

# BRIGHT SPOTS

Ready for School, Prepared to Learn



## Abriendo Puertas/Opening Doors

A stay-at-home mom, Lupe didn't think she could do much to prepare her children for the educational opportunities she so much wanted for them. Unable to read or write in her native Spanish or in English, she felt impossibly constrained. Then she heard about Abriendo Puertas.

"I learned that a lot of Latino kids aren't reading at grade level, and that makes it hard for them to do well in school," Lupe says. More importantly, she learned that she is her children's first and most important teacher and that there were many things she could do every day to create a lively learning environment at home. Now Lupe sits with 3-year-old Miguelito, holding a book and telling stories about the pictures. "It's like they say in Abriendo Puertas," she notes, recalling one of the program's *dictos*, or popular sayings. "If you don't look forward, you stay behind.' Miguelito will go to the university one day."

## Taking research off the shelf

Abriendo Puertas/Opening Doors is a parenting, leadership and advocacy training program for low-income, primarily Spanish-speaking parents of children from birth to age 5. Many participants are immigrants.

"Some parents think that to be ready for kindergarten all you need is a haircut, new clothes and a lunch pail," observes Sandra Gutierrez, national director of Abriendo Puertas. "But what children really need is to be ready socially and emotionally, have a healthy diet, be exposed to a rich vocabulary, and have their parents involved in their education."

With limited access to pre-school and other social supports and advantages, Latino children often start school already behind their non-Latino counterparts, creating an "achievement gap" that remains — or grows wider — throughout the school years. Studies reveal that the gap has remained unchanged over the

## WHO THEY ARE

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### Abriendo Puertas:

- Has served more than 22,000 families in 163 cities and 29 states.
- Works in communities where over 90% of schoolchildren qualify for Free and Reduced-Price Meals.
- Provides 10 parent-sessions that are fun and relevant to Latino culture.
- Offers a curriculum developed in Spanish and English for and by Latino parents.

## CONTACT

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**Abriendo Puertas/Opening Doors**  
**(213) 201-3908**

*Sandra Gutierrez, National Director*  
[sgutierrez@familiesinschools.org](mailto:sgutierrez@familiesinschools.org)

last 20 years, and that Latino children are at high risk for school failure and dropping out.

“Once parents become aware of the statistics, they don’t want their kids to become *una de las estadísticas negativas*,” Gutierrez observes. “Abriendo Puertas takes the research off the shelf and meets that sense of urgency with tools, resources and activities that parents can do each day so their children don’t become one of these negative statistics.”

## Teaching the first teachers

Abriendo Puertas takes a bottom-up, family-involvement approach to school readiness. Its 10-session curriculum for parents draws on the real-life experience and culture of participants. Classes are interactive and fun, and empower parents to improve the lives of their children.

Parents learn about the health and educational challenges Latino children face and the resources available to help families rise to meet them. Valuable lessons include child development and parenting, how the K–12 system works, the rights of parents in public education systems, and the importance of reading to children, as well as good nutrition habits. Participants sign a Reading Pledge Card, a parent-friendly tool that reinforces Abriendo Puertas’ lessons and provides a list of practical tips for nurturing literacy in the home. Parents call it *un compromiso*, a commitment to work with their children on vocabulary and reading. Many post it on the refrigerator as a daily reminder.

## Parenting for school readiness

Pre- and post-program surveys show strong outcomes for parents. Participants come away with new knowledge about parenting and early childhood development, and almost everyone feels more confident about their parenting abilities and better able to access community health and social services. The surveys also demonstrate that after the program, parent participants understand better the importance of home literacy activities, are more involved in community activities including library visits, and are paying closer attention to diet. National research indicates that the attitudes and behaviors reported by parents who take part in Abriendo Puertas correlate strongly with greater school readiness and success.

From its start in Los Angeles, Abriendo Puertas has spread to 29 states and has opened doors to educational success for Latino children from more than 22,000 families. “I wasn’t used to reading to my child,” recalls Edelina, another Spanish-speaking mother. “Now, after Abriendo Puertas, I read to him more frequently, and I try to be more animated. I have also been helping him with homework. His teacher is telling me that he has been advancing in his grade since I started doing this.”

## WHAT THEY ACHIEVE

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Pre- and post-program surveys show the parents’ knowledge increased by:

- 65 points for home practices that prepare children for school.
- 46 points for early learning and development.
- 45 points for social-emotional skills and development.
- 44 points for parenting skills.

From parents’ responses to surveys:

- Weekly visits to the library increase by an average of 36 points.
- 98% of parents felt more confident and effective.

## HIGHLIGHTS

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Abriendo Puertas:

- Is a program of Families in Schools, a Los Angeles education-reform group dedicated to school-family partnerships.
- Conducts 3-day train-the-trainer institutes to prepare facilitators to teach the 10-class curriculum.
- Trains facilitators and provides curriculum to the National Head Start Association.
- Asks parents to sign a Reading Pledge Card listing tips to foster literacy in the home.