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Language Series Speaks to Families: Program enlists Santa Ana parents as 'first teachers' to help their children develop skills

By Joel Rubin

As he has done twice a week for months, 3-year-old David Damasio nestled himself between his mother and Ines Victor on the family couch in a cramped Santa Ana apartment.

Victor opened a children's book and began reading in Spanish to the wide-eyed boy, pausing frequently to gently pepper him with questions about the story line. "*Rojo, gris!*" — red, gray — David said in his native tongue, pointing to colored hats on the page.

Throughout, Victor kept an eye on Sonia, David's mother, to ensure she was paying attention. She pressed the quiet woman to mimic her and ask David questions.

In coming years, when David enters Santa Ana's public schools, he probably will be taught entirely in English. To prepare him for that day, he and his mother are working with Victor as part of an unusual outreach program rooted in a city with one of the country's most concentrated Latino immigrant populations.

Started four years ago by UC Irvine cognitive scientist Virginia Mann, HABLA helps impoverished Latino immigrant parents who often don't know how to build their young children's language skills.

"Parents are the first teachers, but a lot of these parents don't know what to do," Mann said. "We know these early years are when children start to learn languages, and if Spanish is the only language you are able to teach them in, then that is what you have to do.... If a child has language skills in Spanish, it will translate into English."

HABLA (Home-based Activities Building Language Acquisition) serves about 250 families — nearly all immigrants from Mexico — with children between 2 and 4. There are no firmly defined eligibility requirements, but Mann and her staff consider only parents with little education and low incomes. The mean income for HABLA families is \$16,000, and parents typically have eight or fewer years of schooling and little command of English.

Home visitors like Victor work with families over two six-month sessions. They bring a Spanish-language book or a toy to each half-hour lesson, which is used as the day's learning tool and then

given to the family. Through reading and play, the home visitors demonstrate to parents how to engage their children in the freewheeling conversations that help develop a child's vocabulary and language skills.

Mann cited research that shows that economically disadvantaged parents speak about 300 fewer words each hour to their children than more affluent parents do. "There is a vacuum of language, a real loss of words."

And while early-intervention reading programs similar to HABLA have existed in English for years, state education officials said Mann's program was one of only a few in California conducted in Spanish and that offered home visits.

Mann and other child development experts said research has made clear that young children who build a foundation of skills in their native language are able to learn a second language more quickly.

"These children will learn English," said Linda Espinoza, a professor at the University of Missouri who studies early language development. "The question is, will they have the opportunity early on to expand their vocabulary and to learn to think abstractly?"

In Latino immigrant homes, the answer is often no. Espinoza and Harry Pachon, a professor of public policy at USC, said undereducated parents whose own parents did not read to them when they were young typically do not know how to develop their children's language skills. The result, Mann said, are one-way lines of communication in which parents often issue orders and ask questions that require a yes-or-no response.

"I didn't know how to teach my son," said Victor, who participated in HABLA before she became a home visitor. "But I didn't want the same thing to happen to him that happened to me — the first book that was ever read to me was after I started school."

Some parents are also reluctant to speak Spanish to their children out of fear that it will retard their learning of English. Mary Baker, principal of Madison Elementary School in Santa Ana, said that when a new class of kindergartners arrives, her teachers can quickly tell which children do not have skills in either language. "They often don't even know their names," she said. "We call them 'non-nons,' " because they are non-English and non-Spanish speakers.

Such will not be the case for David Damasio. When they leave their apartment, his mother said, they often discuss objects or places that he recognizes from books. In similar scenarios with her older daughter, Sonia Damasio said, there was silence.

As her son rambled excitedly in Spanish, she repressed a chuckle and shook her head wearily. "He talks so much," she said.