

BEHAVIORAL BUZZ

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Administration for Children
and Families and MDRC

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Act now: The registration deadline for the 11/15 Behavioral Science for Human Services Webinar has now been extended through November 14!

We invite you to attend the **Behavioral Science for Human Services Webinar on Tuesday, November 15, 1:00 PM-2:30 PM Eastern**. Attendees at this webinar will learn about using behavioral science to improve aspects of their programs and will walk away from the webinar with clear, actionable takeaways that can increase client participation in social services and improve other program outcomes. [Don't miss out— sign up now!](#)

Thinking Bigger

How Do We Go Beyond Individual Nudges?

Decades of behavioral science research have shown that “nudges” — small changes that aim to sway people in a certain direction — can work. Small tweaks to the design of a program or process can help people save money, improve their health, or avoid harm. The Behavioral Interventions to Advance Self-Sufficiency (BIAS) project clearly demonstrated the impact that nudges can have in human services programs. Funded by the Administration for Children and Families’ Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation (OPRE), BIAS tested nudges in human services programs throughout the country and found consistent significant impacts. Individuals who received nudges were more likely to make child support payments and request modifications of child support orders they could not afford, attend appointments to have their child care subsidies recertified, go to meetings to learn more about program benefits, and more. Similarly positive results have been found in tests of nudges conducted by other

behavioral insights teams.

So far, though, most research on nudging has focused on changing the behavior of **individuals**. These interventions often attempt to guide individual behavior using new or revised messaging strategies such as letters, postcards, e-mails, or texts. The programs stay the same, but users' understanding of them or ability to navigate their options improves. The value of these individual nudges is clear — they cost little and often improve outcomes. Recently, however, behavioral scientists and policymakers have been asking how behavioral science can be applied more intensively to program design. If one goes beyond individual nudges to make broader changes to programs, can one achieve even bigger impacts? Will the solutions continue to be inexpensive, scalable, and amenable to rigorous evaluation?

Going beyond individual nudges means applying the tools of behavioral science to **systems** in a more comprehensive way, perhaps by changing policies to eliminate barriers to access, providing staff members incentives to follow new procedures, or simplifying requirements to promote positive choices. System interventions may require new staff training, revisions to policies and procedures, or authorizations from legal departments or central administrators.

MDRC is testing system interventions in the Behavioral Interventions for Child Support Services (BICS) project, funded by the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement. Child support agencies in seven states and the District of Columbia are launching interventions designed to engage parents in the child support system so that they can develop positive relationships with child support offices and avoid future penalties.

This engagement involves informing parents of their rights and providing them with the opportunity to help craft orders that more accurately reflect the means of the parent who owes support and the needs of the child receiving support. In Georgia, for example, the BICS team and the state's child support program launched an intervention to improve the process by which child support orders are established. Some of the central system changes will be (1) to improve the meetings where orders are established by using principles of behavioral science and procedural justice; and (2) to institute guidelines that allow staff members to initiate a process of lowering child support orders for parents who qualify.

- **Developing a behavioral science-informed meeting**
Case workers are being given new training in how to conduct the meeting where child support orders are established. They are learning a behavioral science-informed script to respond to questions as well as procedural justice techniques designed to

involve clients in a manner that both is and feels fair. Staff members will be trained to follow guidelines intended to help parents feel that they were treated with dignity and respect and had a chance to be heard, understood the order-establishment process, and that the decision-making process was neutral and unbiased.

- **Instituting guidelines for staff members**

Some parents who owe child support and who are not working full time are eligible for “low-income deviations,” which would reduce the amounts of their monthly payments. Low-income parents do not use this option as often as they are eligible for it, partly because both they and agency staff members are unaware of it. The intervention is providing added training to teach case workers about the low-income deviation policy and is instituting guidelines so that they can initiate a request for the deviation if the parent qualifies. Even if eligible parents forget about the deviation or do not realize they can receive it, this change in the system aims to ensure they will still be granted one.

The Georgia intervention also includes individual nudges to encourage parents to attend their meetings and to request low-income deviations. These nudges include a new appointment letter; a calendar magnet with the parent’s meeting date, time, and location; and a reminder about the upcoming appointment. The study will therefore be testing both a system intervention and individual nudges.

Excerpt from Georgia BICS Materials

**DON'T MISS
YOUR PRIORITY
CHILD SUPPORT
APPOINTMENT**

- > Have your say in the child support process
- > Make sure decisions aren't made without you
- > Protect your rights
- > Avoid paying a \$50 fee

Human services programs like child support, child care, and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families have complex requirements that can act as unintended barriers between available services and the people who need them. Fortunately, behavioral science can be a tool to help remove these barriers through individual nudges as well as system interventions like increased staff involvement. System interventions will also be developed and tested in a variety of new domains as part the BIAS-Next Generation project, funded by OPRE. States have some discretion over how to comply with federal laws and guidelines, which provides the opportunity to incorporate behavioral tools into social policies. Doing so increases the chance that social programs can

effectively assist the people they are designed for. The final summary report of the BIAS project, to be released in early 2017, discusses system interventions in more detail.

News & Upcoming Events

- Check out this [short video](#) from OPRE on the BIAS Cuyahoga County, Ohio, child support tests!
- The BIAS project was featured on three podcasts: MDRC's [Evidence First](#), [GovInnovator](#), and [New Books Network](#).
- Two new BIAS reports have been released in the past weeks — the first on child care interventions in Indiana, titled [Cutting Through Complexity](#), and the second on a child support intervention in Washington, titled [Simplify, Notify, Modify](#).
- BIAS team members presented at the Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management (APPAM) Fall Research Conference, and will continue to make presentations at a number of conferences this fall, including the Behavioural Economics in Action at Rotman Research Centre's Poverty Symposium (November 23).
- The [BICS](#) project is launching random assignment tests in eight locations. See page 5 of the [OCSE Child Support newsletter](#) for more information.
- MDRC's [Center for Applied Behavioral Science](#) (CABS) — lead evaluator for the BIAS and BICS projects — also continues to expand, including launching two new projects in the field of higher education. CABS will be cohosting a forum with APPAM on *The Future of Applying Behavioral Science to Improve Social Policy* in Washington, DC, on December 13. See our newly published [infographic](#) or follow CABS on Twitter [@CABS_MDRC](#) for more information.

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