

BEHAVIORAL BUZZ

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Developing SIMPLER Solutions

The field of applied behavioral science continues to grow, with examples showing up from the private sector to the White House. Seminal research studies that nudged individuals into retirement savings plans and organ-donation registration have prompted people from diverse backgrounds to wonder how they can use these insights in their programs and services. The goal of the [BIAS project](#) was to learn how behavioral insights could be applied to human services agencies that serve low-income and vulnerable populations in the United States. What did BIAS learn about applying behavioral insights in this field?

BIAS has now completed 15 randomized controlled trials in child care, child support, and work support programs. While each intervention was designed to respond to unique challenges faced by particular programs, seven behavioral concepts were used in almost every site. These seven concepts led to the “SIMPLER” framework: **S**ocial influence, **I**mplementation prompts, **M**andated deadlines, **P**ersonalization, **L**oss aversion, **E**ase, and **R**eminders. This newsletter summarizes each part of the framework and shares examples of how these concepts were used in BIAS interventions. Practitioners and researchers may find this guide useful when designing behavioral interventions to improve the outcomes of social programs. All of the findings discussed are statistically significant.

Social Influence

Persuasion by society, peers, or a person of influence can affect people's decisions and actions.

- In [Texas](#), the BIAS intervention encouraged incarcerated parents who owed child support to submit applications for child support order modifications. Among other strategies, the new outreach made use of social influence by explaining that “*Other parents like you have had their orders lowered!*” The intervention led to a large increase in the percentage of parents who submitted applications.

Implementation Prompts

Implementation prompts — which encourage people to plan the precise steps they will take to complete a task — can help move people from intention to action.

- In Indiana, the BIAS intervention prompted parents to develop specific plans to make it to their Child Care and Development Fund voucher renewal appointments on time, with the proper documents. This strategy was one of a set of behavioral interventions that increased both the percentage of parents who attended their first scheduled renewal appointment and the percentage of parents who completed the process in one appointment.

Mandated Deadlines

Without a fixed deadline for accomplishing a task, it can be easy for people to procrastinate or assume that they will get around to doing it eventually.

- In the BIAS [Paycheck Plus](#) test in New York, the program advertised an artificially early deadline for attending a meeting, knowing that people who missed the first due date would have time to catch up before the real deadline. People who were given the behavioral intervention that included

the earlier deadline attended the meeting sooner and in higher numbers than those in the control group.

Personalization

Efforts to personalize information or give customers personal assistance through a difficult task can improve outcomes.

- BIAS interventions often sent out communications that were personalized with people's names or prepopulated with information relevant to their cases. In one of the [Indiana](#) child care studies, parents were sent personalized referrals to quality-rated child care providers close to their homes, accompanied by a handwritten note to call the agency with any questions. These notes contributed to an increase in the percentage of parents who selected a highly rated provider.
- In some sites, BIAS interventions also included active personal assistance. In child care studies conducted in both [Oklahoma](#) and Indiana, having a staff member make contact with parents to assist them led to greater impacts than written communications alone.

Loss Aversion

Loss aversion is the tendency to prefer avoiding losses to achieving equal-sized gains, relative to a reference point. Sometimes just rewording a message can lead people to a different outcome.

- In the [Los Angeles](#) Temporary Assistance for Needy Families study, the team designed two notices that conveyed the same information except that one emphasized the benefits participants would gain by attending an appointment, and the other emphasized the losses they might incur by not attending. When compared with the status quo outreach, the notice that emphasized losses increased positive engagement while the notice that emphasized gains did not produce an impact.

Ease

Studies in psychology have shown that people can process, absorb, and recall only a limited amount of information at one time. Thus, a central tenet in behavioral design is that making things as easy as possible can increase the likelihood that people will act.

- The BIAS team's work in [Washington](#) sought to increase the number of incarcerated parents who submitted applications for child support order modifications. The intervention made the process easier for parents by eliminating the need for them to request an application; it mailed them the materials before they even asked. It included a tip sheet specifying which questions in the application had to be answered and sent several other communications, including e-mail messages. This intervention led to a large increase in the number of submitted applications and completed modifications.

Reminders

Reminders reduce the mental effort required to complete an action by providing a cue that the task still needs to be completed. Studies in behavioral science have found that reminders can spur people to action in many fields, including health, voting, and personal finance.

- Almost all of the BIAS sites employed some form of reminder, most notably the child support interventions in [Franklin](#) and [Cuyahoga](#) Counties, Ohio. Simply sending a monthly reminder through mail, robocall, or text message to parents who owed child support but were not getting any other monthly invoice increased the number of parents making payments.

Behavioral science has the potential to help improve a range of social programs, but there is no one-size-fits-all solution. Evidence suggests that the SIMPLER framework is a helpful place to start. Let us know what techniques and frameworks you are using and what you've found most helpful by tweeting us [@CABS MDRC](#).

News & Upcoming Events

- A BIAS capstone conference will be held in Washington, DC, on April 27, with over 100 participants in attendance.
 - Featured speakers include **Crystal Hall** (Assistant Professor of Public Policy & Governance, University of Washington; Fellow, White House Social and Behavioral Sciences Team), **Dilip Soman** (Professor of Marketing, University of Toronto; Policy Advisor and Scholar in Residence, Privy Council Office of Canada), **Donna Pavetti** (Vice President for Family Income Support Policy, Center on Budget and Policy Priorities), **Eldar Shafir** (Professor of Psychology and Public Affairs, Princeton University; co-founder, ideas42), **J. Lawrence Aber** (Professor of Psychology and Public Policy, New York University), **Julian Jamison** (Senior Behavioral Economist, World Bank's Global INsights Initiative), **Maria Cancian** (Deputy Assistant Secretary for Policy, Administration for Children and Families), **Philip Oreopoulos** (Professor of Economics and Public Policy, University of Toronto), and **Sim Sitkin** (Professor of Management, Duke University; co-founder of the Behavioral Science & Policy Association)
- The BIAS project will be presenting at a number of conferences this summer, including the Behavioral Science & Policy Association conference (April 29), the American Public Human Services Association National Health and Human Services Summit (May 23), the Association for Psychological Science convention (May 27), the Administration for Children and Families' Research and Evaluation Conference on Self-Sufficiency (June 1), the Behavioral Decision Research in Management Conference (June 10-11), and the Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management International Conference (June 13-14).
- The [Behavioral Interventions for Child Support Services](#) (BICS) project is continuing to conduct new random assignment tests of behavioral interventions across the county, including three recently launched in Vermont, Texas, and Georgia.
- MDRC's Center for Applied Behavioral Science — lead

evaluator for the BIAS and BICS projects — also continues to expand. More information about the center can be found at www.mdrc.org/cabs and on Twitter [@CABS MDRC](https://twitter.com/CABS_MDRC).

The Behavioral Buzz newsletter shares information and accomplishments from the Administration for Children and Families' behavioral science projects. Since its launch in 2012, the Buzz has focused on the [Behavioral Interventions to Advance Self-Sufficiency \(BIAS\)](#) project, funded by the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation (OPRE),

In recent years, the Administration for Children and Families has launched several new behavioral science projects. In 2014, the Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) launched an initiative called [Behavioral Interventions for Child Support Services \(BICS\)](#). In 2015, building on the success of the earlier BIAS Project, OPRE launched the [BIAS Capstone](#) and [BIAS Next Generation](#) projects. BIAS Capstone will focus on synthesizing and sharing lessons learned from the BIAS project. BIAS Next Generation will expand the use of behavioral science to a wider range of Administration for Children and Families programs. These new projects will now be featured here in the Behavioral Buzz, alongside BIAS. MDRC is leading evaluation and technical assistance work for all projects.

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