



# Behavioral Insights and Parenting Lab

## Fostering Mindfulness in Low-Income Parents of Young Children

### THE CHALLENGE

Gaps in cognitive development between rich and poor children open up early in life and remain largely constant through the school years.

Early childhood intervention programs and other school-based programs have attempted to close these gaps, but these efforts have been only modestly successful.

Researchers have begun to explore factors outside of school environments that could contribute to these achievement gaps. Differences in parenting behavior play an important role in creating and sustaining income-based gaps in children's cognitive and non-cognitive skills. In particular, some low-income parents may experience "cognitive scarcity," which inhibits success in meeting their parenting goals and affects decisions relevant to the future of their children.

Programs for parents aimed at increasing mindfulness, or activities that focus attention on present thoughts and emotions, may help: reducing the cognitive demands of stress, increasing parents' focus and attention on their children, and promoting their children's successful development.

### THE PILOT RESEARCH

Our novel research aims to develop a cost-effective and scalable approach to fostering mindfulness in low-income parents in order to increase their focus and attention to improve their decision-making. In two pilot studies, participants wore a Zephyr BioHarness belt, a monitoring module that collects data on heart rate variability, which is a physiological indicator of stress. We measured parents' executive functioning (EF) using a battery of tests on a digital tablet. The pilot studies are expected to inform a large-scale randomized controlled trial.

#### Mind in Focus

- This proof-of-concept pilot included 53 parents of Head Start children. The treatment group listened to a five-minute guided mindfulness practice, while the control group listened to a neutral recording. Participants then completed the EF tests.
- For a sample of participants under 51 years of age, we found that parents in **the treatment group showed 30.4 percent higher scores** on the EF tests.

#### Parents Working on Wellness (ParentsWOW!)

- This month-long pilot was completed with 29 parents. Participants borrowed a digital tablet for three weeks. Treatment participants were instructed on using Headspace, a guided mindfulness education application, for five to ten minutes every day. Control group participants were given a neutral application.
- At the end of the three weeks, participants were exposed to a stressful audio scenario and given time to recover while employing their stress recovery skills. They then completed EF tasks on the digital tablet. Participants in **the treatment group showed 7.33 percent higher scores** on one of the EF tasks compared to those in the control group.

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### WHO WE ARE

**The Behavioral Insights and Parenting Lab** at the University of Chicago Harris School of Public Policy studies the parental investments that promote children's success and how behavioral tools can leverage these investments to increase their return. Research shows that a variety of low-cost, light-touch "behavioral tools" can successfully change behavior in a number of key arenas of life, including health and financial savings behavior. Part of the Center for Human Potential and Public Policy at Harris, the BIP Lab is dedicated to experimental research to investigate whether these approaches can make a difference in parenting strategies to promote children's development in low-income families. The BIP Lab was founded in 2014 by Harris professors Ariel Kalil and Susan E. 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 well-being. In addition to her work at the BIP Lab, she is engaged in a number of studies of intergenerational economic mobility.



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