



# What Research Tells Us About Latino Parenting Practices and their Relationship to Youth Sexual Behavior

By Michele Allen, MD, MS, Maria Veronica Svetaz, MD, MPH, Rachel Hardeman, MPH, and Michael D. Resnick, PhD

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# Executive summary and key findings

Latino parents play a key role in the lives of their adolescent children. This report describes research assessing the ways that Latino parents' values, beliefs, and parenting practices shape their adolescent children's sexual behavior. Key findings include:

## **Latino parents have many strengths.**

- Many of the cultural values that characterize Latino families (*respeto, familismo, personalismo*) underpin strong family relationships and solid parenting practices.
- Latino parents convey a clear desire to communicate with their children about sexuality and the consequences of sexual activity.
- Research suggests that immigrant Latino parents show great ability to adapt their parenting strategies to meet the needs of the social and cultural environment where they settle in the United States.
- Latino adolescents whose parents use effective disciplinary practices and monitor their children's whereabouts are less likely to be sexually active.

## **Both the social environment and the complex processes of acculturation may make effective parenting challenging for Latino parents.**

- Stress related to the process of settling in a new country, and the "acculturation-gap," where teens more quickly adopt values of the larger U.S. culture than do their parents, may contribute to family conflict, less effective parenting practices, and more problematic adolescent behaviors.
- Latino families living in poor urban environments, those with language barriers, and those without health insurance experience additional challenges to engaging in effective parenting.
- Despite a strong desire to communicate with their children about sexuality, Latino parents report barriers to engaging in those conversations.

**We need more research in a number of key areas to better understand the relationship between parenting and Latino teen sexual behavior. This information will help define effective programs that best meet the needs of Latino families.**

- Which specific parenting practices are most influential on Latino adolescent sexual behavior, and how can programs best address these practices in a culturally relevant manner?
- How do cultural values relate to establishing parenting practices effective for promoting healthy sexual outcomes for Latino youth?
- How do neighborhood and environmental factors influence the transformation of immigrant Latino parents' cultural values after arrival to the United States with regard to parenting beliefs and practices, and what result does this have on adolescent behavior?
- When does the "acculturation gap" become problematic for families in terms of both the timeline of adolescent development and the dynamic processes of acculturation for both parent and teen?

# Introduction

Latinos are a growing and diverse population in the United States with a rich cultural heritage. As an ethnic group, Latinos may be characterized as valuing family highly and benefiting from strong family connections. Yet while we know, in general, that parents play a vital role in protecting the well-being of adolescents, less is known about characteristics of parenting practices in Latino families and how they relate to pregnancy prevention. There is a great need to understand the important role Latino parents play in establishing the beliefs and values that deter their adolescent children's sexual behavior, and to identify challenges that may make parents' efforts less effective. The urgency of these issues is underlined by statistics indicating that Latino adolescents experience a number of disparities in relation to teen pregnancy and sexual behavior.

- Latina teens (aged 15 to 19) have had the highest birth rate of any racial/ethnic group in the United States since 1995, and while birth rates have dropped for all groups since 1991, Latinas have experienced the lowest percentage drop (21 percent).<sup>1</sup> In 2004, birth rates for Latina adolescents were 82.6 per 1,000, compared to significantly lower rates for their counterparts (17.3 per 1,000 for Asian/Pacific Islanders, 26.7 per 1,000 for Whites, and 63.1 per 1,000 for African-Americans).<sup>2</sup>
- Fifty-one percent of Latina adolescents become pregnant at least once before the age of 20 in comparison to a 35 percent national average.<sup>1</sup>
- Recent national data indicates that 44 percent of Latina adolescents reported ever having had sexual intercourse, a percentage similar to Whites. However, approximately 66 percent of sexually experienced Latina teens used contraception the first time they had sex—less than both African-American (71 percent) and White girls (78 percent).<sup>3</sup> Additionally, the percentage of Latina adolescents using condoms or birth control pills is low in comparison to both Whites and African-Americans.<sup>4</sup>
- Though African-Americans have the highest rates of sexually transmitted infections of

any race/ethnic group, Latino youth suffer disproportionately from these infections, including Chlamydia, syphilis, gonorrhea, and HIV/AIDS, in comparison to Whites. In 2004, the prevalence of Chlamydia among Latinos age 15-19 was 1,604 per 100,000, a rate two times higher than Whites.<sup>5</sup>

- Although Latinos represented 13 percent of the United States population in 2001, they accounted for 20 percent of persons living with AIDS and 19 percent of cases first reported. AIDS rates for Latina adolescents fall between African-American and White rates (3.9, 18.5 and 0.8 per 100,000 respectively). Twenty-four percent of new AIDS cases among adolescents ages 13 to 19 occur in Latinos.

## Objectives

This paper will synthesize research addressing the important questions of how Latino parents' values, parenting practices, and potential experiences of discrimination, poverty, and barriers to accessing resources help shape Latino adolescent sexual behavior. We will set the stage by first describing the general theory and knowledge regarding parenting practices in relation to adolescent sexual behaviors. Given that 40% of the Latino population are foreign-born,<sup>6</sup> we will then focus on the strengths and challenges of immigrant parents in developing bicultural parenting practices. The number of studies focusing specifically on Latino parenting practices and youth sexual behaviors is limited. Because effective parenting is one core component of healthy youth development that protects against a number of health-risk behaviors, we will draw from examples of Latino-specific research on other risk behaviors to describe the relationship between parenting practices and adolescent behavior. Next, we will present interventions that have demonstrated improvement in adolescent behavioral outcomes through enhancement of parenting practices. Finally, we will discuss the research, programmatic, and policy implications of these results.

## Latino Parents and Adolescents in the United States

Latinos currently make up over 14% of the population in the United States.<sup>7</sup> In the year 2000, Latino youth age 11-19 comprised 15% of the adolescent population, but projections indicate that by 2025 they will account for 25% of this age group.<sup>8</sup> There are a number of characteristics of the Latino population in the United States that are important in considering families and pregnancy prevention:

- **Diversity:** The Latino population in the U.S. may be characterized by its diversity in culture, ethnicity, socioeconomic status, and immigration history. The majority of Latinos in this country are of Mexican heritage, followed respectively by Puerto Rican, Cuban, Central American, South American, and other ethnic groups.<sup>6</sup> In this paper we will indicate when studies focus on adolescents from a particular ethnic group or country of origin, but will generally refer to Latinos to describe the population counting Latin American heritage.
- **Mobility:** Though the vast majority of Latinos currently live in a small number of states (80% live in California, Texas, New York, Florida, Illinois, Arizona, New Jersey, New Mexico, and Colorado), since the 1990s there has been rapid growth of the Latino population in new areas of the country such as the Midwest and the South.<sup>9</sup> The growth rate of the Latino population in these states has exceeded that in many of the typical gateway states.<sup>10</sup> However, little research has examined how Latino families are faring in these areas where culturally appropriate services in Spanish may not yet be available.
- **Lower socio-economic status:** More Latino families live in poverty than is average for the U.S. population as a whole.<sup>6</sup> Latinos are also by far the racial/ethnic group most likely to be without health insurance.<sup>11</sup> Despite the increased availability of insurance programs for low-income families, 22% of Latino children were uninsured in 2006, compared to 14% of Black, 11% of

Asian, and 7% of White children.<sup>11</sup> This may be because many families fall under the category of “mixed legal status” (meaning that some are undocumented, some carry visas, and others are U.S.-born) suggesting that eligibility for services may also differ by family member. Immigrants who are not U.S. citizens are less likely to have health insurance.<sup>12</sup>

- **Large number of immigrants:** A large number of Latinos arrived as immigrants over the last three decades. First-generation immigrants (born outside of the United States) have made up the largest portion of the Latino population since the late 1980s, but the second-generation (born in the United States with at least one foreign-born parent) is rapidly increasing, and by approximately 2020, will be larger than either first- or third-generation (born in the United States with both parents born in the United States).<sup>13</sup> This is important considering that many Latino families with adolescents are comprised of first-generation parents and second-generation youth. Issues of language, values, and acculturation are therefore important when examining family relations.
- **Core cultural values:** Cultural generalizations about an ethnic group as diverse as Latinos are problematic; however, there are a number of core cultural values that are central in the consideration of how family influences adolescent behavior. Adherence to these values likely depends on socioeconomic status, the specific Latino population considered, and the acculturation levels of both the parent and the adolescent. As most parents employ parenting practices they learned from their own parents, these particular Latino values and characteristics may be associated with particular styles of parenting.
  - A central value related to the influence of families on sexual outcomes is familism (*familismo*), which has been defined a number of ways, but generally describes the collectivistic nature of Latino culture.<sup>14</sup> The definition of familism includes parents, aunts, uncles, grandparents,



# Parenting practices and adolescent behavior

cousins, compadres (extended kin), padrinos (godparents), and life-long friends.<sup>15</sup> Specific aspects of familism include strong family unity, interdependence in daily activities, and close proximity with extended family members.<sup>16</sup> Given that family is often considered the basis of Latino culture,<sup>17</sup> familism is one of the cultural values most likely to persist in second and subsequent generations.<sup>18</sup>

- *Respeto* is an important value in many traditional Latino homes. *Respeto* encompasses respect for the authority of parents and older family members, and the expectation for politeness, obedience, and non-argumentativeness in all interactions with elders.<sup>19</sup>
- Gender roles within Latino families are traditionally considered rigid, with males expected to be strong and provide for the family (*machismo*). Females are expected to be nurturing, and to fulfill the valued multiple roles of mother and wife (*hembrismo*).<sup>19</sup> Women are also expected to be subservient to the male head of household (*Marianismo* - embracing those characteristics of the Virgin Mary<sup>20</sup>).
- *Personalismo* emphasizes honesty, personal character, and inner qualities in establishing social relationships.<sup>17</sup>

While many parenting approaches are appropriate, research has identified some key characteristics of parenting styles that are associated with optimal adolescent outcomes. A number of models have been developed from studies of parenting styles.<sup>21</sup> Among the most prominent of these is the work of psychologist Diana Baumrind, who, along with others, has identified two critical aspects of parental behavior toward adolescents: responsiveness (often described as nurturance) and demandingness (expectations and disciplinary practices).<sup>22</sup> These two dimensions form four parenting styles: authoritative, authoritarian, permissive, and neglectful. Definitions of the four parenting styles are:

- **Authoritative:** Parents with high nurturance and discipline (the optimal combination) are frequently referred to as positive.
- **Authoritarian:** Parents who are controlling but aloof or hostile (high on discipline but low on nurturance) are frequently called dominating.
- **Indulgent:** Parents with high nurturance but low discipline are often referred to as permissive.
- **Neglectful:** Parents with low nurturance and discipline are commonly considered unengaged.

Research shows that children and teens raised in “authoritative” or positive homes show strong advantages in psychosocial development, mental health, social competence, academic performance, and avoidance of problem behavior compared to their peers raised in any of the other three styles.<sup>23, 24</sup> Research in this area indicates that authoritative parents are warm and involved, firm and consistent, and, in the case of adolescents, encourage the development of their children’s own opinions and beliefs.<sup>25</sup> Authoritative parents are able to find a balance between restriction and their child’s independence in a way that allows the child the opportunity for freedom and growth while setting standards, limits, and guidelines.<sup>26</sup>

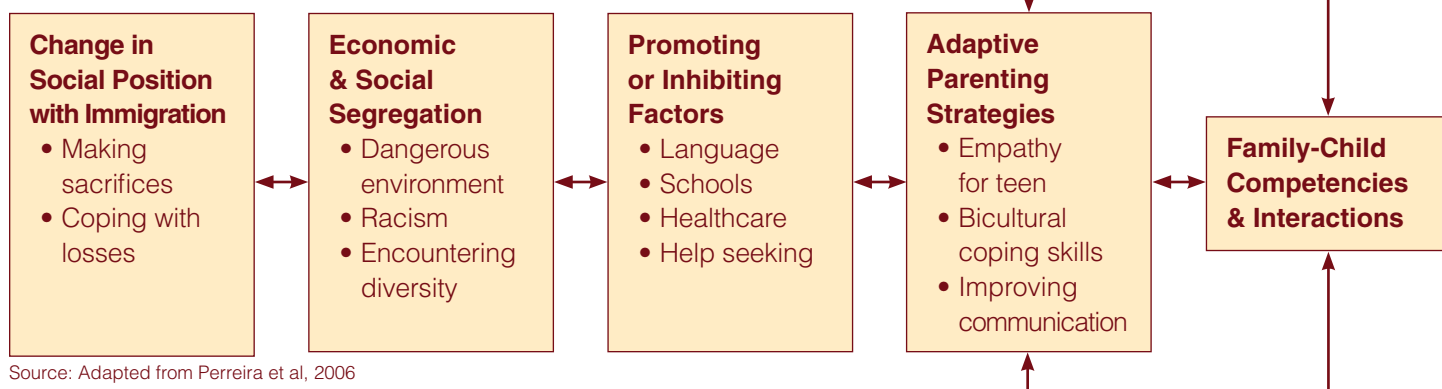
Reviews of the literature suggest widely divergent characterizations of Latino parenting practices, with some researchers labeling them as nurturing, egalitarian, and authoritative while others argue they are authoritarian or permissive.<sup>27</sup> Other research supports that immigrant Latino parents adapt their parenting practices to specific local conditions where they settle - often poor urban environments. Some of these adaptations may lead to more authoritarian parenting practices than those used by parents in their country of origin, in responses to the stressors of the new environment.<sup>28</sup>

# Bicultural parenting: Resiliency of Latino parents

Though the general parenting principals apply to Latino parents, those who are immigrants may experience additional challenges adapting their cultural values, parenting beliefs, and parenting practices to the particular environments where they reside in the United States. Challenges specific to Latino immigrant families include language barriers, unfamiliar social institutions

or time in the United States, may be linked to increased likelihood of adolescent sexual initiation<sup>32-35</sup> as well as condom use,<sup>35, 36</sup> but the role of family in this process has not been well evaluated. The process of acculturation may affect family relationships and thus the propensity for teens to become involved in health-risk behaviors. For example, in two longitudinal studies, increased acculturation led to decreased

## Risk – Resiliency Framework for Latino Immigrant Parents



(e.g. schools and healthcare organizations), discrimination, prejudice, and poverty, all of which may affect parenting practices and efficacy. Ethnographic research suggests the relevance and appropriateness of utilizing an integrative and dynamic model of parenting risk and resiliency for Latino immigrant parents coping with these issues.<sup>29</sup>

Perreira and colleagues<sup>29</sup> showed that effective, engaged immigrant Latino parents developed adaptive parenting strategies to meet the needs of their adolescents in the context of the communities where they settled. Parents adopted a bicultural approach through teaching children about their heritage while attempting themselves to learn more about American culture and values. They also increased communication with their children regarding perceived risks in the environment. Similarly, other work indicates that Dominican and Puerto Rican mothers believe that early and frequent communication about sex is important in difficult urban environments, despite the fact that they received no such information from their own parents.<sup>30</sup>

## Acculturation and Parenting

The complex adaptive process that immigrants (and receiving communities) go through as they interact with new cultural values and beliefs is referred to as acculturation.<sup>31</sup> There is suggestion that greater acculturation measured by generation status, language use,

familism and increased alcohol use.<sup>37,16</sup> Loss of extended family support and ties that occur through immigration may also be a significant challenge to immigrant Latinos parenting adolescents.<sup>29</sup>

Additionally, cultural conflict, which arises as youth acculturate more rapidly than their immigrant parents, has been related to Latino adolescent depression, poor academic performance, substance abuse, and other negative outcomes.<sup>38,39</sup> Parents' inability to speak English is a key aspect of the generational acculturation gap, as reliance on children to communicate in English may undermine the hierarchical power structure in Latino families and therefore parental control over adolescents.<sup>40</sup> The shift in power and erosion of parental authority defined by *respeto* also occurs as children develop more Americanized and individualistic attitudes.<sup>41</sup> The undermining of these culturally defined rules for interaction in the family leads to increased family stress and decreased use of effective parenting practices, which in turn has been associated with higher youth participation in substance abuse.<sup>39</sup> The social isolation that many immigrant Latino families experience may make it difficult for parents to find support for their less-Americanized values. This sort of network level support, or social capital, has been suggested to slow adolescent acculturation and promote parental authority.<sup>38</sup> The role of these sorts of family conflicts on sexual behaviors is currently under-explored in the available literature.



# What we know about Latino families:

## Five areas where parents make a difference in adolescent sexual behavior

### 1. Connection, Closeness, and Trust

High levels of parent-family connectedness are associated with delayed sexual initiation.<sup>42</sup> Additionally, qualities of the parent-teen relationship such as warmth and caring, positive interactions (praise and showing physical affection), and a close parent-child bond or connectedness have been found to protect against future tobacco, alcohol, and illicit drug-use.<sup>42-45</sup> However, the relationship between warm, family environments and sexual behavior is not clear-cut for Latino youth. Dominican and Puerto Rican mothers have been shown to identify the need to devote time to developing relationships with their adolescent children, and the need to balance firmness with love and responsiveness.<sup>46</sup> Results in one study indicated that Puerto Rican youth who report that they discuss problems with their parents were less likely to be sexually active.<sup>47</sup> In contrast, another study found that, in a sample of Mexican and Central American youth, though family connectedness was protective against a number of substance abuse behaviors, it was not associated with the number of sexual partners or condom use.<sup>48</sup>

These strong family connections may be related to perceived parental trust, which is particularly influential for girls.<sup>49</sup> Importantly, trusting mother-adolescent relationships set the stage for increased frequency of communication about sexuality and pregnancy prevention, which in turn predicts less adolescent sexual activity.<sup>50</sup>

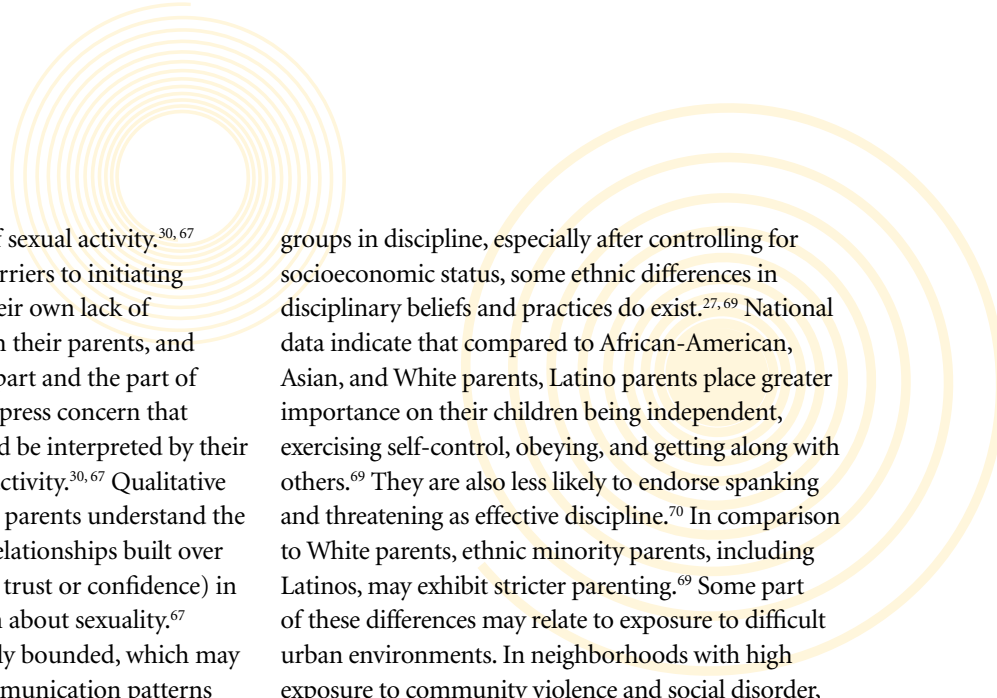
### 2. Communication

Studies of parenting practices in relation to sexual behavior report that communication is vital: teens who communicate with their parents on a regular basis about specific sexual issues are less likely to become sexually active,<sup>51, 52</sup> and are more likely to use condoms or birth control if they are having sex.<sup>53, 54</sup> However, results are not uniform and suggest that more consistent measures of communication are needed, as is an understanding of whether other factors (such as parental values or adolescent perception of parental trustworthiness,

knowledge, or expertise) establish the effectiveness of communication.<sup>55</sup>

For Latinos, communication specifically related to sexual behavior may occur less frequently than in families from other racial/ethnic groups.<sup>56-58</sup> In contrast, other research indicates that while Latina mothers have higher discomfort in these discussions compared with White mothers, they have no higher infrequency of such discussions overall.<sup>59</sup> It should be noted that differences may exist between groups of Latinos, with one study suggesting Mexican-Americans discuss sexuality less extensively than other groups.<sup>60</sup> Latino adolescents of both genders more often communicate with their mothers about sex; however, boys report more frequent communication with their fathers than do girls.<sup>60, 61</sup> It is clear, however, that this communication is important. In one study, non-pregnant Latina youth reported receiving more information from their parents regarding sexuality than a similar sample of pregnant Latinas.<sup>62</sup> Similarly, Latina mothers' responsiveness to discussing sexual topics was effective in delaying adolescents' intent to become sexually active in situations of high perceived peer sexual activity.<sup>63</sup> In other research exploring links between communication and behaviors, high levels of parent-youth communication<sup>64</sup> or attachment measured by frequency of communication about activities, events, and troubling problems,<sup>65</sup> were protective against substance use and other anti-social behavior for Latino youth. In contrast, another study did not find an association between general, open maternal communication and a scale of sexual involvement (predominant behaviors were kissing, French kissing, or petting) for middle school aged Latino youth.<sup>66</sup> This suggests that communication specific to sexual activity may be more effective than general communication.

Much of the literature indicates that while Latino parents appreciate the need for open communication, they find engaging in these conversations difficult. Latino parents identify the importance of discussions about topics such as delaying sexual intercourse so that youth can focus on their education, and the



health-related consequences of sexual activity.<sup>30, 67</sup> However, they also describe barriers to initiating these conversations, such as their own lack of communication about sex with their parents, and embarrassment on both their part and the part of their children.<sup>30, 67</sup> They also express concern that discussing contraception would be interpreted by their children as condoning sexual activity.<sup>30, 67</sup> Qualitative work by McKee reinforces that parents understand the important context of quality relationships built over years (described as *confianza* – trust or confidence) in enabling open communication about sexuality.<sup>67</sup>

Communication is culturally bounded, which may lead to particular types of communication patterns in Latino families. Importantly, communication style with youth may vary between Latina and White mothers due to differing underlying cultural values. For example, in a qualitative study comparing mother-youth conversations between Latinos and Whites, authors attributed Latina mothers' greater dominance in conversations to differing definitions of a satisfying family environment.<sup>68</sup> Authors conclude that given the value placed on children's respect and obedience toward their parents, the mother-dominated style may indicate that the family is close and gets along well. Intervention programs designed to improve parent-youth communication must consider these culture-specific communication styles.

### 3. Control and Discipline

Parental control and disciplinary style have also been associated with adolescent sexual behavior in Latino youth. Hovell, *et al*, investigated mothers' positions on dating rules and concluded that the presence and enforcement of dating rules may delay onset of sexual intercourse.<sup>56</sup> However, the disciplinary style that parents utilize may have important effects on youth behavior. For instance, Puerto Rican youth who characterized their parents' disciplinary style as utilizing cold or indifferent punishments were more likely to be sexually active.<sup>47</sup>

While much research suggests that there is more cultural similarity than variation between racial/ethnic

groups in discipline, especially after controlling for socioeconomic status, some ethnic differences in disciplinary beliefs and practices do exist.<sup>27, 69</sup> National data indicate that compared to African-American, Asian, and White parents, Latino parents place greater importance on their children being independent, exercising self-control, obeying, and getting along with others.<sup>69</sup> They are also less likely to endorse spanking and threatening as effective discipline.<sup>70</sup> In comparison to White parents, ethnic minority parents, including Latinos, may exhibit stricter parenting.<sup>69</sup> Some part of these differences may relate to exposure to difficult urban environments. In neighborhoods with high exposure to community violence and social disorder, tight parental control may represent an adaptive parent strategy that promotes safety, and may be related to more positive outcomes for minority children rather than over-controlling behavior.<sup>71</sup> Research with Mexican-Americans in particular suggests that it is the *combination* of firm or somewhat harsh control with high levels of maternal warmth that may be most effective approach where families are faced with stress related to acculturation.<sup>27</sup> Evidence from an inner-city sample of Latino and African-American boys similarly suggests that the combination of high levels of parenting practice (positive parenting, appropriate discipline, and monitoring) and emotional enrichment were associated with less rule-breaking and aggressive or poor social behavior, and fewer symptoms of anxiety, depression, or attention problems in this high-risk setting.<sup>71</sup>

### 4. Monitoring

Age-appropriate parental monitoring of adolescents' whereabouts protects against intention or actual engagement in sexual intercourse,<sup>53, 72, 73</sup> and other sexual behaviors,<sup>74, 75</sup> across multiple racial and ethnic as well as socio-economic groups. Some work suggests that successful monitoring is related to the strong ties that promote an adolescent's willing disclosure of information to parents as much as,<sup>76</sup> or more than<sup>77, 78</sup> parental tracking and surveillance of adolescent activities.

As is true for the general adolescent population, parental monitoring has protective effects in relation to a range of health-risk behaviors among Latino youth including tobacco, other substance abuse, and delinquent and antisocial behaviors.<sup>65, 79-82</sup> Less is known about the relationship between parental monitoring and sexual activity for Latino youth. A school-based sample of Puerto Rican youth found that increased parental supervision was protective against early onset of sexual activity.<sup>47</sup> A second study with youth largely of Mexican and Central American heritage found parental monitoring to be negatively associated with the number of sexual partners among respondents who were sexually active.<sup>48</sup> Multi-ethnic samples including a substantial number of Latinos have shown a relationship between increased parental monitoring and later age of sexual initiation,<sup>83</sup> and greater condom use for boys.<sup>49</sup> Like other parents, Latino parents may develop specific strategies to monitor or protect their children in challenging social environments. Some parents use strategies like limiting children's friendships and activities, controlling when, where, and with whom they played and went, or by promoting involvement in known activities such as extracurricular participation or church events.<sup>28</sup>

## 5. Traditional Latino Family Values

Traditional Latino values regarding family relationships define how parenting practices occur in Latino families, and should be considered in pregnancy prevention programs. For instance, the values of *familismo*, *respeto*, and *personalismo*, have been shown to contribute to parenting practices that are authoritative.<sup>46</sup> These values can be incorporated into counseling frameworks that support the specific parenting strengths and challenges of Latino families.<sup>84</sup> Additionally, particular values may be singularly important for decisions around reproductive health. For example, *Marianismo*, which implies virtue, stoicism, and elevates the maternal care-giving role, may account for a general Latino family preference to continue

with a teen pregnancy should it occur.<sup>85</sup> *Familismo* has been associated with decreased influence of peers on risk-taking behaviors, including initiation of sexual intercourse.<sup>86</sup> High levels of familism have also been shown to be protective for Latino youth against substance abuse.<sup>37, 81</sup> Given the cultural pattern of using the family as a resource for advice and support, it is not surprising that in addition to communicating with parents, peers, and dating partners, teens rely on their extended family for information about sexual issues.<sup>61</sup> To date however, research has not shown that increased communication with extended family has any beneficial effect on delaying sexual initiation or increasing consistent condom use. One possible explanation is that communication might not necessarily encourage safer sexual behaviors if the information transmitted is inaccurate or incomplete; parents and adult extended family members may be uninformed or have outdated sexual information.<sup>61</sup>

The ultimate influence of "traditional values" on pregnancy prevention is mixed when considered on the community level. Some studies suggest that shared adherence to more traditional Latino cultural norms including commitment to family and the presence of intergenerational families may be protective against teen pregnancy.<sup>87</sup> Similarly, neighborhood-level analysis indicates that high concentrations of Latino families are protective against early sexual initiation.<sup>88</sup> In contrast, authors from a Los Angeles-based study hypothesized that pro-fertility values and the availability of support networks for young parents may explain why high degrees of neighborhood collective efficacy (the degree to which neighborhoods are close knit, and neighbors help each other, get along, watch out for others children, and share values) was protective against unmarried pregnancy rates for non-Latino neighborhoods, but not for Latino neighborhoods.<sup>89</sup>

# Parents, the education system, and adolescent outcomes

Given the strong protective effect of connection to school and school success against early pregnancy, and the elevated high school drop out rates for Latino youth, consideration of Latino parental attitudes about education and experience with the U.S. educational system is important.<sup>90</sup> A qualitative study among highly acculturated Latino teens and their mothers found aspirations for completing high school and college and having a career to be recognized by both mothers and daughters as important.<sup>91</sup> While the value of childbearing was still found to be central, the timing of a family and the need to prevent a pregnancy was considered equally important for both mothers and teens. A study of Latinos in Mexico and the U.S. found that the majority of children had aspirations to attend and finish college, and that parents held high expectations for their children's educational achievements.<sup>28</sup> However, although both groups showed the same amount of involvement in school homework, parent involvement in the type of activities expected by schools (monthly parent meetings, advisory boards, and fundraising activities) was significantly higher in Mexico than in the United States.<sup>28</sup> Immigrant Latino parents may lack cultural knowledge about ways of interacting effectively with schools, creating discontinuity between home and school.<sup>18</sup> Future research should investigate whether a disconnect between parental involvement in the education of their children and the parenting that occurs outside of school may contribute to risky sexual behavior among this population.

# Can parenting interventions influence adolescent sexual behavior?

Parenting interventions have been shown to improve parenting practices, and in some cases, adolescent outcomes. Parenting interventions such as these have the benefit of the dual strategy: enhancing protective factors while reducing risk.<sup>92,93</sup> These create positive impacts on health promotion, the development of assets and competencies, and the reduction of health jeopardizing behaviors.<sup>94-97</sup> Notably, an intervention focused on improving parental monitoring among African-American parents improved monitoring and increased the frequency of discussions about sexuality and adolescent condom use.<sup>98</sup> The addition of this parental monitoring intervention to an adolescent-based intervention was found to enhance protective effects as evidenced by reduced rates of cigarette, alcohol, and illicit drug use.<sup>98,99</sup>

Few Latino-focused parenting programs are described in the available literature, and those that do exist have been largely focused on preventing substance abuse and general delinquency. Given that parenting practices are likely to influence multiple behaviors, consideration of the evaluation evidence for these programs is important. Martinez, *et al.*, utilized a participatory approach to create a parenting-training program specific to the needs of Mexican and Central American immigrant parents in Oregon.<sup>100</sup> Parent participants reported improvement in overall effective parenting, appropriate discipline, and reinforcement of youth pro-social behavior. Adolescent children of these parents reported decreases in aggression, externalizing behaviors, and likelihood of tobacco use. *Families Unidas*, a parent-based, culturally-appropriate, comprehensive substance abuse prevention program in Miami that includes education, peer support, skill development, and opportunities to practice communication techniques and skills with a professional facilitator, has been shown to improve family functioning and decrease adolescent problem behavior.<sup>101</sup> The combination of this program with an HIV training program is reported to be more efficacious at preventing unsafe sexual behavior than a control.<sup>102</sup>

# Summary and research implications

In summary, parental cultural values, communication styles, and discipline and monitoring practices are important considerations when planning and implementing programs to prevent teen pregnancy in Latino adolescents. However, much research and programmatic evaluation is necessary to better understand the relationship between parenting practices and pregnancy prevention for Latino youth, and how clinics, schools, and other organizations can best support those practices. There is a clear need for further research in a number of substantive areas to answer important questions about Latino families:

1. *How well are communities experiencing the more recent settlement of Latino immigrants responding to the needs of newly arrived families?* The shift in immigration patterns during the last decade has brought Latinos to non-traditional settlement areas throughout the U.S.; therefore, “the border” can now be found in all states, and in suburban as well as urban and rural communities. Most research addressing Latino parents and their interaction with the host community comes from more traditional areas for Latino settlement such as the Southwest, New York, and Miami. All states need feedback on how they are responding to families, and means for assessing success in answering the specific needs of immigrants.
2. *What are the key factors in a bicultural parenting model that influence parenting and sexual behavior outcomes?* A comprehensive framework for bicultural parenting should be developed and tested to assess key factors in how parenting practices affect youth sexual outcomes and guide intervention development.
3. *Which specific parenting practices are most influential on Latino adolescent sexual behaviors, and how can programs best address these practices in a culturally relevant manner?* The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy has highlighted a number of programs that are effective in preventing early sexual activity and pregnancy for Latino youth; however, few of these involve parents.<sup>103</sup> Given the vital role that parents play in the lives of Latino youth, more programs integrating parents should be established and evaluated.
4. *How do cultural values relate to establishing parenting practices effective for promoting healthy sexual outcomes*

*for Latino youth?* More research is required to answer how programs can successfully incorporate traditional cultural values into risk reduction interventions.

5. *How do neighborhood and environmental factors influence the transformation of immigrant Latino parents’ cultural values after arrival to the United States with regards to parenting beliefs and practices, and what result does this have on adolescent behavior?* This information may help to separate core Latino parenting values from adaptive or potentially maladaptive responses to hostility, racism, violence, or other stressors. Interventions can then be developed to best empower Latino parents in the context of their social environment.
6. *How does the complex interaction between adolescents who are in transition developmentally and in terms of cultural beliefs, and adults whose cultural beliefs and practices are also in adaptive evolution, lead to patterns of family functioning and adolescent sexual outcomes?* Future research should address when the “acculturation gap” becomes most problematic for families in terms of both the timeline of adolescent development, and the dynamic processes of acculturation for both parent and teen. Pinpointing key sets of factors that are associated with high levels of family stress will help direct the development of effective interventions.

The research results point to a number of areas where advocacy and policy changes may improve services to Latino parents and youth, ultimately resulting in decreased pregnancy rates among the Latino community. Successfully serving Latino teens and their parents will require increased cultural understanding and systems changes that can accommodate their needs and values as a distinctive ethnic group. There is much literature on improving healthcare outcomes by incorporating the core values of the population served into organizational practices.<sup>104</sup> For example, an article that collected the impressions and lessons learned by providers working with Latino youth in pregnancy prevention concludes that part of the challenge is a culture clash between the options/solutions presented by providers and those of their Latino clients.<sup>105</sup> Practitioners working with Latino teenagers need to embrace a systemic approach that considers the values and dynamics of Latino families.



# Provider pearls for working with Latino families

In that way, a truly resiliency-based intervention is likely to result in the strengthening and empowerment of Latino families.

This type of transformation may require consideration of the values that guide clinics, the education system, and community-based organizations. For instance, the United States' healthcare system is defined by the individual-focused values of the mainstream culture, which tends to compartmentalize care, and emphasizes results that can be measured and improved in a short time. To best serve Latino parents and their teens, programs that allow for assessment of family relations and support parent education should be developed and reimbursed. Indeed, one such successful model is prenatal education, which is now an accepted component of clinical practice. All families would benefit from support and education for the significant family transitions which occur with the "arrival" of a teen. Providers, advocates, community leaders and legislators need to keep working toward a transition that places primary care and behavioral care as core, elemental parts of the healthcare system.

In sum, there is much to be done to understand and implement programs to support Latino parents as they guide their adolescent children into adulthood. In addition to information on Latinos in particular, more in depth analysis of differences in parenting attitudes and practices between different Latino populations is important. An understanding of these and related dynamics among Latino populations in the United States may further inform strategies for health promotion, protection, and prevention among a wider array of social groups, as we continue to experience national, regional, and local changes in our demographic composition as a nation. Research into the particular may in fact shed light on broader, universal understandings about ways of assuring the healthy development of all of our young people.

Based on the research reviewed for this article and on the experiences of the two family physician authors who work extensively with Latino youth, we have prepared twelve provider pearls for working with Latino families. These tips have a clinical bent, but are applicable for all practitioners working with Latino families.

1. **Focus on the teen within the family context.** The core Latino value of familism necessitates a family-based approach to adolescent care and preventive services that considers the values and dynamics of Latino families. This requires inclusion of parents and other family in decision-making and consideration of parental authority more than might be necessary for other cultural groups.
2. **Develop creative ways to reach out to extended family.** Extended family members are an untapped resource in Latino families. Involve aunts, uncles, cousins, or other adults to whom teens turn to for advice in clinical or programmatic activities. A trusted extended family member may be an important bridge between parents and teens when conflicts arise.
3. **Ask about individual and family conflicts around acculturation.** Research suggests that conflicts can arise for individuals and within Latino families as adolescents master language skills and familiarity with cultural and institutional values in the United States more rapidly than do their parents. Parents may feel conflicted about how to respect their own values while accommodating those of the mainstream culture. Youth may feel pulled between parental values or identity and a desire to be more "American." These pressures or stress may result in grief, mental health problems, or conflicts and tensions between parents and youth. Additionally, both teens and parents may newly experience racism and discrimination, which adds additional stresses that may impact family health and functioning. It is important that providers acknowledge social inequities, and help families find positive means of response.
4. **Respect parents' language choices.** Understand that differential language abilities between youth and parents may undermine not only a clinical or other encounter, but also parental authority in general. It is therefore imperative to reinforce parental authority by speaking to the parent in their language of choice. Adolescent children should never be used as interpreters. Simple efforts like having materials and questionnaires available to parents in Spanish may encourage parents' involvement, and provide a starting place for other important discussions.



5. **Be personable.** *Personalismo*, or relationships based on warmth, trust, and respect are highly valued in Latino culture. Latino families therefore need to feel that the teacher of their child, their nurse, or their social worker genuinely cares about them. Remembering details such as the names of children or spouses, and asking about them in conversation is a way to express that you care and value the relationship
6. **Discussions regarding confidential medical care should be approached with an understanding of Latino families' cultural values.** Many Latino parents are unfamiliar with the concept of confidential care for teenagers, and may misinterpret it as a threat to their core values of respect for parental decision-making and the sanctity of the family. However, many parents will change their perspective if confidentiality is fully explained in clear and simple language. Latino parents should be reassured that an important goal of confidential discussions is to encourage parent-adolescent communication about sensitive topics. To avoid parent-adolescent misunderstandings and establish that confidentiality is the norm for the care of all teens, it should be explained to the teen and parent together at the first visit, before the provider begins other discussions. (See appendix A for a detailed script of this discussion.)
7. **Provide culturally and linguistically relevant parent education.** Multiple organizations focused on parenting adolescents have noted that most Latino parents are ready and waiting for culturally and linguistically relevant coaching on parenting teens. Providers can support and promote agencies that are developing these programs, and encourage parents to attend.
8. **Immigrant Latino parents may need information on how to allow adolescents to develop independence safely.** Immigrant parents may need guidance to understand normative adolescent activities in the United States. Adolescents need safe opportunities to develop a mature interdependence, but immigrant parents

may not recognize appropriate situations to allow this growth. Those expected expressions of independence and rites of passages that are regarded as culturally normative by many in the U.S. may become a source of stress in a Latino family. One typical example is many parents' negative reaction to the request from their children to go to a sleep-over in the home of a friend. Providers should discuss these anticipated developmental passages and how Latino parents can assure their child's safety (e.g. the need to call the friend's parents prior to an event). Address their fears and help connect Latino teens and children to supervised organized activities (i.e. extra-curricular activities or sports). Parents may need information on how these activities improve their children's skills at school.

9. **Parents may feel isolated socially, and with regard to their parenting beliefs.** Parents may feel isolated in their new community, especially in those areas where Latinos have settled more recently. It is important, therefore, that providers have a strong working relationship with other organizations serving the Latino community. Referrals to other agencies may decrease parents' social isolation and increase their connection to local community resources. These connections may nurture the development of social networks within which parents' beliefs and values can be supported, and their ongoing, meaningful engagement in the lives of their teens can be celebrated.
10. **Given the cultural value placed on motherhood, secondary pregnancy prevention may have a particularly important role for Latinas.** Though statistics support the multiple negative consequences of teen pregnancy, for Latinas, there may also be positive outcomes. The experience of some clinicians suggests that positive transformations in support of the motherhood role may result from a teen pregnancy, such as new motivation to finish school. As with other aspects of adolescent care in Latino families, it is important to involve the

# Appendix A—Script for discussion of confidential medical care

family in the teen's prenatal care and to assist with the transition into new family roles. Once the first child is born, the challenge to practitioners is to utilize those same cultural values to motivate ongoing participation in education and to delay of a second pregnancy. The importance of staying in school in light of modern economic demands should be emphasized to the whole family.

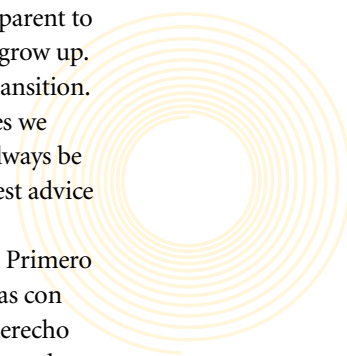
11. **Help parents understand and navigate the educational system.** Research indicates that Latino parents have high educational expectations and aspirations for their children, but they may lack understanding as to how the system works and their expected role in their children's learning. Given the link between educational success and delayed pregnancy, assisting Latino parents in developing this knowledge and skill base is crucial for pregnancy prevention. Investment in community or school-based programs that address these issues for Latino and other immigrant parents is likely to bring significant long-term results in educational and other public health arenas.
12. **Avoid burn-out.** Providers may feel isolated and overburdened when working with underserved populations such as Latinos. Do not reinvent the wheel. Refer and create space to meet other providers who share your mission and passion. Use those opportunities to refresh, share ideas and resources, and recharge. Channel some of the stress into advocacy.

The following is intended as a guide for addressing the concept of confidentiality in a family context, with the provider speaking to both the parent and teen together. This script has been developed by the staff of Aquí Para Ti/Here for You, a Youth Development Clinic-based program for Latino youth and their families, funded by the Eliminating Health Disparities Initiatives of the Office of Minority Health in the Minnesota Department of Health.

"I want you to know that we are going to talk all together first, and then alone with your teen, as your child has the right to a private confidential moment with his/her provider. This means that all the topics and issues that they discuss will stay between them, and that the provider will not disclose that information to anyone, including the teen's parent. This opportunity for a private conversation was created to ensure the teen with "a safe space" where he/she can have questions, doubts, or concerns answered. Sometimes teens don't want to raise these types of questions with their parents, perhaps from feelings of embarrassment or because they don't want to cause their parents to worry. You should know that confidentiality has its limits. If there is any threat to your teen's life or another person's life, I have the duty to inform you.

At the same time, we know how difficult it is for a parent to raise a teen and to do it in a culture where you didn't grow up. Therefore, part of our mission is to help you in this transition. We want to be your partner and even when sometimes we can't discuss certain details about your teen, we will always be there for you: guiding you and giving your teen the best advice possible to protect him/her."

"Queremos explicarles lo que va a pasar y por qué. Primero vamos a hablar todos juntos y luego hablaremos a solas con su hijo/a adolescente, ya que los adolescentes tienen derecho a tener un momento privado y confidencial con el proveedor de salud. Esto quiere decir que la información y los temas de que ellos hablen quedarán entre ellos, y el profesional no lo compartirá con nadie, ni siquiera con los papás. Esto ha sido creado para brindarles a los adolescentes un espacio seguro donde sientan que pueden ser respondidas sus preguntas, dudas o preocupaciones. Sabemos que algunas veces los adolescentes no quieren hacer ciertas preguntas a sus padres, o en presencia de ellos, para no preocuparlos, o porque se avergüenzan, o porque a veces sienten que los pueden defraudar/decepcionar. Pero este derecho a hablar en forma confidencial tiene sus



límites, ya que si yo siento que la vida de su adolescente u otra persona corre peligro, tengo la obligación de informarle para poder hacer un plan para protegerlos.

Al mismo tiempo, sabemos que a veces ser padres de adolescentes puede ser un poco difícil, especialmente cuando los papás tienen que hacerlo en una cultura distinta a la en que ellos mismos crecieron. Parte de nuestra misión es ayudar a los padres con este cambio en la familia. Nosotros queremos acompañarlos en esta tarea como compañeros de equipo, y aun cuando algunas veces no podamos discutir ciertos detalles acerca de la información que su hija/o ha compartido con nosotros, siempre estaremos ahí para ustedes, guiándolos y dando a usted y a su hija/o el mejor apoyo posible para ayudarlos a protegerse.”

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The goal of the National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy is to improve the lives and future prospects of children and families and, in particular, to help ensure that children are born into stable, two-parent families who are committed to and ready for the demanding task of raising the next generation. Our specific strategy is to prevent teen pregnancy and unplanned pregnancy among single, young adults. We support a combination of responsible values and behavior by both men and women and responsible policies in both the public and private sectors.

If we are successful, child and family well-being will improve. There will be less poverty, more opportunities for young men and women to complete their education or achieve other life goals, fewer abortions, and a stronger nation.

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