



Creating Programs that Respect the Unique Language & Culture of Latino Fathers

Between 2008 and 2010, the Academy for Educational Development [AED] piloted the Las Manos de Apá project at two Seasonal and Migrant Head Start Programs in the states of New York and Michigan. Funded by the Office of Head Start, The Las Manos de Apá Project is focused on developing a best practice model for the engagement of Latino fathers in the education of their young children. This tip sheet was developed based on lessons learned from Head Start staff, Father Involvement Coordinators, fathers who participated in the program and their families.

Tip Sheet 2 provides an overview of values that can help guide program activities designed to reach Latino fathers and families.

Why Fathers? The need to address Latino children's literacy needs in Head Start

Latinos are among the fastest growing population in the nation and most recent statistics indicate that approximately 25% of the children in Head Start are from Latino homes. The Latino population also experiences a 43% high school dropout rate, which is higher than any other cultural group. Recent research that cites the importance of the involvement of fathers in the school success of children. Therefore it is imperative that Head Start programs reach out to Latino fathers in culturally and linguistically responsive ways. Programs should take the time to develop relationships with Latino fathers and support them in their roles as the primary education nurturers of their children. The Las Manos de Apá focuses on two key factors that can help improve Latino children's educational achievement: father involvement and early literacy.

The Importance of Family

In many Latino cultures, family or "La familia" is of primary importance. Family is defined very broadly and includes aunts, uncles, grandparents, cousins, and close family friends. Families are close knit and rely on each other during times of happiness and stress. Lessons learned in this area:

- **Fathers want to involve their children, wives, brothers, fathers, and sons—their whole family.** As one coordinator shared: "I learned in the training that it is important, that in order to get the fathers' participation we have to involve the whole family. So we try to, I try to do activities, like yesterday we had a soccer game and we invited the fathers and also the children. It is important because one of the goals is the father has to be a role model. It was good, it worked yesterday. So that's the one thing that I learned, that we have to involve the whole family to get the father's participation".

- **Fathers like activities focused on family.** For example, fathers reported liking an activity called Los Sabios which had fathers tell stories about their grandparents. The fathers enjoyed sharing lessons and wisdoms learned from their grandmothers and grandfathers as part of the activity. This activity was very emotional for many fathers who had left beloved family members behind in other countries or whose grandparents had passed away. They also expressed in the following session that this was the first time they had shared these stories with their wives and children.

“What I appreciate most about this project is to know there are people who care about us. I feel it is important for us to be brave and to share our stories—to be brave and tell the stories in the group. To admit what has happened with our stories and allow the tears to make us more of a man. Tears don’t make us less of a man; it makes us more of a man. This helps us like some kind of therapy. None of us ever share things. I never shared things. I felt like my business is my business and I never told anyone. I hold things in. This group has helped to show the way is to move forward and focus our lives—to get ahead. I personally am very grateful to this group.”

The Importance of Children

Children play a very important role in Latino cultures. Children are viewed as the hope for the future. Parents will make great sacrifices for their children and will do things for their children that they may not do for themselves. As Eden Torres states in her article, “The primary relationship in a Mexican American family is not between husband and wife, but between the parent and the child,” (Pg26 COLORS nw-Dec 1994 “Old Symbols, New Definitions: one Chicana’s perspective on Mexican American Family Life by Eden Torres). Lessons learned in this area include:

- **Fathers like activities that linked them to their children** such as preparing book carts, visits to the library, playing soccer and other activities. Fathers reported that sharing the stories from the father’s group with their children helped build their relationship with their child. The children also liked spending time with their fathers and one child proudly told her teacher that her father had participated in a soccer game the previous day. As part of one father’s group event, fathers worked with a carpenter from the community to make rolling book carts for their children. The building of the book carts deeply moved fathers as they were able to make something of beauty from their hearts for their children.

The Importance of Community

A sense of community is very important culturally. Emphasis is placed on the good of the collective rather than the individual.

As Leo Lopez, a Latino father and professional stated, “It is not about who you are and what you can get. It is about who we are and what we can be together.” This sense of community must be established before any work can begin. As Roberto Dansie PhD. states, “For Latino males, the “we” must be established before the “I” can emerge. Relationship is everything and interactions with Latino males should begin with talking about the elements of everyday life such as family, work, the weather, etc. before any business can begin. Father involvement coordinators were able to build a sense of connection and support among fathers through activities and structure of the groups.

- **Fathers find the mutual support from others important.** Fathers emphasized that they appreciated the “convivencia” or feeling of fellowship and time to socialize. They appreciated the opportunity to share ideas and to desfogarse (to relieve one’s feelings).
- **Attendance starts out low but grows overtime.** Trust and respect is extremely important in many Latino cultures and it takes time to build the relationship with fathers. Coordinators at both sites shared that attendance was low at first but grew as men heard about the groups. The Coordinators also emphasized the importance of the participation of every father and helped fathers to feel valued and needed in the group. Fathers who may have missed a meeting were contacted personally for an individual meeting by the father coordinator.
- **Fathers want to involve other males in the activities to create a sense of community.** The ability of the father involvement coordinators to be flexible and include as many male family members as possible proved to be critical. One group invited their teenage sons. Another group brought their sons who were younger (10 years of age) and in another site a father brought an elder (a father in his 60’s). The participation of all these important males in the life of a Head Start child is important since they all interact with and nurture the child.

“This is the most beautiful. [I] used to see him [another member in the group] in the community, he was my neighbor, but we did not speak. Now when I see him I say hello and I have a friend in the community”.