The Basics®


FIRST FIVE YEARS RESEARCH REPORT

# Basics Insights

## Birth-to-5 Text Messaging for Early Relational Health & Kindergarten Readiness

NOVEMBER 2025

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# The Basics Principles


## INTRODUCTION

The Basics model is a public health approach for early childhood development launched in 2016. Grounded in The Basics Principles, early relational health and kindergarten readiness are key intended outcomes. This report examines the impact of Basics Insights text messaging, launched in 2020. It has become one of the most important tools that communities in the Basics Learning Network use to support families.

**Background**. The Achievement Gap Initiative at Harvard University (AGI) formulated The Basics Principles between 2012-14, with guidance from a science advisory committee. The committee drew on an extensive body of developmental research that also underlies two National Academies of Sciences reports, *Neurons to Neighborhoods* (2000)[1] and *Early Relational Health: Building Foundations for Child, Family, and Community Well-Being*." (2025)[2]

The *Neurons to Neighborhoods* report, published more than a decade before The Basics model was conceived, highlighted the critical influence of social contexts on early brain development. It laid the groundwork for research later advanced by the Center on the Developing Child at Harvard, where the concept of "*serve and return*" communication between infants and caregivers became core language for the field, including for The Basics.

The newly released *Early Relational Health* report emphasizes the pivotal role of strong loving relationships in child development and family wellbeing. It aligns most directly with The Basics first Principle, *Maximize Love, Manage Stress*, but readers will see how the issues addressed by all five Principles contribute to relational health.

Both reports address the importance of helping families from marginalized backgrounds to overcome structural barriers that impede their access to information and support. This lack of access contributes to disparities in lived experiences from birth to 5 and helps explain the troubling fact that inspired the AGI to create The Basics model: that cognitive skill gaps between racial and ethnic groups and across levels of parental education emerge before age two in national data and continue to widen over time.

The Basics' theory of change holds that disparities resulting from lived experiences can be reduced—and more children can flourish—when parents and other caregivers receive information, encouragement, and reminders that help make The Basics Principles part of their daily routines.

**How The Model Works.** Basics Learning Network communities embed The Basics Principles into existing services— for example, health care, libraries, family supports, early education and care—as well as parent-to-parent networks and local sites of national programs such as Head Start and Reach out and Read.

In addition, they help families enroll to receive Basics Insights (BI) text messaging, as a key tool in The Basics' portfolio of resources.

**Basics Insights.** The twice-weekly messages to caregivers' smart phones are available from birth through the child's fifth birthday, delivering developmental information and activity ideas aligned with The Basics Principles. Current language options are English, Spanish, Arabic, and Brazilian Portuguese, with additional languages forthcoming.

While parents of every race, ethnicity, and education level can participate, the program is designed for families whose children may be at risk of entering kindergarten without adequate preparation. To ensure accessibility, the messages are written below a sixth grade reading level. BI was added to The Basics suite of tools five years ago in 2020, and participation is steadily expanding. The top 10 communities have together enrolled over 20,000 families, while the top 25 have each registered at least 250. These numbers vary based on how long communities have been active in the program and the level of local partner engagement. The long-term goal is to reach millions of families by engaging thousands of partner organizations, supported by hundreds of local backbone coalitions that partner with parents and other allies in local ecologies of family support.

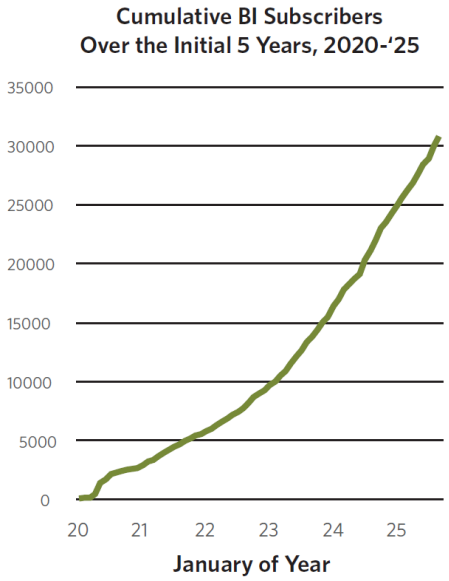
BI messages are organized around The Basics Principles and address the core domains of early childhood development: cognitive, social-emotional, language, physical, and approaches to learning. The birth-to-3 messages launched in 2020. They align with the *Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework and the Massachusetts Early Learning Guidelines for Infants and Toddler*. Messages for ages 3-to-5 were added in 2022, in response to requests from parents and family service providers and were designed to align with developmental science for that age group.

By fall 2025, 9,024 individuals—representing 32% of parents who had ever enrolled in Basics Insights—had completed a baseline survey online at registration. Of those eligible for follow-up, 4,267 (13%) completed a second survey administered 3.5 months later.[3] Nearly half of these respondents (1,920) had also completed the baseline survey, allowing for longitudinal comparisons to measure change over time within this subsample.[4]

In 2023, a separate random phone survey of Boston subscribers found that nonrespondents to the online surveys were actively engaged and similar to respondents in how they used the messages and assessed the program, suggesting that nonresponse bias may be minimal.

# FIRST FIVE YEARS' FEATURED FINDINGS

BI strengthens caregivers' understanding of child development, promotes earlier and more frequent use of research-based caregiving practices, and motivates users to share their new knowledge with others. Additionally, longer participation in BI—regardless of child age—is associated with higher scores on a combined measure of children's social-emotional and cognitive skills. Families with the least prior experience using Basics-related caregiving practices show the greatest gains.




## Parents Report High Satisfaction

Responses to the 3.5-month follow-up survey show high engagement.

- 65% report they have *talked about the messages* with a friend or relative.
- 81% totally and 16% mostly agree that *they would recommend* the messages.
- 62% totally and 28% mostly agree that the messages *help them understand* their children.
- 68% totally and 25% mostly agree that they *learn new things to do* with their child.
- 83% totally and 15% mostly agree that the messages *keep them thinking* about how to help their child learn.
- 37% use all of the messages and 45% use most of them, for a total of 82% who use all or most of the messages.

## Parents Increase Use of Practices Aligned with The Basics Principles

The BI baseline and 3.5-month follow-up surveys use simple, forced-choice questions to ask parents how frequently they engage in five activities that align with The Basics Principles: (1) hugging or cuddling with their child, (2) talking about feelings (theirs or their child's), (3) talking about numbers or counting objects, (4) playing with their child, and (5) reading or looking at books together. Response options range from multiple times per day to seldom or never.

Parents complete the baseline survey before they start receiving messages, so their answers are not influenced by the program. Because parents enroll when their children are different ages – from birth through age five - baseline responses by child-age can be used to estimate what 3.5-month survey results *would have been* without the program.

The difference between these estimated values and the actual results at each child age reflects the average impact of receiving BI for 3.5 months.

- **BI produces greater than normal increases in caregiving**. Among parents of infants, half or more of the increases in caregiving behaviors observed over the first 3.5 months of receiving BI are estimated to result from BI's impact, beyond the normal changes that occur without the BI program. On average, parents adopt key caregiving practices about **6 months or more earlier** than they would have without BI.

The child-age profile in BI baseline data shows that by around two years of age, the normal frequency of key caregiving behaviors stops increasing. It either plateaus or gradually declines as children get older. This pattern, observed across parental education levels and racial and ethnic groups, is consistent with findings in prior research.[5]

- **Impacts continue past two years of age.** Among parents of children older than two, there are positive changes in Basics-related caregiving behaviors over the first 3.5 months of BI enrollment that appear largely attributable to BI, since by this age such behaviors no longer tend to increase with child age.

Taken together, these results suggest that BI not only accelerates the adoption of caregiving practices during children's earliest years but also bolsters them beyond the point when such behaviors typically plateau.

## Parents with Lower Future Orientation and Persistence Narrow the Caregiving Gap

Survey items pertaining to parental mindsets measuring *Future Orientation* and *Persistence* were combined to create an index of Future Orientation and Persistence (FOAP). The index is based on parents' levels of agreement on a 5-point scale from "Not like me" to "A lot like me" with two statements: *"I am the type of person who plans for the future," and "I am the type of person who keeps on trying when something is really hard to do."*

- The largest increases in caregiving behaviors over 3.5 months receiving BI were observed among parents who scored lowest at baseline on the FOAP index.[6]
- This suggests that BI has the greatest impact on families whose baseline dispositions make them least likely, without BI, to use Basics-related parenting practices.

Over the 3.5-month period, parents in the lowest categories of the FOAP index substantially narrowed the gap in caregiving compared to peers in the top group. Their average caregiving level after 3.5 months of receiving BI exceeded the baseline level for the top group, although the top quartile also showed improvement.

These findings are consistent with prior research indicating that reminders are especially effective for parents who are more present-oriented than future-oriented.[7]

## Basics Insights Enhances Children's Social-Emotional and Cognitive Growth

The length of time a parent receives BI messages is a measure of program dosage. Every message delivers a "dose" of information and encouragement designed to strengthen caregiving.

- Findings from an earlier report show that longer BI enrollment for parents predicts greater social-emotional and cognitive growth for their children—with implications for kindergarten readiness—even after controlling for race and ethnicity, parental education, disability status, and frequency of Basics-related parenting practices.

- The estimated magnitude of this positive effect over the 30-month period from the age of 18 months to 48 months is equivalent to 28% more than normal growth on a combined measure of social-emotional and cognitive skills. The 95% confidence interval ranges from 12% to 43%, corresponding to an advantage of roughly 4.4 to 12.8 months, centered on 8.4 months.

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The remainder of the report begins with background on the BI program, followed by an examination of how awareness of The Basics model and BI text messaging spreads within communities, what caregivers report about the value of the messages, and the estimated impacts from quantitative analyses.

# THE DESIGN OF BASICS INSIGHTS

Nearly all adults now own a cellphone. A 2019 survey by the Pew Research Center found that 99% of adults aged 18 to 49 have some type of cellphone and 94% own a smartphone.[8]

The widespread use of mobile devices combined with the reach of text messaging creates powerful opportunities to influence adult behavior, given that about 95% of text messages are read[9] compared to about 25% of emails.[10]

This accessibility has fueled rapid growth in interventions that draw on behavioral science, using text messages to "nudge" people toward beneficial actions.[11]

Research shows that well-timed prompts and reminders can improve outcomes in a variety of areas ranging from health, education, and early literacy[12] to K-12 course performance,[13] and college attendance. [14]

## Key Features of The Basics Insights Program

Basics Insights (BI) delivers developmentally appropriate text messages that guide caregivers in building strong parent-child attachments and supporting early learning. The program reinforces trusted-messenger conversations about The Basics 5 Principles within Basics Learning Network communities or can serve as a stand-alone, bite-sized curriculum for busy caregivers.

Key features for families include:

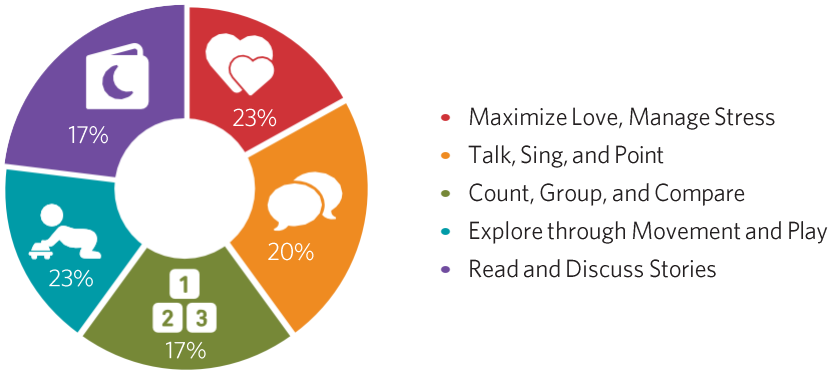
- **A five-year curriculum,** from birth to age five, with enrollment available at any point.
- **Two messages per week.** The first message shares a science-based "Fact" related to child or caregiver development, and the second offers a "Try This" activity linked to that fact.
- **Complementarity with other Basics resources**. The content for each week is explicitly aligned with one of the five Basics Principles. The text messaging can be used in combination with other Basics materials, such as videos and tips in the online Toolkit for Parents (English and Spanish) and a range of resources in The Basics Community Toolkit for frontline providers.
- **Developmental Sequencing**. The program uses the child's birthdate to deliver age-appropriate guidance that progresses over time.
- **Multiple Languages.** Messages are available in English, Spanish, Arabic, and Brazilian Portuguese, with additional languages planned.
- **Personalization**. Messages can be personalized with the child's name and gender, or a gender-neutral option.

Features for organizations that sponsor parents to receive BI include:

- **Easy to Sign-Up Parents** via a unique URL or QR code, with options for organizational branding.
- **Bulk Enrollment** as an option using spreadsheet upload.
- **Data Dashboard** which provides organizations with real-time enrollment tracking and aggregate demographic data of users signed up through the organization's URL link or QR code.
- **An Optional "Engage" Feature** that allows organizations to send local messages directly to enrolled families.

All five Basics Principles are woven throughout the five-year sequence. *Maximize Love, Manage Stress* is emphasized from the first week and represents the largest share of messages, tied with *Explore through Movement and Play* (Figure 1).

**Figure 1: The Share of Basics Insights Messages Covering Each of the Five Principles**




Messages evolve in step with a child's developmental age range. Figure 2 shows examples from the *Talk, Sing, and Point* Principle messages at weeks 17, 61, 101, and 144. In each example, the first message of the week is a "Fact" explaining a development insight, and the second is a "Try This" suggestion for applying that insight.

**Figure 2: Snapshot of Basics Insights Text Messages**

**Talk, Sing, and Point Messages for Weeks 17, 61, 101, and 144**

| Age | Basics Principle | FACT | TRY THIS |
|---|---|---|---|
| WEEK 17 | Talk, Sing, and Point | **FACT**: Your baby is experimenting with making sounds and learning that they get your attention. By responding, you encourage them to keep practicing! You are building their language and communication skills. | **TRY THIS**: When your baby makes a sound, show excitement in your face and voice. Let them finish so they know you are listening. Then respond with real words. See how long you can keep the "conversation" going back and forth by responding to their sounds and expressions. |
| WEEK 61 | Talk, Sing, and Point | **FACT**: Your child understands a growing number of words, even though they can't say them yet. Talking to them builds their vocabulary and strengthens your relationship. | **TRY THIS**: Tell your child each part of them that you love and give that part a kiss after you say its name. "I love your nose. I love your elbow. I love your toe." Be silly. |
| WEEK 101 | Talk, Sing, and Point | **FACT**: Children like to know that you are paying attention to them. They will make more of an effort to think and talk if they know that you will listen and respond in a supportive way. | **TRY THIS**: Show your child you are listening carefully. This may mean avoiding distractions, such as your phone. If you are busy, stop to say, "Wait a minute until I finish this, then we can talk. Okay?" Assure them that you are interested in what they have to say. |
| WEEK 144 | Talk, Sing, and Point | **FACT**: Your child may ask tons of questions. When you ask a question back, instead of just giving the answer, you help them develop problem-solving skills and confidence. | **TRY THIS**: Involve your child in answering their own questions. When they ask a question, respond, "Hmm, what do you think?" Listen and show that you value their ideas. Have a back-and-forth conversation. |

The messages are designed to strengthen Basics-related conversations in healthcare, childcare, and other community settings by providing behavioral "nudges" that encourage caregivers to integrate the Principles into daily routines. In addition, a subset address the caregiver's own wellbeing and social-emotional needs, a holistic approach that distinguishes BI from other caregiver-focused technologies, where social-emotional support is often underrepresented.[15]

## Experts Helped Ensure Quality

The Basics developed the BI messages, based on early childhood science and guidance from organizations such as the American Academy of Pediatrics.

Each message was classified under one of the Basics Principles during development. Expert advisors, including leading scholars and pediatricians, reviewed the initial drafts for content, phrasing, and sequencing. Messages were refined based on their feedback to ensure developmental appropriateness and clarity.

## Alignment with Birth-to-3 Frameworks

BI supports the whole child by addressing all core domains of early childhood development: cognitive, social- emotional, language, physical, and approaches to learning. The latter encompass curiosity and initiative, creativity and imagination, persistence and attention, openness to new situations, and self-regulation.

The *Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework (ELOF)* identifies five domains, or "broad areas of early learning and development … that are essential for school and long-term success."[16] They are: Approaches to Learning, Social and Emotional Development; Language and Literacy; Cognition; and Perceptual, Motor, and Physical Development. Each domain is subdivided into goals, which are "broad statements of expectations for children's learning and development" that are tailored to different developmental periods.[17]

Our detailed analysis of the ELOF shows that BI messages address all five domains and nearly all of the associated goals.

A similar analysis using the *Massachusetts Early Learning Guidelines for Infants and Toddlers* found that 48 of the 56 guidelines (86%) are reflected in BI messages. Some guidelines were not applicable because they address educational settings outside home environments.

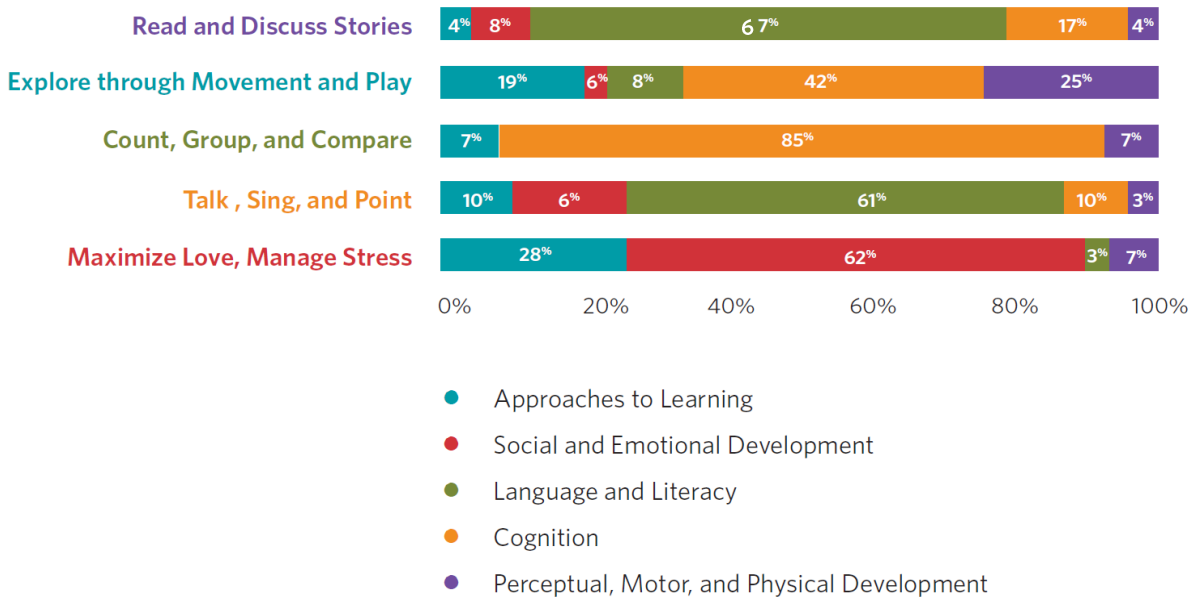
Figure 3 provides examples of how BI messages align with the developmental domain of both ELOF [18] and the Massachusetts *Guidelines.*[19]

Figure 4 shows how the messages associated with each Principle align with ELOF development domains. In most cases, a single ELOF domain accounts for the majority of messages associated with that Principle. For example, 85% of the **Count, Group, and Compare** messages align with the Cognition domain in ELOF. **Maximize Love, Manage Stress** texts are primarily associated with Social and Emotional development (62%). **Talk, Sing, and Point** and **Read and Discuss Stories** texts correspond most closely to Language and Literacy (61% and 67% respectively). And 42% of **Explore through Movement and Play** messages also align with Cognition, showing that multiple Principles can target the same developmental domain, though the strength of emphasis varies across Principles. Note also that 25% of **Explore through Movement and Play** corresponds to Perceptual, Motor, and Physical Development.

**Figure 3: Basics Insights Align with Developmental Domains in Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework and Massachusetts Early Learning Guidelines**

| HEADSTART DOMAIN | MASSACHUSETTS DOMAIN | BASICS INSIGHT MESSAGE |
|---|---|---|
| Approaches to Learning | Approaches to Learning | **TRY THIS**: When your child is struggling with a task, give them just enough help so they can succeed. You might need to give them a boost or move an object within reach. Then cheer them on to overcome the challenge. They might also signal that they need help by looking at you or gesturing. |
| Social-Emotional Development | Social-Emotional Development | **TRY THIS**: Live in the moment this week while you bond with your newborn. Hold them against your body. They'll be soothed by the warmth of your skin. Your gentle touch will make them feel loved. |
| Language and Literacy | Language and Literacy | **TRY THIS**: Sing or recite rhymes during daily routines, like changing your baby's clothes or diaper. You can make up a song about what you are doing together. Smile and look into their eyes. See if they watch your mouth as it moves. |
| Cognition | Cognition | **TRY THIS**: Find moments to play a fun game of "peek-a-boo." Hide your face with your hands. and then open them up to show a big smile. "Where did daddy go? Here he is!" Keep playing as long as your baby is interested and enjoying it. |
| Perceptual, Motor and Physical Development | Perceptual, Motor and Physical Development | **TRY THIS**: Babies should sleep on their backs, but during the day while they are awake, make sure your baby gets some "tummy time." They may fuss at first, so start with just a few minutes at a time. Make it fun by getting on the bed or floor with them, making silly faces, and chatting. |

**Figure 4: Percentages of Basics Insights Messages Corresponding to Each Head Start Domain, by Basics Principle**




In sum, Basics Insights text messages provide timely prompts that encourage parents and other caregivers to engage in everyday behaviors that support young children's learning and overall wellbeing across key developmental domains.

# FINDINGS FROM IMPLEMENTATION

This section examines how awareness of The Basics strategy and BI text messaging is spreading, what users report about the value of the text messages, and how parenting practices compare between the baseline and the 3.5-month survey.

## How Local Awareness Spreads

Most parents register for BI through local *trusted messenger* organizations. These same organizations often provide families with encouragement and reminders to incorporate The Basics Principles into daily routines. The cost of subscriptions is covered by local backbone organizations or other arrangements and parents are never asked to pay.

In the 3.5-month survey, respondents were asked, "*Do you ever hear about The Basics around your community? If yes, where? (Check all that apply.)*" Seventy percent selected at least one source, and fifteen percent of those reported multiple sources.

Figure 5 shows the percentages of respondents who selected each sector from the survey's drop-down menu of places where they hear about The Basics.

**Figure 5: Sectors where People Hear about The Basics**

(% that selected each sector. Some respondents did not select a sector.)

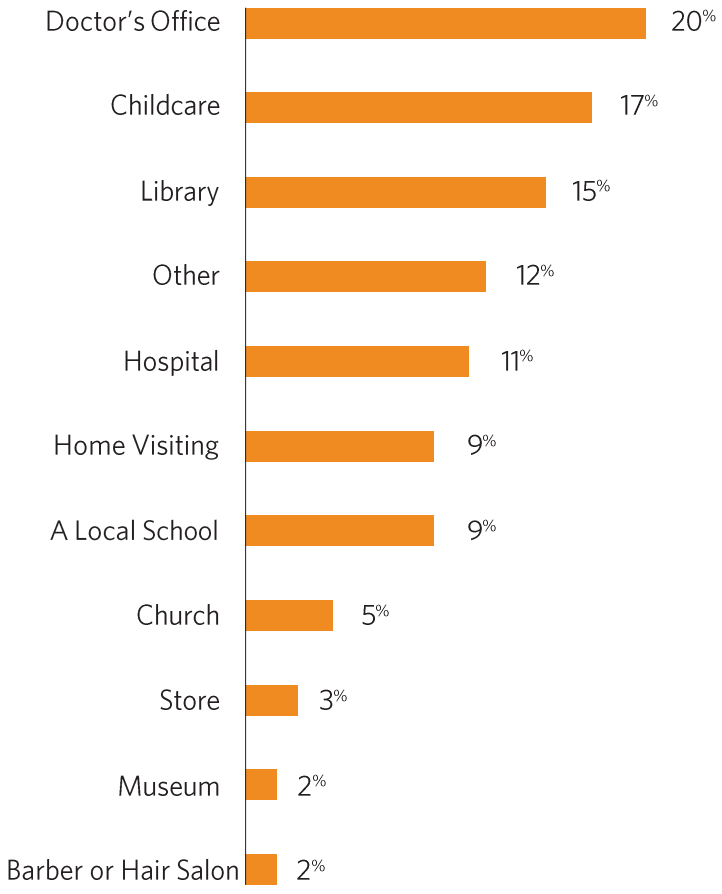


Figure 6 shows that 65% responded "*Yes*," when asked, *"In the last few months, have you talked about Basics Insights text messages with a friend or relative."*

**Figure 6: Parents Discuss Basics Insights with Friends and Relatives**

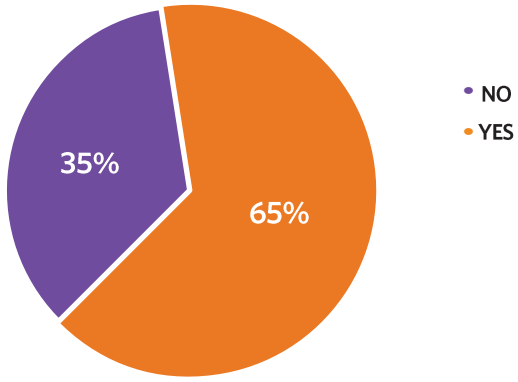
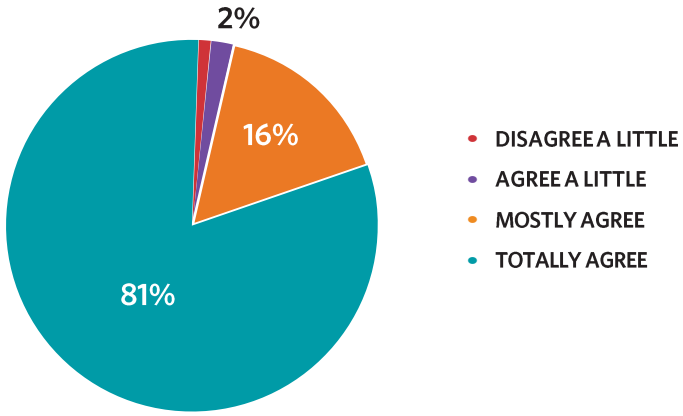



Figure 7 shows that 81% of respondents *Totally Agree* and 16% *Mostly Agree* that they would recommend the text messages to other parents and caregivers. This high level of endorsement suggests strong overall satisfaction with the program and broad-based willingness to promote it within their communities.

**Figure 7: Parents Would Recommend Basics Insights to Others**




## Parents Learn from Basics Insights

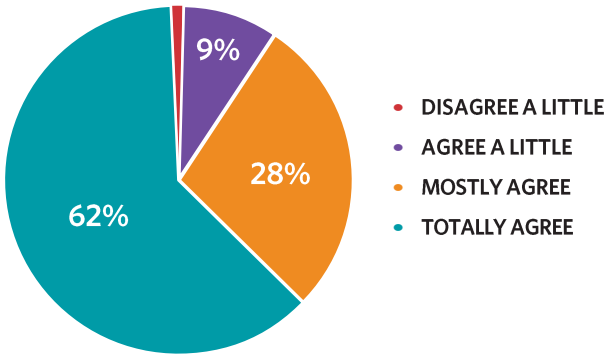
Research on behavioral change shows that people are more likely to act on recommendations when they understand how the actions will lead to outcomes they value.[20]

The BI program is designed to build this type of understanding. As shown previously in Figure 2 (see page 7), each Monday message provides a science-based fact, and Figure 8A shows that 90% of respondents to the 3.5-month survey *Mostly or Totally Agree* that the messages help them understand their child better. Each Wednesday message includes a "Try This" activity related to Monday's fact, and Figure 8B shows that 93% agree *Mostly or Totally Agree* that they learn new things to do with their child.

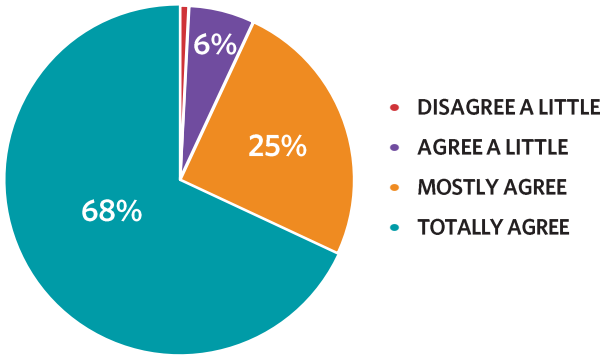
Pairing a fact on Monday with an activity idea on Wednesday helps engage and encourage caregivers to integrate new practices into daily routines.

**Figure 8: Messages Help Parents Understand the Child and Learn New Things to Do**

**8A | The text messages help me understand my child**




**8B | I learn new things to do with my child**

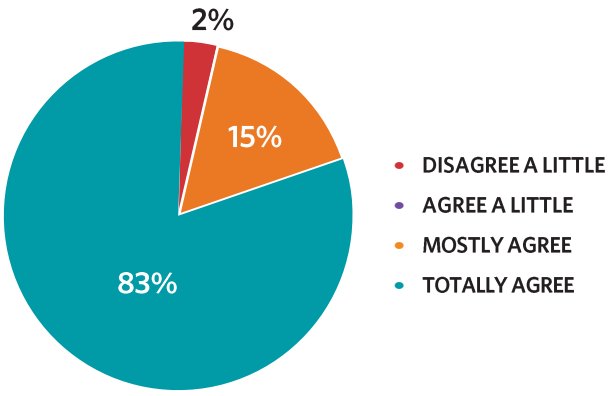



## Messages Affect Parents' Thoughts and Behaviors

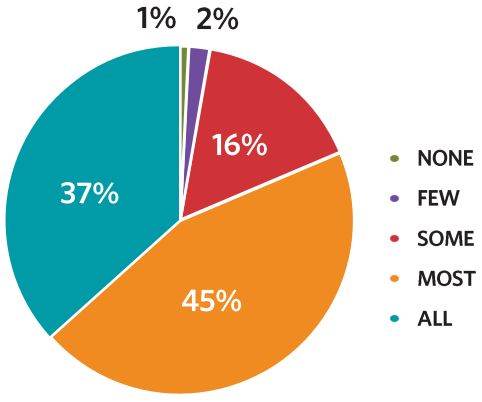
Parents report on the 3.5-month survey that BI influences what they think about and what they do. Figure 9A shows that 83% *Totally Agree* and 15% *Mostly Agree* that BI keeps them thinking about ways to help their child learn, while 9B shows that 82% (i.e., 37% *All* and 45% *Most*) report using the messages frequently.

**Figure 9: Messages Keep Parents Thinking about How to Help the Child Learn and Using the Messages**

**9A | The text messages keep me thinking about how to help my child learn.**




**9B | In the last few months, how many of the messages did you try to use with your child.**



## Parent Testimonial Quotes from a Randomized Survey

A random phone survey was conducted in 2024 with 175 Basics Insights subscribers in Boston who had not responded to the online baseline survey. Each received a text message notifying them of the upcoming call and offering a $20 gift card for participating in a brief interview about the messages they received on Mondays and Wednesdays. The interviewer completed interviews with 75 individuals, yielding a 40% response rate. On average, respondents had been receiving the messages for 18 months.

The purpose of the survey was to assess whether systematic differences existed between respondents and nonrespondents to the baseline survey. The main difference observed was that members of the random sample of baseline nonrespondents had, on average, fewer years of schooling than baseline respondents. This discrepancy may partly reflect the timing of the survey, which was conducted in November and December, just before the holidays, and the offer of a $20 gift card incentive, which may have influenced who chose to participate.

At the end of the phone survey, people were invited to share any additional comments. Roughly half did. The following themes summarize their responses.

1. **Support for First-Time Parents:** Many parents, especially those new to parenting, expressed gratitude for the guidance and encouragement provided.
2. **Practical Guidance and Tips:** Parents valued the clear, actionable advice that could be applied to everyday parenting situations.
3. **Sense of Community and Connection:** Messages helped parents feel connected and supported, whether or not they had family or friends nearby.
4. **Positive Impact on Parent-Child Interaction:** Parents described more frequent and richer activities and conversations with their children, which they believed contributed to their children's development.
5. **Appreciation for Consistency:** The regular, ongoing messages created a sense of continuity that fit well into daily routines.
6. **Motivation and Confidence:** Receiving ideas and encouragement helped parents feel more confident and motivated in parenting.
7. **Awareness of Child Development:** Messages prompted parents to notice and celebrate developmental milestones and skills.
8. **Adaptability:** Parents appreciated that the program worked for different family circumstances, including working parents, and that it was supportive rather than judgmental.

Taken together, these portray BI as a practical, supportive, and inclusive resource that meets parents where they are, strengthens parent-child connections, and builds caregivers' confidence across a wide range of parenting situations.

## Basics-Related Parenting Becomes More Frequent

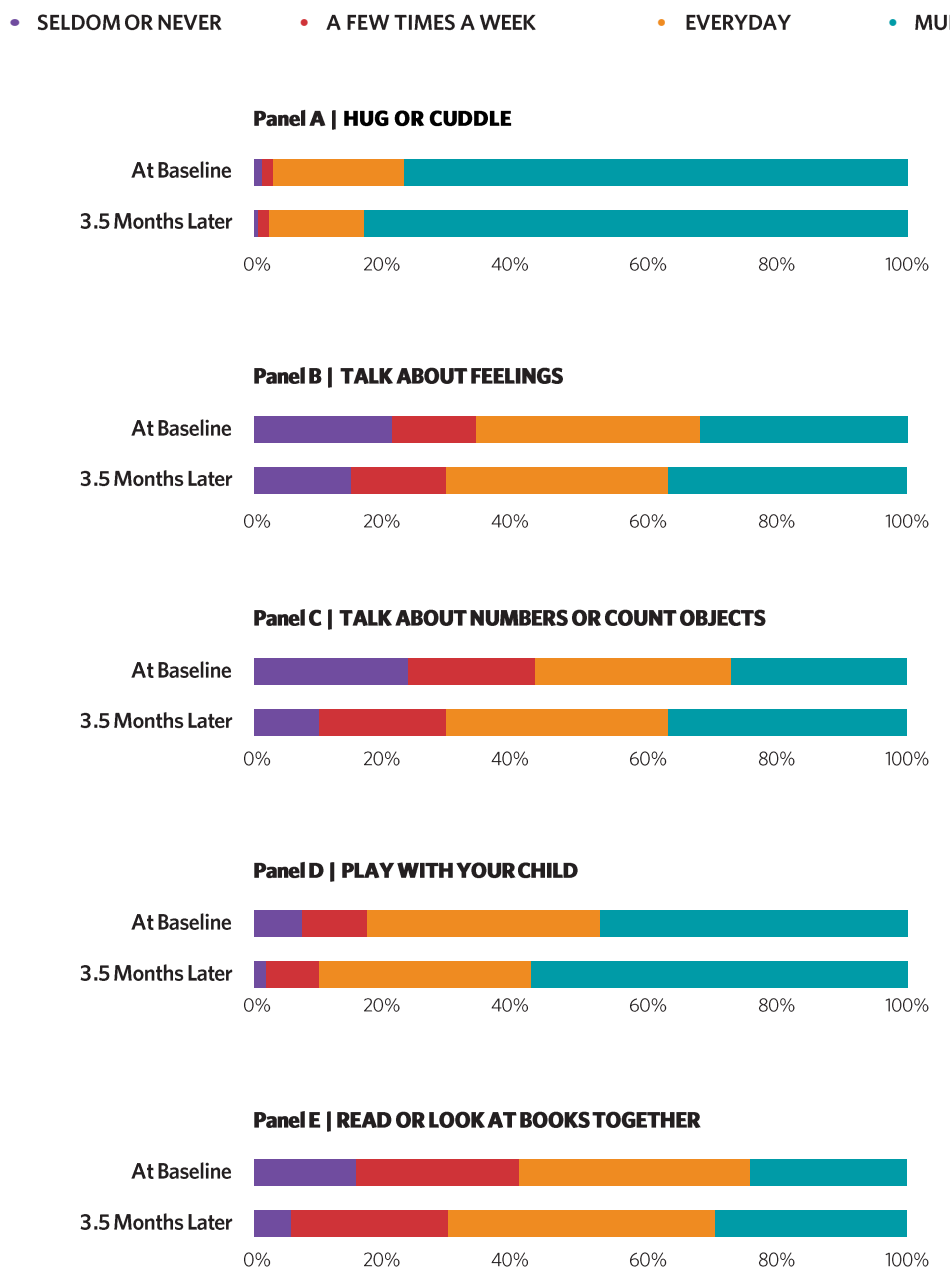
A total of 1,920 adults completed both the baseline and the 3.5-month surveys, allowing for comparison of the same individuals at two points in time to estimate how parenting behaviors change over the first 3.5 months of receiving BI messages.

The changes for each measured behavior were statistically significant. The survey items were designed to be simple and easy to answer. Parents were asked, "In the past week, how often did you..." followed by five activities: *Hug or cuddle with your child? Talk to your child about feelings/ their feelings?*

*Talk to your child about numbers or count objects? Play with your child? Read or look at books together?* Respondents could select from four options: **multiple times a day, daily, a few times a week, or seldom or never.**[21]

Figure 10 shows response patterns at baseline and follow-up.

**Figure 10: Frequencies of Basics-Related Caregiving Behaviors Increase from Baseline to 3.5-Month Follow-up, among Respondents who Completed Both Surveys.**




All the patterns in Figure 10 show a shift toward more frequent use of the parenting behaviors. The changes observed between the two time points are highly significant ($p < 0.001$).

## Parsing Age vs. Basics Insights as Explanations for Increased Frequency

**How much of the difference between baseline and 3.5-month responses simply reflects the fact that parents naturally increase certain practices as their children grow older?**

The key question is whether the observed changes primarily represent normal developmental trends or whether a portion can be attributed to receiving BI text messages for 3.5 months.

This analysis combines the five items shown in Figure 10 to create a composite measure of parenting calculated at baseline and again 3.5-months later. The mean and standard deviation of the baseline composite are used to standardize both the baseline and follow-up scores.[22]

Figure 11 draws on data from the 1,920 people who completed both surveys,[23] ensuring that the same respondents are represented at both time points. The horizontal axis shows the child's age in months at baseline, when the parent first registered for BI.[24]

The graph shows three lines:

- **At Sign-Up.** Representing responses from the baseline survey at registration.
- **At 3.5 Months.** Representing responses from the 3.5-month follow-up survey.
- **Counterfactual.** Representing an estimate of what responses *would have been* at the time of the 3.5-month survey if respondents had not been receiving BI messaging.

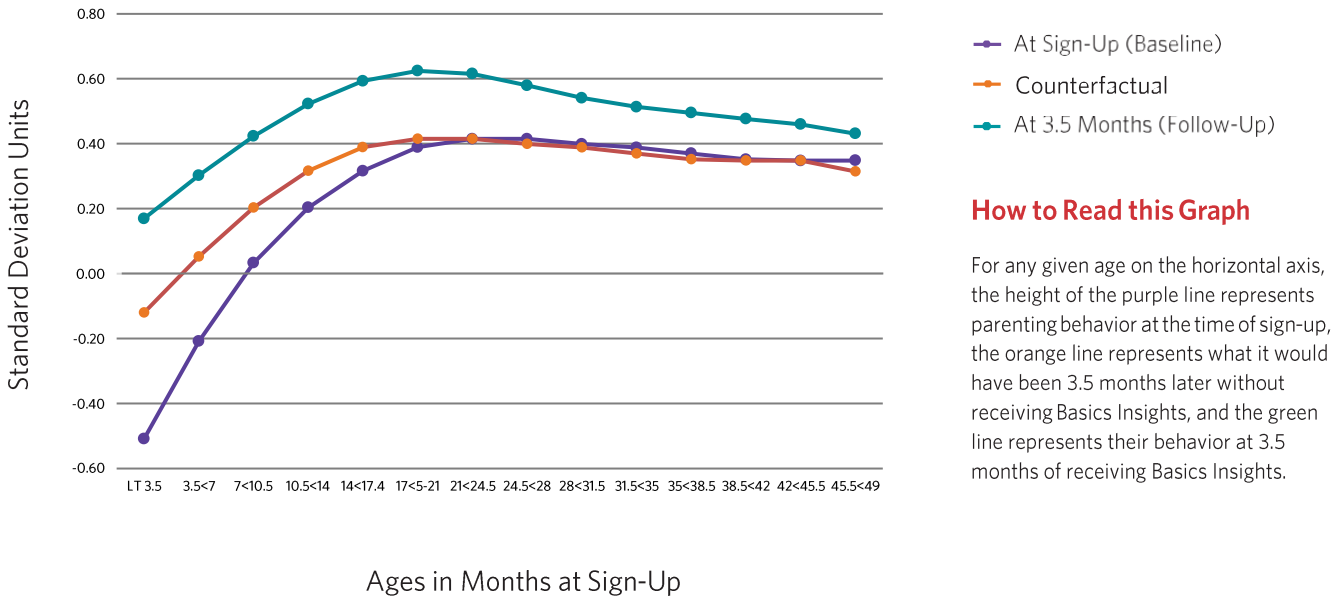
Calculating the counterfactual is possible because parents register for BI when their children are at different ages. For each parent, the counterfactual estimate for their 3.5-month response is based on the average baseline responses of other parents whose children were about the same age at that point in time, but who were completing the baseline survey rather than a follow-up survey. This average provides an estimate of what the parent's response would have been at the 3.5-month mark if they had not received BI during that period.

For any given age at sign up (shown on the horizontal axis of Figure 11), the vertical distance between the bottom and middle lines represents the change expected over 3.5 months without participation in BI. The distance between the middle and top lines represents the additional change associated with receiving twice-weekly messages.

The gap between the baseline and counterfactual lines is largest for children under two years old, indicating that parents naturally increase the kinds of interactions measured in the survey during this period. From age two onward, however, these behaviors typically plateau or decline slightly.

Note that the estimated impact of BI—the vertical distance between the counterfactual and 3.5-month follow-up lines—is positive across all ages and peaks between birth and two years of age at about 0.20 standard deviation (defined on the baseline distribution), suggesting the strongest program effects on parental behaviors occur during this early developmental window.

**Figure 11: Use of Basics-Related Caregiving Practices, by Age in Months at Sign-Up, for the Matched Sample of Baseline and Follow-Up Respondents**




**How to Read this Graph**

For any given age on the horizontal axis, the height of the purple line represents parenting behavior at the time of sign-up, the orange line represents what it would have been 3.5 months later without receiving Basics Insights, and the green line represents their behavior at 3.5 months of receiving Basics Insights.

Figure 11 suggests that BI accelerates parents' adoption of age-appropriate caregiving behaviors. For example, parents of infants aged 3.5 to less than 7 months who have received BI messages since birth report caregiving levels comparable to those typically observed among non-BI parents of 10.5- to less than 14-month-old children, a shift of roughly seven months earlier in reaching similar levels of engagement. Likewise, parents of children aged 7 to less than 10.5 months who have received BI messages for 3.5 months report caregiving levels near the peak seen among non-BI parents, though their children are about ten months younger. These findings indicate that BI helps parents reach higher levels of responsive, developmentally appropriate interaction earlier in their children's lives.

Promoting the early adoption of science-based caregiving practices is one of the core reasons The Basics initiative was founded. The findings provide strong evidence that this goal is being achieved.

## Parents' Baseline Dispositions Help Predict their Improvement

An experimental trial conducted by Susan Mayer at the University of Chicago and colleagues found that parents who were more present-oriented, rather than future-oriented, benefited the most from receiving reminders to read to their children, something they planned to do but might not have done without the prompts.[25]

Does a similar pattern apply with Basics Insights? Yes.

The baseline survey asked parents to rate themselves on two mindsets:

- **Future Orientation:** *"I am the type of person who plans for the future".*
- **Persistence:** *"I am the type of person who keeps on trying when something is really hard to do."*

Analyses of the two items separately shows that each has a similar relationship to caregiving behaviors, so they are combined here into a single five-level index for simplicity. This composite measure, referred to as *Future Orientation and Persistence* (FOAP), ranges from 1 to 5, where 1 represents the lowest combined self-rating on the two items and 5 represents the highest.[26]

This analysis focuses on daily caregiving. Of the five practices in Figure 10, four are included here. *"Hugging and cuddling"* is omitted because, as Figure 10 shows, almost all parents report doing this daily, leaving little variation for analysis.

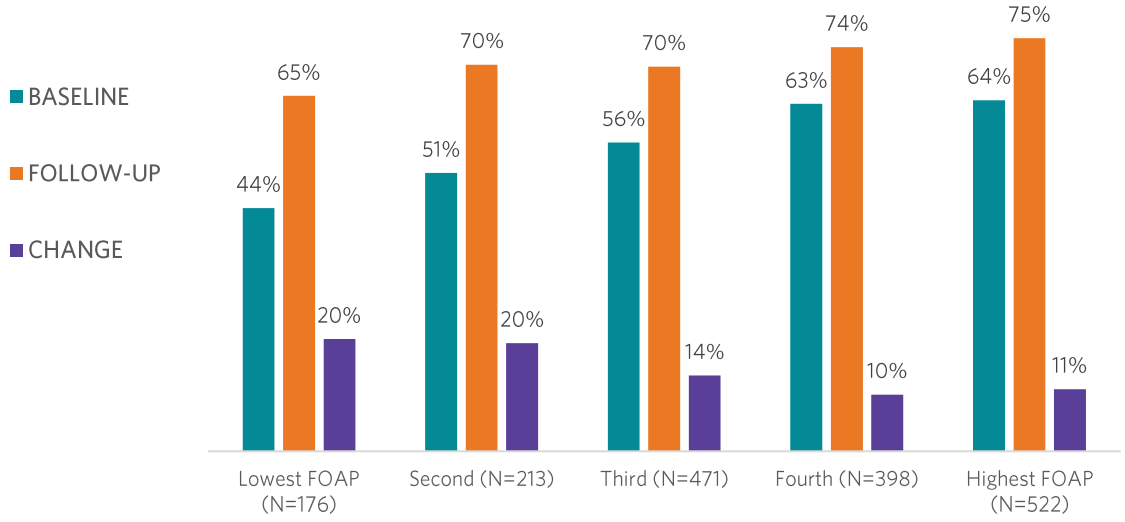
The questions guiding the analysis are: For each FOAP level, what percentage of respondents report using at least three of the four practices daily during the prior week? How does this percentage change from baseline to follow-up? How do these patterns differ across FOAP levels?

Figure 12 uses only the matched sample of respondents who completed *both* surveys.

Results show that at baseline, respondents in the lowest FOAP categories are least likely to use three or more practices daily, while those at the highest FOAP category are most likely.[27]

The most notable finding is that parents with the lowest FOAP scores at baseline show the greatest improvements over 3.5 months. As a result, their caregiving patterns become more similar to parents with higher FOAP scores.

**Figure 12: Percent Daily Use of Basics-Related Caregiving Practices at Baseline and Follow-up, by FOAP Category, using the Matched Sample**




Recall the survey item, *"The text messages keep me thinking about how to help my child learn,"* with which 83% of respondents "totally agreed" as shown in Figure 9A. By the 3.5-month survey, agreement with this statement was equally high among respondents at the highest and lowest FOAP levels from the baseline. The "*...thinking about how to help my child learn*" item was not asked at baseline, because respondents were not yet receiving the messages, but it seems likely that caregivers in the lower FOAP categories may have experienced the greatest increase.

The Basics movement welcomes all parents, but these findings suggest that BI—supported by relationships that encourage parents to apply the messages—may have its greatest impact among those least likely, without it, to engage consistently in the brain-building practices at the heart of The Basics model. The findings therefore are consistent with research showing that well-timed prompts can have an outsized impact on parents less inclined, by disposition, to sustain certain practices on their own.

## Child Development

A report available at this link analyzes data from The Basics' Parental Assessment of Child Development Status (PSCDS) to examine the relationship between BI participation and child development outcomes. The data set includes 2023 and 2024 responses from parents who had enrolled in BI for at least 6 months and whose children were at least 18 months old at the time of the survey.

The PSCDS survey was developed by The Basics, Inc. in collaboration with early-childhood scholars and practitioners affiliated with the Boston Opportunity Agenda, the city's collective impact initiative associated with the national StriveTogether network.

Nine items in an index for social-emotional and cognitive skills are shown on Exhibit A.[28]

**EXHIBIT A | Child Development Items**

**MY CHILD**

**Social Emotional**

- Shows ability to build positive relationships through appropriate interactions with adults and peers. Tries to make people feel happy.
- Enjoys playing with other children.
- Is good at calming down on their own if they're upset.
- Shows ability to cooperate in groups and helps to find a solution if the group has a problem.

**Cognitive**

- Can say how many there are, when a group has between 1 and 5 things in it.
- Can compare and sort objects...can put things into groups of the same type (for example, put the spoons with the spoons and the socks with the socks).
- If you say a word, can tell you a word that rhymes with it (e.g., "cat" and "hat")
- When confused, tries more than one way to figure something out.
- Can follow directions that have multiple steps (e.g., "pick up your shirt and give it to me").

The Cronbach's alpha for the nine items is 0.81 and item analysis indicates that each item contributes to it.

Based on variation among parents enrolled for different lengths of time, the estimated impact on child development of receiving Basics insights from 18 to 48 months of age is equivalent to 8.4 months of additional skill growth during that 30-month period on the blended index of social-emotional and cognitive skill. The 95% confidence interval ranges from 4.4 months to 12.9. This policy relevant finding will be the focus of ongoing research.

## Limitations

This report is based on self-reported survey data, and two main sources of potential bias should be kept in mind. Both could lead to overestimating the strength of the findings when generalized to all BI subscribers.

- **Favorability bias** - Respondents may overstate their satisfaction with BI or the extent to which they engage in the targeted behaviors.
- **Self-selection bias** - Parents who respond to the surveys may be more engaged and benefit more than families who do not respond.

## FOUNDATION FOR THE NEXT FIVE YEARS

The Basics model was launched in 2016 and BI was added in 2020. This report analyzes baseline and follow-up survey data reported by BI users from January 2020 through September 2025. Findings provide a strong foundation for the next five years of research and partnerships.

The Basics' whole-community approach is built around trusted messengers based in local institutions and personal networks who provide information, encouragement, and reminders to make The Basics Principles daily routines. One of their roles is to help families register to receive BI, as a standardized and dependable way to keep science-based caregiving top of mind and actionable.

The facts and activity ideas that BI delivers twice-weekly focus on one Principle per week. By sharing developmental science in small doses through accessible technology while embedded in a broadly collaborative effort to strengthen relational health, The Basics Model provides a scalable way to enrich young children's lives across whole communities.

Three findings are most noteworthy:

**First, the impact of BI on caregiving is positive, and it is largest from birth to two years of age**. While BI's estimated effects are positive throughout early childhood, they are greatest, on average, during the first two years of life at about 0.20 standard deviation. The likely reason that effects are largest in the first two years is that **communicating purposefully with young children is beneficial several months earlier than many parents initially realize.** Receiving BI leads them to start using Basics-related caregiving behaviors up to 6 months or more earlier than they otherwise would have.

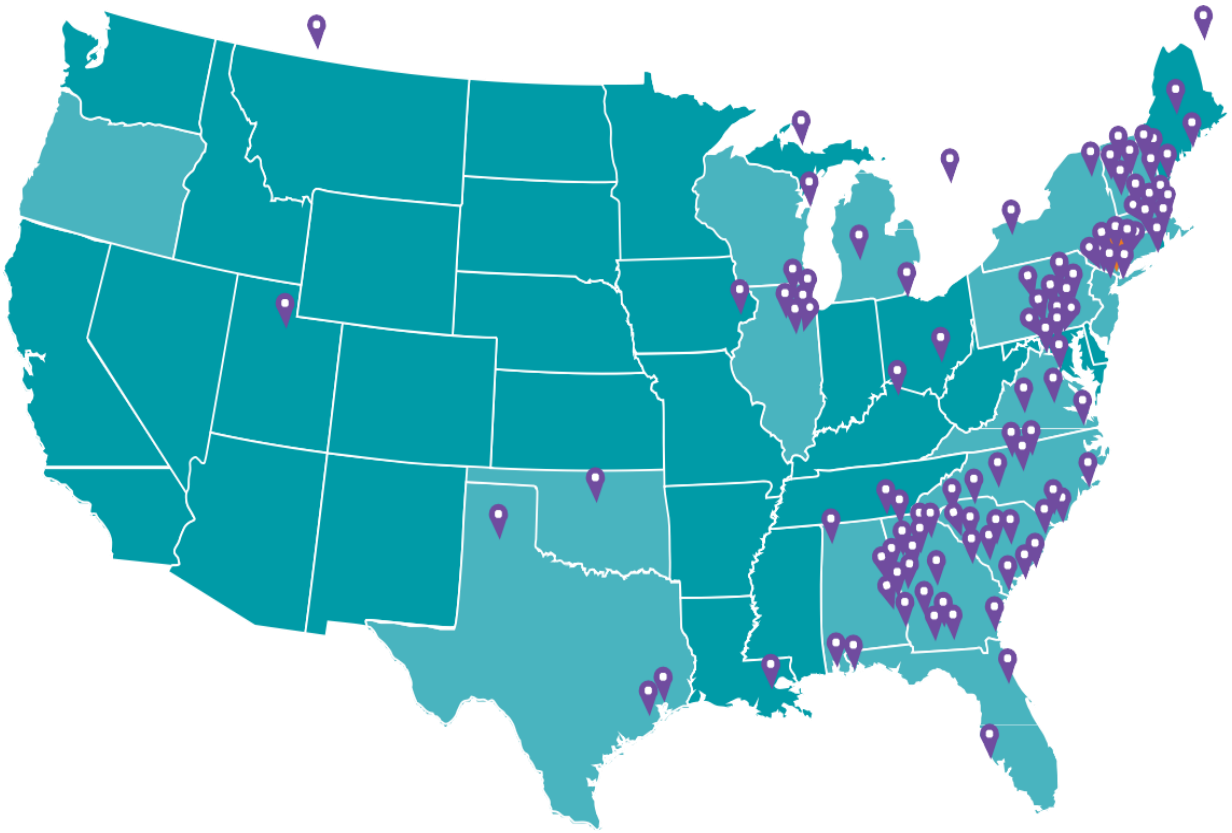
**Second, mindsets matter. Caregiving behaviors improve the most among parents who are the least engaged initially in practicing Basics-related behaviors.** Increases in Basics-related caregiving over the first 3.5 months of enrollment are greatest among parents who, at registration, report lower *future orientation* and *persistence* mindsets. Parents in the lowest two groups among five mindset levels become 20 percentage points more likely after 3.5 months of BI to be using at least 3 Basics-related practices daily, while parents on the highest two mindset levels increase their likelihood by half that much. The finding that **mindsets like future orientation are predictive of parenting behaviors and interventions can lead to positive changes in such behaviors** is consistent with other recent research.

**Third, BI dosage has positive estimated impacts on child development.** The research on BI finds, on average, that **children have a higher level of social-emotional and cognitive skill, compared to their same aged peers, the longer their parent has been receiving BI**.

Findings in this report align with prior research where impacts on parenting and other behaviors are the product of behavioral nudges delivered using text messaging.[29] These findings and additional issues will be studied extensively with collaborators and a steadily growing data set over the next five years.

# APPENDIX

## Locations of U.S. & Canadian Organizations that Register Basics Insights Subscribers



Locations in Brazil and Bermuda not shown.

# ENDNOTES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2 National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. (2025). Early Relational Health: Building Foundations for Child, Family, and Community Well-Being. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. https://doi.org/10.17226/29234

3 Responses to the 3.5-month follow-up survey represent 13% of users enrolled at least 3.5 months with a child not yet 5-years old at the time of the survey. This response rate is in the typical range for cell phone surveys. See: Elizabeth M. Brown, Lindsay T. Olson, Matthew C. Farrelly, James M. Nonnemaker, Haven Battles, and Joel Hampton (2018). "Comparing Response Rates, Costs, and Tobacco-Related Outcomes Across Phone, Mail, and Online Surveys ." Survey Practice 11 (2).

Nina Hoe and Heidi Grunwald (2015). "The Role of Automated SMS Text Messaging in Survey Research." Survey Practice Vol. 8(5). Pp. 1-16.

Bella Struminskaya, Kai Weyandt & Michael Bosnjak (2015). "The Effects of Questionnaire Completion Using Mobile Devices on Data Quality. Evidence from a Probability-based General Population Panel." Methods, Data, Analyses Vol. 9(2). Pp. 261-292.

4 The parent/caregiver users covered by this report enrolled between January 2020 and June 2025 and are concentrated in 22 states. Those 22 states are places that have local backbone organizations in the Basics Learning Network. Other states—all but Alaska, Idaho, and Montana—are represented because families often send the registration link to friends and family members living in other places.

5 Joseph Price and Ariel Kalil (2018). The Effect of Mother–Child Reading Time on Children's Reading Skills: Evidence From Natural Within Family Variation. Child development. Advance online publication. doi: 10.1111/cdev.13137

6 This aligns with other recent findings. See note viii below.

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10 Steven MacDonald (2019). "The Science Behind Email Open Rates (and How to Get More People to Read Your Emails)," *SuperOffice* (June). Available: www.superoffice.com/blog/email-open-rates/

11 Susan E. Mayer, Ariel Kalil, Philip Oreopoulos and Sebastian Allegos, op. cit.

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15 The Early Learning Lab, "NextGen Technology: Insights and Recommendations to Support the Parents of Children Ages 0-3," (2017). Available: www.startearly.org/app/uploads/2021/10/REPORT_NextGen-Technology.pdf?utm_source=chatgpt.com

16 Office of Head Start, "Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework: Ages Birth to Five," (2015). Available: eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/ sites/default/files/pdf/elof-ohs-framework.pdf

17 Ibid.

18 Office of Head Start, "Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework: Ages Birth to Five," (2015). Available: eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/ sites/default/files/pdf/elof-ohs-framework.pdf

19 Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care. "Massachusetts Early Learning Guidelines for Infants and Toddlers," (2011). Available: www.mass.gov/files/documents/2018/12/20/20110519_infant_toddler_early_learning_guidelines.pdf

20 Kara Weisman and Ellen M. Markman (2017). "Theory-based explanation as intervention." *Psychonomic Bulletin Review* (2017) 24:1555–1562. DOI 10.3758/s13423-016-1207-2

21 The last three response options on the survey—"once a week or less"; "never"; "child is too young/old"—were combined for reporting purposes to "seldom or never."

22 The mean of the baseline metric is then 0 with a standard deviation of 1, while the mean for the follow-up measure becomes 0.39 with a standard deviation of 0.79.

23 Lines on the graph are smoothed using moving averages.

24 Ages older than 49 months at sign-up are not shown in the graph because too few parents in this higher age range registered and completed surveys to provide a sufficient basis for analysis.

25 Op. cit. Susan Mayer et. al.

26 The correlation of Persist with Future Orientation is 0.43. Both variables were rated on a 5-point scale where 5=A lot like me, 3=Somewhat like me, and 1=Not like me. Among respondents in the matched sample that complete both baseline and follow-up surveys and answered the mindset questions, the pattern for Persistence was that 42% marked 5, 37% marked 4, and 19% marked 3, 2% marked 2 and 0,28% marked 1. For Future Orientation, 50% marked 5, 28% marked 4, 18% marked 3, 2% marked 2 and 1% marked 1. Because so few respondents score below 3 on either index, respondents with a score of 3 or below are combined, so that each index has values of 3, 4, or 5. Adding the two 3-level variables produces an index with 5 values, where the highest value is 10 and the lowest value is 6. The FOAP index in the paper combines the bottom two values into a single category.

27 The differences in caregiving across FOAP levels are highly significant, and the pattern hold when other variables, such as parental years of schooling and the child's age, are included in multivariate analyses.

28 The report treats the nine items as a single construct. Future analyses will examine the social-emotional and cognitive indices separately.

29 See endnotes 12, 13, and 14 and references in the prior report here.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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