

BROOKINGS

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Helping parents help their children

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Many young children grow up without supportive home learning environments. One often cited study found that by the age of four, poor children hear about 30 million fewer words than wealthy children.[i] This fissure manifests in great differences in children's motor, social, emotional, literacy, and numeracy skills when they first start kindergarten, gaps that persist through school and into the labor market.[ii]

Unfortunately, parenting has proven to be difficult to change. Most programs for parents take the form of short workshops that bombard parents with information and expect them to operationalize new, complex behaviors consistently over long periods of time. These workshops often conflict with childcare or work, and so it is not surprising that many parents do not show up for the workshops when offered. Even for those who do attend, there is rarely a benefit.[iii]

To be sure, not all parenting programs are ineffective. For example, nurse home visitation programs in which nurses visit parents, regularly modeling positive practices and providing additional services, have shown important effects for families facing some of the most difficult circumstances. However, these programs are costly, and as a result, are unlikely to scale at anywhere close to the quality required to support all families in need.[iv]

Parents are not the only adults for whom behavior change is hard. Job training programs for displaced workers are often ineffective, or not nearly as beneficial as traditional schooling, which is one of the reasons advocates support focusing funds on helping children and youth develop the skills they need in school so that they can be flexible in the labor market.[v] While a lack of knowledge, skills, and resources can get in the way of adults making beneficial changes, even when individuals have these resources, ingrained behaviors can be difficult to change.

Research can help us understand why it is so difficult for us, as adults, to change, even when we want to. Why don't we exercise regularly? Why don't we save for the future? Why don't we engage with our children as we want to? Behaviors that we have to do over and over again are simply hard to sustain. We lose focus, getting distracted by the details of day-to-day life. To make changes, we need to hold our attention, which can be hugely challenging especially when the consequences aren't immediate.[vi] We often don't see the benefits of exercise or savings until many years later. We need self-control to focus on long-term goals,

and many of us don't have enough. Parenting requires similar self-control. While regular educational interactions with children have some immediate rewards, many of the benefits come later. What makes matters worse, the benefits of alternative choices, such as washing the dishes or of talking with friends, can bring parents more immediate pleasure.

But attention isn't the only behavioral barrier facing parents. In fact, it may not be the most important. Perhaps the biggest barrier comes from the difficulty of choice. Parenting requires making many choices over and over again. Some choices are complex, such as which type of child care or health care to choose; but some, while seemingly simple, such as what question to ask your child at school pickup, can still be challenging because of the infinite number of choices available. In the face of cognitively demanding tasks such as choosing from many options, individuals can freeze, choosing not to do anything or relying on what they see other people do, instead of making choices explicitly to maximize their goals.[vii]

Illustrating the difficulty of choice, one study found that if people are offered a selection of six varieties of jam they are ten times more likely to buy a jar of jam than if they are offered a selection of 24 varieties of jam. [viii] If even a choice of jam can be overwhelming, imagine the difficulty that parents face in making choices all day and every day. If positive parenting is the fallback from being raised by or learning from effective parents, then falling back to what comes easiest is fine; but for those many parents without these fallbacks, the job is much more difficult.

Given all of the difficulties with changing adult behavior, a possible conclusion could be that building supports for parents is not a good use of resources, and instead, policies should focus on schools and other educational settings outside of the home. But what a waste this conclusion would lead to. Virtually all parents want their children to succeed, and in fact they are, in most cases, the adults who care most about their children.[ix] Moreover, parents often have opportunities to interact one-on-one with young children or in at least with a smaller number of children per adult than do childcare providers. These close adult-child interactions can be key to learning for children of all ages.[x] Parents are also a constant in children's lives while many children move across multiple care settings. Parents have an unparalleled desire and unmatched potential to improve child outcomes—if only available supports could help them to overcome behavioral barriers as well as the information and resource shortages that they face.

New approaches to adult behavior change give substantial reason for optimism. As one example, text messaging programs designed to hold attention on tasks that need to be repeated over long periods of time have led to substantial improvements in healthcare, including weight loss, medication regimen adherence, and glycemic control.[xi] Participants in a texting program designed to help individuals in New Zealand quit smoking had a 28 percent quit rate, compared to 13 percent for the control group.[xii] While texting parents is far less common, one study sent parents or guardians of high schools students several messages over six months about students' missing assignments (including homework, classwork, projects, essays, and exams) and found positive effects on class attendance, assignment completion, student behavior, and grade point average.[xiii]

Text messaging can help parents overcome the difficulties of choice as well as those related to self-control and attention. We studied an eight-month long texting program for parents of preschoolers that provided small, easy-to-implement parent-child activities, along with information and encouragement. Here is an example of a week of texts:

Monday – FACT: Kids need to know that letters make up words. Kids with good letter knowledge become strong readers.

Wednesday – TIP: Point out the first letter in your child’s name in magazines, on signs & at the store? Have your child try. Make it a game. Who can find the most?

Friday – GROWTH: Keep pointing out letters. You’re preparing your child 4K! Now when you point out a letter ask: What sound does it make?

This program increased parents’ educational activities with their children, as well as their interactions with their children’s teachers, and it led to gains in children’s literacy.

Currently, texting is a uniquely positioned technology for supporting parents. Ninety-seven percent of American adults under the age of 50 have cell phones, 98 percent of cell phone owners can access texts, and texts have a 95 percent open rate, compared with 36 percent for email. Moreover, adults who have been the most difficult for traditional parenting programs to reach often text at the highest rates.[xiv]

However, the lesson from these texting studies is not that text-messaging is the best mechanism for reaching parents. The key takeaway is both more nuanced and more optimistic. Parents want to help their children succeed, and they are a significant untapped resource for child success and for closing the enormous gaps that exist between groups of children. Some parents need intensive supports including skill-building, mental healthcare, and financial assistance. Yet many parents largely need help obtaining information and overcoming the simple behavioral barriers that adults face regularly. For far too long, we have been bombarding parents with workshops that, while helpful in intention, do little to help parents maneuver the difficulties that they actually face in reaching their goals and helping their children.

Most policy discussions aimed at improving outcomes for children focus, perhaps rightly, on schools. Yet, one of the lessons from the influential Coleman Report, celebrating its the 50th anniversary this year, is that even with substantial investments in school, families play a key role in educational outcomes and their evident inequalities. While parenting programs have often failed in the past, they can succeed if they break down the complexity of parenting into small steps that are easy to achieve and provide continuous encouragement to parents over an extended period of time to hold attention. In doing so, they can tap most children’s greatest advocates and help to reduce the great inequalities that children face in early learning.

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