Not Your Garden Variety Learning Experience

Save the Children’s Early Childhood Development and Early Literacy Program, Early Steps to School Success, Helps Prepare California Girl for School and Life

Three-year-old Analia makes her way to her family’s small vegetable garden with her mother, Sandra, as an abundance of red jalapeños begin to blossom. They’re not yet ripe for picking, but the Central Valley California toddler is more than ready to tell her mom what color they are, and count the number that are growing.

At first glance, the garden visit may seem like a moment for Sandra to gauge whether they can include the jalapeños in a dish on the family’s upcoming dinner menu. It is, in part, but more importantly, it becomes an opportunity for Analia to learn more about the world
around her – how the vegetables need the sun and rain to grow, how the peppers and the pepper plants smell and feel to the touch, and yes, how they will one day become a zesty part of one of the family’s future meals.

The afternoon lesson is one of many brain-building opportunities Sandra includes in Analia’s day-to-day life. While the mother of two does everyday activities around the house, like washing the dishes or preparing dinner, she has Analia name the types of dishes they’re putting away, or smell and touch the different ingredients that are coming together to make the evening meal.

“Sandra is really great about plugging Analia into her daily routines. She draws her in and keeps the language going,” said early childhood specialist Virginia, who has been visiting Sandra and family since before Analia was born. “The idea is to engage parents and children, and to give the parents the confidence that they have what it takes to be their child’s first teacher.”

Virginia conducts family home visits as part of Save the Children’s Early Steps to School Success program, a rare family resource in Sandra and Analia’s rural community in central California, which struggles with limited services, poverty and unemployment.

Through such visits, parents like Sandra are equipped with the skills – and brain-building activities – to successfully support their children’s development. And as a child grows, the program offers book exchanges and parent-child groups, laying a foundation of language and literacy skills for the child, and opportunities to develop socially and emotionally with their peers.

With limited family in the area, the parent-child group has helped Sandra build further connections in the community, as well. It has also given her opportunities to strengthen her leadership skills, as she has started to plan and run some of the group’s activities.

“I’ve seen a big growth with Sandra,” said Virginia. “She’s a lot more confident in herself.”

Sandra and Analia’s community also has a small library with very limited hours, but Virginia, through the Early Steps book exchange program, helps them constantly update their home library, strengthening Analia’s early reading skills.

Book by book, from garden visit to the next daily learning opportunity, Analia will be well prepared for preschool and beyond.