

The Impact of Text-Message Nudges on Preschool Attendance in Uruguay



In recent years, education systems in Latin America have significantly increased coverage for children in primary school. However, challenges related to early childhood education remain. In Uruguay, student absenteeism at preschool is high in comparison to primary school, and this may be due in part to parents undervaluing preschool education. In partnership with the Inter-American Development Bank and Ministry of Education of Uruguay, researchers are evaluating the impact of behaviorally informed SMS messages intended to inform parents about the importance of early childhood education and encourage preschool attendance. The study will measure the messages' impact on parents' views of early education and children's rates of absenteeism.

Policy Issue

In the last few decades, education systems in Latin America have significantly increased educational coverage. Almost all children now attend primary school, and access to secondary education has considerably increased. However, significant challenges in early childhood education remain. Where early childhood education programs are offered, school absenteeism rates are high. Research suggests that absenteeism prevents young children from partaking in essential early learning that may enhance their development, and places children at risk of falling behind in their education.^[1]

One major factor contributing to children's absence in preschool may be that parents do not understand or value the significance of early childhood education attendance. Programs that change parents' mindsets by emphasizing the benefits of preschool attendance could be effective. However, little research exists on understanding or altering parents' attitudes towards the value of early childhood education.

Evaluation Context

In Uruguay, the government offers free education at four levels: early childhood, primary, secondary, and tertiary. Private institutions also offer educational services at each of these levels. Early childhood education is offered for three- to five-year-olds in preschool centers, and preschool is mandatory for children four and above. However, according to Ministry of Education data, there is significantly lower preschool attendance when compared to school attendance at higher levels within the public school system. Absenteeism in public preschool centers of three- to five-year-old children was approximately

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30 percent in 2016, while it was only 10 percent in primary schools.

A 2017 government survey indicated that other than health reasons (which accounted for about 26 percent of absences), the explanations given for absence are ones that would not be considered excused absences in the formal school system: 51 percent of absences were due to vacation and 11 percent to bad weather. This data suggests that parents may be undervaluing preschool education. The results of a focus group conducted by IPA show similar patterns: participants indicated that there is a lack of widespread knowledge of the impact of preschool absences on child development among parents.

Details of the Intervention

In partnership with the Ministry of Education, researchers and IPA are evaluating the impact of a behaviorally informed message intervention in Uruguay. The research team is interested in determining whether behaviorally-informed text messages can “nudge” parents to bring their children to preschool every day and if these messages change parents' attitudes towards early education. Text messages will be delivered through the Ministry of Education's *GURI familia* application, a platform that serves for communication between parents and schools.

The research team will randomly assign 194 preschools to one of two groups:

Text-message group: Parents whose children attend preschools in this group will receive text messages intended to nudge them to bring their children to school consistently and minimize unnecessary absences. These messages will focus on themes such as information about the number of absences, the returns and benefits to early childhood education, logistical planning to get children to preschool, and the important role parents play in getting their children to school. Parents will receive three or four messages weekly for three months.

Comparison group: Parents assigned to this group will not receive the messages at the time of the study.

Researchers will evaluate the impact of the messages through a) surveys conducted at the beginning of the text-message campaign and after the campaign has finished and b) government administrative data that will indicate school absenteeism rates for children, indicators related to early childhood development (such as cognitive, motor, and socio-emotional development and attitudes towards learning), and child learning outcomes.

Results and Policy Lessons

Study ongoing; results forthcoming.

Sources

[1] Chang, H.N., & Romero, M. (2008). Present, Engaged, and Accounted For: The Critical Importance of Addressing Chronic Absence in the Early Grades. National Center for Children in Poverty, Mailman School of Public Health at Columbia University, New York, NY. Retrieved from http://www.nccp.org/publications/pdf/text_837.pdf.

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