

Behavioural economics offer a low-cost tool to improve early childhood programmes

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Many parenting decisions can be affected by biases, especially in disadvantaged contexts. This results in parents' decisions being inconsistent with their real intentions. Understanding how biases affect caregiving decisions is a crucial step in designing strategies to overcome them. Insights from behavioural science demonstrate potential to increase the effectiveness of more traditional early childhood interventions.

For example, the literature increasingly shows that messaging is a useful tool to implement nudges. Simple interventions using low-cost communication tools such as SMS can be very powerful if they are properly designed.

I was thrilled to be invited to be part of this issue, which sheds more light on how behavioural economics can improve early childhood programmes and policies. In the articles I reviewed, authors emphasise the biases that potentially affect caregivers – from present bias to limited attention and information processing capabilities – and show how interventions such as low-cost communication strategies can take these biases into account. Several authors show how cost-effective these types of interventions can be in very different contexts, while also being very open and reflective about the limitations of the behavioural toolbox.

Behavioural science is not only about the tools but about the mindset of the people using them

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One often hears innovation compared to a “toolbox”. You open it and find implements of different shapes and sizes, each with a different job to do. Learn which tool to use in which situation, and the rest is simply down to practice.

But innovation – especially behavioural innovation – doesn’t always work like that. You find that one tool, so useful in your own basement, becomes useless in the neighbours’. The tools themselves are constantly changing, as is the shape of the toolbox itself!

Here’s a better metaphor: parenting. Kids eat broccoli at a friend’s house, but at home it’s only pizza or pasta. They listen well to teachers at school – at home, it’s a different story. Kids change as they grow. As a parent, how can you ever know for sure “what works”?

You can’t. You do your best to integrate new techniques when you hear about them – perhaps even by reading this journal! But deep down every parent knows that the best way to change their kids’ behaviour is to change their own, for which no easy fix will suffice. The only proven technique is to always look critically at your own assumptions, challenging yourself to do better, while recognising that it’s a journey with no easy shortcuts.

The tools matter. But so does the mentality of the person – parent or programme designer – who wields them. Having had the privilege of reviewing several articles in this issue, what I believe its writers and editors have done exceptionally well is to capture not just some new intervention concepts or even the broad lesson that “context matters”, but the mindset of humility, reflective adaptation and inquisitiveness that is so critical to behavioural science.

More than nudges: behavioural insights are a foundation for guiding investments in children's early development

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I welcomed my intellectual collision with the discipline of behavioural economics over ten years ago. As an applied economist whose research focused on the social problem of poverty and children's development, this new set of ideas and tools – beyond household time and money resources – was revolutionary for me.

My research gave me a wildly new perspective on caregivers and parents. While well-intended and well-informed, they are also – as we all are – flawed humans, subject to biases and norms that respond to context and circumstances. I no longer see it as possible to assess parenting by looking narrowly at skills or the quality of time or interactions with a child. Rather we need to understand it as encompassing hundreds of daily decisions, from small to big, all made in the moment and requiring economic, social and mental resources including humour, patience and resilience.

I realised that broader economic, policy and political ecosystems do not always prioritise the role of caregiving and parents in the family system. These

realisations have subsequently infused almost all of my research focused on child poverty, income supports and early intervention.

The design of a monthly unconditional cash transfer, for example, intended to reduce poverty among US families of infants and toddlers, was informed by insights into how financial instability and scarcity drain people's attention. A study found that automatically enrolling caregivers of newborns into an early literacy programme, with the choice to opt out, led to more caregivers acting on the information provided. Another study found that eliciting pride in parenting reduced the judgement and stigma that some parenting support programmes can unintentionally evoke.

I was delighted to be invited to be part of creating this volume. The content showcases how insights from behavioural science offer more than a nudge – they provide a human-centred perspective that is foundational for guiding and shaping social investment in early childhood development.

Investing in behavioural science that puts ideas into action

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The Bernard van Leer Foundation began focusing on behavioural science seven years ago. While many early years programmes aimed to inform or educate caregivers, what parents really needed was help to move from good intentions to action.

Behavioural methods have long been used in fields such as child nutrition, HIV prevention and hygiene, but much of the early years community is still not familiar with these approaches. Many continue to use information, education and communication methods pioneered in the 1980s, without accounting for the revolution in fields including behavioural economics and human-centred design, the explosion in social media, or new types of participatory methods.

Together with our partners we have begun to adopt new approaches and measure changes in behaviours, rather than knowledge. This edition of *Early Childhood Matters* brings together the fruit of these efforts with stories that demonstrate how to expand our understanding of how behavioural sciences and early childhood development intersect. It is inspiring to see the creativity, rigour and determination of actors around the world who are pushing the boundaries and challenging rigid, paternalistic views of what parents need.

The Bernard van Leer Foundation is committed to investing in behavioural science for the early years. Ongoing initiatives include the INSEAD course for early years leaders, the development of toolkits and guides such as the forthcoming *Little Parenting Book*, partnering with the Inter-American Development Bank to generate better evidence through applied operational research with governments and academics in multiple countries, and an upcoming landscape study on the use of technology to influence behaviours of early years professionals and caregivers.

We look forward to continuing to deepen and broaden these partnerships, to enable early years professionals to better empower parents to be the caregivers they aspire to be.

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