



LATINO INFANT INITIATIVE

Vital and Valuable: Latino Fathers and Their Infants and Toddlers

As stated in our prior publications, Latino infants are re•making the United States. In 1970, the Latino population of the U.S. was less than 10 million people; today, we are more than 62 million. According to the U.S. Census Bureau, this may increase to more than 110 million by 2060! This increase is overwhelmingly due to the births of millions of Latino babies. Latino families, congratulations!

For more than 50 years, UnidosUS has worked to promote the well•being of the Latino community. This publication from the UnidosUS's Latino Infant Initiative (LII) specifically aims to identify and discuss the vital and valuable roles Latino fathers can play in promoting the healthy development and early learning of their young children, specifically preparing infants and toddlers for reading success.

A Special Opportunity

Latino fathers can play vital and valuable roles in promoting their infants' and toddlers' development and educational success. Considering the many aspects of fatherhood, it is crucial to consider key scientific evidence on infant development, early reading, and dual language learning. The main message: *fathers can support their infant's long•term school success through daily interactions that include language.* Daily interactions drive the development of skills, attitudes, and abilities that promote bonding, joy, attachment, confidence, **and the language skills that are the foundation for reading success.**

Babies grow up to be adults. Their future employment opportunities and earning potential are strongly tied to their level of education. Educational success, specifically reading success, is connected to the early learning and language development that occurs between birth and the start of kindergarten.

**CHILD
DEVELOPMENT:
A LONG•TERM
VIEW**

Employment and Income

Education and Reading Success

Early Learning and Language

Learning to read is highly challenging; reading success requires many skills. It also requires motivation to work through the challenges. Infants and toddlers benefit from developing strong language skills and personal motivation to engage with books. The research is clear: the earliest years (i.e., birth through age five) are the time to *prevent* reading difficulties.¹ Latino dads can play a major role in building the skills and motivation that underlie successful early reading.

Learning to READ: 1, 2, 3

1. *Learning to read is fundamental to school success AND highly challenging.*
2. *Many children experience reading difficulties or reading failure.*
3. *Strong language development during the first five years establishes a pathway for reading success.*

Building Reading Success from Birth

Latino fathers can play valuable roles in building the foundation for their children's reading success.

Daily interactions that include plenty of language support early reading development. It's important to note that babies' brains are highly powerful and active during the first year of life.

Even though they can't yet speak, babies have **many capabilities for language. So, whether dads speak Spanish, English, or both languages, babies benefit. As they listen to you speak, babies are able to:**

- **Analyze** what they hear. Babies are able to identify the individual sounds of the language (or languages) they hear and store them in memory—during the first year of life! This enables the baby to grow up being able to speak the language (or languages) fluently. It also enables the child to begin analyzing the sound patterns of a language. Being able to analyze and manipulate the sounds of a language between birth and five years is a great foundation for future reading success.
- **Process** rules of grammar. It's not necessary to teach grammar—when babies hear you talk, they naturally learn grammar—such as recognizing how to refer to past, present and future events. Again, this ability will be important when the child enters school and begins reading about past, present, and future events.
- **Understand** words and their meanings—this skill comes from daily experience. Learning lots of words before entering kindergarten is great preparation for children to take on the challenging task of learning to read. Much scientific evidence demonstrates that [early vocabulary](#) is connected to future academic achievement!





Early Dual Language Development

Babies have *many* capabilities for language—including dual language development. According to the National Academy of Sciences:

- Children have the capacity to learn two languages easily.
- Children should **not** give up their home language to learn English.²

These are the conclusions of the highest scientific organization in the United States. Children are NOT confused when they grow up with more than one language. For more information, see the UnidosUS’s publication [“Are Babies Confused When They Grow Up with Two Languages?”](#).

So, Latino dads:

- If you speak Spanish, interact with your baby in Spanish.
- If you speak Spanish and English, interact with your baby in either language.

The key point is to use the language (or, languages) you prefer and are more proficient in—and to use them daily to build your baby’s language.

The best way to start building reading success:
providing experiences with language right after the baby is born!

We encourage all Latino fathers to:

1. Describe your child’s activities and actions. Be a “play•by•play” announcer—talk about whatever the child is looking at or is involved in. For example: “Are you eating the apple? Does it taste good?”
2. Engage your child in a series of back•and•forth interactions: they do something; you say something. Your language literally leaves imprints on your child’s brain, resulting in word learning!
3. Read books and/or look at pictures (in a magazine, family photos on your phone) and discuss the pictures.





“Serve-and-Return” refers to back-and-forth interactions—including verbal and non-verbal communication (smiles, facial expressions, gestures) between babies and adults. Serve and return can begin during the first year of life, although the baby is not yet speaking. For example, when the baby “serves” (by doing or saying something) and the adult notices and responds meaningfully, the baby will be ready to extend these interactions over time. Month after month, as the baby grows, they will be able to process larger amounts of information and vocabulary, which is the foundation of reading comprehension.

Reading in Two Languages

Babies benefit when they are read to in any language!

If you speak Spanish, read to your baby in Spanish. If you speak Spanish and English, read in both languages. Many research studies report a positive association between Spanish oral language proficiency and reading in English.

Latino fathers can promote the future reading success of their infants by reading daily. Babies also benefit when their dads take time to talk about the pictures they see on a page; the goal is to create a fun and enjoyable back•and•forth interaction.

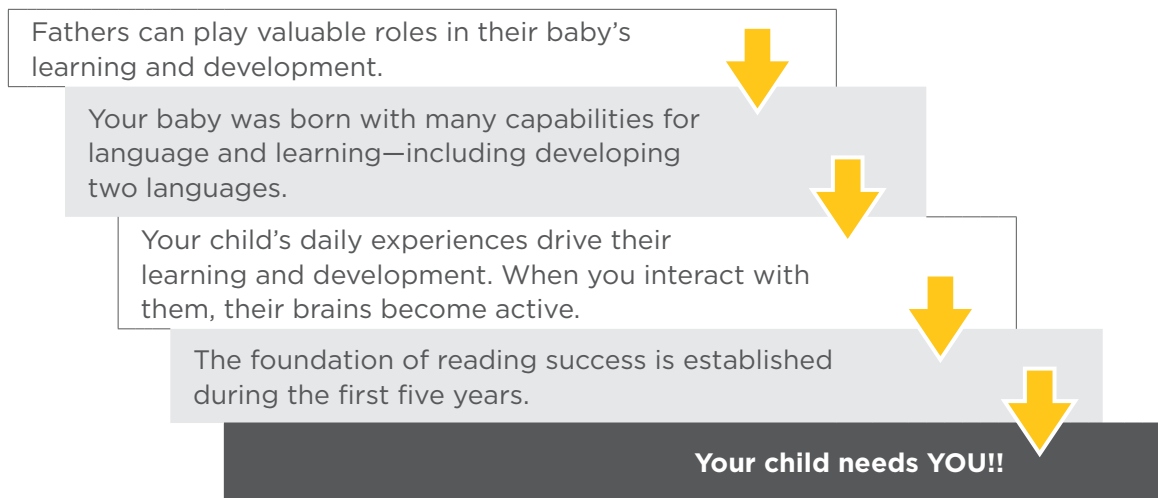
So, Latino dads can:

- Observe which books/pictures your child likes best. Read these again and again. As the child grows, encourage them to point to the pictures they already recognize.
- Let your child point to pictures and say the names of objects or actions when they begin speaking.
- Make comments that connect the words and ideas in the book or the picture to your child and family. For example, if your family has a pet and there is a picture of that animal in the book, make some comments.

Regular experiences with books and pictures will support your child in building a larger vocabulary and developing enjoyment and motivation for reading. Latino dads can play a valuable role in supporting the healthy development and early learning of their babies!

Click [here](#) to learn more about our work in this topic.

TAKE AWAYS FOR LATINO DADS



Endnotes

1. National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine. 2017. *Promoting the Educational Success of Children and Youth Learning English: Promising Futures*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/24677>.
2. National Research Council. 1998. *Preventing Reading Difficulties in Young Children*. Washington, DC: The National Academies Press. <https://doi.org/10.17226/6023>.



UnidosUS is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization that serves as the nation's largest Hispanic civil rights and advocacy organization. Since 1968, we have challenged the social, economic, and political barriers that affect Latinos through our unique combination of expert research, advocacy, programs, and an [Affiliate Network](#) of nearly 300 community-based organizations across the United States and Puerto Rico. We believe in an America where economic, political, and social progress is a reality for all Latinos, and we collaborate across communities to achieve it.

For more information on UnidosUS, visit www.unidosus.org or follow us on [Facebook](#), [Instagram](#), and [Twitter](#).

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