

# Engaging Parents with Preschools: Evidence from a Field Experiment

Based on BFI Working Paper 2022-97, [“Engaging Parents with Preschools: Evidence from a Field Experiment,”](#)

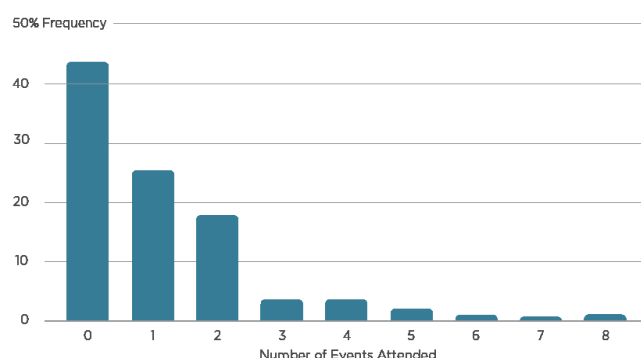
by Ariel Kalil, Susan Mayer, and Rohen Shah of the Harris School of Public Policy at UChicago

*Parents who received financial incentives and text message reminders were 28% more likely to attend a preschool event; the same parents were also more likely to attend unincentivized events.*

Studies have revealed a correlation between parents’ involvement in their children’s education (through event attendance, volunteering, communication with teachers, etc.) and better school performance, with some research showing a causal relationship. Likewise, publicly supported preschools such as Head Start are required to promote family engagement, which means spending limited financial and human resources. Even so, parental attendance at preschool-sponsored parent engagement events is low, raising questions about the effectiveness—and opportunity costs—of such efforts.

Are there ways to improve low participation rates? In this new research, the authors test whether combining financial incentives and behavioral tools could help increase parental engagement, and to do so they employ a randomized control trial (RCT) to test the combined impact of loss-framed financial incentives along with text-message reminders. Before describing their methodology further, a brief word about RCTs and loss-framed incentives. RCTs are a study design whereby people are randomly assigned to a control group (no incentive, in this case) or a treatment group (those who receive the incentive). A well-designed RCT ensures that differences in outcomes are attributable to the variable under study. In this study, that variable is a loss-framed incentive,

**Figure 1 •** Frequency of Parents Attending Preschool Events



which is one that is “prepaid” and then “clawed back” if targets are not met. For example, a parent offers \$7 at the end of the week if a child does the dishes every night, but then deducts \$1 for every night the child misses.

In practice, the authors’ treatment group included 319 parents at preschool-sponsored family engagement events at six subsidized preschools in Chicago from November 2018 to March 2019. Treatment parents were offered \$25 per event for eight roughly 90-minute events, a compensation level slightly above the median hourly wage of parents in this demographic. The monetary incentive was offered as a loss-frame incentive of \$200 in a virtual account (redeemable at the end

of the experiment), of which \$25 was deducted for each missed event. The parents also received weekly text message reminders with event details, as well as a second text message that indicated how much money remained in their account.

The authors' findings include the following:

- Financial incentives and reminders increased the attendance rate by 28% (3.6 percentage points), from 12.9% to 16.5%.
- The length of the event, or the time of day that it was held, had no statistically significant effect on participation.
- A key positive spillover also occurred: Consistent with habit formation, treatment parents were more likely to attend events that were not incentivized.

The good news, then, is that the treatment effect is high in relative terms—increasing attendance by nearly a third is a positive result. Unfortunately, at 16.5%, the overall attendance rate is still small and far below expectations. This outcome, combined with other recent research, leads the authors to a blunt conclusion: Preschools serving disadvantaged children should abandon or wholly reimagine their efforts to induce parents to attend school events.

What would a reimagined effort look like? Given such barriers to attendance as work schedules and low parental expectations on the value of such events, such programs may need to offer substantially more money than merely compensating for lost earnings. Also, schools may have to offer events that parents perceive as worthwhile, and future research could employ randomization tests to better understand parents' preferences.

#### READ THE WORKING PAPER

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