

Save the Children: Using Behavioral Science to Improve Parenting Skills

How to improve the parenting skills of migrant parents in China? That was the task that confronted Vee Snijders and Katie Chen, two behavioral scientists at Save the Children's Center for Utilizing Behavioral Insights for Children, also known as CUBIC.

Vee, Katie, and the rest of the CUBIC team were working with Save the Children China to encourage parents, especially fathers, to be more engaged in their child's development and to adopt positive, non-violent parenting practices. Their focus would be on migrant families in China, a population that tended to have lower socioeconomic status and thus more-significant parenting challenges. What interventions could CUBIC create? Critically, how would they know if the interventions had been successful?

Save the Children and Behavioral Insights

Save the Children is an international nonprofit that for over 100 years has focused on improving the lives of children. Present in 118 countries, the organization has a three-part ambition for children by 2030¹:

- **Survive:** No child dies from preventable causes before their fifth birthday.
- **Learn:** All children learn from a quality basic education.
- **Are Protected:** Violence against children is no longer tolerated.

Among numerous efforts to achieve this mission, Save the Children launched two regional programs in China in 2022: Parenting without Violence (PwV) and Early Childhood Care and Development (ECCD). PwV aims to eliminate physical and humiliating punishment in the home for families around Guangzhou City, so that children may grow up in respectful and safe settings. ECCD aims to help targeted young boys and girls aged 0-6 around Shanghai City to reach their full potential. With such important but ambitious goals, it was vital that these programs deploy their limited

resources in a targeted manner. How best to deliver plans efficiently and effectively, to achieve the most good?

These two programs reached out to CUBIC to apply a new approach, behavioral insights, to their efforts. Save the Children had established CUBIC in 2020 with experts who had worked on various international behavioral insights teams. CUBIC was the first applied behavioral science team to focus on the rights and welfare of the world's most marginalized children. The center works internationally with in-country teams to design, deploy, and evaluate interventions to promote child welfare.

Such behavioral interventions are commonly called “nudges.” Nudges are subtle, scientifically informed influences to improve social outcomes. Critically, to qualify as a nudge, the intervention must occur without restricting anyone's choice. For example, placing healthy foods at eye level in a cafeteria is a nudge aimed at improving public health. Banning unhealthy foods is not a nudge, because it restricts choice.ⁱⁱ

The CUBIC team is comprised of nearly 20 staff and interns located across the worldⁱⁱⁱ, bringing together expertise in qualitative research, quantitative research, experimentation, and design. The multidisciplinary composition of the team is critical to its success. At the time of this writing, the team has tackled topics ranging from teacher absenteeism to COVID-19 vaccination to reducing child labor—all in just the two and a half years since its inception. Together with the Save the Children PwV and ECCD teams in China, Vee, Katie, and the rest of the CUBIC team were determined to help improve the skills of parents and the lives of their children.

Parenting without Violence (PwV)

Parenting without Violence focuses on supportive, involved, empowering parenting that seeks to develop children by focusing on their strengths rather than trying to correct their weaknesses. It is commonly known as strengths-based parenting^{iv}. While approaches vary, the central theme is to emphasize positive interactions. Parents recognize, reward and reinforce positive behaviors and impulses; demonstrate empathy,

warmth and support; and create an environment that makes it easier for children to behave cooperatively and constructively^v.

While most parents aspire to parent positively, this can often prove challenging in practice. Stress, competing priorities and a lack of experience can all get in the way of regular positive engagement with their children. Barriers are even higher for parents in more challenging circumstances. Furthermore, traditional attitudes tend to distance fathers from the role of an engaged parent. In fact, fathers are seen more as a source of discipline, often based on physical violence rather than support for the child. How could behavioral insights help cultivate positive parenting, especially among fathers?

Achieving Parenting without Violence in China

Save the Children was committed to promoting parenting without violence, but there was much work to do to ensure that all children received positive support. Chinese law partially bans violent punishment of children, yet in 2022, 10 million children across the country were still experiencing it^{vi}. Furthermore, persistent gender differences remained in the way parents behaved. Fathers that adopted traditional roles showed limited involvement in raising children. This diminished the father's meaningful relationships with their children and increased the burden on mothers.^{vii} A national survey in China found that 72% of female respondents reported that they handled most or all housework responsibilities related to raising children^{viii}.

The specific target of this project was migrant families: families who had moved to Guangzhou or Shanghai from rural or remote areas in China, in search of economic opportunity and jobs. In general, these families were more likely to be of lower socio-economic status^{ix}. Urban families had a more equal division of labor between fathers and mothers, whereas rural migrants showed a stronger tendency towards mother-dominated parenting with limited involvement from fathers^x. These migrant families faced significant challenges not experienced by wealthier groups. Thus, in addition to social norms, specific structural barriers to fathers' involvement existed. For example, the need to earn money often distanced fathers from their children^{xi}.

The team’s focus was thus to improve the quality of the father’s engagement with their children while reducing violent disciplining from any caregiver. In addition to the gender of the parent, disciplinary practices also varied based on the gender of the child, with boys suffering more physical abuse, girls more neglect^{xii}.

The Behavioral Science Approach^{xiii}

The CUBIC team employed a behavioral science approach in all its projects (Figure 1). This involved defining target behaviors and exploring why those behaviors occurred before developing a solution. Solutions were then tested for effectiveness and scaled up to ensure greatest impact.

The Target phase involves aligning an understanding of key concepts in behavioral science with the basic problem to be addressed. At this stage the aim is to narrow the problem’s scope by focusing on specific behaviors that can be addressed in the rest of the project. The target must be clear and relatively manageable. So an inappropriate target would be a vague notion like improving attitudes towards parenting in the entire country of China. Instead, the CUBIC team identified two specific behavioral goals: 1) to encourage fathers to spend at least 10 minutes every day with their child, including reading, playing, and helping with homework, and 2) to reduce violence in discipline, including hitting, yelling, embarrassing and ignoring children.

Figure 1. A Behavioral Science Approach (TESTS)^{xiv}



The second phase, Explore, focuses on a deeper understanding of context and the behavior. This typically involves qualitative research, such as in-depth interviews with relevant stakeholders. For this project, the team conducted a literature review,

interviewed 10 key community stakeholders, such as social workers and teachers, and interviewed 26 fathers and 10 mothers^{xv}. The qualitative research focused on four thematic areas: Household Dynamics, Parenting, Disciplining, and Sources of Knowledge on Parenting.

The Explore phase suggested a number of barriers to positive change. These were grouped under three headings.

1. **Structural:** People are unable to change even when they want to change, due to environmental, societal, economic, or physical constraints and systems. For example, to earn money, fathers might take on demanding work schedules in which they have to leave their families for long periods (including evenings and weekends). This limits the hours that they have with their children, particularly if the children are of a younger age. For example, a mother from Guangzhou said, *“My husband is under a lot of pressure. So I can understand that he spends little time with the kid, but the kid certainly does not understand. But we have no choice.”*
2. **Behavioral:** This represents the influence of beliefs, mindsets, and decision-making and judgment processes. Some parents demonstrate a lack of self-confidence in their parenting abilities, hindering their willingness and effort to improve. Fathers may also believe in gender norms that designate women as the dominant caregiver. For example, a preschool teacher from Shanghai said, *“After all, in our traditional concept, men have to be the main breadwinners. And then this leads to the fact that moms may stay longer at home.”*

When it comes to the use of violence in disciplining, parents may believe in negative social norms that say fathers “should play bad cop” in parenting. Most parents hold personal beliefs that violence is an acceptable form of discipline under certain contexts. Generational factors play a role, as parents may have been raised with violent discipline and therefore practice this with their children. They are also unlikely to interfere when encountering a public scenario of violent

discipline, as they feel that they do not have the full context of the situation. For example, a father from Shanghai said, *“If I see violence towards children I will not interfere, nor will I persuade with words, because every family is different. Maybe the kid is used to this pattern, right?”*

3. **Informational:** This represents areas where people lack the knowledge they need to improve their choices. For example, parents may not know how to spend quality time with their children, or how to discipline their child in a non-violent, positive manner. For example, a father from Guangzhou stated, *“I have no other choice but to hit. I am not the kind of person who has special solutions. So before I can find some solutions, including the tools I mentioned, what can I do?”*

Ideas For Change^{xvi}

To solve these problems—fathers’ low engagement with their children and violent disciplining—CUBIC leveraged the behavioral diagnostic findings from the Explore phase. The group worked with the local Save the Children teams to identify 153 ideas that might help drive more positive parenting. These ideas were clustered (combined) and a voting procedure reduced this list to six ideas—three focused on father engagement and three on violence reduction—to be tested as potential solutions.

To increase fathers’ involvement, the following ideas were developed in sufficient detail for application. The behavioral insights underpinning the idea are in parentheses. (See Table 1 for a definition of each behavioral insight)

- Have regular game and sports events encouraging fathers and children to work together (Temptation Bundling, Peer Pressure, and Regular Reinforcement).
- Provide regular activity tips for fathers and children over social media, with a social competition and small rewards (Non-financial Rewards and Competition).
- Use children and other fathers as influential messengers in a social media campaign (Messenger Effect and Call to Action).

To reduce violent disciplining the following interventions were created.

- Use visible cues in the form of a phone keyring and verbal pledges to encourage parents to commit to nonviolent parenting (Social Desirability Bias, Social Signal, Pledge, and Commitment Bias).
- Make it easier for bystanders to intervene by providing them with a simple tool (Bystander Effect, EASY, and Sense of Civic Duty).
- Build empathy by showing the negative effects of violent disciplining from a child's perspective using a social media campaign (Messenger Effect, Empathy Gap, and Substitution)

The behavioral science ideas these interventions relied on are shown in Table 1. Prototype interventions which could be used to apply the idea were created. For example, an invitation to a father/child sporting event was created along with details on the best practices for hosting such an event. Each intervention had a specific target (e.g., fathers of kindergartners). Possible channels for the message were outlined (e.g., workplaces, social media). Finally, the barriers it hoped to address were outlined (e.g., work obligation as an excuse, lack of emotional control).

All ideas employed simple messages that were delivered by messengers from the target community and emphasized positive social norms (rather than attacking negative social norms). The ideas used both on- and off-line messages, and were designed to be testable to confirm if they actually made a difference before they would be scaled up to other parts of China.

The team at CUBIC wondered what additional interventions they might be able to create. What would be the target issue (lack of father engagement, violent disciplining, or both), target audience(s), and distribution channel? What behavioral science ideas might they be able to leverage and/or combine? How would the intervention work?

Table 1. Behavioral Science Ideas Used in Interventions

Temptation Bundling	Pairing a pleasurable indulgence with a valuable activity whose payoff is long-term can encourage uptake.
Peer Pressure	Direct and indirect influence of members of your social groups impacts your behavior.
Regular Reinforcement	Reinforcing behavior with positive rewards encourages it.
Non-Financial Rewards & Competition	Gamifying a task can encourage people to engage with it.
Messenger Effect	The right messenger changes how people react to information.
Call to Action	Explicit instructions on what to do helps people take action.
Social Desirability	People want to present themselves in a favorable light.
Social Signal	Sharing a visible cue helps promote appropriate behavior.
Pledge	A pledge may help people feel more committed to an action.
Commitment Bias	Past commitments may have to be overcome for change.
Bystander Effect	Seeing others not intervening make us less likely to intervene.
EASY	A key idea in behavioral science; to encourage a particular action, make it easy to do.
Sense of Civic Duty	Utilizing the feeling that this is right for society.
Empathy Gap	A lack of empathy might discourage positive behaviors.
Substitution	Replacement of emotions or behaviors may be easier than simply asking people to stop feeling or doing things.

Testing

A key part of the behavioral science approach is testing. The researcher does not presume to know what is best. Therefore, after prototypes are developed, they are typically deployed in tests. The ideal test is a RCT (Randomized Control Trial), which uses a similar logic to the trials of medicines. Some people would get the “treatment” (in this case, the intervention designed to promote positive parenting) while others would not. The test would be to compare outcomes—in other words, fathers’ involvement and abandonment of violent discipline—across those who received the intervention and those who did not. Critically, who gets the intervention must be random. This helps ensure that the groups are as similar at the start as possible, so that outcome differences could be ascribed to the intervention and not to other factors.

An important principle to avoid in RCTs is spillover, when the treatment group indirectly affects those who did not receive any treatment (e.g., through word-of-mouth

conversations regarding the interventions that then change behavior). This would influence the accuracy of the outcomes measured.

How might the CUBIC team have designed tests for their proposed interventions? What metrics should they use to measure outcomes, and how should they randomize groups to minimize the possibility of spillover? For example, should they randomize across different individuals, or families, neighborhoods, cities? When tested, do you think the interventions developed by the CUBIC team worked? If so, how could these be scaled up to improve life for vulnerable children in China?

Behavioral Intervention: Template for Design

Brief description of the intervention			
Target issue (e.g., violent discipline, father engagement, both)	Behavioral insights used	Details of the intervention (e.g., how does it work, where is it implemented)	Testing strategy (e.g., unit of randomization, metrics to measure, how to collect the data)
Target channel (e.g., social media, physical location)			
Target demographic (e.g., age, gender, role)			

Endnotes

ⁱ Save The Children, “Who are We?”, <https://www.savethechildren.net/about-us/who-we-are>, accessed October 27, 2022

ⁱⁱ Thaler, R. H., & Sunstein, C. R. (2009). *Nudge*. Penguin.

ⁱⁱⁱ At the time of writing (November 2022).

^{iv} NCT – the national charity for pregnancy, birth and early parenthood, “[What is positive parenting and how is it done?](https://www.nct.org.uk/life-parent/parenting-styles-and-approaches/what-positive-parenting-and-how-it-done)”, <https://www.nct.org.uk/life-parent/parenting-styles-and-approaches/what-positive-parenting-and-how-it-done>, accessed November 7, 2022

^v Ibid.

^{vi} Wang, M., & Liu, L. (2014). Parental harsh discipline in mainland China: prevalence, frequency, and coexistence. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 38(6), 1128–1137.

^{vii} CUBIC, Save The Children Improving Fathers’ Engagement and Disciplinary Practices in China, Final presentation and report, 22nd Sept 2022

^{viii} Save the Children China USING BEHAVIORAL INSIGHTS TO IMPROVE OUR UNDERSTANDING OF PARENTING PRACTICES AMONG CHINESE MIGRANT FAMILIES Behavioral Diagnostic Report, Center for Utilizing Behavioral Insights for Children (CUBIC), August 24, 2022

^{ix} Save the Children China USING BEHAVIORAL INSIGHTS TO IMPROVE OUR UNDERSTANDING OF PARENTING PRACTICES AMONG CHINESE MIGRANT FAMILIES Behavioral Diagnostic Report, Center for Utilizing Behavioral Insights for Children (CUBIC), August 24, 2022

^x Save the Children China USING BEHAVIORAL INSIGHTS TO IMPROVE OUR UNDERSTANDING OF PARENTING PRACTICES AMONG CHINESE MIGRANT FAMILIES Behavioral Diagnostic Report, Center for Utilizing Behavioral Insights for Children (CUBIC), August 24, 2022

^{xi} Save the Children China USING BEHAVIORAL INSIGHTS TO IMPROVE OUR UNDERSTANDING OF PARENTING PRACTICES AMONG CHINESE MIGRANT FAMILIES Behavioral Diagnostic Report, Center for Utilizing Behavioral Insights for Children (CUBIC), August 24, 2022

^{xii} Save the Children China USING BEHAVIORAL INSIGHTS TO IMPROVE OUR UNDERSTANDING OF PARENTING PRACTICES AMONG CHINESE MIGRANT FAMILIES Behavioral Diagnostic Report, Center for Utilizing Behavioral Insights for Children (CUBIC), August 24, 2022

^{xiii} This section is based upon CUBIC, Save The Children Improving Fathers’ Engagement and Disciplinary Practices in China, Final presentation and report, 22nd Sept 2022

^{xiv} Target, explore, solution, trial, scale. The Behavioural Insights Team. (Nov 2022.). Retrieved January 18, 2023, from <https://www.bi.team/publications/testsguide/>

^{xv} Save the Children China USING BEHAVIORAL INSIGHTS TO IMPROVE OUR UNDERSTANDING OF PARENTING PRACTICES AMONG CHINESE MIGRANT FAMILIES Behavioral Diagnostic Report, Center for Utilizing Behavioral Insights for Children (CUBIC), August 24, 2022

^{xvi} This section is based upon CUBIC, Save The Children Improving Fathers' Engagement and Disciplinary Practices in China, Final presentation and report, 22nd Sept 2022