

# BICS

THE BEHAVIORAL  
INTERVENTIONS  
FOR CHILD SUPPORT  
SERVICES PROJECT

## A BETTER RESOLUTION Reaching Child Support Agreements Between Parents in Vermont

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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.

cabs  at mdrc

### OVERVIEW

State child support programs secure financial support for children whose parents live apart. Establishing parentage, establishing and enforcing orders, and collecting and distributing payments are core child support program functions. Many child support programs are interested in engaging parents in these child support processes. In particular, engaging noncustodial parents early on, during order establishment, can increase the proportion of child support orders to which both parents agree.<sup>1</sup>

In the state of Vermont, the child support program is judicial, which means that the court holds the authority to establish and modify child support orders.<sup>2</sup> When the program needs to establish legal parentage,<sup>3</sup> establish a new child support order, or modify an existing order, it invites parents to attend a Case Manager Conference, held at the courthouse and facilitated by a court staff member. A staff member from the Vermont Office of Child Support (OCS) also attends to provide background information on the case, but does not facilitate the conference. If an agreement — known as a stipulation in Vermont — is not reached between the parents at the Case Manager Conference, the case is moved to a court hearing.<sup>4</sup>

Early in the project, during the diagnosis and design phase, OCS estimated that both parents attended these conferences less than half of the time, which made them less likely to reach a

- 1 Noncustodial parents are also sometimes called obligors; they are the parties who have been ordered to pay child support. Parents who *receive* child support are described as “custodial parents.”
- 2 Some states have administrative child support programs in which this authority rests with the child support agency.
- 3 When some cases are initiated, it is necessary to establish whether or not the person named as the noncustodial parent is actually the parent of the child(ren) involved in the case. This step is called “establishing parentage.”
- 4 Throughout this brief, the terms “agreement” and “stipulation” are used interchangeably. In Vermont, stipulations can be reached in order to establish parentage or new child support orders, or to modify existing child support orders.

stipulation outside of a court hearing. Furthermore, even with both parents present, many of those meetings did not result in stipulations.<sup>5</sup> OCS leaders believed that child support outcomes could be improved if more parents attended the meetings and reached stipulations. Since stipulations typically happen earlier in the process than judicial hearings, increasing stipulations can reduce the time and hassle involved in establishing orders for both parents and OCS, which could mean child support payments are made sooner.

The BICS team worked with OCS to design an intervention that would achieve two goals: (1) to increase parent participation in the establishment process (for both parentage and new orders) and the order modification process, and (2) to increase the number of cases where the parents reach agreement on at least one important issue outside of court.

The intervention had two main components: (1) a change to letters and outreach to increase participation in meetings, and (2) structural changes to the meetings themselves to increase the number of them that resulted in agreements between the parents. The central innovation was an OCS-led “Resolution Meeting,” created for the study as an alternative to the court-based Case Manager Conference. Both parents were invited to attend the Resolution Meeting using letters and forms redesigned following principles of behavioral science. When parents arrived at their local child support offices for Resolution Meetings, OCS staff members asked them to complete a priming exercise designed to get them in a mindset focused on the needs of their children, with the idea that that mindset would make them more open to reaching agreement. The OCS staff members who led the meetings were trained in concepts of behavioral science and principles of procedural justice.<sup>6</sup> Resolution Meetings were designed to be perceived by parents as respectful, neutral in tone, participatory, and helpful.

To test the effectiveness of the intervention, 947 cases were randomly assigned either to a group that received the intervention or to a control group whose cases were handled according to the business-as-usual practices. To measure parent engagement, OCS focused on attendance at the targeted meeting (that is, the Resolution Meeting for the intervention group and the Case Manager Conference for the control group).

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<sup>5</sup> Although OCS did not track how often parents showed up before the intervention began, its initial estimates from proxy measures in its administrative data indicated that only about 25 percent of parents invited to participate in meetings outside of court reached stipulations.

<sup>6</sup> “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).

The study found that parents in the intervention group were more likely to attend and had better meeting outcomes than parents in the control group. The intervention increased the rate at which both parents attended the targeted meeting by 8.4 percentage points, which is an overall increase of 31.9 percent. Additionally, the intervention increased the proportion of cases where stipulations were reached at the targeted meeting by 11.3 percentage points, which is an overall increase of 91.1 percent. Both of these effects are statistically significant.

In addition, the average length of time between the initiating action (a case opening or a modification request) and stipulation at the targeted meeting was 70 days shorter for parents who reached stipulation in the intervention group than for similar parents in the control group, which represents a 72.9 percent decrease. This finding is nonexperimental.

The outreach materials and the Resolution Meetings were well received by parents and OCS staff members. Parents said that the redesigned materials were helpful, and staff members found the BICS approach more respectful toward parents. All of these results suggest that child support programs can use these strategies to effectively engage parents in establishing and modifying orders.

The sections that follow provide more background on the existing process, the intervention's design, the results of the test, the implementation of the intervention, and the lessons this study offers for the child support community.

## THE EXISTING PROCESS

When OCS receives a request to establish or modify a child support order, OCS initiates contact with the parent who requested or applied for those services.<sup>7</sup> Either parent can apply for child support services; the more common scenario, in which the custodial parent is the applicant, is used here to explain the process.

For a new case to establish parentage and support, OCS sends a legal notice called a "Welcome Letter" to notify the noncustodial parent that he or she has been named as a responsible parent and that OCS intends to pursue legal action to establish a child support order. OCS then invites the parent applying for services to an initial "Intake Meeting" at the OCS office to prepare a case for a filing with the court. For a modification, a packet of information is sent to the parent who is requesting the modification, for that parent to complete and return. The parent has an option to request an appointment.

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<sup>7</sup> The same procedure applies to referrals for child support services from public-assistance programs.

Once the case is filed with the court, a Case Manager Conference is scheduled and a packet of documents is sent to the noncustodial parent (the “initial packet”).<sup>8</sup> The initial packet includes the date, time, and location of the scheduled conference, several pages of legal documents, and a summons to appear in court. The court sends the initial packet by certified mail, which the parent must retrieve at a post office. If the parent does not pick it up, a sheriff is sent to serve the parent with the summons.

In the current process, child support orders can be established or modified through a Case Manager Conference or at a hearing with a magistrate.<sup>9</sup> The Case Manager Conference process is administered by the courts. The meeting is scheduled before a hearing and is led by a court case manager, offering parents a chance to reach agreement outside of a hearing. At this meeting, a court case manager reviews legal and financial documents with the parents and explains the legal process. An OCS staff member also attends this conference to help explain the process, and to provide background information about the case during the meeting. If the parents reach an agreement on the issue(s) at hand (parentage, order establishment, or modification), the court case manager submits the stipulation documents to a judge or magistrate for signature. If a stipulation is not reached, a magistrate or a judge will need to hold a hearing.

Although OCS did not have specific measures on the rates at which parents attended Case Manager Conferences, OCS estimated early in the project that fewer than half of Case Manager Conferences have both parents in attendance. For Case Manager Conferences where both parents attend, agreements are reached in about half of the cases. The low rates of attendance and agreements result in parents being required to attend court hearings and delays resolution of support obligations.

## INTERVENTION DESIGN

OCS identified two primary goals for the intervention: (1) increasing parent participation in the establishment process (for parentage, new orders, or both) and in the order modification process, and (2) increasing the number of cases where the parents reach agreement on at least one important issue outside of court.

After OCS identified these goals, the BICS team engaged in a process called “behavioral diagnosis and design” to develop the intervention in partnership with OCS

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<sup>8</sup> Roughly half of parents who request or apply for modifications are called in for meetings, as opposed to all parents who ask OCS to establish new orders.

<sup>9</sup> In some regions, individual child support specialists are willing to work with parents to reach agreements if the custodial parent brings the noncustodial parent to the initial intake meeting. However, this practice does not appear to be common or an explicit path to order establishment in Vermont’s child support program. The description of the process in this brief is meant to represent the typical process as it is known to OCS and the courts.

and Veritas HHS (the Vermont team).<sup>10</sup> Through interviews with staff members and parents, observations of Case Manager Conferences, and data analyses, the BICS team and the Vermont team gathered information to map out the steps in the targeted processes and to identify “behavioral bottlenecks.” Behavioral bottlenecks are points where parents and staff members may be affected by common psychological and behavioral tendencies that impede program goals. The team then developed an intervention to address the following bottlenecks:

- The welcome letter and the forms sent in the initial packet are difficult to understand and adversarial in language, tone, and process, which could lead to an ostrich effect among parents.<sup>11</sup>
- The initial packet is sent by certified mail, which requires the parent to go to the post office to receive it, a hassle factor.<sup>12</sup>
- If the notice is not received by certified mail, a sheriff is sent to deliver the summons, reinforcing negative perceptions of OCS as adversarial and causing a further ostrich effect.
- Parents are informed about the Case Manager Conference a minimum of a month in advance, which could lead parents to have a failure of prospective memory.<sup>13</sup>
- Parents may experience cognitive overload during Case Manager Conferences, which cover as many as four important and possibly contentious issues (parentage, parental rights and responsibilities, legal responsibilities, and the order amount).<sup>14</sup>
- Attending Case Manager Conferences involves hassle factors. Conferences are scheduled on weekdays during business hours (8 a.m. to 4:30 p.m.) without checking with parents about their availability, and there are only a limited number of time slots available. It is possible for parents to reschedule or to make alternative arrangements, but those options are usually not explicitly offered to them.

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**10** Veritas HHS is a consulting firm that Vermont hired as the BICS implementation contractor using a competitive bid process. Veritas HHS provided project management and data support for the intervention, including child support expertise, data extraction, data compilation, quality assurance, and first-level data analysis.

**11** The ostrich effect is the tendency to “bury your head in the sand” to avoid negative or unpleasant information.

**12** A hassle factor is a seemingly small barrier, like filling out a form or waiting in line, that can have an oversized effect on completing a task.

**13** Prospective memory failure is the experience of forgetting to perform a planned action or intention at the appropriate time.

**14** Humans’ mental resources are limited and are more fallible than people often recognize. Cognitive overload happens when an individual’s mental resources are overburdened, impairing his or her ability to process information and make decisions.

- BICS researchers observed Case Manager Conferences and noted that when parents were confrontational or in disagreement, court case managers tended to defer their cases to the hearing process, where the magistrate could make decisions.

To address these bottlenecks, OCS and the BICS team made changes to the written communications sent to parents, added personalized reminder calls, and created an entirely new administrative procedure for parents to meet and discuss their cases at the Resolution Meeting. Figure 1 compares the intervention process with the usual process.

The intervention consisted of several components:

- 1 Resolution Meeting.** OCS created an administrative alternative to the Case Manager Conference, led by OCS specialists.<sup>15</sup> The Resolution Meeting, which provided an opportunity for parents to reach agreement earlier in the process, replaced both the intake meeting and the Case Manager Conference.<sup>16</sup> The standard time for the Resolution Meeting was 90 minutes so that OCS staff members could have more time to help parents complete relevant documents. To support this new approach, these staff received additional training in conflict resolution, the behavioral concepts of framing and reframing,<sup>17</sup> deescalation techniques, neutrality, and other skills and principles drawn from behavioral science. In addition, they were trained in principles of procedural justice, including new techniques to maintain neutrality and encourage parents to have a voice in the process so that the meeting would be received well by both of them. During the meeting, OCS specialists encouraged parents to express their perspectives and concerns. They tried to be respectful, neutral, and helpful so that both parents would feel comfortable. To minimize hassle factors, the meeting could be held outside of normal business hours or parents could participate by phone if necessary.
- 2 Initial packet redesigned to use principles of behavioral science, inviting both parents to attend the Resolution Meeting.**
  - **Larger envelope.** To make the initial packet stand out from other mail and grab the recipient's attention, the new package was sent in a larger envelope than typical mail.

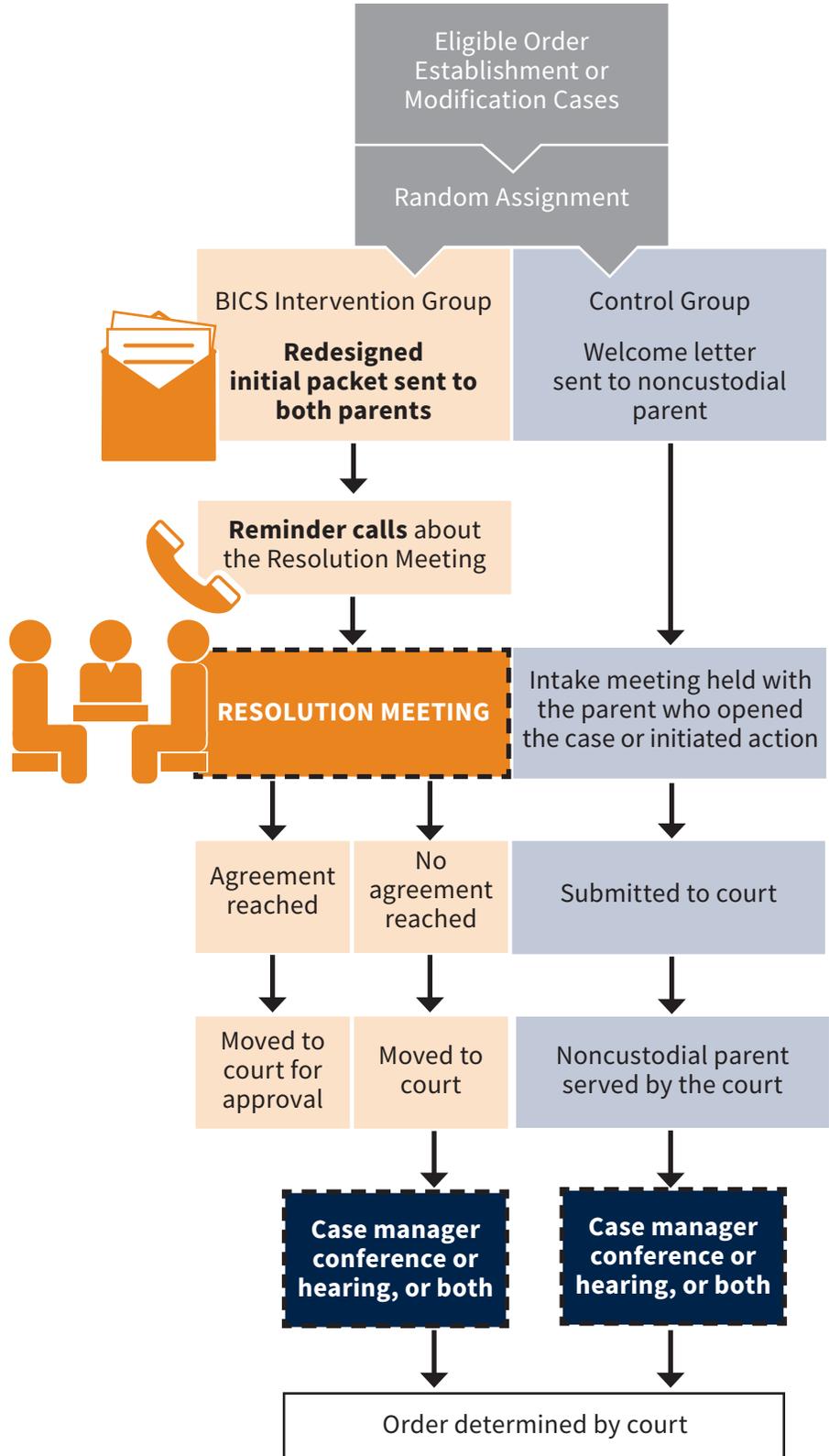
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<sup>15</sup> OCS specialists were either child support officers or paralegals employed by OCS.

<sup>16</sup> Vermont was able to enact this new meeting without legislative changes or significant legal issues. OCS reached an understanding with magistrates that Case Manager Conferences could be waived if the parents reached agreement at the Resolution Meeting. This option was not available before the BICS test.

<sup>17</sup> Reframing is a technique used to change one's view of the same events by restating or presenting information in a way that shifts or broadens perspectives.

Figure 1. Study Design



- ▣ **Regular mail delivery.** The new initial packet was sent by regular mail rather than certified mail.
  - ▣ **Cover sheet.** A new cover sheet was created to be the first page of the packet. The cover sheet highlighted the most important documents to bring to a Resolution Meeting and suggested that the recipient put those documents in the large envelope in which the packet was sent. This suggestion served as an implementation prompt.<sup>18</sup>
  - ▣ **Welcome letter.** The team developed a new, simplified letter with the most important information prominently featured, as shown in the first part of Figure 2. The second page of the letter included a map showing the location of the child support office, directions, and contact information (as shown in the continuation of Figure 2). There was also a calendar with the appointment time and date circled. The letter emphasized that parents could reschedule the meeting or participate by phone if necessary, and encouraged parents to make contact with the child support office in case of a scheduling conflict. These changes were meant to signal that the child support office could be helpful to parents.
  - ▣ **Genetic testing information sheet.** When parentage needed to be established, the packet included a new information sheet with answers to frequently asked questions about genetic testing. This information sheet was revised to make it easy to understand and encouraged parents to do genetic testing early.
- 3 Reminder calls to attend the Resolution Meeting.** OCS staff members made reminder calls both five days and one day before the scheduled meeting. They were trained to use scripts that were friendly, helpful, and respectful in tone and that reinforced important messages about the meeting. These calls also allowed parents to reschedule their meetings if the appointments no longer worked with their schedules.
- 4 Priming activity that prepared parents to see themselves mainly as parents.** Before the meeting, while parents were waiting in the office, they were handed an activity sheet that asked several questions about how they raised their children. The activity asked them to think about their roles as parents and then to select three actions from a list of eight that they believed were important things they could do to support their children. This identity-priming activity was intended to encourage participants to consider their roles as parents and to focus on the interests of their children. Parents were told that the

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<sup>18</sup> Implementation prompts are tools to help people make plans to follow through on their intentions.

activity was optional, their answers did not have to be shared with anyone, and they could keep the activity sheet for themselves. The completed activity sheet was not collected by OCS.

**Figure 2. Redesigned Welcome Letter**

Important Meeting on **June 5, 2016!**

Hello [noncustodial parent's first name],

My name is Mark from the Vermont Office of Child Support (OCS). I am here to help parents and caretakers like you through the child support process. I'd like to work with you and [custodial parent's first name] to get [child's first name] the support needed!

To come up with a child support agreement that works for everyone, I have scheduled a **resolution meeting** with you and [custodial parent's first name]. The meeting will give us a chance to come up with a support agreement in an **informal non-court setting**. This meeting could take up to two (2) hours.

Call us if you have concerns about meeting with the other parent in this setting or you feel this action is not in the best interest of you **or** your child.

**Here is what we will do at the meeting:**

- Talk about the current schedule for parenting time and visitation.
- Learn how support **for your child** is calculated and talk about each parent's ability to provide support.
- Ask ANY questions you have.
- Come up with an agreement for parenting time and financial support that works for everyone.

**All YOU need to do is:**

1. Mark Your Calendar	2. Collect this Information	3. Come to Our Office
The resolution meeting is on:  <b>June 5, 2016 2:00 PM</b>  <i>Call us at the number below if you cannot meet at this time!</i>	1. Government Issued ID 2. 4 most recent pay stubs 3. Tax returns for past two years 4. Court orders about the child(ren) 5. Any health insurance information you have  <i>Use the envelope you received from us to put your documents in.</i>	On the date of the resolution meeting bring your documents to:  <b>The Asa Bloomer Building                      88 Merchants Row                      Rutland, VT 05701</b>  <i>See the enclosed map for directions!</i>

Need to request a one-on-one meeting, ask questions or reschedule? **CONTACT ME.**

**Phone: 1 (802) 786-5060**  
**E-mail: mark@ocs.vt.gov**

**We want you to be part of this process. Don't miss this chance!**

IMPORTANT: This letter has also been sent to [custodial parent's full name]. If you have any concerns about sharing information with the other parent please call us.

Personalization

Simplification

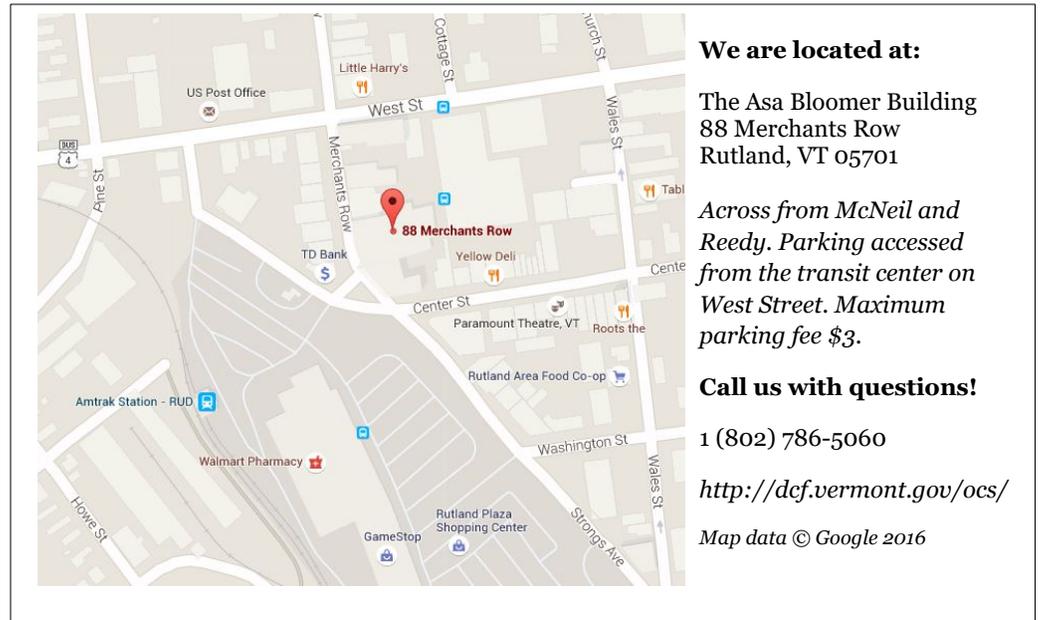
Loss aversion

(continued)

Figure 2 (continued)

Simplification

## Getting to your appointment



## RESULTS

To test the intervention, newly initiated establishment and modification cases in four Vermont counties were randomly assigned to an intervention group or a control group.<sup>19</sup> Cases assigned to the control group received business-as-usual materials and services, while cases assigned to the intervention group were handled using the intervention procedures (see Figure 1). Box 1 provides more details on the study sample, research methods, and data sources.

The study focused on two primary outcomes aligned with the intervention goals: (1) the rate at which both parents participated in the targeted meeting (the Reso-

<sup>19</sup> Random assignment occurred by case rather than parent because the intervention requires both parents to be in the same group, either the intervention group or the control group. Guardianship cases (that is, cases involving a guardian such as a grandparent rather than both parents) and cases that were initiated out of state were excluded. Also excluded were modification cases where one parent was currently in contempt proceedings for not abiding by a child support court order. Cases that had been closed for at least six months and reopened were considered “new” and were eligible for the study. These cases were treated the same way as newly opened establishment cases. Some parents have more than one child support case (for example, if the parent has children with more than one other person and there are child support cases for each set of parents). For these cases, the focus was on the eligible case in the study, but all cases associated with that parent were assigned to the same group.

### Box 1. Data and Methods

The sample for this study consisted of 947 new child support cases (for establishing parentage, child support orders, or both) and modification requests that were initiated over the 16 months between February 2016 and May 2017 in Windham, Franklin, Windsor, and Rutland Counties. There were 464 cases assigned to the intervention group and 483 cases assigned to the control group.

To estimate the intervention's effects, the BICS team analyzed child support administrative records for at least eight months after the month of random assignment for all sample members. This was an "intent-to-treat" analysis, in which the intervention's effects were estimated by comparing the full control group with the full intervention group, whether or not individuals in the latter group received the full intervention (for example, actually attending the Resolution Meeting). Cases that closed during the study period, in either group, were also included in the analysis.

The impact analysis compares the average (mean) outcomes of intervention members with the average outcomes of control group members. Because the two groups were randomly assigned, any statistically significant differences between the two groups' outcomes can be attributed to the intervention.

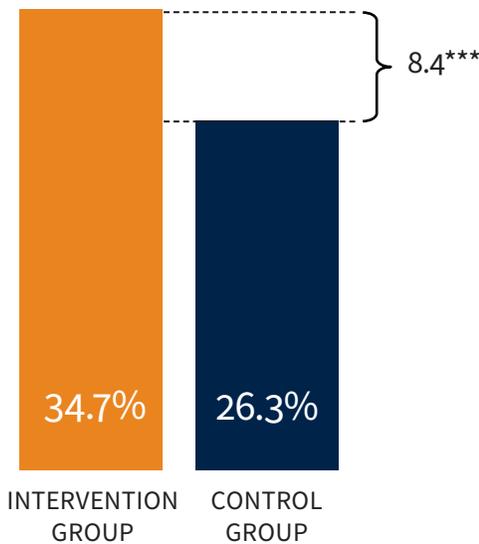
The following data sources were used in the analyses presented in this brief:

- **Child support administrative records.** The research team obtained data on child support cases from state systems using the OCS internal management information system. The outcomes analyzed from this data source included the rates at which parents attended target meetings, the results of those target meetings, and the number of days to stipulation.
- **Site visits.** The BICS team conducted five site visits in 2015 and 2016 to understand how parentage and child support order amounts were established and modified and to monitor and document how the intervention was implemented. Researchers observed Case Manager Conferences and Resolution Meetings and interviewed court and child support staff members and parents.
- **Cost information.** The Vermont team provided information used to estimate the cost of the intervention that included staff salaries with fringe benefits and overhead, as well as the average costs for sheriffs to deliver documents.
- **Staff level-of-effort focus group and questionnaire.** The Vermont implementation team held a focus group with meeting facilitators in May 2016 to determine their initial level of effort. A questionnaire for OCS staff members who implemented the intervention was administered later in the intervention. The questionnaire collected information on the average length of time it took to schedule resolution meetings, send materials, make reminder calls, prepare and hold Resolution Meetings, file materials with the court, and take other steps in the case-establishment and modification process. Almost all of the staff members implementing the intervention participated in one or both activities. This information was used in conjunction with cost information and the impact analyses to estimate the cost-effectiveness of the BICS intervention.

lution Meeting for the intervention group or the Case Manager Conference for the control group); and (2) the proportion of cases where parents reached stipulations at the targeted meeting. The time it took to reach stipulations among the members of both groups was examined as a secondary study outcome.

This intervention was highly effective. As shown in Figure 3, it increased the rate at which both parents participated by 8.4 percentage points, from 26.3 percent of the control group to 34.7 percent of the intervention group (a 31.9 percent increase). Additionally, the intervention increased the proportion of cases with stipulations by 11.3 percentage points, from 12.4 percent of control group cases to 23.7 percent of intervention group cases (a 91.1 percent increase), as shown in Figure 4. Both of these effects are statistically significant, meaning that the effects were unlikely to have occurred by chance.

**Figure 3. Percentage of Cases Where Both Parents Participated in the Targeted Meeting<sup>a</sup>**

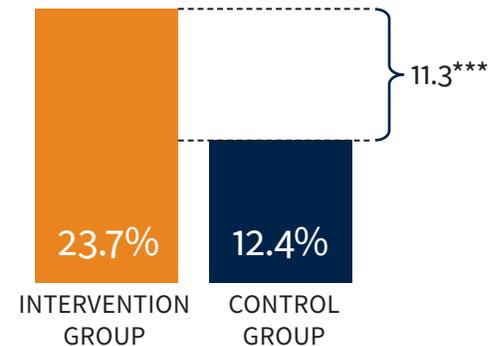


SOURCE: MDRC calculations based on data from the Vermont Office of Child Support.

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

<sup>a</sup>The targeted meeting for the intervention group was the new Resolution Meeting. The targeted meeting for the control group was the standard Case Manager Conference.

**Figure 4. Stipulations Reached at the Targeted Meeting<sup>a</sup>**



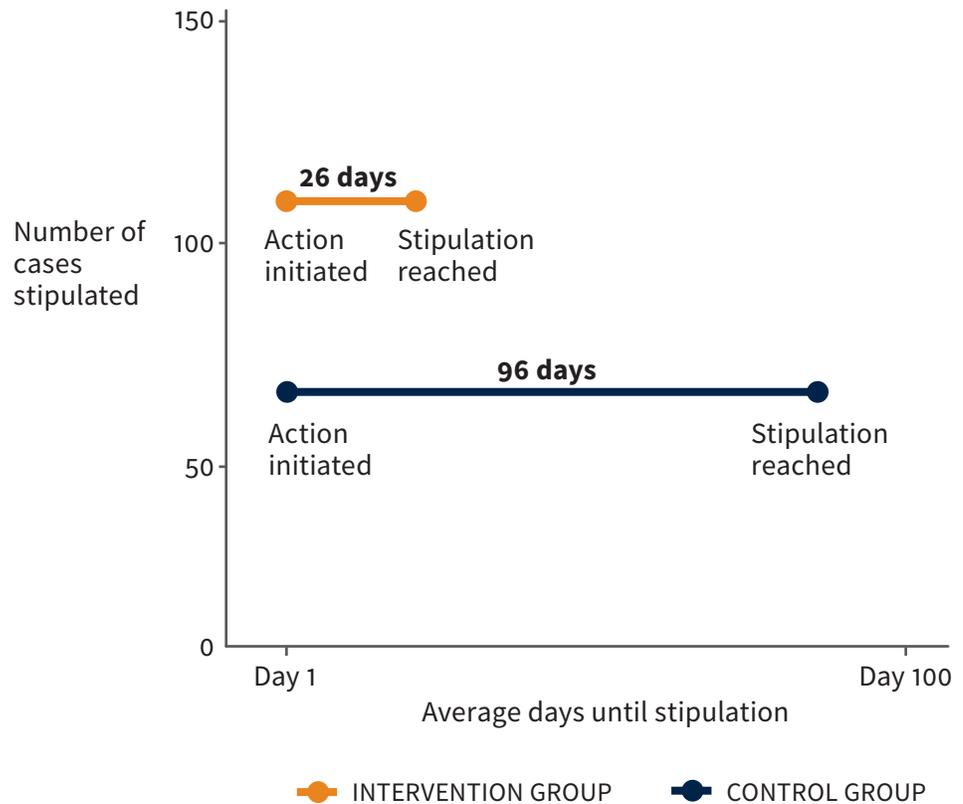
SOURCE: MDRC calculations based on data from the Vermont Office of Child Support.

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

<sup>a</sup>The targeted meeting for the intervention group was the new Resolution Meeting. The targeted meeting for the control group was the standard Case Manager Conference.

Figure 5 suggests that the intervention may have reduced the time from the initiating action (case opening or an application for modification) to stipulation at the targeted meeting. This difference in time to stipulation is nonexperimental, since it is only measured among cases that reached stipulations, which is a nonrandom subset of the full sample. It may be that the parents in the intervention group who attended the Resolution Meetings and reached agreement are systematically different from those in the control group who reached agreement. For that reason, the difference is also not assessed for statistical significance. The results show that among cases in which a stipulation was reached, it was reached on average after 26 days for the intervention group compared with 96 days for the control group.

**Figure 5. Number of Cases That Reached Stipulation at the Targeted Meeting and Number of Days Until Stipulation**



Source: MDRC calculations based on data from the Vermont Office of Child Support.

## IMPLEMENTATION

The intervention was generally implemented as designed. Initial packets were mailed on time and reminder calls were made as intended, although there was some initial resistance from the OCS staff and the courts. A few months into the intervention, the team tweaked the language in the initial packet to encourage parents to disclose histories of domestic violence so that OCS could handle those cases better. The priming activity, which was optional, was completed by parents about half of the time, according to OCS staff members.<sup>20</sup>

OCS specialists initially expressed concerns to the research team and to their own managers related to the increased workload and backlog involved in scheduling Resolution Meetings. As staff members grew more comfortable with their new duties, however, their apprehensions subsided. They also made fewer scheduling errors, and most began to report that the workload was manageable.

Several parents told researchers that they liked the welcome letter they received as part of the new initial packet and found it inviting. They also liked having the date and time of the scheduled meeting clearly marked, as well as the map of the office's location. These parents found reminder calls to be helpful and appreciated not having to go to court. In addition, in interviews with the research team, staff members said that they believed the BICS approach was more respectful of parents than the approach used with the control group.

A preliminary analysis indicated that the intervention services may be less costly than business as usual due to a reduction in service of process for cases that are resolved or dismissed outside of court, as well as a reduction in cases being filed with the court. These anticipated savings are from OCS's perspective and are largely the result of early parent engagement and stipulations occurring earlier in the process. Precise estimates are not available due to limited data.<sup>21</sup>

## LESSONS AND NEXT STEPS

Vermont's intervention aimed to increase the rate at which both parents participated in the establishment or modification process (in person or by phone) as well as the proportion of targeted meetings that resulted in stipulations. These results provide promising evidence to support the use of behavioral science in the child support process, as the intervention produced statistically significant effects on

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**20** The BICS team does not have information on the exact number of parents, or which parents in particular, completed the priming activity.

**21** Cost information was collected as described in Box 1. After those data-collection efforts were complete, however, OCS identified additional costs that might affect the cost analysis. As a result precise cost estimates are not available for this publication.

all outcomes of interest. First, the evidence suggests that relatively small changes based on principles of behavioral science — revising communications materials and adding reminders — increased the likelihood that parents would take the first step of attending an initial meeting. These changes were followed by a larger structural change: the Resolution Meeting with both parents, in a less formal setting than a courthouse, led by a specialist trained in procedural justice. Together, these changes increased the rate of stipulations.

The rate at which both parents participated in targeted meetings increased by 8.4 percentage points, and the rate of stipulations increased by 11.3 percentage points. Furthermore, parents who reached agreement in the intervention group did so 70 days sooner, on average, than parents who reached agreement in the control group.

Because this study’s intervention had multiple components that were available to all intervention group members, it is not possible to identify which parts of the intervention led to improved outcomes. For example, it is possible that the revisions to the welcome letter alone would have had the same effect on attendance without any reminders, or that the effects on stipulation rates could have been achieved without the priming exercise. Further study would be required to isolate the relative influence of each technique.<sup>22</sup>

The tone, style, and volume of communications materials that Vermont sends parents in the beginning of the child support process are not unique. Around the country, many child support agencies begin by sending parents many legal documents and a great deal of administrative information, much of which can be difficult to understand. Many agencies have limited contact with noncustodial parents until they are late on payments. This study adds to the evidence that incorporating principles from behavioral science at the beginning of the process to engage parents can create a “user-friendly” experience for them and improve outcomes.

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<sup>22</sup> A second phase of the BICS intervention in Vermont is testing whether providing travel reimbursement gives parents an incentive to attend meetings outside of court.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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