

BICS

THE BEHAVIORAL
INTERVENTIONS
FOR CHILD SUPPORT
SERVICES PROJECT

EXPLAINERS AND CASE MANAGERS

Engaging California Parents During Child Support Order Establishment

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The Behavioral Interventions for Child Support Services (BICS) project aims to improve federally funded child support services by increasing program efficiency, developing interventions informed by behavioral science, and building a culture of rapid-cycle evaluation. MDRC led technical assistance for the BICS team, partnering with MEF Associates and the Center for Policy Research. The BICS project is funded and managed by the federal Office of Child Support Enforcement in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The grantees are California, Colorado, the District of Columbia, Georgia, Ohio, Texas, Vermont, and Washington. The evaluation contract is overseen by the State of Washington's Division of Child Support in the Department of Social and Health Services.

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OVERVIEW

State child support programs secure financial support for children whose parents live apart. Establishing paternity, establishing and enforcing orders, and collecting and distributing payments are core child support program functions. An essential step in the process of establishing an order of support is delivering legal documents to a person named as a parent.¹ This step of delivering documents is known as “service.”²

In California, a parent receives a legal service package known as a Summons and Complaint (S&C) that says a legal proceeding to establish child support has been initiated and he or she has been named as the parent for the child or children in question.³ Many parents do not take any action in response to the S&C, which contains long and potentially confusing paperwork, and as a result child support orders are established without their involvement. These default orders are more likely to go unpaid than orders established with parental involvement. When parents do not pay child support orders regularly, custodial parents and children lack stable financial support. Furthermore, child support debt accrues for parents, potentially damaging their

- 1 Throughout this brief the term “parent” is used to describe someone who has been named as the noncustodial parent in a child support case. Noncustodial parents are also sometimes called obligors; they are the parties who have been ordered to pay child support. In this brief, a parent who *receives* child support is specifically described as a “custodial parent.” When the brief refers to “parents” in the intervention, these are only noncustodial parents, but when it refers to “both parents,” “either parent,” or “all parents,” custodial and noncustodial parents are included.
- 2 Throughout this brief, the terms “service,” “serve,” and “served” are only used in reference to this official delivery of legal documents rather than the more common usages related to providing assistance. “Services” is used in this brief only in the phrase “child support services,” which refers to the array of activities provided under the child support program, and in agency titles.
- 3 In some cases, paternity must also be established. In these cases, the service packet can include documents both for establishing paternity and for initiating the child support order.

credit, and enforcement actions such as driver's license suspension and contempt-of-court proceedings can be taken against them.

The child support agencies in Sacramento County and San Joaquin County worked with the BICS team (see sidebar on page 1) to test whether a behavioral intervention would increase parents' engagement in the order establishment process. Their primary goal was to increase the percentage of orders established by stipulation or hearing — order types that indicate parent engagement — and reduce the percentage established by default. A related goal was to increase the number of parents who submitted a specific form, known as the Answer form, in response to service.⁴

The intervention had several components that were the same in both counties. First, specially trained BICS case managers focused only on the order establishment process and on implementing the intervention. Second, these case managers added a simple explainer sheet available in English or Spanish to the front of the S&C and moved the Answer form in the S&C package so that it was directly behind the explainer instead of buried in the middle. Third, the BICS case managers called parents after service to explain how to fill out the Answer form. Finally, they called parents again if the Answer form was submitted, explaining the next steps parents needed to take.

To test the intervention, a total of 3,906 parents in Sacramento and San Joaquin Counties were randomly assigned into two groups: the intervention group and the control group. The intervention group parents were assigned to the BICS case managers and experienced intervention conditions, and the control group parents were assigned to non-BICS case managers and experienced business-as-usual conditions. The study counties and the BICS team tested whether the intervention could increase the percentage of parents who submitted Answer forms, decrease the percentage of orders established by default (by increasing the percentage of orders established at court hearings or by stipulation), and increase child support collections.⁵ The BICS team also measured whether the intervention had different impacts in the two participating counties and whether it had different impacts among parents who spoke different primary languages (that is, either English or Spanish).

⁴ California's "Answer to Complaint or Supplemental Complaint Regarding Parental Obligations" form can be found at www.courts.ca.gov/documents/fl610.pdf.

⁵ The two counties differ somewhat in their definition of "stipulation." In San Joaquin county, stipulations include orders where agreements were reached directly between both parents while they were in the courthouse (either before or during their scheduled hearing), whereas Sacramento records such agreements as orders established by hearing. A review of San Joaquin's 245 stipulations conducted after the study found that 54 of them (22 percent) would have been classified as orders established by hearing under Sacramento's definition. Since both order types indicate parental participation in the order establishment process, this study combines orders established at court hearings and those established by stipulation as one outcome.

The intervention produced positive, statistically significant impacts on:

- Answer forms filed (3.1 percentage points)
- Orders established at court hearings or by stipulation (3.2 percentage points)
- Child support payments (\$93 on average, from \$351 paid on the study order in the control group to \$444 paid in the intervention group)⁶

While the intervention did not have a statistically significant impact on the percentage of orders established by default, it did decrease the percentage of cases that never saw orders established by 5.3 percentage points (from 32.6 percent of the control group to 27.4 percent of the intervention group), an impact that is statistically significant. However, it is likely that some of these impacts largely reflect an unintended outcome of the intervention — increased rates of service — rather than the effects of the intervention components operating as planned.

More parents in the intervention group (74.6 percent) were successfully served than parents in the control group (69.6 percent). This impact was unanticipated and was larger in San Joaquin County (7.6 percentage points) than in Sacramento County (3.4 percentage points).

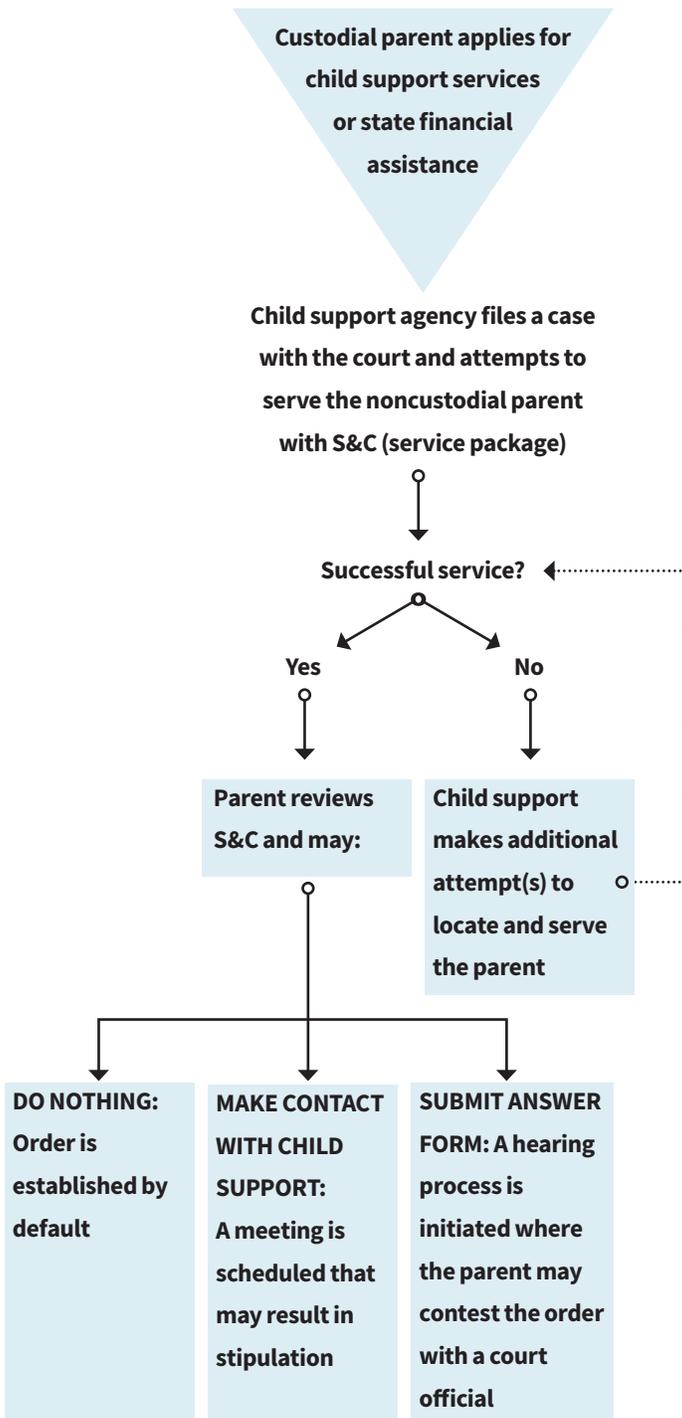
This statistically significant “service effect” is good in its own right because it is important to the order establishment process that parents receive the S&C packages. Unfortunately, this service effect makes it difficult to determine whether the intervention components or the increased rate of service are responsible for the positive impacts on Answer forms filed, orders established, and payments. There is some evidence to suggest that the intervention components (rather than the service effect alone) contributed to the statistically significant impact on orders established at hearings or by stipulations, particularly in San Joaquin County.

Another important finding is that the intervention increased overall order establishment by 17.1 percentage points among Spanish speakers, while increasing it by only 4.1 percentage points among English speakers. The impacts are statistically significant in both subgroups, and the difference between the two subgroups’ impacts is also statistically significant, meaning the intervention was more effective at increasing order establishment among Spanish-speaking parents.

Front-line staff members and leaders from both counties reported that many parents said they liked the intervention materials. Staff members enjoyed the ability

⁶ The “study order” is the first order opened by each BICS parent during the intervention period. It is the order used here to calculate total payments made. Some parents may have had two or more orders open during the intervention period, but payments on these other orders are excluded.

Figure 1. Initial Steps to Establish a Child Support Order in California



to connect with and motivate their customers to “have a say” in their child support orders using the talking points informed by behavioral science.

The sections that follow provide more background on the existing process; the intervention’s design, results, and implementation; and the lessons this study holds for the child support community.

THE EXISTING PROCESS

In California, child support orders are established through a judicial process. Child support staff members work closely with the courts, and a court official takes the final action to legally establish a child support order.

The order establishment process begins when either parent applies for child support services or when a custodial parent applies for state financial assistance (see Figure 1).⁷ If the custodial parent is the applicant, the agency attempts to make contact with the named noncustodial parent to explain that a child support case has been opened and to obtain current financial information to calculate the proposed order amount. Whether or not the parent is successfully reached, a case manager prepares the S&C paperwork for the new case, calculating a proposed order amount using whatever information is available.

The S&C is filed with the court and must then be delivered to the parent in person. In the majority of cases, this delivery is handled by a “process server” (not by mail or certified mail).⁸ Process servers notify the agency when they are able to serve parents successfully. If a process server cannot serve a parent, the S&C is returned to the

⁷ It is more common for custodial parents to apply for child support services, but noncustodial parents may apply. This intervention focused on cases initiated by custodial parents.

⁸ A process server is someone who delivers documents notifying a person about legal proceedings. Service can also be received in the child support office if a parent goes to the office. In Sacramento, 23 percent of all successfully served orders (both in and outside of the study) were served in the child support office during the study period, compared with 16 percent of all successfully served orders in San Joaquin.

child support office where the staff tries to find better contact information for that parent. If service is not successful, the order cannot be established.

Once notified of successful service, a child support staff member calls the parent to ask whether he or she has questions about the next steps in the process. These calls are unscripted and are handled differently by each staff person. Staff members are encouraged to make multiple call attempts to reach parents, but they are not required to do so. The BICS team observed that staff members' workloads often only allow them to make one attempt.

The S&C is 41 pages long and can be intimidating and difficult for parents to understand. The first page names the parent as a defendant in a court case, stating, "the local child support agency has filed this lawsuit against you." The package contains worksheets outlining the assumptions used to calculate the proposed order and includes information about how parents can respond if they do not agree with the terms. However, there is no explanation of the contents or how they are organized. The Answer form — a vital document a parent must review and complete if he or she would like to request a hearing to contest a proposed order — does not appear until page 26 and does not clearly state whether to file the form with the child support agency or the local court clerk.

Because the S&C is a legal document, the court requires that the child support agency send an official, English-language version to all parents regardless of their primary languages. While parents can request a version in Spanish, most Spanish-speaking parents do not.⁹ Conversations with staff members suggest that many Spanish-speaking parents who speak some English agree to receive forms and phone calls in English to avoid embarrassment, even if they are not fluent.¹⁰

Parents may react to the S&C in several ways:

- 1 Do nothing.** Take no action in response to the S&C or to any subsequent contact attempts. If parents do not take action within 30 days, an order is typically established by *default*.¹¹
- 2 Make contact with the county child support agency** and ask for a meeting. This meeting may result in an order established by *stipulation* (that is, a formal

⁹ If they do request Spanish versions, Spanish speakers may use them as guides but must record their answers in English on the English form.

¹⁰ During the intervention, 5.4 percent of the parents in the full sample (approximately 4 percent of parents in Sacramento County and 6 percent of parents in San Joaquin County) reported that their primary language was Spanish, either in an application or when working with an agency staff member. Staff members estimated that the actual percentage of Spanish-speaking parents in each county was roughly twice as large.

¹¹ Parents have 30 days to respond if they live in California and 60 days if they live out of state.

agreement among the custodial parent, the noncustodial parent, and the child support agency, approved by a court official). Making contact does not guarantee a stipulation, but it is the first step toward that outcome.¹²

- 3 Submit an Answer form**, which initiates the court’s hearing process and may result in an order established by *hearing*. Hearings are scheduled through the court, though child support staff members are present. If parents attend, they can present information about their incomes or parenting time that differs from the information included in the proposed order.
- 4 A combination of 2 and 3** above, which are not mutually exclusive. A parent may make contact with the agency to ask for a meeting and may also submit an Answer form.

The existing process after a parent submits an Answer form is different in the two counties where the intervention was tested.

- In **Sacramento County**, when an Answer form is received, child support immediately files it with the court to establish a hearing date. A child support staff member from the court unit then calls both parents to inform them of the court date and explain what to expect at the hearing.
- In **San Joaquin County**, a dedicated staff member calls every parent who submits an Answer form before filing the form with the court, to better understand the parent’s concerns and current circumstances. If it seems like a parent’s concerns could be resolved through a meeting in the child support office, the parent is encouraged to come into the office to establish an order by stipulation rather than going to court.

At the time of the intervention, Sacramento County and San Joaquin County did not have specialized case managers to work with Spanish-speaking parents.¹³ If one or both parents identified Spanish as their preferred language during the application process in Sacramento, Spanish-speaking office assistants certified by the county to work without an interpreter could help translate for case managers, or case managers could use a language line to call parents with the aid of an interpreter. In San Joaquin, certified Spanish-speaking case managers could serve parents directly, or case managers could use the language line.

12 If the custodial and noncustodial parents are not able to come to an agreement, the case may still be forwarded to the court for a hearing if the noncustodial parent submits an Answer form. Alternatively, a parent may make contact with the child support agency but still see an order established by default.

13 After this intervention, San Joaquin County implemented a specialized unit of certified Spanish-speaking case managers to work with parents who designate themselves as speaking Spanish and requiring an interpreter.

A central problem both county agencies observed was that many parents served with the S&C were not responding, which the agencies saw as a lack of engagement. In Sacramento and San Joaquin Counties in 2013 and 2014, only about 32 percent of parents served with S&Cs submitted Answer forms (40 percent in Sacramento and 16 percent in San Joaquin for the two years assessed). In both counties, a large percentage of child support orders were established by default (45 percent in Sacramento and 60 percent in San Joaquin). An analysis of payment rates for different types of orders showed that payment rates were highest among parents who reached stipulation agreements or established their orders at court hearings and lowest among default orders, though it may not be that the types of orders caused this difference in payment rates.¹⁴

INTERVENTION DESIGN

Sacramento and San Joaquin Counties' primary goal was to increase engagement in the order establishment process by increasing the percentage of orders established by stipulation or hearing — order types that indicate parent engagement — and by reducing orders established by default. A related goal was to increase the percentage of parents who submitted Answer forms, an important first step indicating parent involvement upon receiving the S&C. Additionally, San Joaquin County was particularly interested in increasing the number of orders established by stipulation as opposed to by hearing.

After identifying the goals, the BICS team engaged in a process called “behavioral diagnosis and design” to develop the intervention in partnership with the study counties. Through interviews with staff members and parents, observations of program activities, and data analyses, the BICS team mapped out the steps in establishing an order and identified “behavioral bottlenecks” — points where parents and staff members may be affected by common psychological and behavioral tendencies that get in the way of active participation. The team then developed an intervention to address the following behavioral bottlenecks in that process:

- The S&C package is very complicated and may be overwhelming. The Answer form, placed in the middle of the package, does not clearly present the available options for parents and the consequences of inaction.
- The S&C package frames the proposed child support order as a lawsuit against the parent. This framing could be threatening, which may cause parents to stop participating in the process.

¹⁴ The California Department of Child Support Services' analysis showed that on orders established by default, parents pay on average 25 percent to 29 percent of their support on time.

- The person who is served is addressed as a “litigant” and not a “parent,” which may generate a defensive and adversarial response.
- Parents may simply procrastinate or put off responding to the notice.

The intervention was designed to simplify and personalize information, clarify the consequences of inaction, explain next steps in the process, help parents plan, and build trust between parents and the child support agencies. The intervention focused on overcoming the bottlenecks listed above using specialized staff members, redesigned materials, and scripted calls at three points in the process. The intervention components are described below and summarized in Figure 2.

1 BICS Case Managers

- In each county, the intervention was delivered by two dedicated BICS case managers. The BICS case managers received special training in principles of behavioral science and procedural justice.¹⁵ BICS case managers focused exclusively on establishing orders for the intervention group. Control group parents were assigned non-BICS case managers who provided business-as-usual order establishment services and continued to perform a range of other tasks (enforcement actions, modifications, etc.) for cases that were not included in the study.

2 Explainer Sheet and Prominent Placement of the Answer Form

- **Explainer sheet.** Because the S&C is an official court document, it could not be redesigned for this intervention. Instead, the counties added an explainer sheet to the front of each S&C package prepared for a parent in the intervention group. The explainer sheet provided a simple summary of the process and clear instructions about what the recipient should do next (Figure 3). The back of the explainer sheet described how to fill out the Answer form. Personalized language invoked the procedural justice principle of being heard. A checklist clearly laid out the actions a parent should take next, providing an “implementation prompt” — a prompt for parents to make a plan to take action. In addition, language on the bottom half of the front page described the consequences of inaction in terms designed to activate “loss aversion” — the fact that people are more motivated by potential losses than gains of equal size. The messages encouraged parents to submit the Answer form or to make contact with the child support agency to discuss next steps.

¹⁵ “Procedural justice” refers to the idea that people’s perception of a process and how they are treated during it determines how they respond to it. Five central components of procedural justice are the neutrality of the process, voice and participation, respect, understanding, and helpfulness. See Emily Gold La Gratta and Elise Jensen, *Perceptions of Fairness: An Evaluation Toolkit* (New York: Center for Court Innovation, 2015).

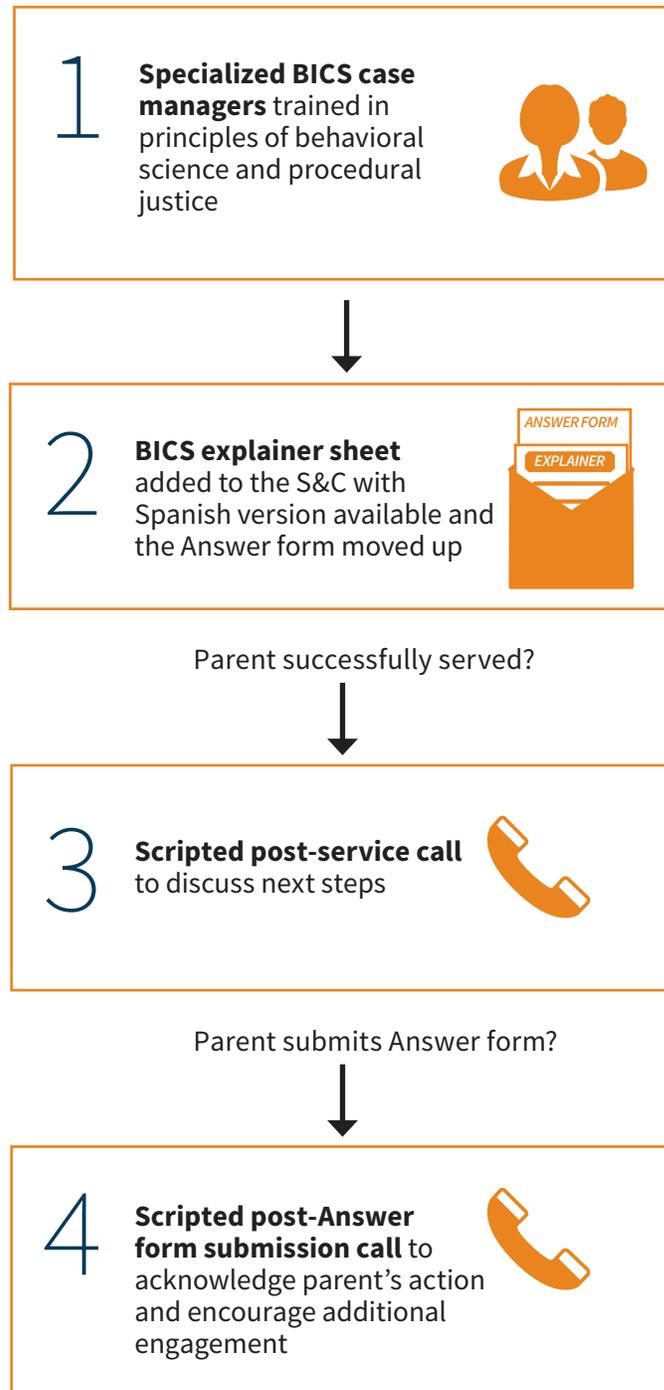
Figure 2. Intervention Components

Figure 3. Explainer Sheet Front and Back

Personalization

Implementation prompt

Loss aversion

Simplification

Front Page:

Hello, <NAME>. Have your say in setting up your Child Support order.

You have received these documents because you have been named as the parent of <NAME> on a child support case. At the Sacramento Child Support Office, we want to work with you to explain your options so you can protect your rights.

What do you do now?

File an "Answer" form to this case to get an order that's based on your actual situation. It will only take 10 minutes. Here's what to do next:

- 1** Fill out the "Answer" form FL-610 included in this packet. See instructions on the back.
- 2** Mail or bring the form to Sacramento County DCSS, 3701 Power Inn Rd, Sacramento, CA 95826. **We can file the "Answer" for you! Call for other options: (916) 875-2427*
- 3** Respond to our call or e-mail to discuss the options for your next step in this case.

Make sure your voice is heard. Act now!

Unless you act

- You may be legally named a parent and be **required to pay**.
- You may **lose the chance for your voice to be heard** and may **not get proper credit** for the time you spend with your child.
- Your order may be filed in **as little as 30 days** from the date you received this package. Submit your Answer form **today** to have your voice heard.

Back Page:

How do I fill out the "Answer" form FL-610?

Box at the top of the page	In the box that starts with "ATTORNEY OR PARTY WITHOUT ATTORNEY," print your name, address, and telephone number if it's not already there. If you have a lawyer, give this form to your lawyer to fill in.
Question 1	You will need to write in the names of each child. You can find these names on form FL-600 in this package (look at the top right corner for FL-600). Check "Yes" next to each child if you are that child's parent. If you are not the parent or aren't sure, check "No" next to the child – this will tell the child support office (in question #2) that you want a genetic paternity test.
Question 2	You don't need to write anything here. If you checked "No" next to any child's name, this will automatically tell the child support office that you want a genetic paternity test.
Question 3	Look at FL-630 for the support amount you are expected to pay. Then: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Check box (a) if you agree to pay this amount. Check box (b) if you do not agree this amount.
Question 4	If you disagree with anything (such as order amount or paternity), check the box and explain why you disagree.
Question 5	Write in your address, phone numbers, and email address. This is very important. We will need this to call you to follow-up and help you avoid unexpected legal consequences.
Signature and Mailing	Write the date, print your name, and sign (you are the "Declarant"). Double-check that everything is correct! Remember to mail or bring the Answer form to Sacramento County DCSS, 3701 Power Inn Rd, Sacramento, CA 95826 - we will file the answer with the court for you, or you can file the answer directly with the court. Make sure you respond when we call or email you.

Questions you might have

How did DCSS calculate this amount?
The child support agency collected information about your wages to calculate how much both parents should pay. If they didn't have any information, they assigned you an amount based on minimum wage at full-time. If you want to make changes, you should file an "Answer" form (FL-610) within the next 30 days and talk with the child support caseworker when they call you.

What happens if I do nothing?
If you do nothing, this **does not** mean that your child support order will go away or become \$0. It means that your child support order may be set at the amount in this packet, which you'll then be required to pay. If you do not pay, you'll face penalties such as having your driver's license taken away, your passport denied, wage garnishment, liens, credit bureau reporting, and ultimately contempt of court.

Am I being sued?
When a child support order is filed, it is a legal process. That is why the child support agency calls it a lawsuit. It does not mean that you broke the law.

What if I'm not the parent?
If you respond indicating you are not the parent, we can schedule paternity testing. The test is quick, painless (a simple mouth swab), and can usually be scheduled at a convenient time for you. Genetic testing is free to you.

Questions?
Call the Child Support Office at (916) 875-2427

- **Spanish translation.** Spanish-speaking staff members in both counties helped the BICS team translate the explainer sheet into Spanish. Parents whose primary language was Spanish received the Spanish version of the explainer sheet at the front of their S&C packages.
- **Prominent placement of the Answer form.** Clerical staff members moved the Answer form from the middle of the service package to the top, directly behind the explainer sheet, before they sent packages out for service. Doing so both made the form easier to find and placed it near the instructions included on the explainer sheet.

BICS POST-SERVICE TALKING POINT EXAMPLE:

It's very important that you act soon, otherwise you may lose the chance for your voice to be heard and may not get proper credit for the time you spend with your child.

3 Scripted Post-service Phone Call to Discuss Next Steps

- **Post-service phone calls guided by talking points and a checklist.** After parents in the intervention group were served successfully, BICS case managers called them on the phone to discuss the next steps they should take. To ensure that the messages delivered in phone calls were consistent, the BICS team developed a checklist and talking points for BICS case managers to follow. The talking points were informed by behavioral science and used

important principles of procedural justice such as providing an overview of the establishment process, stressing child support's neutrality and role in the process, pausing at multiple points to ensure parents understood, and encouraging parents to participate in the order establishment process (see the example in the sidebar above). In these calls, BICS case managers encouraged parents to file Answer forms as a way to ensure they had a chance to participate in the process, in the event that they could not come to an agreement outside of court. They also helped parents make concrete plans for next steps.

- **Three required call attempts.** BICS case managers were required to conduct up to three post-service call attempts if a parent was not reached on the first or second attempt.

BICS POST-ANSWER FORM SUBMISSION TALKING POINT

EXAMPLE:

This can be a very confusing process, but we are here to help make it easier for you and as fair as we can. You're doing the right thing for this child and protecting your rights by moving this process forward. Please call me if you have any questions down the road!

4 Scripted Post-Answer Form Submission Phone Call to Discuss Next Steps

- **Post-Answer form submission phone calls guided by talking points and a checklist.** If parents in the intervention group submitted Answer forms, BICS case managers called them and used a checklist and talking points informed by behavioral science (see the example in the sidebar). The purpose of this call was to acknowledge that a parent had taken the first step by submitting the Answer form and to attempt to motivate the parent to take the next step: either attending a stipulation meeting or the scheduled hearing.
- **Three required call attempts.** As with the post-service calls, BICS case managers conducted up to three call attempts after receiving an Answer form from a parent.

Although San Joaquin and Sacramento Counties had different existing processes after an Answer form was submitted for the control group, the intervention as designed was the same for the intervention group in both counties at all points in the process.

The BICS team hypothesized that the intervention would make parents more engaged in the order establishment process and that any increased engagement would be reflected in an increase in Answer forms filed, an increase in orders established at court hearings or by stipulation, an increase in payments, and a decrease in default orders. The team hypothesized that the two counties might show different results, since their existing order establishment processes were different. The team also hypothesized that there might be different results among parents whose primary language was Spanish than there were among English-speaking parents, since the intervention gave Spanish-speaking parents a relatively new opportunity to receive instructions in their primary language.

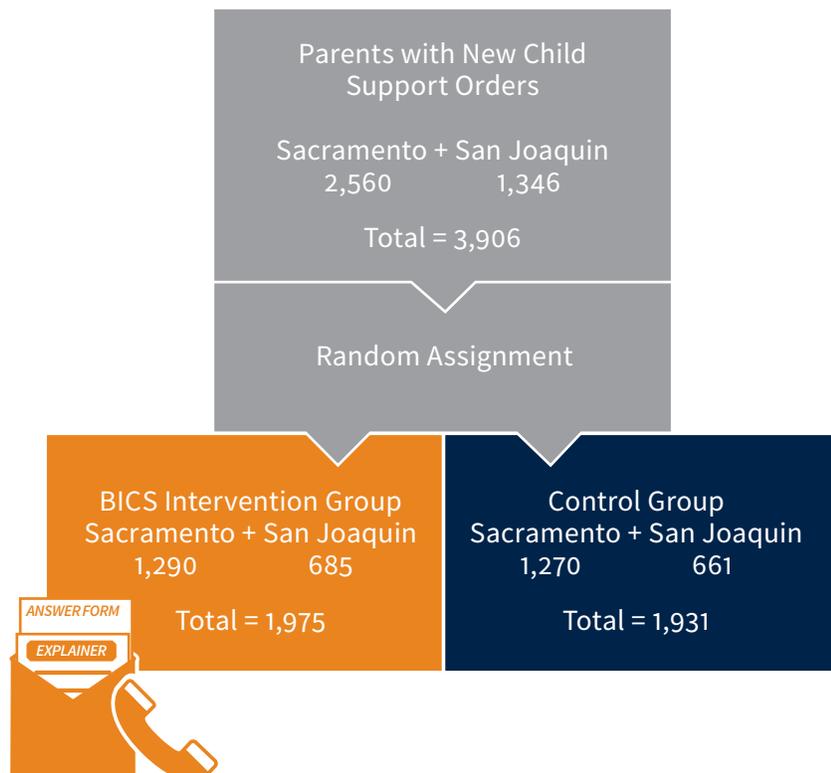
RESULTS

To test the intervention, parents with newly opened cases in Sacramento and San Joaquin counties were randomly assigned into one of two groups between April and December 2016 (see Figure 4). Parents assigned to the control group received their counties' business-as-usual procedures. Parents assigned to the intervention group were assigned to the BICS case managers and received the intervention procedures. Box 1 discusses the research methods and data sources used in the study.

- **The intervention produced an unanticipated impact on service rates.**

The intervention resulted in an unintended impact on the likelihood of a parent being successfully served. As shown in Figure 5, the intervention increased service rates by 5.0 percentage points, from 69.6 percent to 74.6 percent. Orders cannot be established without successful service, so increasing service rates for a group of newly opened cases will also affect other outcomes related to order establishment. Additional impacts on the post-service outcomes of interest can be largely attributed to the greater number of parents in the intervention group who were successfully served.

Figure 4. Random Assignment Diagram



Box 1. Data and Methods

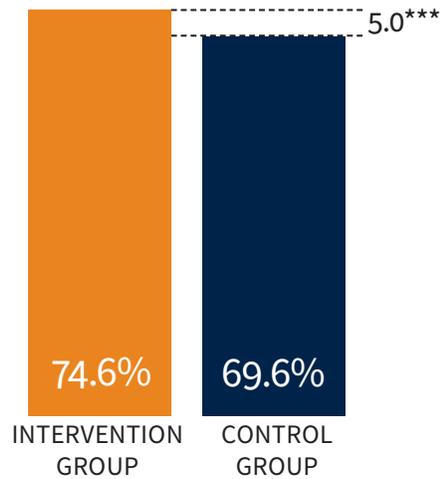
The sample for this study consisted of 3,906 parents with newly opened child support cases in Sacramento and San Joaquin Counties who were eligible for service between April 2016 and December 2016. Approximately half of the parents (1,975) were randomly assigned to the intervention group, while the other half (1,931) were randomly assigned to the control group (see Figure 4). The BICS team verified that there were no systematic differences between these groups.

To estimate the impacts of the intervention, the BICS team analyzed child support administrative records for all sample members. The impact analysis compares the average (mean) outcomes of intervention group members with the average outcomes of control group members. Because random assignment produced two groups that were alike in all ways other than the study conditions, any statistically significant differences between the two groups' outcomes can be attributed to the intervention.

The following data sources were used in the analyses presented in this brief.

- **Child support administrative records.** The BICS team obtained data on service, child support order establishment, Answer form submissions, and child support payments from the California State Department of Child Support Services Data Repository. Payments on study orders (defined in footnote 6) were followed for 13 months. Outcomes other than payments — including rates of successful service, numbers of Answer forms filed, numbers of orders established, and types of orders established — were followed for at least 13 months. Parents who joined the study during earlier months were followed for more than 13 months.
- **Study tracking data.** BICS and non-BICS case managers used an Excel spreadsheet to track their interactions with parents assigned to the intervention group or control group, respectively, including the dates when they attempted to call parents, the rates at which they successfully reached parents, and parents' attendance at stipulation meetings. These data help to show how the intervention was implemented and were also used to estimate its cost.
- **Staff-time study.** BICS and non-BICS case managers recorded how they spent their time over two weeks of October 2016. These data were used to estimate the net cost of the intervention per person (the additional time and material costs spent on BICS activities relative to comparable, business-as-usual order establishment activities). The BICS team then multiplied these per-person costs with the quantity of each intervention component delivered to the intervention group as shown in the tracking data.
- **Cost information.** Sacramento and San Joaquin Counties provided financial information (loaded staff salaries and printing/paper costs) to help estimate the cost of the BICS intervention.
- **Site visits and phone interviews.** The BICS team conducted five visits to each of the two counties between 2015 and 2016 to understand how orders were established in the business-as-usual condition, and to monitor and document how the intervention was implemented. During each of the visits, the team met with child support staff members involved in the order establishment process and observed BICS case managers placing outgoing calls using BICS talking points. The BICS team also conducted phone interviews with parents whose orders had been established recently.

Figure 5. Percentage of Parents Successfully Served an S&C Package



SOURCE: MDRC calculations based on data from the California State Department of Child Support Services Data Repository.

NOTE: Statistical significance levels are indicated as: *** = 1 percent; ** = 5 percent; * = 10 percent.

Although these “service effects” were not anticipated, it is important to understand what led to them, since successful service plays a critical role in the child support process. Box 2 explores this issue in greater detail.

- **More parents submitted Answer forms.**

Figure 6 shows that the intervention produced a statistically significant, 3.1 percentage point increase in the proportion of parents who submitted Answer forms, from 27.5 percent of the control group to 30.6 percent of the intervention group.

- **More orders were established overall. Among the orders established, more were established by stipulation or hearing.**

As noted above, child support orders can be established by hearing, stipulation, or default. In addition to increasing the number of Answer forms submitted, the intervention aimed to decrease the number of orders established by default.

Table 1 shows that the intervention did not have a statistically significant impact on the percentage of orders established by default. However, it did decrease the percentage of cases that never saw orders established by 5.3 percentage points

Box 2. How Did This Intervention Unexpectedly Improve Service Rates?

When the unexpected impact on service rates was detected, the BICS team worked with the counties and conducted additional analyses to determine what was causing it.

Examining the Service Rate Increase More Closely

An analysis of a subset of the sample indicates that the intervention and control groups were successfully served S&C packages at the same rate on the first attempt (43 percent of the intervention group and 40 percent of the control group), but a greater percentage of the intervention group than the control group was served successfully on second and third attempts (16 percent compared with 9 percent).

The analysis also revealed that parents in the intervention group who were not successfully served on the first attempt received slightly more additional service attempts than parents in the control group who were not successfully served on the first attempt (1.3 additional attempts for intervention group members not served on the first attempt, compared with 1.0 for the control group).

The additional attempts for parents not successfully served on the first attempt varied by county: In Sacramento, parents in the intervention group received 1.3 extra attempts, while parents in the control group received 1.2 extra attempts. In San Joaquin, parents in the intervention group received 1.4 extra attempts, while parents in the control group received 0.6 extra attempts. These differences suggest that there may have been additional efforts made in San Joaquin to locate intervention group parents and serve them with S&Cs following initial, unsuccessful attempts.

This analysis is based on a March 2017 review of total and successful service attempt counts for the total, pooled sample across both counties (2,043 intervention group parents and 1,984 control group parents, based on data provided by the counties). The follow-up period varies by the date a case was randomly assigned; for cases enrolled in April 2016, the analysis used 10 months of follow-up data, while it used 2 months of follow-up data for cases enrolled in December 2016.

Factors Contributing to the Service Impact in San Joaquin County

The BICS team suspected that differences in case managers' caseloads and workloads might be causing the difference in outcomes. To assess whether that was the case, the research team analyzed the number of unique cases (that is, the number of different individuals) worked by the two BICS case managers and by the seven non-BICS case managers in San Joaquin assigned to serve the control group parents over three months during the intervention (May 2016, September 2016, and February 2017). There was a moderate difference between BICS and non-BICS case managers in the number of unique cases worked. Over those three months BICS case managers worked an average of 103 unique cases per month, while non-BICS case managers worked an average of 128 unique cases per month, some of which were cases not enrolled in the study.

(continued)

Box 2 (continued)

Analyzing workloads revealed a large difference in the range of tasks expected of BICS and non-BICS case managers in San Joaquin. BICS case managers focused almost exclusively on getting orders established for the intervention group parents, who were their only cases. Non-BICS case managers worked on establishing orders for control group parents, and also worked on a range of child support activities for parents who were not in the study at all. BICS case managers could not complete their other tasks unless parents were successfully served, while non-BICS case managers generally had many other tasks that demanded their immediate attention when service attempts for control group members were unsuccessful.

Thus, it appears likely that a higher proportion of intervention group members were successfully served in San Joaquin because BICS case managers had somewhat smaller caseloads and fewer overall duties than their counterparts assigned to the control group cases. The BICS case managers had the time to conduct additional research and find better information that could be used to locate and serve parents with the S&C package.

Factors Contributing to the Service Impact in Sacramento County

While the impact on service in Sacramento County was lower than that in San Joaquin County (3.4 percentage points compared with 7.6 percentage points), it was also unexpected and statistically significant.

In contrast to San Joaquin, it is unlikely that the BICS case managers in Sacramento put more effort into locating parents than did their non-BICS counterparts. However, the BICS team did not conduct the same task-level analysis in Sacramento County as San Joaquin, so it is *possible* that case managers did put more effort into locating parents in the *control* group.

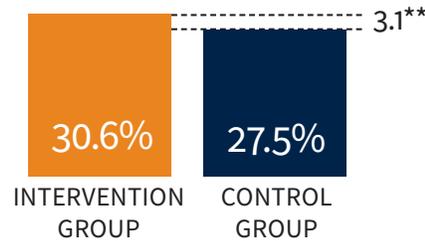
Another theory is that the in-house process servers in Sacramento who were familiar with the intervention may have consciously or subconsciously made more of an effort to serve parents in the intervention group than those in the control group. While the BICS team observed some evidence to support this claim during early monitoring visits, no subgroup analyses were conducted to confirm the theory empirically.

Since there is limited evidence to support any specific theory explaining the impact on service in Sacramento, the causes of the impact are less clear for Sacramento than they are for San Joaquin.

Lessons for the Child Support Community

Successful service can be a challenge for all child support programs, not only those in this intervention or those in California. After a failed attempt, child support workers must search for better addresses before attempting service again. The fact that specialized staff members in San Joaquin County produced higher service rates in this intervention suggests that other agencies might be able to realize similar benefits from specialization.

Figure 6. Percentage of Answer Forms Filed



SOURCE: MDRC calculations based on data from the California State Department of Child Support Services Data Repository.

NOTE: Statistical significance levels are indicated as: *** = 1 percent; ** = 5 percent; * = 10 percent.

Table 1. Orders Established, by Order Type

Order Type (%)	Intervention Group	Control Group	Impact
Default	35.5	33.4	2.1
Stipulation or hearing	37.2	34.0	3.2**
Never established	27.4	32.6	-5.3***

SOURCE: MDRC calculations based on data from the California State Department of Child Support Services Data Repository.

NOTE: Statistical significance levels are indicated as: *** = 1 percent; ** = 5 percent; * = 10 percent.

(from 32.6 percent of the control group to 27.4 percent of the intervention group), an impact that is statistically significant. This impact probably occurred because of the intervention group's higher service rate, since nearly all parents who are served receive orders, either by default or through active participation in the order establishment process.

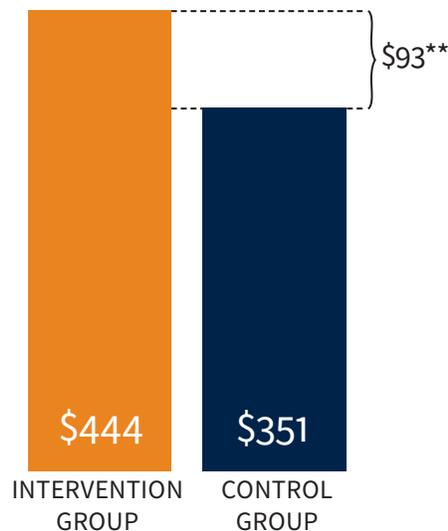
Table 1 also shows that the intervention increased the proportion of orders established by stipulation or at hearings by 3.2 percentage points (from 34.0 percent of the control group to 37.2 percent of the intervention group). While it is self-evident how successful service could, by itself, lead to the establishment of more orders, it is less obvious that successful service would affect whether orders were established by default, at a hearing, or by stipulation. It is therefore possible that the

revised service package and the enhanced communication between BICS case managers and parents after service contributed to the disproportionate increase in hearings and stipulations relative to default orders.

- **The intervention increased total payments in the first year.**

As Figure 7 shows, the intervention led to a statistically significant \$93 increase in total payments on study orders in the first 12 months after random assignment. This was a 26.5 percent increase, from an average of \$351 in the control group to \$444 in the intervention group. This effect was probably the result of the increase in successful service that led to the increase in orders established.

Figure 7. Total Amount Paid on Study Order, Months 1-13



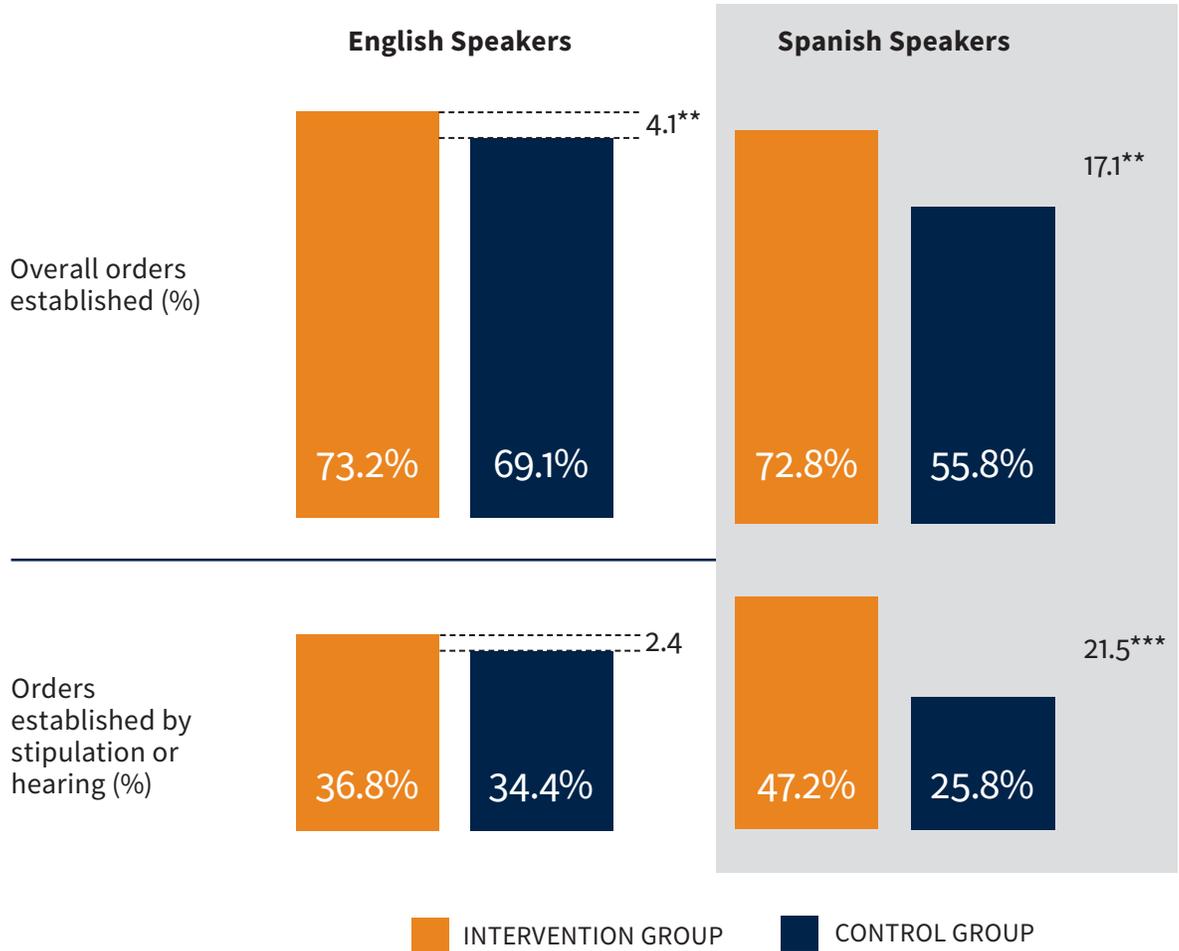
SOURCE: MDRC calculations based on data from the California State Department of Child Support Services Data Repository.

NOTE: Statistical significance levels are indicated as:
*** = 1 percent; ** = 5 percent; * = 10 percent.

- **The impacts on overall orders established and on order establishment at hearings or by stipulation were much higher among Spanish-speaking parents.**

Figure 8 shows that the intervention increased the proportion of parents who had orders established by 17.1 percentage points among Spanish speakers (from 55.8 percent of the control group to 72.8 percent of the intervention group), while increasing that proportion by only 4.1 percentage points among English speakers

Figure 8. Impacts on Order Establishment, by Language



SOURCE: MDRC calculations based on data from the California State Department of Child Support Services Data Repository.

NOTES: Statistical significance levels are indicated as: ***= 1 percent; ** = 5 percent; * = 10 percent.

The difference in impacts on overall orders established is statistically significant at the 10 percent level.

The difference in impacts on orders established by stipulation or hearing is statistically significant at the 1 percent level.

(from 69.1 percent of the control group to 73.2 percent of the intervention group).¹⁶ The difference between the two groups' impacts was also statistically significant,

¹⁶ Parents who spoke primarily Spanish made up 5.4 percent of the full sample (209 parents). Parents who primarily spoke English made up 77.3 percent (3,020 parents). The counties did not report a primary language for the remaining 17.1 percent (468 parents).

which is strong evidence that the intervention was more effective at increasing order establishment among Spanish-speaking parents.

Among Spanish speakers, the intervention increased the service rate by 13.4 percentage points, while among English speakers it increased the service rate by 4.5 percentage points. However, the difference between these impacts was not statistically significant, perhaps due to the low sample size of Spanish-speaking parents, so this difference may be due to chance.

Strikingly, the intervention was also much more effective at increasing the percentage of parents who established their orders at hearings or by stipulation among Spanish speakers than English speakers. Among Spanish speakers, the intervention increased orders at hearings or by stipulation by 21.5 percentage points (from 25.8 percent of the control group to 47.2 percent of the intervention group), an increase that is statistically significant. There was no statistically significant impact among English speakers. Notably, for the Spanish-speaking group, 16.3 percentage points of the 21.5 percentage point impact on orders established by hearing or stipulation was a result of orders established by stipulation, specifically. While the definition of stipulation varies somewhat by county (as noted in footnote 5), it is possible that the intervention was more likely to lead to orders established with parental agreement among Spanish-speaking parents than among primarily English-speaking parents.

It is possible that the impacts on order establishment and order type (that is, orders established through hearings and stipulations) among Spanish speakers were a result of the enhanced communication between BICS case managers and parents *after service* occurred. When asked, staff members hypothesized that Spanish speakers may have responded especially well to the explainer sheet because it was translated, and they may have been motivated to act by the hands-on support in their primary language that BICS staff members provided during phone calls and stipulation meetings.¹⁷

- **The intervention was more likely to increase orders established at hearings or by stipulation in San Joaquin County than in Sacramento County.**

Table 2 shows that the intervention's impacts on service, Answer forms submitted, order establishment, and orders established at hearings or by stipulation were larger in San Joaquin County, while its impact on total payments was larger in Sacramento County. However, only the difference in impacts on orders established at hearings or by stipulation was statistically significant, suggesting that the other differences in impacts between the counties may be due to chance. Notably, as shown in Figure 9, 5.2 percentage points of the 8 percentage point impact on or-

¹⁷ One of the BICS case managers in San Joaquin County, where the impacts on order establishment and orders established by stipulation are more pronounced, is fluent in both Spanish and English.

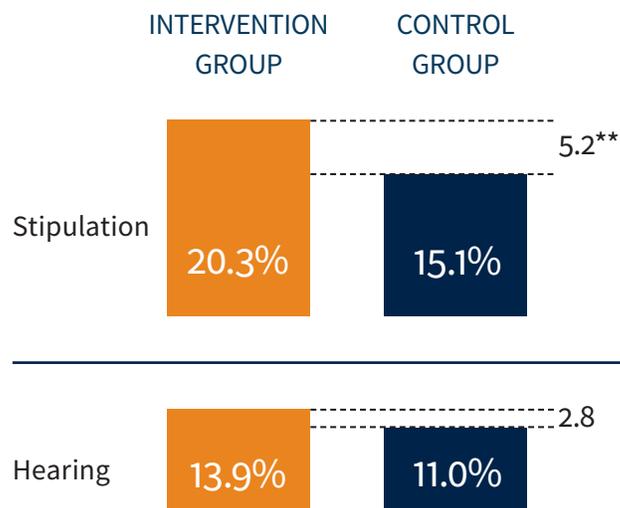
Table 2. Impacts on Key Outcomes, by County

Outcome	Sacramento Impact	San Joaquin Impact	Varied by County? ^a
Successful Service (%)	3.4*	7.6***	No
Answer form filed (%)	1.9	5.7***	No
Order established (%)	4.0**	7.5***	No
Stipulation or hearing (%)	0.9	8.0***	Yes
Total payments per target case	\$131**	\$20	No

SOURCE: MDRC calculations based on data from the California State Department of Child Support Services Data Repository.

NOTES: Statistical significance levels are indicated as: *** = 1 percent; ** = 5 percent; * = 10 percent.

^aNo indicates the difference in impacts between counties was not statistically significant. Yes indicates the difference was significantly significant at the 5 percent level.

Figure 9. Percentages of Orders Established by Stipulation and Hearing In San Joaquin County

SOURCE: MDRC calculations based on data from the California State Department of Child Support Services Data Repository.

NOTE: Statistical significance levels are indicated as: *** = 1 percent; ** = 5 percent; * = 10 percent.

ders established at hearings or by stipulation was a result of orders established by stipulation, specifically, which probably reflects San Joaquin County's emphasis on this method of order establishment.

IMPLEMENTATION

The BICS team observed that most of the intervention was implemented as planned. Staff members generally followed protocols when creating and mailing the S&C packages. They inserted the explainer sheets in the appropriate place and moved the Answer forms to the front of the packages. When conducting calls with intervention group members, BICS case managers generally used the checklists and talking points. Staff members also adapted the talking points to specific cases' circumstances.

There were three notable ways that the intervention was *not* implemented as designed. As discussed in Box 2, BICS case managers in San Joaquin County modified the intervention by conducting additional research when an initial service attempt was unsuccessful. This additional effort was not prescribed by the intervention and may have led to an increase in service rates for the intervention group in San Joaquin. There is limited evidence regarding the implementation factors that contributed to the increased service rates for the intervention group in Sacramento County (see Box 2 for additional discussion).

Another way the intervention was not implemented exactly as planned was that BICS case managers in both counties did not always call parents after they returned their Answer forms. Since parents often submitted Answer forms after speaking with BICS case managers, case managers sometimes felt the second call was unnecessary, depending on how much time had passed between the post-service call and the day the Answer form was submitted.

The third modification to the intervention was that BICS case managers in both counties incorporated intervention materials into other aspects of their work. For example, when BICS case managers were unable to reach parents for post-service calls, they mailed them an additional copy of the BICS explainer sheet with the Answer form to encourage them to call the child support office. BICS case managers also used BICS talking points during other conversations with parents.

Overall, staff members and managers reported in focus groups that the intervention and training led to increases in productive, collegial communication with parents and improved job satisfaction. Staff members reported that the BICS approach encouraged a more open flow of information between them and parents, increasing understanding for parents and leading to a culture shift among the BICS case managers. Some of these case managers had been working at the counties for years and had been initially reluctant to use the new talking points. One BICS case

manager described herself as a “BICS convert” who swore she would never return to her previous communication style given the positive parent reactions and reduction in stress she experienced.

When intervention group parents were interviewed by phone after their orders were established, they also described positive interactions with their case managers. They appreciated the staff members’ ability to answer questions, explain next steps in the process, and motivate them to take action. Parents did not report strong views on the explainer sheet, perhaps because they were interviewed months after receiving it.

Based on agency data and a brief time study conducted by case managers, the net cost of the bundled intervention was \$7.65 per intervention group participant in Sacramento County and \$14.46 in San Joaquin County.¹⁸ Table 3 shows that virtually all the costs can be attributed to the additional time BICS case managers spent on the intervention components relative to non-BICS case managers completing similar tasks for control group members. For example, in Sacramento County BICS case managers spent, on average, 12 minutes conducting post-service calls for intervention group members when using the talking points and checklists. Non-BICS case managers spent 6 minutes on post-service calls with control group members, so the net cost of this component in Sacramento is 6 additional minutes, multiplied

Table 3. Net (Additional) Per-Person Costs for the Intervention Group, by Intervention Component

Intervention Component	Sacramento County	San Joaquin County
Service-package preparation	\$5.42	\$5.44
Phone outreach (preparing for, attempting, and conducting calls)	\$1.78	\$8.18
Staff training	\$0.43	\$0.82
Materials	\$0.02	\$0.02
Total	\$7.65	\$14.46

SOURCE: MDRC calculations based on material cost and wage data provided by the California State Department of Child Support Services, implementation data from case managers’ logs, and time-study data collected by DCSS staff members.

18 In San Joaquin County, BICS case managers spent 17 minutes on average for each post-service call, 11 minutes more than their non-BICS colleagues spent on those same calls. In contrast, BICS case managers in Sacramento County spent 12 minutes on average for each post-service call, 6 minutes more than their non-BICS counterparts spent. This larger difference in San Joaquin is one reason that county’s net costs are higher than Sacramento’s. Also, note that the estimated net costs do not account for the time BICS case managers spent conducting additional research to locate members of the intervention group since that was not a planned component of the intervention.

by the average wage of case managers in the state. Because BICS case managers had fewer other tasks competing for their time and were required to make up to three call attempts, they spent more time, on average, per intervention group case than non-BICS case managers did per control group case. Material costs, such as those for printing and mailing, were minimal.

LESSONS AND NEXT STEPS

This test is a good reminder that rigorously evaluated interventions can yield unintended outcomes. Many of the impacts seen in this study are probably due to the increased service rate for the intervention group. This unexpected but positive finding suggests that using specialized staff members to locate parents following unsuccessful service attempts can increase service rates and other important outcomes.

Because this study saw this unexpected effect on service rates, more research is needed about the effects of the individual intervention components. Fortunately, San Joaquin County is testing the effect of the explainer sheet and reorganized S&C package alone, without specialized BICS case managers and phone calls. That test is designed to isolate the effect of those specific components and eliminate the possibility that an unanticipated increase in service rates could skew the results.¹⁹

Although most impacts from this intervention may have been caused by the impact on service, the impacts on orders established at hearings and by stipulation in both counties suggest that aspects of the intervention gave parents a better understanding of the process and motivated them to participate in it. Parent and staff interviews indicated that intervention group parents did have a better understanding of the process.

Additionally, the higher impacts on order establishment among Spanish speakers compared with English speakers suggest that the intervention may have been especially helpful for Spanish-speaking parents and that the positive outcomes for this group were not caused by the service effect alone.

A final, important lesson from this test was the effect it had on case managers, agency leaders, and parents. Case managers and parents said that they appreciated the opportunity to develop relationships with one another during this foundational phase in a parent's relationship with the child support agency. Case managers in particular felt that the intervention reduced stress for parents and staff members alike, and that it made their interactions with parents more positive by giving them a more active coaching role. Both counties in this study plan to integrate some of the principles of behavioral science they have learned from BICS in their regular printed materials and case management approaches.

¹⁹ Results from San Joaquin's secondary test will be included in the BICS final report, which will be posted to the OCSE BICS webpage: www.acf.hhs.gov/css/grants/grant-updates-results/bics.

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