



The Little Book for Parenting Programmes

Applying Behavioural Science to Increase Caregiver Engagement



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Save the Children

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1. Introduction



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Introduction

Parenting programmes are a key pillar of early childhood development (ECD) policy globally. Delivered through home visits, group sessions and/or remotely, they seek to support the development of children from pre-conception through to age five by influencing their parents' knowledge, skills, attitudes and practices. There is strong evidence that they can significantly improve key ECD outcomes, such as children's cognitive, language, motor and social emotional development¹.

The impact of a parenting programme naturally depends on the level of parental engagement. To reap the full benefits of a programme, parents must, for example, be aware of the programme, enrol, attend sessions, engage with the content and apply what they learn at home. Unfortunately, programmes often encounter challenges with low levels of parental engagement². Parents may be unaware of a programme, not enrol, only attend a few sessions, struggle to absorb the information covered during sessions or seldom implement the recommended practices at home.

Behavioural science can increase the impact of parenting programmes by providing insights on why parental engagement issues arise and recommending solutions to address them. This guide outlines several of these insights and provides guidance on how to apply them. It is intended for implementers, policymakers and donors involved in parenting programmes.

The guide has 4 sections:

- Brief introduction to behavioural science and how it can increase the impact of parenting programmes
- Overview of the journey parents go through on a typical parenting programme and the barriers to parental engagement they may face along the way
- Solutions for addressing these barriers and increasing parental engagement
- Guidance on how to use this guide to increase parental engagement on your programme.

We hope this guide will contribute to increasing the impact of parenting programmes by providing implementers, policymakers and donors with new ideas about some of the underlying barriers to parental engagement and how to address them.

Happy reading!

Contact us to learn more and discuss the ideas in this guide.

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Illustrations by Ezeipik

¹See Jeong et al. (2021) for a recent meta-analysis.

²See Gennetian et al. (2019) for a review of the evidence on issues with parental engagement.

2. Why Behavioural Science?



Illustrations by Freepik

Why behavioural science?

Parents everywhere want the best for their children. Yet parental engagement is a common issue for parenting programmes.

Behavioural science helps explain why, despite their intentions to do what's best for their children, parents struggle to engage with parenting programmes given the barriers they face, and provides innovative and cost-effective solutions for increasing parental engagement by addressing these barriers.

The behavioural science perspective draws on 2 key insights:

³For excellent reviews, see [Halpern \(2019\)](#), [Kahneman \(2011\)](#) and [Soman \(2017\)](#).

⁴This may be particularly true for parents who are juggling parenting demands along with other life demands, and especially true for parents in difficult circumstances such as single parenthood or insufficient income, which place excessive strain on their cognitive resources.

⁵Hill et al. (2021)

⁶Wendel (2020)

1. OUR MENTAL SHORTCUTS CAN PREVENT US FROM TAKING ACTIONS WE WANT³

Our mind has key limitations. We have limited memory, attention and ability to process information. Due to these limitations, we often rely on mental shortcuts to decide what to do⁴. Whilst our shortcuts often work well, they can also lead us to do things which we later regret.

One mental shortcut which appears to influence a lot of our behaviours - especially those we later regret - is to do what provides the greatest immediate benefits (often called present bias). From the perspective of parents, there may be few contexts where what a parenting programme asks them to do, such as reading to their child, provides greater immediate benefits than doing something else, such as letting the child watch TV so they can have a break. A parent may therefore want to read to their child, but repeatedly find themselves letting the child watch TV instead, and later regret having done so.

2. OUR BEHAVIOUR DEPENDS ON A LONG CHAIN OF EVENTS^{5,6}

Whether we perform a specific behaviour at a given moment, such as reading to our child on a particular evening, depends on a series of decisions and behaviours taking place beforehand. For example, we must remember in time to act on it (e.g., before our child goes to bed). Then, we need to form the intention to read (*"I'm going to read with Naomi."*). To follow through on our intention, we need to, among other things, locate reading materials, find our child, convince them to sit down, begin reading and possibly persevere with reading as they show a lack of interest or ask to do something else (*"Mum, can't we play on your phone instead?"*).

A single decision or behaviour can break the chain of events at any point. For example, perhaps we decide that we'll read later and then we forget, or maybe our child gets up and runs away midway through reading and then we give up for the evening. As a result, the behaviour never happens - even if, for example, we are well informed about the benefits of reading, capable of reading and actually want to read.

By drawing on these insights, behavioural science identifies barriers to parental engagement which we often **overlook or underestimate**, and offers **innovative and cost-effective** solutions for increasing engagement by addressing these barriers.

The *Talk to Your Baby* programme in the USA offers a great case study for these points⁷. It significantly increased enrollment on its text-based learning programme by making simple changes to the enrolment process. It changed from providing mothers with a handout with instructions to enrol by texting a phone number to automatically enrolling mothers instead⁸. By removing two barriers to enrollment - remembering to enrol and sending a single SMS to actually enrol - it increased enrollment from from 1% to 89%.

The remainder of this guide focuses on how to increase the impact of parenting programmes by applying these types of insights to your programmes. We begin by mapping out the journey parents typically go through on a parenting programme and the barriers to parental engagement they may face at each step (Section 3). Then, we present solutions which can address these barriers and increase parental engagement (Section 4). Finally, we offer guidance on how to use this guide to increase parental engagement on your programme (Section 5).



Illustrations by [Freepik](#)

⁷Gennetian et al. (2020)

⁸Mothers could leave the programme at any time by replying "STOP" to the programme phone number.

3. Parent Journey & Potential Barriers



Illustrations by Eceebik

Overview of a Parent's Journey

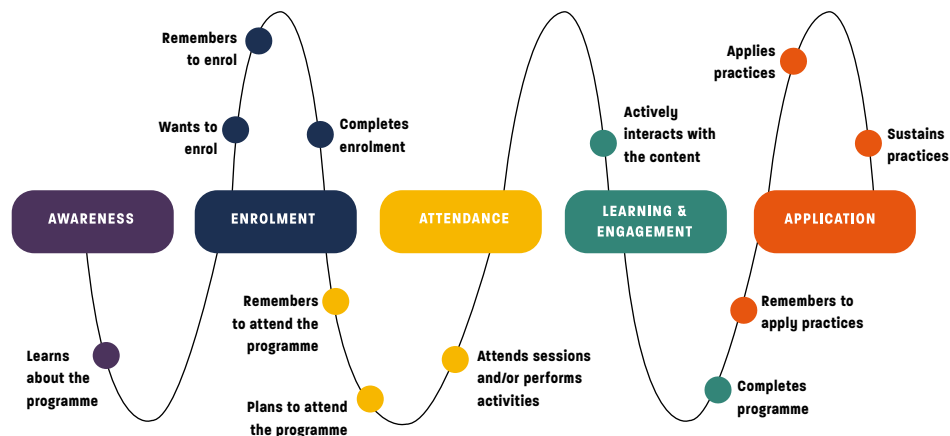
For parents and children to reap the full benefits of a parenting programme, parents must properly engage with the programme. This requires navigating 5 stages⁹ common to parenting programmes: parents must (1) become aware of the programme, (2) enrol, (3) attend, (4) learn and engage with the content and (5) apply the practices at home.

Successfully navigating each of these stages involves **multiple decisions and behaviours** that are often overlooked when considering why parental engagement issues arise (see *Figure 1*). For example, for parents to enrol on a programme they need to want to enrol, remember to enrol and then actually complete the enrolment process.

Each of these steps - want, remember and actually enrol - may also consist of multiple decisions and behaviours. For example, to enrol on a programme, parents often need to complete an online form. This involves, among other things, locating their cell phone, tablet or computer, purchasing credit if required, typing in the web address, finding the form on the website, having access to the information requested in the form, proceeding in the face of internet issues (e.g., losing internet connection midway and having to start again) and so on.

A parent's journey on a parenting programme is seldom straightforward, where they proceed from one stage to the next. Instead, it is often characterised by setbacks and the need to consistently repeat behaviours and decisions before reaching a favourable outcome. Stages can also be intertwined, leading to feedback loops. For example, the learning experience during a given programme session might significantly influence the likelihood of a parent attending another session, and therefore, progressing in the programme.

Figure 1. Parent journey in a programme: stages, decisions and behaviours



⁹While the specifics may vary between different programmes, we think the five stages identified are a useful generalisation of the common journey in parenting programmes.

Summary of Barriers Along the Journey

At each step in this journey, parents can face barriers which reduce their engagement and thus limit the impact of the programme.

Barriers to parental engagement can be **structural, informational or behavioural**. Examples of structural barriers include a lack of money, time, access to social services or fluency in a specific language. Informational barriers relate to incomplete, confusing or misleading information.

This guide focuses on behavioural barriers: **barriers which arise because of the mental shortcuts we rely on when deciding what to do**. Often these barriers can lead us to **behave in a way which we later regret**. For example, we tend to prioritise smaller, immediate rewards over larger, future rewards. As a result, we're unlikely to consistently implement new parenting practices unless we feel like there are immediate benefits to doing so. The longer-term benefits of these practices, such as the child's future development, are likely insufficient to ensure we do them.

Behavioural barriers are often overlooked or underestimated when designing programmes or considering why parental engagement issues arise. This is a missed opportunity. They often have a surprisingly big impact on limiting parental engagement and are frequently the most actionable.

We have identified 11 behavioural barriers which we expect to apply to a broad range of parenting programmes (see *Table 1*). Below we provide details on each barrier and fictional quotes for how these barriers may sound in practice at different points in the parent journey.

Table 1. Behavioural barriers faced by parents throughout their journey on a parenting programme

Limited attention	Hassle factors	Present bias	Status quo bias
Inaccurate beliefs about who the programme is for	Social norms (family or community)	High cognitive load	Perceived lack of self-efficacy
Overconfidence	Planning fallacy	Inaccurate beliefs about the programme's benefits	

Detailed View of Behavioural Barriers

LIMITED ATTENTION

Our attention tends to be scattered across all the different demands we face. Financial issues, health worries, professional or personal commitments take up mental 'bandwidth'^{10,11,12}. As a result, we fail to notice things, like the launch of a new parenting programme or a key point made during a parenting session, and we repeatedly forget to do things, like enrol, attend sessions and implement practices at home. This may be particularly true for low-income parents, whose attention is likely to be repeatedly captured by the challenges of their situation (e.g., worrying about buying food and paying rent)¹³.

WHAT THIS MIGHT SOUND LIKE

"The nurse talked about a new parenting programme. But I was so worried about getting back on time for lunch I can't remember the name of the programme."

"I really want to try out the new games at home. But I just forget. I'm so worried working out how to pay rent."

Solutions which target barrier:

Remind: regularly remind parents about what they need to do and why (pp. 20)

¹⁰ Bergman (2019)

¹¹ Gennetian et al. (2019)

¹² Mayer et al. (2018)

¹³ Mullainathan and Shafir (2013), Kremer et al. (2020), York et al. (2018)



Illustrations by [Freepik](#)

INACCURATE BELIEFS ABOUT PARTICIPANTS

We often hold incorrect beliefs. Parents may mistakenly believe that only certain 'types' of parents participate in parenting programmes. For example, they may think only 'bad' parents or women should participate¹⁴. There's a risk that they interpret an invitation to participate as a criticism of their parenting skills¹⁵. The community can share these misinformed beliefs, leading parents to worry about being negatively judged by others as 'bad parents' who need help (see social norms on pp. 13)^{16,17}.

WHAT THIS MIGHT SOUND LIKE

"I'm not a bad parent, so I don't need to receive parenting instructions."

"These parenting sessions are for mothers, not for fathers."

Solutions which target barrier:

Role models: provide parents with examples of people like them who perform the target behaviours and who overcame challenges to do so (pp. 28)

¹⁴Hill et al. (2021)

¹⁵Hill et al. (2021)

¹⁶Mayer et al. (2020)

¹⁷Hill et al. (2021)

¹⁸Gennettian et al. (2019)

¹⁹Bergman (2019)

OVERCONFIDENCE

We can be overconfident about how great we and our loved ones are. For example, parents of school-age children consistently overestimate their children's performance at school and underestimate their absences^{18,19}. As a result, we might not realise when we could benefit from help, how rarely we perform a 'good' behaviour, like singing to our children, and how unlikely it is we'll do it more often in the future. Parents - especially those who have previously raised a child - may be overconfident about their parenting skills (e.g., "I know what I'm doing"); their child's competence (e.g., "My child already know lots of words"); the frequency with which parents already perform the target behaviours (e.g., "I always read to my kids"); or which they are likely to do it in the future (e.g., "I'll definitely read to them tomorrow").

WHAT THIS MIGHT SOUND LIKE

"I recently heard about this programme to teach us how to better engage with our children at home. I don't think we need that. My son is growing up just fine, and I already engage with him enough."

"This is our third child; he is gaining weight and rarely gets sick so we do not need to watch any additional videos."

Solutions which target barrier:

Feedback: provide parents with timely feedback about their behaviour (p.25)

HASSLE FACTORS

Often a minor inconvenience is all that's needed to prevent us from doing the things that we 'should' do. Parents may never get around to enrolling if the enrolment process involves too many steps or if it requires too much information and documentation²⁰. Similarly, they may not apply the practices at home if it's difficult to work out how to do so²¹.

WHAT THIS MIGHT SOUND LIKE

"I tried to enrol but they asked for my child's birth certificate. I don't have it yet, and the register office is in another town. It is just so complicated and not worth it."

"What should I do with these sticks, paper and fabric? I don't have time to read the instructions and they're not clear."

Solutions which target barrier:

Easy: make it easy to perform the target behaviours (p.21)

Plan: help parents plan how they will perform the target behaviours and commit to their plans (p.22)

²⁰See [Bettinger et al. \(2012\)](#) for an example about the role of hassle factors in university enrollment and [Gennettian et al. \(2020\)](#) for an example about the effectiveness of automatic enrollment on a parenting programme.

²¹A programme in Colombia - *Mis Manos Te Enseñan* - found that among parents who did not use the materials provided to them, 39% said they were difficult to use ([Rubio-Codina and Lopez-Boo \(2022\)](#)).

SOCIAL NORMS (FAMILY OR COMMUNITY)

Our beliefs about what the people in our family and community do²² and think we should do²³ significantly influence our behaviour. We're less likely to perform a behaviour if we think it goes against what they do or think. Parents are less likely to enrol, attend or apply the practices if they think that other people in their social group are not doing so. Parents may also worry that they'll be judged negatively for participating in a programme if it teaches new approaches to parenting that contrast with common practices and beliefs in their social group²⁴.

WHAT THIS MIGHT SOUND LIKE

"None of my friends are going to the sessions. Maybe this is not a good programme for us."

"In the parenting groups, we learned that using physical punishment with kids is wrong. However, every time my child has a tantrum, my mother-in-law expects me to educate my child as she did with her kids...with the belt."

Solutions which target barrier:

- **Social norms (behaviours):** highlight that other parents perform the target behaviours (p.27)
- **Social norms (beliefs):** highlight that people approve of the target behaviours (p.29)
- **Role models:** provide parents with examples of people like them who perform the target behaviours and who overcame challenges to do so (p.28)

PLANNING FALLACY

We tend to underestimate the time, costs and risks of future actions²⁵. This can show up in several ways. For example, parents might underestimate the time and costs (e.g., transportation, childcare) required to consistently attend parenting sessions, or they may underestimate the amount of time it takes to adopt a new behaviour, such as playing with their child. As a result, they're unlikely to do everything the programme asks of them.

WHAT THIS MIGHT SOUND LIKE

"I thought I could participate in today's session, but I also had to prepare lunch and clean the house before going, so it ended up being too late."

"I don't have the time this week to make toys with my child, but I'll have more time next week and will do it then."

Solutions which target barrier:

Plan: help parents plan how they will perform the target behaviours and commit to their plans (p.22)

²²This is often referred to as *descriptive* norms.

²³This is often referred to as *injunctive* norms.

²⁴Gennetian et al. (2021)

²⁵Kahneman and Tversky (1982)

²⁶Kalil (2022)

PRESENT BIAS

We tend to prefer rewards that are certain and immediate over those which are far-off and uncertain²⁶. As a result, we're less likely to do things with long-term, abstract benefits when we can do things with immediate, concrete benefits instead. Parenting programmes often ask parents to do things where, from the parent's perspective, the perceived benefits are long-term and abstract (e.g., *"Play with your child to help their development."*) and the short-term benefits may not be obvious. Instead of doing what the programme asks of them, such as attending a session or applying a new practice at home, parents may be tempted to instead do things which bring them immediate gratification (e.g., letting the child watch TV so they can have a moment to relax).

WHAT THIS MIGHT SOUND LIKE

"I will skip today's exercises, my child is doing fine, and I could use this time to take a little break."

"The nurse told me to feed my kids nutritious snacks but feeding them these biscuits is so easy and convenient."

Solutions which target barrier:

- **Easy:** make it easy to perform the target behaviours (p.21)
- **Losses:** emphasise the losses from not performing the target behaviours (p.26)
- **Rewards:** provide immediate rewards for performing the target behaviours (p.24)
- **Plan:** help parents plan how they will perform the target behaviours and commit to their plans (p.22)

HIGH COGNITIVE LOAD

We struggle to absorb and act on information when it requires significant effort to process. During the sessions, parents may receive too much or unclear information about what they should be doing (e.g., abstract concepts, lack of practical examples, too many topics at the same time). As a result, parents may not engage with or absorb the information, and are therefore less likely to apply it.

WHAT THIS MIGHT SOUND LIKE

"I don't know what this programme is about. I have too many other decisions to make in my life and I don't have time to figure out whether or not we should go to this programme."

"I opened the WhatsApp messages, but the information was so complicated, I didn't know what to say or how to respond."

Solutions which target barrier:

- **Remind:** regularly remind parents about what they need to do and why (p.20)
- **Easy:** make it easy to perform the target behaviours (p.21)

INACCURATE BELIEFS ABOUT BENEFITS

Parents may underestimate²⁷ the benefits of the target behaviours - especially when they do not feel age-appropriate to them.

WHAT THIS MIGHT SOUND LIKE

"The app said I should be teaching my baby about the parts of her body, but she doesn't even speak. I don't think she understands any of this, so I will stop until she starts speaking."

"I've been told to take my child to play outdoors more often but it is so hot. I don't even think they are getting any benefit from this. I would rather give them a phone to play with at home. They're clearly much happier."

Solutions which target barrier:

Benefits: explain the benefits of the target behaviours in terms parents understand (p.23)



Illustrations by [Freepik](#)

²⁷Cunha et al. (2013) find that, on average, mothers underestimate the returns of early childhood investments.



STATUS QUO BIAS

We tend to prefer to keep things as they are by sticking to a decision previously made or not taking any action that would bring about change²⁸. When a behaviour is outside of our routine, it is harder to perform it - especially since lots of our behaviours occur automatically without any deliberation²⁹. Attending sessions or applying new parenting practices requires parents to make an active decision and deviate from the status quo of their existing commitments and routine. This requires additional mental effort and planning. This barrier might be particularly relevant for male parents, given that in most cases participating in child-rearing activities is outside of their routine.

WHAT THIS MIGHT SOUND LIKE

"The programme facilitator asked us to help our wives and spend time with the kids during the weekends, but I have things to do, and my wife has been doing it just fine."

"This programme told me that it is important for my son to see his parents together whenever possible, especially during family mealtimes and on weekends. But my wife and I have busy work schedules and like to do our own thing on the weekends. We don't want to change our routine."

Solutions which target barrier:

- **Easy:** make it easy to perform the target behaviours (p.21)
- **Losses:** emphasise the losses from not performing the target behaviours (26)
- **Plan:** help parents plan how they will perform the target behaviours and commit to their plans (p.22)

²⁸ Samuelson and Zeckhauser (1988)

²⁹ Wood (2019) estimates that 43% of our daily behaviours occur automatically.



Illustrations by [Freepik](#)

PERCEIVED LACK OF SELF-EFFICACY

The extent to which we think we are capable of doing something affects whether or not we try to do it and how quickly we give up³⁰. Parents' beliefs about their ability to implement practices recommended by a programme will affect whether they do them.

WHAT THIS MIGHT SOUND LIKE

"I followed the instructions and sang the song to my son, but he wasn't interested and even looked scared. I don't know what I'm doing wrong. I should just let someone else do it."

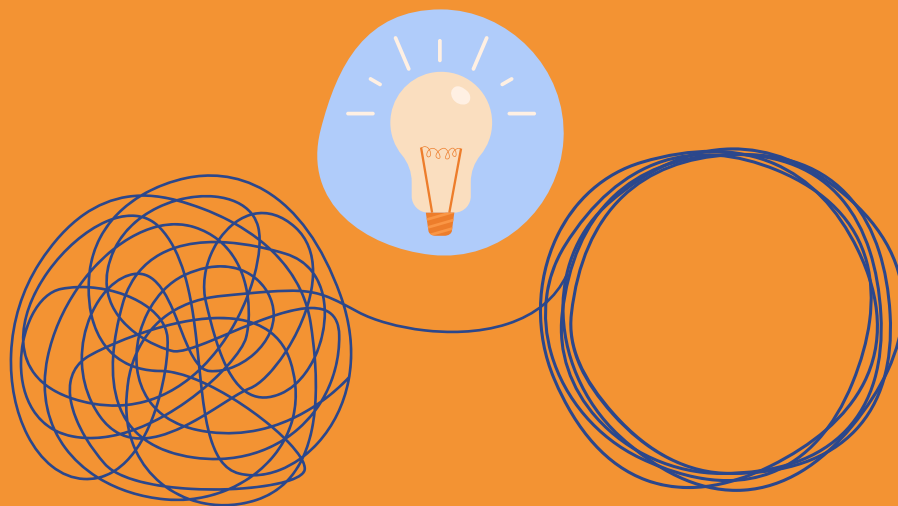
"My child has a speaking delay so even if I watch the videos I will not know how to practise them at home, I'd rather wait until my child starts school. They are professionals and know what they are doing."

Solutions which target barrier:

- **Reflect:** get parents to reflect on their successes (p.19)
- **Plan:** help parents plan how they will perform the target behaviours and commit to their plans (p.22)
- **Role models:** provide parents with examples of people like them who perform the target behaviours and who overcame challenges to do so (p.28)

³⁰ [Bandura \(1982\)](#)

Solutions



Solutions

Programmes can increase parental engagement by implementing solutions which target the behavioural barriers facing parents. For example, parents may rarely sing to their child because, amidst their busy lives, they simply forget to do so. Reminding them to sing can increase the likelihood that they do.

In this section, we present behavioural science solutions which target the barriers covered in the previous section. We focus on solutions for which we believe there is strong evidence that they can work across a range of behaviours and contexts. For example, reminders can increase savings among a sample of Peruvian, Filipino and Bolivian savers³¹; encourage Germans to make dental appointments³²; and increase Uruguayan parents' involvement with their children³³. However, the solutions we present are not necessarily off-the-shelf solutions that are guaranteed to work on your programme. Please see Section 5 on applying this guide to understand how to apply these solutions on your programme and the importance of testing solutions to assess whether they work.

For each solution, we outline the barriers it targets, present evidence it can work, offer nuances on when to use it and provide practical recommendations for where and how you can apply it on your programme. You can use *Table 2* below to find solutions relevant for the barriers on your programme.

Table 2. Mapping solutions to barriers

BARRIERS	SOLUTIONS WHICH TARGET BARRIERS
Limited attention	Reminders: regularly remind parents about what they need to do and why (p.20)
Inaccurate beliefs about programme participants	Role models: provide parents with examples of people like them who perform the target behaviours and who overcame challenges to do so (p.28)
Overconfidence	Feedback: provide parents with timely feedback about their target behaviour (p.25)
Hassle factors	Easy: make it easy to perform the target behaviours (p.21) Plan: help parents plan how they will perform the target behaviours and commit to their plans (p.22)
Social norms (family or community)	Social norms (behaviours): highlight that other parents perform the target behaviours (p.27) Social norms (beliefs): highlight that people approve of the target behaviours (p.29) Role models: provide parents with examples of people like them who perform the target behaviours and who overcame challenges to do so (p.28)
Planning fallacy	Plan: help parents plan how they will perform the target behaviours and commit to their plans (p.22)
Present bias	Easy: make it easy to perform the target behaviours (p.21) Losses: emphasise the losses from not performing the target behaviours (p.26) Rewards: provide immediate rewards for performing the target behaviours (p.24) Plan: help parents plan how they will perform the target behaviours and commit to their plans (p.22)
High cognitive load	Reminders: regularly remind parents about what they need to do and why (p.20) Easy: make it easy to perform the target behaviours (p.21)
Inaccurate beliefs about benefits	Benefits: explain the benefits of the target behaviours in terms parents understand (p.23)
Status quo bias	Easy: make it easy to perform the target behaviours (p.21) Losses: emphasise the losses from not performing the target behaviours (p.26) Plan: help parents plan how they will perform the target behaviours and commit to their plans (p.22)
Perceived lack of self-efficacy	Reflect: get parents to reflect on their successes (p.19) Plan: help parents plan how they will perform the target behaviours and commit to their plans (p.22) Role models: provide parents with examples of people like them who perform the target behaviours and who overcame challenges to do so (p.28)

³¹ Karlan et al. (2016)

³² Altmann and Traxler (2014)

³³ Bloomfield et al. (2023)

SOLUTION: REFLECT

Get parents to reflect on their successes

BARRIERS TARGETED

Perceived lack of self-efficacy

EVIDENCE THIS CAN WORK

A study in the USA improved how parents felt about themselves and increased their interest in learning about and attending a parenting programme by asking them to reflect on a time when they felt proud³⁴. Parents were asked: “What did you do that you were proud of? What motivated you? What led to your success?”

WHEN TO USE THIS

This should be a core feature of any programme.

HOW TO APPLY THIS TO YOUR PROGRAMME

At the start of the programme, create exercises for parents that allow them to reflect on their successes as both an individual and a parent. For example, “Think about a time when you felt successful or proud. Where were you? Who were you with? What did you do?”³⁵

Then, at the start of each parenting session, ask parents to reflect on their parenting successes since the last meeting. For example, “What changes have you noticed in your child since we last met? What have you helped them with? What have they learned from you? Was there a really tough day which you didn’t think you’d make it through and then you did?”

Illustrations by [Freepik](#)³⁴Hill et al. (2020)³⁵Hill et al. (2021)

SOLUTION: REMINDERS

Regularly remind parents about what they need to do and why

BARRIERS TARGETED

High cognitive load
Limited attention

EVIDENCE THIS CAN WORK

A programme in **Uruguay** employed SMS reminders to increase parental involvement with their children after they had completed an 8-week workshop³⁶. Parents received three messages per week in the evening when they were likely to be free. These messages covered the benefits of the practices, concrete suggestions of what they should do and focused on building a positive identity. Example messages are:

- *"Talk to [child's name] while you are washing [him] or changing [his] diapers. Look [him] in the eye when you speak to [him]. When [child's name] tries to respond, don't interrupt [him] and do not get distracted. [Child's name] needs to know you are listening."*

- *"There is no one that wants as much for [child's name] as you do. Think about one or two moments in the past days in which you felt*

you really contributed towards [her] wellbeing. Trust yourself and continue seeking more of these moments during the week."

- *"The more you speak to [child's name], the better will [his] language develop and the more [he] will learn. Today and in the following days, remember and repeat this thought: "I take advantage of all the moments with [child's name] to speak to [him]."*

WHEN TO USE THIS

This should be a core feature of any programme.

HOW TO APPLY THIS TO YOUR PROGRAMME

Send parents SMS about upcoming sessions and about the behaviours they're to perform at home. You should:

- Personalise the content to address the parents and the child (e.g., *"Dear [parent name], understanding the reasons that your child [child name] is crying can help you prepare a better response ..."*)

- Emphasise the benefits why the target behaviours are important (e.g., *"Early reading gives [child name] a head start in life. Children who read for 10 minutes every day are 22% more likely to finish high school."*³⁷)

- Time the messages so that they arrive when parents are most likely to be able to act on them (e.g., send a reminder to play games with their child after dinner but before bedtime).

- Calibrate the number of messages you send so you remind the parents without overwhelming them; 2-3 messages per week could suffice³⁸.

Help parents to remind themselves by linking the target behaviours with an existing part of their routine (e.g., sing together after brushing the child's teeth) or providing them with objects which can remind them of the target behaviours (e.g., calendars, fridge magnets, etc.).

³⁶ Bloomfield et al. (2023)

³⁷ Gennetian et al. (2019)

³⁸ Cortes et al. (2018)

SOLUTION: EASY

Make it easy to perform the target behaviours

BARRIERS TARGETED

Present bias Hassle factors Status quo bias
High cognitive load

EVIDENCE THIS CAN WORK

A text-based early learning programme in the USA - Talk to your Baby - increased enrolment by automatically enrolling eligible mothers and giving them the option to drop out instead of requiring them to sign up³⁹. Mothers received a text message welcoming them to the programme and were informed that they could opt out of messaging by simply texting "STOP" at any time.

A text messaging programme in the USA aimed at the parents of pre-schoolers increased parental involvement by providing parents with concrete recommendations of activities they could do to support their child⁴⁰. Parents received three SMS per week over a period of eight months:

- **FACT** message emphasising the importance of particular skills (e.g., *"Letters are the building blocks of written language. Children need to*

know the letters to learn how to read & write.")

- **TECHNIQUE** message recommending specific activities (e.g., *"Point out the first letter in your child's name in magazines, at the store & on signs. Have your child try. Make it a game. Who can find the most?"*)

- **GROWTH** message providing encouragement and reinforcement (e.g., *"Keep pointing out letters. You're preparing your child 4K! Now when you point out a letter, ask: What sound does it make?"*).

WHEN TO USE THIS

This should be a core feature of any programme.

HOW TO APPLY THIS TO YOUR PROGRAMME

Automatically enrol parents (e.g., by linking up with a health programme) or simplify the enrolment process to require fewer steps or information.

Set aside time in each parenting session for parents to practise the target behaviours

(e.g., washing hands with their child, how to teach proper hand-washing technique, how to encourage hand-washing at the right moments). Parents can also practise how to overcome obstacles to performing the target behaviours. For example, the facilitator can ask them: *"Suppose your child did not want to wash their hands after eating messy food. How could you engage them?"*

Break down complex behaviours (e.g., reading) to simple behaviours by providing parents with concrete recommendations of what they should do (e.g., *"Read pages 1-4 of ... at 18:00 this evening."*).

³⁹Gnetten et al. (2020)

⁴⁰York et al. (2018)

SOLUTION: PLAN

Help parents plan how they will perform the target behaviours and commit to their plans

BARRIERS TARGETED

Present bias Hassle factors Status quo bias
Planning fallacy

EVIDENCE THIS CAN WORK

A programme in the **USA** targeting Latino parents of young children increased parental communication with the children's teachers by helping parents to plan how they would communicate and asking them to commit to their plan⁴¹. Parents were asked to plan when (e.g., which day and time), where (e.g., at home or at school) and how (e.g., in-person, phone call) they would communicate with the teacher. They then committed to their plan by specifying a goal and writing and reciting their goal and plan (e.g., *"In the coming weeks I will communicate with [child name] teacher. If, it is [time] and I am at [location], then I will [behaviour]."*).

WHEN TO USE THIS

This should be a core feature of any programme.

HOW TO APPLY THIS TO YOUR PROGRAMME

Ask the parents to commit - ideally publically - to attending each session and develop a plan for how they'll attend, including how they'll overcome any challenges. For example, *"I'll ask my dad to look after Miguel so I can attend each session by myself. I'll drop Miguel off around 3pm and then I'll take the 504 bus at 3:30pm to arrive on time. If my dad can't look after Miguel, I'll ask my sister. If she can't help out, I'll take Miguel with me."*

Ask the parents to commit - ideally publically - to a specific goal (e.g., reading for 30 minutes every evening) and develop a plan for when, where, how they'll do this, including how they'll overcome any challenges. You should advise them to link the behaviour to a moment in their routine. For example, *"Every evening after bedtime (when), I will lie in bed with Ana (where) and read 5 pages of The Hungry Caterpillar (how). If she doesn't seem interested in reading, I will try reading her book about football."*



⁴¹[Arriaga and Longoria \(2011\)](#)

SOLUTION: BENEFITS

Explain the benefits of the target behaviours in terms parents understand

BARRIERS TARGETED

Inaccurate beliefs about benefits

EVIDENCE THIS CAN WORK

A programme in **Madagascar** increased children's school attendance and performance by telling parents about the returns to education in simple terms⁴². Parents received information about the average earnings for different levels of education and the corresponding percentage difference by education level (e.g., men who complete primary school earn around 28% more than those who don't).

WHEN TO USE THIS

This should be a core feature of any programme.

HOW TO APPLY THIS TO YOUR PROGRAMME

Emphasise the benefits of your programme and target behaviours which parents care **most** about and do so in terms they **understand**. For example, instead of saying a programme helps their development, you could say: *"Parents and children who complete this programme are more likely to have a better relationship, and the children are more likely to complete school."*

Where possible, emphasise the **immediate** benefits of what you want them to do (e.g., *"In tomorrow's session, you will learn how to play with your child and will find out that your baby is very smart."*).

You can also emphasise the **urgency** of acting (e.g., *"Under three is the optimal time to invest in your child's development. A baby's brain is growing so rapidly at this time that this is the point of maximum opportunity to boost their development."*)

In addition to emphasising the development benefits of the programme, you should speak with the parents to understand what they see as the benefits from their perspective (e.g., seeing how smart their baby is).

⁴²Nguyen (2008)

SOLUTION: REWARDS

Provide immediate rewards for performing the target behaviours

BARRIERS TARGETED

Present bias

EVIDENCE THIS CAN WORK

A programme in **India** doubled the percentage of children who completed their vaccinations by providing parents with a new and immediate incentive to do so⁴³: 1 kg of lentils for each vaccination administered and a set of metal plates if they completed the vaccination schedule.

The *Parents and Children Together* programme in the **USA** employed social rewards as part of their strategy which increased the time parents spent reading to their children⁴⁴. Each week parents set a reading goal. If they met their goal, they received a congratulatory SMS message. Parents could also see whether they were the top reader at their child's daycare centre in a given week. The programme, which included other elements, worked best for the most present-biased parents.

WHEN TO USE THIS

If you can provide rewards which are meaningful to parents and you can provide these rewards over the entire period that parents should perform the target behaviours (e.g., the attendance reward can be implemented across all sessions). Avoid offering rewards if you think there's a risk you'll need to withdraw them prematurely. If you withdraw the rewards, parents may stop doing what you're encouraging them to do⁴⁵.

HOW TO APPLY THIS TO YOUR PROGRAMME

Make the sessions and target behaviours fun so that parents actually enjoy attending sessions and applying the practices. In the sessions, reduce the amount of content to be covered and introduce games, quizzes and opportunities for parents to share and laugh about their experiences. Provide parents with fun at-home activities for performing the target behaviours. For example, the child can learn about handwashing by washing their parent's hands or learn letters from playing a game; the parents can participate in fun weekly

challenges, like singing their favourite childhood song to the child, making a toy, or holding a treasure hunt in the house. The activities should build on local traditions, games and cultural practices (e.g., baby massage in Nepal).

Reward parents for attending the sessions and performing the target behaviours. Rewards can be in-kind (e.g., refreshments, ticket for a raffle or lottery, play materials, photo of the parent and child, etc.) or social (e.g., congratulate parents for finding time in their busy lives to attend, offer certificates, monitor their progress toward obtaining the certificate and then hold graduation ceremonies etc.).

⁴³[Banerjee et al. \(2010\)](#).

⁴⁴[Mayer et al. \(2018\)](#).

⁴⁵[Sercán-Mori et al. \(2022\)](#) observed that parents stop attending nutritional monitoring services for children once short-term incentives to participation (e.g., food, in-kind gifts) are eliminated from the programme.

SOLUTION: FEEDBACK

Provide parents with timely feedback about their behaviour

BARRIERS TARGETED

Overconfidence

EVIDENCE THIS CAN WORK

A programme in Chile increased children's school attendance and performance by sending parents SMS about their child's attendance, behaviour and test performance⁴⁶. Over a period of 18 months, parents received weekly SMS about attendance and monthly SMS about test performance and behaviour. A range of feedback interventions find similar effects⁴⁷.

WHEN TO USE THIS

If you are able to accurately track parents' behaviour (so you can personalise the feedback).

HOW TO APPLY THIS TO YOUR PROGRAMME

Inform parents on a regular basis - e.g., in person or via SMS - about how they rank in terms of attendance relative to the other parents in the programme. What you say to a parent should depend on their attendance record. You should congratulate the parents with high attendance (e.g., "Congratulations! You are one of the top attendees.") but you should motivate parents with low attendance to attend more frequently (e.g., "We have not seen you recently. Most parents attend five or more sessions. Our next session is on [day and time] at [location].")

Track how often parents perform the activities recommended by the programme (e.g., talking to their baby) and give them feedback based on their performance. Make sure you congratulate parents who rank high on application and reinforce the benefit of performing the behaviour to keep parents motivated (e.g., "Well done! You're one of the top performers in the programme. [child's

name] is on [his/her] way to success!"). You should remind low-performing parents about the benefits of performing the behaviour (e.g., "Looks like you haven't been able to talk much to [child's name] this week. Remember, spending time talking to [child's name] helps [his/her] strengthen your connection with each other and helps their brain develop!").



⁴⁶ Berlinski et al. (2021)

⁴⁷ See Bergman (2020) for an overview

SOLUTION: LOSSES

Emphasise the losses from not performing the target behaviours

BARRIERS TARGETED

Status quo bias

Present bias

EVIDENCE THIS CAN WORK

A programme in the **USA** increased parental attendance at kindergarten events by setting aside financial incentives for parents⁴⁸. Parents could only claim the incentives after all events had taken place and were fined for each event which they missed (e.g., a parent who missed two events would receive 25% less than a parent who attended all events). Parents also received SMS emphasising that they would lose incentives by failing to attend: “[Event Name] is on [Day of Week] [Date] at [Time]. Hold onto the \$ in your Bank. Mark your calendar!” The programme even increased attendance at other kindergarten events which were not incentivised (i.e., parental attendance would not affect the level of incentives they received).

A programme in **Colombia** increased parents’ willingness to send their children back to early childhood centres after the COVID-19

pandemic by sending SMS which emphasised the losses of not attending the centres⁴⁹. For example, “Join the reopening of ICBF pre-schools, where your child will increase their physical, cognitive, and emotional development. Don’t be left behind!”

WHEN TO USE THIS

If you can clearly articulate the losses in concrete terms and they are significant.

HOW TO APPLY THIS TO YOUR PROGRAMME

Draft clear messaging emphasising the losses from not performing the target behaviours. For example, if parents have the option to opt out of any messaging, you can frame the option as “I will lose opportunities for my child’s development by not receiving these materials” instead of a more passive “I do not want these materials”⁵⁰.

Another example encouraging a target behaviour could look like “Time with your child is finite and precious. They’ll grow up in the blink of an eye. Don’t miss it by spending too much time on your phone. Spend quality time with your children without technology distractions.”

Illustrations by [Freepik](#)⁴⁸Shah et al. (2022)⁴⁹Ham et al. (2022). See also Kalil et al. (2021), who increased children’s attendance at kindergarten by sending messages which emphasise the losses of not attending. For example: “Tomorrow your child could be learning important reading skills. Don’t let Alex lose this opportunity!”⁵⁰See Gennetian (2021) for an alternative wording.

SOLUTION: SOCIAL NORMS (BEHAVIOURS)

Highlight that other parents perform the target behaviours

BARRIERS TARGETED

Social norms (family or community)

EVIDENCE THIS CAN WORK

The tax authority in **Guatemala** increased tax compliance by sending letters to defaulters which explained that most people pay their taxes on time⁵¹. The letters stated: "According to our records, 64.5 percent of Guatemalans declared their income tax for the year 2013 on time. You are part of the minority of Guatemalans who are yet to declare for this tax."

WHEN TO USE THIS

If the target behaviours are **popular** among other parents (e.g., most do them) that your programme participants identify with⁵² (e.g., similar socioeconomic background, location, ethnicity, religion, etc.).

HOW TO APPLY THIS TO YOUR PROGRAMME

Inform parents that parents similar to them perform the target behaviours. For example:

- "Most parents in your neighbourhood attend our programme."
- "70% of parents in your neighbourhood play every day with their children."
- "Over one thousand parents in your neighbourhood have completed our programme."

Illustrations by [Freepik](#)⁵¹ [Kettle et al. \(2016\)](#)⁵² [Bicchieri and Dimant \(2019\)](#)

SOLUTION: ROLE MODELS

Provide parents with examples of people like them who perform the target behaviours and overcame challenges to do so

BARRIERS TARGETED

Social norms Perceived lack of self-efficacy

EVIDENCE THIS CAN WORK

A programme in **Ethiopia** increased parents' aspirations, their investment in their children's schooling and the number of their children enrolled in school by showing them a brief documentary⁵³. The documentary gave examples of people like them who had improved their socio-economic status without support from the government or NGOs.

WHEN TO USE THIS

If you can use examples of parents that your programme participants identify with (e.g., similar socioeconomic background, location, ethnicity, religion, etc.)

HOW TO APPLY THIS TO YOUR PROGRAMME

Provide testimonials - video, audio, text or in-person - from similar parents who perform the target behaviours. These testimonials should cover the challenges those parents faced, how they overcame these challenges and the benefits of doing so. This technique not only leverages the concept of role models but also the messenger effect: the impact of a message depends on the person delivering it.⁵⁴

⁵³ Bernard et al. (2014)

⁵⁴ Dolan et al. (2010)



Illustrations by [Freepik](#)

SOLUTION: SOCIAL NORMS (BELIEFS)

Highlight that people approve of the target behaviours

BARRIERS TARGETED

Social norms (family or community)

EVIDENCE THIS CAN WORK

In Saudi Arabia, husbands often have the final say on whether their wives can work. Most husbands actually think women should be able to work but they underestimate the percentage of other men who agree with this. Researchers increased men's willingness to help their wives search for work by telling them about the percentage of men in their area who think that women should be able to work, thus correcting their perceptions⁵⁵.

WHEN TO USE THIS

When the target behaviours are popular among people who carry influence over the parents on your programme (e.g., similar parents, grandparents, religious leaders, community leaders, teachers, role models, etc.). For this solution to work best, there should not be a big difference between what people say and what they do⁵⁶. For example, saying that "Most

parents in your neighbourhood want to participate in our programme." is only likely to work if people believe that many parents actually participate in the programme.

HOW TO APPLY THIS TO YOUR PROGRAMME

Inform parents that people approve of the target behaviours. For example: "Most grandparents in your neighbourhood want their grandchildren to participate in our programme."

Share testimonials and endorsements from relevant reference groups - e.g., religious leaders, community leaders, teachers, role models, etc. - where they praise the target behaviours.

Illustrations by [Freepik](#)⁵⁵ Bursztyn et al. (2020)⁵⁶ Bicchieri and Xiao (2009)

Applying This Guide: Instructions For Readers



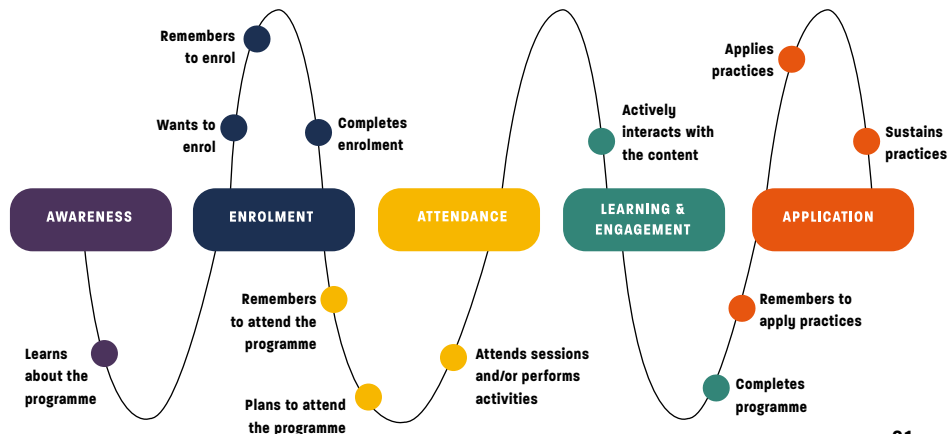
Mapping Parents' Journey Through Your Programme

Before you start

This section includes a set of tools (e.g., checklists, tips and questionnaires) to help you map the parent journey on your programme, diagnose barriers to parental engagement on this journey and design behaviourally-informed solutions to tackle these barriers.

The successful application of these tools will depend on the depth of knowledge you have about your programme, its processes and the parents' experiences with your programme. Therefore, before using these tools, consider conducting formative research. This means becoming familiar with the experiences of all stakeholders involved by conducting interviews, observations, focus group discussions, surveys, or any other method that captures the nuances of human behaviour.

The parent journey is a visualisation of the process that a parent goes through from the moment they learn about your programme to the moment they experience the anticipated impact (e.g., more frequent high-quality interactions with their children). This process consists of the different stages in your programme and parents' own behaviours and decisions within each stage. We suggest five broad stages, some of which might not be relevant to your programme. You can map the entire journey or focus solely on specific stages. While the specific decisions and behaviours can vary across stages, we find it useful to think about what parents need to remember to do, want to do and then actually do. The following guiding questions will help you identify the steps involved in each of these stages.



	AWARENESS	ENROLMENT	ATTENDANCE	LEARNING & ENGAGEMENT	APPLICATION
GUIDING QUESTIONS	How do parents learn about the programme for the first time?	What do parents need to do to enrol or start participating in your programme?	Once parents complete the enrolment process, what do they need to do next?	During the programme activities, what do parents need to do to engage and absorb the content?	What are parents expected to do at home after engaging with the programme?
STEPS (BEHAVIOURS AND/OR DECISIONS)	<p>Example:</p> <p>Attend school-related activities and/or belong to a school-related WhatsApp group</p> <p>Receive an invitation to join the programme</p> <p>Open the invitation and read the content thoroughly</p>	<p>Example:</p> <p>Want to enrol Remember to enrol Know how to enrol</p> <p>Click on a link in the invitation which takes them to a registration webpage</p> <p>Complete the registration forms and submit their registration</p>	<p>Example:</p> <p>Remember when the sessions occur</p> <p>Make a plan for how to attend the sessions (e.g., asking for help with childcare, working out how to travel to the location where the sessions are held, etc.)</p> <p>Attend the sessions</p>	<p>Example:</p> <p>Pay attention during the sessions</p> <p>Understand the content</p> <p>Understand how to apply the content in their daily lives</p>	<p>Example:</p> <p>Remember the practices</p> <p>Want to apply the practices</p> <p>Know how to apply the practices</p> <p>Begin applying the practices</p> <p>Regularly apply the practices</p>

Identifying the Behavioural Barriers Parents Face

After mapping the parent journey, the next stage is to identify the barriers which are limiting parental engagement in your programme. The barriers likely vary across the different stages and steps in the parent journey. For example, the barriers preventing parents from learning about the programme might be quite different from those preventing them from completing the enrolment process. We recommend that, if you're new to applying behavioural science, you focus on identifying the barriers for only a handful of steps.

To decide which steps to focus on, it can be useful to think through the following questions:

- Which steps are most important for the **impact** of the programme?
 - For example, it might make most sense to focus on identifying the barriers which can prevent parents from applying the practices.
- Which steps have the biggest **engagement** problem?
 - For example, if few parents show up to the sessions, it could make sense to focus on the barriers to attendance.



- What might be the **easiest** step to fix?
 - For example, if very few parents know of your programme, and you have an easy way to reach them, you could consider starting with this.

To identify which barriers might apply at these steps, use the following guiding statements.

If you answer “True” to any of the guiding statements, that barrier **might** be relevant to your programme. *However, it is important to derive the answer to these questions based on formative research findings (i.e., speaking with field staff, programme participants, parents in the local community, etc.) and not simply from personal assumptions.*

Barrier	Guiding statement	True	False
Limited attention	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Parents lead busy lives - Parents seem busy, confused and/or distracted when learning or receiving information about the programme 		
Inaccurate beliefs about participants	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - There are negative stereotypes in the community about parenting programmes and parents who attend these programmes 		
Overconfidence	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Parents don't believe they need support in developing their parenting skills - Parents don't believe their children need additional support 		
Hassle factors	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Parents say they want to enrol but never get around to it - The enrolment process is not straightforward (e.g., it requires completing forms that can be perceived as complicated or providing documents, like ID cards or certificates, that not everybody might have available) - There are lots of partially completed enrolment applications - The programme does not break down the target behaviours (e.g., reading) into simple step-by-step instructions 		
Social norms (family or community)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Few members of the community have already participated in the programme - Parents express concern about a possible lack of support from a local influencer or leader - There are differences between what the programme encourages parents to do and local parenting practices - Lessons taught by the programme are different to what parents' close family do or did (e.g., partner, parents and in-laws) 		
Present bias	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - From the perspective of the parents, the benefits of the parenting programme are long-term and abstract, but the costs are concrete and immediate 		
Planning fallacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Parents claim they are too busy to participate in the programme - Parents lack concrete plans for their daily activities 		
High cognitive load	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Parents seem overwhelmed, confused, or disengaged while learning programme materials - Parents seem distracted by contextual situations during programme lessons, meetings or trainings - The sessions cover a lot of new information - The information presented during programme sessions is abstract and there are few practical examples - The programme does not break down the target behaviours (e.g., reading) into simple step-by-step instructions 		
Inaccurate beliefs about benefits	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Parents fail to recognise or underestimate the benefits of supporting early childhood development in their homes and with their families 		
Status quo bias	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Parents have existing routines and ways of doing things with their children 		
Lack of self-efficacy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Parents seem insecure about their ability to raise a child, engage in more parenting activities and/or spend high-quality time with their kids - Parents worry about their ability to overcome challenges involved in what you're asking them to do 		

Developing Solutions to Address the Behavioural Barriers

Once you have identified the barriers within specific steps on the parent journey, you can develop solutions using the process below.

1. Select the priority barriers to target

a. Ask yourself the following questions.

- i. Which barriers have the biggest **impact** on the specific step? For example, if you think the key barrier preventing parents from applying the practices at home is present bias, focus your intervention on addressing this.
- ii. Which barriers are **easiest** to address? For example, if you think that parents forget to attend the sessions and you can easily send them SMS reminders, you should try doing so.

2. Identify the potential solutions

a. Which solutions are helpful for addressing these barriers? See Table 2 on p.18.

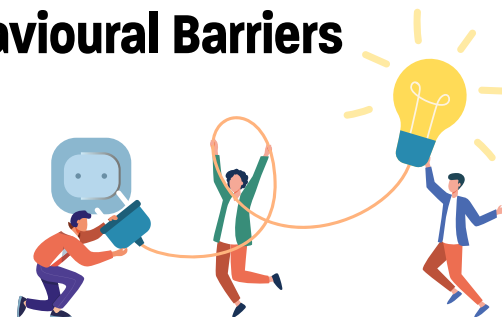
3. Think about 'when to use this' guidance for each solution

a. Consider the solutions where you're confident that you can meet the '*when to use this*' criteria

presented in p.19-29; drop any solutions where you can't or where it's uncertain if you can. Otherwise you risk developing a solution which could be ineffective or even backfire.

4. Score and rank your solutions according to impact, cost, and fit⁵⁷

- a. **Impact:** do you think the solution will have a low, medium or high impact on the barriers you're targeting?
- b. **Cost:** how costly, in terms of time and resources, will it be for the team to implement the solution: cheap, moderate or expensive?
- c. **Fit:** regardless of the other criteria, is this solution something that fits with your culture and policies?



Start small with 1-3 solutions that work for your programme. The next thing to work out is the details of *how* you will implement the solution. This involves thinking through the contextual factors that will affect implementation. You should engage relevant stakeholders - including the target population - when developing your solutions. We present some example questions for each solution to help you start contextualising your solutions.

⁵⁷We leave it to you to decide how to weigh the different scores. For example, sometimes the cost of the solution may be more important than the impact and vice versa.

Adapting These Techniques: Questions to Consider

Technique	Questions to ask yourself
Regularly remind parents about what they need to do and why	<p>What is the most effective way to regularly communicate with parents?</p> <p>When during the day parents have the time and resources to pay attention to your communications?</p>
Provide parents with timely feedback about their behaviour	<p>How can you monitor parents' behaviours so you're able to provide feedback?</p> <p>What is the most effective way to regularly communicate with parents?</p> <p>When during the day do parents have the time and resources to pay attention to your communications?</p> <p>Who is the best messenger to deliver this type of information?</p> <p>Remember, feedback may be perceived as criticism. Consider messengers like teachers or session facilitators who are perceived as experts.</p>
Make it easy to perform the target behaviours	<p>How can you break down the behaviours into simple, step-by-step instructions?</p>
Help parents plan how they will perform the target behaviours and commit to their plans	<p>Is it within parents' control to plan for barriers to performing the behaviour?</p> <p>What types of mechanisms for public commitment can be easily and effectively implemented?</p> <p>How can commitment be signalled to others?</p>

Technique	Questions to ask yourself
Highlight that other parents perform the target behaviours	<p>Which parents do the parents on your programme identify with?</p> <p>Who has influence over what the parents on your programme think and do?</p>
Highlight that people approve of the target behaviours	
Provide parents with examples of people like them who perform the target behaviours and who overcame challenges to do so	
Emphasise the losses from not performing the target behaviours	<p>What are the concrete losses from not performing the target behaviours?</p>
Provide immediate rewards for performing the target behaviours	<p>What types of rewards will incentivise parents and are affordable for the programme?</p>
Explain the benefits of the target behaviours in terms parents understand	<p>How do parents define successful futures for their children?</p> <p>How can you link the outcomes of the programme to their definitions of success?</p>
Get parents to reflect on their successes	<p>Which aspects of their lives (which identities) can parents draw on to recall successes in their lives?</p> <p>Are these exercises better done individually or in groups?</p>

Testing Your New Solution in the Field

Once you have decided to implement your solutions, it is important to test their impact. Many well-intentioned solutions can backfire or be ineffective⁵⁸. You need to conduct a test to understand whether the solutions increase, decrease or have no impact on parental engagement.

Remember: improved knowledge does not mean improved practices. When deciding which outcomes to measure to evaluate a solution, be sure to capture parents' actual behaviours. For example, if your programme encourages parents to play with their children, you should measure how often parents play with their child. You may also want to assess their knowledge (e.g., concepts taught, benefits of play, etc.), but this won't necessarily tell you whether their behaviour has changed.

Within applied behavioural science, it is best practice to test solutions using a randomised controlled trial (RCT). In an RCT, you randomly assign parents to either receive no new solution or a new solution you want to test. For example, if you wanted to test the impact of sending parents reminders, some parents would receive reminders and others would not. You can then compare outcomes between these groups to estimate the impact of your solution.



Illustrations by Ezeipik

For example, if you wanted to test the impact of reminders on attendance, you could compare the average numbers of sessions attended by parents who received reminders versus those who did not.

However, sometimes there are insufficient resources (e.g., capacity, time, etc.) to conduct an RCT. If so, you can consider other evaluation methods, such as quasi-experimental methods

(e.g., Difference-in-Differences Analysis, Regression Discontinuity). Please reach out to us if you would like to learn more. You can find our contact details on p.4 of this guide.

⁵⁸ See [Stibe and Cugelman \(2016\)](#) for a review.

Self-Reflecting as Programme Stakeholders: A Shortlist of Implementer Barriers & Biases

Behavioural insights are not only useful to help us better understand the complex decision-making and thinking process of programme beneficiaries, but also of programme implementers and stakeholders. Programme designers, managers, staff, and donors, like everyone else, are also subject to behavioural biases and heuristics, and these could affect the design, delivery and impact of parenting programmes. Below, we discuss a non-exhaustive list of behavioural barriers that may influence programme stakeholders.

It is important to also note that parenting programmes often operate in complex, challenging environments. There are often structural barriers facing parenting programmes, including but not limited to: humanitarian conflict, complex stakeholder coordination or limited buy-in, imited programme funding, poor integration into existing sectors and systems, high staff turnover and low staff retention and broader societal constraints such as low digital penetration or community literacy rates. The behavioural barriers below neither disregard nor address these structural barriers, but rather present a different lens through which programme stakeholders can reflect on their thinking, decision-making and operations.

Table 3. Potential Implementer Barriers & Biases

Barriers	Description	What stage this is most likely to occur in the programme	How it might occur in the programme
Aversion of ambiguity	We have an innate tendency to avoid the ambiguous and the unknown. We prefer to choose options and paths with clear and complete information. ⁵⁹	Planning & design Implementation & delivery	This can manifest in programme staff being overly rigid, prescriptive, or "by-the-book" when designing, delivering and facilitating. Out of fear of uncertainty, implementers fail to account for the unique nature of each parent and child or tailor the programme components to their context. This could reduce parents' interest in the sessions, therefore affecting attendance and completion rates, as well as their ability to effectively implement the lessons at home.

⁵⁹ Frish and Baron (1988)

Barriers	Description	What stage this is most likely to occur in the programme	How it might occur in the programme
Cognitive overload	We all have a finite ability to retain and process information, apply knowledge, maintain focus and make choices. ⁶⁰	Implementation & delivery	Implementing and delivering a new intervention requires cognitive effort. Cognitive overload can be a barrier to efficacy especially for implementers who are new or for implementers who need to modify an existing and familiar routine. ⁶¹
Confirmation bias	We have the tendency to favour information that confirms our beliefs. As a result, we may discount newer information that is not in line with what we already believe, or even avoid such information.	Planning & design Implementation & delivery Evaluation Scale-up	If there is existing data from early pilots that confirms one's beliefs about a programme, later results that contradict those beliefs may be discounted. This can result in relying on false positives to make important decisions such as changes to programme design and scaling. ⁶² For example, programme implementing stakeholders may not reflect sufficiently on changes, amendments, or adaptations required for scale-up, or even invest sufficiently into programme evaluation to uncover these learnings.
Mental models	Mental models are the way we perceive the real world to be by virtue of our thought processes or ideas about how something works. These mental models may not necessarily be representative of the actual scenario.	Planning & design Implementation & delivery Scale-up	Implementers may have existing mental models about a problem or operating context that aren't tempered by direct exposure (e.g., cultural and societal norms, gender norms in parenting, poverty, conflict). Often, organisations overlook the importance of in-depth situational analysis, to assess the needs, demands, interest and understanding the barriers target families face. Without a precise perception of a problem, its context and why it occurs, there is a risk of designing and implementing programmes that aren't fit for purpose. ⁶³

⁶⁰ Zucker et al. (2021)

⁶¹ Zucker et al. (2021)

⁶² Mayer et al. (2020)

⁶³ World Bank (2014)

Barriers	Description	What stage this is most likely to occur in the programme	How it might occur in the programme
Planning fallacy	A human tendency to underestimate the amount of time it will take to complete a task, as well as the costs and risks associated with that task—even if it contradicts our previous experiences. ⁶⁴	Planning & design Implementation & delivery	Stakeholders do not budget sufficient time or funds to recruit and train implementation staff, run the programme, or gather data required for monitoring and impact evaluation.
Status quo bias	We prefer to have things stay as they are by sticking to a decision previously made. There is a tendency to do nothing to keep things the way they are ⁶⁵ . This is related to sunk cost fallacy (see below).	Planning & design	Stakeholders may forego better alternatives to running programmes despite the evidence that their current way of doing things is not the most effective ⁶⁶ . For example, given the choice of a new superior curriculum to a current curriculum, the choice is often the current curriculum.
Sunk cost fallacy	We have a tendency to follow through on an endeavour if we have already invested time, effort, or money into it, whether or not the current costs outweigh the benefits ⁶⁷ . This is related to status quo bias (see above).	Planning & design Evaluation	Stakeholders are hesitant to adapt, modify, or stop a programme, even if it is achieving limited impact or is not successful.

⁶⁴ Behavioural Insights Team (2017)

⁶⁵ Samuelson and Zeckhauser (1988)

⁶⁶ Polites and Karahanna (2012)

⁶⁷ Arkes and Blumer (1985)

About Us



The Bernard van Leer Foundation is an independent Dutch organisation working worldwide to ensure that all babies and toddlers have a good start in life. We inspire and inform large-scale action that improves the health and wellbeing of young children – especially the most vulnerable – and the people who care for them.

<https://bernardvanleer.org/>



The Busara Center for Behavioral Economics is a research and consulting firm that applies and advances behavioural science to address the most challenging development problems in the Global South. Busara works with academics, policymakers, and organisations to evaluate and implement behavioural and social interventions. Busara has consistently improved its partners' products, programmes and had policy impact across a number of sectors, including financial inclusion, health, agriculture, and governance.

<https://busaracenter.org/>



Save the Children is the leading independent organization for children, working in 117 countries to ensure children survive, learn and are protected. Launched by Save the Children in April 2020, the Center for Utilizing Behavioral Insights for Children (CUBIC) is the world's first applied behavioral science team focusing specifically on the world's most marginalized children's rights and welfare. Our mission is to apply behavioral science to create positive change for children.

<https://www.savethechildren.net/cubic>

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The Little Book for Parenting Programmes
Applying Behavioural Science to Increase Caregiver Engagement



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