THE PROGRAM

The BIP Lab has partnered with the Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) to deliver a behaviorally informed text message program to Illinois preschool families during the 2020–21 school year. Using the tools of behavioral science, Chat2Learn makes it easier for parents to have conversations with their children that spark learning and curiosity. The Chat2Learn program helps parents establish and sustain habits of parent-child interaction that promote children’s foundational skills for school readiness.

Chat2Learn delivers several text messages each week in English or Spanish to parents who enroll in the program with ideas for daily chats with their preschoolers. The messages are based on research evidence from the Behavioral Insights and Parenting Lab and guide parent-child conversations to build literacy, mathematics, and social-emotional skills for kindergarten readiness.

Because Chat2Learn is delivered by text message, it does not require Wi-Fi access or app downloads, making the program accessible, inexpensive, and scalable.

THE CHALLENGE

Parents are the single greatest influence on children’s skill development and long-term success, and early childhood is a critical period for parental investments in children’s learning and development.

Gaps in skill development and educational outcomes appear before children enter kindergarten and remain throughout schooling. The COVID-19 crisis threatens to deepen these gaps between economically advantaged and disadvantaged children. Research shows that differences in parental engagement in learning interactions with their children is causally related to differences in children’s school outcomes. Reducing these disparities requires supporting parents to create and sustain habits of helping their children learn at home before kindergarten begins.
WHO WE ARE

The BIP Lab at the University of Chicago Harris School of Public Policy studies the science of parental decision-making through the lens of behavioral science. Research shows that a variety of behavioral supports can optimize the decisions that people make. The BIP Lab is dedicated to understanding how such behavioral supports can support parental investments that promote children’s development, especially in low income families. The lab was co-founded in 2014 by University of Chicago Harris School of Public Policy Professors Ariel Kalil and Susan Mayer.

DIRECTORS

Ariel Kalil, PhD, is a professor at Harris Public Policy, where she also directs the Center for Human Potential and Public Policy. She is a developmental psychologist who studies economic conditions, parenting, and child development. In addition to her work at the BIP Lab, her current research examines the historical evolution of income-based gaps in parenting behavior and children’s cognitive and non-cognitive skills.

Susan E. Mayer, PhD, is a professor and dean emeritus at Harris Public Policy. She has published numerous articles on the measurement of poverty, the effect of growing up in poor neighborhoods, and the effect of parental income on children’s wellbeing. In addition to her work at the BIP Lab, she is engaged in a number of studies of intergenerational economic mobility.