Lessons Learned from the BICS Demonstration Grants

A 2018 Article Series from *Child Support Report*

Summary

In 2018, the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) ran a series of six articles from BICS grantees in *Child Support Report*. This series highlighted the experiences of child support agencies and staff, the benefits of BICS interventions for parents, and the variety of ways that behavioral strategies have been applied. In each article, the parents' names have been changed.

Key Definitions

Behavioral economics - Traditional economics assumes that all people have unlimited time and ability to think through complex problems effortlessly to arrive at the "correct" choice. Behavioral economics uses insights from psychology and other related fields to help explain how and why we act in ways that are not always in our best interest.

Behavioral bottleneck - Behavioral bottlenecks are cognitive biases or ways in which decision-making is impacted by predictable errors. A very common example is procrastination. People predictably put off unpleasant or arduous tasks. This bottleneck can affect completion of forms, attendance at appointments, or response to communication from a child support agency.

Intervention - An intervention is a combination of program elements or strategies designed to produce behavior changes or improve outcomes among individuals or a specific population. Interventions may include services; practices; or changes to policy, the environment, or programs.

Behavioral Interventions for Child Support Services (BICS)

OCSE awarded five-year Behavioral Interventions for Child Support Services (BICS) demonstration grants to eight child support agencies in 2014 to test how behavioral economics principles can improve child support program processes and outcomes. The eight grantees are California, Colorado, Georgia, Ohio, Texas, Vermont, Washington, and the District of Columbia.

California — You Only Fail When You Stop Trying

Courtney Watts, BICS Coach, *Sacramento County Department of Child Support Services*

In September 2017, Donna was ordered to pay $175 a month in child support. Sacramento Department of Child Support Services (DCSS) establishment workers had limited contact with her early in the process, and we had lost all contact with her by the time of her hearing, where Donna failed to appear.

Sacramento focuses its current BICS intervention on payment reminders and early engagement right after an order is established. I received Donna's case in October.

My initial review showed that Donna moved and changed phone numbers frequently. I correctly anticipated that reaching her would be hard. I tried all the usual caseworker tactics to reach her, but none worked. I ended up leaving a lot of voicemail messages. I also sent letters using different behavioral phrases such as, "This can be a very confusing process, but we are here to help make it easier for you and as fair as we can," hoping to get Donna to respond. Months went by and none of my attempts were successful.

It was frustrating not to be able to reach her. Prior to BICS, this case would've gone unattended for months, if not years. But I kept trying to contact Donna so I could understand her story, determine what might be happening in her life, and help her get on track with her child support case.

After three months of frustration, I decided to give it one last attempt so I texted Donna. I wasn't hopeful, but thought it couldn't hurt to try. Imagine my surprise when I received a text response from Donna a few hours later! I quickly texted her back asking her to call me so we could talk more in depth about her case. Just a few minutes later, my phone rang!

Donna told me she didn't know that an order had been set. Then she surprised me further by telling me that her son's father, who we had identified as the custodial parent, had died about a week before the child support hearing back in September. Her son was living with her, and she'd been too busy taking care of him to deal with the hassle of my calls and letters. My text made it easier for her to respond; she said that's the way she communicates with everyone.

Donna was relieved to learn that I could close the case and that she didn't owe any child support since her son had been living with her the whole time. With all the other things going on after the father's death, Donna was grateful I'd made that one last try to contact her.

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Vermont — BICS Pays Off for Dads, Moms, and State

Roberta "Birdie" Mayers, Director, *Vermont BICS Project*

Sam struggled to pay his bills and child support. His child support debt was more than $17,000. Sam's bank account had been frozen. Like many parents who have fallen behind, he worried about his debt that was growing each month. Sam decided to do something about it. He needed to earn more money, so he decided to go back to school.

Sam juggled working part-time, spending time with his kids, and going to school to become a Licensed Practical Nurse (LPN). In April 2017, he earned his LPN certification and got a job working as a licensed nursing assistant. Though he was making more money, Sam had fallen further behind during school and was worried about catching up.

Sam's past interactions with the Vermont Office of Child Support Services (OCS) didn't sit well. He felt the caseworkers and court staff had judged him and treated him unfairly because he has multiple cases. Sam wanted to support his children, but he didn't want to go back to court. Despite his past experience, he called OCS to see if he could modify his order now that he was earning more so that he could begin to reduce his child support debt.

Engaging parents differently

Under the BICS demonstration, the random assignment procedure put Sam's case into a new resolution process. We're using principles from behavioral economics and procedural justice to create a less intimidating and more informal process for parents to resolve disputes between themselves and with our office. Parents have a chance to tell their side of the story and to learn about child support rules and processes. We designed these new case resolution meetings to help parents feel like they are treated fairly.

Instead of sending Sam back to court, which could repeat his earlier negative experience, we invited Sam to an in-house case resolution meeting led by a specially trained facilitator. Sam's situation is complicated because he has cases with three custodial parents. To address all of Sam's child support orders and debt, we needed to schedule resolution meetings on the same day with each of the other parents. To make it even more challenging, we had to complete all three meetings in a particular sequence because the outcome of each meeting depended on the others.

To coordinate all of these meetings and engage the custodial parents, we developed letters and reminder call scripts using behaviorally informed language and concepts. The new materials included checklists and simple planning tools to help the parents see the value in participating in the process and preparing everything before the meeting.

The new materials worked! All three custodial parents met with Sam and the OCS facilitator. It was a daylong process, but everyone stuck it out. At the end of the day, Sam was able to reach agreements with each of the custodial parents, and he left with modified orders on all of his cases.

One year, thousands of dollars

It's been over a year since Sam's resolution meetings. He recently came into the office to make an additional, voluntary payment on his back support that reduced his balance to only $1,732 for all three cases! The OCS facilitator who worked with Sam last year happened to be in the office when he came in, and Sam shared how the experience of being treated fairly and respectfully at the resolution meetings had totally changed his perception of us. He is no longer afraid to come into OCS.

Sam has also graduated from college. He obtained his Registered Nurse (RN) License and is interviewing for jobs at a nearby hospital. Once he gets an RN position, he told the facilitator he would be back to make sure his child support is coming out of his new paycheck. He said he would also ask for upward order modifications since he'll be making more money and can pay more support.

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Ohio — New Approach Increases Modification Requests

Cassie Young, BICS Project Director, *Franklin County, OH*

Kati Stiles and Laura Buehrle were typical Franklin County Child Support Enforcement Agency caseworkers with about 1,000 cases each. They provided customer service, performed financial reviews, initiated enforcement actions, and processed modification requests and reviews. In 2016, Buehrle and Stiles went from being typical caseworkers to "modification masters" because the Ohio BICS project equipped them with an array of tools they could use to help parents navigate and complete the modification process.

Important but cumbersome

Modifying orders is a core child support function. Downward adjustments can be the difference between payment and non-payment for a noncustodial parent who has lost their job or had a significant income reduction. Upward modifications, when a noncustodial parent is making more money, can provide more resources for their children's needs.

Getting from a change in income to a completed modification review is no easy feat — parents must complete lengthy packets, assemble the necessary documents proving changes in income, and remember to return the mandatory paperwork within the required time. The BICS team reviewed child support data for Franklin and Cuyahoga counties and found that this complicated process resulted in a modification completion rate of only about 45%.

Testing a new approach

As the first intervention, the counties decided to try to increase the submission of completed modification packets. Staff from both counties worked closely with MDRC's behavioral science experts to identify where the parents got stuck the most or dropped out. Together, they used behaviorally informed strategies to address these obstacles and redesign the process.

The Franklin County staff tested an intervention where they sent parents simplified modification paperwork and assigned these cases to a dedicated modification unit. Buehrle and Stiles devoted their full attention to working with parents to complete modification requests. They could keep better track of parents' recalculations, note which ones hadn't returned paperwork, make proactive calls, and send email reminders about upcoming deadlines. This helped ensure the parents had all the information necessary to complete the modifications.

Stiles noted, "Even making one outreach made a huge difference, because often when I called a client, they had simply forgotten about the deadline for paperwork."

Preliminary data showed that the intervention increased the number of parents that completed the modification process by more than 10%.

Effects beyond modifications

The BICS way of doing things has transcended the original scope of the project, expanding into much of Franklin County's child support work. Staff who worked on BICS have carried what they learned into their regular casework.

According to Buerhle, "It became habit to perform extra research and outreach to my clients, so I have noticed my customer service skills have improved even after the project ended."

Franklin County's BICS team believes that although this work requires an upfront investment, once we incorporate it into regular business practices, it improves government processes and outcomes. That frees up staff time and allows caseworkers to provide more individual attention to their clients. It's a win-win for staff and parents alike.

Franklin County Child Support Enforcement Agency Director Susan Brown reports that the project has caused staff to look at their work with new eyes. "We no longer look at our processes in the same way," she said. "Now, we are always looking through a behavioral lens and asking, 'Where are the bottlenecks here and how do we remove barriers so that clients can be more successful?'"

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Georgia — Winning Over a Child Support Veteran

Cindy Little, BICS Program Director, *Georgia Division of Child Support Services*

Theresa is a caseworker in the Macon Child Support office. You might know caseworkers like Theresa. Even after 30 years of child support work, she still has that knack for connecting with customers and still treats every parent with respect and equal importance. Every day, Theresa and workers like her step into their 8-by-8 cubicles and deliver excellent customer service. In spite of their hard work, we still have challenges engaging parents.

Too many missed appointments

Georgia's first BICS intervention addressed the problem of noncustodial parents failing to come in for case establishment appointments. When parents attend these meetings, they eliminate the need to go to court, and they save money by avoiding service process fees. Attendance can also lead to fewer default orders and lower costs for legal filings and court staff time.

Our large office has many cases requiring a support order. This made it ideal to test the BICS approach to increasing noncustodial parent attendance at establishment meetings. We asked Theresa to be part of the BICS Macon team because of her customer service and case management skills; she readily agreed.

New approach, new materials

At her first team meeting, Theresa received new resources, including a script to use with noncustodial parents. Theresa was skeptical because, in her opinion, she already provided more than enough information at establishment meetings. She felt she didn't need a script prepared by behavioral experts to provide excellent customer service! Despite her initial doubts, she agreed to give this new approach a try.

Our BICS intervention also included a simplified appointment letter mailed out in an eye-catching envelope that also held a magnet with the appointment date circled. One week before the appointment date, caseworkers sent out a reminder flyer. Georgia started mailing out these new materials in April 2016 to parents in the intervention.

Quick results

Within a few weeks, Theresa noticed two changes. More parents were appearing at the office for their scheduled appointment, and they were actually thanking her after the establishment meetings. Parents appreciated the clear explanation of the child support process and the benefits of coming into the office. These positive responses from parents made Theresa reconsider her skepticism of the behaviorally informed script.

Our overall data, which is summarized in a 13-page brief, backs up Theresa's experience. When we compared parents randomly assigned to the intervention group with parents that we handled using the old process, our intervention increased the number of noncustodial parents that came to the child support office to accept service voluntarily by 8 percentage points.

Parents that experienced the new intervention provided comments such as, "I really liked the magnet because it helped me remember the appointment date." Another commented, "I am so relieved that I came into the office. I was unfamiliar with the child support process and I didn't think I would have a say in the outcome."

Parents want to support their children, but the process of establishing a child support order can be overwhelming, confusing, and emotionally challenging. The initial meeting with noncustodial parents can make a huge difference in their ongoing engagement with the program and their child support payments.

The new normal

Theresa is a self-reported behavioral convert. Even though she's no longer required to use the BICS tools, she's sticking with the new way of doing business with parents. Theresa knows it makes her job in that 8-by-8 cubicle a little easier every day.

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Washington — A Step in the Right Direction

Thomas Smith, BICS Project Director, *Washington*

Two months after taking over as the BICS project director, I found myself at a BICS grantee meeting, talking with colleagues from across the nation about the challenges noncustodial parents can face after a new order is established. Specifically, we were talking about the challenges parents face in Washington, given our state's policies and procedures. Although I had worked in child support for 17 years, this was one of the first times I had stepped back and thought about our processes from a parent's perspective. As I fielded questions, a single thought echoed through my mind: If experienced child support professionals were confused by Washington's process, how could we possibly expect parents who are new to child support to understand?

Fresh perspective

The BICS project provided us with new tools to analyze our practices. I learned to apply a behavioral lens to identify the potential obstacles parents experience in completing program requirements. Behavioral science uses insights from psychology and other related fields to help explain how and why we act in ways that are not always in our best interest — whether we are procrastinating on an important project, missing a deadline, or making impulse decisions.

Traditionally, agencies have often designed programs assuming that parents have unlimited time and ability to think through complex problems or complete several required steps. A behavioral lens can help child support programs better understand why a process may not function as intended or why people (parents or staff) behave differently than we would like. I've been the BICS project director for about 18 months and using behavioral principles to improve program operations has become second nature. Now I find myself introducing these ideas to others and trying to explain their value.

Staff reactions

When I met with staff in our Everett office that were part of our second BICS intervention, they wanted to know why we were doing this. They had recently started reaching out to noncustodial parents with new orders to review the terms of their orders, stress the importance of making regular child support payments, and develop specific payment plans.

While I felt the project had been going well so far, I wanted to hear how they felt. I asked the staff to describe their feelings about the project using just one word. They responded, "Curious." "Interested." "Frustrated." "Hopeful."

They were curious about how the intervention would play out long term and interested in the final results. Some were frustrated with the relatively low percentage of parents they had been able to reach so far, but they were still committed to following through. Team members hoped that their work would be effective.

Caseworkers that had successfully contacted parents explained that the parents had many questions about who we were, what we did, and why we were involved. We based our intervention mainly on the assumption that parents have limited understanding when it comes to the child support process, so it was encouraging to hear some evidence that we were on the right track.

Making meaningful changes

After my meeting with the Everett staff, I felt optimistic. It was refreshing to hear them discuss the best ways to engage noncustodial parents. They would need to make cultural shifts to embrace the lessons from BICS, which takes time, energy, and leaders dedicated to the cause.

We've implemented BICS projects in both Seattle and Everett, and staff members in both locations have demonstrated they are ready for these changes. The commitment I've witnessed from our BICS team has been unwavering.

We still have a lot of work to do and data to analyze before we fully understand the impact of our efforts. From what I have already seen, I am confident that BICS is a step in the right direction.

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Ohio — Endless Opportunities to Improve

Rachael Balanson, Program Officer, ***Cuyahoga Job and Family Services, Office of Child Support Services***

At the Cuyahoga County Office of Child Support Services, we have over six years of experience using behavioral science to improve our program. Two years before BICS launched, we were part of the Behavioral Interventions to Advance Self-Sufficiency (BIAS) project led by the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation at the Administration for Children and Families. As veteran developers and testers of behavioral interventions to improve child support, we want to highlight two of the ways we're using these methods to make it easier for parents to navigate child support programs and services. Our trials focused on genetic testing and age of majority determination.

The genetic testing process

In Cuyahoga County, only 37% of parents appear for their scheduled genetic testing appointments. Having a low rate of completed appointments affects our paternity and order establishment performance and has long-term legal impacts for families. We used the three-step process we learned in BIAS and BICS — diagnose, design, test — to try to improve our genetic testing process and outcomes.

Diagnosis

After mapping out our existing process, we identified two key behavioral bottlenecks that we thought might be affecting appearance rates. First, there's the potential for parents to procrastinate or avoid dealing with the uncertainty of a genetic test. Second, we realized that the notice we sent to parents might be confusing and could trigger cognitive overload.

Design

To address these bottlenecks, we made several changes to our genetic testing procedures. First, we streamlined the appointment process to make it easier for parents to walk in for genetic testing. This reduced the hassle factors associated with having to come into the office on a specific date and time and relieved our staff from having to reschedule missed appointments.

We also redesigned the scheduling notices for parents by using simple language highlighting the benefits of genetic testing for mothers, fathers, and children. These notices include information about the new walk-in option for testing. For notices to alleged fathers, we added a bright blue, attention-grabbing insert that says, "Don't get stuck paying for someone else's child." We chose this language to motivate the recipient to come in for testing by appealing to loss aversion — the desire to avoid financial losses.

Test

In order to see if the changes we made have the desired impact, we're randomly assigning 400 alleged parents into two groups. We've assigned half to a control group that receives the old notices while the other half, the treatment group, gets the new notices with the blue insert. When the test period is over later this year, we will compare outcomes to see if the new notices made a difference. Then we can make decisions about whether or not to continue using the new process and, potentially, to design and test other behaviorally informed changes.

Children reaching majority

We've also applied our behavioral design expertise to our termination process for children turning 18 or graduating at 19 years old. This process is very challenging because it requires both parents and schools to respond to our requests for information about the age and graduation date of the child. Each month we mail letters to the parents and school to secure enrollment and graduation information for children turning 18 or graduating at 19. They must submit proof of enrollment to us either in-person or by mail or fax. These options consistently have low response rates so we spend a lot of time trying to track down information. We also see many upset parents whose child support obligation continues past the termination date noted on their order.

In 2017, our termination process team considered behavioral interventions to simplify the process, revamp the letter, and offer more personal assistance to our customers. They developed a checklist that clearly outlines agency requirements

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regarding enrollment and graduation, and created a new email address that can receive scanned or photographed documents.

The team didn't just work on the parts of the process involving parents. They extended these process improvements to their work with area schools. This greatly increased the number of institutions that returned lists of graduating students, which helped us process terminations with more timeliness and accuracy.

More opportunities ahead

The Cuyahoga County Office of Child Support Services sees endless opportunities to apply the diagnosis and design tools in our behavioral toolbox. We have a little more than a year left under BICS to continue this work, and, looking beyond BICS and BIAS, we are integrating these ideas into how we approach our mission. We seek to transform lives through innovation and service, helping the families we serve live their best lives.

Examples of Behavioral Bottlenecks and Interventions

This chart shows examples of bottlenecks with definitions, ways to address the bottleneck, and possible interventions staff could use.

Bottleneck	Definition	Ways to Address	Possible Intervention
Cognitive overload	We always think that we will be able to pay attention to information and then understand and remember it as long as it is important enough. However, these mental resources — that we take for granted — are more fallible than we often recognize.	Simplify materials to make them easier to understand. Provide implementation prompts. Reduce the number of choices.	Use implementation prompts to help parent make a payment plan.
Hassle factors	Small barriers such as filling out forms or waiting in lines. While these costs are trivial and often neglected, reducing or relieving them can have an outsized impact.	Make it as easy as possible. Provide implementation prompts.	Provide paid postage, pre-addressed envelope for child support payments.
Identity	Every person has many different overlapping, and sometimes conflicting identities (mother, daughter, lawyer, etc.) that are active at different times. Our decisions and actions are different depending on which identity is active, and identities can become active because of small changes in the environment.	People have multiple identities. Find one favorable to the behavior. Prime that.	Refer to noncustodial parents as a parent or father, rather than obligor.
Loss aversion	The disproportionately negative experience of a loss compared with an equivalent gain. In other words, because of loss aversion the pain of losing $20 is greater than the pleasure of finding $20.	Can be used as a motivator – "take this action to avoid this loss." Can be reduced if the loss is less apparent, such as through automation of payments rather than regularly writing a check.	Emphasize how much debt can accumulate from missed child support payments.
Ostrich effect	The tendency to avoid information we do not wish to know, even when that information might have significant negative implications.	Offer help. Reframe interaction.	"Call us if you can't make your payment in full."
Procrastination	People are shortsighted and often put off decisions, which may be partly due to inertia, the complexity or unpleasantness of the decision to be made, and the focus they have on the present. It's about the dilemma between what is good for us now, versus what is good for the future.	Provide reminders and deadlines. Break decisions into steps and provide planning tools.	Use of commitment devices "What day will you send your payment?" with penalties for missing deadlines.