

BEHAVIORAL BUZZ

Brought to you by the
Administration for Children
and Families and MDRC

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Welcome!

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), BIAS completed 15 evaluations of behavioral interventions in child care, child support, and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) programs.

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 a major 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.

This issue of the Buzz focuses on past and future behavioral interventions tested by child support agencies, reminding readers of the findings from the BIAS child support tests and previewing the work of the BICS initiative.

Applying Behavioral Science

to Child Support Services

Behavioral science can be applied to child support programs in many ways. In a recent [article](#) in NCSEA Communique, we noted that behavioral science provides a new way of thinking about old questions, such as: Why don't parents come into the office to establish their child support orders or bring the right paperwork when they do? Why don't noncustodial parents who have fallen on hard times make contact with the child support office to get an order modification to which they may be entitled or to access referrals to employment and other services? Additionally, tools from behavioral science may help staff members engage parents, maintain contact with them, build trust with them, and promote positive program outcomes.

The child support program administrators who participated in BIAS tested two types of behaviorally-informed interventions. One aimed to increase child support payments, and the other aimed to increase requests for order modifications from noncustodial parents who were incarcerated. The findings from these tests are summarized briefly below.

Lessons Learned

Findings from BIAS

The number of child support payments—though not the amount of the order paid—increased with reminders.

A series of tests in [Franklin](#) and [Cuyahoga](#) Counties in Ohio aimed to help parents avoid missed payments. The interventions targeted parents who did not have payments automatically deducted from their paychecks through income withholding. In both counties, sending reminder notices increased the number of parents who made at least one child support payment by about 3 percentage points. The Franklin County test showed that using robocall reminders similarly increased the likelihood of payment, while the Cuyahoga County test achieved the same result by sending text messages. When parents were already

being sent a reminder, redesigning the notice did not make them more likely to make payments in either county, and none of the reminders increased overall collection amounts. This pattern of results suggests that while reminders can make a difference, some of the targeted parents may have lacked the resources to increase the amount of money they paid and may have needed additional forms of support, such as employment referrals or order modifications.

Order modification requests increased with behaviorally-informed prompts.

Two state agencies tested ways to increase requests for order modifications from incarcerated noncustodial parents, who often cannot afford their orders while serving their sentences. In [Texas](#), less than a third of incarcerated parents applied for order modifications before the BIAS intervention despite the child support agency's outreach efforts. The BIAS team sent two postcards, the first before mailing a simplified outreach letter and prepopulated application, the second followed the letter and application. The first postcard served to "prime" the recipient's identity as a father, while the second was a reminder. This approach led to an 11 percentage point increase in submitted applications.

In [Washington State](#), there was no existing outreach to incarcerated parents. The BIAS team used a similar strategy of priming the target group of parents (in this case, using e-mail communication for all who had it), simplifying the application, and sending reminders. Results from this test are forthcoming, but early indications are promising.

The Next Chapter

Designing Interventions for BICS

In the BICS demonstration project, MDRC's team is working with child support agencies in California, Colorado, the District of Columbia, Georgia, Ohio, Texas, Vermont, and Washington State to build on these early lessons from BIAS and apply insights from behavioral science to engage parents positively and improve program performance. These interventions are currently being designed in close collaboration with state grantees and the Office of Child Support Enforcement. They aim to get parents more engaged when child support orders are established, create orders based on evidence of the noncustodial parent's ability to

pay, facilitate the order modification process, and make it easier to avoid missed payments.

The teams will attempt to do this by:

- **Combining redesigned communications with new procedures.**

Several states are using insights from behavioral science — many of them tested in BIAS — to increase the number of parents who respond to their outreach, particularly at the start of the process when child support orders are being established. In addition, they are making changes to the experiences parents have when they respond to these notices by ensuring staff members are trained in procedural justice principles, which embed the idea of fairness into the child support process; ready to provide referrals to employment and mediation services; and focused on calculating orders based on evidence. [1] For example, in Vermont, parents will be invited to attend a newly created order establishment meeting held in child support offices instead of the courts, with child support staff members trained in procedural justice and negotiation. Child support agencies in California, the District of Columbia, Georgia, and Washington State are also designing interventions to engage parents in order establishment.

- **Providing more personal assistance at critical points.**

In an effort to make it easier for parents to complete some critical tasks, some agencies will change the way they provide assistance to parents. In Texas and Colorado, agencies will help noncustodial parents create plans for making manual payments. In Ohio, both parents will be provided with more support and prompts to help them complete the order modification process.

The BICS project will launch at least eight tests in 2016. As in BIAS, BICS will evaluate the interventions using random assignment. To ensure child support agencies and others can learn from these findings to improve child support outcomes for parents and children across the country, results from these evaluations will be disseminated through this newsletter and other channels.

News and Upcoming Events

- Check out our recently released publications!
 - *[Nudges for Child Support: Applying Behavioral Insights to Increase Collections](#)*
 - *[Engaging Providers and Clients: Using Behavioral Economics to Increase On-Time Child Care Subsidy Renewals](#)*
- The BIAS project was referenced by [Healthline](#), [NPR](#), [Social Impact Architects](#), [Governing](#), and the [New York Times](#).
- The BIAS project will be presenting at the Child Care Aware (April 4-6) and Association for Psychological Science symposiums (May 26-29).
- The BIAS project will be holding a convening in Washington, DC on April 27.

[1]Not all of these components will be tested at each site.

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