

An illustration of a woman with dark hair and a purple face, wearing an orange top, gesturing with her hand. She is talking to a man with a red face and dark hair, wearing a yellow top. There are blue speech bubbles between them, a large orange question mark above the man, and a starburst of orange shapes above the woman. The background is light blue.

Difficult Conversations as an Intertemporal Choice

Yena Kim

SJDM Session #6 Track II | November 18, 2023

Life is full of important conversations

Life is full of important conversations



Giving critical
feedback

Life is full of important conversations



Giving critical
feedback



Sharing bad
news

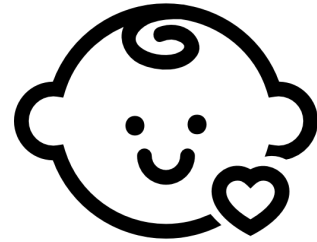
Life is full of important conversations



Giving critical
feedback



Sharing bad
news



Where babies
come from

Life is full of important conversations



Giving critical
feedback



Sharing bad
news



Where babies
come from

A **knowledge** story?



A **knowledge** story?

“I don’t know if they want
to *hear my feedback...*”

“I don’t know if they’ll
understand what I’m saying...”



But what about times when we know the benefits?



**LONG-TERM,
ABSTRACT GOALS**

Promote learning & growth

But what about times when we know the benefits?



**LONG-TERM,
ABSTRACT GOALS**

Promote learning & growth

VS



**SHORT-TERM,
VISCERAL TEMPTATIONS**

Avoid harming others

A **want-should** story?



**LONG-TERM,
ABSTRACT GOALS**

Promote learning & growth

VS



**SHORT-TERM,
VISCERAL TEMPTATIONS**

Avoid harming others

Our approach

Our approach

Question 1:

Do people perceive intertemporal trade-offs?

Our approach

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Do people perceive intertemporal trade-offs?

Question 2:

Do these conversations feel like want-should conflicts?

Our approach

Question 1:

Do people perceive intertemporal trade-offs?

Question 2:

Do these conversations feel like want-should conflicts?

Question 3:

Are people *aware* that these are want-should conflicts?



**Do people perceive
intertemporal trade-offs?**

1 U.S. ADULTS ($N = 298$)

Psychological experience of (dis)honesty

- Motives
- Costs and benefits
- Intertemporal judgments



2a

U.S. POLITICIANS ($N = 154$)



2b

U.S. PHYSICIANS ($N = 104$)



2c

H.K. STUDENTS ($N = 412$)



Please think of the most recent time when you struggled to communicate honestly.

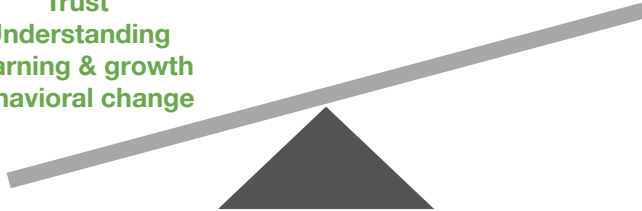
That is, think of the most recent time that you considered being dishonest or were tempted to lie, and either ended up being evasive, omitting information, avoiding the conversation, lying, telling the truth, or anything in between.



When deciding whether to communicate honestly, which consequences did you think would happen and when?

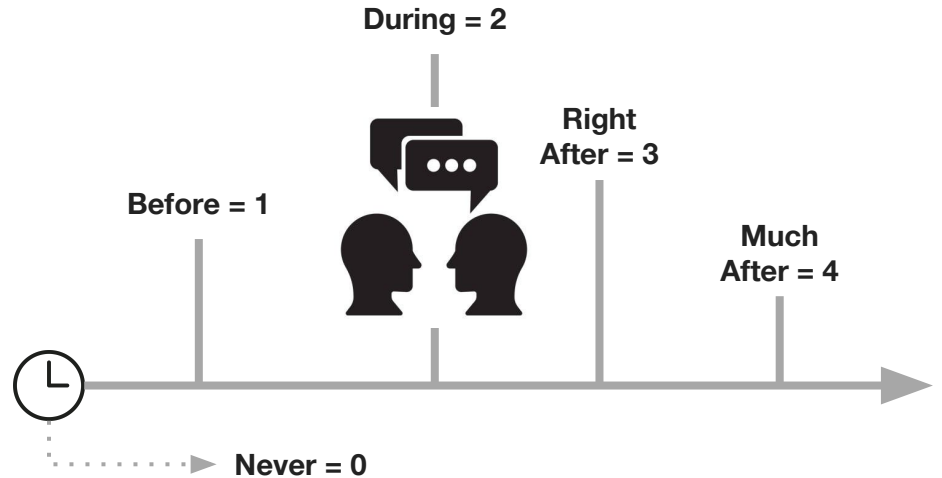
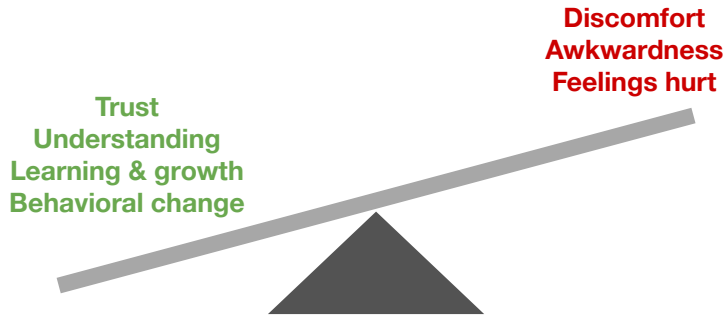
Trust
Understanding
Learning & growth
Behavioral change

Discomfort
Awkwardness
Feelings hurt



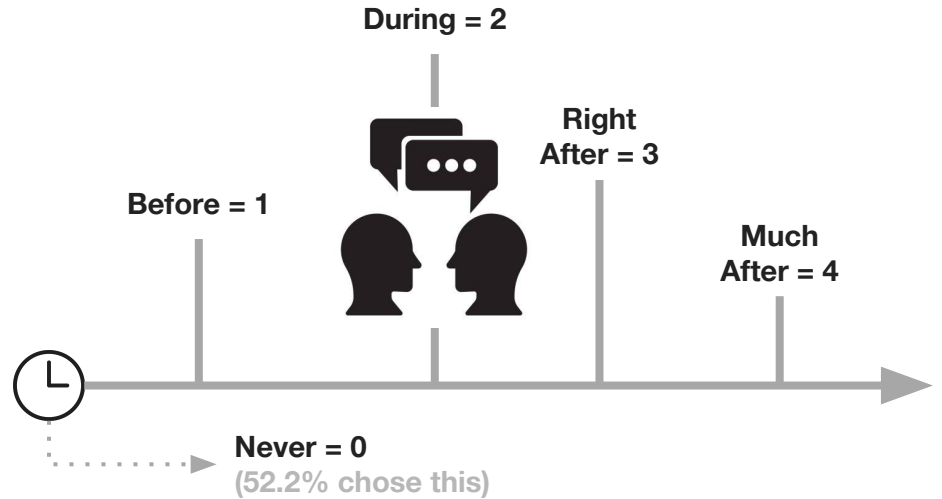
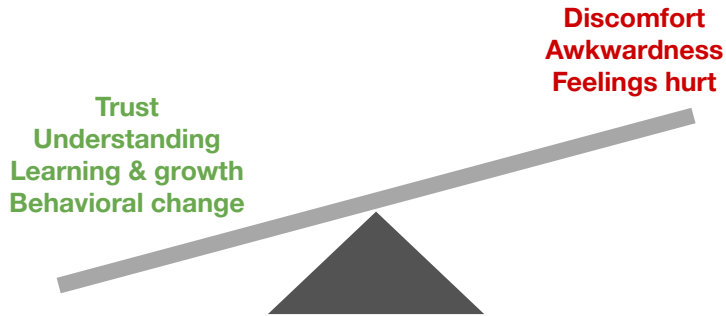


When deciding whether to communicate honestly, which consequences did you think would happen and when?

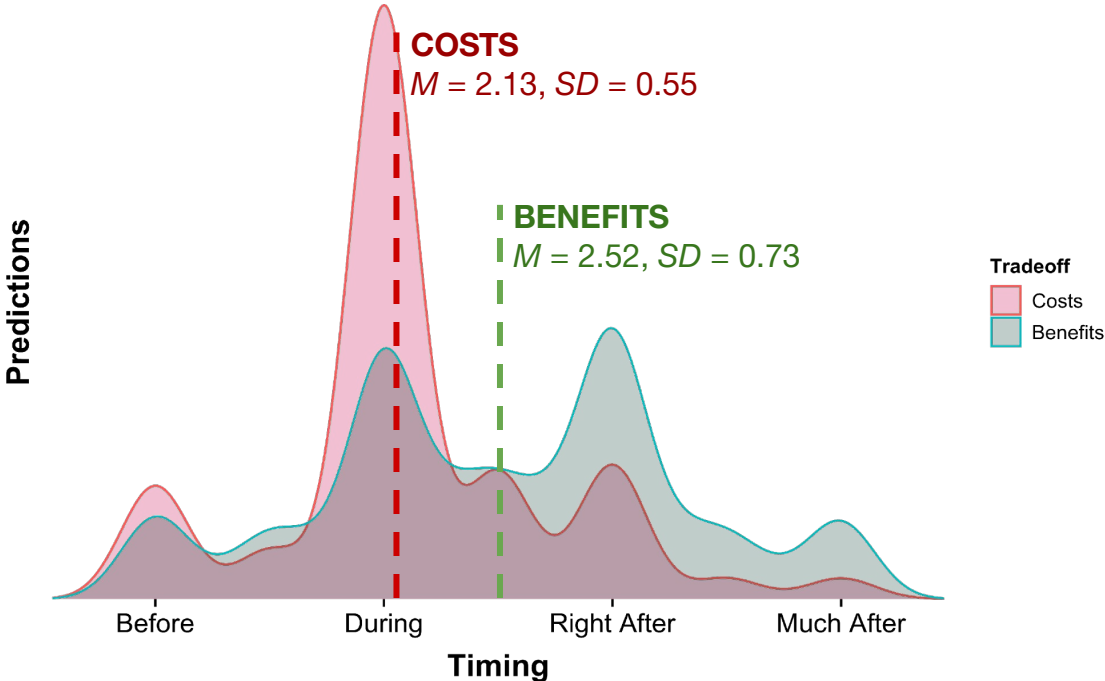




When deciding whether to communicate honestly, which consequences did you think would happen and when?



People expected costs to occur **sooner** than the benefits



$t = -7.88, p < .001$

Conceptually replicated across diverse samples

2a POLITICIANS



2b PHYSICIANS



2c H.K. STUDENTS



Do people perceive intertemporal trade-offs?

Across diverse contexts, people perceive the costs to be more immediate than the benefits.



**Do people procrastinate on
difficult conversations?**



Please think of information that could bring about benefits if you shared it—but could also cause harm.

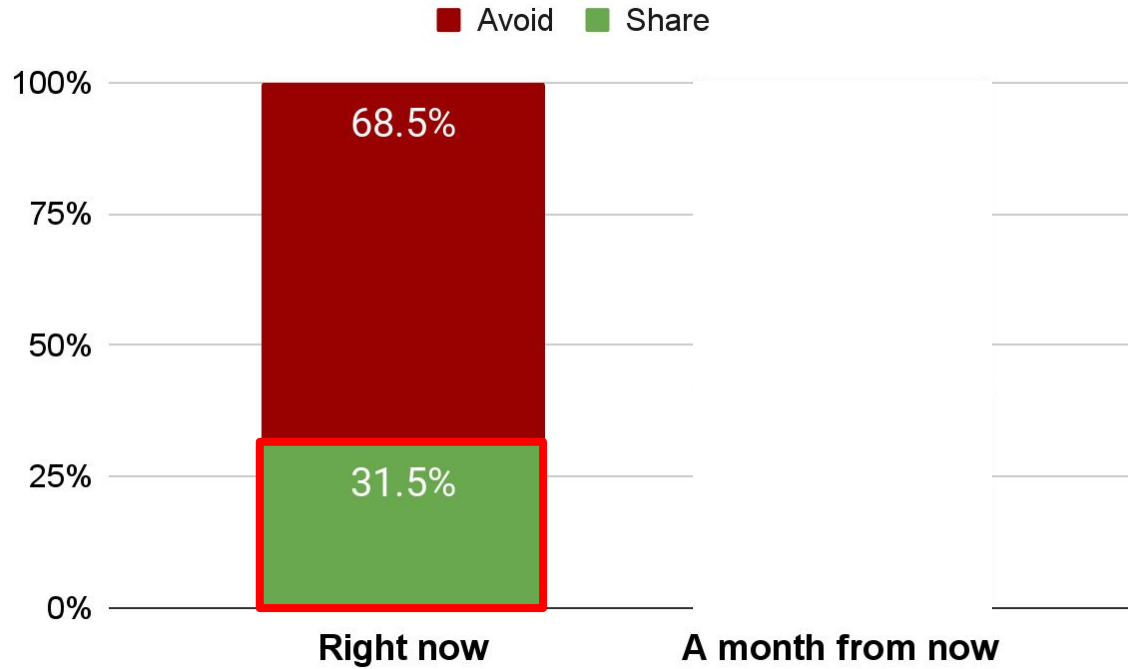
This should be information that you *could but have not yet* shared with someone.



Imagine that you are going to run into this person, and you can choose to share this information with them...

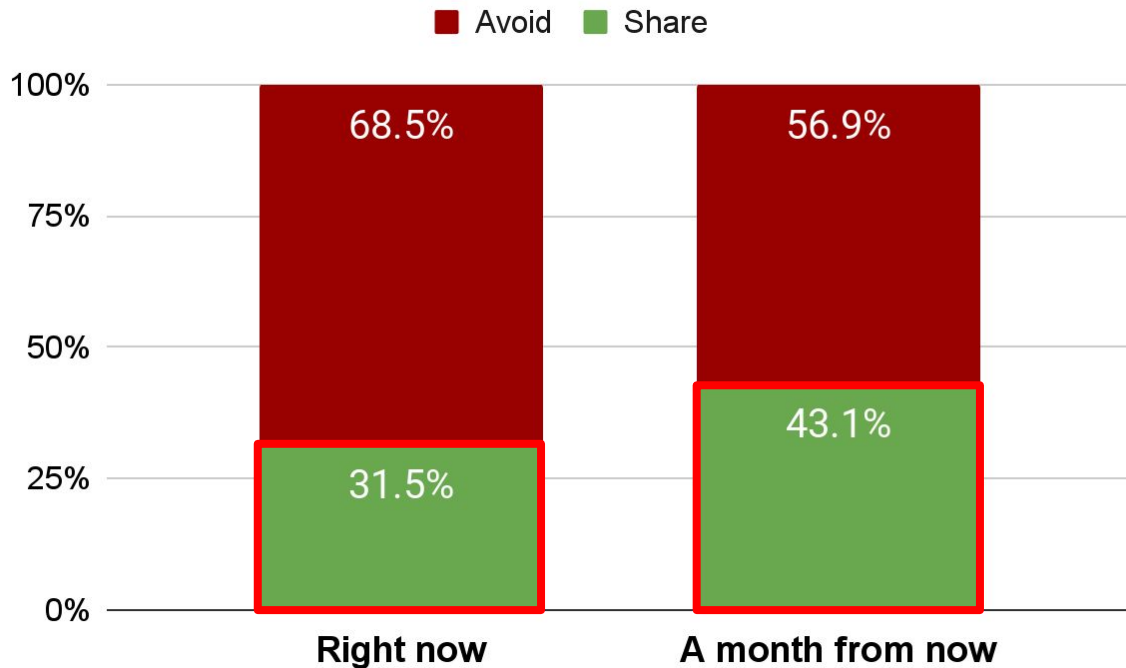
If you had to have a conversation **RIGHT NOW** (vs. **A MONTH FROM NOW**), what would you do?

- Avoid sharing the information
- Share the information



$\chi^2 = 10.76, p < .001$ (McNemar Test)

People said they're more likely to share later (vs. now).



$\chi^2 = 10.76, p < .001$ (McNemar Test)

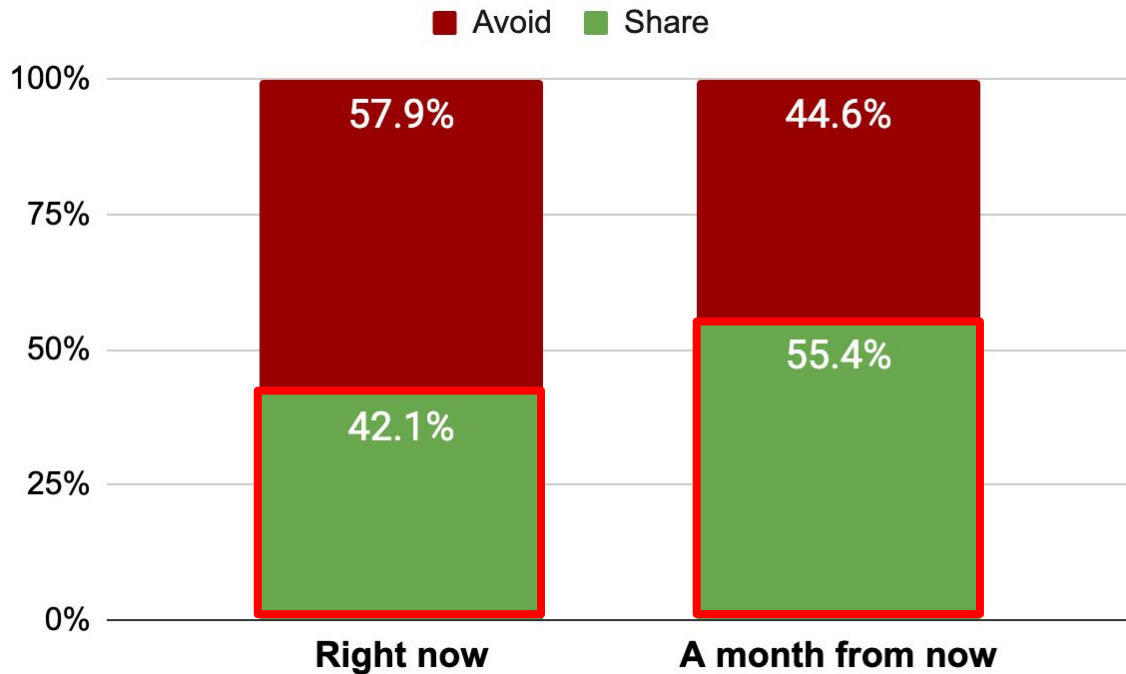
What if we give people a chance to **plan ahead?**



Take a moment to figure out what you would do if you had the opportunity to share this information.

Imagine talking to this person directly and write out exactly what you would tell them.

Planning ahead still doesn't address the whole story...



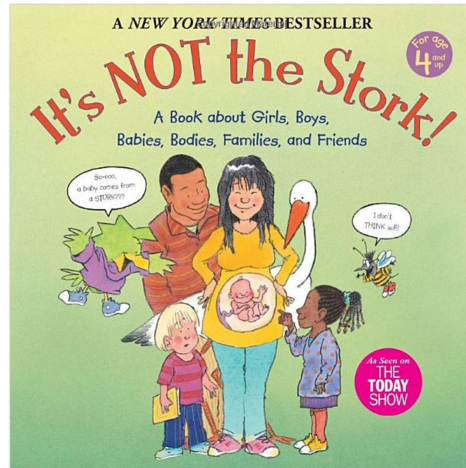
Do people procrastinate on difficult conversations?

Given the intertemporal nature of conversational consequences, people end up procrastinating on tasks they know they *should* do—but don't *want* to. This effect persists even after planning out the conversation.



**Are people *aware* that these
are want-should conflicts?**

Do **parents** know their self-regulatory issues with difficult conversations?



General design

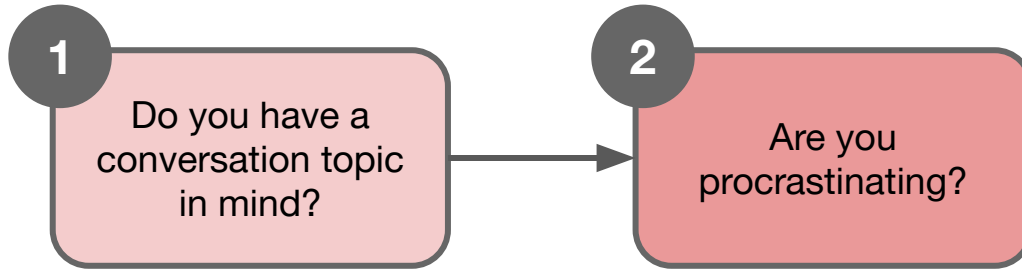
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Do you have a
conversation topic
in mind?



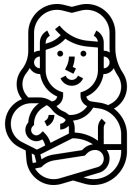
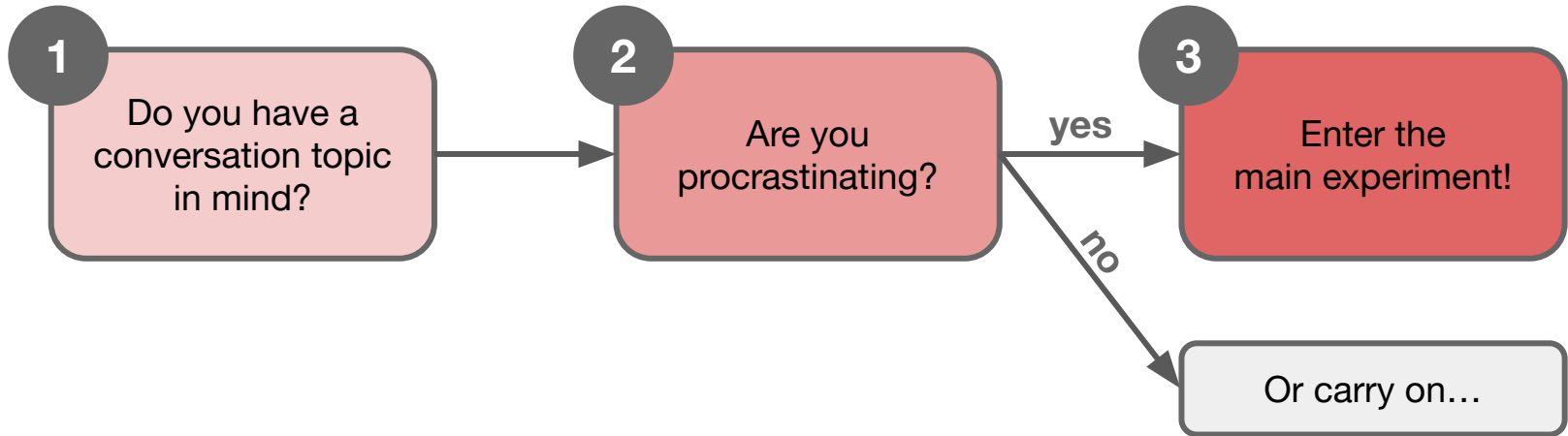
Annie

General design



Annie

General design



Annie

Step 1



Please think of a conversation that could bring about benefits if you had it with your child—but could also cause discomfort.

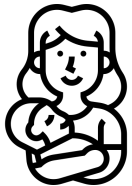
This should be a discussion that you believe IS age-appropriate for your child, but you have NOT YET had with your child.



Annie

Step 2

How likely are you to have this discussion
TODAY (vs. SOMETIME IN THE FUTURE)?



Annie

**How likely are you to have this discussion
within 50 days?**



Annie

**How likely are you to have this discussion
within 50 days?**



Annie

Step 3: Random assignment to commitment device opportunity



Procrastinating Parents
(reported pushing conversation to the future)



Treatment
(yes device)
 $N = 101$

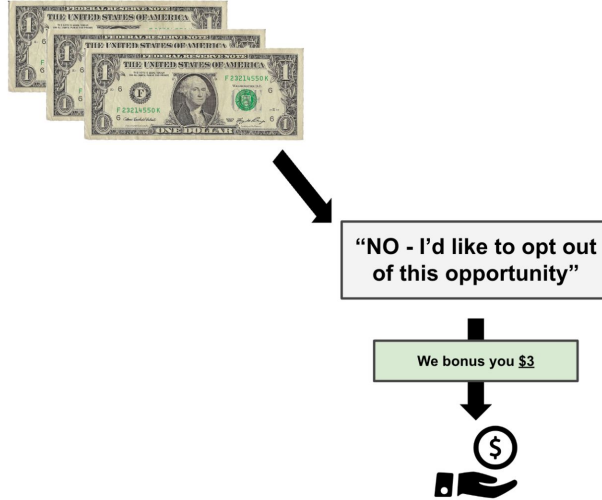


Control
(no device)
 $N = 93$



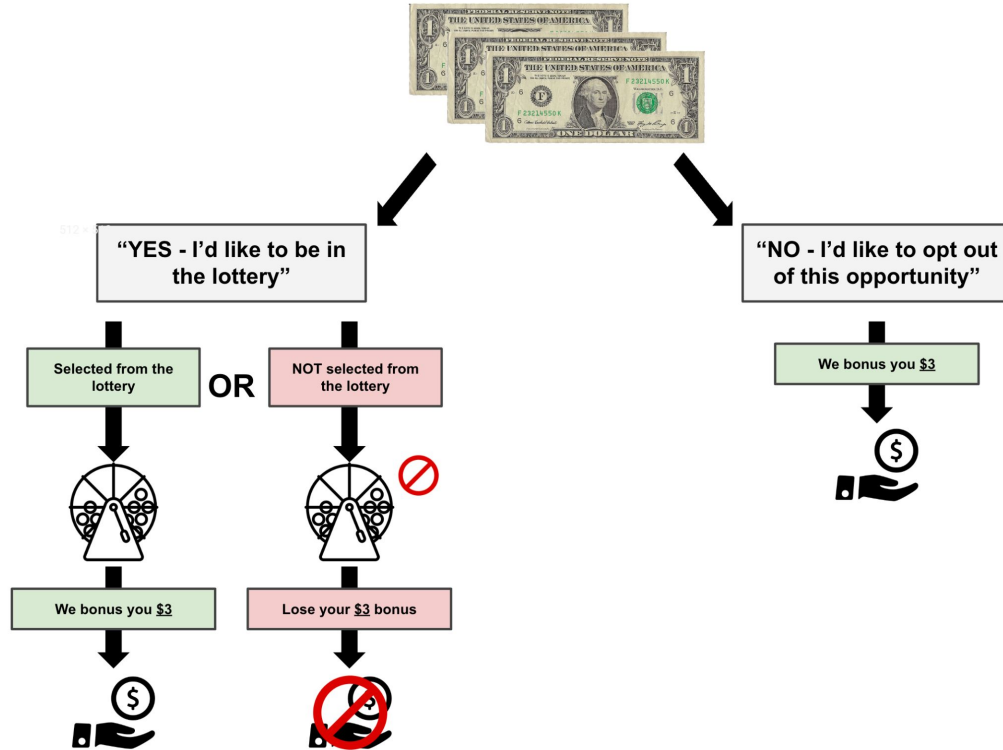
Annie

It all begins with a **\$3 bonus...**



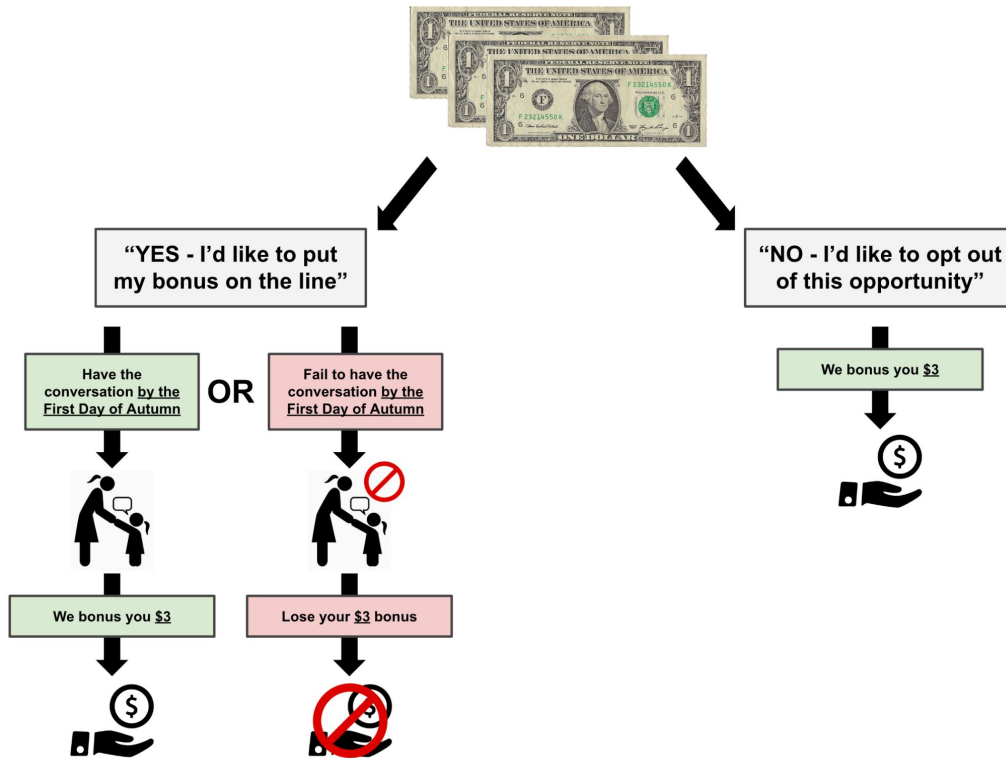
Annie

Control = risky choice to enter lottery



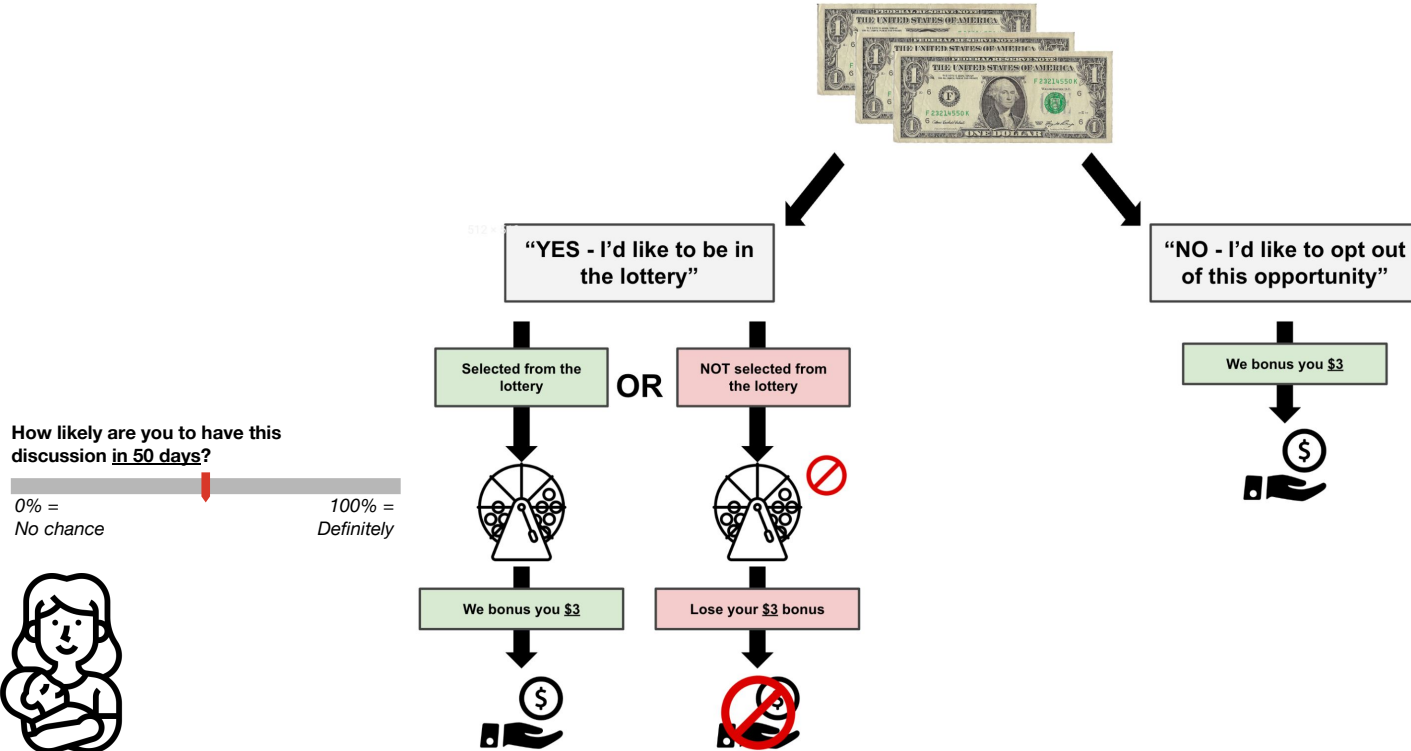
Annie

Treatment = risky choice to take commitment device



Annie

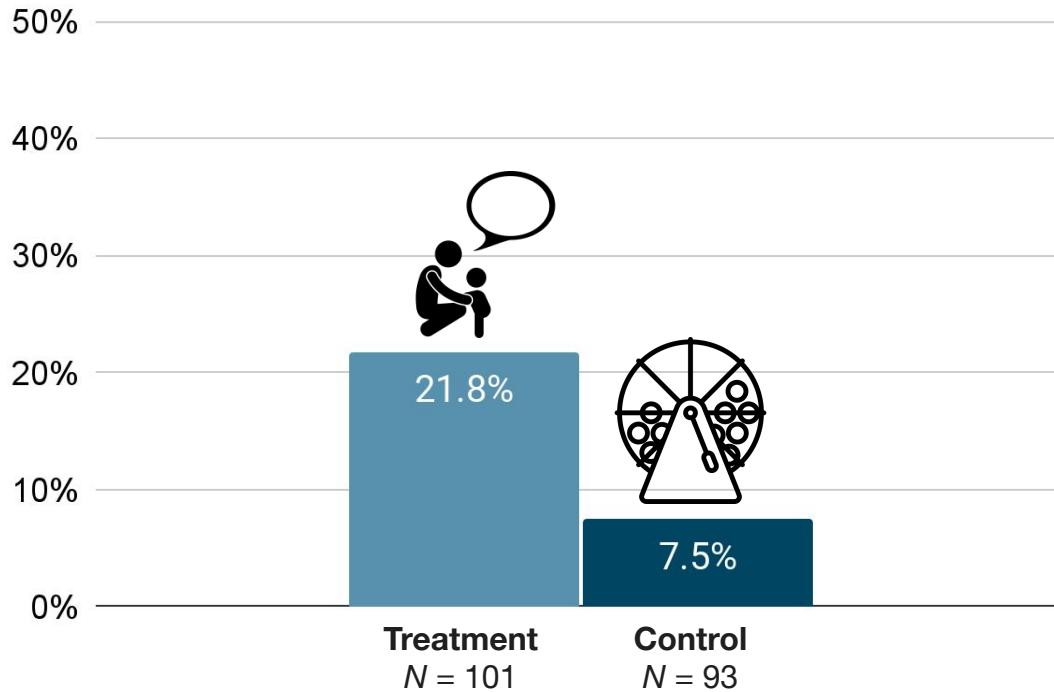
Equating the risk between the conditions



Annie

So what did we find?

More parents made the risky choice in the **treatment condition** (vs. control)



$\chi^2 = 6.66, p = .010$

Why parents decided to precommit



Treatment

“Because it's a very important conversation to have with my child and this incentivizes me to have this conversation soon rather than continue to put it off.”

“I think a small reward would be a good incentive. It's an uncomfortable topic and I might not do it unless I have a bit of motivation.”

Why do people avoid difficult conversations?



Why do people avoid difficult conversations?

**KNOWLEDGE
PROBLEM**

“I don’t know if they’ll
benefit from this...”



Why do people avoid difficult conversations?

**KNOWLEDGE
PROBLEM**

“I don’t know if they’ll benefit from this...”

**MOTIVATION
PROBLEM**

“I know I *should*, but I really don’t *want* to!”





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UChicago



Emma Levine
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T. Bradford Bitterly
HKUST



Nathan Lee
RIT



Karen Kim
UChicago

Thank you!

