

Show Up 2 Grow Up

Boosting Attendance in Head Start



The Challenge

High levels of absenteeism are common in subsidized preschool programs. Studies show that the share of children in Head Start programs who miss more than 10% of the school days (or over a month of instructional time) is 36% in Chicago. This startling trend continues over the course of the child's education: one-third of chronically absent four-year-olds continue to be chronically absent in kindergarten and of these students more than 30% are still chronically absent in second grade.

Absenteeism is a problem for preschool children because they miss crucial time to develop kindergarten readiness skills. But in many cases it is also an indication that their parents may need help with developing the habit of regular school attendance in order to avoid creating a cycle of absenteeism that could later lead to school failure. Preschool absences may also be a signal of other problems related to parent and child planning and self-regulation. Helping parents establish regular school attendance may therefore help parents and children develop routines that have positive spillovers to other behaviors.

Behavioral science has shown that individuals often encounter cognitive "roadblocks" that prevent them from engaging in behavior that they themselves want to do. Head Start programs stress the importance of attendance, and low-income children are less often absent from kindergarten than preschool. This suggests that one or more cognitive "roadblocks" may reduce attendance in the preschool years.

The Study

- Funded by the Joyce Foundation, this randomized controlled trial aims to develop a cost-effective and scalable behavioral approach to understanding and reducing absenteeism in Head Start programs.
- Show Up 2 Grow Up implements a series of text messages (approximately 4-6 per week). These messages 1) emphasize the importance of preschool learning concepts to kindergarten readiness; 2) prompt parents to identify obstacles to attendance and create plans to address these obstacles; 3) provide information to parents about their children's monthly attendance rates; 4) remind parents to maintain a goal of daily attendance.
- We have created a platform for parents to maintain a monthly goal of 100% for their child's attendance and the intervention provides objective feedback for parents on their success in meeting these goals.

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.