

Beyond a Haircut, Lunch Pail, and New Shoes

Opening Doors to School Readiness for Latino Children and Their Parents

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Lupe, a Spanish-speaking mother of three, wanted to help her children succeed in school, but because she did not read or write in Spanish or in English, she did not think she had much to offer them. After all, she felt once her children reached school, the teachers would take over and do what was needed. As a stay-at-home mother, Lupe loved to prepare delicious meals for her family, as her mother and grandmother had done during her childhood. And her children were happy, well-fed, and well-loved. Recently, through a friend, Lupe learned about Abriendo Puertas/Opening Doors, a program developed by and for Latino parents of young children, and, while she was hesitant to participate, she went to listen to the first session. The class immediately made sense to Lupe, and she discovered a whole new way of thinking in which she had even more to offer her children than she had previously realized—and a lot to learn.

Lupe actively participated in all 10 sessions offered by the program, experiencing a range of topics addressing best practices in school readiness, goal setting, child development, family communication, language and literacy, healthy physical and social-emotional development, and education advocacy. Through Abriendo Puertas, Lupe learned that she could get her children ready for school by including them in daily activities, like preparing meals. At the market, Lupe began to talk to them about the color and size of the different fruits and vegetables she was

buying, and they counted the pieces together as they put them in bags. The family's meals became healthier. And at home, while cooking, Lupe now talks with her children about the texture and source of the ingredients she uses, lets them help measure the ingredients, and has them share in the accomplishment of putting dinner on the table. With her youngest children, she has also started holding books and telling stories about the pictures as she turns the pages. The books have come from the neighborhood library, which Lupe had never entered before attending the program.

In an Abriendo Puertas class, Lupe stated,

I love this country and work hard so that my family can have opportunities and an education that I've never had. I enjoyed this program and met other women just like me—we all want the best for our kids. The experience

Abstract

Abriendo Puertas/Opening Doors is an evidence-based program developed by and for Latino parents of young children to address opportunity gaps related to young Latino children. The program gives parents the information they need to understand child development and to access needed supports and services that will allow their children to get the best possible start in school. The curriculum includes 10 interactive education sessions for parents that emphasize the importance of the parents' involvement in their children's education. Evaluation data reveals significant positive benefits from program participation.

*helped me understand my role as a leader of my family. I've now set goals and made plans to reach them, step by step. For example, with reading—I don't want Miguelito to not read well. I learned that a lot of kids aren't reading at grade level and it makes it very hard for them to learn and do well in school. Miguelito is 3 years old. We have fun going to the library, reading books and telling stories. It's like they say in *Abriendo Puertas*—If you don't look forward, you stay behind. He will go the University one day.*

The change brought about by Lupe's engagement in *Abriendo Puertas* has made her home a dynamic learning environment and Lupe a valuable teacher to her children. The program's evaluation (Bridges, Cohen, Fuller, & Velez, 2008) indicated that there was a significant increase in parents' reports of confidence after participating in the program.

Supporting School Readiness

MANY LOW-INCOME LATINO parents thoughtfully get their children ready for kindergarten with a new haircut, a lunch pail, and a new pair of shoes—for them, this is the definition of school readiness. They often do not see their role as their children's first and most important teacher. And, as kindergarten becomes more academically demanding, their children often arrive at school unprepared for the real challenges that await them. Many Latino children start school academically behind their non-Latino peers, creating an achievement gap that continues throughout the school years. Latino children are at great risk for eventual school failure and dropout (Fuller et al., 2009; Reardon & Galindo, 2009).

Latino children are also likely to face other challenges. In 2009, the poverty rate for Latino children was already more than 33% (Nepomnyaschy, 2007). Compared to their non-Latino peers they also exhibit high rates of obesity, which is linked to more serious health problems like diabetes in adulthood or even earlier (Escarce, Morales, & Rumbaut, 2006).

Building on Family Strengths

SCHOOL AND HEALTH risks and poverty rates overshadow the many strengths of low-income Latino children. The majority of them have healthy birth outcomes, strong early social skills, nurturing and supportive families, and a rich cultural heritage, and these elements form a robust foundation for later success (Crosnoe, 2006; Fuller et al., 2009). Building on these strengths is increasingly important as Latino children are already one of the largest and fastest-growing segments of the U.S. population. Currently, Latinos make up more than



PHOTO: COURTESY ABRIENDO PUERTAS/OPENING DOORS

Abriendo Puertas/Opening Doors was developed to address opportunity gaps related to young Latino children.

20% of American children. They are expected to represent nearly 33% by 2030 (Mather & Foxen, 2010; U. S. Census Bureau, 2004). The well-being of Latino children must become a national concern because their success or lack of success will play a large part in determining the nation's future and ability to compete in the future global market.

Reducing Disparities and Increasing Opportunities

MANY IN THE policy community note the health disparities between Latinos and their non-Latino counterparts, or the achievement gaps evident in school performance, but these gaps have to be addressed as opportunity gaps. Research has indicated that having an informed, attentive, and engaged parent is one of life's greatest advantages. Parents benefit from receiving information they can easily digest and put to use on a daily basis to support their children. *Abriendo Puertas* was developed to address those opportunity gaps related to young Latino children: the program gives parents the information needed to understand child development, access needed supports and services, and truly become their children's first and most important teacher and best advocate, and make their home their child's first school.

Curriculum Focus

ALTHOUGH IT is also available in English, the *Abriendo Puertas* curriculum was developed in Spanish for and by

Latino parents. It is a cost-effective, train-the-trainer program, which is easy to adopt and to adapt to make it relevant to the community in which it is being used. The 10 sessions are fun and grow from the culture of the families served. The *Abriendo Puertas* approach is multifaceted, covering child and family well-being, good health, social and emotional well-being, school readiness, the economic well-being of the family, and a parent's ability to advocate on behalf of children. The curriculum is based on evidence, both from child development research on how best to support child well-being and from an on-going evaluation of the most effective methods for working with participating parents. Program facilitators aim to demystify relevant research and provide the key information to parents so that they can discuss it and choose whether or not to incorporate it into their practices. *Abriendo Puertas* assumes that parents will do what is best for their children if they know more about their children's development and are presented with good options for action. The program uses social networks and relationships with the facilitator and among participants to deepen parents' understanding and new skills.

Specifically, *Abriendo Puertas* informs parents about local data on the health and education challenges their children face and offers important resources: most notably, the parents themselves. The program invites parents to consider the facts: (a) the time from birth until age 5—all before school even starts—is a vital time for children's learning;

PHOTO: COURTESY ABRIENDO PUERTAS/OPENING DOORS



Nurturing and supportive families and a rich cultural heritage form a robust foundation for later success.

(b) parents, even those without much formal education, are leaders of their family, and are their children’s first, most important teachers; (c) there are resources available to support the development of their children; and (d) there are small things that parents can do every day in their homes to make a huge difference in their children’s learning and in their lives.

Language Learning

Many participating parents are eager to learn how they can be effective teachers for their children, but are flummoxed by questions around language. For example, Maria wants her three children to have a lot of opportunity, which she knows will be helped by having them learn English. Because she is Spanish-speaking, she does not want them to be confused by learning two languages at once; she is just not sure what to do. Also, even though her parents never read to her, she has heard that parents should read to their children, but she isn’t a very good reader—particularly in English.

Learn More

ABRIENDO PUERTAS / OPENING DOORS

www.familiesinschools.org/

abriendo-puertas-opening-doors/

The Web site for Abriendo Puertas provides information about training events, an overview of the curriculum in English and Spanish, and related resources.

Through Abriendo Puertas Maria learns that her children will have an easier time learning English if they have a good foundation in Spanish (Slavin & Cheung, 2005; Tabors & Snow, 2002). Abriendo Puertas encourages parents to support their children within their language, culture, and community, building on what is already in place to add to the children’s—and family’s—well-being. Evaluation results revealed that strengthening the connections parents felt to their social support networks and their communities, through involvement in the program, was significant (Bridges et al., 2008). Further, the program introduced Maria to her neighborhood elementary school’s expectations for children entering school and encouraged her and others in the group to become active participants in their children’s education—from cradle to college. Maria shared with other parents in the session:

I don’t want my daughter to be one of the statistics we learned about. I’m glad I now understand what’s happening in the schools, so many not graduating. I’ve made a commitment to be involved in her education and will talk to other parents about it, too. As parents, what we do is of great consequence—I won’t forget that.

Health and Mental Health

In addition to focusing on academic preparedness, Abriendo Puertas supports children’s broader well-being by addressing key health and mental health issues. Another participant, Gloria, has two boys and is proud of their being big and healthy, because she is keenly aware of times growing up when her parents had trouble putting food on the

table regularly. Both of her siblings, who were small as children, now have health problems, including asthma and diabetes, so she makes sure her boys eat a lot to stay strong. They often get hungry when she is out with them, so she treats them to McDonald’s, which is their favorite restaurant. And when they go to the market, the boys usually behave better if she buys them cookies or a soda.

Through Abriendo Puertas, Gloria learned that the average child eats 64 pounds of sugar in a year, and many are at risk for diabetes because they eat more fast food than fresh fruits and vegetables. She heard that almost 40% of Latino children from 2–19 years old are obese, which in reality is neither strong nor healthy (Mather & Foxen, 2010). Gloria learns that by feeding her children more of the wholesome food that her mother cooked for her as a child, her boys will actually be stronger and less likely to have health problems as they get older. And, in case she has questions or concerns about her boys’ health, she finds out about health services in her community to get a second, professional opinion and deal with other health or mental health issues. Evaluation results of the program suggested that the health resources knowledge that participating parents gained was some of the most useful (Bridges et al., 2008).

Continuous Improvement

ABRIENDO PUERTAS AIMS TO improve the outcomes of Latino children from within the community. The founders continue to receive input from parents about the subjects of utmost concern and feedback about the program’s messages and delivery. The curriculum is based



PHOTO: COURTESY ABRIENDO PUERTAS/OPENING DOORS

There are small things that parents can do every day in their homes to make a huge difference in their children’s learning and in their lives.

on a popular education approach that conveys respect for participants' life experiences and includes them in both the teaching and the learning that take place. It also provides modeling for parental involvement in their children's schooling because research has indicated that parent engagement is linked to their children's academic performance (Rodríguez-Brown, 2010). From the opening session, which focuses on early brain development with an exercise that includes throwing colored yarn back and forth across the room to show neurons connecting, to the use of the *Lotería*¹ game to help emphasize some of the lessons presented, Abriendo Puertas engages parents in active and enjoyable learning. They become comfortable as they are guided by an enthusiastic, welcoming trainer who is armed with a comprehensive curriculum and community demographics and resource information.

This approach is borne out in the initial evaluation results. The evaluation tracked 109 parents over the course of their participation in Abriendo Puertas, using both quantitative and qualitative data collection and analyses. Participants reported significant increases (with effect sizes noted) in their:

- Confidence about parenting skills ($SD = 0.48$)
- Knowledge about and access to available health services ($SD = 0.65$)
- Social support and social connections in the community ($SD = 0.27$; $SD = 0.11$)
- Community involvement ($SD = 0.20$)

¹ *Lotería* is a Mexican game of chance, similar to bingo, but using images on a deck of cards instead of numbers on ping-pong balls.

As shown in Figure 1, and illustrated in parents' stories, Abriendo Puertas made a difference—a big difference to many participants. These results and the associated feedback were used by the program developers to improve and refine the class.

The program's initial promising results and the clear relevance for the growing Latino community across the country have resulted in its adoption by many organizations around the country that provide services to low-income Latino parents of young children. It is now in 25 states and 76 cities and is training trainers and providing the curriculum to staff of the National Head Start Association and its members and to staff of the National Association of Child Care Resource and Referral Agencies and its members. Abriendo Puertas offers a 3-day training institute for professionals working with Latino families, teaching others how to facilitate the parenting program in their local communities. These efforts are strengthened by the program's ongoing commitment to improvement, conducting evaluations of both the train-the-trainer institutes and the parenting programs across the country with diverse Latino populations. Parents—as leaders of their family—are powerful agents of change. Abriendo Puertas is only the first step for Latino parents who are eager to learn more and build on the assets they have to improve the school and life success of their children. It does open the doors to opportunities. 🚪

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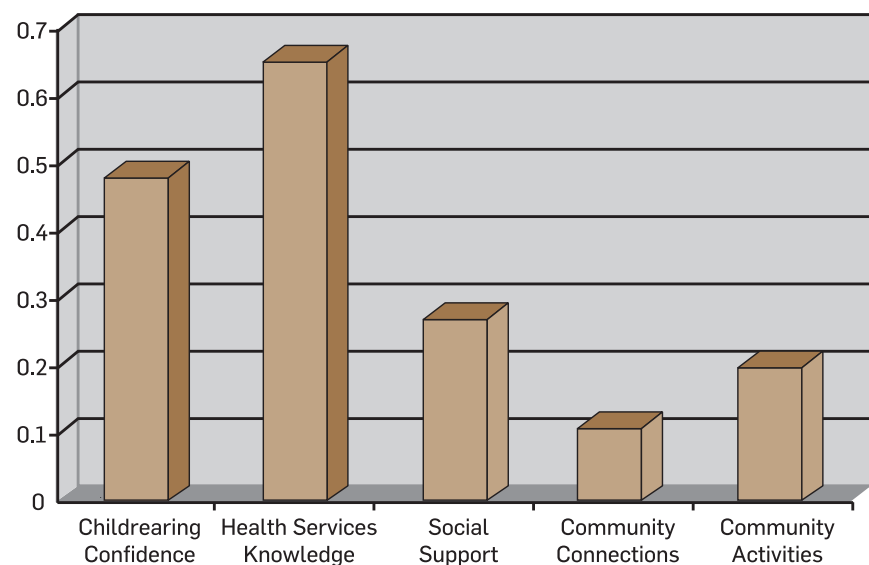
PHOTO: COURTESY ABRRIENDO PUERTAS/OPENING DOORS

Many participating parents are eager to learn how they can be effective teachers for their children.

of California, Berkeley. Currently, she does research on the implications of expanding access to preschool—particularly how expansion would affect low-income and Latino preschool children. She also is conducting research on how Latino families experience preschool and how those preschool programs can best serve their children. Dr. Bridges completed her doctoral training at the University of Virginia and her postdoctoral training at University of California, San Francisco.

SANDRA GUTIERREZ is the national project director of Abriendo Puertas/Opening Doors. Ms. Gutierrez led the development of Abriendo Puertas—the nation's first evidence-based, comprehensive training program for Latino parents with children birth 5 years old. Prior to her work with Abriendo Puertas, Ms. Gutierrez developed a series of training programs to support children and families involved in the child welfare system for Parents Action for Children. She brings more than 35 years of experience with legal, children's advocacy, and community service organizations. Her multifaceted career has included founding the first service organization to assist Central American refugees, developing health education programs for the United Farm Workers of America, and designing campaigns to promote the benefits of preschool to the Latino community. In addition, for 7 years, she served as a founding member and state commissioner for First 5 California.

Figure 1. The Effect Sizes of Abriendo Puertas Indices



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Errata

Corrections to the January 2011 article “The Foster Care Baby Boom Revisited: What Do the Numbers Tell Us?” by Fred Wulczyn, Lijun Chen, Linda Collins, and Michelle Ernst, *Zero to Three*, 31(3), pp. 4–10, are listed here:

On page 5, errors in Table 2 are corrected here, in the shaded boxes at right.

On page 8, the third paragraph should read as follows (corrected text is underlined):

Infants are more than 4 times more likely than older children to enter foster care. The question of placement risk is addressed in Table 2, which displays entry rates per 1,000 children by age and race/ethnicity of the child. For example, between 2000 and 2008, the risk of placement for infants increased from 7.6 to 8.9 per 1,000 children. During that same period, the rate for all older children stayed at just under 2 per thousand (1.8/1000). This is consistent with the change in the proportion of all children admitted to foster care who are less than 1 year old.

On page 10, in the first column, the second bullet should read as follows (corrected text is underlined): The risk of placement for infants is more than 4 times greater than it is for most other children.

Table 2. Rate of Placement per 1,000 Children and Placement Disparity by Age and Age and Race/Ethnicity: 2000 and 2008

Child characteristics	Entry year	
	2000	2008
Entry age		
Infants	7.6	8.9
Older children	1.8	1.8
Age disparity	4.3	4.6
Age by Ethnicity		
Infants		
White (W)	4.5	5.9
Black (B)	21.1	17.5
Hispanic (H)	5.3	6.0
Disparity (B/W)	4.7	3.0
Disparity (H/W)	1.2	1.0
Older children		
White (W)	1.4	1.3
Black (B)	3.7	3.2
Hispanic (H)	1.4	1.5
Disparity (B/W)	2.6	2.5
Disparity (H/W)	1.0	1.2