

Young Latino children show strong classroom skills, despite many growing up in poverty

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Immigrant Latinos display strong parenting practices and raise socially agile children, but these early gains are likely to be eroded by mediocre schools and peer pressure in poor neighborhoods, according to findings published by the American Psychological Association.

In a special section of the journal [Developmental Psychology](#), a team of researchers examines how no-nonsense parenting practices - especially Latino traditions of strict discipline, respect for adults and strong family bonds - shape children's social and cognitive growth and their assimilation into mainstream culture.

"Immigrant kids begin school with surprisingly good social skills, eager to engage teachers and classroom tasks, even though many are raised in poor households," said Bruce Fuller, PhD, of the University of California at Berkeley, who co-edited the special section. "This stems from tight families and tough-headed parenting. Our findings shatter the myth that immigrant or low-income parents necessarily produce troubled children."

One study, based on 19,500 kindergartners nationwide, found that Latino children engaged in classroom activities and displayed cooperative skills at levels equal to those of white non-Latino children, despite vast differences in family income between the groups. In addition, Latino children's social skills contributed to their learning about numbers and

mathematical concepts during this first year of school, the researchers found.

But children's social agility and classroom enthusiasm often wanes by middle school, according to the researchers. "These children benefit from a strong foundation against outside negative forces, which contributes to their early school achievement but fades over time, especially during adolescence," said Cynthia García Coll, PhD, of Brown University, co-editor of the special section. "Assimilation places many children at risk of losing tight bonds to family and [experiencing] school failure."

The national study of Latino kindergartners included teacher reports of five social competencies: engaged approaches to learning, self-control, interpersonal skills, internalized problem behaviors (anxiety, loneliness, low self-esteem) and externalized problem behaviors (propensity to argue, get angry, act impulsively). "Those Latino children who were the best at focusing on learning tasks showed the steepest learning curves in math," said Claudia Galindo, PhD, a University of Maryland professor who co-directed the study.

The scientists discovered wide Latino-white gaps in 5-year-olds' knowledge of numbers and mathematical concepts. But the children's social skills and eagerness to take on classroom tasks were just shy of being statistically equal to those of their white non-Latino peers. In the first year of school, children raised in bilingual homes displayed more concentrated learning, after taking into account a variety of family background factors.

Children from African-American homes did not show comparable levels of classroom engagement and social agility. "Poverty alone does not explain the strength of parenting or the social assets that children bring to school," Fuller said. "Culture and language growth play a huge role in

boosting achievement, which we now see benefit many Latino children."

Children from Puerto Rican families, in contrast to those of Mexican heritage, showed disparities in social competence when compared to white non-Latino children. Children of Cuban or South American descent (whose parents had higher education levels, on average) showed equal competence when compared to white non-Latino children.

Two additional studies in the journal's special section show how early gains for [Latino children](#) can be undercut during adolescence through peer pressure, weak schools and the perception of ethnic discrimination. In the first study, Latino teens who pulled away from parents and their ethnic identity displayed weaker school engagement (Umaña-Taylor and Guimond). When teens perceived ethnic or racial discrimination, they tended to retain stronger family ties that strengthened their ethnic identity, the researchers found.

The second study - tracking 294 older Latino and Asian immigrant children - found that those attending highly segregated or violent schools went downhill in their own school achievement (Suárez-Orosco and others). The rising rate of single-parent families in many immigrant communities is associated with a drop in children's school performance.

Other findings include:

- Young Latino children's enthusiasm and agility in classrooms stems from warm yet firm [parenting practices](#) (Livas-Dlott and others). Researchers observed 25 Mexican-American 4-year-olds inside their homes and found that mothers on average were clear and direct when children misbehaved or failed to complete an assigned task. This tough-love parenting occurred within a supportive climate, nurturing cooperative children who expressed

mutual obligations to family members, researchers said.

- Another study shows how strong customs from one's native country can promote learning by teaching children to pay attention to what is going on in front of them (Lopez and others). Researchers gave instructions to 38 6- to 11-year-old siblings in order to examine differences in learning processes between those raised under Mexican traditions and those raised by parents who practiced American customs. Children paid more attention to their siblings' activities and learned a novel task more readily when living in homes where Mexican customs were practiced. [Children](#) paid less attention to their siblings, and learned less, when living in homes where Western traditions and individualistic practices prevailed.
- Researchers surveyed 15,362 African-American, Latino and Asian tenth- graders from 752 schools about their understanding of how racial and socioeconomic barriers affect their expectations for well-paying jobs (Diemer and others). Two years later, the researchers asked the students about their extracurricular activities, school achievement, community participation and vocational expectations. Reading and math achievement had the strongest effect on the students' expectation of winning high-paying jobs, while awareness of racial and economic barriers had the strongest effect on the value that students placed on work.

Provided by American Psychological Association

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