



Behavioral Insights and Parenting Lab

Learning Curiosity

THE CHALLENGE

Educators and practitioners define kindergarten readiness both in terms of a child's facility with academic skills like letter and number recognition and key non-cognitive skills such as curiosity.

Children from low-income families enter kindergarten behind more advantaged peers, and the pandemic-induced decline in preschool enrollment may further widen this gap. Research suggests that a curiosity-promoting approach to early childhood learning produces greater skill development compared to the typical academic approach used in most preschools and promoted to most parents.

THE STUDY

Learning Curiosity is a six-month text-based research program. It examines the efficacy of two contrasting approaches to help low-income parents improve two important elements of school-readiness in their preschool-aged children: vocabulary skill and curiosity. Families will be randomized into one of two treatment arms or a control group for this study.

Academic Treatment: Parents will receive text messages that contain a vocabulary word and its definition, and parents will be prompted to teach their child the word through closed-ended statements and questions.

Curiosity-promoting Treatment: Parents will receive text messages that contain a vocabulary word, and parents will be guided to engage in open-ended conversation about the word.

Control Group: Parents will receive messages about topics unrelated to parent-child learning interactions.

Our hypothesis is that motivating curiosity-promoting parent-child learning interactions will increase children's vocabulary skill and curiosity more than motivating standard academic parent-child learning interactions.

About TIME

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 through the lens of behavioral science. Research shows that a variety of behavioral supports can optimize the decisions that people make. The BIP Lab is dedicated to understanding how such behavioral supports can be used to motivate parental investments that promote children's development, especially in low-income families. The lab was co-founded in 2014 by University of Chicago Harris School of Public Policy 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.