



Behavioral Insights and Parenting Lab

Early Investments Project

THE CHALLENGE

Research shows there are differences in the way economically advantaged and disadvantaged parents invest in their children. It also shows the amount of time parents spend with their children matters for their cognitive development.

The gap between the amount of time that advantaged and disadvantaged parents spend with their children overall and in educationally relevant activities has widened over the last 20 years.

There are many theories for what accounts for differences in parenting between the two groups. However, there is little systematic evidence to mediate across these theories.

Practitioners and policy makers need evidence in order to implement effective parent engagement strategies that matter for children's success.

THE RESEARCH

The Early Investments Project is a two-phase study that aims to estimate the causes of differences in parent decision-making by parental advantage. This project will use innovative methods to survey parents of children ages 3-6 across the income spectrum in the Chicagoland area.

The first phase of the project is a pilot to ensure that the methods of survey data collection are sound. The second phase is full-scale data collection with a larger, representative sample of parents.

Data analysis will test differences based on theories such as the following. Compared to advantaged parents, disadvantaged parents:

- Have fewer financial **resources** to spend on investments;
- Have different **information** about what constitutes effective parenting;
- Face more **cognitive barriers** such as stress and other factors;
- Expect a lower **return on investment** in their children.

Parent participants will be surveyed once using vignettes, assessment tasks, and other recent innovations to elicit true preferences and beliefs about investments in their children's development. For example, participants may be exposed to various scenarios to determine their preferences and beliefs as well as digital tasks to measure skills related to their executive function.

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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 science of parental decision-making especially through the lens of behavioral science. Parents are the single greatest influence on children. Parents' investments and engagement in their children's development drives children's skill acquisition and varies greatly by family background. Disadvantaged children are at particular risk for entering kindergarten behind their more advantaged peers, setting up an achievement gap that persists across the school years and into adulthood. Finding ways to support effective parent investment and engagement in children's development is key to closing this gap.

Research shows that a variety of low-cost, light-touch behavioral supports can optimize the decisions that people make in a number of key arenas of life, including decisions about health and financial savings. The BIP Lab is dedicated to understanding how such behavioral supports can be used to leverage parental investments to promote children's development in low-income families. The Lab was co-founded in 2014 by Professors Ariel Kalil and Susan 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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