

Parent Engagement Interventions Are Not Costless: Opportunity Cost and Crowd Out of Parental Investment

Carly D. Robinson 

The Brown University

Raj Chande

The Behavioural Insights Team

Simon Burgess

University of Bristol

Todd Rogers

Harvard University

Many educational interventions encourage parents to engage in their child's education as if parental time and attention is limitless. Sadly, though, it is not. Successfully encouraging certain parental investments may crowd out other productive behaviors. A randomized field experiment (N = 2,212) assessed the impact of an intervention in which parents of middle and high school students received multiple text messages per week encouraging them to ask their children specific questions tied to their science curriculum. The intervention increased parent–child at-home conversations about science but did not detectably impact science test scores. However, the intervention decreased parent engagement in other, potentially productive, parent behaviors. These findings illustrate that parent engagement interventions are not costless: There are opportunity costs to shifting parental effort.

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PARENTS are integral in shaping children's academic and life successes (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Reardon, 2011). President Obama (2009) endorsed this sentiment when he stated, "There is no program or policy that can substitute for a mother or father who will attend those parent–teacher conferences or help with the homework or turn off the TV, put away the video games, read to their child." The former president's words remind us of the power of parents investing in their child's education, while simultaneously highlighting the complexity of parenting: These are just a handful of the many education-promoting behaviors we expect engaged parents will undertake.

But parents have limited time and resources to dedicate to parenting their child. In the face of

these realities, parents necessarily need to make decisions about which parenting behaviors they will engage in and, consequently, which behaviors they will not (Shah et al., 2012). Thus, parents miss out on the potential benefits associated with the behaviors they do *not* engage in—what economists call the "opportunity cost"—every time they choose to engage in a particular parenting behavior. Ideally, policies and educators direct parents toward the most productive behaviors that would promote their child's educational success.

Recent research suggests behavioral interventions that encourage and motivate parents to engage in specific ways can improve various educational outcomes, including attendance (Kalil et al., 2019; Lasky-Fink et al., 2021; Robinson

et al., 2018; Rogers & Feller, 2018), academic performance (Bergman & Chan, 2021; Bergman et al., 2020), literacy (Cortes et al., 2019, 2021; Mayer et al., 2019; York et al., 2019), and dropout rates from summer school (Kraft & Rogers, 2015). In many ways, the benefits of these interventions are clear. They are low-cost, scalable, and meaningfully improve student outcomes. Less straightforward, however, are the potential opportunity costs associated with these interventions. That is, what behaviors are parents foregoing when they redirect their time and efforts as the result of an intervention?

Consider an intervention that aims to increase homework submissions by alerting parents that their child failed to complete a homework assignment. If all goes according to plan, when parents receive that alert, they will take action to get their child to submit the missing assignment or act to make sure they do not neglect assignments in the future. If the child improves their homework submission rate, the intervention is a success. However, parents' time and cognitive bandwidth are finite. By directing the parent to attend to on-time homework assignments, they will necessarily have to sacrifice other behaviors. Maybe a parent will redirect the time they would otherwise spend scrolling Twitter, in which case the opportunity cost in terms of educational benefit to the child would be low. Or, perhaps, encouraging their child to complete an overdue assignment replaced the parent making sure their child went to bed at an appropriate time. In this case, the opportunity cost in terms of educational benefit to the child may be greater.

In this brief, we report on a randomized field experiment where we sent parents of 3,483 middle and high school students text messages reporting what their child learned in science class that day and encouraging parents to ask their children specific questions about that content. Parents received an average of two text messages per week over 4 to 6 weeks. Nearly two thirds of the students ($N = 2,212$) completed a survey at the end of this period reporting on their at-home behaviors and interactions with their parents. The intervention increased parent-child at-home conversations about science but did not have a discernable impact on students' science test scores. At the same time, the intervention decreased the likelihood that students reported their parents

engaged in other behaviors that could help them prepare for school (e.g., turned off the television when the child was watching) and school-related discussions (e.g., talked about current homework assignments). This pattern shows that parent engagement interventions are not costless. Successfully directing parental investments toward some parent engagement behaviors can crowd out other, possibly beneficial, behaviors. Parents have limited time, attention, and resources to invest in their child's education, so there can be opportunity costs to shifting parental effort.

Present Study

Sample and Design

The study took place during the 2013–2014 school year in five secondary schools (Grades 7–11) in England, with a total of 5,078 students. (See the Supplementary Online Materials [SOM] in the online version of the journal for additional details.) All students who were enrolled in a science class that had a unit test during the study window (February–April) were eligible to participate ($N = 3,725$). Across the five schools, we excluded 116 students (3.1%) because their parent opted them out of the study and an additional 146 students (3.9%) because the school did not have a working mobile phone number for any parent. We performed a stratified randomization of participating students by school, science class, prior attainment (on their most recent low-stakes science test), and free and reduced-price lunch (FRPL) status. Of the students in our final sample, 1,729 were assigned to the treatment condition and 1,754 to the control group. Of these 3,483 students, 2,212 students completed the final student survey. There were no statistically significant differences between the conditions on the pretreatment covariates, $ps > .40$ (see SOM).

Procedure and Intervention Details

The intervention involved texting parents about what their child learned in science class that day. To do this, research assistants used an existing texting platform which was mostly employed for administrative purposes by the participating schools. Over the course of the intervention period, science teachers wrote “conversational

prompts” for parents after each class period that they shared with the research team. The research team encouraged teachers to first describe what was taught in a non-technical manner and then pose a question that might stimulate genuine curiosity in the parent. For example: “Hi, today [Student First Name] learned about solids, liquid and gases. Please ask them which one is shaving foam? Thanks, [Teacher Name].” These prompts were occasionally edited by research assistants to fit the texting software’s character limit or for typos and clarity.

By the end of the school day, parents in the treatment condition received a text with the conversational prompt relating to the day’s science lesson. Over the course of the science unit (which lasted between 4 and 6 weeks), treatment parents received an average of two texts per week, $M = 2.03$, $SD = 0.93$, range: 0.20–4.19. Parents in the control group did not receive any texts related to science class from the school.

Measures

Our preregistered primary outcome was students’ test scores at the end of the targeted science unit. In England, secondary school students will typically be tested five times per year in each subject. These are low-stakes tests that schools use to monitor their students’ progress. To compare across schools, we standardized the science tests within school and grade.

At the end of the experiment and after all students completed the unit tests, we administered a survey to all students. The number of students who completed the survey was balanced between the two conditions (control = 63.7%, treatment = 63.3%), $p = .68$ and students who responded did not differ on any pretreatment covariates from those who did not. Students answered questions about how often they discussed science at home, their perceptions of their parents’ behaviors and their parent–child interactions, as well as their own attitudes toward schooling and parent engagement. In particular, we asked students to report on whether their parents received texts about what they learned about in science class, how often they talked to their parents about science class, whether their parents tested them on what they had learned in the past month, and whether their parents discussed what they were

learning about in class. Students also answered whether they *wanted* their parents to receive science class–related texts and whether they would *enjoy* it.

To explore whether the treatment crowded out other parenting behaviors and discussions, we constructed a Parenting Behavior Index and a Parent–Child Discussion Topic Index. The Parenting Behavior Index tallied the number of behaviors students reported their parents engaged in the prior month to help them prepare for school (i.e., turned off the TV/computer/video games, made them go to sleep at a reasonable hour, made sure they had a quiet place to study, checked what they were studying, or another behavior not listed). The Parent–Child Discussion Topic Index tallied the number of school-related topics students reported discussing with their parents in the prior month (i.e., attendance, behavior, participation, focus, effort, current homework, missing homework, studying for tests, grades, or their overall performance). The SOM provides details on all survey items.

Analytic Strategy

We used the following model specification for an Intent-to-Treat (ITT) estimate of the treatment effects:

$$Y_i = \alpha + \beta T_i + X_i + \gamma_c + \varepsilon_i,$$

where Y_i is the student-level outcome of interest, T_i is an indicator for random assignment to treatment, X_i is a vector of covariates including FRPL status and prior science attainment, and γ_c is a dummy variable for each class. We use cluster-robust standard errors to account for within-class correlations across students in outcomes. The parameter of interest is β , which captures the causal effect of the intervention.

Results

As a manipulation check, we asked students to report whether their parents had received texts about what they were learning in science class in the prior month. About 83.7% of students in the treatment groups correctly responded that their parents received the texts, compared with 10.5% of control students who said their parents received the texts. Thus, the treatment group

were 73.2 percentage points (pp) more likely to report their parents received the texts.

Parents of treatment students discussed science class 0.27 times more per week ($SE = 0.059$, $p < .001$) compared with the control group baseline of 1.27 times per week. Relatedly, treatment students were 6.2 pp more likely than control students to say they their discussions about science class were more frequent than usual (16.9% vs. 10.7%, respectively, $p < .001$). We also found 53.8% of treatment students reported that their parents tested them on what they learned in school in the prior month compared with only 42.4% of control students, $SE = 2.2\%$, $p < .001$. However, treatment students did not indicate that their parents discussed what they were learning about in class more generally (i.e., not science-specific) at a higher rate than control students (59.5% vs. 57%, respectively, $p = .283$).

Despite the increase in reported discussions about science class and testing on what was learned in school, we did not find evidence that the treatment increased students' performance on their science unit test scores, $\beta = 0.027$ standard deviations, $SE = 0.021$, $p = .202$. See the SOM for robustness checks and details on heterogeneity analyses.

On the other hand, parenting behaviors that were not related to discussions about science or testing what was learned in school appeared to fall in response to the intervention. Table 1 details the treatment impact on students' reports of their parents' behaviors (Panel A) and parent-child discussions (Panel B). The treatment decreased the likelihood that parents engaged in other parenting behaviors by 0.24 instances in the prior month or 0.18 standard deviations, $p < .001$. Specifically, students whose parents received the text messages reported that their parents were less likely to turn off the TV/computer/video games (-7.4 pp), make them go to sleep (-5.4 pp), and check that they were studying (-5 pp). Similarly, students in the treatment group reported their parents discussed 0.26 fewer non-science, school-related topics with them in the prior month, $p = .036$.

There is evidence of potential spillover of the treatment to the control group—29% of the students in the control group reported that their classmates' parents received text messages about science class (compared with 46% of students

in the treatment group). However, we cannot know whether these students' parents were aware about the science-related messages other parents were receiving. If control students' parents were aware of the intervention, they may have been more likely to ask about their children about science, suggesting that these results are a lower bound estimate of the treatment effect on parental engagement.

Finally, students appear to have liked the treatment more than they would have predicted. Compared with the students in the control group, treatment students were more likely to report they *wanted* their parents to receive texts about what they were learning in science class next term (34% vs. 41.3%, respectively, $p < .001$) and that they would *enjoy* it if their parents received texts about what they were learning science class so they could talk about it together (31.8% vs. 37.6%, respectively, $p = .007$). While we cannot know whether parents enjoyed receiving the text messages or not, we do not find any evidence of heterogeneity in the treatment effect on test scores by text dosage (see Table S4 in the SOM) suggesting that parents may not have experienced text message fatigue.

Discussion

Interventions aimed at parents can increase student success if they increase productive parental investment (Cunha et al., 2006). This can be achieved by some combination of increasing the total productive time parents invest in their child or substituting less productive time investments with more productive ones. Of course, this requires parents to discern which investments will be more or less likely to produce educational gains by their child. The recent successes of parent-focused behavioral interventions suggest that parents' time investments are malleable and can be shifted toward certain behaviors that impact student outcomes (see Bergman, 2019).

In the present study, we successfully increased the amount of time parents invested in talking with their child about science class and testing them on what they learned that day. Contrary to our expectations, we did not find support that this investment increased students' science test scores. Instead, we discovered that the intervention appeared to substitute some parental

TABLE 1

Impact of Sending Parents Conversational Prompts on Student Perceptions of Parenting Behaviors and Parent–Child Discussions

Outcome	Control mean	Treatment effect	<i>p</i> value	<i>R</i> ²
Panel A				
Parenting Behavior Index	2.50	−0.242*** (0.053)	.000	.123
Turned off TV/computer/ video game	44.8%	−0.074*** (0.020)	.000	.113
Made child go to sleep	57.8%	−0.054** (0.026)	.036	.104
Quiet place to study	53.8%	−0.033 (0.023)	.152	.094
Checked child was studying	67.7%	−0.050** (0.021)	.02	.090
Other	26.0%	−0.029* (0.017)	.09	.100
None of these things	6.0%	0.005 (0.012)	.781	.074
Panel B				
Parent–Child Discussion Topic Index	4.82	−0.261** (0.123)	.036	.160
Attendance	36.2%	−0.007 (0.021)	.743	.127
Behavior	47.0%	−0.023 (0.020)	.248	.202
Participation	27.0%	−0.010 (0.021)	.638	.136
Focus	40.0%	−0.017 (0.023)	.810	.115
Effort	51.0%	−0.018 (0.022)	.409	.118
Current homework	69.4%	−0.054*** (0.019)	.005	.130
Missing homework	34.2%	−0.042** (0.021)	.050	.079
Studying for tests	62.4%	−0.031 (0.019)	.107	.124
Grades	69.4%	−0.027 (0.019)	.169	.137
Overall performance	45.2%	−0.027 (0.021)	.259	.110
Did not ask about school	3.0%	−0.003 (0.007)	.681	.064

Note. The Parenting Behavior Index sums all the sub-behaviors (excluding “None of these things”). The Parent–Child Discussion Topic Index sums all the sub-discussion topics (excluding “Did not ask about school”). All of the models include class student prior attainment and FRPL as covariates, school-level fixed-effects, and robust standard errors are clustered at the class level. The observations for each row range from 2,201 to 2,212.

p* < .1. *p* < .05. ****p* < .01.

investments (e.g., turning off electronic devices) with another (i.e., talking with their child about science) that was not necessarily more productive at increasing the targeted educational outcome (i.e., science test scores). While the end-of-unit science test score was our intended outcome, we acknowledge that the intervention could have positively impacted other beneficial outcomes that we did not measure, like curiosity or parent–child relationships.

On one hand, these results are promising. They demonstrate parents respond to encouragements from schools about engaging in their child's education, and that students like such interventions more than they would expect. Parents act when they receive simple, easy to take-up, accurate, reliable, and timely messages (Lasky-Fink & Robinson, in press). Policymakers and educators should continue to partner with parents in service of increasing student success. On the other hand, policymakers and educators must consider what other parenting behaviors may be crowded out as a result of redirecting parents' efforts.

Though not the focus of this article, we note that the final experimental sample may not have been large enough to detect a plausible effect size on achievement. The not statistically significant 0.027 standard deviation increase in test scores corresponds to approximately 1 month of additional schooling (Hill et al., 2008). Nonetheless, the present results show that regardless of the effect on achievement the intervention crowds out other parental investment. Therefore, if the intervention led to a meaningful increase in student test scores, the question would become, are the test score gains more important than the decrease in other parental behaviors? The benefits of the intervention would have to be weighed against the associated opportunity costs.

Future research could involve designing an experiment that varies the educational productivity of the encouraged parental behaviors. Such a design could confirm the current manuscript's thesis by finding that all encouragements crowded out other parental investments but encouraging behaviors that have relatively high (as compared to low) educational productivity would result in better student outcomes. Second, a future experiment might directly observe

parental investment behavior rather than relying on self-report. While children's perceptions of their parents' behaviors consistently associate with academic and social outcomes (e.g., Diaconu-Gherasim & Măirean, 2016), their self-reports of their parental interactions over the prior month could be biased. More objective measures of parental behaviors would allow for closer observation of the mechanical process of how and why parents substitute and adjust their investments (see Dizon-Ross, 2019).

This study shows that parent engagement interventions are not costless. Successfully directing parent investment toward a particular behavior can crowd out other, potentially productive, behaviors. Parents have limited time, attention, and resources to invest in their child's education. When developing interventions and communications for parents, policymakers must be aware that, as economists say, there are no free lunches.

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ORCID iD

Carly D. Robinson  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-0663-1589>

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Authors

CARLY D. ROBINSON is a postdoctoral research associate at the Annenberg Institute at Brown University. Her research interests sit at the intersection of education, psychology, and policy with a focus on improving social support for students.

RAJ CHANDE is a principal advisor for the Behavioural Insights Team and a maths teacher at a

secondary school in East London. He has worked on projects targeting higher education participation, attainment in further education colleges, teacher recruitment, teacher workload, and attainment in secondary schools.

SIMON BURGESS is a professor of economics in the School of Economics at the University of Bristol. He studies the economics of education.

TODD ROGERS is a professor of public policy at the Harvard Kennedy School of Government. He is a behavioral scientist whose work supports student success and attendance, strengthens democracy, and improves communication

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