

Texts and tablets more than double time parents spend reading to kids

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In a new study, parents were loaned tablets with children's books and sent reminders each week to achieve their goals of time spent reading to their children. Credit: Robert Kozloff

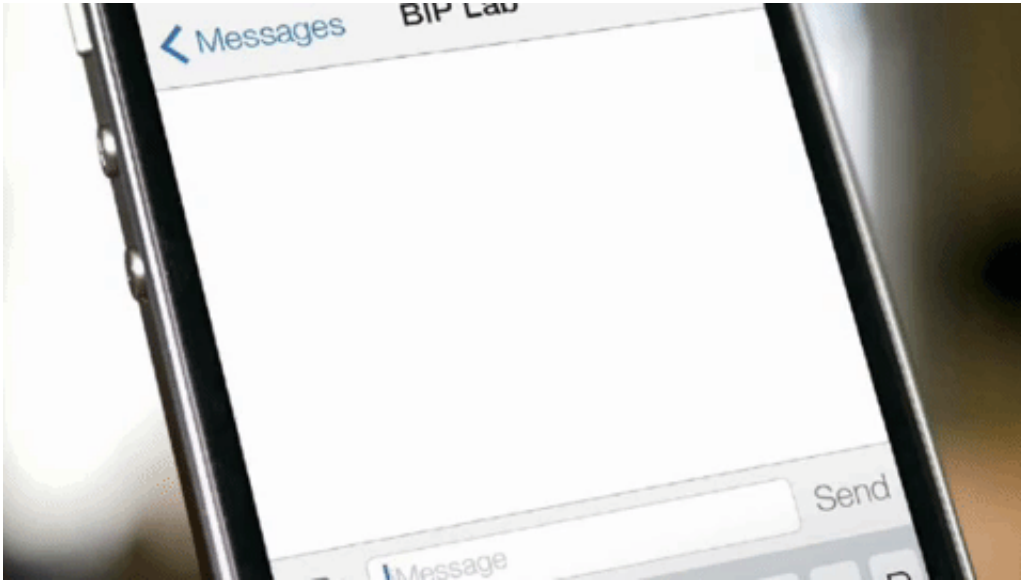
The Behavioral Insights and Parenting Lab at the University of Chicago Harris School of Public Policy recently published in the *Journal of Human Resources* results from a study showing that using text messages to help parents set goals for reading to their children and to remind

parents of their goals can double the amount of time that parents of Head Start children spend reading to their children using a digital library.

"Previous research has shown that reading to [young children](#) is associated with greater literacy and numeracy skill," noted Prof. Susan Mayer of Harris Public Policy, one of the researchers who designed and conducted the Parents and Children Together (PACT) experiment. "Yet we know that many parents, especially lower-income parents and parents with limited education seldom read to their children. So we created a program that uses behavioral tools to help parents overcome cognitive roadblocks to spending time reading to their children."

Behavioral Insights and Parenting Lab co-directors Mayer and Prof. Ariel Kalil of Harris Public Policy, along with Philip Oreopoulos of the University of Toronto and Sebastian Gallegos of the Inter-American Development Bank, invited parents from eight preschools in Chicago to borrow an electronic tablet for six weeks. The tablets included a library of more than 500 children's books along with an application that would record the time, audio and video of parents reading to their kids. Parents were randomly divided into a treatment group and a control group.

Parents in the treatment group were asked to set a goal each week for how much time they would read to their child. Then they were sent several [text message](#) reminders each week to work toward their goal and weekly feedback on the actual amount of time they spent reading to their child. Parents also received a social reward in the form of a digital badge for meeting their goals.



Credit: University of Chicago

The PACT results show that after six weeks:

- Parents in the treatment group doubled the amount of time they spent reading to their child.
- Parents in the treatment group read an average of almost five books per week, while those who were not read an average of two or three.

The PACT study found that the most present-biased parents increased their reading time in response to the PACT program much more than parents who were the least present biased. Present bias is the tendency to focus on activities that provide immediate satisfaction over activities that have a pay off sometime in the future. It is a common cognitive bias that we all experience to some extent, such as when we procrastinate, or put off doing something until tomorrow that we know we should do today. These results suggest that the behavioral tools in PACT increased reading time by helping parents manage their present bias and mitigate

their tendency to procrastinate when it comes to reading to their children every night.

The PACT study is part of a large portfolio of work at the Behavioral Insights and Parenting Lab that brings insights from behavioral science to understand the science of parental decision-making. In particular, the work aims to understand and address the cognitive roadblocks that stand in the way of parents' ability to form and adopt habits of effective engagement with their children. The [behavioral science](#) of parental decision-making is a new field of research being developed at the Lab that builds on work in the science of financial and health decision-making. Using behavioral tools like reminders, commitment devices and social incentives, the lab designs technology-based interventions for parents that can be implemented at a very low cost by service providers. The BIP Lab then tests the efficacy of these interventions using field experimental methods.

The adoption of behavioral tools to increase parental engagement with their children to promote children's cognitive, emotional and physical development and health is still in the very early stages, but the PACT findings point toward cost-effective approaches to improve the skills and ultimately the futures of young children.

"Our goal is to identify ways to implement low-cost, light-touch behaviorally informed programs that help bolster parental engagement on a large scale," Kalil said. "The development of such approaches offers a significant and compelling new opportunity to improve the lives of families and children."

More information: Susan E. Mayer et al. Using Behavioral Insights to Increase Parental Engagement: The Parents and Children Together Intervention, *Journal of Human Resources* (2018). [DOI: 10.3368/jhr.54.4.0617.8835R](https://doi.org/10.3368/jhr.54.4.0617.8835R)

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