



# Latino Cultural Guide

## Building Capacity to Strengthen the Well-Being of Immigrant Families and Their Children: A Prevention Strategy

*This is intended as an overview of selected highlights of items that are critical to understanding children and family environments of Latino immigrant groups. Through research and field interviews, the following represents general themes for the Latino culture and family dynamics. It is not meant to be exhaustive or representative of every family or group. Each family and child is coming from a unique and particular experience and should be approached in this way.*

### Accurate understanding of parenting practices

Above all, Latino parents want their children to be safe and protected. This may be particularly true of recent immigrants who are bewildered by all the potential dangers of their new country. Studies have shown that less-educated mothers rely more on authoritarian parenting, and there is a relationship between education and parenting styles.

### Parent and child nurturing and attachment styles

Latino parents tend to exhibit both greater intimacy and more protective behaviors and strictness than non-Hispanic whites.

### Expectations of child development

At home, adolescents live in a traditional cultural environment where, although children, they face economic demands that often force them to take on adult roles. Their peer group also is closely monitored by parents and limited to a few friends whose parents share similar values, including those on virginity, submissiveness, and family fidelity. Parental overprotection highlights the belief that the degrees of social success for Latino adolescents in this critical phase of development will ultimately determine the total family's success in the new society.

### Attitudes in seeking health care for children

Studies focusing on early intervention and health services found that Latino families may lack familiarity with these service systems and may be unaware of ways in which they can access those services. Additional factors that may influence Latino families' access and utilization such as language or transportation barriers and immigration status require further investigation. Disabilities or behavioral issues are often regarded as the work of "God's hand" or fate.

### Attitudes toward emotional behavior and mental health

The Latino culture is complex and heterogeneous. Further, there are significant differences in attitudes toward the use of mental health services. Latinos represent various countries of origin, among them Mexico, Puerto Rico, South Central American, and this factor influences the use of mental health resources. Moreover, help-seeking patterns change under the influences of migration, acculturation,

and change in socio-economic status.

A few general themes can be identified: perceptions of depression are generally linked to social stressors and take the form of "headaches." Help is sought from family members. More serious mental illness—schizophrenia, delusions, and hallucinations—may be conceived as "part of life" or "God's will." Cooperation in treatment comes from empowering the family and educating them in their role in the recovery of the family member.

### Role of kin and tribal networks

Some Latinos maintain this sense of a village for raising their children by living in tight knit Latino neighborhoods in the United States, where extended family members, godparents, and friends from the pre-immigration community live within a few blocks of each other. Women, in particular, may have moved to the United States with their husband's family. Separation from their own family and a reliance on in-laws may result in an increased sense of isolation for these women. Immigration status among family members is often mixed, resulting in complex situations for child welfare and public benefits.

### Support networks in coping with day-to-day challenges

Professionals should work to reduce the isolation of immigrant families. Extended family members, godparents, neighborhood friends, and clergy may be able to provide physical and emotional support to families and even serve as formal or informal foster parents, when necessary.

### Intergenerational tradition and values

Everyone is entitled to discipline within the extended family structure. This role can vary depending on who is employed out of the home and who is caring for children in the family. Extended family members and neighbors are often preferred for child care, which reinforces the strong value placed on social connectedness among Latino families.

Familismo, the value of closeness and interconnectedness among family members, is prevalent in Latino culture. Familismo includes a sense of family obligation, respect for elders, and a sense of responsibility and obligation to care for all members of the family. Familismo and extended kin give the task of raising children a sense of community.

## Roles of men and women in their family life and socialization of the children

The Latino family has been represented, for the most part, as homogenous with a patriarchal structure where the man is head-of-household, and the women and children have a more submissive role. The stress on cultural sameness overlooks a great variety of influences among Latin American nations—ethnic, racial, historical, and cultural variables. For example, although influenced by more than 100 years of U.S. control, Puerto Rico has maintained a history of assertive feminism, dating back to the Taino Indian experience. It is also important to recognize the role of economics in affecting the family structure. The breadwinner, who may be a man or woman, holds significant power in the family.

## Requiring Special Attention

The dropout rate in school attendance is very high for Latino students. Many Latino students face challenges related to poverty, immigration status, limited English proficiency, and damaging gender and ethnic stereotypes.

Further, the high teen pregnancy rate for Latinas—the highest of any ethnic group—reflects and reinforces the barriers they face. Latinas have had the highest teen birth rate of any major ethnic/racial minority in the US since 1995. This experience puts youth and families in challenging circumstances, presenting further economic and educational implications.

Please note the following for culturally competent practice in using this guide:

Practice Notes: The Contribution of Ethnographic Interviewing to Culturally Competent Practice, 2001—  
[http://www.cehd.umn.edu/SSW/cascw/attributes/PDF/practicenotes/Practicenotes\\_10.pdf](http://www.cehd.umn.edu/SSW/cascw/attributes/PDF/practicenotes/Practicenotes_10.pdf)

## For Additional Reading and References:

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## Immigration and Legal Issues

There are an undisclosed number of children who live with the fear that they will lose a parent to deportation. They are native-born children of undocumented immigrants.

## Experiences in the migration journey

In the case of recent immigrants, culture shock colors almost every aspect of daily life and may complicate obtaining an accurate assessment of parenting. Stressors for low-income, Latino immigrant families include: cultural differences; the need to learn a new language; the impact of bilingualism on cognitive functioning, personality, and worldview; prejudice and discrimination; disruptions in the family life cycle; anxious daily interactions with people outside the ethnic group; confusing interaction with institutions such as schools, courts, hospitals, and immigration; and fear of deportation for those who are undocumented. Families often arrive in stages—men often arrive first, followed later by women and children. This pattern of separation and migration can create tensions between family members. Even when intact, the traditional family structure disappears with the altered dynamics brought on by the migration journey. Furthermore, families can often be seen as highly transient as a result of looming fears of deportation, the instability of poverty, and uncertain housing conditions. Many families are of mixed immigration status.

Center for Advanced Studies  
in Child Welfare

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