

Esperanza Families React Positively to Early Child Development Intervention “Sit Down & Play”

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Background

Socioeconomic and racial/ethnic disparities in early child development (ECD) and school readiness are well-documented and have been deemed a public health crisis. Interventions that target responsive parenting practices and the quality of the home learning environment during the first two years of life, including opportunities for play, have great potential to improve early cognitive development and long-term outcomes.

Adapting the Sit Down & Play Program

Our research team from the University of Illinois Chicago School of Public Health (UIC SPH) collaborated with the pediatric team at Esperanza Health Center’s California Avenue clinic to identify adaptations to the **Sit Down & Play** (SDP) program. SDP is a responsive parenting intervention that combines interpersonal counseling on the benefits of play with the provision of simple, age-appropriate toys (see Figure 1) to foster parent-child interactions and learning among children under 2 years.



FIGURE 1: Examples of Simple, Age-appropriate Toys



A rattle is given to 2-month-olds

Nesting cups are given to 15-month-olds

In 2023, UIC SPH and Esperanza carried out formative research to explore whether SDP would appeal to Latinx families at Esperanza and to identify modifications to meet their needs and preferences. Parents of children 2-24 months of age were enrolled during their well-child visits and participated in two study interactions, as depicted in Figure 2.

A total of 22 families participated in the study. Parent participants ranged in age from 18 to 45 years, and the majority were Mexican or Mexican American (63.6%) and had multiple children (72.7%). Data collection and interviews were conducted in Spanish for 7 (31.8%) participants and in English for the other 15 (68.2%) participants.

FIGURE 2: Sit Down and Play Study Interactions



Parents’ Positive Reactions to the Intervention

In interviews two weeks after the intervention, participants shared overwhelmingly positive reactions to the toys and recommended activities. During the follow-up interviews, parents noted several benefits of SDP: it offered parents new ideas for interacting with their children, provided opportunities for bonding, and demonstrated that even the simplest toys can be enriching. For some parents, SDP provided completely new information, while for others, it served as a helpful reminder about the importance of play for learning.

“When she came in and spoke to me, it opened my eyes. It reminded me of what I have to do with my son. I have to give him a little more time.... I feel like it doesn't matter if you're a first-time mom or a fifth-time mom or a third-time mom. I feel like everyone would benefit from it.”

–Mother of a 12-month-old

Participants generally felt that the doctor's office was a great place to learn more about child development, and several parents with older children mentioned that they would have appreciated getting this information in the past.

The Value of Interpersonal Counseling

Many participants commented on how much they enjoyed key elements of the SDP counseling session at Esperanza, where they observed research staff engage in play-based demonstrations and received real-time feedback on their parent-child play interactions. Parents preferred the in-person counseling and demonstrations over the written materials. Most participants reported that they misplaced or did not read the SDP handouts.

Challenges to Playing with Child

After the in-office visit, parents also described some challenges to incorporating routine play with their young children. The main challenge was time, especially among parents with multiple children and for those working long hours. Another challenge that emerged was the notion of play as silly or not a good use of time.

Participants attributed this perspective to cultural norms or the fact that their own parents did not play with them when they were younger. Some participants acknowledged that the SDP information was helpful in providing new narratives in the context of such norms.

"I wish my pediatrician was involved in some sort of project like this when my oldest was little. If I had known about Sit Down & Play and applied those things, maybe she would not have needed speech therapy."

-Mother of a 24-month-old and a five-year-old

"The conversation we had with each other was so good and the way that she described how every activity worked and every activity that was available to do with the toy. We did the peek-a-boo thing with the mirror and my daughter was so interested in it."

-Father of a five-month-old

"When you talk to them about talking to babies, many times, a Hispanic person will say, 'Ay, how am I going to talk to him? They're going to say I'm crazy because he doesn't hear me, he doesn't understand me' But no, it's not like that."

-Mother of an 18-month-old

Next Steps

The study team is using these findings to modify SDP to incorporate participant feedback, reduce challenges, and improve the program's appeal for Esperanza's Latinx population. Adaptations to the interpersonal counseling component will:

1. Emphasize the value of parent-child play for as little as 5 to 10 minutes per day
2. Provide suggestions on how to engage older siblings in interactions with an infant or toddler
3. Provide ideas on how to use common household items as toys

In addition, the study team is developing an SDP website to replace the handouts and make the information more accessible to parents. **The long-term goal for this project is to explore the feasibility of integrating SDP into pediatric routine care to make it available for all children under 2 years of age during their well-child visits.**

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