

Teach parents to teach their kids

Esther J. Cepeda / Syndicated Columnist

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CHICAGO – Education starts at home. This is old hat to a lot of people. But for too many parents, it's a concept that's simply not on the radar.



As the proponents of universal preschool keep pushing to get extra schooling for the most at-risk kids onto the national agenda, few are pinpointing moms and dads as the key to boosting school readiness.

Luckily, there are programs pioneering parent education as a vital step in increasing educational results for children not brought up with solid family traditions of preparing for school.

“What almost all parents have in common is a love for their child and a willingness to do anything for the child to have more opportunities than the ones they had,” said Sandra Gutierrez, the national director of the Abriendo Puertas program – which means “opening doors” in Spanish. “But they just don't know how to go about it.”



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Operating in 30 states, the program is designed to strengthen the child-rearing and leadership skills of Latino parents with children up to age 5. The hope is that the parents can then help narrow the opportunity gap before their children begin formal schooling and be efficient advocates for the kids once school starts. The lessons of Abriendo Puertas can and should be replicated in communities of any ethnicity where children are not performing well in struggling schools.

First, a little background about why Hispanic children start school at such a disadvantage.

Gutierrez says that though Latinos are known to have strong family relationships and often live in multigenerational homes, they have the tendency to believe that education is something that happens only at school.

But Hispanics are far from being the only parents who believe that education is primarily the job of the schoolteacher.

“You and I and all the academics who study childhood education, we know about all the research showing how important brain development is during the zero to preschool years,” Gutierrez told me. “But it's just not common knowledge.”

“We have got to get this information off the shelves and provide it to low-income, at-risk parents – all parents, really – in as friendly and accessible a way as possible. And it has to be in a way where they can go home and do some very simple things with their babies and young children that will make a big difference.”

The Abriendo Puertas program is distinct in that it uses a culturally specific curriculum to teach Hispanic families how to take advantage of a child's earliest years to bond in education-boosting ways – such as by teaching parents important child-rearing tenets through familiar Spanish-language games and proverbs.

But at its core, it is a model for reaching communities where children are least likely to rise to their academic potential – by simply opening parents' eyes.

“We interviewed over 700 parents, primarily Spanish-speaking, and we learned that, for instance, a significant portion of them believed that their child’s cognitive abilities were predetermined – that a child in a family would only be as bright as a dad or a brother,” Gutierrez said.

“But once we taught them that they had the power to determine how their kids did in school, they were hungry to know more. They wanted to learn how to teach their kids their colors and numbers, how to read books with their kids and how to get their children ready for school in ways that don’t require much education on their part or much money.”

Gutierrez also sees Abriendo Puertas as an approach for parents whose children are navigating the treacherous terrain of middle and high school, and the path to college.

“We are a very different program in that we educate parents about the performance of their local school districts, we give them the tools to make a difference in their children’s early education and we strive to do it in a very real, down-to-earth, engaging way,” Gutierrez said. “It’s definitely not a lecture – we make parents feel comfortable, let them talk about their own educational experiences and help them sort out the myths from the realities.”

Universal preschool is a fine goal. But getting into the neediest communities and teaching parents how to be their child’s first and best teacher cannot be underestimated, much less ignored, as a method for closing persistent achievement gaps.

E-mail: estherjcepeda@washpost.com. Copyright, Washington Post Writers Group.