

## Parenting classes tailored for Latino families show promise in closing achievement gap

June 23rd, 2013 | [Add a Comment](#) |

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Reporting & Analysis

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SAN FRANCISCO – A program offering parenting classes tailored to Latino families is showing promise as a way to help children arrive in kindergarten ready to learn, a key early benchmark that educators say can help close entrenched achievement gaps across racial and economic lines.

The national program, called *Abriendo Puertas*, offers classes in more than 80 California cities and was the subject of a University of California, Berkeley study showing that parents who took the classes gained a better understanding of how their children learn and how they can help prepare their children for school. The program reflects a growing awareness that promoting early parental engagement in a child's education is key to his or her academic success later on.



Flor Alvarez hugs her daughter Sophia, 3, during an *Abriendo Puertas* class May 28 at the Bayview Hunter's Point Family Resource Center in San Francisco. Credit: Lillian Mongeau, EdSource Today

Researchers said Latino families are in particular need of this intervention because of low levels of adult education, minimal focus on reading to children at home and a lack of knowledge about how young children learn. Latino children are also historically less likely to attend preschool than their black, white and Asian peers, which makes the care and education they are receiving at home particularly important. On top of that, many Latino children with Spanish-speaking parents must learn English as a second language to be successful in school.

Last year, Latino students as a group received a score on the state's Academic Performance Index of 740, compared to 852 for whites and 905 for Asians. The API is a composite score on a scale of 200 to 1000 based on multiple standardized tests administered each year in California schools. This gap is evident before

students even start school. Latino children as young as 2 years old already lag behind white children in both language and cognitive skills, according to a study by the University of California, Berkeley Institute for Human Development.

"It becomes really important to think about how we can work with parents and make some changes that might affect that," said Margaret Bridges, a developmental psychologist at the Institute who co-authored [the study measuring the impact of \*Abriendo Puertas\* classes](#) on parents' knowledge about child development and parenting techniques.

The 10-session [Abriendo Puertas](#) – "Opening Doors" in Spanish – curriculum is designed to meet the specific needs of Latino families with young children.

Classes cover topics from the importance of reading at home as a way to instill early language skills and prepare children for school, to healthy nutritional habits, to positive discipline. For example, in the class on literacy, parents learn that they can teach young children early literacy skills in Spanish that will translate to English literacy skills later. The idea is to combat the low academic performance of Latino children by showing their first teachers, their parents, the best ways to interact with and teach young children at home and to advocate for them once they get to school.

Abriendo Puertas classes are offered in 196 cities and 31 states, including more than 200 locations in California. The free classes are offered to low-income parents with children ranging from infants to age 5. The weekly two-hour classes are offered through local family resource centers. The centers are often attached to a school or child care facility and offer a range of services from child care and preschool to mental health and family counseling and legal advice. Classes are meant to be scheduled at times that working parents, many of whom have non-traditional hours, can easily attend.

The national program is funded with grants from Boeing and the Kellogg Foundation and with support from an anonymous philanthropist. Any organization wishing to have staff trained in teaching the curriculum can pay \$2,000 per staff member, or apply for scholarships, for a three-day training from the national program. The cost of the training includes program materials and prepares trainees to teach other local experts to facilitate the classes.

This model is called “train the trainers” and is meant to ensure parents learn from community members with whom they share an equal footing. The Berkeley study was done on classes taught by this second generation of trainers and shows the model can be effective, Bridges said.

The program was first developed in 2007 with significant input from Latina mothers, said Sandra Gutierrez, the program’s national director. The classes are infused with elements of the Latino culture.

“We did a lot of listening,” Gutierrez said. “The voices of the parents are in the curriculum. That’s why parents like it.”

The Berkeley study used surveys of 625 participants in 35 different classes in six states to determine that parents in the classes showed a significant growth in their understanding of the topics covered. Eighty-six percent of those participants were immigrants and more than half of them had not finished high school. Researchers administered pre- and post-class surveys to participants asking about each of the 10 subject areas covered by the course. Parents showed significant improvement in their understanding of all 10, including a better grasp of how their children learn at early ages, ways to promote language and literacy skills and how to better prepare their children for school.

“(Parents) were gaining a lot of practical knowledge about ways they were interacting with their children in more effective ways,” Bridges said.

While the current research shows that the program has a clear effect on parents’ knowledge, there is not yet clear data on how the program affects the children of those parents. A study is being conducted in Los Angeles that will compare the outcomes of children whose parents attend Abriendo Puertas classes and children from similar socioeconomic and ethnic backgrounds whose parents do not attend the classes. Gutierrez said results of that study are expected in 2014.

Gutierrez is confident that the new study will show that her program is helping children as well as adults. She said parent engagement hasn’t risen to the top of the reform agenda yet, but she thinks that’s where it should be.

“Parents are undervalued and there’s a need to invest in parents to improve schools and student outcomes,” Gutierrez said. “The more families are engaged, the healthier country we’re going to have.”

Yuliana Velazquez recently graduated from the first Abriendo Puertas class to be offered in the rural town of Lost Hills, near Bakersfield in the Central Valley.

“I started coming to this program because my kids wouldn’t listen,” said Velazquez, a mother of a 2-year-old and a 4-year-old. “They would stress me out. There was a point when I just didn’t want to come home after work.”

Velazquez grew up in the United States, and had her first child when she was 18. She said she needed to learn how to talk to her kids, ways to show them that they are her priority and what she can do to help them succeed in school.

In another effort to connect to Latino parents, Abriendo Puertas works proverbs, mostly of Mexican origin, into the

curriculum and uses illustrations based on the popular Mexican bingo game known as “*lotería*” in all its materials.

A recent Tuesday afternoon class at the Bayview Hunter’s Point Family Resource Center in San Francisco focused on the importance of parents taking care of their own emotional health to better care for their kids. A poster-sized illustration in the front of the room showed a mother and daughter looking at each other on a bright red background in classic *lotería* style. Tacked above a TV monitor displaying the Powerpoint for the day’s class was a handwritten sign reading, “*Cada cabeza es un mundo*,” which translates to: “Each head is a world.”

Ana Moreno, a foster mother of three and a Peruvian immigrant, heard about the classes during a visit to her local library. “It’s helped me a lot, every day,” Moreno said in Spanish.

Moreno, who does not have children of her own, was near tears in expressing her gratitude for the classes. Learning about child development has helped her better provide for all three of her foster children: a toddler and two older children, she said. She and her eldest foster daughter both suffered abuse as children and Moreno said that made it difficult for them to trust each other. Moreno said the classes, several of which teach techniques for communicating with children, have helped her to gain her daughter’s trust. Now she and her daughter can talk more openly, she said, and that has led to better behavior and more confidence.

Rosario Velazquez is the case manager for the Lost Hills Family Resource Center. She said that she became interested in offering the Abriendo Puertas program in her rural community because of its focus on Latino parents.

“My goal is for (parents) to recognize and identify their potential in being advocates for their kids’ education,” she said. “It’s a program that I would have liked to be present in my community before now.”



A sign describing the focus on the day’s lesson during an Abriendo Puertas session at a family resource center in San Francisco is illustrated in the style of the popular Mexican bingo game called “*lotería*.” May 28, 2013. Credit: Lillian Mongeau, EdSource Today



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