Helping Families Help Themselves:
Effects of an SMS Parental and Stress Management Intervention[1]

Lelys Dinarte - World Bank
Sofia Amaral - ifo Institute, Ludwig Maximilian University of Munich and Cesifo
Patricio Dominguez Rivera – IDB
Santiago Perez-Vincent - IDB

Despite the growing evidence suggesting that lockdown measures increased parental stress and child maltreatment, how to counteract such consequences of COVID-19 remains an open question. We estimate the causal effect of parental stress management and social norms around child maltreatment on the quality of parent-child interactions in El Salvador. Using an individual-level randomized control trial design, we test the impact of a high-dosage and free SMS intervention delivered over three months to 4,718 parents. The intervention is a remote-delivery adaptation of the in-person intervention shown to have successfully reduced stress and violent behavior in other populations. Caregivers in the treatment group receive three SMS/WhatsApp messages per week for three months. The messages contain information, exercises, videos, and links to a blog with additional content. The blog will store all content and exercises from previous weeks, allowing caregivers to access the material on-demand.

To test the intervention's effect, we conducted a baseline survey with 2,344 fathers and 2,374 mothers residing with children aged eight years of age or younger while caregivers were two months into the lockdown. We survey parents over the phone and collect various measures on parental investments and mental health through validated instruments and the use of vignettes. As compared to fathers, we find that mothers exhibit twice as high above-average scores for depression, anxiety, and stress. For fathers, above-normal anxiety affects over 20% of men. For 30 percent of parents, physical punishment is considered a useful tool for disciplining children. Fathers are more likely to tolerate physical punishment. Unemployment at the start of the quarantine increased for both parents but, more so, for fathers. Both caregivers increased the time spent with children by 2 hours per week. Parents have

[1] The implementing partner for this intervention is Glasswing International. The project received ethics approval from the National Ethics Committee of El Salvador.

undergone two months and a half of intervention, and compliance with treatment – individuals who open the messages - remains stable at 70 percent. Incentivized content knowledge surveys reveal an increased knowledge of stress management and positive parenting techniques among treated caregivers compared to the control group. We hypothesize that such improvement in information on managing stress and positive parenting improves mental health and parental time investments and lowers child maltreatment. Together, these findings could inform how to best adapt interventions into a remote delivery framework that could mitigate the short and long-run negative consequences of stay-at-home orders and COVID-19 related stress.