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Teachers Reach Out to At-Risk Children

Teachers learn new strategies to help keep at-risk children in school



Photo: EDIFAM

Elda Damaris Flores de Lopez applies teaching strategies she learned in a USAID workshop.

“I used to be a serious, stern teacher and a strict disciplinarian,” said Elda. “Now I am more understanding of children’s needs and more aware of why they behave as they do.”

When poor, rural children in El Salvador start first grade, they run a high risk of repeating the grade, deserting school or developing learning problems. The problems stem from a variety of factors, including parents who are inexperienced in child development, lack of access to early childhood services and, where services are available, teachers and caregivers untrained in promoting healthy development and school readiness. Elda Damaris Flores de Lopez and others like her are trying to change that — with support from USAID.

A kindergarten teacher in Santiago Texacuangos, a rural community of 23,800 people, Elda was one of the teachers selected by USAID to participate in its Early Childhood and Family Education (EDIFAM) training. In an effort to improve the care and education of poor, rural Salvadoran children, EDIFAM aims to enhance the skills of early childhood caregivers and educators, increase the cognitive skills of young children, strengthen the quality of institutions that provide child care and education, and increase community awareness of the importance of child rearing skills.

“I used to be a serious, stern teacher and a strict disciplinarian,” said Elda, who has been a teacher for ten years. But after participating in EDIFAM workshops, Elda says she treats the children quite differently, becoming more understanding of their needs and behaviors. When her students drop their school supplies, for example, she now knows that it’s not because they are clumsy or uncoordinated; they just lack the developed motor skills that adults have. Elda also now gives her students the opportunity to communicate in class, since she learned that complete silence may not necessarily be optimal for learning.

One of Elda’s students used to misbehave in class, acting out aggressively and isolating himself. But since Elda participated in EDIFAM training, the student has become better integrated in activities, is friendlier with other students, and is rapidly improving his performance.

Elda is just one of the 450 rural kindergarten teachers who were trained by EDIFAM and who together reach more than 13,000 rural children.