NEW JOURNALISM ON

LATINO CHILDREN

GIVING LATINO CHILDREN A STRONGER START

Push is on to help infants and toddlers–but will parents buy in?

PHOTO CREDIT: ANNIE WELLS

Lizbeth Rosales marvels at how her 2-year-old daughter has blossomed while participating in an Early Head Start program.

Each week, a counselor from El Nido Family Centers visits Rosales's South Los Angeles home to guide her and other family members in preparing learning activities for Itzel, who was once shy and quiet. The counselor has taught Rosales the importance of singing and reading to her daughter, exposing her to new words and playing games that encourage her to count, learn shapes and improve hand-eye coordination.

Now, the ponytailed little girl smiles and talks freely with visitors. She's learning how to count and each day seems to know a new word.

"The program is helping me to be a better mom and to understand what her needs are," said Rosales, 23, as she sat on her living room floor helping Itzel mold a gluey paste into a snowman.

New Journalism on Latino Children offers a fresh perspective on reporting and research on Latino families and schools. It is a project of the National Education Writers Association, based in Washington, D.C. and the National Panel on Latino Children and Schooling, based at Berkeley's Institute of Human Development. For additional stories, new research and tips for reporting, look for updates at www.ewa.org or call EWA for more information at (202) 452-9830

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Early Head Start serves newborns through toddlers. It is an offshoot of Head Start, the 44-year-old federal program for low-income children ages 3 through 5. Rosales plans to enroll Itzel in regular Head Start when she is 3. "It's important to continue, because beginning her education at a young age will benefit her in the long run," Rosales said.

Rosales and Itzel embody not only the promise of Head Start, but also the growing role of early childhood education as a focus of public policy.

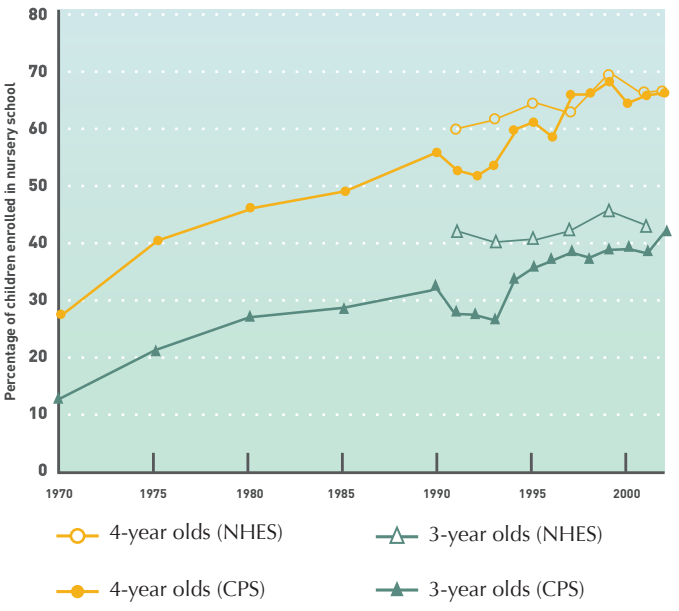
Social scientists studying brain development and emotional growth increasingly identify early education as critical to preparing children for kindergarten. As well, researchers have linked it to a host of longer-term benefits to society, such as higher employment and lower crime rates.

President Obama, arguing that early education is key to raising academic achievement, advanced new investments, including $1.1 billion in stimulus funds for Early Head Start, $1 billion for Head Start, and $8 billion for state early learning grants.

But as the investment in early education increases nationwide, advocates express concern that Latino children may not reap the full benefits.

Latino children are the fastest-growing segment of the U.S. population and, according to a study commissioned by the National Task Force on Early Childhood Education for Hispanics, will comprise more than a quarter of Americans 8 and younger by 2030.

Preschool Enrollment Rates for 3- and 4-Year-Olds: 1970–2002



Source: Data compiled by Lynn Karoly and James Bigelow of Rand Corporation from the National Household Population Survey (NCES) and the Current Population Survey of U.S. Census.

While the number of Latino children in early education programs is rising, they are still the least likely of all ethnic groups to be enrolled in preschool. About 40 percent of Latino children ages 3 through 5 are enrolled, compared to 60 percent of white and African-American children, according to the advocacy group Pre-K Now.

Barriers include a lack of English language skills, inability to pay for private programs, a paucity of subsidized programs in some Latino neighborhoods and the reluctance of undocumented immigrants to utilize government benefits. Some research suggests that Latinos rely more on relatives to care for their children than do other groups.

As a result, research suggests, Latino children often trail their white peers in school readiness, scoring lower, for example, in reading and math skills. Further down the road, Latinos have higher dropout rates, lower college attendance and fewer employment opportunities.

President Obama recognized the peril of the achievement gap in a March 10 speech announcing his education agenda at the U.S. Hispanic Chamber of Commerce.

"Today, some children are enrolled in excellent [early learning] programs," he said. "Some are enrolled in mediocre programs. And some are wasting away their most formative years in bad programs. That includes the one-fourth of all [kindergarten] children who are Hispanic and who will drive America's workforce of tomorrow, but who are less likely to have been enrolled in an early education program than anyone else."

Social scientists say that efforts to increase funding and capacity for early childhood programs will help. But what will most benefit Latino children, they say, are higher standards and greater attention to developing literacy skills and bilingual instruction, which can be politically controversial.

The good news, according to a 2006 survey conducted by the Tomas Rivera Policy Institute, is that Latino families value early education, and 96 percent said they would send their children to publicly funded programs if they were available. But parents must navigate a patchwork of programs, including Head Start, preschools, nursery schools and day care. The choices may be public or private; free, subsidized or pricey; educational or not.

The quality of programs in all categories varies, and there are opponents to any government-funded preschool—among them those who suggest the best place of all for young children is at home with their parents. Some research has shown that the benefits of Head Start fade over time. But a 2005 Head Start impact study found moderate gains in several school readiness measures for children, including Latinos, who attended Head Start over those who did not.

Increased access to infant and toddler programs was one of the key recommendations of the 2007 report issued by the National Task Force on Early Education for Hispanics, and it's not just the policy makers and activists who want to see this happen. Families are eager to take part.

The El Nido Early Head Start home visiting program, which covers a swath of South Los Angeles that was once largely black but is now mostly Latino, is the only one of its kind in the three zip codes it serves. With nearly 4,000 eligible children—family income must fall below the federal poverty level, about $22,000 for a family of four—and a capacity of 60, the program cannot keep up with demand. The agency is waiting to hear if its application for stimulus funds to expand services to 144 children has been approved.

"The community perception about early education has changed in the eight years that I've been doing this," said Liz Cortez, an El Nido family and community outreach specialist who travels to community events, welfare offices and job training agencies to preach the gospel of early education. "I meet parents now who say this is a great benefit, and they want to get involved. They may not know exactly what children are going to learn, but they want to get involved."

Early Head Start is the largest federally funded early learning program for the 0-to-3 age group. It helps about 60,000 children nationwide at any given time and offers parent education, health care and services for pregnant women in community centers and in homes.

Many experts say that the parenting tools Early Head Start provides are particularly important for Latino families, because a higher percentage of Latino mothers have not completed high school. Studies have found that undereducated parents are less likely to read books and share stories with their children, activities that are a foundation for literacy skills.

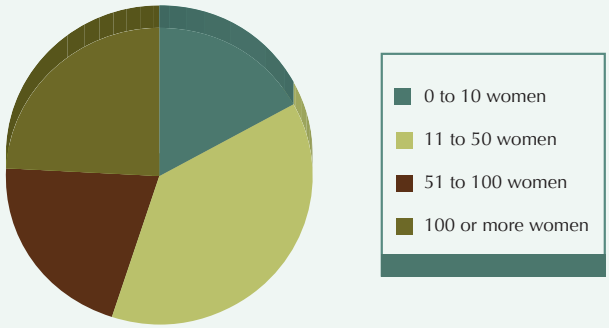
As a child and family development specialist for El Nido, home visitor Abisai Espinales gently guides parents who start out with little understanding of gross and fine motor skills or the intricacies of cognitive development. During a recent visit with Rosales and daughter Itzel, one of 12 children in her caseload, Espinales started off with a review of the little girl's learning activities and temperament since the previous week's visit. There was also a health questionnaire and a review of mom's state of mind. Rosales was three months pregnant with her second child.

When he is home, Rosales's husband, Julio Miramontes, a hardwood floor installer, is included in activities, as is the extended household: Itzel's grandparents, two uncles and an aunt.

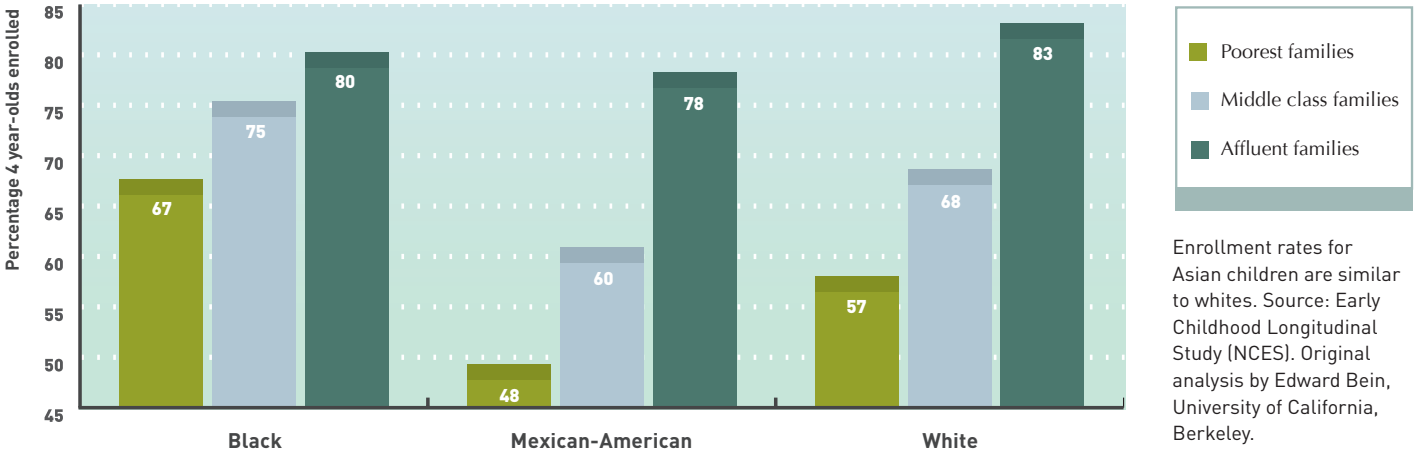
Sitting on the floor making a gluey mush with borax, water and toilet paper, Lizbeth Rosales encouraged Itzel to count the paper slips. The activity, Espinales said, introduces Itzel to measuring, mixing and working with different textures. Itzel, her little fingers working the paste into balls, didn't want to stop.

Like most parents in Early Head Start, Rosales plans to enroll Itzel in regular Head Start when she is 3. "It's important to continue," she said. "Beginning her education at a young age will benefit her in the long run."

Pent-up demand is strong for Early Head Start. Counts of pregnant women on waiting lists across local programs, 2006



Percentage of 4-year-olds attending a preschool center by child's ethnicity and family's socioeconomic status, 2005



Enrollment rates for Asian children are similar to whites. Source: Early Childhood Longitudinal Study (NCES). Original analysis by Edward Bein, University of California, Berkeley.

Some research has found that Latino children are more likely than others to be enrolled in child care arrangements that lack an educational component.

"There has been very little attention to the definition of quality in the context of the changing makeup of the early learning population," said Michael L. Lopez, executive director of the nonprofit National Center for Latino Child and Family Research. "For Latino children, this will determine if their experience will be beneficial or less beneficial."

There is also a general perception that Latinos want to keep their children at home. Based on that assumption, researcher Lopez said, the Los Angeles Universal Preschool program, funded by tobacco taxes, incorporated an equal mix of centers and home-based child care. But Lopez suspects that may only be the case for very young children, and he is now conducting studies in Los Angeles County on how a child's age factors into care choices.

While Rosales is comfortable with the home visiting program, she said she never considered a center. She wouldn't like to leave her daughter with someone she doesn't know.

That was not a factor for Gabriela Luna, whose 2½ year-old son, Hector, is enrolled in an Early Head Start center in the Los Angeles suburb of Downey run by Plaza de la Raza, a nonprofit child development agency.

Luna is a studying full time toward a teaching credential, and her husband, Rafael, works as a nursing assistant. Hector, who enrolled in the program at 1, has bonded with his teachers, she said, and she feels secure that the staff is highly trained and accountable.

"Since both of us go to school or work, we would have the choice of a babysitter or leaving him in a school setting," Luna said. "And I know the importance of education." Since Hector started the program, she said, "his motor skills are really good, he's talking and his pronunciation in English and Spanish is improving."

Gabriela said that she was not concerned about his teachers' cultural sensitivity. But some studies have found that providers' lack of cultural and linguistic training causes tension or keeps some Latino families away.

Research conducted by Delis Cuellar, assistant professor in early education at Humboldt State University in Arcata, Calif., found a cultural gap between first-generation Mexican-born parents and some Head Start teachers in Arizona, who left parents alone to be with their children when they arrived in the classroom. The teachers thought they were being sensitive in allowing "alone time" between parents and their children, while the parents interpreted the approach as standoffish and racist. There were differences in interpreting literacy (parents focused more on penmanship than comprehension) and parenting skills (teachers thought parents discouraged exploration). And teachers tended to view the children as being from poor homes even when that wasn't the case.

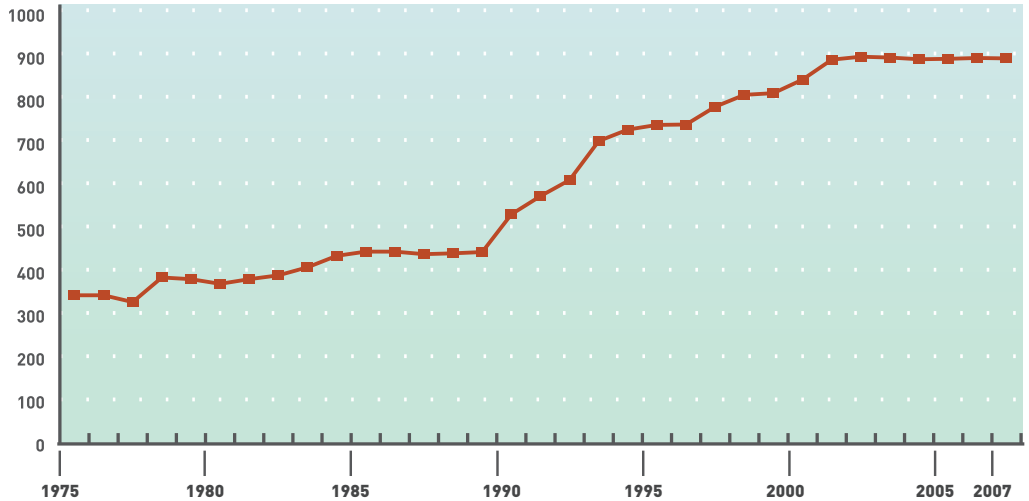
"There isn't a lot of training [on cultural sensitivity] in colleges and universities," Cuellar said.

Early childhood educators are beginning to adjust to changing demographics. Crystal Stairs, a Los Angeles County nonprofit child development agency, was having a tough time filling 90 spaces in a child care center located in the Nickerson Gardens public housing project in Watts, said chief executive officer Holly J. Mitchell.

The client base was 50 percent Latino, but 90 percent of the staff were black. The agency hired a Latino public relations firm to study the needs of the community.

"We stopped resting on our laurels of high quality and did door-to-door canvassing, put up new signage and sensitized ourselves to the ethnic makeup of our staff," said Mitchell. Eventually, more Latino staff and students were attracted to the program. "We didn't intentionally go out and hire, but the change happened naturally."

Head Start enrollment levels reached a plateau in 2001, as Washington focused on quality improvement.



Sources

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Social scientists will be looking closely to determine if the new focus on early education will translate to gains for Latino children.

Expansion of early education programs in some states has been stymied by the recession. In Ohio, for example, a state preschool program aimed at preparing low-income 3- and 4-year-olds for kindergarten recently ended when funding ran out. In Massachusetts, early education programs for homeless and teen parents recently fell to budget cuts. And some Head Start classrooms in Pennsylvania closed recently when the state cut supplemental funding.

But in Illinois, Gov. Pat Quinn moved to restore most state money that was cut from early childhood programs, and a program that allows 4-year-olds in Iowa to attend preschool without charge expanded this fall and is expected to serve more than 12,900 students this school year.

The National Institute for Early Education Research recently recommended using stimulus funds to help English language learners by insuring that there are more full-day, full-year programs in underserved communities, providing training and incentives for teachers to

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MARISOL TOVAR-MERCADO

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learn second languages and increasing the numbers of dual-language preschool programs.

Separately, in California, a new state preschool curriculum encourages teachers to create classrooms that reflect students' home culture.

Nonprofit groups like Plaza de la Raza are looking at ways to better serve clients. The agency has a pilot project that uses family child care providers to deliver Head Start services in their homes.

There are currently five providers in the program, which is in its second year, said Plaza assistant director Rosalina Cabunoc-Fine. The homes are closely vetted and monitored. Providers must have credentials and go through extra training beyond what is required for typical child care.

When school starts in September, provider Marisol Tovar-Mercado will have 12 children in her East Whittier home, where her family room is well-equipped with kid-sized tables, chairs, books and arts and crafts spaces.

The majority of families are Latino working parents and Tovar-Mercado is glad she has learned how to provide the children with educational skills. "I know when they enter school, they will be ready," she said.

That is the ultimate goal, said experts.

"Even with more stimulus money, we're going to have to figure out ways to expand into communities where Latinos live," said Linda Espinosa, a consultant and retired professor of early education at the University of Missouri-Columbia. "It doesn't mean just adding more slots. We're going to have to think more strategically to increase participation rates."

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