

A Conversation with Immigrant Mothers About Early Learning Programs



Benefits, Barriers & Work to Be Done

*A Conversation with Immigrant Mothers
About Early Learning Programs:*

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Council on Children and Families

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Some words of wisdom to all who share in the responsibility of shaping policies that influence the lives of our young children...

Education then, beyond all other devices of human origin, is the great equalizer of the conditions of men, the balance-wheel of the social machinery.

-- Horace Mann

Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world.

-- Nelson Mandela

The object of education is to prepare the young to educate themselves throughout their lives.

-- Robert M. Hutchins

Education costs money, but then so does ignorance.

-- Sir Claus Moser

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INTRODUCTION

Approximately one in four of New York’s four-year-old children lives with an immigrant mother and half of these children live at or below the 200 percent poverty level despite the fact that most of these mothers and their spouses are in the workforce. Fortunately, a widely recognized means to equalize opportunities for children in poverty is participation in early learning programs. For children in immigrant families, participation in such programs has dual benefits in that the programs develop important literacy skills necessary for success in school while also familiarizing families with their new communities. These programs are particularly important since they level the playing field for New York’s young children who are born in immigrant families and are citizens of the United States.

Overall, New York’s children of immigrant mothers tend to be enrolled in early learning programs. However, the percentage of children enrolled is somewhat lower than their peers in non-immigrant families. Furthermore, enrollment varies by immigrant mothers’ country of origin with lower rates of enrollment observed among children with mothers from Spanish-speaking countries, primarily from Mexico and Central America (1).

Country/Region of Immigrant Mother	Probability Children Enrolled in Early Learning Program
Dominican Republic	63.0%
Mexico	61.2%
Ecuador	63.9%
Rest of South America	72.4%

Source: Council analyses of *Integrated Public Use Microdata: Version 3.0*.

OUR GOALS

The purposes of the focus groups were to learn about immigrant mothers’ decision to either enroll or not enroll their children in early learning programs and gain a better understanding of the perceived barriers and benefits of such programs. Of particular interest was the identification of cultural factors that might contribute to differing enrollment rates.

APPROACH USED

A series of focus groups were conducted in the New York City and downstate regions of New York State. Members of the focus groups were invited to participate based on pre-established citizenship, geographic, ethnic and income criteria. Specifically, focus group participants (N=92) were immigrant mothers whose country of origin included Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico, and Peru. These individuals were mothers who had children between two and six years of age and were living at or below the poverty level. Mothers included both documented and undocumented residents; most of their children were citizens of the United States and were currently enrolled or had been enrolled in early learning programs¹. The mothers lived in New York City (Brooklyn, Bronx and Queens) and areas outside the New York City region (Poughkeepsie, Beacon, Peekskill). These regions were selected due to their high concentration of Spanish-speaking immigrants.

Staff who work with immigrant families in healthcare settings, home visiting programs and early care and education programs were given fliers that (1) described the criteria for participation, (2) detailed the purpose of the sessions and (3) identified the honorarium provided. The fliers were printed in both Spanish and English. Staff shared the fliers with mothers and assumed responsibility for recruiting participants. Mothers who agreed to participate received a follow-up call prior to the session to remind them of the session.

The interview protocol developed for the focus group sessions was designed to gather information regarding:

- Mothers' familiarity with early learning programs (i.e., availability and program features of programs in home country);

¹Mothers were not asked to disclose the specific early learning program (e.g., Head Start) their child attended.

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- Factors that influenced mothers' decisions to enroll their children in early learning programs; and
 - Mothers' perceived benefits of early learning programs (Appendix A).

The focus groups were conducted in Spanish and took approximately 75 minutes to complete. Each session was recorded with the permission of the participants, then translated and transcribed for further analyses. Refreshments were made available to participants and each participant received a gift card to a local store (i.e., Target or Wal-Mart) as an honorarium.

WHAT WE LEARNED

Familiarity with Early Learning Programs in Country of Origin

According to focus group participants, in their country of origin, the earliest involvement children have in education programs tends to be in kindergarten. However, in Mexico, the country of origin for most mothers in the focus groups, pre-kindergarten is available for children at age three. It was reported that Ecuador does not have similar programs for young children. Often, access was related to mothers' location (e.g., urban, rural).

Differences between programs in the U.S. and those abroad were noted in terms of curriculum, staffing and range of services. For example, mothers acknowledged that the programs encountered in the U.S. differed from those in their country of origin in terms of curriculum where the U.S. programs focused more on academics for older children while programs in their country of origin emphasized socialization, whether children

I see that in Mexico, kinder[garten] is all play—play and drawing and here my son is learning to add. It is better here.

Over there [Mexico], if you have money you can place your child in a good school, if not, they only play. Over here, they [staff] are very aware of everything—if children need something or if they have a problem, they detect it. Here there is more support.

were three or four years old. While it is well-established that play is an important aspect of health child development, mothers were concerned that there be a proper balance, especially as children approached school age.

Staffing of the early learning programs in mothers' countries of origin ranged from programs that relied exclusively on volunteers to programs with a single teacher and secretary as her assistant to programs with credentialed teachers and psychologists. Staffing was often dependent upon the geographic location of the schools with more professionals in the urban schools. Mothers noted the programs in their countries of origin did not have the extensive screening services (e.g., hearing) available in the U.S., which meant access to special services was limited to families that had greater resources.

The issues of access and program quality were frequently expressed when mothers spoke about early learning programs in their country of origin. The same issues were echoed when they spoke of barriers to services in the U.S.

Factors Influencing Enrollment

Outreach

The quality of outreach is often dependent upon the extent staff in programs that serve low-income families are familiar themselves with early learning programs, their perseverance and creativity. Program staff who served focus group mothers and their children made continuous efforts to link with other community service providers so outreach could be extended and improved. Examples of these linkages included making connections with medical settings, schools, libraries, churches and the general media (i.e.,

Single Stop

Single Stop is based on the premise that many low-income families are not aware of what public benefits they are due. Single Stop offers free one-on-one counseling to low-income families across New York City to assess their needs and determine eligibility for various benefits. Forty sites are open.

www.robinhood.org

television and radio). However, the quality and reach of the network established among professionals is highly dependent on staff knowledge of other programs, which is not developed in a formal, systematic fashion. Rather, it is specific to each program and staff within that program.

Single Stop, a service established through the Robin Hood Foundation, provides low-income families with access to confidential counseling that informs them of the various benefits for which they may be eligible. Although it was not intended for immigrant families, it has provided many with valuable information and links to service. This is just one example of the type of coordinated collaboration needed to enable families to access necessary services.

Enrollment Criteria

Once parents become aware of early learning programs, they can be unclear about the criteria used to accept children into programs. For example, a mother was able to easily enroll her son, who has a speech impediment, in a program and expected to have a similar experience once her daughter became eligible to attend. However, the mother became discouraged after seeing a number of children from low income, single parent families enrolled before her daughter. This mother was unaware of the weighted criteria used to determine which children are enrolled. A greater understanding of the criteria may have helped the mother to decide whether to take alternative steps, such as enrolling her child in a different program. The mother stated she lost trust in the program, given the extensive wait. Another mother decided to pay a babysitter rather than try to negotiate the system. Overall, mothers recommended sound, ongoing communication between the parents and programs once parents began the enrollment process.

Another issue related to enrollment criteria centered on the need for documentation. Mothers acknowledged programs increasingly required parents to have documentation or to have notarized letters from employers, which has been prohibitive for some families. It is important to note that Head Start Programs, the most commonly used programs among focus group participants, do not require social security numbers or proof of citizen status; however, parents are required to provide proof of income eligibility. Undocumented mothers noted employers are more likely to provide the necessary letters if the letters are needed for healthcare or education purposes, not other purposes.

If the mother is single and has low income, her children get in right away. My daughter was on a waiting list for two years—I lost trust in the program.

I have not even received a letter stating I am on a waiting list and I have applied about a month or more.

Availability of High Quality Programs

I stop and think if we did not have these types of programs, what would it be for our children starting kindergarten? They would not learn a lot and they would not learn English either. Our situation would be to have them at home until they were five years old and then after five send them to kindergarten, where they would be lost. They would be completely lost because they would be in a place with a new language; they would not know their alphabet, the sounds, and many other things that they [early learning] programs give them.

As described earlier, program capacity is a problem in most areas where supply does not meet the demand and waiting lists are the norm. This is due, in part, to the fact that most families seek out programs that are free or low cost. Mothers explained it is somewhat easier to get children enrolled in child care programs compared to Head Start programs since there is a cost associated with child care programs. In fact, one mother with little discretionary income available paid \$400 per month so her child could be enrolled in an early learning program. Although this amount is comparatively low for early care and education programs, other mothers acknowledged this is not a feasible option for most families.

Mothers also noted a need for programs designed to meet the special needs of children (e.g., early intervention and preschool special education programs). However, these programs were viewed with reservation by some families who explained that families may feel a stigma is associated with these programs and may not care to have their child enrolled. This underscores the need for staff with cultural sensitivity that are able to help families understand the reason for these programs so children will be enrolled and receive timely services.

Head Start Programs in focus group communities had:

- Teacher to student ratios ranging from 1:3 to 1:12
- Teacher turnover ranged from 1 to 17 percent

Mothers cited staff turnover as a problem and noted poor pay as one reason for the turnover. It is estimated that turnover for Head Start staff ranges from 1 to 17 percent in the communities where the focus groups were conducted. Concern was expressed regarding the quality of staff and mothers, to a certain extent, assumed staff had the appropriate credentials. Mothers showed particular concern for children's safety and noted this was an especially important factor in deciding whether to enroll their children in a program. Overall, Head Start staff located in the communities where the focus groups were conducted (i.e., New York City and downstate region) had several staff with Associates and Baccalaureate degrees².

The mothers in these focus groups clearly wanted a program that went beyond social skills development. These mothers were clear that they preferred early learning programs that developed language and reading skills in addition to social skills. This differs from a previous study that indicated immigrant mothers preferred family-based programs that emphasized a nurturing, social environment (2).

Transportation

Focus group participants explained that many Hispanic mothers do not drive so it can be difficult getting children to programs that may be located a distance from their homes. It was noted transportation was particularly helpful to mothers who were in the workforce. Typically, programs were located within the community and mothers who did not work brought their children while those who did work made arrangements with others to have

² It is important to note the level of education may not be comparable in other areas of the state given that New York City requires staff to be certified and have a Bachelor's degree.

children brought or returned from the program. Mothers indicated transportation was a cost concern as well as a logistic concern.

Cost

A major consideration for most parents is the cost of programs. As noted earlier, many parents focus on Head Start programs given the expense of child care programs. Some mothers explained that costs associated with child care centers can be affordable with one child attending but are prohibitive with multiple children in the program. In fact, some mothers decided to leave the work force and stay home to care for their children since the expense of the program was equal to or exceeded the amount of money earned at their minimum wage job. However, it is important for families, program staff and policy makers to recognize the 'value-added' when children attend *high-quality* early learning programs. Although the expenses for such programs may be equivalent to the amount of money earned, the value realized from development of parenting skills and family literacy may off-set the costs.

I think we as mothers want things for our children and we are willing to pay for them. Not as much as it is required in child care, but also not for free. Mothers and parents are willing to contribute so that these types of programs don't disappear.

Language

As might be expected, language is a considerable barrier to mothers' ability to find programs and communicate with staff once children are enrolled in those programs. Many of the Head Start programs located in the communities where focus groups were conducted have bi-lingual staff and mothers' underscored the need for these individuals to have a good command of the Spanish language so a necessary level of accuracy could be maintained throughout the course of a conversation. Some mothers felt they missed the subtleties of statements since they were not able to translate their message into English and staff were not able to fully translate their message into Spanish. With respect to written communications, mothers were appreciative when program staff sent letters home that were translated. Some mothers noted it was common for a letter to be in English on one side of the page and in Spanish on the other side; others stated this was not done on a regular basis.

Mothers were in agreement that staff needed to be bi-lingual; however some mothers were adamant that they should also learn English and were interested in English courses. Not all mothers agreed with this view. It was noted that the scheduling of English courses often conflicted with when children were home and made it difficult to attend the courses without child care.

I had my daughter in a child care program and they only spoke English. It was a very scary experience for her at first.

We only ask for more centers to be open and for them to have bilingual workers.

One tries but then in the middle of a conversation one does not understand. Sometimes one is left with the desire to know more about what they said. It would also facilitate things if we would learn English because it is also our responsibility.

There is an interpreter but she tells you everything upside down and there is no one that can interpret in trying to understand her.

Perceived Benefits of Enrollment in Early Learning Programs

I have seen with child care and Head Start they [staff] have them [the children] in a routine and I think that is beneficial for them. At home, I don't have that custom because I never had that in my country. I did not have a schedule; I did not have a routine. From what I understand, that is important for the formation of the children—that they start with rules, routines that help them in their development.

Healthy Child Development and School Readiness

Mothers acknowledged the multiple benefits of early learning programs, noting that these programs offered their children an opportunity to learn skills that assisted their child's social and cognitive development. Mothers were also candid that children would not have similar experiences if they were at home due to mothers' hectic schedules. Some mothers noted children were more likely to watch television if they stayed at home since the mothers were not able to spend the amount of quality time that staff spent with the children. Furthermore, mothers felt staff may be better prepared to assist their child's cognitive development. Mothers repeatedly acknowledged the benefit of having children socialize with other children and be able to make an easier transition from home to school.

Head Start programs give many possibilities for people who cannot pay. I like the hours and my daughter has good nutrition. And I really like the teachers that she has. She learned a lot in Head Start.

The Astor Head Start not only worries about the development of the child but also worries about, from what I saw, the Hispanic child, because they would call the parents to learn about their situation and their experiences as Hispanics and as immigrants and how that influences the development of the child.

Assistance with Parenting Skills

Mothers consistently stated that children were not the sole beneficiary of early learning programs and that they also gained considerable knowledge. For example, mothers described activities related to nutrition awareness where children were encouraged to eat a variety of fruits and vegetables. The recipes were translated and shared with families, which allowed mothers to add these foods to their family meals. In another instance, a program that encouraged father involvement was able to engage fathers who, according to these mothers, would have been less likely to participate in such programs in their country of origin.

Staff regularly provide parents with information regarding parenting skills that are consistent with their child's development. In addition to this information, workshops are another means used to help parents gain a greater understanding of child development and effective parenting skills. In one instance, a mother described workshops presented by social workers, dentists, physicians, and teachers then encouraged mothers to attend the next sessions with her.

Sense of Community

Mothers faced a higher degree of isolation in the U.S. than in their country of origin. For example, in their country of origin, it is typical for children and parents to go outside their homes and interact with neighbors. However, this is not the case for most mothers once they are in the U.S., which makes it more difficult to interact with other mothers. In many ways, the early learning programs serve a 'neighborhood' purpose in that mothers, as well as children, are able to connect with peers. This clustering of mothers makes

There are lots of programs, and truthfully, they are very interesting. A lot of social workers attend, dentists, psychologists, I go to learn because the truth is one leaves surprised.

And those things one appreciates because it's a support and they take their time so that we learn more.

In America, no one helps you with your children.

early learning programs a natural forum for sharing information and providing supports to families. The incident where one mother invited others to attend parenting workshops together is just one example of the potential.

WAYS TO SUPPORT IMMIGRANT FAMILIES

Recognize and support the unique circumstances of immigrant families

Many of the concerns raised by *immigrant* mothers were similar to the concerns of *all* mothers who are interested in the well-being and development of their children. However, *immigrant* mothers face considerable challenges when trying to negotiate services for their children. As expected, mothers noted the need for bi-lingual staff but also pointed out that the level of language proficiency among bi-lingual staff influenced how well mothers were able to understand important aspects of programs, including enrollment criteria, eligibility and the need for documentation. Clearly, programs need to consider the level of language proficiency among their bi-lingual staff.

Families benefit when they are able to interact with culturally sensitive staff. For instance, some families indicate a stigma is associated with the use of programs designed to support children with special needs. Staff that recognize such differences will be able to take this into account when working with families. Furthermore, cultural mediators serve a valuable role in preparing staff to work more effectively with immigrant families.

Requiring minimum program requirements, whenever possible, is another means of supporting immigrant families. Most early learning programs do not require social security numbers or documentation. However, many mothers noted difficulty getting letters from employers, which were used to show evidence of income eligibility. It is suggested that programs streamline procedures wherever possible to encourage immigrant families to enroll.

See Appendix B for a summary of strategies that could improve communication with immigrant families.

Support a formal means of coordination and collaboration among service providers that would assist low-income and immigrant families.

Currently, certain human service organizations exist with the primary purpose of linking families to the multiple services they need. Examples of such organizations are Child Care Resource and Referral programs that link families to early care and education programs, the well-established Settlement Houses in New York City as well as the more recent One Stop described in this report. Additionally, experienced staff from a variety of programs like Head Start and Women Infant Children (WIC) have established relationships with colleagues in other programs and developed informal networks that link families to appropriate services. These networks, whether formal or informal, are valuable resources since they leverage the trust that has been developed between staff and families. This trust allows families to gain information about program eligibility and documentation requirements, increasing the likelihood families know about services and feel comfortable accessing them. Efforts should be taken to

maximize coordination of these networks since stronger networks ensure that more consistent information is shared with a broader group of families.

The networks that facilitate delivery of services among immigrant families could go beyond availability of bilingual staff and be further enhanced with the availability of cultural mediators whose major functions include:

- To serve as a communication link between service providers and immigrant families;
- Provide support to families so they can promote their own needs and interests when using services;
- Provide awareness training to service providers; and
- Assist in the development of culturally appropriate information and promotional materials.

An effective network would also consist of supports for professionals to become aware of other services that might be beneficial to the families they serve. Cultural mediators should play a major role in this network so cultural sensitivity is increased among all staff.

Support access to high-quality early learning programs in areas with low-income immigrant families.

Mothers of four year olds were less interested in programs that focused on socialization and more interested in programs that offered a broad curriculum and developed language and reading skills. Pre-kindergarten programs targeted in areas of low-income immigrant families would considerably offset the current demand for such programs.

An easily accessible rating system could be beneficial given that most mothers *presumed* programs had a high level of quality. For instance, they described their experience with staff turnover and the effect it had on their children; they noted the importance of safe environments; and commented on which programs provided good nutrition. However, this information was piecemeal and not all mothers' were aware of which program features required their attention. A quality rating and improvement system (QRIS), such as the one under development by the Governor's Children's Cabinet could support families by providing information about the quality of features in a given early care and education setting that were most beneficial for their children's success.

To ensure programs have qualified staff, it is also recommended that professional development be expanded and available to early childhood programs. Additionally, when possible, include family-based programs in staff training offered to center-based programs—an approach successfully used in California.

We tend to think of programs services *for children* when we take into account what constitutes 'high' quality. Yet, mothers very clearly noted the value of parenting education and other opportunities to improve parenting skills. This feature is particularly important for low-income immigrant families who may feel isolated in their new circumstances. An established network, which was described above, could maximize outreach and inform parents of other opportunities that may not be offered through the program their child attends as well as engage parents who may be reluctant to have their children participate in early learning programs.

APPENDIX A

PROTOCOL USED TO GUIDE FOCUS GROUPS WITH IMMIGRANT MOTHERS

Welcomes, Introductions & Opening Statements

Comments to welcome mothers, remind them of the purpose of the focus group, give an overview of the process and information that will be gathered and remind them of what is meant by early learning programs.

Overview of Participants

- Who has or may have had children in early learning programs?
 - Ask if any of the mothers work or worked when their children were in the program.
 - Ask the mothers to tell us a little about their arrangement (e.g., Head Start, child care, Even Start, Universal Prekindergarten, neighbor)
- Who does not have children in these programs?
 - Ask if any of the mothers work or worked when their children were not old enough to go to school.
 - If mothers have/had preschool age children, who cares/cared for them when they work/worked?

Current Experience with Early Learning Programs

- Let's begin by learning about your experiences here.
- Could you please tell us **how you or other mothers learn about the early learning programs** in this community? That is, how do mothers get information about the programs?
 - If no response: For example, do you hear about these programs from other mothers; from church organizations; or from staff at programs you attend?
- What **difficulties** do mothers have **locating and learning about these programs**?

-
- Could you share ideas about **what could make it easy for mothers to get information** about early learning programs?
 - What *type of information* do you think mothers would like to have about the programs? That is, what **type of information would be helpful to mothers** so they could decide if they want to have their child attend these programs?

Expectations about Early Learning Programs

- Even when mothers have good information, we know there are many reasons why they may or may not send their children to early learning programs. Next, we would like to talk about those reasons.
- *Program Factors:* Let's begin by talking a bit about the programs. Sometimes, the programs do not work well for the families. Could you please talk about what you would like to see in programs that could serve your children? For example, tell us what would you like to see in terms of:
 - **Hours opened;**
 - **Location of the program;**
 - **Transportation;**
 - **Program costs;**
 - **Program staff;**
 - **Ability to work with children who may have special needs;**
 - **Other program qualities?**
- Now, thinking about the program characteristics we talked about, are there **any things about the program that would make you decide to *not* send your child?**
- *If it has not been discussed at this point,* ask mothers if language is a barrier for them or their children in communicating with program staff and learning about what is going on in the program. Is there **anything programs do or should do to improve communications with families?**
- *Other Factors:* We talked a lot about the programs and their staff. However, there are times when families simply feel early learning programs are not the place they would like to have their children spend their time. Are you aware of **other things that may help families decide they may not want to send their children to early learning programs?**
- If no response, or if responses have not covered this yet:

-
- How about a **child's age**? Is there an age at which families think children are too young?
 - How about the **availability of family or friends who could care for children**? Would families prefer to have this arrangement instead of an early learning program?
 - Are there **any other things families think about** when deciding they may not send their children to early learning programs?
 - When we talk about these programs, we often think of the children and forget about family members but it is very important that family members also feel comfortable and welcome in these programs. How could programs do that well? What would they **need to do to make families feel comfortable, welcome and feel like they are a part of their children's program**?

Early Learning Program Outcomes

- **If we had 'good' programs**, that is, programs like we just discussed, **what do you think we would see in the children that attend these programs** (e.g., cognitive, social, psychological characteristics such as happy about attending, ability to play with others, ready for school).? If no response, ask mothers what would children be able to do, how would they feel about themselves, etc?

Familiarity with Early Learning Programs

- We would like to learn more about your country and programs in your home country that serve young children.
 - Is it common or not common to have children attend early learning programs?
 - If you are familiar with these programs:
 - Could you please tell us about the process parents go through to get their children in the programs?
 - Could you talk about children's daily activities in these programs?
 - Who are the staff that work with the children (e.g., trained teachers, teacher assistants, other)?

-
- Would you say they are used more, less or the same amount by mothers who work outside the home than mothers who do not work outside the home?
 - What are the costs of these programs?

Closing Thoughts

Is there anything else you would like to add that could help us **make early learning programs better** for children and their families? Thank you for your time. It was a pleasure talking with you and your ideas will help us greatly.

APPENDIX B

It's Understood! Ways to Improve Communications with Immigrant Parents

Leverage credibility already established—

Introduce parents to early learning programs through partnerships with the service programs they currently use. The credibility and trust established by one program (e.g., health care settings, churches) can be leveraged to increase immigrant participation in another program. Also, make staff at immigrant serving programs aware of your program. Similarly, among families in your program, encourage parents to share information with other family members and friends.

Communicate clearly and often—

With verbal communication, the quality of the translator is particularly important. Parents are not always able to get the level of information they need if the person conducting the translation is not fluent in both English and Spanish. At times, accuracy of information has been shortchanged in an effort to simplify information. In written communication, translate documents in English and Spanish, preferably on one page, so information is available in both languages. Keep in mind that the process for program enrollment can be lengthy, given

extended waiting lists. Once the enrollment process has begun, keep families apprised of their status and next steps.

Consider your shared goal and build on it—

The well-being of their children is the one aspect you share in common with parents so be sure to provide opportunities where parents can learn to be better parents by engaging in activities with their own children. This also affords families an opportunity to become familiar with American traditions, such as Father's Day and Mother's Day.

Build bridges, not barriers—

Be cognizant of the effort it takes for parents to be actively involved in your program and do not assume that those who participate are fully comfortable. They may still need to be encouraged to participate and ask questions. Additionally, be sensitive to issues around documentation and gather the minimum information required.

Serve as a natural support system for parents—

Programs like yours may be one of the few supports available to parents. As one mother noted, she always had access to neighbors, friends and family prior to her arrival in the United States. However, she felt increasingly isolated once she arrived. Programs can become that natural support and act as an information resource for parents while providing services to children. Being a 'comfort zone' provides an opportunity to engage parents in parenting programs and family literacy activities.

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