

REFI INSIGHT

The **ROCKWOOL** Foundation Interventions Unit
Insights and Learning series - October 2019

Tips By Text

Text messages to
support children's
early language
development



What is RFI INSIGHT?

At the ROCKWOOL Foundation Interventions Unit we aim to generate new knowledge about possible solutions to challenges faced by society. Our work is spread over four phases. First, we investigate the nature of a current issue, drawing on knowledge, insights and lessons gained from research, social innovation and interaction with practitioners. Second, we prototype and develop possible solutions. Third, we evaluate the impact of these solutions in order to determine the degree to which they generate positive change and their cost-effectiveness in doing so. We keep scalability in mind throughout; solutions are designed to reach their full potential at scale, which is our fourth and final phase. Our work is always a learning process. New questions arise, and we continuously acquire new insights into the nature of the challenge, the intended participants, and the methods that may produce positive change. We build on this knowledge in creating a specific solution. However, it is not until we finally see the results of a research-based impact evaluation that we know whether that solution really does have the capacity to generate positive outcomes for participants, and benefits for society as a whole. It takes time to reach that point. The idea of “RFI Insight” is to share the practical knowledge insights, and learnings that we continuously accumulate through our work, including in the early phases.

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Tips By Text

Text messages to support children's early language development

As a parent, how can you best support your child's language development in your busy everyday life? There are many demands on the parents of young children today, and it can be difficult to make sure you are doing enough to support your child's language. In the TipsByText project, we send parents of young children three text messages each week with tips on fun activities designed to fit into family routines and to make it easier for parents to improve early language skills. We are currently testing whether these prompts can encourage parents to use a wider vocabulary in their everyday interactions with their children, and thus to support their children's language development.

Research results produced by the ROCKWOOL Foundation Research Unit indicate that there is a strong correlation between children's early language skills and how well they perform in school later on. At the same time, research shows that in Denmark there are significant differences among children in their language development, and that these differences are already present in kindergarten.¹

The aim of TipsByText is to support children's early language development. Over a period of eight months, parents of children aged three to five receive weekly text messages with ideas for entertaining activities and games that stimulate children's language, and which parents and children can easily do together in the course of the day. TipsByText is a well-established, research-based initiative for parents that originates from Stanford University, California. The ROCKWOOL Foundation Interventions Unit has worked with Danish language researchers and language consultants to adapt TipsByText to a

Danish context and typical daily routine. TipsByText can be used with all children aged three to five, and it can be used by all parents. Parents receive text messages that are adapted to the specific age of their children and that are especially suitable for supporting children who score below average on the Danish national language assessments.

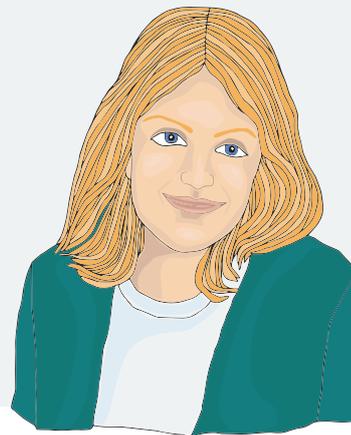
Working in close collaboration with five Danish municipalities, we are about to begin a research-based impact evaluation of TipsByText using a randomised controlled trial format. The parents of around 1,600 randomly-selected children will be offered the opportunity to participate in the programme. A corresponding number of children will be used as a control group. Danish national language assessments will be used to determine whether the text messages have succeeded in helping the parents in supporting and promoting their children's language development.

¹Hjorth-Trolle, Anders & Rasmus Landersø (2019): "Børns udvikling af sproglige færdigheder har social slagside" (Children's language skills development has a social downside). ROCKWOOL Foundation Research Unit newsletter.



W *I talk to him more now. The text messages give me ideas for how I can talk to my child, and what we should talk to children about. Because we think differently – we’re adults, we don’t think about what something is called, about what colours are, or what numbers are, and about cars and lorries and that sort of thing. Those are things that don’t interest us – but they interest children. So now we talk about the bus, about the push-buttons in a bus and ...”*

/ Omar, father of a three-year-old boy



W *When I heard that you could get good advice and suggestions for play activities, I thought that it was a good idea that I get a little help, because I’m busy. For example, bath-time is fun now – for me too. And it means that I feel like a good mother, because I’ve done my job – but it feels like fun instead of a duty.”*

/ Anna, mother of a five-year-old boy

Adapting the programme to a Danish context

TipsByText is an intervention that was originally developed in the USA under the name of Ready4K, where it has been shown to have positive effects on children's language development.² The programme was initially devised by Professor Susanna Loeb and her colleagues at the Center for Education and Policy Analysis at Stanford University. The ROCKWOOL Foundation Interventions Unit has adapted the programme for use in Denmark, working closely with Susanna Loeb herself, with Pia Thomsen (a Danish researcher and

consultant in the field of child language), and with language consultants from selected municipalities. The Danish programme has been designed to promote greater interaction and contact between parents and their children. At present it exists in three versions, for use with children aged three, four and five, respectively.

We learnt a great deal from the adaptation process, and we will share this knowledge in the next RFI Insight.

W *TipsByText empowers parents to support their children's language development through specific and tangible activities. The trialling and evaluation of TipsByText in Denmark can make a significant contribution to filling the gap in our research-based knowledge regarding the design and effectiveness of low-cost initiatives intended to benefit families and children."*

/ Pia Thomsen PhD, researcher and consultant in the field of child language



²York, Ben, Loeb, Susanna, and Doss, Christopher (2019): "One Step at a Time: The Effects of an Early Literacy Text Messaging Program for Parents of Preschoolers". Journal of Human Resources vol. 54 no.3.

What is TipsByText?

TipsByText is an initiative that is rooted in the notion that all parents want the best for their children. However, for parents of young children, everyday life is often very complex, and packed with a host of tasks. The basic idea underlying TipsByText is to make it easier for parents to support their children's language and development. Most parents are well aware that they ought to help their children develop their language skills, but are often short of ideas for how to do so, and of the time needed. The text messages in TipsByText provide parents with specific ideas for how they can stimulate their children's language development - on the way home from kindergarten, while giving their child a bath, or when preparing meals. Through text messages, parents receive regular tips and short reminders

about how they can engage their children in entertaining conversations, explore rhymes, and supply the words needed to talk about everyday routines.

In other words, TipsByText is not a traditional language stimulation counselling tool that parents themselves have to work out how to put into practice at home. It is firmly based on the idea that linguistic interaction should be fun, easy, and a natural part of the everyday routine for young children.

The TipsByText programme consists of three weekly text messages: a FACT message, a TIP message and a GROWTH message.

MONDAY

FACT

On Mondays, parents receive a text message with a FACT that is designed to motivate and provide them with knowledge about language and the significance of various skills for children's development.

TEXT

Children love repetition and routines, and they support your child's development. At bath time, ask: What are the things we need for a bath? Why?

WEDNESDAY

TIP

On Wednesdays, parents receive a TIP that includes ideas for specific activities designed to fit into family routines. The TIP builds on the knowledge that the parents obtained through Monday's FACT.

TEXT

Talk to your child during bath time. Ask: What do we use shampoo for? Look at the shampoo bottle together and hunt for letters.

FRIDAY

GROWTH

On Fridays, parents receive a GROWTH text message that provides encouragement, recognises parents' input and builds on the TIP sent on Wednesday.

TEXT

Conversations at bath time help teach your child new skills. Talk to your child about parts of the body. Ask: Where are your elbows? What do they do?

The vast majority of children in Denmark attend day-care institutions, where it is an explicit aim to support early language development. TipsByText complements this work by supporting parents in acting as language role models in the home.

W *I find that the text messages generate more conversations between children and parents. The parents of four-year-old children are amazed that you can talk to children about, say, cooking, and involve them in it. Or that you can talk to your child about what a carrot is. A parent came in and told us about his new knowledge – which was actually something we’d already talked to him about several times here at the kindergarten, because his son will soon turn five and he has minimal language skills... But the message just hadn’t sunk in before.”*

/ Day-care manager.



Who is it for?

TipsByText can be used by all parents of children aged three to five. In adapting TipsByText to a Danish context, emphasis was placed on ensuring that parents with different educational backgrounds and native languages would find the intervention to be relevant and helpful. TipsByText can also be used by parents whose mother tongue is a language other than Danish, as the texts are available in eight different languages.

The text messages are designed to be particularly relevant for parents whose children score below average on the Danish

national language assessments. The aim of TipsByText is thus to support the language development and early literacy of young children, helping to ensure that all children get a good start to their primary education. By focusing particularly on those children whose language development is below average, the ambition is to reduce the significant gaps in language skills that are present right from the beginning of primary school, and which affect the children's academic and social development.

Small-scale trials & interviews with parents

In adapting the programme, we paid particular attention to ensuring that the content of the TipsByText messages would be meaningful and relevant to parents in Denmark. For this reason, we carried out several small-scale trials of TipsByText. In the summer of 2018, we ran a three-month trial in three Danish municipalities. Subsequently, we conducted mini-interviews with 90 parents out of the 176 enrolled, and 25 in-depth interviews with parents selected to provide a representative sample of the broad target group for TipsByText.

There was minimal drop-out from the trial. In fact, of the 176 parents who enrolled in the programme, only 14 unsubscribed. The parents who withdrew were also interviewed, so that we could learn about their experience.

The parents were interviewed by anthropologists and sociologists who had received training in the use of an interview guide and various interview tools. The aim was to encourage an open dialogue and to create a space in which parents could freely recount their experiences and give feedback, including criticism, about the intervention.

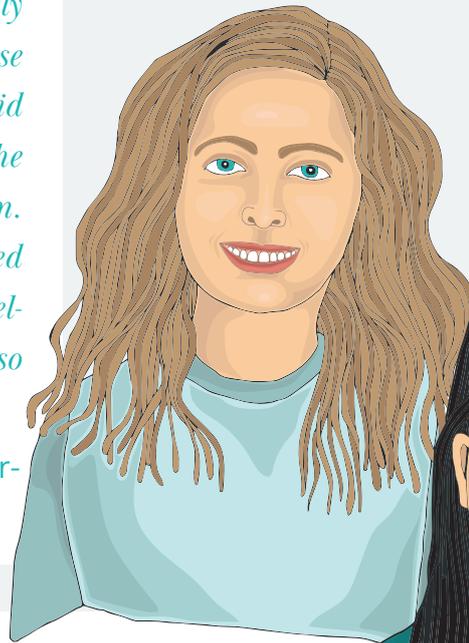
How was TipsByText received by parents?

1. TipsByText was received especially well by those parents whose children scored below average on the national language assessments. In the interviews, parents gave detailed examples of how they made use of the texts, with everyday routines being given greater prominence in boosting language development. The texts provided reminders to do things that often tend to get forgotten in the course of busy everyday lives. In addition, parents acquired ideas for how to carry out regular routines in a new, fun, and educational way.
2. The parents responded actively and thoughtfully to the messages. They made use of those ideas they considered to be good and fun, and skipped the messages that they did not think were suitable for their child. It was evident in the interviews that a text can inspire completely new ideas and linguistic behaviour. For example, the text “When your child says ‘apple’, you can respond ‘RED apple’” might later prompt the child to come up with ‘ORANGE carrot’ of his or her own accord. This seems to indicate that the intervention can work with the texts themselves functioning as the main element.
3. A large proportion of those parents who had only limited Danish language skills themselves preferred to receive the texts in Danish rather than in their own mother tongue. These parents stated that they wanted to strengthen their own Danish language skills, and the short texts with tips in Danish were a good exercise. Some of these parents said that they now more often have short conversations in Danish with their children.



W *I think TipsByText is really good. Really, really good – and I use a lot of it... There was a text that said I should talk to him about parts of the body, for example the elbows and so on. I hadn't done that before. So, I asked him, and he didn't know where his elbow was, until I explained it to him – so that made a lot of sense."*

/ Sarah, mother of a three-year-old boy



W *I don't think a lot about teaching my children language skills on a daily basis because in everyday life you are busy, and I have to hurry up and get dinner ready. But then it's nice when you're in the kitchen, and get a text suggesting that you start naming all the things in the kitchen. Or talk to your children about what you're doing. So children learn what things are called, and what they're used for. I wouldn't think about that otherwise. My daughter is now allowed to help prepare the salad, and so I ask her "Do you want to take the tomato or the cucumber?" And so she learns what things are called. I think that text was very useful. It wasn't something we did very much before."*

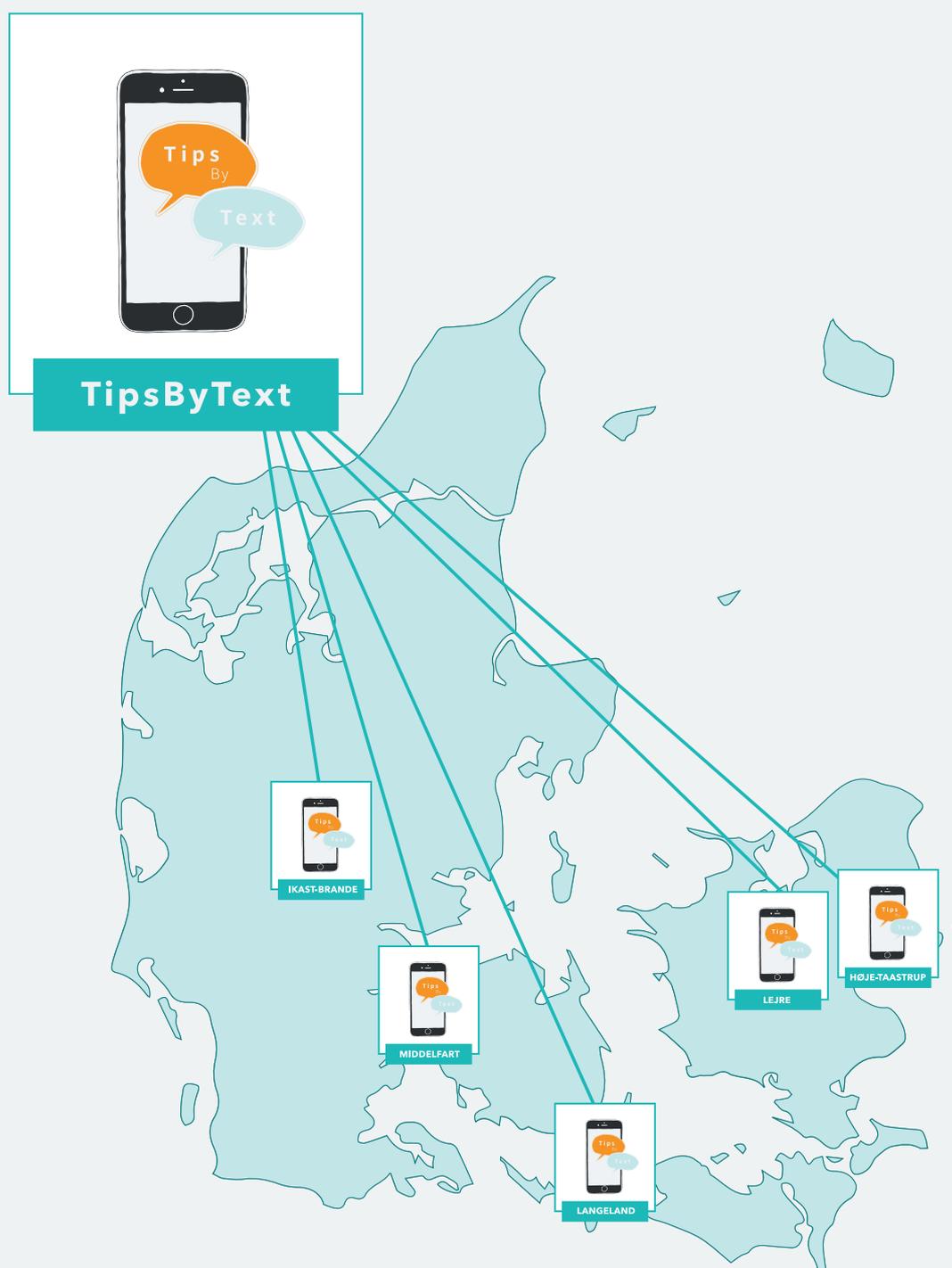
/ Parvaneh, mother of a four-year-old girl



Does TipsByText improve language outcomes in Denmark?

The next step in our work with TipsByText will be focused on answering the question, can TipsByText support the language development of three- to five-year-olds in Denmark?

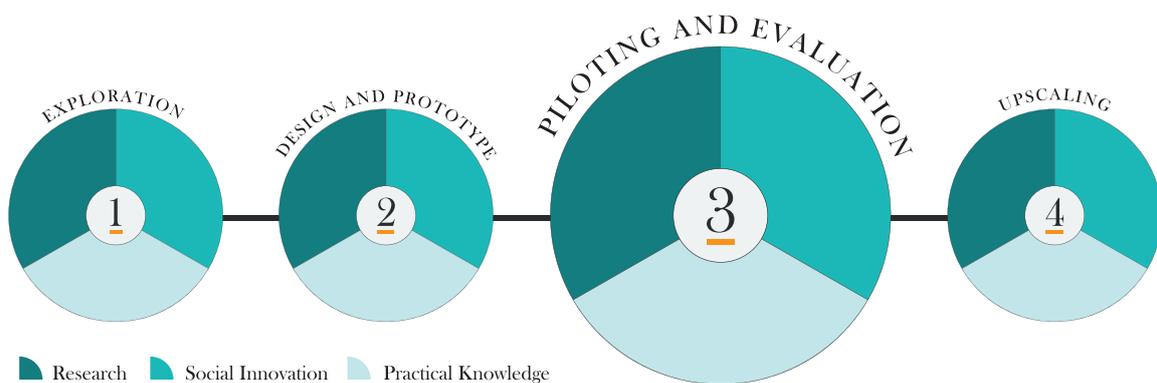
We are therefore currently planning a large-scale trial in 2020 with 3,200 children spread across our five partner municipalities, Høje-Taastrup, Ikast-Brande, Langeland, Lejre and Middelfart.



The study is designed as a randomised controlled trial, with a treatment group of around 1,600 children whose parents will be offered the opportunity to participate in the programme. This group will be compared with a control group, again comprising around 1,600 children, whose parents will not participate in the programme. The experimental design will produce solid knowledge about and evidence for whether TipsByText has the capacity to increase the level of children’s language development over and above the development that normally occurs over eight months.

We will use ‘Sprogvurdering 3-6’ (‘Language assessment, ages three to six’, produced by the Danish Ministry of Education) as a tool to measure the effects, and will carry out data collection in both day-care institutions and schools, working closely with Rambøll Management Consulting. Professor Marianne Simonsen of Aarhus University will be the person primarily responsible for the impact evaluation. The evaluation is designed to make it possible to monitor the effects in both the short and the longer terms, and for different groups of children

The RFI model



The TipsByText project has now entered the third phase in the RFI model. This means that we are about to launch a large-scale pilot and a research-based impact evaluation in collaboration with our five partner

municipalities. We will investigate whether TipsByText has a positive effect on children’s language development and whether the intervention is cost-effective and scalable.

Contact the ROCKWOOL Foundation Interventions Unit

For more information, please contact Helene Bie Lilleør, Chief of Interventions, by email at: hbl@fintervention.dk.

<https://www.rockwoolfonden.dk/projekter/tidlig-indsats/>

Our project partners



The Danish version of this text was completed on 18 October 2019.



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