



Behavioral Interventions for Child Support Services

What is BICS?

In the Behavioral Interventions for Child Support Services (BICS) demonstration project, the Office of Child Support Enforcement (OCSE) has competitively awarded grants to seven states and the District of Columbia to better understand individuals' behavior and decision-making ability when it comes to participating in the child support program. The five-year demonstration is exploring the potential relevance and application of behavioral economics principles to child support services, focusing on areas such as modification of orders and early engagement in the child support establishment process.

The project launched on September 30, 2014, and builds on the Behavioral Interventions to Advance Self-Sufficiency (BIAS) project conducted by the Administration for Children and Families' Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation. Ohio, Texas and Washington's child support programs participated in BIAS and showed promising results.¹ The eight sites participating in BICS are California, Colorado, the District of Columbia, Georgia, Ohio, Texas, Vermont, and Washington.

The first year of the BICS project was devoted to planning. Grantees worked closely with a Technical Assistance and Evaluation (TAE) team and OCSE to define and diagnose their first behavioral interventions. Grantees worked with the TAE team to design interventions using insights from behavioral sciences. These interventions are piloted for six to nine months and rigorously tested to measure their impact.

What is behavioral economics?

Traditional economics assumes that all people have unlimited time and ability to think through complex problems effortlessly to arrive at the "correct" choice. However, through our own life experiences, we know this is often an idealized view. Parents do not always follow through or make the choices that are in their best interest for their child support cases. Sometimes small changes in the way offices send out information or run their programs can make all the difference. These types of changes are often called behavioral interventions.

Behavioral economics uses insights from psychology and other related fields to help explain how and why we act in ways that are not always in our best interest; whether it's procrastinating on an important project, missing a deadline, or making impulse decisions.² Using behavioral economic theories, child support programs can better understand why program participants do not always carefully consider options and analyze details.

Child support programs are well suited for implementing behavioral interventions because they are data savvy, performance driven, and constantly looking for ways to improve and innovate.

The evaluation of the behavioral interventions for child support services grantee

- Washington State Division of Child Support – *Evaluation of Behavioral Interventions for Child Support Services*.

Throughout the project, initial and subsequent interventions will be implemented, evaluated and refined. The final year of the project will be used to scale up successful interventions while grantees implement plans for sustaining critical program analysis and a process for piloting and using simple, low-cost evaluation methods to continue process improvements beyond the life of the grant. Over the five years, each BICS grantee will receive approximately \$390,000 in Section 1115 funds that are eligible for Federal Financial Participation (FFP), for a total of more than \$1.1 million.

What is the goal of BICS?

The overall goal of the BICS project is to introduce and encourage a way of doing business that takes behavioral factors and regular evaluation into account to improve success. Grantees are developing the skills of their staff and organizations to regularly design and implement low-intensity evaluation and improvement. This includes strengthening the grantees' expertise in behavioral economics and evaluation so they can institutionalize a practice of critical inquiry and regular, rapid-cycle evaluation to continue program improvements in a financially sustainable and cost-effective manner.

The BICS demonstration grant is using behavioral insights and rigorous evaluation to improve the effectiveness of the eight grantee sites while positively engaging with parents. Successful interventions will be scaled up and rolled out statewide.

The project also aims to build the evidence base and help inform the larger child support community of the potential benefits of behavioral interventions. While BICS grantees' interventions vary in target areas, they all focus on core aspects of the child support program leaving valuable evidence in areas such as order setting, early engagement, modifications, and encouraging payments.

The behavioral interventions for child support services grantees

- California Department of Child Support Services; Sacramento County and San Joaquin County – *Dedicated Daddies Make a Difference*
- Colorado Department of Human Services; Denver County, Garfield County, Pitkin County, and Rio Blanco County – *How to Help a Partial Payer Pay: Using Behavioral Economics to Increase Payments to Colorado Kids*
- Office of the Attorney General for District of Columbia Child Support Service Division – *D.C. Behavioral Intervention Project*
- Georgia Department of Human Services; Fulton County, DeKalb County, Macon-Bibb County, and Peach County – *Behavioral Interventions in Early Engagement for Georgia Child Support Services*
- Ohio Office of Child Support; Franklin County and Cuyahoga County – *Understanding Perspectives – Behavioral Interventions in Child Support*
- Texas Office of the Attorney General – *Texas Start Smart*
- Vermont Agency of Human Services – *Behavioral Interventions for Child Support Services – Improving Performance and Customer Experience through Choice Architecture*
- Washington State Division of Child Support; King County, Thurston County, and Whatcom County – *Behavioral Interventions for Child Support Services*

How is BICS being evaluated?

To manage the evaluations, OCSE awarded the Evaluation of the Behavioral Interventions for Child Support Services grant to Washington State's Division of Child Support (DCS). DCS provides guidance and oversight to the Technical Assistance and Evaluation (TAE) team composed of MDRC, MEF Associates, and the Center for Policy Research. To test the effectiveness and outcomes of the different demonstrations, the TAE team will evaluate the interventions through randomized control trials or quasi-experimental studies. This demonstration tests a promising approach to behavioral economics in business process reengineering, applicable in many different types of child support procedures.

The BICS Model

With the assistance of the TAE team, all eight BICS grantees are going through a four-phase process to identify behavioral bottlenecks (places where people disengage or do not follow through).

The first phase in the behavioral diagnosis and design process is the **define phase** where grantees have worked to pick target areas for their interventions and define the problems they hope to address while determining desired outcomes. Behavioral interventions can be applied in many different areas; for example: reducing the rate of orders established by default, increasing show-up rates for establishment meetings and hearings, and improving modification processes. While each BICS grantee is focusing on addressing different areas in their programs, they all focus on core aspects of all child support programs. All interventions share the desired outcome of ultimately increasing consistent child support payments.

In the **diagnosis phase**, grantees worked to map out all the steps that their customers and the staff need to take to achieve the desired outcome. This process includes talking with people from both groups to get various perspectives on how these processes work. It is also important to use data to identify bottlenecks that can signal where individuals drop out or disengage with the process. Finally, grantees have identified behavioral factors that may explain these drop-offs. These factors will be the area of focus for the intervention and will drive the design.

The third phase is the **design phase** in which grantees design interventions that address the bottlenecks identified in the diagnosis phase using behavioral theories. Examples include using identity theory to address customers as parents rather than obligors, reducing hassle factors by simplifying options, and positively engaging parents through changes in language.

Finally, the last step in the process is the **test phase** in which the impacts of the interventions are tested using random assignment or rigorous quasi-experimental designs. While each stage has its own core objectives and activities, the stages may overlap and are not always linear. It is expected that grantees will use test results to refine processes, make tweaks to their designs and test again in an iterative process.

Notes

1. <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/research/project/behavioral-interventions-to-advance-self-sufficiency>
2. Richburg-Hayes, Lashawn, et al. (2014). Behavioral Economics and Social Policy: Designing Innovative Solutions for Programs Supported by the Administration for Children and Families. OPRE Report No. 2014-16a. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.