

## READY4K! The Effects of an Early Literacy Text Messaging Program for Parents of Preschoolers

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**Overview:** This brief summarizes the results of an evaluation of READY4K!, an early literacy text messaging program for parents introduced by the Early Education Department (EED) during the 2013-14 school year.<sup>1</sup>

**Background:** The home learning experiences of young children vary dramatically. Hart and Risley (1995), for example, finds that by the age of four, children in “welfare families” hear about 30 million fewer words than children in “professional families.” Most parenting programs have not successfully changed parenting practices or children’s learning. The few parenting programs that have shown promise are not widely accessible, largely due to costs or the demands that they place on parents’ time and effort. Few if any programs have directly targeted the behavioral barriers of parenting that result from the complexity of raising children.



A promising alternative to traditional programs is to break down the complexity of parenting into small steps that are easy-to-achieve and draw on widely-used technology to provide continuous encouragement and support to parents over extended periods of time. Given its widespread use, extremely low cost, and ease of scalability, text messaging (“texting”) is an ideal vehicle for this strategy. Eighty-eight percent of American adults have cell phones, 98 percent of cell phone owners can access texts, and text messages have a 95 percent open rate. Black and Hispanic adults, who are often under-represented in traditional programs, send or receive texts more frequently than do their white counterparts. Moreover, texting to promote positive behaviors has proven efficacy in healthcare and in other educational contexts. As part of a long-standing partnership with EED, we developed a text message-based parenting program for the department prior to the 2013-14 school year.

### The READY4K! program:

✚ READY4K! is a school-year long text messaging program for parents of four year olds designed to help them support their children’s literacy development:

- Linked to the California Preschool Learning Foundations
- Draws on research on literacy development, parenting practices, and behavior change strategies
- Covers a wide range of early literacy skills, from alphabet knowledge to concepts of print
- Structured as a spiral curriculum
- Molly Wertz of Raising A Reader, Catherine Aranda of Jumpstart, and Helen Maniates of the University of San Francisco, provided us with feedback on READY4K! texts
- We conducted a mini pilot study of the program at the Redwood City Public Library prior to introducing it in EED

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<sup>1</sup> For a more in-depth description of the program, detailed results and references, please refer to the full report.

- ✚ Each week during the school year, parents received three text messages about a particular early literacy skill or set of skills. For example:
  - **FACT:** Beginning word sounds are essential for reading. You can help your child learn to read by saying the beginning sound of words. “Read” starts w/ “rrr.”
  - **TIP:** Say two words to your child that start with the same sound, like happy & healthy. Ask: can you hear the “hhh” sound in happy & healthy?
  - **GROWTH:** By saying beginning word sounds, like “ttt” in taco & tomato, you’re preparing your child 4K. Now, have your child make the “ttt” sound.

### Study procedures:

- ✚ **Recruitment:** To recruit parents, we distributed READY4K! enrollment forms to EED enrollment clerks and offered them \$10 for each family that they enrolled. To further encourage participation, we gave parents a \$10 Target gift card for enrolling. Since we did not want texting costs to represent a barrier to participation, we also gave parents \$10 per month or a \$12 monthly Amazon.com gift card.
- ✚ **Participants:** In total, 519 of 874 eligible families at 31 of 34 sites enrolled in the study. Of the 519 families that enrolled in the study, 51 left SFUSD prior to the start of the school year, 19 left the district during the year, and nine opted out of the study, leaving an effective sample of 440 families. Assuming that READY4K! did not affect initial enrollment or mid-year exit decisions, only nine out of 440 families intentionally left the study – an opt-out rate of only 2%.
- ✚ **Methodology:** Within each early education site, we randomly assigned half of the parents to receive READY4K! text (the treatment group) and half to receive placebo texts (the control group). Placebo texts pertained to the district’s kindergarten enrollment requirements or required vaccinations; we sent them about every two weeks. At the end of the year, we compared the home literacy practices and school involvement of treatment parents to the practices and involvement of parents in the control group.<sup>2</sup> We also compared the spring Phonological Awareness Literacy Screening (PALS) scores of treatment and control children.

*Significant increases in parental activity at home and school translated into child learning gains in early literacy. The largest effects are roughly equivalent to two to three months of learning.*

### Findings:

- ✚ **Parents:** We find strong evidence that parents in the treatment group read the texts, used the tips, and found READY4K! helpful. More importantly, parents who received READY4K! texts engaged more frequently in home literacy activities with their children than parents who received placebo texts. These parents were also more involved at school, according to teachers.
- ✚ **Children:** Increases in parental activity and involvement translated into child learning gains in lower-case alphabet knowledge and letter sounds ranging from approximately 16 to 27 percentile points. The largest effects are roughly equivalent to two to three months of learning (all results are statistically significant). We find even more positive effects among children who progressed beyond the first level of the alphabet knowledge sub-test, including effects on their upper-case alphabet knowledge and PALS summed scores, ranging from 21 to 23 percentile points.

<sup>2</sup> Information on parents’ home literacy practices comes from an end-of-year parent survey (65% response rate), while information on parental involvement comes from an end-of-year teacher survey (58% response rate).