental intervention developed for English and Spanish-speaking parents with children enrolled in Head Start programs in Chicago. Participating parents borrow 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 are randomly assigned to the experimental group set weekly goals for the amount of time they intend to spend reading a book from the digital library to their children and receive daily text message reminders reminding them of their goals. At the end of each week, experimental group parents receive visual feedback on the actual time they spent reading in the prior week via a goal-setting app on the tablet. Finally, experimental group parents receive personal recognition on the tablet for meeting their weekly time-use goals in addition to recognition among their peers via group text messaging. Control group parents receive 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 reminding, feedback, or recognition). A total of 169 parents participated in the PACT intervention.

Findings

- Parents in the experimental group spent on average almost 2.5 as much time reading with their children compared to parents in the control condition.
- Over the six weeks of the intervention, treatment group parents read from the story books a total of 152 minutes on average compared to control group parents who spent 63 minutes reading on average.
- This mean difference of 89 minutes is statistically significant at the 1% 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.
- 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 are inconclusive due to the smaller sample size.

Who We Are

The Behavioral Insights and Parenting Lab

Research shows that a variety of low-cost, light-touch “behavioral nudges” can successfully change behavior in a number of key arenas of life, including health and financial savings behavior. 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 School Professors Ariel Kalil and Susan Mayer.

Directors

Ariel Kalil, Ph.D. is a professor at The University of Chicago Harris School of 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, Ph.D. is a professor at The University of Chicago Harris School of 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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