



Tips·by·Text For Informal Caregivers

OVERVIEW

Tips·by·Text for Informal Caregivers is a low-cost, easy-to-scale program to help caregivers of young children build strong learning environments. Unlike other programs that place significant demands on caregivers, this text-messaging program breaks down the complexity of caregiving into small steps that are fun and easy to achieve. It provides encouragement and information over prolonged periods of time, and helps caregivers establish a safe, warm and cognitively stimulating environment. The text messages include fun facts and easy tips that can be readily integrated into existing daily routines.

BACKGROUND

Caregivers often face multiple barriers to creating positive learning environments. Virtually every aspect of human development, from brain growth to cultivating the capacity for empathy, occurs in a cumulative fashion starting in the early years of life. Therefore, deficits in the quality of early childhood care can have significant consequences.

Some care providers lack knowledge about the importance of effective caregiving practices and may struggle to provide stimulating care. Research shows that informal caregivers, in particular, often have low levels of formal education. Moreover, informal caregivers — like all those who care for children — can face decision-making challenges when faced with the huge array of options for activities to do with their children. Rather than making an informed choice, they may feel overwhelmed or distracted, and end up either not engaging with their child or defaulting to familiar, but suboptimal, activities.

KEY FINDINGS

- Informal caregivers report the Tips·by·Text for Informal Caregivers program helps them overcome informational and behavioral barriers to supporting child development.
- Informal caregivers enjoy the texts and 96% would recommend them to others. They also report that most of the time the children enjoy the activities.
- Informal caregivers who work with children across the age range of zero to five years find the information equally helpful.
- Less educated caregivers find the texts somewhat more helpful than do other caregivers.
- The majority of participants in the program are parents (approximately 90%), even though our goal was to recruit informal caregivers. The low percent of informal caregiver participants points to the difficulty of recruiting this population.
- Informal caregivers in our survey sample were evenly split between caring for only other people's children and caring for both their own and others'. The most common non-parent was an aunt, followed by a friend.
- We find little difference in ratings of the program between parents and informal caregivers.

Caregivers need access to easy activities that are meaningful and productive. They also need reminders that, by engaging with the children in their care, they can help those children thrive. Caregivers and their children can benefit from programs that maintain attention and fidelity over time, delineate small and

achievable goals, and provide encouragement and useful information.

THE PROGRAM

The Tips·by·Text program provides these needed supports. It targets the development of zero to five-year-old children, and draws on insights from the proven text messaging programs for parents of preschoolers that we developed and tested in San Francisco and Dallas.

In keeping with the original Tips·by·Text program, the informal caregiver program participants receive three text messages each week. The first text of the week is a FACT text. This text provides context and information, and explains why the topic of the week is important. The FACT text provides incentive for follow-through with the upcoming week's activities. The second text of the week is a TIP text. This text gives caregivers specific advice about how to do an activity that will build the week's skill. Activities are designed to be fun and easily incorporated into existing routines. The third text of the week is a GROWTH text. This text describes a follow-up activity building on the week's skill, and offers the caregiver encouragement and positive reinforcement.

SAMPLE WEEK OF TEXTS

FACT: Learning number words is important for math! Children learn number words when you count out loud. Start with 1 and 2.

TIP: Today, count baby's hands. Say: "How many hands do you have? Point and count: 1,2. You have 2 hands! How many hands do I have? Count and find out!"

GROWTH: Keep counting to 2 to help baby learn number words! Today, count feet, eyes, ears. Say: How many feet? Let's count together. 1,2! 2 feet!

Text messages are designed to focus on the "Big 5" caregiver practices: building on interests and providing learning opportunities; using positive guidance; responding promptly to extend verbal and nonverbal communication; reading or telling stories; and

scaffolding development for growth and learning. Text messages are available in four languages and are geared to the specific age of the child.

THE STUDY

We fielded studies of the Tips·by·Text Informal Caregivers intervention over three years in the California Bay Area. These studies sought to understand how to design the messages to best meet the needs of caregivers, as well as how to recruit informal caregivers to the program. To assess caregiver attitudes about the program, we conducted interviews and surveys. These data collection efforts also gave us an opportunity to understand differences among caregivers and identify their needs, motivations, resources and frustrations.

The surveys and interviews, in addition to the low dropout rate of participants, provide evidence that the Tips·by·Text Informal Caregivers program appeals to a range of caregivers — across education levels, caregiver type, income brackets, and language. The program is equally well received by those working with children across the zero to five-year-old age range.

We find that the text messages help caregivers overcome informational and behavioral barriers to supporting children in their care, and are especially useful to caregivers with lower levels of education. Caregivers report that the texts recommend activities that are fun, easy, and helpful, and that the children enjoy the suggested activities.

Recruitment of informal caregivers is our biggest challenge in conducting this ongoing study. Caregivers' own isolation, combined with concerns about immigration status, language barriers, and other hurdles, makes recruitment difficult. However, we continue to increase our caregiver enrollment annually, to build relationships with our partners, and to establish new initiatives to better reach caregivers. Given the success of the text messaging interventions, we plan to continue offering the program to informal caregivers, and to work towards expanding it, with the goal of providing high quality content to as many caregivers as possible.

CONCLUSION

Designed to promote multiple areas of child development — including sensory, motor, literacy, numeracy, social-emotional, and health skills — the Tips-by-Text for Informal Caregivers Program aims to support caregivers of young children in building vital capacities.

The program provides information and easy, fun activities for caregivers to do with their children. It is available in four languages and geared to each child's precise age. Initial studies of program implementation show that caregivers enthusiastically recommend the program. The studies also highlight the difficulty of reaching informal caregivers at scale, due in part to lack of institutions currently supporting these early childhood educators.

RELATED PUBLICATIONS

Cortes, K., Fricke, H., Loeb, S. Song, D., and York, B., (Forthcoming). "Too little or too much? Actionable Advice in an Early-Childhood Text Messaging Experiment." *Education Finance and Policy* (NBER working paper 27827).

Cortes, K., Fricke, H., Loeb, S. Song, D., and York, B. (2019). "When Behavioral Barriers Are Too High Or Low – How Timing Matters For Parenting Interventions." NBER working paper 25964.

Doss, C. Fahle, E.M., Loeb, S. & York, B.N. (2019). "More than Just a Nudge: Supporting Kindergarten Parents with Differentiated and Personalized Text- Messages." *Journal of Human Resources*, 54(3), 567-603.

Fricke, H., Kalogrides, D. & Loeb, S. (2018). "It's Too Annoying: Who Drops Out of Educational Text Messaging Programs and Why." *Economic Letters*, 173, 39-43.

Widen, S., Orozco, M. & Loeb, S. (Forthcoming). "Reaching Unconnected Caregivers: Using a Text-Message Based Education Program to Better Understand How to Help Informal Caregivers Support Child Development." *Journal of Early Childhood Research*.

York, B. Loeb, S. & Doss, C. (2019). "One Step at a Time: The Effects of an Early Literacy Text Messaging Program for Parents of Preschoolers." *Journal of Human Resources*, 54(3), 537-566.