

An innovative program teaches immigrant mothers and their children side by side

'Now I Can Stand Up For Myself'

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Nora Sandoval and her daughter Abril, 9, in class together.

For most of their young lives in Arkansas, Maria and Abril Guerra, now 11 and 9, tensed up whenever their mother, Nora Sandoval, approached a store clerk. "I no speak English," Sandoval would begin when puzzled by a price or attempting to find a product. She'd finished sixth grade back in Mexico and to her daughters was smart and capable, but clerks usually greeted her with condescension and annoyance.

"I was furious! I wanted to stand up for my mother!" Maria says, breaking into sobs as she remembers her mother's embarrassment.

For Sandoval, not being able to speak English was painful. But even worse, the language barrier made her feel helpless as a mother. She couldn't fill out her daughters' school forms. One night Abril ran into a doorjamb, and blood gushed. Sandoval knew that if she dialed 911, she wouldn't be able to ask for help in English. Luckily, her husband, Ricardo, was home from his gardener's job and drove Abril to the emergency room for stitches.

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The shame and frustration are behind Sandoval now. Thanks to a revolutionary family-literacy program that focuses on immigrants who can't speak English, Sandoval not only speaks English but also reads and writes it. Every weekday morning, she goes to school with her two older girls. (Two younger daughters, ages 3 and 1, are either in day care or at home with their father.) With other Spanish-speaking moms, she participates in a two-hour English class given at her daughters' school. After that, Sandoval goes to Abril's third-grade classroom where, for the next hour, mother and daughter are classmates, learning together.

"Nora hasn't missed a day," says Jennifer Herring-Met, Sandoval's English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher. "Her progress has been extraordinary." She adds that the first time the mothers from her class speak English in public is like "one brick of their own Berlin Wall being punched out." Sandoval saw many bricks fall the other day. Her street was blocked by workers, forcing her to park in front of a neighbor's home. She recalls, "The woman screamed, 'No parking here!' I say, 'My street is closed. I need to get my daughters home!'" Sandoval laughs and adds, "I felt mighty!"

When immigrant parents learn English, their children's lives change. "Studies find that the parents' educational level and the family's poverty status play a huge role in a child's academic success," says Sharon Darling, the founder and president of the nonprofit National Center for Family Literacy (NCFL). Nora Sandoval's city of Springdale, Ark., is one of 6,000 communities that the literacy group has served over 20 years. More than a million families with parents who couldn't read or speak English have participated. The center works with native-born Americans as well as immigrants.

Darling stumbled upon the prevalence and pain of illiteracy 40 years ago. She was a young married schoolteacher in her native Louisville, Ky.—"a country girl in a gingham dress," she remembers being called—when she walked into a church basement to help adults who were illiterate, taking over from a young local teacher bound for media fame: Diane Sawyer. "There were men in that room desperate to read," recalls Darling. "They'd spent their lives hiding their shameful secret—snooping off their laps grandkids who wanted to read bedtime stories, quitting jobs when the co-workers who read for them changed shifts and they no longer had a cover. And they were the courageous ones who admitted it—the tip of the illiteracy iceberg."

According to a newly released federal study, 34 million adult Americans—14% of the population, or about one in seven—struggle with reading and writing English. Lack of literacy affects every aspect of a person's life. Of the nation's unemployed, historically 75% have been people with limited literacy skills; 43% of low-literacy adults live in poverty.

Among the 2 million immigrants who come to the U.S. each year, about 50% lack a high school education and have poor English-language skills. Particularly at risk are children like Maria and Abril—those with Spanish-speaking parents who've had only modest education in their native countries and who are unable to speak

English with their kids. Nearly 60% of Hispanics who don't speak English well end up dropping out of high school, as opposed to 16% of Hispanics who do speak English.

In the early 2000s, Darling noticed that Hispanic families increasingly were seeking the NCFL's help. "We had this huge influx of Spanish-speaking parents and children in our country," she recalls, "and in most places we didn't have programs designed to serve them." As opposed to some other immigrant populations—Indian, Russian, Chinese, for example—many of the Spanish-speaking parents had had limited education in their own countries.

To solve the problem, the Toyota Family Literacy Program was created in 2003, aimed at Hispanic and (to a lesser extent) other immigrant groups. Today, the program serves 75 elementary schools in 25 communities across the U.S. That includes, notes Darling, "places one wouldn't expect it, where Spanish-speaking populations are rising, such as North Carolina and Arkansas." One reason the program has worked so well, she adds, is that it builds on family bonding, a value central to Hispanic culture. Children are happy to have mom or dad join them at school.

When officials in Springdale heard about the program two years ago, they felt it was made for them. More than half of the 17,400 children who attend Springdale district's 26 schools are from families below the poverty level. Forty percent of them—7,000 children—speak English as their second language. Many of the parents of these kids speak only Spanish.

"Our Hispanic families wanted their kids to live the American dream," says Superintendent Jim Rollins, but they were blocked by language. He recalls seeing parents at school who clearly wished to participate but who hung back because they couldn't communicate.

Springdale officials aggressively pursued a \$600,000 grant to bring the program to their community. In September, 75 mothers who spoke only Spanish began the school year side by side with their children. Teacher Herring-Met makes learning fun for Sandoval and her classmates. The women—many of whom didn't get past third-grade level in Mexico or El Salvador—learn by making puzzles and playing games. They hear themselves speak on phonic phones and by singing songs. They're also given incentives: For each group of English words they use, they receive play money that they can exchange for food donated at a school store.

"My students are my heroes," says Herring-Met, who hails from La Jolla, Calif., and speaks fluent Spanish. "I am humbled by them, I'm proud of them, and everyone in the school is enriched by them."

Principal Regina Stewman has children in the same grades as Sandoval's daughters. "Now my kids will never think someone is better or not because of their skin color or because they only speak one language," she says.

For Sandoval, the greatest reward is the competency in English she has attained. She now reads books in English to her younger daughters and can help Abril and Maria with their homework.

At a recent school meeting, Sandoval read aloud a short essay she had written in English. Today, she pulls out the neatly handwritten composition and repeats one sentence that is especially meaningful to her: "I think when any person wants to learn, that person *can* learn." Her daughters look on proudly.