

The next frontier of behavioural science

Applying behavioural insights to parenting interventions



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Parents' behaviour during the first few years of their children's lives has a major, long-term impact on how children develop. Research consistently finds that parents with lower levels of income and education are less likely to engage in behaviours such as breastfeeding, vaccination, reading and positive disciplinary practices. Recently interventions to change parental behaviours have been increasingly influenced by a behavioural insights approach, which departs from the conventional approach.

The conventional approach to parenting interventions is based on the assumption in classical economic analysis that people behave rationally with the aim of maximising something, even if the "something" is unorthodox. For example, a parent who spends time reading to their young child is assumed to be rationally choosing to maximise their child's future potential for learning. A parent who instead watches television, for example, might be assumed to be rationally maximising their own relaxation in the present moment.

Until recently, few economists were willing to concede that people may simply not know what they are doing: individuals were conventionally assumed to do what they expect is best, given their situation. They may lack information – for example, a parent may not know how much reading to their child can benefit them in future. Or they may lack the money to buy books. Interventions based on the conventional approach may seek to overcome these challenges by telling parents it is important to read to their children, and giving them books.

One potential consequence of this conventional approach is a discourse that blames parents for the lower developmental outcomes of their children. In this discourse, if parents have been told about the importance of reading to their children and given books to read, but still choose to prioritise doing other things with their time instead, they are deemed to be responsible for their children's educational outcomes later in life.

Yet research clearly shows that many lower-income, less educated parents say they want to do things such as reading to their children, even if they do not actually do them in practice. Interventions based on

a behavioural insights approach understand this and aim to identify the factors that create a gap between knowing and doing. They look beyond information and money to issues such as attention and decision-making processes.

Changing how parents make decisions

When faced with the need to make quick or difficult decisions, people often rely on mental shortcuts known as “heuristics” (e.g. Gigerenzer and Selten, 2001, p. 12). Behavioural science describes a set of “cognitive biases” that shape these heuristics, and which can lead to the kind of “irrational” decision making in which what people actually do differs from what they say they want to do. At least two potentially important characteristics of parenting make it especially susceptible to the use of heuristics and cognitive biases.

First, parenting investments have returns that are both uncertain and far in the future. When parents invest time in activities such as reading to their children, the costs are immediate but the payoffs will not become apparent for many years. Alternative ways a parent could spend that time will often provide more immediate payoffs. “Present bias” is a cognitive bias that leads people to give more weight to payoffs that are certain and immediate than those which are far-off and uncertain (O’Donoghue and Rabin, 2015).

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Second, parenting often requires quick, on-the-spot decisions: when a child runs towards a busy street, or screams in the supermarket when refused candy, there is little time for the parent to reflect on what to do. In many situations parents respond automatically, in ways that save the time and effort of thinking but

that also form habits – for example, when a child is cranky and fidgety, a parent’s automatic response may be to give them a screen rather than try to engage them in a song, a game or a book.

The cognitive biases that affect people, and the heuristics they rely on, can differ for a variety of reasons – such as levels of stress, the composition of someone’s social networks, or what they experienced in their own upbringing. A behavioural insights approach to parenting interventions seeks to identify and target the cognitive shortcuts that may interfere with some parents engaging in specific parenting practices.

An intervention on reading shows what is possible

Mayer et al. (2019) tested a behaviourally informed intervention designed to increase the amount of time low-income parents spend reading with their children. The researchers hypothesised that present bias might be key, and designed the intervention to overcome this bias with a set of behavioural tools (goal setting, feedback, timely reminders and social rewards) to “bring the future to the present” and help parents form a habit of regular book reading. These tools were all deployed using text messages to make participating in the programme relatively easy for low-income parents with hectic, unpredictable schedules and high levels of daily stress.

Before the intervention, the researchers used standard techniques to assess the extent to which each of the participants is affected by present bias (Andreoni and Sprenger, 2012). Parents who were not present biased were already reading to their children frequently, and the intervention had little impact on them. However, the intervention had a very large impact on increasing the time which present-biased parents spent reading with their children – around one standard deviation, in statistical terms.

These findings show it is possible to identify and address cognitive biases that affect parenting decisions – not just on reading, but potentially a whole suite of nurturing caregiving behaviours that we know are critical to the development of children. Behaviourally informed tools to change parents’

behaviour often have the advantage of being light-touch, low cost, and potentially scalable.

However, these tools must be designed to lead not only to change in behaviour, but also to the expected change in child outcomes: for instance, more reading will not necessarily translate into higher literacy skills if the reading is done reluctantly by caregivers who dislike it (Kalil et al., 2022).

Identifying behavioural approaches that improve both the quantity and quality of parenting is the next frontier for the science and practice of behavioural insights and early childhood development.

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