

Early Childhood Education

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CORNERS

OUTREACH

Parents: A Child's First Teacher

Why early education is critical

In the first five years of life, experiences and relationships stimulate children's development, creating millions of connections in their brains. In fact, children's brains develop connections faster in the first five years than at any other time in their lives¹. Many families in our community do not know this key information nor how they can help their child thrive from the very beginning. Corners families live paycheck to paycheck, working multiple jobs, and feel inferior because of their economic difficulties. Their obstacles become harder to overcome by the lack of support they have living in a place they don't consider their home. Home to our families is where their brothers and sisters are, where they came from, where their native language is spoken and understood. Our families are told that their native language, Spanish, is a burden, or an obstacle on their child's learning and pushes them further behind in school. But that is not true. Each parent in our community can help their child thrive and succeed in school with their parent's native language. Our parents need to understand that they don't have to know English. A child's vocabulary, no matter which language it's developed in, will improve with communication and love.

Our Corners Early Learning mission is to educate parents to be their child's best and first teacher. We have witnessed a strong difference in a student's success based almost entirely on the amount that the parent was academically involved. Our purpose is to help that parent learn the vital role they play in their child's first weeks and months and just how important those words become. The 30-million-word gap, Research by Hart and Risley, shows that a gap exists between students in poverty and students in high income families, especially during the first four years of their lives. However, some simple changes in a home can impact this 30-million-word gap tremendously.

Julia's Difference

Julia*, a mother of four, learned about our Mami y Yo program and attended from the start. With her youngest three children who were all five years old and younger. Julia was nervous in her first class because she was one mom with three kids and did not know how to handle all of them during the activities as each child needed different levels of interaction. We asked a volunteer to sit with her. Julia was able to sit with her two eldest and dedicate the time to teach them the subject of the day, numbers, and do the activity with them. The girls smiled and loved that their mom was sitting down with them playing and making numbers out of play-doh. After our good-bye song, the girls started to cry and get upset because they did not want to leave.

At our next session, Julia thanked early learning leader, saying, "Gracias por darme la oportunidad de ser la maestra de mis hijas" translated to, thank you for giving me the opportunity to teach my daughters.

Julia admitted that with her household responsibilities, sometimes being a teacher to her children and participating in their learning was not a priority. After attending sessions regularly, Julia is more intentional in playing and reading with her children because she now understands the importance of being their first and best teacher.

*We have changed the main character's name in this story to protect her privacy.

What is Corners doing to change lives?

Through a partnership with the Atlanta Speech School, Corners Staff were trained and began facilitating early childhood workshops in our communities in the fall of 2018. Through these programs, Corners encourages parents to build their children's vocabulary and language skills in their native language in addition to speaking English when possible. During these workshops, we encourage parents to practice some simple, everyday actions to prepare their children for school. We give them topics to use in conversation, teach them new songs, and give them books they can read aloud with their children. These activities are essential in facilitating brain and vocabulary development. Every parent has a gift to give their child in speaking and interacting intentionally at every age, but especially from birth to age 5. Brain development in these early years is critical. Corners Outreach is working to develop mothers as leaders and facilitators of these early education workshops in their communities, expanding the reach of this vital aspect of early education that begins in the home.

We created and launched a parent and child centered early learning program in November 2019, called Mami y yo, a bilingual version of Mommy and Me classes that target the low-income Spanish speaking communities. Mami y yo is for all children ages birth to five years and was started at our three academy locations in Gwinnett and Dekalb. Once a week at each location, led by the Early Learning specialist with a certificate in Child Development, we focus on preparing the parent to take what we demonstrate and teach it in their homes. We focus on building the parent and child's relationship while teaching the child their name, the alphabet, shapes and much more through songs, activities, socialization and a lot of laughter. One of the greatest outcomes is the participation of 63 students and parents who actively come to our centers and participate in our program. Our moms have created a family from our early learning participants, and we celebrate birthdays, holidays, and new friends nearly every week. Our moms have also acquired a confidence within themselves by becoming class leaders, leading others in the reading of the story, our daily songs, and have created and led daily activities to help in the foundational learning, twice a week for ninety minutes at each location. Corners Outreach also offers a program for 8 weeks in the summer to prepare students independently from their parent to enter kindergarten or pre-kindergarten. In our second year of summer camp, July 2021, we graduated 31 students to enter pre-kindergarten and kindergarten.

At our different centers, we use the GELDS (Georgia Early Learning Developmental Standards) to help our parents know if their child is meeting the developmental milestones necessary to continue to grow and develop. For the parents of students that will be entering pre-kindergarten and kindergarten, we start off every program school year with the KREP (Kindergarten Readiness Entry Profile). A new organization we partner with called Gwinnett Building Babies Brains (GBBB) was created because 52% of kindergarteners are not prepared with basic knowledge nor ready to enter and succeed in kindergarten. At Corners Outreach, we have seen the impact of a child not ready to start kindergarten. Being behind leads to not being on the appropriate reading level by third grade, an indicator for dropping out of high school. After this research was conducted and GBBB launched their website, they asked us to partner with them in piloting an ambassador program led by our parent leaders. This program is currently only in Norcross but is planned to extend to every city in Gwinnett County.

We are proud of the efforts our parents, students, and partners are all making to create better learning environments to prepare our students for a successful future starting at birth.

What can you do?

We would love to provide more locations in the underserved apartment communities that partner with Corners Outreach. We host these Mami y yo programs Monday through Thursday, in the morning, in various location during the entire year. Please be a part of the outreach and impact we are making in our communities. We ask that you bring love and patience for our little ones and take the time to play games, sing songs, all while their parents are learning how to interact more effectively with their children. If interested email pilar.valdez@cornersoutreach.org.

Through parent and child educational empowerment and improved job options, together we can break the cycle of poverty and improve lives in our community today and for generations to come. Please join us!

Sources:

1. <https://raisingchildren.net.au/>