

# "Inequality at Home: The Role of Parenting in the Diverging Destinies of Rich and Poor Children"

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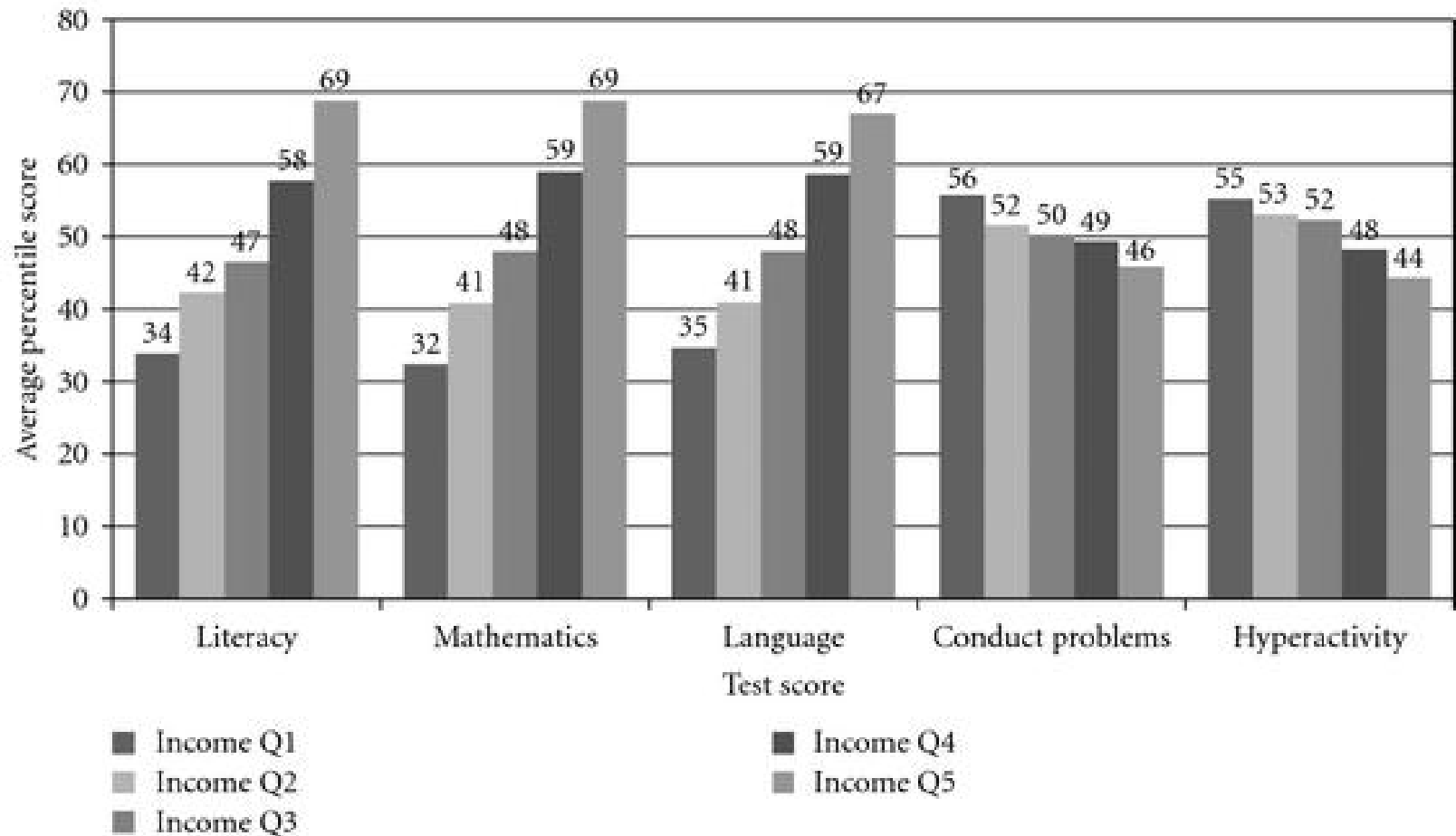
University of Chicago

February 2017

# Outline

- Achievement gaps by family background
- The parenting gap
- Prior efforts to close the parenting gap
- Lessons from behavioral science and the Behavioral Insights and Parenting Lab

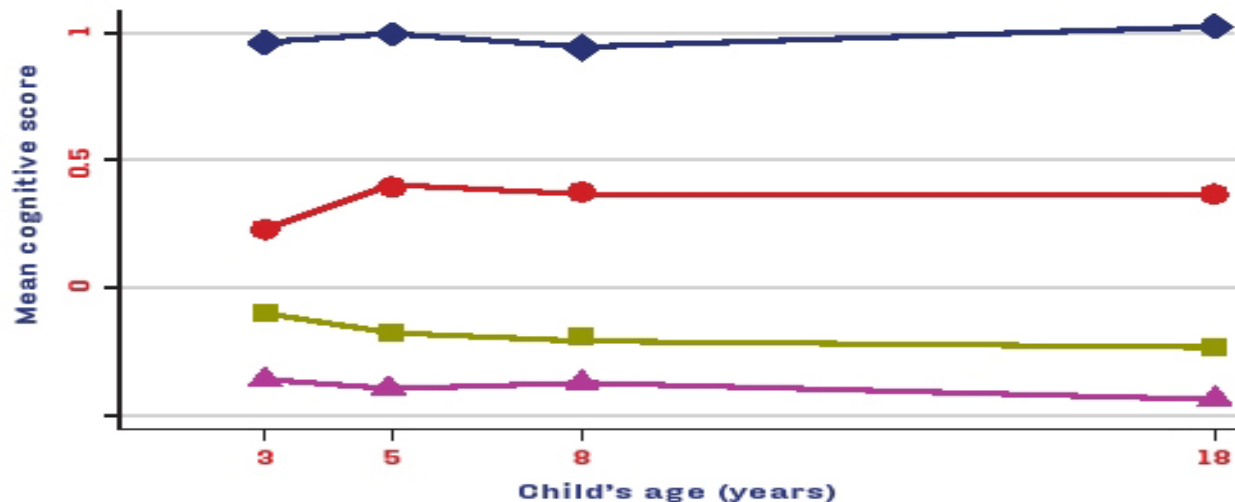
# Income-related gaps in cognitive and social skills for 4-year olds, ECLS-B



# Test Score Gaps Open up Early and Persist

**FIGURE 1**

**Children's Mean Cognitive Score by Mother's Level of Education**



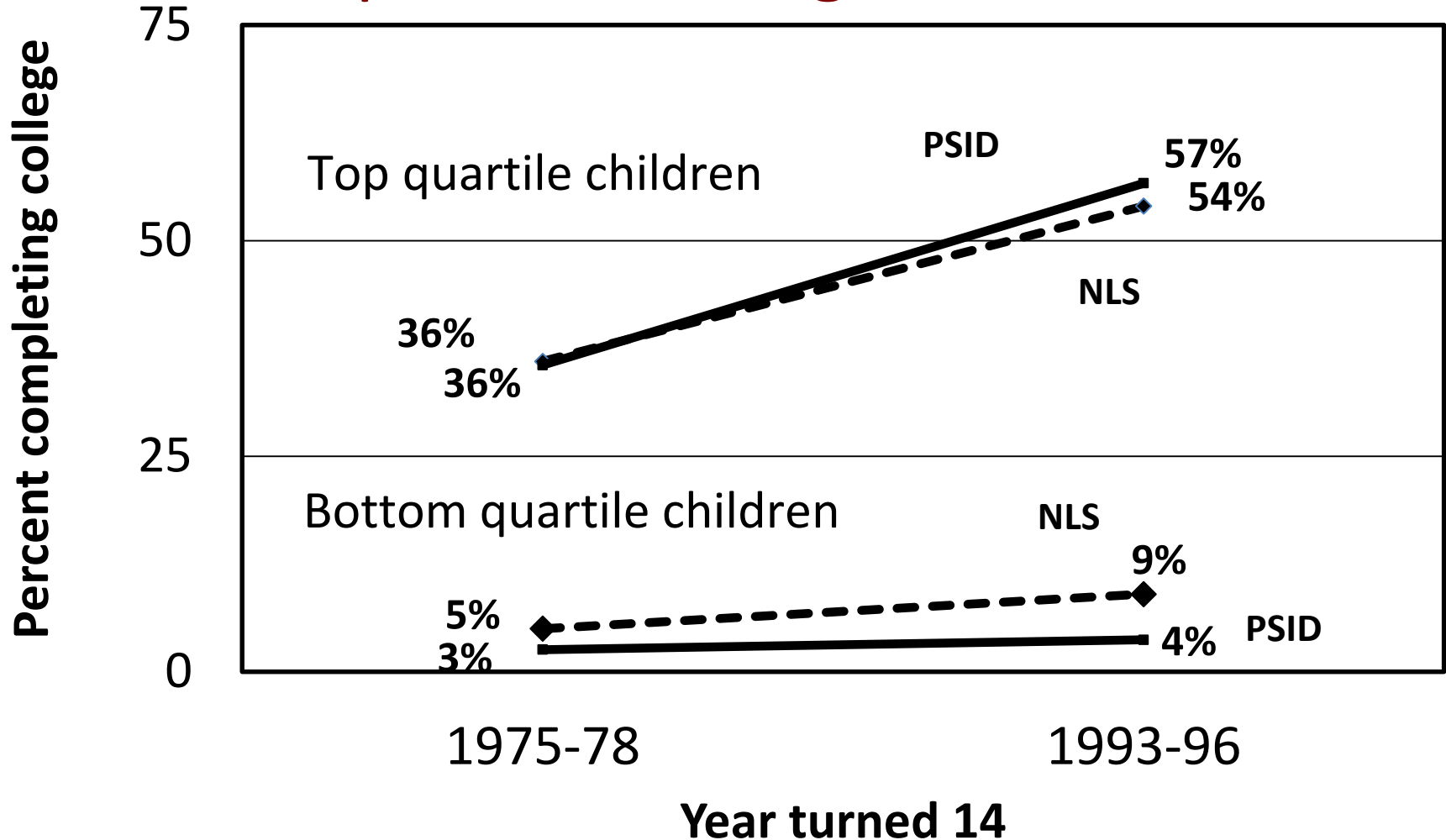
◆ College grad    ● Some college    ■ HS Grad    ▲ Less than HS

**NOTE:** Using all observations and assuming that data are missing at random.

**SOURCE:** Jeanne Brooks-Gunn, et al., "A Reanalysis of the IHDP Program." Infant Health and Development Program, Northwestern University, 2006.

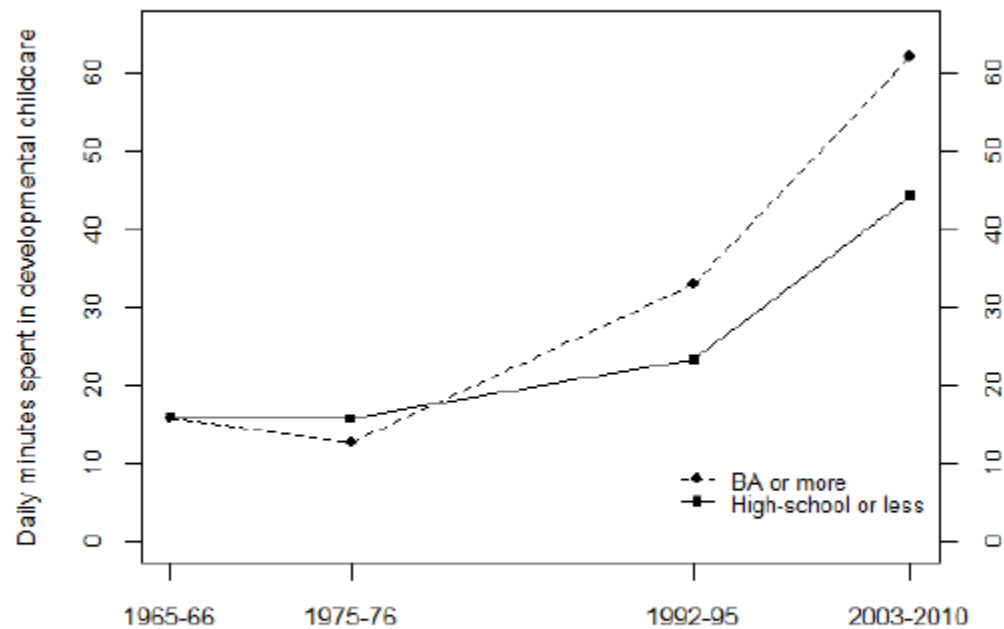


# Achievement and Attainment Gaps are Growing over Time



# Highly-Educated Parents Increasing their Time Investments in Children

Figure 3: Average Daily Minutes of Developmental Time with Mothers by Mother's Education

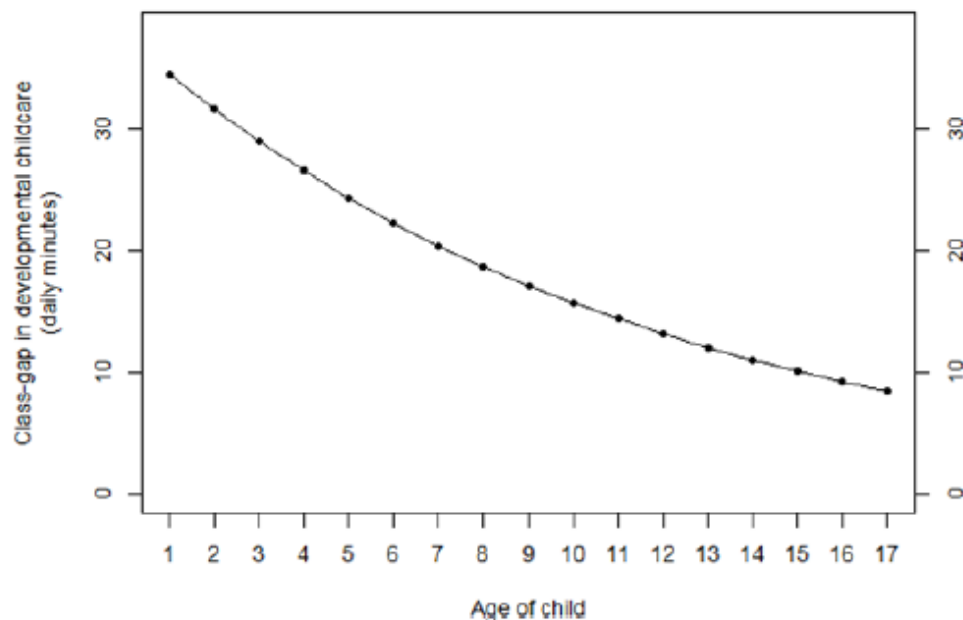


Source: Altintas (2012) Note: Weights are applied to represent the population distribution accurately and to correct for distribution of the days of the week.



# Class Gaps in Maternal Time Investments Larger for Young Children

Figure 4: Class difference in developmental childcare by age of child, 2003-2010



Source: Altintas (2012) Note: Sample is limited to non-Hispanic white mothers only in AHTUS (2003-2010). The class gap shown on the Y-axis is calculated by subtracting the predicted daily developmental childcare time of a low-educated mother from the predicted developmental childcare time of a high-educated mother. Predicted



# Contemporary policy debates are focused on schools...

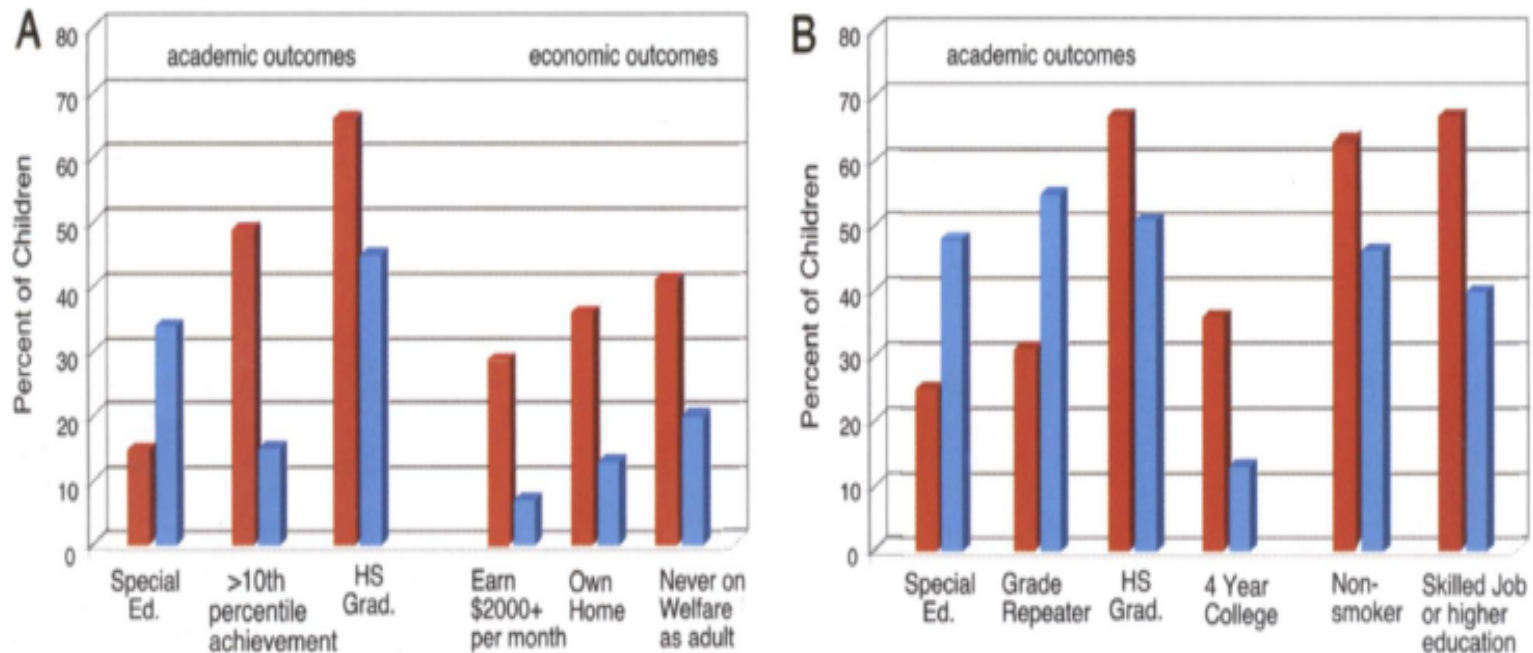


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# Model early childhood intervention programs can improve children's life circumstances

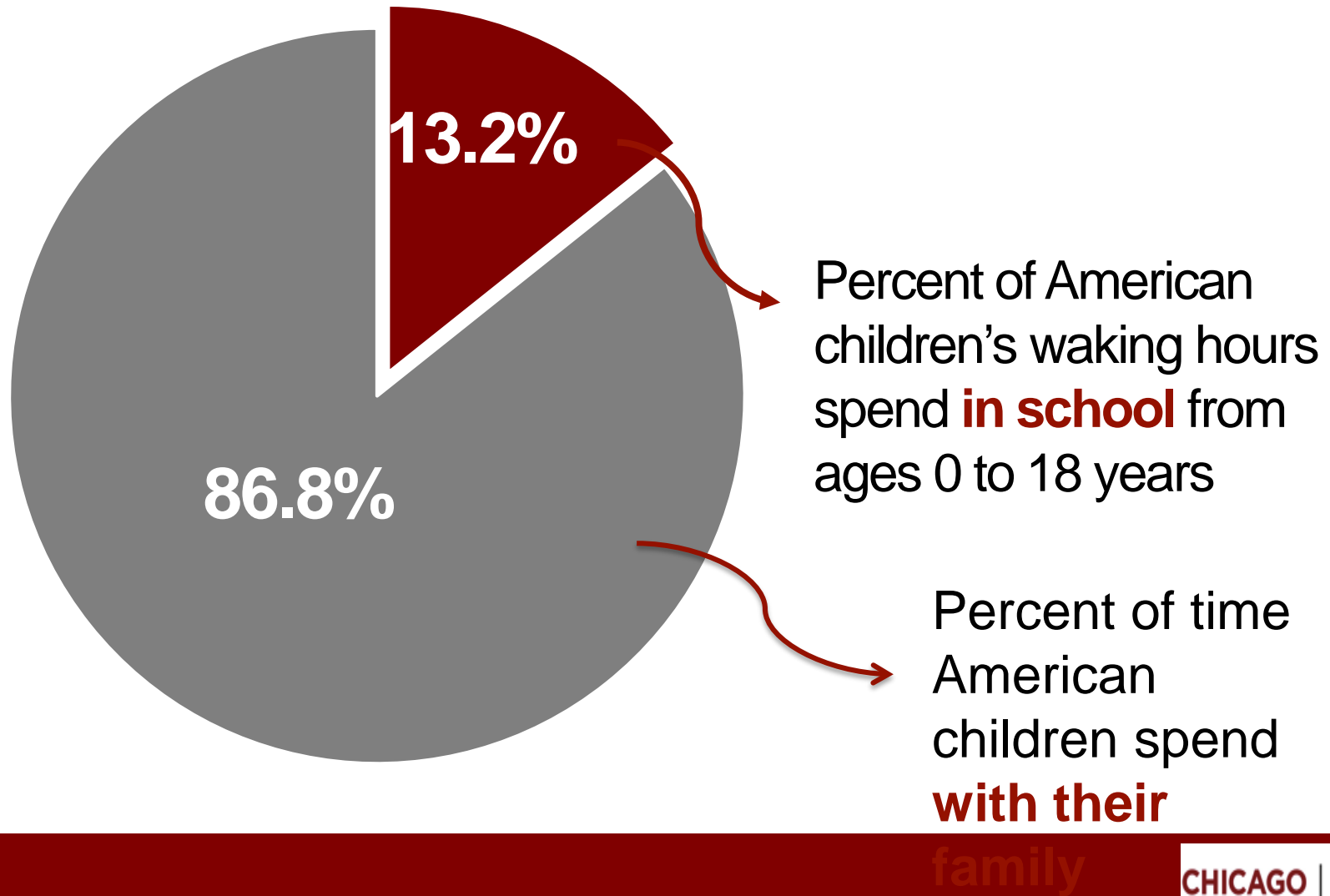


**Fig. 2.** Academic, economic, and social outcomes for the Perry Preschool and Abecedarian Programs. (A) Data from the Perry Program collected when the individuals were 27 years old (High/Scope). >10th percentile achievement, children who scored above the lowest 10% on the California Achievement Test (1970) at age 14; HS Grad, number of children who graduated high school on time. (B) Data from the Abecedarian Program collected when the individuals were 21 years old (Carolina Abecedarian Project and the Carolina Approach to Responsive Education, 1972–1992). Red bars, intervention group; blue bars, control group.

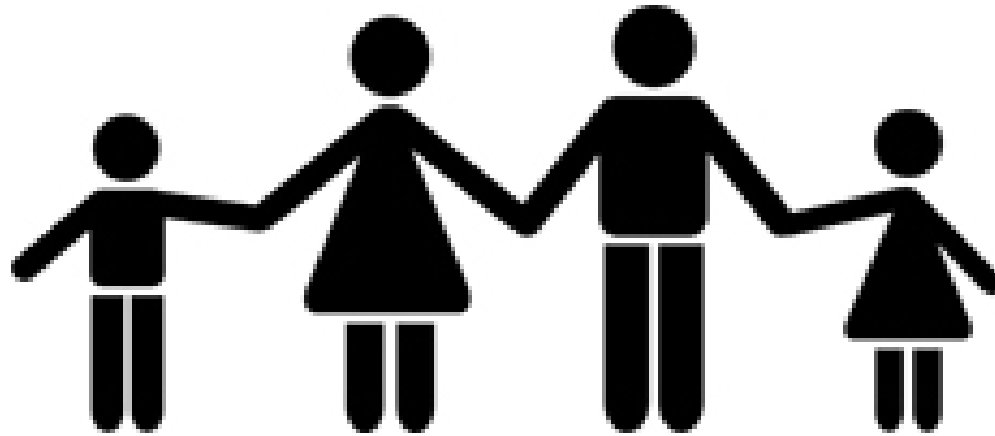


# Time at home eclipses time at school

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# Inequality at home



**Parents with more income and education  
vs. poorer and less-educated peers**

Talk more to  
their children

Are more  
emotionally  
engaged

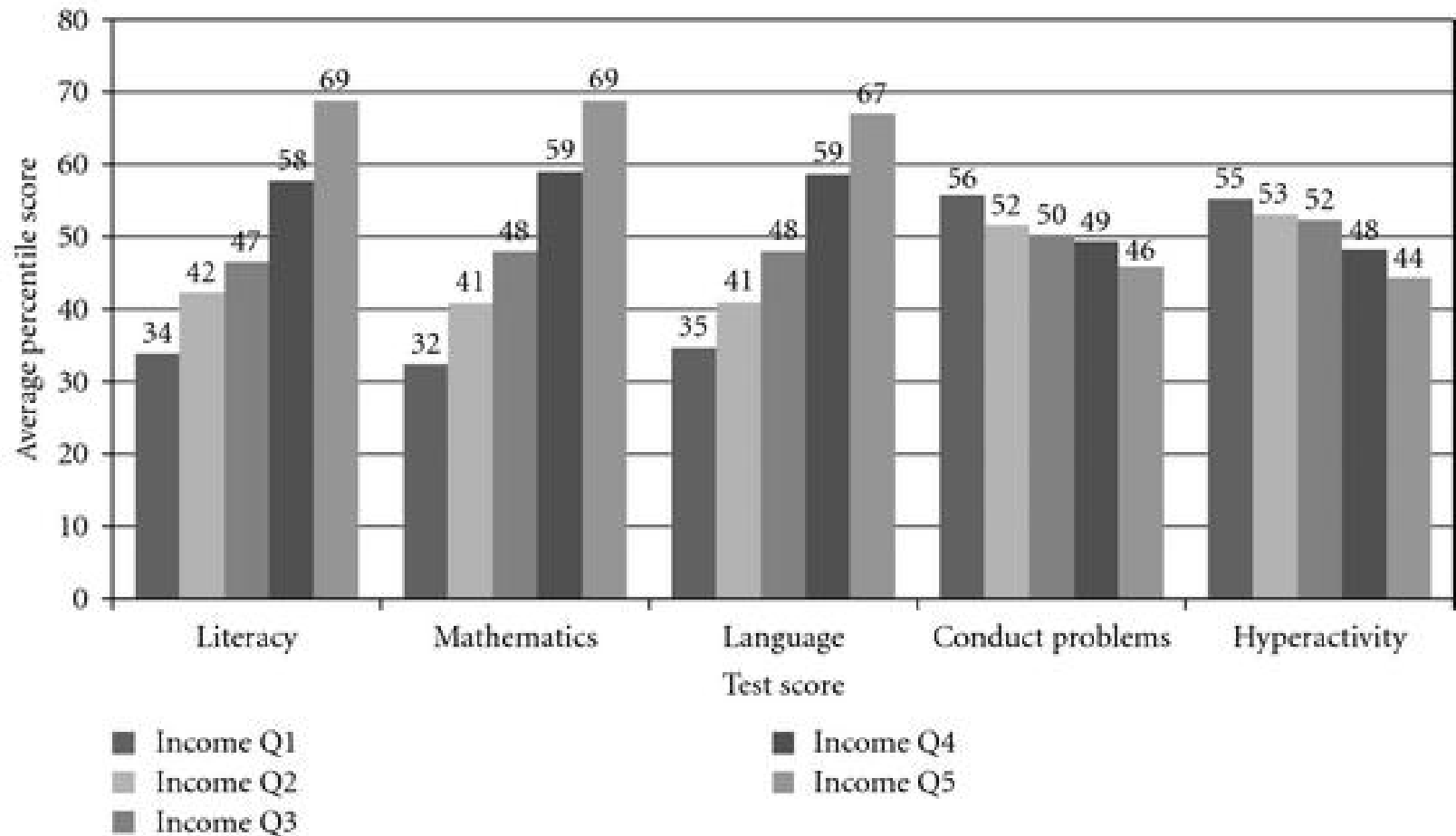
Ask children  
more questions

Use less harsh and  
punitive discipline  
strategies

Use more varied  
vocabulary



# Income-related gaps in cognitive and social skills for 4-year olds, ECLS-B



# Parenting matters.

The single most important factor explaining the poorer cognitive performance of low-income children relative to middle-income children: **Parenting Style**

Accounts for...

19% of the gap in  
**MATHEMATICS**

21% of the gap in  
**LITERACY**

33% of the gap in  
**LANGUAGE**

Key factor in the parenting style domain is maternal sensitivity and responsiveness.

(Waldfogel & Washbrook, 2011)



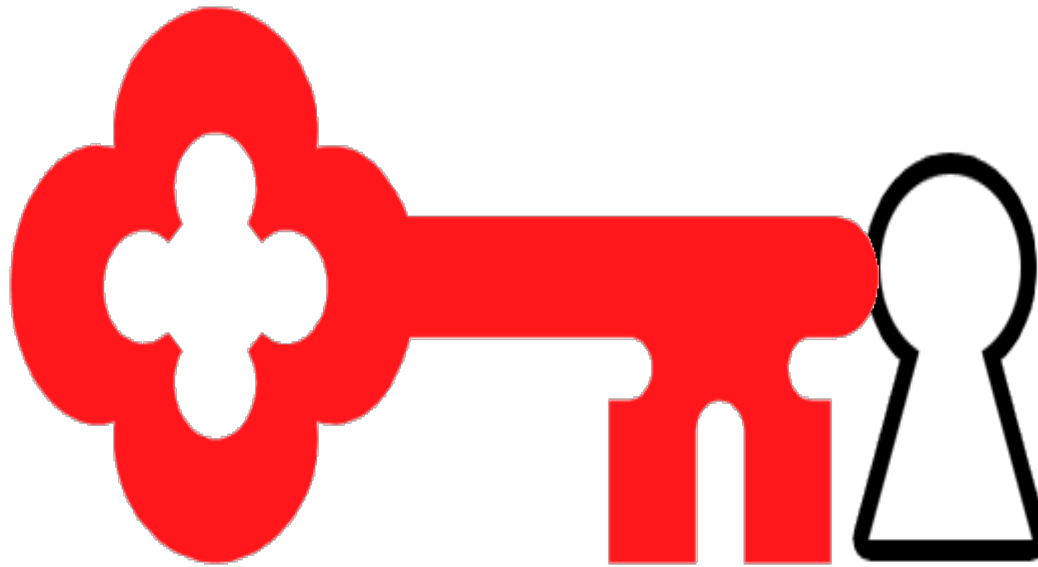
# Parenting matters.

The second most important factor explaining income-related gaps in school readiness: **Home Learning Environment**

Accounts for between...

16%  
&  
21% of the gap in  
**COGNITIVE  
SCHOOL  
READINESS**

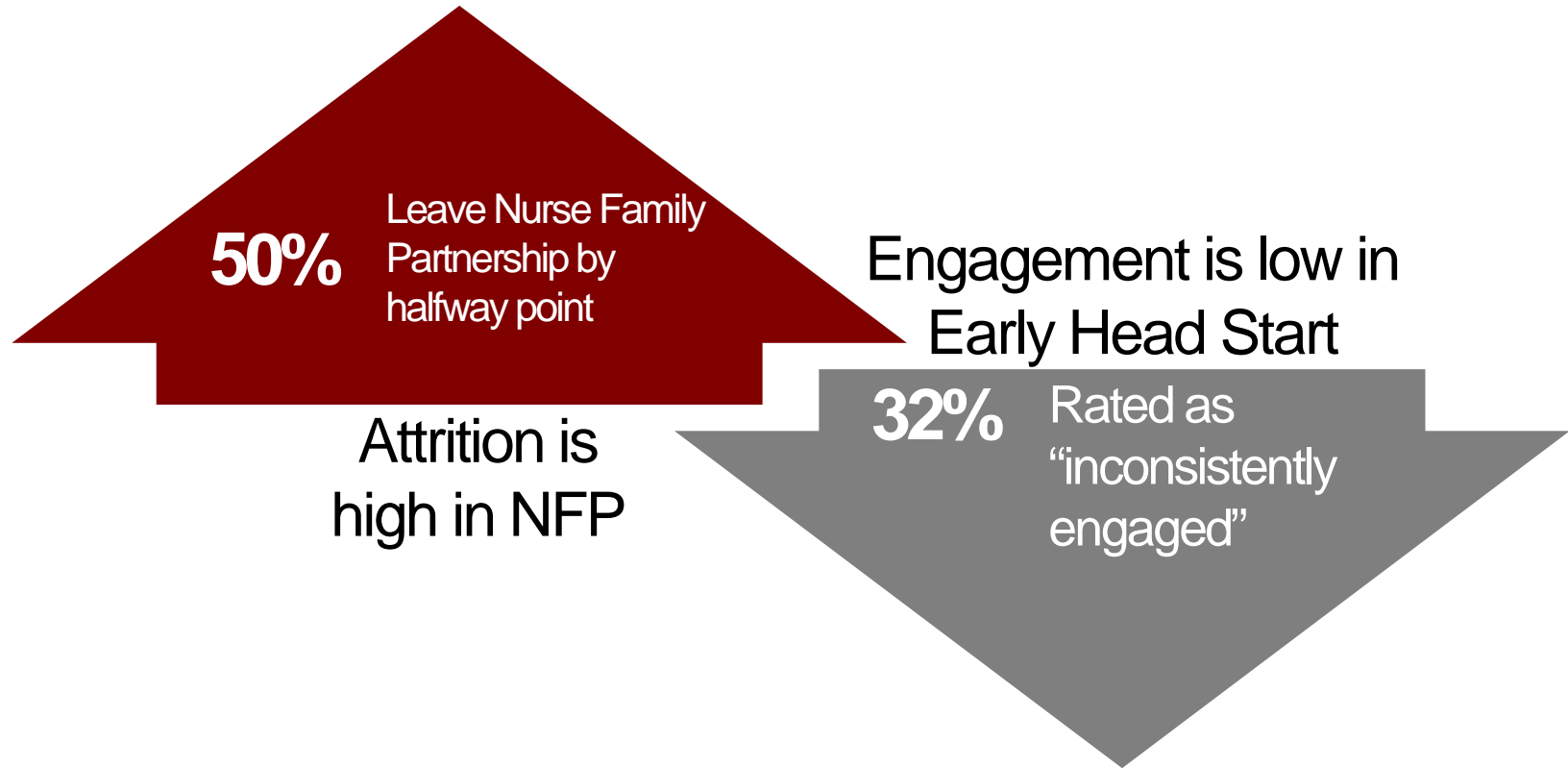




The **key** to closing the gap in child outcomes is closing the gap in *what families do with their children.*

# Participation and engagement in parenting programs

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# What should we make of these results?

- It would be tempting to conclude from these results that policy makers cannot change parenting behavior.
- But it is perhaps more accurate to conclude that policy makers do not know how to motivate parents to do the things these programs are intended to encourage.



# Theory of change: Do we have it right?

- Parenting interventions are typically based on developmental theories about “what children need”
  - Interventions are almost never based on knowledge about what motivates parents to realize their aspirations to be good parents.
- Developmental psychology characterizes parenting in terms of “style”
  - Interventions generally try to change many things at once
  - Inhibits our thinking of parenting as a series of discrete decisions and choices

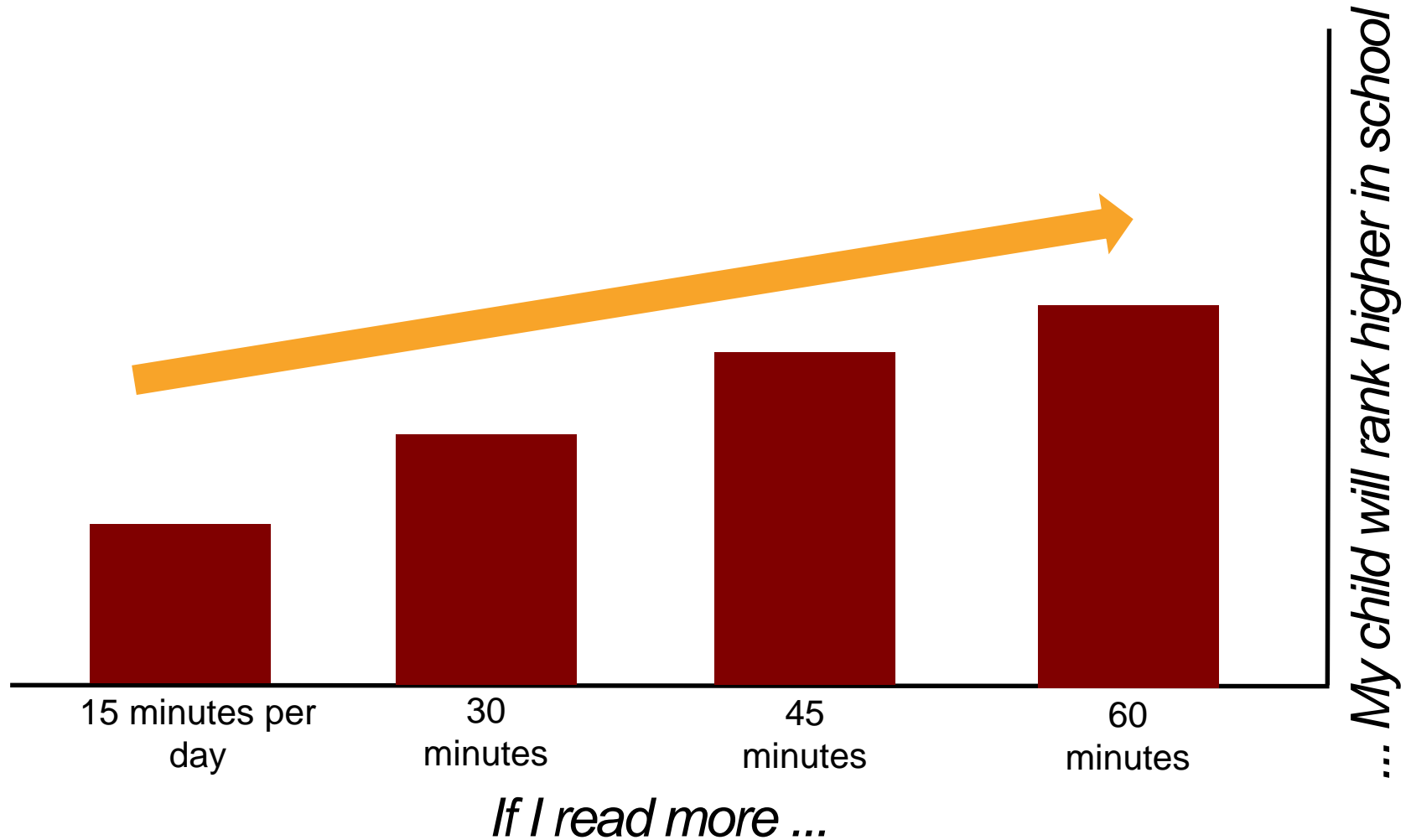


# Limits of the “Information Model”

- Most programs designed to increase parents’ time investments are based on an “information model”
  - assumes that disadvantaged parents are less likely to engage with their children because they either do not know how important it is or they do not know how to do it.
- But information alone is not always sufficient to motivate people to change their behavior
  - not clear that parents listen to “experts” for parenting advice
  - parents differ (by education and social networks) in their willingness to adjust beliefs to new information



# Parents know that the more they read the better their child does (BIP Lab)



# Some behavioral insights relevant to parenting

- People make choices today that are inconsistent with their future selves.
  - Lack of follow through/commitment/self-control arises from this bias.
- Parenting is fraught with uncertainty.
  - **How do people make decisions under uncertainty?** They develop heuristics that are fast, frugal, and computationally cheap – not necessarily aligned with their professed goals and aspirations



# Some behavioral insights relevant to parenting

- Parents are overconfident; low-income parents may be embedded in networks that present inaccurate reference points
- Less-educated parents have less accurate perceptions about their children's academic abilities than richer, more-educated parents
  - Also, every parent thinks her child is unique!
- Purposeful decision-making or focus on the future may be even more difficult in the uncertain and stressful context of poverty



# A behavioral perspective on parent engagement

- Conceptualize parenting not as a “style,” but rather as a series of decisions and the factors that shape those decisions
- The “optimal decision” is one that helps parents reach their own goals
- Decision-making is shaped by many factors, including information (its kind, amount, and sources), various cognitive biases, mental attention and fatigue
- The behavioral perspective is not primarily focused on telling parents what to do or how to do it, but rather structuring the environment in a way that helps parents make optimal decisions

# The **Parents and Children Together** Study Results





# **PACT tests “low-cost, light-touch” interventions designed to increase parent time spent reading to their child.**



- Field experiment designed to answer the question “Can we draw on insights from behavioral science to increase the time lower income parents spend reading to their child?”
- All parents borrow an iPad for 6 weeks and are encouraged to use a digital, recordable story book reading application

# PACT

## CONTEXT

- Implementation at **8 subsidized preschool centers** in Chicago
- Total of **2 rounds** (6 weeks each) + 3 week follow-up
- **PACT Parent Criteria**
  - Children enrolled in subsidized preschool program
  - Child 5-years-old or younger
  - Speaks English and/or Spanish
  - Willing to receive texts

## INTERVENTION



Goal-setting



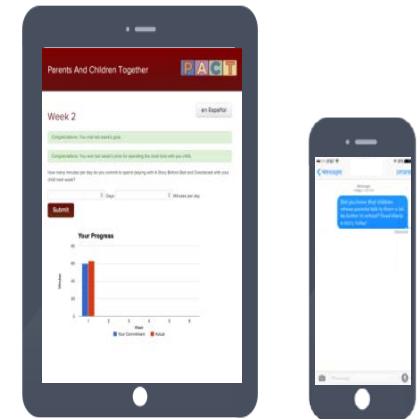
Text reminders



Feedback

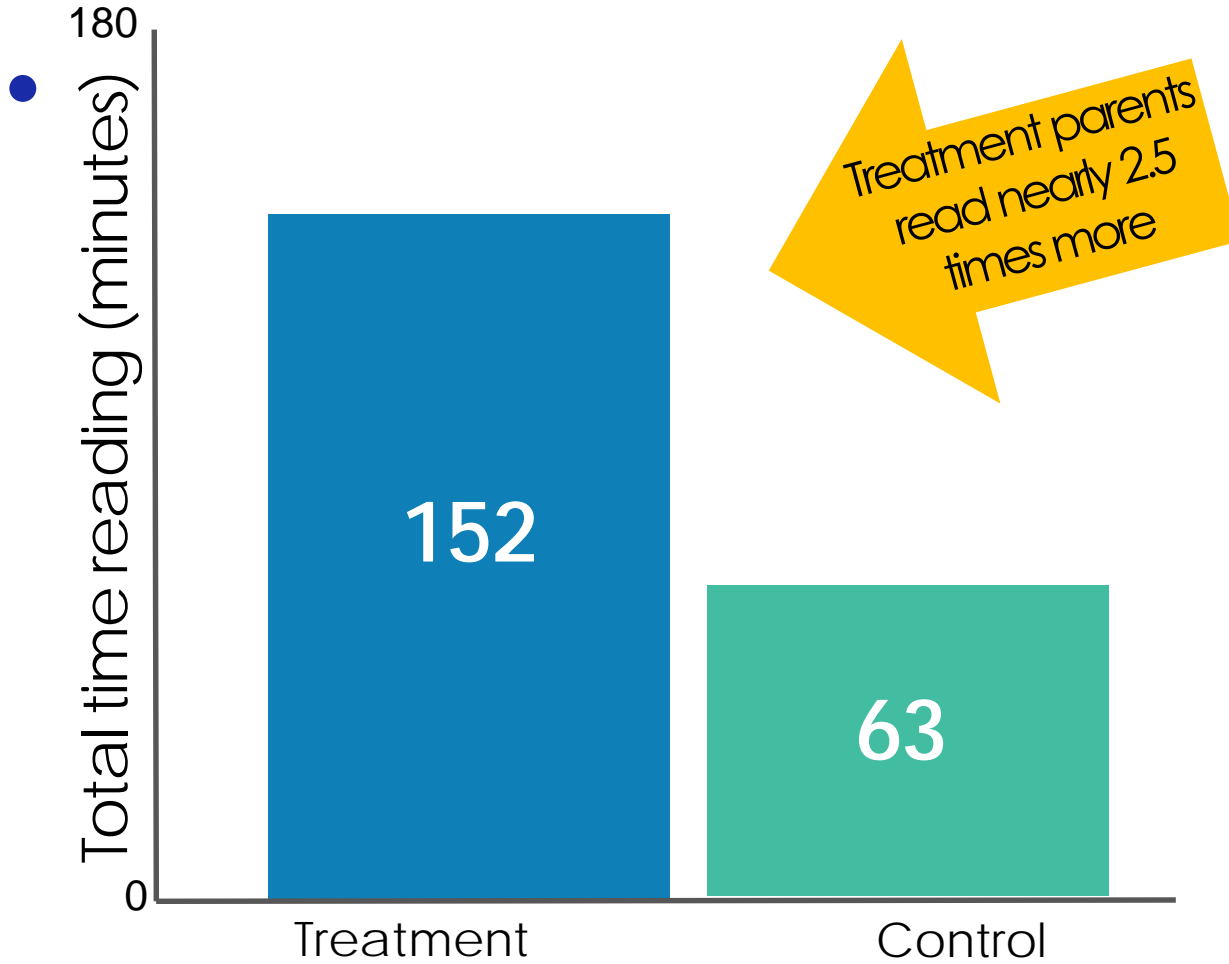


Social rewards

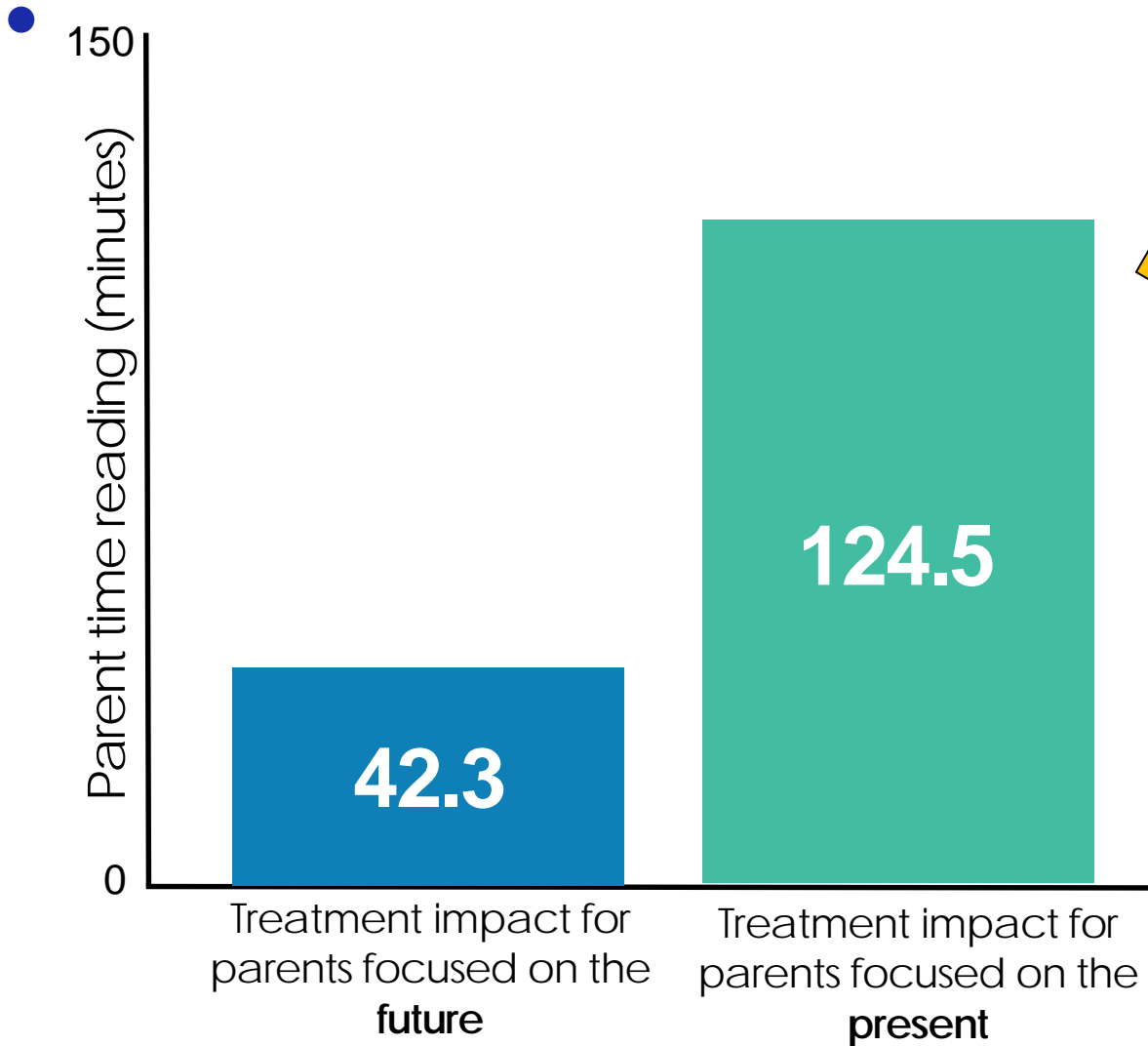


Delivery/Mechanism

# PACT



# PACT



These parents had the most to gain from PACT – and they did!

# Implications for programs and policies:

## Adapting to cognitive biases

- Present bias
  - “Bring the future to the present” with goal setting, reminders, commitment devices, priming
- Overconfidence bias
  - provide objective feedback on behavior, social norming
- Bias in the source of information
  - Figure out whom parents trust for what kind of information, tailor message delivery accordingly; leverage peer influence
- “Information overload”/mental tax:
  - Simplify information, implement “defaults”
  - Help parents create habits so the behavior becomes less mentally taxing
  - Reduce parental stress to expand “cognitive bandwidth”



**Aspiration  
al parenting**

**Actual  
parenting**

# Contact Info

## CHICAGO HARRIS | BIP

### Behavioral Insights & Parenting Lab



[harris.uchicago.edu/centers/chppp/biplab](https://harris.uchicago.edu/centers/chppp/biplab)



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