

# BUENA CASA BUENA BRASA

A program of rhymes and songs draws Spanish-speaking families to the library

by Betsy Diamant-Cohen and Anne Calderón

**S**ince the early 1890s, American public libraries have opened their doors to immigrants. One of the early purposes of the public library was to help immigrants become knowledgeable, assimilated American citizens.

The rationale behind this mission was that a grasp of the English language combined with knowledge of political issues and experience with democracy would help to create informed voters. It was believed that assimilation increased social power and thus the availability of information and knowledge to the public would help stabilize the government.

Today, public libraries no longer attempt to become places where people from various backgrounds are molded together into a melting pot of typical American citizens. Instead, public libraries aim to be more like salad bowls: They strive to mix different ethnic ingredients together

harmoniously, so that the new type of American citizen will be well-informed, able to interact cohesively with others, and yet retain an individual cultural identity.

Although libraries strive to be a destination for immigrants, one difficulty faced by public libraries is how to bring them into the library. Some libraries have planned, advertised, and scheduled story times in Spanish, only to fail to draw an audience, even though numerous Spanish-speaking immigrants live in the community. The question then becomes not only “How can we serve the immigrant population?” but also “How can we attract them to the library in the first place?”





*Buena Casa, Buena Brasa* participants enjoy Thanksgiving at the Pratt library.

In 2006, Baltimore's Enoch Pratt Free Library entered into a partnership with the Maryland Committee for Children (MCC), a

private nonprofit organization whose mission is to improve the quality of early education and childcare. The joint goal was to provide library services to Spanish-speaking families and childcare providers with young children in the Baltimore area, in addition to reinforcing early literacy and kindergarten readiness among this population.

The library was already offering the "Mother Goose on the Loose" early-literacy program, which uses rhymes and songs to help children under age 3 get ready for reading. The program was adapted into a version for Spanish-speakers, and staff identified a branch location and purchased supplies for the program.

Because the organization facilitates training programs for early education and care providers in the Spanish-speaking community, MCC had a database of interested women with young children and had already gained the trust of the Spanish-speaking community. Therefore, when they heard that an early-literacy program would take place at the local public library and that transportation and refreshments would be provided, Spanish-speaking residents who had participated in past MCC trainings were willing to attend a session of the new program.

## Warmth and friendship

*Buena Casa, Buena Brasa* ("Warm Home, Warm Hearth") consisted of Spanish-language songs and rhymes; some were traditional Hispanic rhymes, while others were translations of rhymes by teacher and folksong collector Barbara Cass-Beggs and standard nursery rhymes. A few English-language rhymes were included in order to expose the children to English before starting preschool. Because the Enoch Pratt Free Library offers "Mother Goose on the

Loose" programs for children from birth to 3 with a parent or caregiver in several library locations, *Buena Casa, Buena Brasa* followed the general format of a standard "Mother Goose on the Loose" program. It adhered to the structure and formula, seamlessly combining language with music, movement, art, play, positive reinforcement, and parenting tips, incorporating activities designed to promote social and emotional development.

Following the formal program, staff brought out toys for the children to play with, and the adults were given clipboards with optional participant-feedback assessments, asking questions ranging from "Why is it a good idea to bounce your child in your lap while singing?" to "Why it is important to provide your child with much positive reinforcement?"

The first *Buena Casa, Buena Brasa* session was successful yet chaotic. The parents and childcare providers were in awe of the many library services and thrilled to be part of a program designed just for them, but a handful of logistical issues and unforeseen problems arose. Few of the children seemed to know how to behave in a public space and the parents provided little direction. Although the branch where the program took place had a story time alcove in the children's room, children were running all over the library; as a result, staff spent much time running after children to prevent them from exiting the library or falling down a flight of stairs. Some brainstorming between the facilitators, however, remedied the problems. By the second visit, the purchase of a safety gate for the stairs and the rearrangement of furniture in the children's room helped to delineate the specific area for the program and minimize risk. The issues regarding adult supervision of children were quickly resolved by means of a friendly conversation with adult participants about age-appropriate behavior in children and parental expectations.

Another issue that arose in those first weeks was the need for a clear explanation of participants' interaction with the physical space of the library. Political unrest in their native countries and past negative experiences with formal authority caused several of the participants to fear people in uniform—namely, the security guards. To set the adults at ease, a security guard greeted participants at the subsequent sessions and explained that his duty was to keep people in the library safe.

Also, few adults understood the concept of a public library. *Buena Casa, Buena Brasa* adults were taken to the circulation desk, introduced to the staff, and guided through the library card application process by a Spanish speaker. A Spanish-language tour of the branch showcased videos, Spanish-language newspapers and books, and reference resources. Another week, the group was escorted to the reference desk where they observed a prepped interaction with the reference librarian, demonstrating

the wealth of materials available and the assistance of the reference librarian.

Adults were chatting with each other by the end of the very first *Buena Casa, Buena Brasa* program, a sign that positive and enriching social interaction was taking place. Perhaps it was the warm atmosphere or the fact that they felt more connected after applauding when a child succeeded in pulling Humpty Dumpty down off his wall; regardless of the reason, certain barriers broke down. This was not a one-time occurrence; the friendly atmosphere continued to develop. By the end of the first year, parents and care providers were making play dates with each other's children and meeting outside of the library.

Running this group was a joy for both the librarian and the MCC facilitator. They watched with delight as the children quickly learned how to behave in public settings, as parents became more confident in their role as their children's caregivers and teachers, and as adults and children enjoyed shared moments over a good book. Changes observed included gentler discipline techniques, increased use of library resources, clearer setting of boundaries, and age-appropriate expectations.

## Inciting interaction

Parents and care providers often talked about the positive changes in their lives. Roxana, childcare provider and mother of a 3-year-old, said, "*Buena Casa, Buena Brasa* helped me learn about my child's development. Now I have an idea of how to help him get ready for school. It's also been good for me to find out how I'm going to guide him. I've learned to share ideas with different parents." Like other parents, Pastoriza noticed behavioral changes in her 2-year-old son. "Before *Buena Casa, Buena Brasa*, I'd tell him to put away his toys and he wouldn't do it. But now we sing the 'Toys Away' song that we learned at *Buena Casa* and he'll put his toys away without problems."

Eventually the program moved to the Pratt library's new Southeast branch, where it continued to expand. English-speakers began to attend the weekly program, and immigrants from non-Spanish-speaking countries also became regulars. One week, an English-speaking mom asked if one of the Spanish-speaking participants would do a trade with her; "If you read a book in Spanish to my child," she offered, "I'll read one in English to your child." As soon as this started, other program participants made similar arrangements. This led to the breaking down of barriers between Spanish-speaking and non-Spanish-speaking adults.

It would be an understatement to say that *Buena Casa, Buena Brasa* has been a success. In November 2007, some of the moms approached the MCC facilitator and requested a Thanksgiving celebration in the library. "We have not celebrated Thanksgiving before and our best friends are our library friends," they said. Although it was only two

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weeks before Thanksgiving, the *Buena Casa, Buena Brasa* session during the holiday week culminated with a potluck Thanksgiving banquet attended by more than 40 people. Rice and beans, enchiladas, and fried plantains were on a smorgasbord along with a Middle Eastern rice dish, a Chinese selection, a turkey with stuffing and cranberry sauce, and numerous pumpkin pies.

The group, which by now had grown to include native English-speakers and immigrants from other countries, shared food, laughter, and song. English-speaking parents were holding Latino babies, and Spanish-speaking moms chatted with English-speaking toddlers. There was no wall dividing the families from different cultures. At the end of the luncheon, everyone sang a Thanksgiving song and gathered for a group photo. The sense of community within the group was evident to all present.

These days the public library is widely touted as a place where democracy is strengthened by giving people equal access to technology through free computer use and training. We believe that the library also shows its strengths through personal relationships and programming. Through *Buena Casa, Buena Brasa*, the library has developed a core of new Spanish-speaking users. A new generation is growing up with the public library as an integral part of their lives. Adults have learned computer skills, know where to go with questions and to borrow free materials, and have expanded their participation in public life. Although they still may not be fluent in English, their discomfort at interacting with English-speakers is gone. They have been empowered through their positive association with an American institution. ■



BETSY DIAMANT-COHEN (left) is creator of the "Mother Goose on the Loose" early-literacy program. She holds a master's in library science from Rutgers University and a doctorate in communications design from the University of Baltimore. Her book *Early Literacy Programming en Español: Mother Goose on the Loose Programs for*

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