

## **Latino Parents: Unique Preferences for Learning about Parenting**

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### **Abstract**

In order to provide maximum benefits to the growing Latino population in the United States, parent education programs must be examined to determine whether this population has unique needs that are not served with traditional parenting program curricula and delivery methods. In this study, 760 Latino parents were asked to respond to a questionnaire about their parenting information needs. Results indicate that parents prefer to receive parenting information from friends and family (75%), doctors or nurses (71%), group speakers (65%), and books (63%). Parents with higher levels of education had a greater preference for learning from books  $F(3,690) = 6.5, p < .0003$ . Topics of greatest interest included teaching responsibility to children (90%), helping children learn respect for others (89%), handling child stress (89%), helping children learn to get along with others (88%), building children's self-concept (87%), and talking with children (87%). Indications are that parent educators need to understand parents and target their programs to specific parent needs. Latino parents prefer to learn in family groupings.

One of the fastest growing segments of the United States population is the Latino population -- growing four times faster than the Caucasian population and more than twice as fast as the African American population (Statistical Abstract of the United States, 1995). As the United States population grows in ethnic diversity, the Caucasian population will decrease proportionately (Lewitt & Baker, 1994). With the rapid influx of Latinos in the continental United States, parenting educators are seeking ways to plan for their culturally specific learning needs.

As with any group, there is diversity among Latinos. Meeting the parenting information needs of Latino parents in the United States requires more than Spanish translations of existing parenting materials. For example, Laosa's (1983) studies with Latino families determined that across ethnic cultures, groups differ in their pattern of family interaction and in their concepts of appropriate child behavior and development. Cultural background, family structure, social class, age, and

gender of children may also influence parenting goals of a family, how parents understand and accept information, and how educational parenting programs are to be marketed.

Several researchers have reported differences in parenting style among young mothers, depending on their degree of acculturation or biculturalism (Wasserman, Rauh, Brunelli, Garcia-Castro & Necos, 1990; DeAnda, 1984). Other research findings show that Latinos have a group-specific preference for particular channels of information (Hofstede, 1980; Triandis, Marin, Lisansky, & Betancourt, 1984). There is a serious lack of information on the perceived credibility of sources of information among various populations (Marin & VanOss Marin, 1990). Some information channels may be perceived as more credible than others due to cultural norms.

Specific to Latino audiences, cultural norms may include "hierarchical regard," or respect toward those with power and positions of authority within the home, state, and church. The level of respect paid and the type of relationship developed depend on the person's age, gender, and social class (Saracho & Hancock, 1986). Cultural scripts, or patterns of social interaction, focus on positive interpersonal relationships and are manifested in the acceptance of others' ideas and rights above personal rights. The cultural script of "simpatía" emphasizes the expectation of individuals to avoid interpersonal conflict and to expect high frequencies of positive social behaviors (Triandis et al., 1984).

Collectivism and familism are also important values for parenting educators to understand. Collectivism is a value in loyalty to, and the contribution of, the group -- as opposed to focusing on a particular individual (Toro, 1996). Familism is a value that underlies the strong Latino identification with members of the extended family (Toro, 1996). In her review of the literature on familism, Reguero (1991) states that the term familism is used to describe a cultural value that includes three elements: an integrated network of privileges and obligations that function to support the total family system, the interest of the family as a group having precedence over the individual's interests, and a sense of commitment to other family members.

Professionals cannot determine parents' needs and proceed to prescribe the programs believed to best fit those needs based on their own personal values and ideas (Halpern, 1990; Powell, 1988). Instead, learning should be facilitated by building upon current parenting practices (Powell, 1988) and existing cultural values that allow parents to be receptive to new information. Drawing from this framework, we hypothesized that Latino parents would show preferences for receiving information from a respected instructor or authority figure and that they would prefer to learn in family groupings.

## Method

### Sample and Procedure

To examine the unique needs of parents for parenting information and program delivery, data were collected from a non-random sample of 1200 parents in Missouri, Oklahoma, and New Mexico (DeBord, 1995). Latino parents were analyzed as a separate group of parents and totaled 760 of the parents in the sample. Forming the convenience sample were respondents from child care programs, factories, churches, support groups, personal friends and neighbors, Parents Without Partners, Head Start, teen parents, parents of Oklahoma 4-H participants, members of the American Association for Retired Persons in Missouri, and parents enrolled in New Mexico Family and Nutrition Bureau programs.

There were 760 respondents in the sample who indicated that their ethnicity was Latino. The questionnaire did not ask their country of origin, however, their current residences included New Mexico (92%) Missouri (7%), and Oklahoma (1%) . Responses were primarily received from females (98%). Table 1 outlines the respondents' characteristics by age, educational level, children's ages, and parental status.

**Table 1. Sample Profile of parents by age, children's age, respondent's relation to children, nature of custody, and educational level**

Characteristic	Percent	n
<b>Respondents' ages in years (N=760) Mean=36.9</b>	<b>15-20</b>	43
	<b>21-30</b>	237
	<b>31-40</b>	233
	<b>41-50</b>	113
	<b>51-65</b>	111
	<b>&gt;65</b>	23
<b>Children's ages in years (N=1601)</b>	<b>0-2</b>	374
	<b>3-5</b>	352
	<b>6-9</b>	339
	<b>10-12</b>	208
	<b>13-15</b>	185
	<b>16-18</b>	143

<b>Respondent relation to child (N=760)</b>	<b>Mother</b>	66%	501
	<b>Grandparent</b>	12%	177
	<b>Father</b>	2%	15
	<b>Stepparent</b>	<1%	1
	<b>Other</b>	3%	19
	<b>No response</b>	6%	48
<b>Parental custody status (N=760)</b>	<b>Both parents</b>	66%	503
	<b>Maternal custody</b>	25%	188
	<b>Shared Custody</b>	4%	29
	<b>Grandparent custody</b>	2%	14
	<b>Paternal custody</b>	<1%	7
	<b>Other</b>	<1%	4
	<b>No response</b>	2%	15
<b>Educational level completion (N=760)</b>	<b>Less than high school</b>	16%	122
	<b>High School</b>	56%	426
	<b>2-year college</b>	19%	144
	<b>4-year college</b>	6%	46
	<b>Graduate work</b>	3%	22

In addition to summarizing frequencies, multiple comparisons were made between items to seek relationships between parent characteristics and choices in learning method or topic of concern. Correlations, t-tests, and analysis of variance between parent variables were used to explore differences in learning preference between parent groups by age, education, skill level, and family type.

### **Instrument**

A Parent Information Needs survey was designed by one of the researchers to determine if there were differences in how parents wish to receive parenting information and to explore whether these differences were related to age of parent, age of children, ethnicity, educational level, or other individual or group characteristics. The 20-item Parenting Information Needs survey was available in both Spanish and English, and it was written at an elementary reading level. The survey was reviewed for face validity and clarity by five Human Development faculty members,

four Human Development graduate students, and 10 undergraduate students enrolled in a Parenting Education course. Suggestions and edits were made before the survey was piloted with a diverse sample of parents living in central Missouri. After the survey was piloted, the reading level was lowered and a few questions were added.

The first survey question asked parents to select from a list their three most often used sources of parenting information. The list included the following: one's own parents, other family members, friends, medical doctor or nurse, counselor, church, radio, television, videotapes, magazines, books, classes in school, community workshops, child care staff/school, and newsletters. Subsequent questions asked parents to rate preferences along a 4-point Likert scale from 1 (like the least) to 4 (like the most). These rated questions asked parents about their preferences in format of information and in who should instruct them in parenting education. The list of instructors included the following: trained parent educator, another experienced parent, someone I already know/trust, a member of my family, medical professional, or "other." Respondents also rated their preference for instructional delivery from a list that included the following responses: learn by myself without assistance, learn by myself by reading, learn one-on-one with a trained leader, learn one-on-one with another parent, learn in a group with a trained leader, and learn in a group with another parent leading.

Parents were asked to indicate their perceived need for information about child rearing by rating a list of 23 topics. There were a range of selections including such items as child stress, discipline, child diets, violence in the family, helping children use money, helping children be good friends, talking with my children, and childhood creativity.

General demographic information was obtained from this survey as well. An introductory statement on the survey recognized that parents may have more than one child. The statement then asked parents to respond based on their greatest needs for information at this point in their lives.

## **Results**

### **Sources of Information**

Parents were asked to indicate their three primary sources of parenting information from a list of 15 sources. "My own parents" was the source selected by most (65%) of the participants. The second most used source for parenting information was medical professionals (29%), followed by friends (26%) and other family members (23%) or the church (23%).

Parents were also asked to indicate where they *prefer* to obtain parenting information. They responded that they prefer to get parenting information from friends and family (75%), then

doctors or nurses (71%), followed by group speakers (65%), and books (63%). Table 2 lists all of the respondents' preferred learning sources.

**Table 2. Preferred Sources for Obtaining Parenting Information by Latino Parents. (N=760)**

<b>Preferred method of learning</b>	<b>n showing preference</b>	<b>% showing preference</b>
<b>Friends and family</b>	575	76
<b>Doctors and Nurses</b>	541	71
<b>Group speakers</b>	493	65
<b>Books</b>	476	63
<b>Cable TV</b>	383	60
<b>Magazine articles</b>	458	60
<b>Newsletters</b>	434	57
<b>Pamphlets</b>	424	56
<b>Videotapes</b>	403	53
<b>Audiotapes</b>	336	44
<b>Home visits</b>	282	38
<b>Audiotapes with readings</b>	186	25
<b>Computer files</b>	189	25
<b>Telephone information line</b>	185	24
<b>Radio call-in program</b>	112	15

The most preferred method for learning was in a group with a trained parenting educator leading the group (64%), followed by one-on-one with another parent (61%), and in a group with another parent leading the group (60%).

When parents were asked to rate the type of person they would like to help them learn about parenting education, the highest rating was measured for "someone they already know and trust" (80%), followed by "another experienced parent" (73%), or "a member of my own family" (72%). Preferences for "trained parenting educators" received 70% of the responses.

## Learning in a Group

Those who preferred to learn in a group were asked to respond to a separate section of questions pertaining to preferred group size and group composition. Sixty-seven percent of all respondents ( $n = 513$ ) indicated that they preferred learning in a group. Most (61%) of those who indicated that they preferred group learning also indicated that they prefer learning in a small group of fewer than 15 people (61%). Eighty-seven percent of the parents who completed the group learning section indicated they generally are comfortable when spouses are present in the group; 84% indicated being comfortable when group members are friends. It is important to note that nearly half (49%) of all participants indicated they are not comfortable in a group of people whom they do not know. Table 3 details group composition and meeting location preference; Table 4 indicates how parents would like the training to be focused.

**Table 3. Group Learning Preferences for Group Composition, Meeting Location, and Group Size. (N=513\*)**

<b>Group Learning Preference</b>	<b>% (n)</b>	
<b>Parents who are comfortable with these members in group meetings</b>	<b>Spouse or mate</b>	87 (445)
	<b>Friends</b>	84 (433)
	<b>Other family members</b>	78 (377)
	<b>Others I know</b>	73 (377)
	<b>Others I don't know</b>	49 (251)
<b>Meeting location</b>	<b>Medical facility</b>	66 (342)
	<b>Community agency</b>	25 (129)
	<b>Own home</b>	24 (123)
	<b>Church</b>	23 (116)
	<b>Community college</b>	21 (106)
	<b>College Library</b>	17 (85)
	<b>Community Center</b>	11 (56)
<b>Group Size ( # people)</b>	<b>1 - 4</b>	23 (176)
	<b>5 - 9</b>	24 (185)
	<b>10 - 14</b>	14 (109)
	<b>15 - 19</b>	3 (22)

	<b>20 - 24</b>	1 (8)
	<b>over 25</b>	2 (13)

\* the number of people completing the section on group learning was less than the total sample.

**Table 4. Parents' Preferred Focus of the Content of the Parenting Education**

<b>The focus of the teaching should be on:</b>	<b>% (n)</b>
<b>Developing skills to use with my family</b>	85 (648)
<b>Actual events in my family</b>	76 (579)
<b>Events common to many families</b>	76 (575)
<b>Making things</b>	75 (568)
<b>Other</b>	10 (76)

The majority (89%) of group respondents said they would like to meet once a month for 1-2 hours, but there was not a clear preference for which day of the week to meet. (Saturday received the most (28%) responses for day preference.) In a separate question, 29% of participants agreed that evenings were preferred as a meeting time.

### **Topics Parents Selected**

More than half (57%) of the topics suggested on the questionnaire were rated by parents as 3 or 4 (indicating "like the most"). The topics of greatest interest to the parents included how to teach children to be responsible (90%), helping children learn respect for others (89%), handling child stress (89%), helping children learn to get along with others (88%), building children's self-concept (87%), talking with children (87%), helping children be good friends (86%), promoting childhood creativity (86%), and helping children with school (86%). The least preferred topics included children's chores (57%), and child diets (66%).

### **Between Group Analysis**

A series of one-way analyses of variance (ANOVA) between learning preferences as a dependent variable and gender, family type, or age of parent showed no significant differences.

Further examination of parents based on their education or social class were performed. A variable to assess class was included on the questionnaire; however, due to its high correlation



( $r=.63$ ) with education, only the education variable was used. Educational levels of parents revealed differences in preferred methods of learning. Post hoc Student-Newman-Keuls analysis resulted in differences between parents who had not completed high school and other parents with higher education. Parents with a higher level of education showed greater preference for learning about parenting from books  $F(3,690) = 6.5, p < .0003$ . Parents with fewer than 12 years of formal schooling also indicated a greater need to learn from someone they knew and trusted  $F(3,692) = 4.04, p < .007$ ) and less comfort in learning in groups of parents they did not know  $F(3,476) = 2.8, p < .04$ .

## Discussion and Implications

In this study we examined several factors that should influence the planning of parenting education programs for Latinos. Because the sample was predominantly female, generalization to fathers is inappropriate. Additionally, parent educators should be sensitive to the fact that there are cultural variations within the Latino population.

These results indicate that, as hypothesized, Latino parents use their own parents as primary sources of parenting information and that they prefer to use close family members and friends; or to learn about parenting from someone they already know and trust. For Latinos, this may be explained by the concept of familism, which recognizes the sense of commitment to help other family members. The secondary preference of learning from a doctor or nurse was reinforced by the preferred meeting location of a medical facility. This may be linked to hierarchical regard, or may be related to locations that parents must visit with their children. In discussions with Latino scholars, it has been projected that medical doctors and nurses may be viewed as trusted specialists as well as respected authorities (DeBord, 1995). Offering information specifically for Latino families through medical staff, in medical facilities, and other locations frequently visited by parents may be an important aspect of serving Latino parent needs in local communities.

Results indicated that 51% of those who preferred learning in groups were not comfortable learning in a group of parents whom they do not know. Often parent educators market educational programs to the general public then wonder why the audience is small or has inconsistent attendance. Providing comfortable learning opportunities for those who prefer not to attend group meetings might mean offering an array of learning experiences such as newsletters, small group meetings, or lending libraries. Parenting educators who use group meetings as a delivery method generally plan for group interaction and sharing between parents. Understanding that participants may prefer a particular group composition can enable educators to plan group meetings that will create inviting learning environments. In marketing materials to Latino families, parent educators could specify that attendance will be kept to a minimum and that families are encouraged to sign up as a group.

The possibility of language as a barrier was not assessed in this study. It is, however, suggested that when parent educators are not part of the targeted culture, that they team teach with someone who is of the culture who is fluent in both Spanish and English. Additionally, a question about language is recommended for future research of this type.

Well over two-thirds of the parents surveyed indicated that they preferred that the time they devote to learning about parenting be focused on specific skills they could use at home with their own families. This strategy coupled with assessing the topics about which parents wish to learn can enable parenting educators to plan programs that will meet the *specific* needs of parents. Many of the preferred topics lend themselves to skill-based training, indicating that parenting educators should plan their instructional sessions to include a few specific skills that parents can use with children depending on the age of their child and their family situation.

Parent audiences should be targeted with information specifically selected for their needs and delivered in a way that is most effective. Factors such as educational attainment and cultural values appear to have an impact on learning preferences. Important factors to remember when planning for Latino parents are that Latinos, in general, relate to a group for collective identification, show regard for authority figures, and may prefer small family-like settings led by persons who show "simpatía." To assure cultural responsiveness, involving parents in planning programs will contribute to meeting their diverse educational and parenting needs.

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