

# Child Trends' Evaluation of the Abriendo Puertas Program: Executive Summary and Discussion Brief



June 2014

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## OVERVIEW

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The Abriendo Puertas (Opening Doors) program works with Latino parents of young children to promote practices that foster children's learning and development, parent leadership, and advocacy. Abriendo Puertas is one of the largest programs in the United States working with Latino parents of pre-school aged children. Since it began in 2007, the program has served over 30,000 low-income parents/families in over 400 family-serving organizations and schools in 32 states around the country. Parents participating in the Abriendo Puertas program attend educational and discussion sessions over a 10-week period. Child Trends recently completed a rigorous evaluation of this program – the first random-assignment evaluation of a culturally-relevant parenting education program serving Latino parents with children soon to enter elementary school in the United States. The findings reveal how, with relatively few resources, an evidenced-informed and well-managed effort can make a difference in key parenting behaviors associated with academic success.

The findings of the Child Trends evaluation contribute to our knowledge base of best practices in the field, while paving the road for the Abriendo Puertas program to continue to improve its services and focus its efforts and resources in areas where they are most likely to be successful. The study found that the Abriendo Puertas program has a number of impacts, especially related to educational support in the home. It also highlights aspects of the program that may be more effective if modified, such as those that address more challenging behavioral changes including diet modification and increased parent advocacy with school and other authority figures.

This brief provides an overview of the evaluation study and draws on focus group data to provide context for the findings in the discussion sections.

## THE PROBLEM

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Children's educational success is central to ensuring a healthy society in the future. Today, one in four children in the United States is of Hispanic descent. By 2050, Latino children are expected to represent 36 percent of the U.S. population age 17 and under, compared to the projected 36.4 percent of white children. Yet, troubling disparities in educational achievement levels among Hispanic children, especially those from low-income families, threaten the chances for economic and life success for many in this population. While Hispanic high school dropout rates have decreased substantially in recent years, reports still find that Latino youth are much more likely to drop out of high school compared with their white counterparts.<sup>1,2</sup> In addition, while Hispanic enrollment in post-secondary programs has increased in recent years, Latino adults are least likely to have completed a post-secondary degree in comparison to all other groups.

## WHAT DO WE KNOW?

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Understanding the complexities of factors that contribute to academic achievement is the first step in developing effective programs that promote behaviors needed to improve performance. Latino children from low-income communities enter elementary school with fewer skills that support later educational attainment. This is important because studies indicate that children's early skills are critical to high school completion.

Researchers find that kindergartners who enter school with basic knowledge of arithmetic and reading are more likely to fare well in elementary school. Furthermore, studies find that students' grades in elementary and middle school are good predictors of school completion; those with higher letter grades are less likely to drop out of school than those with low grades. Unfortunately, Latino children are less likely to demonstrate cognitive and literacy readiness skills upon entering school compared to white, black and Asian students. For example, less than one in five Latino children ages three to six recognizes the 26 letters of the alphabet compared to more than one in three black and white children and two in five Asian children.<sup>3</sup>

Furthermore, there is substantial evidence that parents play an important role in nurturing their children's educational success. Important family factors related to school drop out rates are linked to the type of relationship that parents and their children have and the types of educational parenting practices employed in the home. Also, parents who are emotionally supportive, are involved in their children's schooling, are authoritative (are both warm and encourage independent decision-making) in their parenting practices, and who monitor their children's activities, are less likely to have children who later drop out of school.<sup>4</sup>

## THE ABRIENDO PUERTAS PROGRAM

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With these research findings in mind, the Abriendo Puertas program specifically promotes Latino parents' leadership and advocacy as well as parenting practices that foster children's early learning and development in a culturally-relevant manner. The program has set ambitious outcome goals that include teaching parents how to foster children's learning, how to respond to children's emotional expressions, how to keep children physically healthy, and how to advocate for children's well-being. The Abriendo Puertas curriculum covers these topics over a ten-week period.

### PROGRAM EVALUATION

Research finds that it is difficult to change behavior, especially when the desired outcome seeks to change established habits or counters deeply held values. That is why it is imperative that programs aimed at behavior modification include built-in monitoring and evaluation to identify the most promising approaches, and to shed light on practices that may require additional strategies to best achieve desired outcomes.

Child Trends' rigorous evaluation of the Abriendo Puertas program consisted of an impact study and two implementation studies in Los Angeles. In some cities the Abriendo Puertas program is administered by local community organizations. In other cities, including Los Angeles, the Abriendo Puertas program is administered and implemented by trained staff in the local public school districts. The Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) is the second largest school district in the nation; nearly 75 percent of students enrolled in kindergarten are of Hispanic heritage. Mirroring the national school drop out rates, Latino students in the LAUSD continue to lag behind whites and Asians in graduating from high school.<sup>5 6</sup>

**Impact Study:** A total of 922 parents participated in the Child Trends impact study, of which 89 percent were foreign born. Parents were randomly assigned to either a treatment group (468 parents) whose participants were offered and subsequently enrolled in the Abriendo Puertas program, or to a control group (454 parents) which did not participate in the program. Information was collected for both groups in person before the start of the program, and by phone five to six weeks after the end of the program. Additionally, the evaluators collected information from parents who participated in the program 14 weeks after program completion. Results from both groups were compared to determine program impact.

**Implementation Study:** Child Trends also conducted a two-phase implementation study to determine the effectiveness of the Abriendo Puertas program operations and to provide context for the findings. A total of sixty-seven people participated in Phase I of the implementation study, consisting of a series of focus groups and interviews. Forty-two parents participated across four focus groups held in Spanish and all study participants completed a program satisfaction questionnaire as part of the follow-up phone interview five to six weeks after the program. In addition, 25 program personnel from participating schools were interviewed: nine program

facilitators, nine LAUSD staff members, and seven principals. Phase II of the implementation study was conducted approximately one year after the end of the program in order to gather parents' and facilitators' impressions of the impact study findings.

## KEY FINDINGS

**Area of greatest impact: educational support:** The evaluation study found that the Abriendo Puertas program led to the adoption of parenting practices that enhance preschool children's learning and preparation for school. The study found that Latino parents participating in the program gained knowledge about high quality child care and education settings, and improved their organizational strategies and ability to plan and set goals for their children. Parents also gained an appreciation for their role as models for their children. Importantly, these practices appear to be sustained over time. Specifically, Child Trends reported that the Abriendo Puertas successfully enhanced the following behaviors and knowledge base:

- **Parent educational activities at home**, such as reviewing the letters of the alphabet and reading to their child more frequently.
- **Approaches to reading with the child**, such as stopping from time to time to talk about the story with the child and reading with an expressive and enthusiastic voice.
- **Library use**, such as going to the library and checking out children's materials to take home.
- **Knowledge about aspects of child care quality**, such as the importance of child care providers reading to children every day, teaching children how to play with others, and providing healthy snacks.
- **Family organization and planfulness**, such as developing plans to reach family goals for their children and taking time to respond to children's behavior.
- **Parent role modeling**, such as being more mindful of how their behavior sets an example for their children.

### *Discussion:*

Research has consistently found that behaviors are hard to change, especially within a short period of time. Nonetheless, Child Trends' evaluation found that parents in the Abriendo Puertas program made important behavioral changes to foster their children's learning, and evidence suggests that these changes were sustained over time. Hispanic parents have reported in various research studies, and in the focus groups of this evaluation, that they have high educational aspirations for their children.<sup>7</sup> By providing parents with information and tools they need to better align their behaviors with the aspirations they have for their children, the Abriendo Puertas program reinforces and builds on these values.

The program may also reinforce Latino parents' cultural value of "familismo," which stresses the importance of family and parental adherence to being responsible for their children. Parents became more intentional in their parenting as they developed family goals for their children, learning to implement strategies to better support their children. Thus, it seems that the educational aspirations and cultural values of Latino parents positioned them to be receptive to the information they learned and to apply it to new behaviors that encourage children's learning.

**Parents' and facilitators' perception of the program:** In general, parents reported positive experiences with the Abriendo Puertas program and identified areas that they particularly appreciated: the interactive activities that engage parents and provide concrete information, and the culturally sensitive and accessible nature of the classes that encourage social connections. Specifically, the majority of parents and facilitators appreciated the program because it was created in Spanish rather than being a translation from English, and because it incorporates culturally relevant activities, such as children's music from Latin America, culturally familiar games (e.g., Loteria), and "dichos" (popular sayings in the Latino culture that convey messages with strong values or beliefs). Parents also appreciated that the program instruction uses simple terms and plain language and

that the group discussions provide a safe place to reflect on their parenting skills and to expand on them. The majority of facilitators believed that the program provides parents a place to learn from each other and develop social connections.

**Areas of less impact:** The Abriendo Puertas program also gives parents information about how to offer children healthier foods and an active lifestyle, how to foster children's emotional development, and how to become effective advocates for their child before medical, social services and school (principal) authorities. The evaluation study found that the Abriendo Puertas program did not record significant results in these behavioral areas. Parents who attended the program did not seem to gain significant knowledge or to change their practices much in these specific areas.

### *Discussion:*

The focus group discussions with the parents point to possible reasons for these findings, presenting the Abriendo Puertas program with the opportunity to consider programmatic options in order to continue improving outcomes. The challenges to improving healthy living behavior, for example, are widespread across populations in the United States. Weight loss programs abound and many people participate in these programs at different times throughout their life span. Parents in the Abriendo Puertas study reported having had basic knowledge about healthy lifestyle behaviors prior to participating in the program, as they are repeatedly exposed to these messages through numerous sources. They also reported, however, that even with basic knowledge about lifestyle behaviors, it was hard for them to actually apply the information. There was a strong sentiment among parents in the focus groups that making behavioral changes, such as avoiding fast foods and cooking healthy meals, was not only impractical (e.g., expensive and time-consuming), but in some cases also went against their deep-seated cultural habits of food preparation and lifestyle.

Conversations with participants also suggested that parents might not have been receptive to the information about children's emotional expressions because the information did not align well with their cultural norms of gender-appropriate emotional expressions. For example, several parents mentioned that they have been taught that girls should express emotions more freely, but that boys should not do this.

Child Trends found a similar situation regarding learning to advocate for the children before authorities. Unlike program participants' increased interactions with teachers—a behavioral change that had positive results—the evaluation study did not find significant changes in parents' ability to advocate for their child in dealings with other authority figures such as doctors and school principals. Parents participating in the focus groups expressed that they did not really know how to initiate a dialogue with the school principal, for example. This uncertainty may also have roots in perceived cultural roles. Several studies have documented how some Hispanic cultures do not necessarily consider it the role of parents to question the “experts” such as medical doctors or school authorities.<sup>8</sup>

Careful consideration of these findings could lead to changes in the expected outcomes or focus of the program, as well as new strategies to introduce and communicate these topics to the parents throughout the program.

## SUMMARY DISCUSSION

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The Abriendo Puertas program is a model program that demonstrates how, with modest resources, a brief 10-week program can achieve important results for children by helping their parents to prepare them for educational success. It has expanded to 32 states and has the potential for even greater reach. In addition to the positive research findings of this evaluation, participating parents provided countless anecdotes of the constructive effect the program has had on them and their families. Importantly, the program targets the critical problem of children's early skills necessary for later school completion and success.

Abriendo Puertas has developed a culturally-relevant training program that is grounded in educational research. The Child Trends evaluation of the Abriendo Puertas program revealed positive outcomes in several key child development areas associated with academic success, as well as in increasing parents' use of libraries and their knowledge about quality child care. Among other behavioral outcomes, such as healthier lifestyle changes, fostering children's emotional development, and advocating for their child, the Abriendo Puertas program did not record significant results.

It is important to note that the Child Trends evaluation was conducted in only one of the many cities where the Abriendo Puertas program provides services, Los Angeles—an area where public information about healthy living and other topics covered in the program is readily available. For example, the evaluation finding that parents in Los Angeles did not gain significant knowledge about healthy living may be due to the fact that they already had access to this information through many other sources, as indicated in the focus groups. Some of the findings, then, may not necessarily apply to other regions where public information about healthy living topics may not be as accessible as in Los Angeles, or in areas where the Abriendo Puertas program is not administered through the local school district.

The Abriendo Puertas program covers a great deal of information in a short period of time. While some topics are covered and reinforced throughout the program, namely those that improve parental approaches to support preschool children's learning, the health and nutrition and social and emotional development topics are covered in only one session each. Research on program evaluations finds that behavioral and attitudinal changes are more likely to occur when information is repeated and reinforced through hands-on experience. It may be that some of the messages that address the more challenging behavioral changes could benefit from greater repetition and increased hands-on focus, if program resources allow.

It is also important to consider contextual, cultural and programmatic factors. For example, it may be that parents more readily exhibited behavioral changes related to parental support for educational outcomes in the home since these changes aligned well with their educational aspirations for their children and the cultural value of familismo. At the same time, parents were less likely to apply the tools they learned in the program related to healthy living and advocacy because these did not easily align with their habits, economic possibilities and/or their perceived cultural roles and norms.

In summary, by focusing on Latino parents in a culturally- appropriate manner to help them prepare their children for educational success, the Abriendo Puertas program is making a key contribution to future generations of Latinos in the United States, an increasing need in light of the growing Latino population in the United States.

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## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

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Publication # 2014-26

Updated 6/25/14

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