



Using Easy, Attractive, Social, and Timely Principles to Engage Parents in Early Childhood Interventions

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October 2017

Raising children requires that parents juggle demands on their time, attention, energy and finances. Low income parents are further challenged by the strain poverty places on internal and external resources.¹ To mitigate these burdens and their potentially far-reaching consequences for educational disparities, [beELL](#) applies insights from the behavioral sciences, honing in on obstacles that impede on parenting decisions and creating innovations that help low-income parents take advantage of resources that can benefit their children's cognitive and socio-emotional development. In collaboration with early childhood intervention program developers and sponsors, **beELL** designs strategies to engage parents in activities as simple yet crucial as talking, singing and reading to their babies to attending structured parenting programs. **beELL** innovations are guided by prior behavioral science and contribute to the growing evidence base using randomized control study methodology.

Much of the existing behavioral science on engagement can be summarized via the **EAST** acronym developed by the Behavioral Insights Team, highlighting the importance of using strategies that are **Easy, Attractive, Social** and **Timely**.² **EAST** principles are described further below along with applications from **beELL** projects currently engaging low income parents.

EASY

The **easy** principle reflects the need to make beneficial services as effortless for parents to engage in as possible. At **beELL**, we continually ask ourselves and our partners: how might we reduce the number of steps, lower the hurdles and generally smooth parents' path to participating in this service given existing demands on their time and resources?

One especially powerful and well-evidenced strategy makes use of *default* behaviors. Research has long shown that most of us stick with a less onerous, status quo option rather than actively choosing an alternative. In recent years, program developers and policy makers have harnessed this finding to create thoughtful *opt-out* policies, facilitating individual's intentions and ensuring that the default is in keeping with policy goals.³ Such strategies have greatly improved rates of engagement in schemes supporting organ donations, pension contributions, and energy use reduction among other outcomes.

While critics argue that *opt-out* strategies might be manipulative, default designs have, in fact, always existed in public service programs. If energy consumers took no action, they would remain in their utility's "standard" plan rather than enrolling in a carbon gas-reducing alternative although neither plan was predestined to be the baseline. Even highly altruistic driver's license applicants were unlikely to enlist in a hassle-filled process to become organ donors, despite their best intentions. Now as then, individuals are entitled to "opt-out" of a default to take an alternate path.

For a **beELL** study conducted in partnership with the New York City Department of Health and Mental Hygiene ([beELL-NYC](#)), we used an *opt-out* model to engage low income mothers who had previously consented to newborn home visiting services. These mothers

were automatically enrolled in the *Talk to Your Baby* texting program, an early language and literacy intervention developed with the New York City Children’s Cabinet prompting parents to read, sing and talk to their babies. Of the nearly 300 mothers enrolled as of January 2016, less than 1 percent have opted out. This 99% participation rate contrasts sharply with the *opt-in* rate for a similar text-based language and literacy programs involving new parents which, even with significant financial incentives, reached 59% engagement .⁴

Easy techniques minimize nuisance factors that stifle parent engagement in other ways, too. As behavioral scientists, we recognize that most people take the path of least resistance, particularly when facing often hectic and chaotic days. A parent confronting too many decisions may feel paralyzed rather than empowered. ParentCorps, a beELL partner overseeing a family-centered, school-based program supporting school readiness and healthy development in New York City pre-schoolers, minimizes hassles for parents by using existing, well-attended preschool orientation sessions to introduce its own program, lessening the need for parents to plan for and attend an extraneous event.

The **easy** principle relates to the messages we distribute to parents as well. Across programs, we work to be clear, breaking complex ideas into digestible components, keeping language simple and specific and eliminating irrelevant information or jargon. Rather than telling parents that participation in a parenting program can “improve socioemotional skills”, we suggest that the program can help their child “practice getting along with others.” To make engagement as **easy** as possible, we streamline communications within each program by providing a single point of contact for parents who have any questions or concerns.

ATTRACTIVE

The **attractive** principle underscores the importance of engagement strategies that appeal through sight, sound, taste (food!). Along with our program partners, **beELL** ensures collateral materials and program spaces feel personal and relevant to parents. Within [beELL-GRS](#) (Getting Ready for School), parents learn about play-based activities that help prepare their pre-school aged children in literacy, math and self-regulation skills using fun and colourful visual charts and stickers that serve the dual purpose of helping engage families and allowing them to gauge their progress and time spent on activities.

Research suggests individuals are **attracted** to outreach messages that contribute to a positive self-image.⁵ Thus, we are more likely to engage parents by asking, “How important is it to you to be a confident, relaxed parent?” rather than, “How important is it for you to learn strategies that will help your child thrive in school?”. **beELL**’s research team is currently building on these findings, conducting a study on whether receiving positive affirmations might promote parent engagement.

SOCIAL

Parenting behaviors are fundamentally influenced by culture and context; thus it is essential to take **social** context into account when engaging parents in services and programs. Parents, like all humans, are sensitive to social norms. Engagement strategies that emphasize the popularity of a service and the involvement of like-minded parents will be more effective than trying to make parents feel special about being a rare participant. **Social** strategies emphasize the degree to which other parents are participating in a service or program, highlight the parent-social network, and encourage parents to (publicly or privately) commit to other parents (and sometimes to professionals) about their engagement in a service or program.

Social strategies currently field-tested across **beELL** programs include: asking parents to publicly commit via RSVP to session attendance (**beELL-ParentCorps**), enlisting mothers and fathers in sharing video testimonials about their experience in the program (**beELL-ParentCorps**); showing mothers talking, reading and singing to their babies (**beELL-NYC**); and, building on-going social media networks such as Facebook (**beELL-GRS**).

TIMELY

Timely strategies take advantage of transitional moments when individuals are especially receptive to shifting habits and forging new behavioral paths. At **beELL**, we attend to the developmental milestones and transitions during which parents may be more likely to take on new behaviors and habits. **beELL-ParentCorps** incorporates the **timely** principle by initiating its program during the launch of preschool, helping to spark a fruitful collaboration between parents, children and program and school staff.

The **timely** tenet also reflects our tendency to weigh present day benefits more heavily than we do future ones (aka *present bias*). Given that nearly all early childhood programs ask parents to make a present day time commitment with a future payoff (i.e. children’s eventual improved behavior and/or academic performance), **beELL** works closely with program developers to ensure that programs conscientiously support present-day benefits as well; for example, offering on-site babysitting with meals and financial incentives or small gifts for parents who attend.

Timely strategies additionally account for the *time lag* between intention and behavior. Rather than presuming that parents who express interest will remember dates and events, **beELL** incorporates a variety of reminders to redirect parents’ attention to a scheduled commitment, helping bridge the gulf between intention and attendance. Reminders are sent close to the event with attention paid to the need to reduce information overload – for example, keeping event reminders distinct as opposed to bundled with large packets.

SMALL CHANGES, BIG INFLUENCE ON ENGAGEMENT

In a recent book summarizing decades of research on behavioral science, the authors note “*When it comes to influencing the behaviors of others, it is often the smallest changes in approach that make the biggest differences*”.⁶ The EAST mnemonic helps us to readily remember key, well-evidenced principles – aim towards **easy, attractive, social, and timely** strategies – allowing small changes and techniques to powerfully influence parent engagement in services and programs that can support their children’s healthy development.

¹ Mullainathan, S., & Shafir, E. (2013). *Scarcity: Why having too little means so much*. Macmillan.

² Behavioural Insights Team. 2014. East—Four Simple Ways to Apply Behavioural Insights, April 11, <http://www.behaviouralinsights.co.uk/publications/east-four-simple-ways-to-apply-behaviouralinsights/> (accessed July 1 2017).

³ Thaler, R. H. (2015). The Power of Nudges, for Good and Bad. *The New York Times*, 6.

⁴ York, B. N., & Loeb, S. (2014). *One step at a time: The effects of an early literacy text messaging program for parents of preschoolers* (No. w20659). National Bureau of Economic Research.

⁵ Bryan, C. J., Walton, G. M., Rogers, T., & Dweck, C. S. (2011). Motivating voter turnout by invoking the self. *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences*, *108*(31), 12653-12656.

⁶ Martin, S. J., Goldstein, N., & Cialdini, R. (2014). *The small big: Small changes that spark big influence*. Hachette UK.