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Informing Culturally Responsive Training for Home Visitors: Supporting Early Literacy

Acknowledgements

This work is part of the Early Learning Nation (ELN) Collective which seeks to harness the power of communities to help children — from prenatal to age 8 — grow and thrive. A special thank you to Amanda Quiroz-Guajardo, who conducted the study.

Executive Summary

UnidosUS conducted a mixed-methods study to better understand how early literacy is promoted within early childhood home visiting programs and what resources home visitors need to effectively support language and literacy development for Latino families. The study combined a national online survey of more than 100 trained home visitors plus in-depth interviews with 21 practitioners across seven states. This work also builds on the framework used in the UnidosUS [dual language learners](#) published report. Together, the data provides a timely, practice-grounded perspective on how early literacy is understood, implemented, and supported in home visiting settings serving Latino communities.

Home visiting is a voluntary, family-centered early childhood support service in which trained professionals partner with parents in their homes or communities during pregnancy and early childhood. Through regular visits, home visitors provide coaching, resources and connections to services that strengthen parenting skills, support economic stability and help families reach goals they define for themselves. Trained home visitors bring strong foundational knowledge of child development and deep relationships with families, yet many report limited access to training and materials specifically focused on early literacy, particularly for culturally and linguistically diverse households. As a result, home visitors often rely on experiential knowledge, peer learning and real-time adaptation to help families foster language and literacy skills from birth. Despite these constraints, home visitors consistently described early literacy as a core component of their work and emphasized parents' central role as children's first teachers.

Findings show that home visitors hold a broad, holistic view of early literacy that extends beyond books to include everyday conversations, storytelling, songs, routines and play. They emphasized that literacy development begins prenatally and accelerates rapidly in the first years of life, when children absorb language through interaction and repetition. Home visitors observed that when families understand literacy as something embedded in daily life rather than a formal academic task, parents feel more confident and engaged.

At the same time, home visitors identified persistent barriers that shape early literacy engagement in Latino households. These include limited time due to work demands, low parental literacy levels, lack of prior exposure to shared reading and cultural perceptions that formal learning begins in school rather than at home. Home visitors cautioned against framing these challenges as lack of interest, noting instead that many parents demonstrate strong motivation once literacy practices are reframed in accessible, culturally relevant ways.

The findings suggest that strengthening early literacy in home visiting programs requires practical, hands-on training; culturally responsive materials; and strategies that empower parents regardless of literacy level. Home visitors consistently expressed interest in interactive professional development that models literacy practices, supports bilingualism and equips them with tools to engage families through everyday routines.

This report presents key insights from the study, highlights promising literacy practices already in use in home visiting programs and offers actionable recommendations to strengthen early literacy support for Latino families. Building the capacity of the home visiting workforce to deliver culturally grounded, relationship-based literacy strategies has the potential to improve school readiness, strengthen parent-child bonds and advance equitable outcomes for children across diverse communities.

Introduction

Latino children represent one of the [fastest-growing](#) segments of the nation's young population, yet Latino families continue to face structural barriers to early childhood services, including high costs, limited access and programs that do not reflect their cultural and linguistic strengths. Home visiting programs play a critical role in addressing these gaps by supporting families directly in their homes, where trust can be built and learning can be embedded into everyday routines.

Early literacy is a foundational driver of school readiness, language development, and long-term academic success. [Research](#) shows that frequent verbal interaction, shared reading, and responsive caregiving in the first years of life support early cognitive development and later positive literacy outcomes. [Studies](#) also find that home-based shared book reading is positively associated with children's spoken language and vocabulary development during the early years, even after accounting for family background and other language input. [Early literacy experiences](#) beginning in infancy also support brain architecture during a period of rapid neural development, laying the groundwork for school readiness and long-term academic success. However, families do not always receive consistent or culturally responsive guidance about how early literacy develops, particularly in multilingual households.

Home Visiting as a Site for Early Learning Support

Home visiting programs provide an essential entry point for early learning support, particularly for families underserved by traditional systems. Delivered by nurses, early childhood specialists, social workers and family support staff, these programs involve regular, scheduled visits to families' homes, where home visitors talk with caregivers, model age appropriate activities with infants and toddlers and offer relationship centered guidance on child development, health, nutrition and early learning.

Despite decades of research demonstrating that early exposure to language, reading and storytelling supports long-term academic and cognitive outcomes, Latino families often receive inconsistent or outdated guidance. In previous [research](#), UnidosUS found that parents are frequently told conflicting information about early literacy and language development. These mixed messages can undermine confidence and delay engagement in early learning activities. Given the mixed messaging that parents receive, home visitors find that there are challenges to implementing early literacy (Figure 1).

Figure 1. Barriers to implementing early literacy, according to home visitors
(Data Source: Survey of Home Visitors, 2024)

Barrier	% of Home Visitors Citing Specific Barriers	Notes
Limited access to books	61%	Especially in language spoken at home
Parent confidence	54%	"They think literacy means teaching letters."
Time constraints	49%	Competing family stressors
Language mismatch	46%	Materials not culturally/linguistically aligned

Note: Percentage of home visitors mentioning specific barriers to successfully promoting early literacy.

This study was conducted to better understand how early literacy is currently supported within home visiting programs that serve Latino families, and to identify where home visitors need additional tools, training and resources. Drawing on interviews with home visitors across seven states and a national survey of the home visiting workforce, this report examines how early literacy is understood in practice, what strategies home visitors use, what barriers families face and how programs can strengthen literacy support in culturally grounded ways.

The report presents field-based insights, highlights promising practices already in use and offers actionable recommendations to inform professional development, program design and policy. These findings will guide the co-creation of practical, hands-on literacy supports for the home visiting workforce.

Study Approach		
<p>Data Sources</p> <p>This report is based on a mixed-methods study conducted by UnidosUS to understand current practices and challenges related to early literacy in early childhood home visiting programs.</p>	<p>In-Depth Interviews</p> <p>Participants: 21 trained home visitors. Interviews conducted in English or Spanish, per interviewee's preference.</p> <p>Focus Areas:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Experiences with father engagement. • Cultural and structural factors affecting participation. • Strategies used to include fathers. • Training needs and workforce challenges. 	<p>Analytic Approach</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Integrated analysis of qualitative and quantitative data. • Identification of cross-cutting themes with an emphasis on culturally specific insights from Latino and multicultural families.
<p>Survey of Home Visitors</p> <p><i>* Respondents: 111 trained home visitors</i></p> <p><i>* Gender: 94% identify as women</i></p> <p><i>* Race/Ethnicity: Hispanic or Latino (60%), White (22%), Black or African American (11%), Asian or Pacific Islander (2%), Native American or Alaska Native (1%)</i></p> <p><i>* Languages: Mostly bilingual (65%)</i></p> <p><i>* Education: Many hold postsecondary degrees (37% bachelor's degree, 23% master's degree), but only 39% in early childhood education</i></p> <p><i>* Years of experience: Many 3 years or less (35%) or more than 10 years (24%)</i></p> <p><i>* Caseloads: Average of 17 families per home visitor at a time</i></p> <p><i>* Age range of children served: Prenatal to age 6</i></p> <p><i>* Duration of each visit: Mostly 45-60 minutes (42%)</i></p> <p><i>* Program Models Represented: Parents as Teachers, Early Head Start, Healthy Families America, Nurse-Family Partnership and others</i></p>		

Home Visitors' Perspectives on Early Literacy

Drawing on their day-to-day work with families, home visitors emphasized that early literacy is built through routine, relationship-based practices rather than formal instruction alone:

Literacy Begins Before Birth

Home visitors overwhelmingly emphasized that literacy begins before birth. Many described early literacy as starting “from the mother’s womb,” where talking, singing and storytelling set the earliest building blocks for language development.

One home visitor explained:

It's important for children to be exposed to [books] so they can connect with them, because first they have to connect, like babies who are just starting to connect with things. For a baby, it's about telling them the story, talking to them, mainly, so that...they can absorb that information.¹

This belief about early exposure to language shaped how visitors encouraged parents to talk, sing and narrate daily activities from pregnancy onward.

A Holistic Understanding of Literacy

Home visitors described early literacy as far more than reading words on a page. Practices they emphasized included:

- Talking during daily routines
- Labeling objects and actions
- Singing and rhyming
- Storytelling and oral narratives
- Sensory-rich play
- Exploring sequence, cause/effect

One home visitor shared:

Even if you don't necessarily always understand what [the child] is saying... just going along with, 'Oh yeah? You want to tell me some more about that?' and asking open-ended questions gets the child talking more.

These practices were viewed as equally important as reading books for building early language and literacy skills. Home visitors stressed that literacy is not limited to books, but rather encompasses all forms of communication that nurture vocabulary, comprehension and self-expression.

Benefits of Early Literacy

Home visitors consistently linked early literacy to broad developmental outcomes, including cognitive growth, communication skills and emotional regulation. Several practitioners referenced brain development research, noting the rapid formation of neural connections in the first five years of life.

As one home visitor stated:

I feel [that] early literacy does impact a child's learning. Because it's...the foundation for academic growth. You know, for reading, writing, speaking in general, I feel like... [it]kick-starts at an early age for them to have these skill sets when they [go] to school.

¹Originally communicated in Spanish: *es importante que los niños estén expuestos a estos [libros] para que ellos puedan conectar, porque primero tienen que conectar... como los bebés que apenas están conectando (...) para un bebé es contarle, hablar principalmente, para que él pueda... absorber esa información.*

Research supports these observations. [Studies](#) show that early verbal interaction and shared reading predict stronger language and cognitive outcomes in early childhood, even after accounting for socioeconomic factors.

Barriers to Early Literacy

While early literacy is widely recognized as important, home visitors identified several barriers that can limit parents’ ability to engage consistently:

1. Cultural and generational norms

Many Latino parents did not grow up with formal reading routines and may associate learning with school rather than home. Home visitors emphasized that this reflects generational experience rather than disinterest.

One home visitor admitted that even she did not see the importance of early literacy in the past:

I'm going to talk about the past. In the past, it didn't seem important to me. No, not at all. And many families still hold that belief.²

2. Low parental literacy levels

Some parents have limited literacy in English or Spanish, making the practice of reading to their children feel intimidating. Home visitors noted that books can trigger fear of doing something wrong rather than curiosity.

3. Time Constraints and Structural Stress

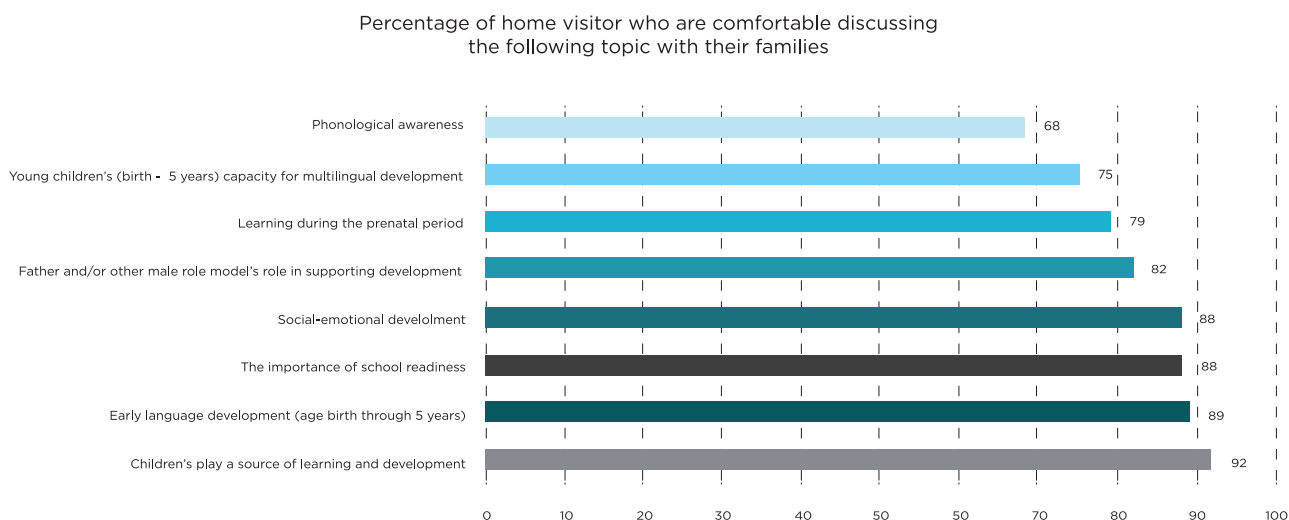
Long work hours, multiple jobs and caregiving responsibilities limit many families’ abilities to establish routines, regardless of cultural background.

4. Overreliance on technology

Home visitors expressed concern that screen time sometimes replaces human interaction and rich language exposure.

Given these barriers, home visitors rated phonological awareness — the building blocks of early literacy — as the topic they feel least comfortable discussing with families (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Home visitor’s comfortability discussing certain topics (Data Source: Survey of Home Visitors, 2024)



²Originally communicated in Spanish: *la voy a hablar del pasado; en el pasado no se me parecía importante. No, no. Y muchas familias tienen todavía ese concepto*

Strategies Home Visitors Use to Support Early Literacy

Despite these barriers, home visitors employ a variety of practical strategies to promote early literacy for Latino families. These methods reflect cultural responsiveness, flexibility, and resourcefulness:

Embedding literacy into everyday routines

Home visitors encourage families to integrate literacy into diaper changes, meals, car rides and playtime. They emphasized using ordinary moments for vocabulary building.

Modeling and Demonstration

Home visitors modeled reading techniques during visits, including picture walks and storytelling based on images, which supported parents with low or limited literacy.

Providing Accessible Materials

Visitors used book bags, lending libraries, bilingual books, high-contrast infant books and family-made books to reduce barriers and build confidence.

Home visitors frequently read with families, demonstrating:

- Picture walks
- How to ask open-ended questions
- How to introduce new vocabulary
- How to create stories using images

This approach is helpful for parents with low or limited literacy.

Training Needs Identified by Home Visitors

Across interviews and surveys, home visitors expressed a strong desire for additional training and support in early literacy. Key themes include:

Training Need: Culturally Responsive Literacy Training

Requests include bilingual materials and supports tailored to Latino families.

Training Need: Materials Selection Guidance

Providers want clearer criteria for choosing book and adapting activities for different ages.

Training Need: Strategies for Caregivers with Low Literacy

Techniques such as storytelling, picture walks, and conversational routines help parents engage confidently.

Training Need: Supporting Families With Time Constraints

Training should prepare home visitors to teach quick, embedded literacy practices that fit families' real lives.

Implications for Practice

Findings suggest that early literacy support in home visiting is strongest when it is relational, flexible and culturally grounded. However, current approaches often rely on implicit knowledge rather than structured guidance, placing the burden on individual home visitors to adapt strategies on their own.

Shifting practice requires moving from generalized literacy messaging to intentional, strengths-based approaches that recognize families' existing routines, cultural traditions and language assets. This equips home visitors with concrete tools, modeled strategies, and confidence to support literacy across diverse family contexts.

For the home visiting field, this means investing in professional development that treats early literacy as a shared, family-centered practice rather than a school-based skill.

Recommendations Based on Findings	Description
Develop a culturally responsive early literacy training series.	Create hands-on workshops co-designed with home visitors. Focus on modeling early literacy practices, embedding literacy in everyday routines, using bilingual materials and supporting parents with low or limited literacy.
Expand access to bilingual and culturally relevant books.	Partner with libraries, publishers and community organizations to provide curated book bags and rotating lending libraries that reflect families' cultures and languages
Create early literacy resource kits for families.	Include high-contrast infant books, bilingual books, rhyme cards, simple guidance sheets and visuals that model easy literacy routines parents can use daily.
Provide home visitors with practical observation tools.	Develop structured but flexible tools that help home visitors assess early literacy behaviors, monitor progress and tailor support to each family.
Offer community-based literacy events.	Host parent-child groups, family bookmaking workshops, storytelling circles and community reading hours to strengthen literacy habits and normalize reading for Latino families.
Develop digital literacy supports in Spanish and English.	Share brief videos, WhatsApp messages or text-based prompts that reinforce early literacy routines between visits and help parents stay engaged in simple, consistent ways.

Next Steps

Next steps include piloting early literacy professional development co-designed with home visitors, testing hands-on training models and refining materials based on feedback from the field. Over time, these approaches can be scaled across programs and regions. UnidosUS will use these findings to inform training design, technical assistance and advocacy efforts that strengthen culturally responsive home visiting practices. The research will also guide partnerships, curriculum development and resource creation aimed at improving early literacy outcomes for Latino children and their families.

Conclusion

Early literacy is a powerful foundation for children’s lifelong learning and well-being. Home visitors are uniquely positioned to help families nurture these skills from the earliest moments, yet they need tools that reflect families’ realities and cultural backgrounds. .

By investing in culturally responsive training and resources, home visiting programs can ensure that early literacy support is accessible, affirming and effective. Strengthening early literacy through home visiting strengthens families, communities and the future of the nation.



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