

Abstract Title Page

Title: Engaging parents in parent engagement programs

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Abstract Body

Background / Context:

Researchers, policymakers and educators have long recognized the role of parents in shaping student achievement. A large body of observational studies documents the strong relationship between family background and educational outcomes (Sirin, 2005), but to date there have been very few experimental studies in this area (Avvisati et al., 2010). Thus, there is little causal evidence on first whether it is possible to move parental behavior and engagement in children's schooling; and second, whether increased parental investment has an impact on student behavior and achievement.

Two recent studies suggest that parent education programs can improve child outcomes. Avvisati et al. (2014) implement a randomized intervention in disadvantaged French middle schools that invited parents to participate in parent-school meetings. The program offered information on the transition from primary school to middle school and advice on how to support and monitor children with schoolwork. They find that the intervention improved both parental engagement in school-related activities and student behaviors, including reduced rates of truancy and better classroom reports from teachers (there were no effects on test performance). Also using a randomized field experiment, Fryer et al. (2015) evaluate the impact of a parent academy program among parents of preschool aged children in the U.S., Parent academy meetings provided information on child development and activities that parents could engage in at home to increase early childhood cognitive and executive function skills. The intervention had large and statistically significant positive effects on both cognitive and non-cognitive test scores of Hispanic and White children, but no impact on Black children.

While this research is promising, it is not well understood how best to engage parents in such programs. Avvisati et al. (2014) included only those parents who actively expressed interest in the program (about 20% of families) and among those there was approximately 50% attendance at parent-school meetings. Thus, overall attendance in the parent population was approximately 10%. Fryer et al. (2015) also only included those parents who actively signed up for an early childhood intervention. In addition, they offered parents large financial incentives for attendance at meetings, as well as for completing assignments with their child at home and based on their child's performance on developmental assessments. Attendance among program parents was approximately 60%. However no previous study has varied the incentive to examine the impact on attendance.

Purpose / Objective / Research Question / Focus of Study:

In this study, we offer a parent academy similar to Fryer et al. (2015) but targeted to parents of elementary school children in the UK. In addition to investigating the impact of the program, our research question focuses on the effect offering an incentive for attendance on parent engagement in the program.

Setting:

The study took place in 16 disadvantaged schools in two councils (school districts) in the UK, Middlesbrough and Camden.

Population / Participants / Subjects:

The study included the parents of 2690 students in Key Stage 2 (ages 7-11). The students are largely disadvantaged and many of the parents are low income, low education and English as a Second Language speakers.

Intervention / Program / Practice:

The Parent Academy (PA) included one 2-hour session every two weeks that parents attended at their child's school with 13 sessions over the course of the school year. The sessions focused on developing parent skills to support learning out of school. Each session focused on a particular content area with English topics in the first half of the year and Math topics in the second half of the year. Every session also focused on a common set of skills, which included:

- A: Use of questioning to support learning
- B: Research
- C: Communication, including speaking and listening
- D: Building self-esteem of the child and the parent
- E: Assertiveness
- F: Study skills – resilience, persistence, reflection and self-assessment.
- G: Use of internet resources to support learning
- H: Role model learning behavior

Research Design:

The study used a randomized controlled trial design. In participating schools, all parents of Key Stage 2 (KS2) students were eligible for the Parent Academy (PA) program unless they actively opted out of the study. Within each school, we randomly assigned parents to one of the following three groups: Control, Parent academy without incentives, or Parent Academy with incentives. In the control group, parents received no intervention. In the Parent Academy without incentives (PA-unincentivized) group, parents received a spot in the parent academy and were actively invited to attend PA sessions. In the Parent Academy with incentives (PA-incentivized) group, parents were also invited to attend PA sessions and additionally received a £30 (~\$50) grocery store voucher at each session they attended. PA-incentivized and PA-unincentivized parents attended different sessions in order to minimize spillovers between groups.

Data Collection and Analysis:

The Parent Academy instructors recorded attendance at each session. We also conducted a survey of parents in all three treatment groups at the end of the year to assess their value of the parent academy programme. In addition, an outside evaluator administered a standardized

assessment to all students in the study at the end of the school year (data not yet available). We will also collect school level data including student attendance, student behavior and student performance as assessed by the classroom teacher (data not yet available). The primary method of analysis is a comparison of mean outcomes across treatment groups with tests of statistical significance in the difference of means.

Findings / Results:

The main finding is that the attendance incentive has a large, significant and sustained impact on attendance at the parent academy. As shown in Appendix B Figure 1, attendance in the unincentivized group ranges between 13-20% at each session, with an average of 15.7% across all sessions. Our attendance rates are slightly higher than the 10% attendance rate for the full population in Avvisati et al. (2014). In the incentivized group, attendance ranges between 48-53%, averaging 51% over the year. The 225% increase in attendance relative to the unincentivized group is strongly significant and stable throughout the year.

Appendix B Figure 2 shows the distribution of the number of sessions attended by parents in the unincentivized and incentivized groups. In the unincentivized group, 74% of parents do not attend a single session. This percentage drops by 30 percentage points in the incentivized group so that a majority of parents (56%) attend at least one session. Strikingly, there is also a 30 percentage point difference in the proportion of parents attending at least 10 sessions in the incentivized group (35%) compared to the unincentivized group (4.5%). These findings suggest that the incentive moves about a third of parents from no engagement in the parent academy (i.e., never attending) to full engagement (i.e., attending almost every session).

Conclusions:

Attendance incentives have a large impact of parent engagement in parent education programs. Importantly, our results suggest that a sizable portion of parents will not engage in a program without incentives but will fully engage with incentives. More work is needed to understand which parents are most sensitive to incentives and the effect on student performance of increased parental participation in parent education programs.

Appendices

Appendix A. References

Avvisati, F., Besbas, B., & Guyon, N. (2011). Parental involvement in school: A literature review. *Revue d'économie politique*, 120(5), 759-778.

Avvisati, F., Gurgand, M., Guyon, N., & Maurin, E. (2013). Getting Parents Involved: A Field Experiment in Deprived Schools. *The Review of Economic Studies*, rdt027.

Fryer Jr, R. G., Levitt, S. D., & List, J. A. (2015). *Parental Incentives and Early Childhood Achievement: A Field Experiment in Chicago Heights* (No. w21477). National Bureau of Economic Research.

Sirin, S. R. (2005). Socioeconomic status and academic achievement: A meta-analytic review of research. *Review of educational research*, 75(3), 417-453.

Appendix B. Tables and Figures

Figure 1: Attendance rates by session

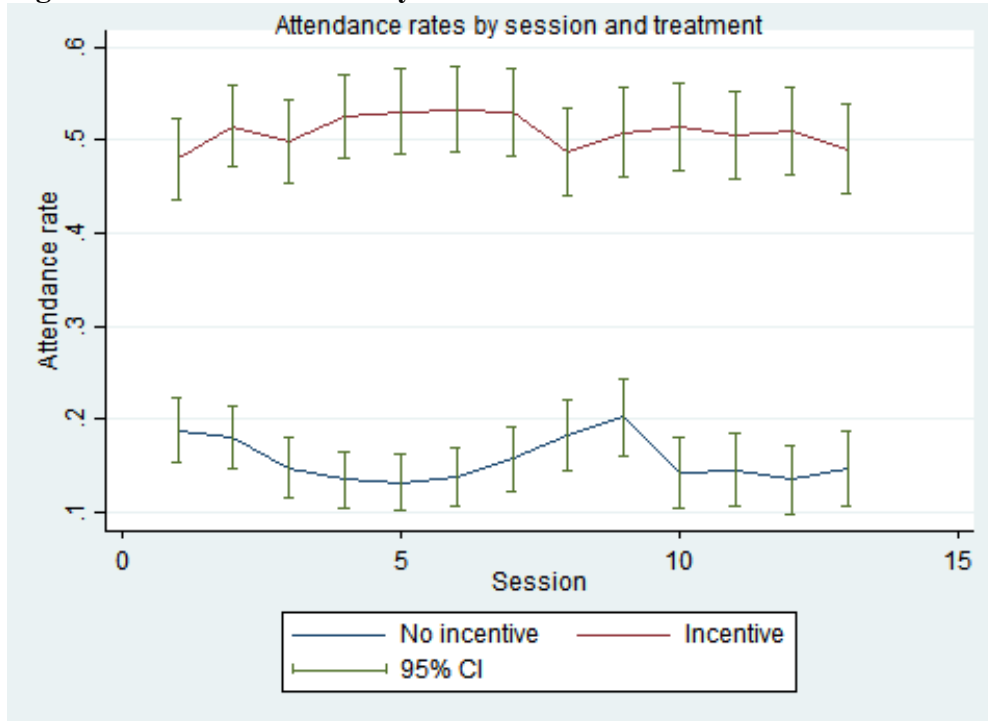


Figure 2: Distribution of number of sessions attended

