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The “Testing and Learning” Framework for Coping With the COVID-19 Pandemic in Elementary Schools

Examination of Parents’ Familiarity With the Framework and Compliance With the Guidelines

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Abstract

Background

On January 27, 2022, the “Testing and Learning” framework (hereinafter: the framework) was launched in the education system in Israel. The framework was designed to maintain a regular study routine while the COVID-19 pandemic was still raging. Under the framework, parents of elementary school students were required to carry out at-home rapid antigen testing of their children twice a week and to report the test result through the parents’ portal on the Ministry of Education website. A team on behalf of “Magen Israel” – Israel’s national program to combat the COVID-19 pandemic, commissioned the Myers-JDC-Brookdale Institute to examine the response by the parents and their compliance with the framework.

Goal

The goal of this study was to examine the extent to which parents of elementary school students were familiar and willing to comply with the framework.

Method

The study was based on a self-administered online survey among 506 parents of elementary school students aged 5 to 11. The survey questionnaire was distributed by a panel company (a commercial company that conducts surveys among people who meet specified inclusion conditions) from February 28 to March 3, 2022. The targeted sample size was calculated separately for each population group (ultra-Orthodox Jews, non-ultra-Orthodox Jews, and Arabs) according to its size and pre-survey estimates regarding its rate of compliance. The sample was weighted before the data analysis according to the proportion of each group in the general population.

Findings

73% of the parents reported that they fully understood the framework and 59% reportedly had no difficulty complying. About 50% of the parents believed that the framework succeeded to a large extent in maintaining a regular study routine. The parents also noted the high availability of the tests: 75% reportedly received at-home test kits for each of their children from their local municipality and 94% noted that supervised rapid antigen tests were available in their place of residence. At the same time, 25% of the parents noted that they did not receive

enough at-home test kits or that they received none at all. The rate of compliance with the framework guidelines was high: 75% of the parents administered the at-home tests twice a week; 72% reported the test results twice a week through the parents' portal on the Ministry of Education website; 89% of those whose children were found positive in the at-home testing reported the positive test results; and 78% reportedly complied with the guidelines regarding the isolation of unvaccinated children who were in contact with a positive-tested family member.

The following variables were found to be related to compliance with the at-home testing guidelines: availability of enough at-home test kits; trust in the government policy on dealing with the COVID-19 pandemic; academic education; district of residence in northern or central Israel; and population group (non-ultra-Orthodox Jews and Arabs). Multivariate analysis indicated that non-ultra-Orthodox Jews and Arabs were 18 times more likely to administer the at-home tests than ultra-Orthodox Jews. It was further indicated that those who received biweekly reminders from their children's school or from the Ministry of Education were 2.5 times more likely to administer the tests than those who did not receive such reminders. Also, respondents who reported that they understood the framework were 2.6 times more likely to administer the at-home tests twice a week than those who reportedly did not understand the framework.

Policy recommendations

- Given the parents' positive response and high rate of compliance with the framework, it is recommended that future policy planning be likewise based on the cooperation of the public at large and on cooperation with the parents of elementary school children, in particular.
 - The schools and the Ministry of Education should be proactively involved in communicating government guidelines to the public and, in particular, in encouraging parents to comply with policy guidelines.
 - A dedicated information campaign should be launched for the benefit of the ultra-Orthodox and Arab population groups in collaboration with key officials and opinion leaders in these population groups, to enhance their familiarity with the framework.
 - A dedicated response tailored to the needs of the ultra-Orthodox population should be developed, to promote trust in the government policy and encourage compliance with the guidelines.