

Every Child Reads



Helping families build strong at-home reading habits

Children who read on grade level are more likely to graduate high school than those who are behind. Reading at home is key to success, but parents don't always know how to help their child build strong habits. ideas42 worked with the non-profit Stand for Children to design a behaviorally informed family literacy program to make it easier for parents to support their children's at-home reading.

Summary

Across the United States, many children struggle to become strong readers. Although reading skills have improved over the last few decades, progress has been slow and largely concentrated in higher-income communities. Two-thirds of public school 4th graders were reading below grade-level in 2013, and only 20% of 4th graders from lower-income families met those grade-level benchmarks.¹

These early challenges have lasting impacts. Children who reach third grade without being able to read proficiently are more likely to drop out of high school,² reducing their earning potential and chances for economic success as adults. As the economy increasingly favors people with strong educational credentials, it becomes even more important to make sure we're giving our children the skills they need to succeed.

It's easy to think of education as something that happens within schools, but a child's education is also influenced by their peers, community, and especially parents. Parents have a stronger influence on children's cognitive and personal development than teachers. This presents a challenge for program designers, since it's much easier to work within established systems than individual homes, but it's also an opportunity: When parents actively encourage their children to read, their children become stronger readers, regardless of family income or pre-existing reading difficulties.^{3,4}

We worked with Stand for Children, a non-profit education advocacy organization focused on ensuring all students receive a high-quality, relevant education, to help parents take this active role. In early 2018, we conducted a pilot of a behaviorally informed family literacy program designed to help families build and maintain at-home reading habits called Every Child Reads (ECR). We're not the first ones to target at-home reading, and our program design was heavily informed by existing approaches. However,

Highlights

- ▶ Only one-third of public school 4th graders are reading on grade level
- ▶ Parents are an integral component of their child's reading success
- ▶ Addressing access to the right books helps increase opportunities for reading

¹ U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, National assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), 2013 Reading Assessment

² The Annie E. Casey Foundation. (2010). *EARLY WARNING! Why Reading by the End of Third Grade Matters*. Baltimore, MD: The Annie E. Casey Foundation. Retrieved from: https://www.aecf.org/m/resourcedoc/AECF-Early_Warning_Full_Report-2010.pdf

³ Scholastic, (2013). *Kids & Family Reading Report 4th Edition*.

⁴ Sénéchal, M., & Young, L. (2008). The effect of family literacy interventions on children's acquisition of reading from kindergarten to grade 3: A meta-analytic review. *Review of Educational Research*, 78(4), 880-907.

applying a behavioral lens to early literacy programs is less common, and the insights we gained can be useful to those leading the charge to support reading skills across the country. Participating families shared favorable feedback, but we also encountered many of the same challenges as others have in implementation and measurement of programs like these.

Designing a family literacy program

ECR supports at-home reading by providing easy access to books and personalized support over text messages, helping parents reach their reading goals for their children. We conducted two pilots—the first with 48 students in Holyoke, MA, and the second with 116 students in Chicago, IL. The program had three key components designed to make it easy for parents to follow through on reading with their children. Families with children in grades K-6 signed up for this program through their schools and participated for about three months.

Get families started with the right books

Lack of access to books is a fundamental barrier to reading. But acquiring “just right” books can be inconvenient or costly, and parents may not know what to look for when selecting books for their children. Small hassles like having to remember to return library books on time to avoid fees can also prevent parents from accessing a steady supply of books for their children.

In our program, we gave each participating family a tablet preloaded with access to myON, a digital reading platform that recommends books based on a child’s interest and reading ability. It also has an audio read-aloud function, which helps parents who don’t always have time to sit down and read with their child. This feature was very popular, especially among younger students and children with learning differences.

In interviews, families cited free access to thousands of books as a major reason for signing up for the program, and kids were excited about reading on tablets. This novelty factor may have kickstarted dormant reading habits, and we found that some families even used myON in combination with paper books. However, logistical and technical challenges made this a difficult component to scale. Families were frustrated and discouraged if the tablets didn’t work, many tablets were damaged or lost, and irregular access to WiFi disrupted book downloads and syncing activity. Technology may have opened doors for book access, but these solutions are far from straightforward.

Personalized tips, reminders, feedback, and support over SMS

Providing books isn’t enough to build habits, so we stayed in touch over text message. Each week, we sent two to three text messages with tips, reminders, and encouragement. We pre-programmed “chatbots” to walk people through common issues to scale personalized support to a large group of participants.

What makes a book “just right?”

1. Not too hard and not too easy
2. Matches the reader’s interests
3. Age-appropriate content

The main goal of the text messages was to give parents regular, just-in-time reminders. It's easy to say that you'll make reading a priority during a parent-teacher conference, but as with many resolutions, it's much harder to follow through and remember the strength of that intention later on. With many pressing and more salient demands in our day-to-day lives, it's easy to miss opportunities to sit down and read. The text messages helped make reading top-of-mind on a regular basis.

While small sample sizes prevented us from experimentally testing whether the messages drove reading activity, parents reported appreciating these messages for three reasons. First, they were simple reminders. If a few days elapsed without reading, the texts helped remind parents get back on track. Second, they were a form of accountability. When we asked how reading was going every week, parents knew someone was paying attention. Finally, regular communication can be seen as a sign of support. Parents felt that we cared enough to stay in touch, and that helped build trust.

Goals that are challenging—but not impossible

Sitting down to read isn't always simple. Children might not want to read, and parents—tired at the end of a long day—need to decide whether the battle is worth it. The benefits (increased chances of graduating high school, attending college, and obtaining a well-paying job) are far-off and hard to visualize, there are no immediate consequences of skipping a reading session, and reading can be unpleasant, tedious, or frustrating for parents if kids don't have the necessary skills or fluency.

Knowing this, we asked participating families to commit to reading with their children a certain number of times each week. Breaking big tasks (building literacy skills) into smaller, more manageable pieces (weekly reading goals) is a good way to make vague, far-off goals feel more immediately relevant. Each week, we sent a text message that reminded parents of their goals and asked them to reflect on their progress.

The most effective way to set goals is to pick those that are challenging, but still attainable. Often, teachers tell children to read 20 minutes a day, every day. For families that don't read regularly, anchoring to this can set them up to fail. It's easy to fall behind and hard to catch up once you miss even a few days, which can cause people to stop trying. Knowing this, we designed the program such that each week was a "fresh start" with new goals that reset, so families didn't have the weight of missed goals hanging over them to prevent them from persevering further. Behavioral science also tells us that people perform better when their goals are about effort rather than performance, so we encouraged people to "just sit down and read" rather than aim for a certain number of minutes or pages.

We found that talking about reading goals each week over text message helped parents remember their commitment and think about reading in a concrete, actionable way. Providing accurate feedback on their progress would have made this even more effective, but we were unable to do so because of measurement and reporting challenges.

The challenges of measuring impact

We believe this program design has a lot of potential; it's grounded in behavioral science and modeled after programs with proven efficacy. However, when interventions target behavior that happens at home—rather than in a more standardized environment, like classrooms—it can be challenging to implement solutions consistently and to measure impact. Here we share some of our approaches and the challenges we encountered that others who design reading programs may find useful.

We measured reading activity through automatically collected myON data. While some students read extensively and persistently, most students read less frequently as the program continued (and some barely logged any time at all). However, our numbers likely underreported reading that happened. If students read offline and had inconsistent Internet access, some of their data might not have been recorded. We also learned through interviews and surveys that families typically used their tablets in combination with regular paper books—in this program we only tracked myON reading.

We also measured text message response rate, learning that messages that ask explicit questions are more likely to get a response, and that—similar to logged reading—response rate declined as the program went on. Still, that may not indicate how engaged parents were. We know from discussions that some parents reminded their child to read after receiving a text message but didn't write back, and the reverse is probably true as well. While we ran some experiments to test whether the texts were influencing reading activity, our sample was too small (and uptake was too low) to see clear results.

The ultimate goal of the program was to improve reading ability. We measured reading ability using myON's built-in lexile tests. Students take a lexile test when they create their accounts, and then they can re-test every couple weeks. On average, we saw positive lexile growth that was greater than might be expected during the program time period. But, less than half of participants ever took a follow-up test, so we couldn't see any change for most students. Also, because tests were taken at home, testing environments would have varied—scores might have been influenced by noise or confusion, and may not accurately reflect reading ability. And even if the tests had higher external validity, we can't know that the increase was caused exclusively by our program, since we didn't follow the growth of a randomly selected control group of students who didn't participate.

Lexile is a quantitative measure of reading level. It can describe a student's reading ability or a book's readability.

Conclusion

The challenges with measuring impact that we encountered aren't unique to our program. Learning more about challenges like these is why it's important to do small pilots before launching interventions at scale. However, piloting to test efficacy can present additional challenges. We saw a tradeoff between impact and measurability: learning—especially at home—can be difficult to measure, yet constraining interventions to target only measurable behavior might limit the program's potential impact.

While it is hard to effectively support informal learning, these difficulties actually highlight the need for a behavioral lens. At home, changing habits and behaviors can be just as important as implementing educational best practices. Our pilots produced valuable insights from exploring the problem through a behavioral lens, as well as positive feedback from participating families. We hope this is one of many more behaviorally informed family literacy programs so we can continue to build evidence and set more children up for successful futures.