



Working With Latino Parents in Child Care and Other Settings

Latinos are the largest and fastest growing minority group in the United States. This group encompasses families from many countries, such as Mexico, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Puerto Rico, who speak various languages and dialects. Between 2000 and 2005, Latinos accounted for 50 percent of the growth in the U.S. population. By 2050, demographers predict this segment will account for more than 30 percent of the nation's total population.

This growth highlights a social value common to many Latino families: They are the least likely of any ethnic group to have their children in child care situations outside the home. Currently, only 21 percent of Latino parents use preschools or child care centers. Instead, the majority of parents opt to have their children cared for by family members or other familiar in-home care providers.

Some of the reasons for low numbers of Latino children in child care are socioeconomic in nature. For instance, Latino families experience a high incidence of poverty, low-wage jobs, and jobs with inflexible work schedules and nontraditional hours, including nights and weekends. Other reasons are related to family composition: Latino families often include many children, particularly children from birth to age 5. Many of these families struggle to find child care that is within their means financially and that meets their needs linguistically and culturally.

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) has said, "Early childhood education needs to be responsive to the ethnic, racial, and cultural backgrounds of the children it serves." Until recently, specific guidelines for how service providers should work with Latino parents have been limited. In this report we summarize the "best practices" for working with Latino children and their families. While these practices pertain to recent immigrants who speak Spanish as their first language, they can be applied to immigrants of other backgrounds and languages, as well.

Become culturally literate

Cultural literacy is the single most important factor in effective interaction with Latino families. Take, for example, paying attention to *personalismo* when recruiting and working with Latinos. *Personalismo* is a cultural value in which interpersonal closeness and connectedness are

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expected. Overlooking *personalismo* can impair the ability to build sound working relationships with this population. Building trust and personal friendship is vital to helping Latino families. Many people from Latin American countries bring with them a custom of telling about themselves and developing a relationship before they are willing to entrust their children to an outsider's care. These parents are more likely to follow the instructions of a friend than an expert who is a stranger, no matter the expert's credentials. This means you must first be a friend. Parents expect providers to open up to them as well, and you will be expected to share information about your family to create this mutual trust.

Members of Latino households generally play certain roles in their families. Fathers are expected to show responsibility and resourcefulness; mothers—nurturance and compassion; children—obedience and respect. Child care providers wishing to retain Latino families should have a working knowledge of how these roles play out in a particular family's life.

Hierarchies exist in many Latino families, wherein fathers are respected as the gateways to their families. For example, outsiders are often expected to meet with the father first, to ask to speak with him first when on the phone, to use a formal manner at first when addressing him (*i.e.*, Señor Perez), and to consult him about decisions that affect the family. Though Latina mothers essentially make the decisions and carry out most of the parenting, most mothers appreciate the security that comes from the involvement of their husbands. These roles are dynamic and fragile, as many families are under stress to adapt to U.S. culture. Remember that the parents are the experts about their families' needs, though they may seek advice from providers who have a better understanding of U.S. systems for doing things.

Encourage dual language learning

The effects of dual language learning have been debated for two decades. Recent research indicates that dual language learners fare better than their monolingual counterparts in almost all areas, including academics and socialization. However, many providers don't know how to encourage dual language development among the children they care for. Here are some practical ways to support the child's home language:

- Use bilingual music, books, pictures, concrete objects, and gestures.
- Teach the other children words in the child's home language (colors, songs, poems).
- Offer encouragement.
- Be patient.
- Create a language-rich environment.
- Establish familiar daily routines.
- Involve families by inviting them to read books and teach songs in their own language.
- Encourage families to volunteer in ways they feel able.

Practical techniques are also needed to help a child acquire the second language. Here are some:

- Repetition, repetition, repetition.
- Teach language through pictures and books.
- Create a language-rich environment.
- Teach through play and praise.
- Let other children serve as role models.

Children develop language by observing role models who encourage, nurture, and support them. One of the keys to success in dual language learning is for care centers to include staffers who speak the child's home language. Providers should learn some words in the child's language, but they should not mix languages when they speak with a child.

Communicate in Spanish when necessary

If Latino parents feel forced to speak English, which is a foreign language to many, it may compromise the ability of child care providers to retain Latino children who are enrolled in a child care setting. Some parents may feel confident speaking in English, but their level of skill may lead to difficulties of understanding on both sides. Additionally, speaking only in English may isolate some parents.

Certainly, parents should be encouraged to learn English. However, bilingual providers represent an essential resource for meeting parental needs. These professionals can switch between Spanish and English and cultural ideologies to create ties with parents, especially those who find themselves between two cultures. Finally, translators may serve an important role. At present, using other, bilingual family members and translators via telephone may prove the most cost-effective method to meet the needs of monolingual Spanish speakers.

Reduce fear among Latino parents

Fear of formal systems is common among both recent and not-so-recent Latino immigrant parents. Much of this fear comes from the treatment of immigrants by the “migra,” now known as the Citizenship and Immigration Services of the Department of Homeland Security. Many Latinos view preschools and other child care institutions as authorities, rather than partners, and parents may need personal attention to overcome the intrinsic fear and deference that comes with this relationship.

To become trusted as part of the Latino community, you must create community networks and partnerships with other organizations and agencies that already serve Latino families. Child care providers can accomplish this by taking active roles in cultural events and celebrations within the Latino community, and by writing articles for Spanish language newspapers and magazines. These types of community involvement will help to reduce fear among these families.

Create coalitions

Even the smallest communities in the country are becoming aware of the need for all service providers to work together to serve the growing Latino population. These individuals, groups, and agencies would do well to identify other similar partners and form coalitions to share resources and provide better services. These partnerships also create opportunities for giving advice, solving problems, coordinating services, and disseminating resources. The multifaceted lives of Latinos often pose significant struggles for non-Latino providers, and these collaborations can potentially prevent problems in the community and provide invaluable solutions to current dilemmas.

Child care providers working with Latino parents will often observe instances in which the parent needs an advocate to facilitate his or her involvement with other organizations, such as schools and social service organizations. Those who seek to help should be aware of their limitations in working with Latino parents and children and should be willing to refer these individuals and families to other service agencies. Child care providers will benefit from keeping a current list of bilingual experts who can assist Latino parents in accessing social and public services. Here are resources you might want to include, even though some of them

may require travel to nearby cities or communities:

- Legal services related to citizenship, immigration, and driver’s licenses.
- Public services pertaining to such issues as welfare, housing, and Social Security.
- Educational services for parents and their children, such as GED classes in Spanish, simplified English classes, computer training, and interpreter services.
- Social services, such as aid, counseling, and advocacy for victims of domestic violence.

Use individualized recruiting and reminders

To find and keep in touch with Latino families, use the media outlets they use. For example, get your picture and message out in the media both through Spanish newspapers and local Spanish television stations, if there are any. Also, some of your best contacts will be through churches with large Latino memberships. Another key strategy is to situate preschools and child care centers near where Latino parents live or near places that they frequent and trust.

Mailers, advertisements, and other publications should be distributed in both English and Spanish, and special attention should be placed on culturally acceptable wording and appropriate levels of literacy. However, flyers and advertising are some of the LEAST effective methods of recruiting Latino parents and their children to child care. Instead, parents are much more likely to respond to invitations to participate made by trusted individuals, such as priests, pastors, or other Latino community leaders.

Other effective techniques include personal visits to family homes, phone calls, and personal, handwritten invitations. Multiple written reminders, phone calls, or both are essential when establishing a working relationship with Latino parents. Also be aware that many Latino parents work during unconventional times and may need child care during these times. For example, those who work second shift or who won’t get home from work until late in the evening may find it easier to work with a child care provider who can juggle his or her working hours to accommodate those parents.

Encourage punctuality

The concept of time may be viewed very differently in Latino communities. Punctuality is

often less important than personal relationships (*personalismo*). Understanding this divide is vital to providing services and may necessitate a “drop-in” feel to service provision. Do try to emphasize the importance of punctuality, but be aware that parents will often arrive for appointments early or late, at times because of factors out of their control. Keep track of parents’ arrival times, if needed for bookkeeping purposes.

Summary

Working with Latino children and parents can be very satisfying, but it requires attention to details that are important to their culture. Professionals who are sensitive to the culture of Latinos will be able to work more effectively with Latino parents and will experience greater program success.

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