

Latino teens happier, healthier if families embrace biculturalism

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Over the years, research has shown that Latino youth face numerous risk factors when integrating into American culture, including increased rates of alcohol and substance use and higher rates of dropping out of school.

But a new study from the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill shows adolescents who actively embrace their native culture - and whose parents become more involved in U.S. culture - stand a greater chance of avoiding these risks and developing healthier behaviors overall.

The findings are from a longitudinal study by the UNC-based [Latino Acculturation and Health Project](#), which is supported by the U.S. Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) and directed by Paul Smokowski, Ph.D., an associate professor at the UNC School of Social Work. Researchers interviewed 281 Latino youths and parents in North Carolina and Arizona, asking questions about a wide range of measures of lifestyle and mental health. Participants answered according to how much they agreed with each question (for example, from "not at all" to "very much"), resulting in scores on a scale for each measure.

"We found teens who maintain strong ties to their Latino cultures perform better academically and adjust more easily socially," Smokowski said. "When we repeated the survey a year later, for every 1-point increase in involvement in their Latino cultures, we saw a 13 percent rise in self-esteem and a 12 to 13 percent decrease in hopelessness, social problems and [aggressive behavior](#)."

"Also, the study showed parents who develop a strong bicultural perspective have teen children who are less likely to feel anxiety and face fewer social problems," he said. "For every increase in a parent's involvement in United States culture, we saw a 15 to 18 percent decrease in adolescent social problems, aggression and anxiety one year later. Parents who were more involved in U.S. culture were in a better position to proactively help their adolescents with peer relations, forming friendships and staying engaged in school. This decreases the chances of social problems arising."

"Such results suggest that Latino youth and their parents benefit from biculturalism," Smokowski said.

The findings are presented as part of a series of articles featured next month in a special issue of Springer's journal *The Journal of Primary Prevention*, a collaborative initiative between UNC and the CDC. The special issue presents the latest research on how cultural adaptation influences Latino youth behaviors - including involvement in violence, smoking and substance use, as well as overall emotional well-being - and offers suggestions for primary prevention programs that support minority families.

"Bicultural adolescents tend to do better in school, report higher self esteem, and experience less anxiety, depression and aggression," said study co-author Martica Bacallao, Ph.D., an assistant professor at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, whose work is also featured in the special issue. "It is interesting that, in order to obtain these benefits of biculturalism, adolescents and parents often need to do the opposite of what their natural tendencies tell them. Parents who are strongly tied to their native cultures must reach out to learn skills in the new culture. Adolescents who quickly soak up new cultural behaviors should slow down and cultivate the richness in their native cultures."

Smokowski added: "The burgeoning size of the Latino population and the increasingly important roles that Latino youth will play in American culture are worthy of community attention. Communities can either invest in prevention to nurture Latino youth as a national resource or pay a heavy price later in trying to help these youth address social problems such as substance use, aggression or dropping out of school; all of which often results from the stress of acculturation."

More information: www.springerlink.com/content/0278-095X

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