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## **Strong Spanish at Home Helps Hispanic Children Learn English**

**IRVINE, CA (February 10, 2005)** — Spanish-speaking parents can help their children prepare for school and provide a foundation for learning English by spending more time reading, talking and interacting in their native language. That is one of the preliminary research findings from HABLA, an educational outreach program in Orange County, California.

HABLA's findings are part of a growing body of evidence that preschool Hispanic children are more likely to become fluent and acquire literacy skills in English if they have a strong foundation in their home language. For parents who come to this country and want their children to learn English, it means they don't have to first learn English themselves.

“All parents need to speak the language they know the best,” said Dr. Virginia Mann, founder of the program. “This way, they will be able to fulfill their role as their child’s first and most important teachers. Speaking and reading with their children will do much more than English language television can ever do. The Spanish that Hispanic parents teach their children will be the basis for the English the children will learn in school.”

HABLA—an acronym for Home-Based Activities Building Language Acquisition—was founded in 2001 by Dr. Mann, a cognitive sciences professor at the University of California, Irvine. It has helped more than 350 families — nearly all Mexican immigrants — challenged by poverty, low education levels and language barriers. The program supports increased verbal interaction in the homes of economically disadvantaged Latino children between 2 and 4 years old. Using culturally appropriate mentors who serve as coaches and role models for parents, the program teaches fun, straightforward methods through books and toys used in the home. As a result, the children are better prepared to succeed in school.

The Children and Families Commission of Orange County has provided most of the funding for the HABLA program — over \$1 million to date. HABLA's innovations include involving university faculty and students in very early, home-based intervention to promote school readiness for disadvantaged Latino children, and HABLA's employment of Latinos as home visitors paid by collaborative funding through federal, state and local agents, as well as the AmeriCorps program and work study.

With the educational spotlight currently focused on testing and achievement in public schools, and with Hispanics now the largest and fastest growing minority in the United States, the reading-readiness of children in Spanish-speaking families is important to educators and families across the country. In 2000, Hispanics constituted more than 17 percent of total enrollment in public schools in the United States.

HABLA was inspired by a wealth of research showing that weak language skills can harm school readiness. HABLA aims to catch young children before a language problem develops. When parents do not read to their children, have frequent conversations or play language games, the children neither speak nor listen as well as they should. In Southern California, kindergarten teachers often refer to such children as ‘non-non’s because they do not know either Spanish or English. HABLA shows parents ways that they can build and exercise Spanish language skills so that their children have the speaking and listening skills that are optimal for learning. HABLA is an accredited replication site of the National Parent-Child Home Program (PCHP) — one of five sites in California and among 143 worldwide.

The program not only helps build learning environments for low-income families, it saves taxpayers money.

“It’s like prenatal vitamins,” Mann said. “Early interventions are cost-effective. A year of HABLA costs \$2,000, while a year of preschool or special education costs three times that.”

Through its funding of HABLA and numerous other initiatives, the Children and Families Commission of Orange County has created a unique network of care for Hispanic children and families in need. The Commission's efforts to reach out to Hispanic families in the neighborhoods and homes where they live have been very well received and are providing a model for communities around the country to replicate.

The Commission was created as a result of Proposition 10, the California Children and Families Act of 1998. The proposition added a 50-cent sales tax on tobacco products sold in California and requires that funds raised be used to support education, health and child development programs for children from the prenatal stage to age five. The Commission is responsible for overseeing the allocation of tobacco tax revenues received annually from the State Commission.

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