

# Helping Latino families transition to child care

José, a 4-year-old boy, has moved with his family from Mexico to Texas. Because both of his parents work during the day, they have enrolled him in a child care program near their home. José understands Spanish but knows little English. Although he enjoys interacting with other children, he often does not know what to do when the teacher informs children to move to the next activity. Because his parents work all day and are new to Texas culture, they do not interact much with teachers and other parents in the program.

How can his teacher best respond to José and his family?



When Hispanics or Latinos (the terms *Hispanic* and *Latino* will be used interchangeably in this article) decide to leave their home country to reside in the United States, the entire family immediately

faces changes and challenges. The employment, housing, language, and education of children are a few major areas in which quick adjustments need to be made. Actually, some family members may be apart from each other for several years until they are able to reunite. These factors are closely associated with cultural change (Lui and Rollock 2011).

Furthermore, some parents with limited English proficiency and financial resources may encounter hardships during the initial adjustment period that can directly affect their children's development. Social support from the community, including caregivers and teachers, can be critical to ensure optimal development and transition of Latino families. If not done in a timely fashion, the transition can create adjustment issues for young children that can make their parents' lives even more stressful.

## Latinos: A fast growing population

The fastest growing minority population in the United States is the people who identify their origin as Hispanic or Latino (Ennis, Ríos-Vargas, and Albert 2011). U.S. Census data from 2000 to 2010 shows the Hispanic population has increased by 43 percent (Ennis, Ríos-Vargas, and Albert 2011). This is a significant increase that is projected to continue.

Based on this report, 16 percent of the entire U.S. population self-identified as Hispanic or Latino. Out of 50 million Latinos in the nation, 18.7 percent (almost 9.5 million people) reside in Texas. In addition, the largest subgroup of Hispanics is Mexican Americans at 63 percent.

As a consequence, programs—including education and child care—will see an increase in the number of Latinos participating. Respecting this demographic and economic trend, child care programs and teachers, along with other social service providers, would

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be wise to develop policies that encourage and support working as partners with families to ensure a quality experience for children.

## Immigrants and child care

A number of studies of immigrant families and their experiences with child care provide clues for how we can support Latino families as they transition into early care and education programs.

Nergaard (2009) studied families that had accepted an offer of free half-day child care for their 4- and 5-year-old children in Oslo, Norway. The immigrant families came largely from East Asia and the Middle East. The experiment took place over six years with about 650 children participating, including siblings of the original group. Child care staff exchanged information with parents in the morning, invited them to join in activities, held meetings and celebrations (such as religious festivals), and encouraged participation in monthly coffee break activities. The study found that most parents were happy not just because the service was free but also because their children began learning the Norwegian language and had access to activities and a playground. The teachers, some of whom had multicultural and multilingual backgrounds, reported that children benefitted from knowing Norwegian in their acquisition of knowledge and social interaction with other children.

Oberg (2007) examined child care preferences of African immigrant parents in the Midwestern United States. The author found that several of the 18 surveyed parents preferred family members to care for children in their own homes in an effort to reinforce their native African identity. The majority of their children, however, were in child care because many of the parents were students and needed study time. In addition, they wanted their children to socialize with other children, learn English, and succeed academically. The author concluded that culture is a powerful tool in making decisions about child care and that child care programs need to incorporate children's cultural practices in their daily activities.

Fischer, Harvey, and Driscoll (2009) surveyed 98 Latina immigrant mothers in the Boston and Washington, D.C., metropolitan area who had at least one child between 1 and 12 years old, to examine their perception of qualities essential for being a successful parent. As the authors explained, evidence

indicates two values common among Latino parents are *familismo*, a way of life that focuses on the family and interdependence, and *respeto*, the display of proper demeanor and respect for elders and authority. This study affirmed the prevalence of those two values and also noted that Latina mothers did not view economic resources as a priority for being a good parent. By contrast, U.S. families valued individualism and independence. The authors suggested that the difference could cause stress for Latina mothers and inhibit their integration into the dominant culture.

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## LEARN MORE ABOUT *FAMILISMO* AND *RESPETO* TO SHOW APPRECIATION OF LATINO CULTURE.

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Uttal (2010) coined the term *liminal cultural work* to describe a state of limbo in which people from two different cultures negotiate an exchange of values. The author chose to explore this concept by looking at Latina immigrant family child care providers—that is, women caring for other people's children in their own homes—based on her work with a project in Madison, Wis., to increase the number of certified Spanish-speaking family child care providers. As the caregivers reconciled the differences between their child-rearing beliefs and practices with those of the larger society, they came up with a way of synthesizing the best of both worlds while retaining their own traditions and values.

Koury and Votruba-Drzal (2014) used national data to explore the relationship between parents' country of origin and a child's reading and math skills at age 5, as well as the contribution of home and non-parental care to early academic skills. The authors found wide variances between parents' nationality and their children's school readiness. The highest scoring group were children of East Asian parents, while the lowest scoring were children of Mexican, Central American and Spanish Caribbean parents. The authors explained that the variances were largely due to differences in child, socioeconomic, and family characteristics and that early

home environments and non-parental care played a modest role.

## Tips for adjustment

The literature suggests a number of ways that caregivers and teachers can enhance the transition of Latino families to child care and the classroom.

- Review and be familiar with children's backgrounds through their enrollment paperwork and parent-teacher conference summary reports.
- Talk with the family about their goals for children while in the program. If a goal is to become bilingual, talk about how teachers and parents can work together to develop dual language skills. You might label classroom items and read books in English and Spanish, for example. In addition to helping Spanish speakers learn English, you will also be helping English speakers (teachers and children) learn Spanish.
- Designate a teacher to provide a brief, verbal report to the parents about the adjustment and progress of their child at the end of each day. The teacher may point out the child's artwork or other projects the child particularly enjoyed. This teacher can also update what the parents like to see in their child's development. Besides a daily report, the teacher can give parents weekly announcements, possibly in Spanish, so they will know what to expect in upcoming activities or events.
- Invite one or both parents to spend extra time at drop-off or pick-up in an activity with their child and the other children. The parent may spend 10-15 minutes looking at a picture book with children, for example. Such activity can increase a sense of involvement and stability for the child in the new environment.
- Invite a parent to bring a couple of items from the Latino culture to talk about during show-and-tell time as part of a week's curriculum. Parents can talk about Cinco de Mayo, which celebrates Mexico's victory over the French in Puebla in 1862, for example, or demonstrate how to make tortillas or tamales. Their perspective can educate children about different cultures that exist in the world.
- Create a handout that lists local libraries, YMCA, non-profit agencies, children's programs at local churches, and family friendly stores that can help families and their children in a new cultural home.
- Work with other Latino parents, particularly those who have been in the United States much longer, to provide social support. Those parents can offer useful information and guidance about what newly arrived parents can expect from the teachers and how parents can partner with them.
- Learn more about *familismo* and *respeto* to show appreciation of Latino culture. This collaborative partnership can become a learning and trusting experience for both teachers and Latino parents. Teachers can know how to serve Latino families better and, in return, Latino parents will learn how to work with teachers to help children develop in a positive manner.
- Be patient with new immigrant parents and their children as they move into the new culture. Keep an open mind and recognize that both cultures have much to offer each other.

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## A growing partnership for young children

Young children need a stable home environment in order to explore other places, including early care and education programs, to achieve optimal development (Berns 2013). Moving to a new country can threaten the stability of a child's development, particularly when parents are new to the community or under financial stress.

Risk factors that are most likely to influence young children's development are stressful events that change daily routines, the frequency of stressful events, and the emotional unavailability of parents

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or caregivers (Osofsky and Chartrand 2013). Supportive partnerships with Latino parents help create the stable environment to ensure current and future developmental success.

BE PATIENT WITH NEW IMMIGRANT PARENTS  
AND THEIR CHILDREN AS THEY MOVE  
INTO THE NEW CULTURE.

The early care and education experience then can benefit children, parents, and teachers. Quality programs do much more than care for children when parents are working; they are a safe place for parents and teachers to work together to learn about each other and the strengths of each culture. Teachers can become better prepared to deal with a growing Hispanic population, and immigrant families can begin to trust new people in a new country, resulting in a win-win situation.

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