Background

Cigarettes…army recruitment…college enrollment…organ donation…what do these four things have in common? In fact, decisions about all four have been proven to be affected by “nudges.” A nudge is something that influences someone’s decision, and small nudges—in the form of a text message, a deliberately worded letter, a personalized email, or certain default options—can make big changes. Nudges arose out of the field of behavioral science which studies and analyzes human behavior. A nudge is just one way to shape a decision; a concept called “implementation intention” is another way. Take for example a study Todd Rogers conducted in 2008 during the presidential primary between Barack Obama and Hillary Clinton. During typical phone calls about voting on Election Day, some people were asked about the details of how they would get to the polls, when they would go, and what they would be doing beforehand; others were simply asked if they planned on voting. The people who answered the more in-depth questions, describing their intentions, were twice as likely to actually show up to vote on Election Day. It has been proven through many studies that small changes to recruitment or engagement strategies can have powerful results, so what are the right changes? How can nudges help you in your work?

The White House Office of Science and Technology Policy founded the Social and Behavioral Sciences Team (SBST) in 2014 to explore exactly these questions. The SBST has taken this idea of nudges and applied it to a range of government programs with the goal of increasing accessibility and improving efficiency. With small nudges they were able to nearly double the rate at which Department of Defense Service members signed up for retirement plans. The SBST increased college enrollment of low-income students by 5.7% simply through using a series of timely text messages. They also found that personalized letters made farmers 22% more likely to obtain a microloan. These nudges were both cost-efficient and effective, but what does it mean for Head Start? How can Head Start programs use insights from behavioral science to help nudge participants, partners, and others in the community?

We know that the work Head Start programs do has the power to shape habits that last a lifetime. Nudges could enhance those effects. Simplifying the language used on forms makes people more likely to enroll, text message reminders can reinforce parent-child interactions, and prompting people to write down the time and date of an influenza vaccine makes them more likely to show up. Nudges like these can have great effects. One Head Start program has found that one small way to change behavior and increase program attendance - read more below!

Resources

White House Social and Behavioral Sciences Team Annual Report
The White House Office of Science and Technology Policy created the Social and Behavioral Sciences Team (SBST) in 2014. Since then, the SBST has tested various nudges. In
September of 2015, they published this report to review the successes and challenges they’ve faced.

**The Rise of the Nudge--The Unit Helping Politicians to Fathom Human Behaviour**

By Tamsin Rutter

The United States isn’t the only country using nudges to influence people’s decisions. The UK, in fact, has had its very own “Nudge Unit” for several years, and nudges are being used all over the world. ([Find out more here!](#)) Many of their nudges have been great successes. They’ve made changes to sign up 100,000 more organ donors a year and doubled army applicants. They were able to reduce the dropout rate of adult literacy classes by 36% by sending a simple, two-sentence text message. The article also mentions what researchers learned from nudges that didn't work.

**Why Nudging Your Customers Can Backfire**

By Uptal Dholakia

The rise of the nudge began about eight years ago with a book by American economist Richard Thaler called *Nudge*. Nudges are everywhere, and this article details just a few and explores the difference between nudges and motivational psychology.

**Changing Parental Behavior One Nudge at a Time**

An Interview between Ariel Kalil and Emily Fledhake

Ariel Kalil is the Director of the Center for Human Potential for Public Policy and Co-Director of the Behavioral Insights and Parenting Lab at University of Chicago’s Harris School of Public Policy. In one study, the Behavioral Insights and Parenting Lab set out to increase the time low-income parents spent reading with their kids. The group that received behavioral nudges along the way read 2.5 times more than the control group!

**Research**

**Do You Have a Voting Plan?: Implementation Intentions, Voter Turnout, and Organic Plan Making**

David Nickerson and Todd Rogers

During every campaign, countless phone calls are made to ask people to vote. These standard efforts that ask citizens whether they’ll vote and who they’ll vote for have no significant impact. Before the 2008 Democratic presidential primary, Rogers and his team scripted a phone call that reached nearly 20,000 households in Pennsylvania. The script asked just three questions:

(1) Around what time do you expect you will head to the polls on Tuesday?
(2) Where do you expect you will be coming from when you head to the polls on Tuesday?
(3) What do you think you will be doing before you head out to the polls?

What the people who received the phone call answered did not matter because the process asked them to think about voting; they had visualized the future action, a concept called implementation intention. These simple questions increased voter turnout by 4 percent as a whole. When the results are broken down, multiple voter households were barely affected while single voter households saw an increase in turnout of nearly 10 percent.
The findings of this study have widespread implications about helping people plan for and reach their goals. These interventions may have the greatest effect on behaviors with individuals who are least likely to be engaged in discussions about the topic. The authors hypothesized that multi-voter household were less affected because they were already having these discussions with those with whom they live. As the next election approaches, how are you planning to get to the polls?

For more information about the use of behavioral insights in politics, click here.

**Mobile Technology and Family Engagement: Texting Intervention Increases Head Start Parents' Engagement in Parent-Child Activities**

Lisa Hurwitz, Alexis Lauricella, Ann Hanson, Anthony Raden, and Ellen Wartella

This study looks at the effectiveness of using text messaging as a supplement to engaging parents. The study was conducted in several Head Start centers to evaluate whether text messages that send educational prompts and reminders are a worthwhile and cost-effective addition to family engagement strategies. The service—a subscription that sends parents educational activity recommendations—was given to study participants for free but is usually a commercial service. Participants were from three Head Start centers and three Early Head Start centers.

All participants who received the activity text messages were enthusiastic about the service and engaged more with their child. Interestingly, the text messaging service was more effective for fathers. Fathers who received the text messages engaged in more activities with their children than fathers who did not receive text messages. The service was also more effective with parents of boys.

**Behavioral Economics and Social Policy: Designing Innovative Solutions for Programs Supported by the Administration for Children and Families**

Lashawn Richburg-Hayes, Caitlin Anzelone, Nadine Dechausay, et al.

The Behavioral Interventions to Advance Self-Sufficiency (BIAS) project was sponsored by the Office of Planning Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) and the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) to better understand how behavioral economics can be used to improve ACF’s programs. For this project, program administrators were asked to evaluate their programs to identify “bottlenecks” or areas which do not have the desired outcome. Then, at these “bottlenecks,” administrators were asked to look at the particular “bottleneck” from a different perspective, whether staff or participant. Each time, the problem is defined, reasons are diagnosed, an intervention designed, and the intervention is tested, and this process is done in repetition. The report lays this framework out in great detail.

This report details a study that was done through the Oklahoma Department of Human Services. The goal was to increase the number of clients who renew their child care subsidy on time. Three interventions were used. In one, the child care providers were given information about their clients’ deadlines, then prompted to send reminders to their clients about upcoming deadlines. For the second intervention, the renewal process was communicated early and clearly to clients and this communication continued throughout. The third intervention was a combination of both techniques of the first and second interventions. The first intervention, the
“provider intervention,” helped increase the rate of on-time renewal. The second intervention, the “client intervention,” had no effect on on-time renewal, and the third combination intervention had no greater effect than either intervention. Facilitating on-time renewals for child care subsidy is beneficial to both provider and client.

Discussion

1. What nudges does your program already have in place?

2. A “bottleneck” is a certain point in a process during which there aren’t desirable outcomes (Read our third piece of research for more information.) “Bottlenecks” are great targets for interventions or nudges that will hopefully change people’s behavior. What is a specific “bottleneck” in a process that your program has?

3. How has your program adjusted the processes that your parents and families go through to create easy paths to success? Shorter or simpler forms? Timely reminders?