



Behavioral Insights to Support Early Childhood Investments

Remarks and Accompanying slides

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The United States spends billions of dollars on early childhood programs—higher than the OECD average per child—with over \$16 billion in federal funding on Head Start, home visiting, and child care subsidies alone.¹ This investment is backed by a now familiar estimate that roughly every dollar spent on quality early education and care can produce more than a (respectable) \$7 return. It is natural to conclude that early education and intervention is a wise, perhaps “the” wise, way to invest in all children, especially income poor children.

This is a striking economic cost benefit result: it is elegant, appealing and easy to understand. But, I am here to talk about one reason why this seemingly elegant mathematically sound result may lead us astray. My claim is that this cost-benefit analysis makes strong assumptions about human behavior, more specifically about the behavior of parents, as informed, attentive, disciplined, and objective acting agents on behalf of young children. We can debate the extent to which taking on parenting is human or crazy, but for the sake of today’s presentation, let’s say parents are like all humans with brains that are not computers, and circumstances that sometimes lead to imperfect, impulsive, short-sighted, and messy decision making, and further, that is sensitive to a variety of social influences whether it is other parents, schools or Dr. Phil’s (potentially misguided) best parenting practices. And, let’s also say, that these characteristics prevail even when their child’s best interest is at stake.

I know. I’m the lucky parent of three emerging older adolescents. I have plenty of gray hair to show for it, and a litany of impulsive, short-sighted, imperfect decisions, often favoring the easy path over the more difficult one which by the way includes a few suboptimal early care and education choices.

Let’s pose these questions: If the foundation of successful early childhood investments is parents, and parents are imperfect decision makers, is the cause hopeless? Is it possible to support parents toward decisions that open, not close, doors for their children? Is it possible to empower parents to parent at their best capacity? Is it possible to redirect parents from busy lives, work, and financial challenges to be attentive to their children’s early learning? Is it possible to shape parenting habits? The good news is that the answer to each of these questions is YES.

¹ Average annual expenditure in OECD countries is \$8000/ enrolled child. 0.8% of GDP; Annual expenditure for U.S. \$9986 vs. OECD average of \$7927; http://www.keepeek.com/Digital-Asset-Management/oecd/education/starting-strong-2017_9789264276116-en#.Wa2vtcaOyUk#page22. In 2014 the U.S. spent 14.9 billion on head start and CCDF; <https://www.nationalpriorities.org/analysis/2015/early-childhood-education-fact-sheet/>. Home visiting: https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/mihope_report_to_congress_final.pdf



Here's the bad news: If we were to ask, are most typical early childhood systems and programs designed to do so? The answer here is NO.

There are three problems:

1. Well intentioned policy makers and program developers do not recognize parents as humans, and incorrectly assume parents will act in the ways they intend;
2. Early childhood program and content developers often ignore that sometimes, maybe all times, parents already know what their children need and what they need help with and instead of being told what do, they would like support on what they are already trying to do; and,
3. The policy and program world focuses on big decisions and big problems, when instead, parenting would be better viewed as a series of small decisions often made in micro contexts. This results in a wide open policy design gap.

What we are left with is a host of all star early childhood programs that struggle with low dose, erratic engagement, and diluted returns on investment.

This is where my work and the beELL initiative comes in. We ask hard questions and engage in diagnostic type of work that often starts with unnoticed problems from the eyes of program operators by taking the lens of parents. We also come at this with a deep appreciation for the context of poverty.

I am a self proclaimed imperfect parent. That was under the circumstances of a stable partner and one father for each of my children, a home, food always in the fridge, a savings account, two well functioning cars, a neighborhood with no crime. Strip that all away. If you have not yet read Scarcity (Mullainathan & Shafir, 2013), read it now.

Behavioral insights applied in the domain of parenting has inspired a path toward creating new light touch interventions to support children's development—like those developed by colleagues Ariel Kalil and Susanna Loeb.

What we do at beELL is a little different: With behavioral insights under our belts, we collaborate closely with policy and program developers (often as community based partnerships) to help regain the return on early childhood investment by putting parents, offering tools that reduce the intention to action gap, and doing so as seamlessly and efficiently as possible.

We're lucky to be working with NYC DOHMH, a school-based parenting and socio-emotional program that is scaling throughout NYC preschool and early childhood centers, and Head Start programs. Their specific challenges vary but each has a common theme: what low cost light touch strategies can be incorporated into existing programs to increase parent engagement and boost child development? We have accumulated lessons and promising results that I'll briefly describe here related to affirmations, misestimation, attention, choice overload and the broader application of choice architecture principles.



Here's just a few things we have already learned:

- Beauty is in the eyes of the beholder; a child is flawless in their parents eyes. Parents not only **misestimate** their capacity for, and performance of, certain parenting skills but also misestimate, usually overestimate, their time and related inputs—like time spent reading—to support their children's development. Giving parents objective feedback can have real impact. We created a **feedback** form in one of our projects reporting back to parents what they handed in weekly about their time spent on activities; this enhancement not only increased return rates but also subsequent time on those activities. (we also learned that teacher distribution of this feedback in an envelope is much more powerful than neutral distribution in a cubby.)
- All parents want what is best for their children. Becoming a parent does not come with a manual. And children, young children, are the toughest characters around. It is exhausting and there is little external validation. No one reminds a parent why they are putting up with dirty diapers, food thrown on the floor, or tantrums in the mall. Empowering parents and reminding them that they already have everything their child needs and redirecting their identity as a parent in a positive way by way of **affirmations** can carve a path toward openness to programs. We convey this positive message during the second of two newborn baby home visits coupled with a video demonstrating early language interactions. We are also adapting the values-based affirmation approach for a kick-off event for a parenting program that we pilot tested through an online survey.
- Preserving parent choice is a tenet of our political system, yet parents are paralyzed by the resulting effect **on too many choices**. The status quo often conflicts with intent. We work hard dissecting the default and incorporating opt-outs, like in New York City's Talk to Your Baby program; we reduced choices in teacher recommended activities for children at home like in this weekly letter; and, we will be testing an example of an active choice/opt-out in a voluntary parenting program this year, an example shown here.
- Parenting is never in isolation. Children need stuff like homes, food, clothes. Investing in children cuts across these necessities. Distractions exponentially increase with each additional child. **Attention**, as a resource, is by default already at a drained level just by virtue of having a young child, even before the day starts. We see in our work, like in other domains, that strategic use of reminders (in companion texts), are effective. We also see the positive impact of leveraging existing school events, and incorporating implementation intentions, and commitment devices. All ideas that can be seamlessly integrated in existing practices.
- **Personalization, simplification, timeliness and attractiveness rooted in a trusted delivery source** are all principles infused in our work. These principles offer guidance in ways that transform a conventional flyer like this [example on left side of slide], into a personalized invitation, like this [example on right side of slide]. Such behaviorally infused transformations can have striking impacts on behavior like parent attendance to orientation meetings and workshops as shown in this figure.



The business of delving into the messiness of parent behavior inevitably uncovers also useful lessons, especially when it comes to the appealing and attractive world of technology.

We have already accumulated a few lessons in this regard: First, personalized approaches can also backfire. Most text based programs, scaled up, are not designed to be bi-directional communication platforms. Parents reply back expecting a personalized response; breaching trust is a real risk when they do not get a reply.

- Exploit but recognize the novelty effect. Parents will hone in on the first new text, image or click through, but this interest will dissipate.
- Saturation is a real barrier. Schools, doctors, friends, lawyers, everyone is after the same thing and using the same types of platforms and technologies.
-
- Parents actually do opt-out. It is a small proportion but don't be fooled that texting, for example, implies universal access.

Getting the most from early childhood investments. Visit us to learn more at www.beELL.org, and follow us on twitter @beellorg.

Behavioral Insights to Support Early Childhood Investments

Lisa Gennetian, NYU

beELL[™]: nudging children to a better start



beELL is a collaboration between researchers at New York University and education and government institutions.



beELL™: nudging children to a better start



Parents misestimate. Feedback helps recalibrate estimation.

GRS Activities at Home November



Dear {PARENT}.....

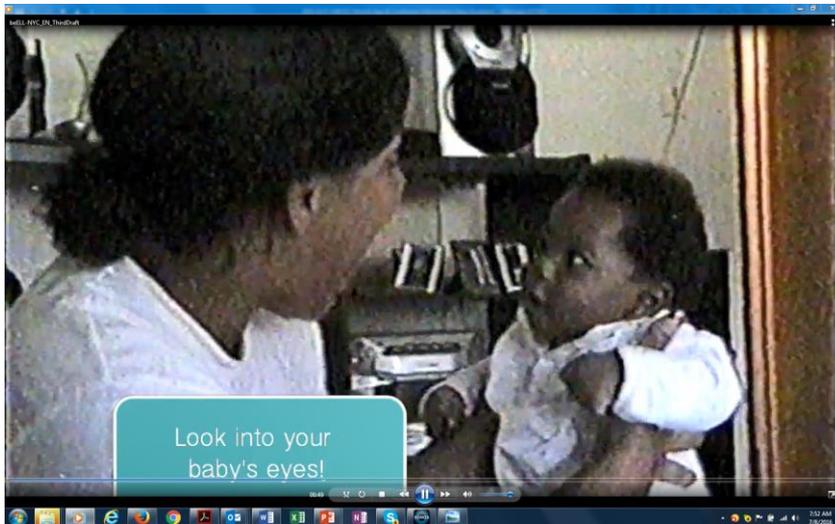
Here's how much time you spent with {CHILD} on GRS activities last month:



?: "Sorry we did not receive your activity trackers"

Parents juggle multiple identities. **Affirmations** positively empower parents.

Being a new mom can feel overwhelming sometimes, but you're doing a great job. What was one new thing (baby's name) has done since I saw you last week? Something that made you smile?



Inertia from too many choices: Default parents from passive choice to active choice.

Parent Program will meet on Thursday,
October 26th at 4PM.

Please write your name below.

Name: _____

Please check in one box below:

- I will attend Parent Program at my child's school to help my child succeed in school.
- I WILL NOT attend Parent Program and won't be able to take advantage of this opportunity to help my child succeed in school.

Inertia from too many choices: Showcase “best” choices.

GETTING READY FOR SCHOOL
THIS WEEK
PLAY. SHARE. LEARN.

USE THIS BOOK!



What we did this week in class:

This week's activities for your child:

	Activity Name	Pages
10 minutes	_____	_____
10 minutes	_____	_____
10 minutes	_____	_____
BONUS: Your favorite activity	_____	_____

★ Reach the goal of 30 minutes or more this week on GRS activities!

From: _____

Redirecting **attention** through integrated reminders and commitment devices in existing texting intervention

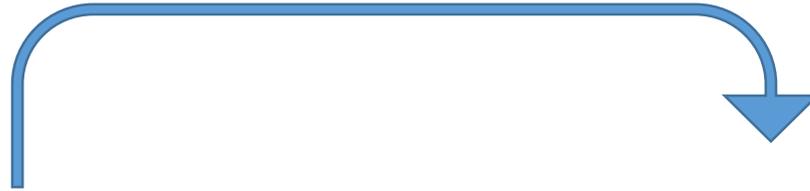
The first ParentCorps session at [REDACTED] school is on Wednesday, October 20th, at 3:30PM. Receive the ParentCorps "Guide for Parents from Parents" to use at home. Can you make it? Reply Y for Yes. N for No.

[REDACTED]

H
Yes

Glad you can make it! Ms. [REDACTED] is looking forward to seeing you there!

Using behavioral insights to transform a flyer into an invitation...



Help your child get ready for Kindergarten!

Remember, *you* are your child's first and most important teacher!

Join us for Parent Kickoff!

Hear more about fun activities to support your child's learning and receive a GRS Gift Bag.

When: Friday, October 23rd, 2015
Time: 3:15 pm - 4:00 pm
Where: Classroom 1

See you on October 23rd!



You are Invited!

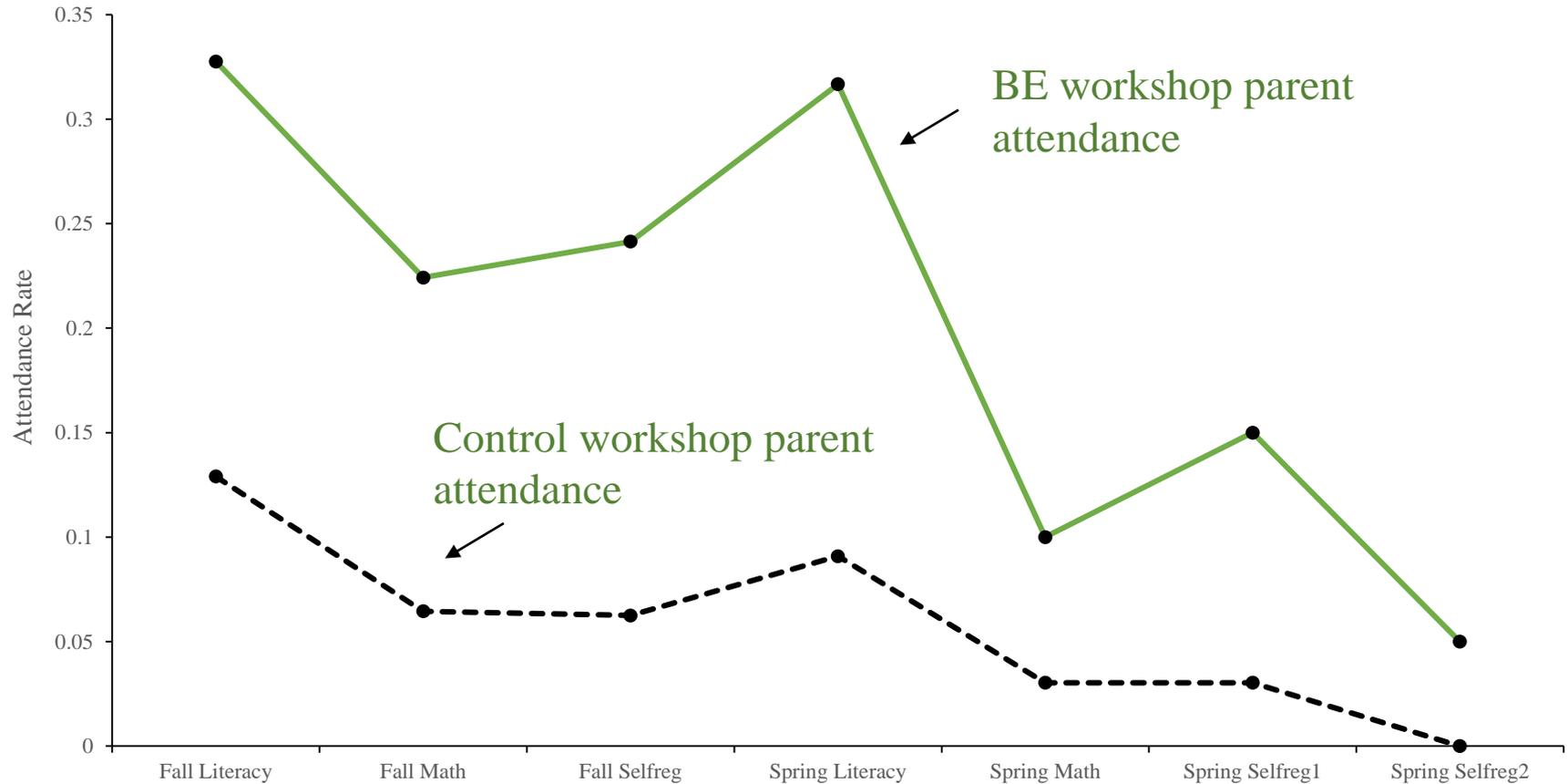
Join your **TEACHER** and other families in your child's class.
Receive a **GRS GIFT BAG**.
Hear more about fun activities to support your child's learning.

Classroom: _____
Date: _____
Time: _____



GETTING READY FOR SCHOOL

...can produce behavioral change on parent attendance like this:



Emerging cautions: parent behavior and technology

- Personalized approaches can backfire. Most text based programs, scaled up, are not designed to be bi-directional communication platforms.
- Capitalize on but also recognize the novelty effect.
- Saturation is a real barrier.
- Parents do opt-out.



Getting the most
from early childhood
investments.

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