

The Seattle Times

Why one Bellevue family is giving thanks: Their little boy doesn't speak. But just look at him walk – and make all kinds of progress

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1 of 7 | *Berna Franco Rodriguez and Saul Franco hold their son, Saul Franco Rodriguez, who benefitted greatly from Kinderling's Spanish Stepping Stones preschool. (Bettina Hansen / The Seattle Times)*

By [Hannah Furfaro](#), *Seattle Times* staff reporter

More than anything, Saul Franco Rodriguez's parents wish to hear his voice.

Saul is a spunky 3½-year-old who smiles almost all the time, loves to play outside and is learning to test his independence. His latest feat: learning to open the refrigerator door and snacking on whatever he finds inside. The other week, he discovered his dislike for raw onion.

Saul communicates his emotions and desires. But Saul doesn't speak. When he was born, his parents say, he was silent and appeared to be sleeping. By 6 months, Saul hadn't shown an interest in sitting up, and by 9 months, he didn't know how to crawl. Saul's parents say their two older children started sitting and crawling earlier.

Saul's mother Bernardina Franco Rodriguez was concerned and took him to a pediatrician. The doctor said not to worry, but a second opinion led the family to [Kindering](#), a nonprofit that offers developmental evaluations, preschool, parent classes and several types of therapy. The center was a haven for their family, Rodriguez said in Spanish, with Saul's father, Saul Franco, translating for her. Spanish-speaking staff there gave her "confidence to talk about the issues" her family faced with Saul, she says.

Kindering staff evaluated Saul's motor and cognitive skills and referred him to a neurologist, who ran a battery of blood and genetic tests that all came back clear. After a brain scan, Saul's family finally had a possible explanation. Saul has too little of a fatty substance called myelin, which insulates nerve fibers and helps speed up the flow of information across the central nervous system.

There's no specific treatment for Saul's myelination condition. And it's still unclear if Saul's lack of myelin is directly linked to his developmental delays. But nonetheless, Kindering offers services that have helped move Saul from being extremely delayed to now meeting many developmental milestones.



Circle time at Kindering's Spanish Stepping Stones preschool. (Bettina Hansen / The Seattle Times)

As a baby, Saul underwent physical therapy once a week with Kindering staff who visited his Bellevue home. Saul and his mother also enrolled in a "co-op" class that helps special needs children and their parents play together and practice skills. He later joined a Kindering preschool class called "Stepping Stones," where he learned to pull himself up using a table, and

eventually, to walk. “I feel grateful for the people who worked [with] me and Saulito,” Rodriguez said, using a nickname for Saul.

All of these services are provided in Spanish. About 10% to 15% of the approximately 6,000 children and families Kinderling serves each year speak Spanish, says Lisa Greenwald, the center’s chief executive officer.

Kinderling is one of a dozen nonprofits that share in readers’ donations to The Seattle Times Fund For The Needy campaign. The center was founded in 1962 by a group of five Bellevue-area families with special needs children. It now operates centers in Bellevue, Bothell, Redmond and Renton and serves about half of the families with children who need services in those regions.



Educator Juan Panchana talks to Victoria Sierra Galaviz during circle time at Kinderling’s Spanish Stepping Stones preschool. Isaias Vega is to the right. (Bettina Hansen / The Seattle Times)

Many of the services are covered by individuals’ insurance, but agency officials say they don’t turn away families who aren’t insured. Kinderling relies on donations and government support to cover these and other costs. The organization’s impacts are far-reaching. Officials say about [46% of young children](#) Kinderling serves don’t need special education services past age 3; in 2018, the agency estimated this translated into \$15.7 million in savings for school districts in 2018.

Families who visit Kinderling speak more than 60 languages, Greenwald said, and the center’s staff speak more than a dozen, including Mandarin, Korean, Hindi, French and Russian. As

Kinderling has grown the types of services it offers, she says, it has also expanded the ways it serves families who speak languages other than English.

For Spanish-speaking families, the options are lengthy. In addition to developmental evaluations and specialized classes, Kinderling helps link families to community resources and sends Spanish-speaking staff to lead therapy sessions at families' homes. The center recently hired a new medical director who speaks Spanish, Greenwald says, as well as an equity and inclusion officer charged with evaluating programs.

"We've really been focusing on how we can provide the most culturally responsive services," Greenwald says. For languages not spoken by Kinderling staff, she says, the agency uses an interpreter.



Victoria Sierra Galaviz works with educator Juan Panchana during Kinderling's Spanish Stepping Stones preschool. Bettina Hansen / The Seattle Times)

Several local hospitals and clinics use interpreters or hire staff who speak other languages, but Kinderling's all-in-one model may take stress off families facing a lengthy diagnostic odyssey or those seeking several types of specialized care.

"If parents don't speak English, yes, it's hard to navigate the system," says Juan Panchana, a Kinderling educator who worked with Saul's family and teaches the Spanish Stepping Stones class.

On a recent Wednesday there, groups of toddlers sat around half-moon-shaped tables for snack time, while therapists sang songs in Spanish to teach the children about cleaning up. At one table, Panchana and a speech-language pathologist named Lindsey Cross held up containers filled with yogurt, crackers and other snacks and asked the children to find the pictures and names of the foods, in Spanish, on a pictograph.

The class included a mix of neurotypical children and those with developmental conditions. For children with special needs, speech and physical therapists guide them through activities to help them hit developmental goals, such as learning to climb stairs or using words to make requests. Parents sat in an attached room and watched from behind a one-way viewing window.



Speech therapist Lindsey Cross works with Isaias Vega. (Bettina Hansen / The Seattle Times)

Stepping Stones and the co-op class helped Saul's family develop a lasting network with other families, Rodriguez says. Saul graduated from the class a few months ago, but one of his old classmates now attends his new preschool, Sherwood Forest in Bellevue.

Saul continues to undergo physical therapy and is on a waiting list for Kinderling's speech and occupational therapy services for older children. He also faces new challenges: He has difficulty swallowing liquids, and recently was prescribed a medical gel that helps thicken water or other drinks to prevent him from choking.

But by many measures, he has made incredible progress.

At home on a day in November, he came into the family room with a pair of too-big black mittens pulled over his hands. It's all "monkey see, monkey do" with Saul these days, his dad

said. Saul wears mittens to copy his mom, whom he saw pull on yellow rubber gloves before cleaning the kitchen. He also likes to give big hugs and play on his parents' laptop.

Saul's parents noticed other signs of improvement, too. He recently imitated the bark of a dog, his mom says. And his dad swears he heard Saul say "dog," in English, during a recent visit to the park.

Rodriguez laughed when her husband shares the story. She said she'll believe it when she hears it.

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