

# Children



Karla moved to the United States from El Salvador more than ten years ago. She now lives in southern California and works for a local grocery store. It was at this store several years ago she saw a flyer for adult literacy tutoring at the nearby library. It was especially for parents of young children, under five years old. Perfect, she thought. Her first daughter was already over that age but she now had a younger daughter who was not yet five. Karla knew how to read in Spanish but she was not able to read or write in English although she could speak it. She also wanted her second daughter, Laura, to have a good adjustment to school. Her first daughter, Anna, was already in fifth grade and was struggling with reading. Karla worried that she had made a bad decision when she placed Anna in an English-only class. She wanted to have more options to consider when Laura went to school and she had a feeling that being more literate herself would help her make better decisions for her children.

The first year we talked to Karla she had already made some important changes since she had already been in the program more than a year. She said “I can stand up for myself and defend my ideas



better.” She said *“I think the one to one method is better than school,”* and said her tutor had high expectations of her. The way she put it, her tutor would not accept any excuses, *“he says no Karla, don’t tell me you can’t do it because we already did this before and you know how to figure it out. Sometimes he tells me to read and then write about it. It is very difficult for me.”* In addition to her individual tutoring, she and the girls were attending FFL programs and her husband was helping by tutoring Anna in math.” She had also gained confidence in talking to her daughter’s teachers. *“Well, what I do is go into the school and talk to the teacher and ask questions. I have talked to the teacher about finding a tutor for my daughter.”*

The second year showed even more changes for Karla. She had progressed toward her goal of becoming a clerk in the office. She was also volunteering at the church. She said she had been going to the church for six years. *“It helps my family a lot and it helps my relationship with my family a lot.”* Still, even with church participation, her social network was rather small compared to average adult networks. Mostly, she was connected to her immediate family and luckily her mother was able to help with many of her busy activities. Her children were doing well in the second year although the older daughter

**L**ike Karla, all learners had children, at least one of whom was under the age of five when we first interviewed their parents. A key feature of the FFL program is working with the adult learners to help them get their preschool age children ready for school. The expectation is that children will benefit from the attendance of their parents, indirectly through their parents and directly, by attending family literacy events and programs. Therefore, this was one of the key questions in our study: how did the children benefit from the FFL program? Many questions asked in the interview concerned the children. This proved to be our only way to know about the progress of their children. Many of the learners had more than one child and usually their other children were older and already in school, sometimes even high school. (The average age of the adult learners in this study was in the early 30s.) The presence of additional children provided even more information about parenting of children of different ages.

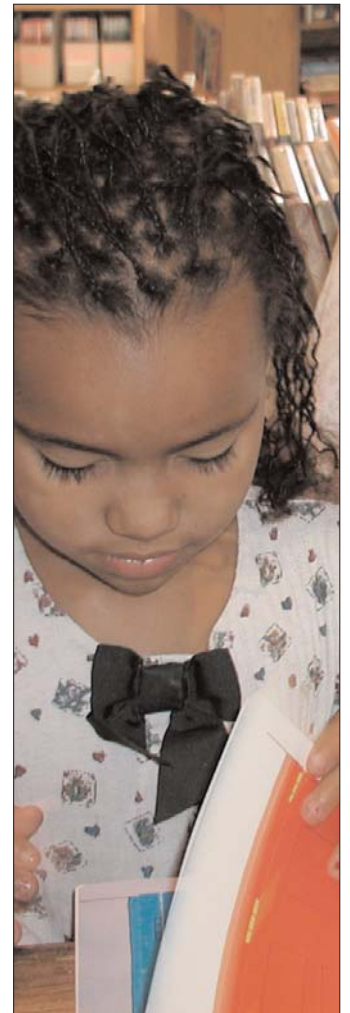
The first interview questions asked were typically to obtain information about name and age of each child. Then, participants were asked how each child was doing in preschool or school and what literacy activities they were involved in. Interviewers probed for as much information about each child as possible. We were expecting to find out about children’s strengths, weaknesses, adjustments, and experiences with literacy

*“thinks she knows everything.”* The entire family was interested in maintaining a connection to her homeland. They read “little histories” and kept in touch with music and culture through reading and corresponding with family still in El Salvador.

In the third year there was a subtle shift in Karla’s language in the interview. She did appear to have assimilated more into her surroundings and gave much more detailed descriptions of her experiences during her conversation with us. She was very interested in the books she was reading, some of them about Hispanic culture while others were novels about love and life. Her children were doing well and she mentioned that everyone in the family was a reader. She and Laura, her youngest, read together every night. Laura was now in school and doing great. Karla and Laura read to each other. The family also had a computer and Karla mentioned using it. *“I read the news on the Internet and I look up information I need like addresses.”* Karla was still being tutored because as she said *“there is always something new to learn.”* How did her children feel about her continued learning? *“They are proud of me and I am proud of them,”* she reported.

activities, school, teachers, and peers. We also asked if the parent read to the child and if he/she was able to help the child with literacy activities and if so, how. Another question was asked to get even more detail: “Could you tell us a story about your child so we can know a little more about him/her?”

One issue needs to be clarified before proceeding with how the children progressed during the time their parents were being tutored. Nothing in our interviews suggested that our learners were deficient in parenting before they attended literacy tutoring. It is important to separate effective parenting from the literacy experience. Parents do not need to know how to read and write well to be good parents. Our questions were intended to find out how the literacy improvement on the part of the parent influenced parenting, perhaps by improving ability to help with literacy, or by increasing confidence in decision-making, such as we saw with Karla. What we did observe was change over the three years in the ways that parents discussed their children. We are not sure how much of this was due to the program since we did not have a controlled study with literacy scores to prove change. However, the changes are consistent with the objectives of the library program, which are to promote literacy behaviors, confidence and interest.



## FIRST YEAR

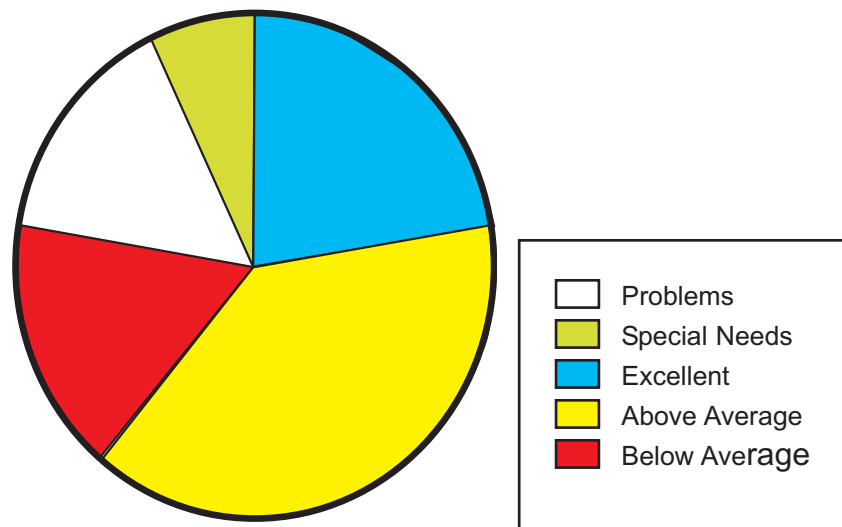
When we asked the learners how their children were doing, they gave many answers. The figure 1 below presents these answers. This shows that over half of the children were doing well in school, with the others labeled as below average or as having problems. Some of the children were reported to have special needs.

## LEARNERS' ASSESSMENT OF CHILDREN

Results from the first year showed that adult literacy learners felt they were able to help their children with homework, using a number of methods. When asked how they helped their children with school assignments, 25% reported they helped them with literacy skills and 23% said they supervised their children while they completed their homework. Only 14% said they were unable to help. A number of participants, 14%, reported that they used outside resources to help their kids. Some parents reported that they had to refer their children to someone else for help, sometimes their spouse, another relative, or even their tutor. Regarding the tutors, it was clear that adult learners used many of the same techniques their tutors used with them when helping their children. It would appear that the way tutors provided literacy assistance was observed by the learners who were then more able to help their children.

All of the parents expressed an interest in their children, of course, and in fact over half gave them as a main reason for joining the program. This was particularly evident among the Spanish speakers, both those interviewed in English and those interviewed in Spanish, who often mentioned their children in their long term goals. They were most likely to speak about helping their children. In contrast, native English speakers mentioned others goals as frequently such as obtaining a GED, owning a home, improving themselves and traveling, typical mainstream American dreams. We found this interesting and attributed it to differences between the "American" individual self as contrasted with a more

**Figure 1**  
How Are Their Children Doing?



collective self. Participants who spoke other first languages besides Spanish were interviewed in English, and were most interested in improving their English. They were more practical in their answers. If they didn't speak English they had very few people to speak with.

When interviewed in the second year, most of the parents reported taking their children to the library and over half reported attending special children's literacy programs in the library. Because the library was the location for the literacy tutoring in most cases, the learners became comfortable coming to the library for other events geared toward their children. Story time was one of the most popular activities listed but parents also went to help their children use computers and to attend puppet shows, science presentations and arts and crafts activities. A few parents reported going to the library to attend special workshops, such as one about civil rights. All of these activities promoted and supported literacy and are the sort of activities highly educated parents would want themselves and their children involved in.

When asked how their school age children were doing in school, over 70% reported that they were doing good to excellent whereas 19% said the children were below average in school. A few of the children were reported to have problems in school (6%) and 4% of the parents said their children had special needs. These parent reports show that overall the children were doing pretty well in school and if they were having problems, the parent knew it. The parents appeared to be well informed about their children's educational progress.

The children were also very important in the learners' social networks. A large number of learners, 86%, included their children in this circle. What is unusual about this is that for many learners the children were the only people in this circle who lived close by. And, answers to another interview question revealed interesting perceptions of their children's roles in their lives. The question was "could you tell a story about your child so we can better understand him/her?" A majority of the parents, 73%, had a story to tell about their children but a surprising percentage, 27%, did not. This was somewhat unexpected since our expectations were that if they were going to literacy sessions to help their children they would have stories to tell about their children that might relate to this theme. As well the expectation probably came from our own experiences hearing friends talk about their children - always a big topic. But one interviewer who also listened to a significant number tapes while checking accuracy of transcriptions said her observation was that many of the learners wanted to talk about themselves. According to her, it seemed they had not had a lot of opportunities to talk about themselves and they were eager to do so now. She thought they would rather talk about themselves than their children, in some cases.

Another possibility is that telling stories about other people requires a frame of reference that people who are more literate have and those whose literacy skills are lower may not. And this has to do with the scripts that go with storytelling. Also, it is possible that one reason

## SECOND YEAR

parents tell stories about their children is to show their own competence in parenting. This may be a foreign idea to someone who has not been in the literate world, who does not yet display confidence in literacy.

For those who did talk about their children, 65% of these told stories about their children's successes, their trials and victories and developmental descriptions of activities of their children. Most interestingly, 20% of the stories concerned instances where the child served as a mentor for the parent. One story included a mild chastisement of the parent for having difficulty with an assignment. According to the parent, the child said, "I don't want to hear that, mother. You can do anything you put your mind to." More common were stories in which the children helped the parents understand some written communication or translated words for them. Of the remaining stories there were those in which the parents talked about themselves and how they were helping the child succeed.

The tutors had an influence on the children and this was captured through the question "do you know your learner's children?" When asked that question, 81% of the tutors said they knew their learner's children personally. When asked how they helped the learners' children, 50% said they helped the parent directly to help their children. Some tutors actually tutored the children or helped them in some personal way. In fact, 20% said they had direct contact with the children or the children's schools. Of the tutors that indirectly helped their learner help the children, 62% helped with literacy tasks (such as reading children's books and discussing pre-literacy activities). Some also helped by finding outside resources. In fact, 19% said they fell into this category while 15% helped with educational needs by contacting the school, or by helping the parent figure out how to deal with a situation.

**THIRD YEAR** The third year interviews revealed a shift in the parents' statements about how their children were doing. The shift was toward much more comfort in talking about their children with a much easier time telling stories about their children. We would like to attribute this directly to the effects of the literacy services but we must admit there are many other possible reasons for the shift. Other possibilities include the fact that the children were getting older and were doing more literacy activities by going to pre-school and elementary school. Another possibility is simply the passage of time and more familiarity with literacy activities as a result. Nevertheless, the library's adult and family literacy services addresses all the concerns that were discussed in the interviews so we can say that is congruent with normal parental activities and helps reinforce them.

The big difference seen in the interviews in the third year is revealed in the amount of elaboration parents used when talking about their kids. Whereas in the first year it seemed difficult for the parents to come up with stories about their children, in the third year the interviews gave the feeling of an across the fence chat about children. Perhaps the parents

were more comfortable in their participation in the world of parenting, at least the part in which they understood the school system more and are talking with teachers. Perhaps they were observing their children more from a literacy perspective.

For one thing, they appeared to be more concerned about how the children were doing in school or in their preschool learning activities. "I was concerned that he would not catch up or learn as fast but he is doing great," said one parent. Several of them said they knew just how to find out how their kids were doing. "I have great communication with my children. I always ask them how school went because if you don't ask them then they are never going to confide in you." Parents talked more specifically about which aspects of literacy are going well or not. One parent talked about the child's reading grade level and how the child loved to look up vocabulary words but didn't perform quite as well in writing. Another parent said her daughter was doing better in math. Parents talked about their children winning awards at school and how important it was to them.

These adult learners also had more explanations about why the children were doing well or not. There were motivational reasons given, for example, the child doesn't like to work or the child is "lazy" or the child is a "go-getter" or as one parent described her son "he is a little smarty." There was more talk about developmental stages. For example, "he loves to play more than study but this is normal and to be expected." Also common among parents that have older children was the concern that once the kids went to middle school and high school peer influence would be too intense.

In addition to explaining the performance of their children, they seemed to be using a number of strategies to cope. One common technique was to stay in touch with the teacher and the school. This was mentioned numerous times and is an important component of the training given volunteer tutors in the family literacy services. Also mentioned was the library where they could go to get additional help. It was explained that libraries have computers, tutors and after school programs. Several families had hired tutors. Quite a few people mentioned limiting TV. One family with more than one child who was in special education said that the older children awoke early to tutor the youngest child who was only a "little bit behind." By doing this, they saw some improvement. Modeling the tutoring approach itself had impacted this family.

Participants, when contacting the school for information about their children, described themselves in the role of advocate. One mother said "I have had lots of conferences with the teachers because they say she is doing badly. They ask why she is so easily distracted. She tells me she does not like school. I have to figure this out." Others also talked about special education placement for their children. Although none of them were resisting it, they were concerned that the right decision be made. Some parents mentioned how much the teachers made a difference in their children's learning. One parent said "last year my son was not doing

well. I don't know what happened this year but he is doing great. The teacher makes learning fun and he is doing his best."

Another recurring theme was that the children were "doing their best." This comment was made over and over again. Some parents even said "not perfect but the best possible." This perhaps mirrored the comments their tutors made to them about putting in effort. They spoke about using other techniques in trying to help their children and these may have been related to techniques their tutors used, for example, one person reading and the other following along and correcting, doing writing assignments, telling stories, and other methods.

When asked if they read to their younger children, participants all said "yes," or as one person said "of course." It was taken for granted. Not only did they read to their children but their children read to them. As one parent said "My daughter reads to me and I am all ears." One person said when she read to her children when they were younger she skipped words if she didn't know them but as the child's own reading improved she couldn't do that anymore so the kids started helping her. She said, "it's not embarrassing - they know I am still learning." Another person talked about having an older daughter in high school read chapters in good books such as the Diary of Anne Frank. She said they discussed each chapter and would say to themselves "we are free; we must remember this."

The overall attitude revealed was one of pride, and pleasure that their children were doing well. One parent said "I am just so happy my child loves to read." Another parent talked about her young daughter saying that she was the "book worm" in the family. Quite a few parents mentioned that their children were reading above grade level. All parents mentioned that their elementary school children were reading already. All of the children, even the little ones, were using the computer in some way. Over half of the participants had computers at home, otherwise they signed up for time at the library or the children used the computers at school. If the family did not have a computer, many mentioned they were saving for one or planning to fix a broken one. Not much specific knowledge of what their children were doing on the computer was given. Some of them said their children were playing computer games and others mentioned they were using the Internet.

The question "could you tell a story about your child so we can understand him/her better?" was answered quite differently in the third year than in the first and again we don't know if it is because we interviewed a more selective group the third year, if being interviewed more than once helped, if the children's increasing age gave them more interesting activities, or if the parent's own literacy progress and understanding made the difference. Stories were much more elaborate and descriptive than before. Third year stories were all about their children's aptitude for learning, the older children's extra curricular activities and their personalities. Older children in elementary and high school were active in soccer, basketball, T-ball, dancing, music lessons, swimming and they had friends that were also described. When describing personality traits, parents discussed whether the children were easy going or argumentative, whether they got



along with others and how they got along in the family. One mother said “my daughter goes out of her way to help people and she gets along with people of all ages.” Another mother said “my son has a nice personality and is very caring. He likes music and he is funny. A lot of times his friends come over to play and he doesn’t mind sharing his toys.”

Many of the stories told about children concerned their striving toward goals. One story was particularly striking. The mother described how her son was playing on a losing team and felt the coach should put players in different spots so “after the game he came home and drew every position on the team and who should play that position. He took that plan to the coach and said maybe they had a chance at winning. So the coach said ok that he would do it for one game and believe it or not they actually won the game. I find this as one of the most interesting things that my son has done.” Another parent told how her family wanted to have a party to celebrate an occasion but didn’t have the money so the daughter said, “if I can make a little money can we have it?” The daughter, just a child, started helping another person by translating for her and she was given a little money that she then saved toward the party. The parent said “she is one of those persons who is always working hard, she is always trying to do better and better. She always takes the initiative.”

It is clear that these parents are involved in lives and literacy experiences of their children. Some parents state the obvious connection between their own literacy learning and that of their children. But all of them want to see their kids succeed at life and see that literacy is an important part of the formula for success.