

**Using Behavioral Insights to Increase Attendance at Subsidized
Preschool Programs: The Show Up to Grow Up Intervention**

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1. Background/Context: Children’s chronic absenteeism from preschool imposes costs on the schools, the children’s peers who do show up, and the absent children themselves (Balfanz & Byrnes, 2012; Connolly & Olson, 2012; Ehrlich, Gwynne, Pareja, & Allensworth, 2013; Ehrlich, Gwynne, & Allensworth, 2018; Jacob & Lovett, 2017),

2. Purpose/Objective/Research Question: Attendance in kindergarten is substantially higher than attendance at preschool only one year prior to kindergarten among similar families attending preschool and kindergarten in similar neighborhoods. It is unlikely that changes in structural barriers alone explain this dramatic increase in attendance in kindergarten compared to preschool. Instead, this difference points to some role for potentially malleable factors. We implemented a field experiment called Show Up to Grow Up designed to increase attendance and diminish chronic absences at subsidized preschool programs in Chicago, targeting malleable factors that potentially drive absences from preschool.

3. Setting: Our research took place at Head Start centers in Chicago. We focus on children in Head Start programs because of the statutory requirement that Head Start programs maintain an average rate of attendance of 85% or risk sanctions. Programs are required to manage systematic program attendance issues by tracking attendance and using the data to address problems with chronic absenteeism.

4. Population/Participants/Subjects: Parents whose primary language was either English or Spanish, who had a child aged 3–5 years old enrolled in a subsidized preschool program, and who had access to a mobile phone were eligible for the experiment

5. Intervention/Program/Practice: Our intervention consisted in personalized text messages sent over an 18-week period to parents targeting malleable factors that potentially drive absences from preschool.

6. Research Design: we implemented an RCT. Within each center and classroom, we randomized half of the eligible parents to the treatment group and half to the control group. Parents of siblings were randomized with all of the siblings to either treatment or control groups.

7. Data Collection and Analysis: We use administrative records from preschools, combined with survey data collected at baseline suggest that our intervention.

8. Findings/Results: Our randomized controlled trial shows qualitatively important treatment impacts of the intervention on increasing the number of attended days and decreasing chronic absenteeism among the parents’ children. Further, our results suggest not only that the treatment impact is stronger among those children in the bottom quantiles of the attendance distribution but also that our intervention made the importance of preschool more salient to parents who reported at baseline lower expectations for attendance and weaker beliefs about the importance of attendance to their children’s development. Together, these results provide evidence that malleable barriers play some role in parents’ decisions influencing their young children’s attendance at school.

9. Conclusions: Description of conclusions limitations, and recommendations of authors.

Our results point to the potential to help preschool centers save resources by implementing low-cost light-tough interventions targeting malleable barriers in order to achieve the schools' attendance requirements and may provide insights into absenteeism in other similar organizations. Among the limitations: Because multiple types of behavioral messages were bundled together in our intervention, we cannot determine which of them (either singly or jointly) drove our significant treatment impacts. Future work with larger samples could separate these messages into distinct treatment arms to better understand which was driving the treatment impacts. While the SUGU study results strongly suggest the promise of using behavioral tools to motivate low-income parents to support their children's attendance at Head Start, many questions for future research remain. Among these are how long a behavioral intervention must last before parents no longer need the behavioral tools to reinforce the new behavior, which specific behavioral tools lead to the greatest change in parental behavior, and how much altering parental behavior alters child outcomes. Finally, the results of SUGU—like the results of all research—should be replicated. If replications support the evidence found in SUGU, finding ways to widely implement behaviorally informed programs to alter parental engagement is also a high priority.

10. References:

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- Ehrlich, S. B., Gwynne, J. A., Pareja, A. S., & Allensworth, E. M. (2013). Preschool attendance in Chicago public schools. *Research Summary*.
- Ehrlich, S. B., Gwynne, J. A., & Allensworth, E. M. (2018). Pre-kindergarten attendance matters: Early chronic absence patterns and relationships to learning outcomes. *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, 44, 136-151.
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