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Title: Opportunity NYC – Family Rewards: Qualitative Study of Family Communication

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Abstract 3 Body

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Background / Context:

As discussed in the first paper in this symposium, the Opportunity NYC-Family Rewards project experimentally evaluated the effects of rewarding certain health, education, and work activities with cash that was paid directly to families, partially to see how relieving the stresses associated with poverty might affect child outcomes such as behavior and school proficiency. This paper will present findings from the qualitative component of the Family Rewards study. Part of the rationale for the Family Rewards experiment was in fact to test how families might respond to incentives without extensive support or guidance, and program designers had no explicit expectations about how families would embrace an “incentives-only” program in practice. In this way, a good deal of Family Rewards “implementation” occurred within families themselves.

One especially important topic around program implementation relates to family patterns of communication related to rewards. Although there were multiple ways that Family Rewards designers envisioned the conditional cash transfer (CCT) improving student performance (see Figure 1), the program’s most direct route to influence educational outcomes was to incentivize test scores and attendance – the conditions on the program’s “Activity List.” At the same time, Family Rewards oriented parents and not children to the program, and gave parents the rewards for elementary and middle school students’ achievement. This meant that parents of elementary and middle school students were free to decide how much or how little to explain about the program, directly influencing their child’s understanding of Family Rewards. Because of these factors, how families communicated about rewards helped determine how children understood the program, and how prominent the program was within family dynamics. This topic of communication is also important because research has shown that the way rewards are framed may influence their reception (Kahneman and Tyersky, 1979; Tyersky and Kahneman, 1981).

Purpose / Objective / Research Question / Focus of Study:

Aimed at low-income families in six of New York City’s highest-poverty communities, the Family Rewards program ties cash rewards to a pre-specified set of activities. This paper presents the qualitative findings from interviews with 77 families. It examines how families incorporated the program into their households, and specifically the techniques parents used to communicate with children about the rewards, and how children reacted to the education incentives. Specifically, we ask: (1) How did parents explain Family Rewards to their elementary, middle, and high school aged children? (2) What did children retain about the program rules and goals, and what were their views on receiving monetary incentives for school performance? (3) How did pre-existing tension in parent-child relationships influence parents’ abilities to communicate with their child about Family Rewards?

Setting:

The intervention was aimed at low-income families in six of New York City’s highest poverty communities in the Bronx, Brooklyn, and Manhattan.

Population / Participants / Subjects:

The core study involved approximately 4,800 families, half of whom could receive the cash incentives if they meet the required conditions. Data for this report rely on 156 structured

interviews with 77 families in the program group over a period of 2 years. To select participants, a random sample of program group members was drawn within each community district, and was stratified so as to ensure coverage of children who entered the program in the fourth, seventh, and ninth grades – the special targets of the intervention, although all children in the household were eligible for rewards. Three rounds of interviews were conducted, with 77 families interviewed in the first round, 44 families were then re-interviewed in the second round, and in the third round 39 children from 30 families were interviewed.

Intervention / Program / Practice:

Opportunity NYC–Family Rewards was launched by the New York City’s Center for Economic Opportunity in 2007 as a three-year intervention. It is a two-generation CCT program designed to encourage changes in parents’ and children’s behavior by offering rewards (cash payments) for behavior in three key areas: family preventive health care practices (e.g., going to well-child visits), children’s education (e.g., attending school regularly, attaining particular scores on standardized tests), and parents’ workforce efforts (e.g., full-time work). Rewards for parental behavior and younger children’s behavior were paid directly to parents. Rewards for older children’s behavior were split between children and parents (see Abstract 1 for more details).

Research Design:

In addition to the larger Opportunity-NYC – Family Rewards project, intensive interviews were included in the research design. To develop the universe of potential interviewees, a random sample of program group participants was drawn from each community district covered in the demonstration, stratified by the “target” or index grade of the child, with equal numbers in the fourth, seventh, and ninth grades. Outreach, sample characteristics, and analyses are described below.

Data Collection and Analysis:

Information was collected via intensive one-on-one interviews. All potential participants were mailed letters describing the research, and outreach workers conducted follow-up calls during the day and the evening to ensure a balanced sample in terms of those who were working and not working. Scheduling resulted in 77 families in Wave 1 interviews, conducted almost exclusively within participants’ homes, with some in MDRC offices when participants’ work schedules were conducive to such a meeting. Wave 1 interviews were conducted between April 2008 and May 2009. These families were fairly representative of the program group on a range of relevant characteristics (see Table 1).

Because the program’s theory of change was that benefits to participation could accrue over time, researchers attempted to conduct follow-up interviews within the same sample so as to trace these longitudinal dynamics within families, approximately one year later. Making contact again with families was somewhat more challenging, as some families had moved, and many others had phones disconnected. Special effort was made to reach those participants who described themselves as being less engaged with the program during the Wave 1 interviews, by leaving letters and postcards directly under their door, but there was little response from this particular group, suggesting that some families had disengaged from the program at that point. However, forty parents were re-interviewed during Wave 2 interviews, conducted between May 2009 and February 2010. As a result of outreach dynamics, in the second wave of interviews,

participants tended to be somewhat less advantaged (in terms of income and disability status) and also somewhat more engaged with the program (in terms of the amount of rewards accrued) than the program group as a whole.

These families were the basis for a third round of interviews, conducted directly with children in the household. Students who entered the program in the fourth, seventh, and ninth grades were especially solicited, but in many cases families were interested in having all children speak to interviewers. As a result, 39 children in 30 families were interviewed during the period of October 2009 and April 2010. All interviews were recorded and transcribed, and were subsequently coded and analyzed using NVIVO 8, which allowed inter-rater reliability checks.

Findings / Results:

The qualitative study provides insight on how parents communicated with their children about Family Rewards. Parental decisions around how to communicate with their children about Family Rewards greatly influenced the child's understanding of the program. As important as the basic knowledge that parents shared with their children, was the way parenting style and general family communication interacted during conversations around Family Rewards. In families that already were experiencing tensions in parent-child relationships, parents were less able to incorporate the program into their regular communication and more likely to choose to limit the child's knowledge of Family Rewards. As a result of all these factors, levels of communication varied greatly from family to family. However, in cases where parents were transparent with their child about the rules and goals of Family Rewards, children still reported a vague and sometimes inaccurate understanding of the program. Communication levels shaped the children's understanding of Family Rewards and potentially affected the strength of the program in its ability to directly influence a child's academic performance.

Conclusions:

Opportunity NYC – Family Rewards was designed to have very little service provision or case management – leaving the bulk of program “implementation” up to the families. The qualitative study sheds light on how families interpreted and integrated Family Rewards into their household. The most direct way families could use Family Rewards was to utilize the program as an incentive to encourage children to improve in school. However, to effectively use the program as an incentive, parents needed to find ways to communicate about the rewards to motivate achievement, and develop reward systems to reinforce their efforts. Parental decisions around how to communicate with their children about Family Rewards greatly influenced the child's understanding of the program. Low levels of communication between parents and children suggest a need for program implementers to provide parents with different tools to help them talk about incentives with children of different ages, with different personalities, and with different levels of academic readiness. Finally, because parents may not choose to use these tools within households, next-generation CCTs may also wish to consider more direct engagement and marketing of incentives to children.

Appendices

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Appendix A. References

References are to be in APA version 6 format.

Kahneman, Daniel, and Tversky, Amos. (1979). Prospect theory: An analysis of decisions under risk. *Econometrica*, *47*, 263-291.

Tversky, Amos, and Kahneman, Daniel. (1981). The framing of decisions and the psychology of choice. *Science*, *211*(4481), 453-458.

Appendix B. Tables and Figures

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The Opportunity NYC Demonstration: Family Rewards				
Table 1.1				
Characteristics of Qualitative Interview Respondents				
Characteristic	Wave 1 Respondents	Wave 2 Respondents	Program Group	
Parent's baseline measures				
Currently at least one parent is working (%)	41.5	36.4	45.9	
Annual household earnings (\$)	8,901	6,401	9,880	
Living in public housing (%)	31.5	28.2	30.4	
Receiving Section 8 rental assistance (%)	23.3	25.6	21.7	
Receives public housing or Section 8 rental assistance (%)	54.1	52.5	50.8	
Has a physical or mental condition that limits work (%)	28.1	36.4	27.3	
Primary language spoken at home is Spanish (%)	17.6	15.0	21.9	
Target children's ^a baseline measures (%)				
4th grade in year 1	28.8	32.5	33.1	
7th grade in year 1	34.3	30.0	31.6	
9th grade in year 1	37.0	37.5	35.3	
Met English learning standards, year 1	45.1	55.0	38.8	
Met math learning standards, year 1	56.3	70.0	56.2	
Summary of rewards earned by families				
Average amount of rewards earned in years 1 and 2 (\$)	6,714	7,171	6,183	
Sample size	74 ^b	40	2,377	
<p>SOURCES: MDRC calculations using Family Baseline Information Forms, administrative records from New York State, New York City Department of Education administrative records, and Seedco's Family Rewards program data.</p> <p>NOTES: Wave 1 interviews were conducted between April 2008 and May 2009. Wave 2 interviews were conducted between May 2009 and February 2010.</p> <p>In New York State, students who score at a level of 3 or higher on a 4-point scale are deemed "proficient."</p> <p>Sample sizes may vary because of missing values.</p> <p>Rounding may cause slight discrepancies in calculating sums.</p> <p>Year 1 and 2 cover the 2007-2008 and 2008-2009 school years, respectively.</p> <p>^aGrades 4, 7, and 9 are "target grades" for the Family Rewards program, and so all families have a child in grades 4, 7, or 9.</p>				

The Opportunity NYC Demonstration Family Rewards

Figure 1.2

Ways Family Rewards may Support Educational Achievement through Family Dynamics

