

Engaging Latino Families

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Introduction

Engaging Latino families involved in the child welfare system requires the planning and delivery of an array of comprehensive and culturally competent services and programs. The lack of knowledge of the cultural needs, values, and strengths of these families often leads to assumptions and misconceptions that can weaken the quality of services. That system must have culturally competent child welfare practitioners who are committed to work actively with these families to achieve safety, stability, and permanency planning for children and youth. Moreover, we all have to come together through collaborations involving our local communities, academia, private and non-profit organizations, and government to assess the child welfare system's readiness to engage Latino children and youth and their families and its effectiveness in serving them.

While Latino communities share many characteristics and values, they are diverse in terms of race, national origin, language, religion, educational background, socio-economic factors, traditions, lifestyles, immigration experiences, and citizenship status, among others. Acknowledging diversity within the Latino population represents a step in the right direction but will itself not lead to a more culturally responsive practice. Child welfare practitioners and managers need to build on this recognition and emphasize the importance of expanding their knowledge and skills for planning and implementing culturally competent services that could address the needs and strengths of this population. The task brings serious challenges,

undoubtedly, that require a degree of self-awareness, receptivity, and openness as well as the willingness to find and support innovative ways to reach out to the Latino community and engage them to work collaboratively towards the safety, stability, and welfare of its children and youth.

This chapter discusses guidelines for developing a culturally competent practice in the child welfare system, focusing on the work with Latino families in their communities. First, a socio-demographic overview of the Latino populations living in the United States is presented, followed by a discussion of their cultural values and assets. The chapter then outlines the main components of a cultural competence model, proposing this approach as a practice to engage Latino families in a meaningful way that values and appreciates the richness and diversity of their culture. Hopefully, it will promote critical thinking and an open dialogue about the implications for developing a culturally competent practice in child welfare organizations.

Socio-Demographic Overview

Latinos are the largest and fastest growing ethnic group in the United States. According to the 2010 Census, 50.5 million individuals, comprising sixteen percent of the United States population, self-reported to be of Hispanic or Latino origin. This suggests a growth of 15.2 million Latinos in the past decade, accounting for more than half of the total population growth in the United States. Most Latinos reported to live in the states of Arizona, California, Colorado, Florida, Illinois, New Jersey, New York, and Texas, but there was considerable population growth in every state, notably in Arkansas, Georgia, Nebraska, Nevada, North Carolina, and Tennessee (U.S. Bureau of Census 2010).

The term “Latino” is typically used to refer to all people who live in the United States and share a common Latin American ancestry, with sets of accompanying characteristics and values. Importantly, the term does not denote race, as Latinos may be of any racial and ethnic background. Geographically, Latinos are associated with individuals and families that come from over nineteen different countries, including: Argentina, Bolivia, Colombia, Costa Rica, Cuba, Chile, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, El Salvador, Guatemala, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama, Paraguay, Peru, Puerto Rico, Uruguay, and Venezuela. According to the 2010 Census, the three largest Latino sub-groups in the U.S. are Mexicans, which account for 31.8 million, followed by Puerto Ricans and Cubans. Growing rapidly are other immigrant groups that have come from countries in Central and South America.

Within Latino families the Spanish language, culture, and traditions are usually cherished and transmitted from generation to generation (Delgado 2007). Nevertheless, the language spoken at home may vary depending on each family’s country of origin and linguistic region (Zuniga 2001). For example, some Latinos speak Quechua, which is an indigenous language spoken by large numbers of people in South American countries. Moreover, Spanish may be spoken as a first language or as a second language or may not be spoken at all in the home. Religious practices may also vary. While many Latinos are thought to be Roman Catholics, many families identify themselves as Christians, Jews, Jehovah’s Witnesses, and Pentecostals, among other religious affiliations. Furthermore, a significant number of Latinos practice rituals influenced by their African and/or indigenous heritage and beliefs such as *Santería* and *Espiritismo* (Negroni-Rodríguez & Morales 2001). Likewise, there are Latinos who are spiritual, but are not religious.

Immigration experiences and citizenship status vary among Latino families. Although immigration and citizenship status tend to be wrongly assumed (i.e., non-citizen) by the individual's appearance, socio-economic background, language proficiency, and/or speech accent, the fact is that many Latinos living in the United States are documented and have a legal status to live and remain in the United States (Earner 2007). While some Latino immigrants lack documentation, it is important to note that they still have rights within the U.S. legal system. Nevertheless, Latino families' own fear and concern about their immigration and citizenship status often prevent them from accessing and using needed services to which they may be legally entitled (Dettlaff, Earner, & Phillips 2009).

Cultural values and assets

Staff in child welfare services must understand how cultural values can affect decision-making in daily life. Delgado (2007) emphasizes that practitioners working with Latinos should start from the position of understanding family and community assets as resources. This approach can enhance problem solving and the process of seeking help, including how families are empowered to use resources within the child welfare system. For instance, systems theory, the ecological model, and the strengths perspective could be applied as part of the process for identifying the resources and assets that Latinos have, regardless of their needs, within their own families and community. The use of the resilience model can also influence significantly the child welfare practice on a number of levels to enhance a participatory approach among Latino families, especially recent immigrants.

Latino families tend to share strong interpersonal values of *respeto* (respect), *personalismo* and *símpatia* (personalism), as well as *confianza* (trust) that establish communication and build significant relationships (Negroni-Rodríguez & Morales 2001). In

addition, the values of *familia* (familism) and *cooperación* and *colectivismo* (cooperation and collectivism) underline the importance of empathy and mutual aid by establishing strong bonds with extended family members, neighbors, and community members (Zuniga 2001). The opinions and support of grandparents, aunts, uncles, and godparents are often part of the safety net and taken into consideration at a time of making important life decisions. This sense of cooperation and collectivism is considered an important community asset for confronting limitations and overcoming difficult times (Delgado 2007).

Challenges and Needs

Although little is known about the actual number of immigrant children and youth involved in the child welfare system, it has been suggested that their numbers are increasing, especially in the long-term foster care population (Earner 2007). This uncertainty gets complicated by the limited research on the risk factors that call Latino families to the attention of child welfare services as well as their patterns of service utilization once they are in the system (Dettlaff, Earner, & Phillips 2009) Recent literature, however, has pointed to a number of factors that could contribute to the need for Latino families to receive child welfare services, especially those who are immigrants. For instance, they may be at risk of encountering disruptions in family life due to the stress and difficulties faced by the immigration experience, including the isolation and uncertainty of the process of new settlement (Altman & Michael 2007; Earner 2007). Stresses associated with poverty, lack of adequate health care, food, housing, education, and employment opportunities, among others, result in the need for multiple services that are linguistically and culturally responsive (Dettlaff & Rycraft 2010; Gutiérrez, Yeakley, & Ortega 2000; Negroni-Rodríguez & Morales 2001).

It brings great concern that Latino families in need of services underutilize and/or are underserved by the child welfare system and other systems of care for a variety of complex reasons. Some factors mentioned in the literature are related to: (a) the stigma of the child welfare system in the community; (b) fear of being discriminated against; (c) lack of familiarity and understanding of the child welfare system's procedures and policies; (d) lack of culturally and linguistically sensitive services and resources that could respond to family's needs and strengths; and (d) lack of knowledge and skills to deal with diversity in a holistic manner (Altman & Michael 2007; Dettlaff, Earner, & Phillips 2009; Earner 2007; Rivera 2002). In addition, the lack of attention to organizational behaviors and attitudes towards issues of racism, oppression, and discrimination could seriously affect the development of policies, programs, and services that should be culturally responsive. Some examples of such misdirected policies would be: standards for foster and adoptive parents that have the effect of excluding extended family members; the misinterpretation of parents' behavior; and assumptions based on a family's language proficiency that could result on their exclusion from the planning and decision-making process.

Often Latino families involved in the child welfare system also receive services from other systems of care, making it necessary to address services in a collaborative and coordinated manner (Ortiz-Hendricks 2005) as this case study illustrates:

La Familia Santos

Mirabel and Carlos Santos have been married for 15 years. The Santos' moved from Puerto Rico to New York City in 1980, and live in the East Harlem section of Manhattan. Mirabel works in her home, Carlos works as medical technician at Metropolitan Hospital in their community. The Santos' have three children, Paula age 12 years, Tiago age 10 years, and Liliana age 3 year. Paula and Tiago are in the local public school; Liliana is developmentally disabled and has been enrolled in the NY Child Study Center for early childhood intervention education in Queens outside of their community

Mirabel is the primary caretaker of the children and takes Liliana to all of her appointments. One of the requirements of the NY Child Study Center is that all family members engage in weekly on-going family therapy. Mirabel and the other children are ready to attend in spite of the difficulties that this requirement poses to them, but Carlos has difficulty attending because of his job hours, the distance to the Center from his job, and finally, because he feels uncomfortable in an environment which requires that he speak English. Carlos feels that he can best express himself in his first language, which, is Spanish, but a Spanish-speaking therapist is unavailable to meet with them. This causes a stress in the family system and in the family's ability to access culturally competent services which are accessible for all family members and within their community

Such collaborations must identify and work across different disciplines and many levels of information and sources, including help-seeking behaviors, language and communication styles, disclosure of information, and support systems practices, among others (Dettlaff & Rycraft 2010). Working collaboratively with other systems of care is an important step towards making services more accessible and responsive to the cultural and linguistic needs of Latino families.

Moreover, child welfare collaborations or coalitions must involve Latino families, communities, academia, private organizations, and government to systematically assess cultural competency issues and embark on problem-solving efforts (Dawson & Berry 2002). Far from working in isolation, the child welfare system should actively seek opportunities to convene representatives from different sectors to evaluate the effectiveness of current policies and programs as well as marshal available resources for services that are more responsive to the needs and strengths of Latino families in their communities. Effective child welfare collaborations can produce very beneficial results, such as opening communication among all involved in the case assessment and permanency planning efforts and potentially reducing the duplication of services (Rivera 2002).

Culturally Competent Practice

Cultural competence has been described as a set of behaviors, attitudes, skills, policies, and organizational structures which come together as a paradigm or model enabling professionals to work effectively in cross-cultural situations (Lum 1999). The development of a culturally competent practice in the child welfare system needs to be a proactive decision supported by management and staff at all levels. This is not a skill that will be acquired in a series of monthly workshops but rather an ongoing effort that requires the intentional, continuous expansion of cultural knowledge, skills, and resources. This process should be adequately supervised and guided by clear ethical standards of practice along with opportunities to train child welfare staff over an extended period of time.

Engaging in a culturally competent process results in an ability to understand, communicate with, and effectively interact with people across cultures in a respectful and accepting manner. It requires a sense of empathy and genuine interest in learning about the stories, immigration experiences, and perceptions of others. In working with Latino families, it is important to create nourishing environments where families feel safe to open up about their feelings and fears. While some cultural guidelines might be helpful in assessing and intervening with these families, practitioners must remember that each family is unique and different. As an important principle for engaging Latino families, child welfare practitioners must provide the space for families to define themselves and their communities of support rather than stereotyping them or making assumptions based upon nationality, immigrant status, and language proficiency, among others (Altman 2008; Rycraft & Dettlaff 2009).

A cultural competence model usually includes the following components: (a) self-awareness, (b) recognition of attitudes towards cultural differences, (c) knowledge of different

cultural practices, and (d) cross-cultural skills (Lum 1999). Self awareness is crucial to working with the complexities of a multicultural setting such as the child welfare system. If awareness reflects a consciousness of one's own racial and cultural heritage, personal values, beliefs, and reactions to people who are different, then staff in child welfare organizations should reflect on the possible prejudices and stereotypes that they may have about those who are different than themselves. Indeed, self-awareness helps us to start moving away from biased perceptions that may be long held. The self-reflection requires us to be honest and humble as well as commit to do the hard work that is necessary for undoing racism and liberating ourselves from discrimination and oppression. The recognition and assessment of individual and organizational attitudes regarding groups different from our own must be part of the ongoing process of becoming culturally competent.

The belief that culture makes no difference and that traditional intervention approaches are universally applicable to all families demonstrates a cultural blindness that will undermine the effectiveness of child welfare policies and programs (Netting & O'Connor 2003). Nevertheless, many child welfare organizations have moved from being “culturally blind” to a stage that might be called cultural pre-competence where staffs realize shortcomings in working with cross-cultural populations. As part of this shift, it has been observed that some agencies, for example, recruit and hire Latino persons to the agency staff, board of directors, or advisory committee. While encouraging staff diversity, it must be stressed that this activity alone will not make the agency culturally competent. Sometimes when personnel are hired as part of a strategy to attain organizational diversity, they may be excluded from key decision making roles, setting false expectations and losing valuable opportunities for broader thinking and experience among core management (Kettner 2002). Similarly, when staff persons are asked to attend a one-time

retreat or training on the topic of cultural diversity, the event may introduce some cross-cultural knowledge and outreach skills in the service area, but this activity by itself will not achieve cultural competency. Shallow or under-resourced efforts will not make for meaningful impact in this arena.

Having a culturally competent practice in child welfare organizations means accepting, respecting and appreciating differences, and valuing other cultures. It means having staff at all levels embark on a process of continuous self- assessment regarding culture and race as well as enhance their critical thinking about the dynamics of power. Certainly, the staff along with the organization must possess a genuine interest and desire to expand their cultural knowledge, skills, and resources (Kettner 2002). With those objectives, child welfare organizations should commit to searching for necessary resources and adapting the services to ensure cultural relevance in the communities where they are located (Netting & O'Connor 2003). Recommendations include integrating a variety of activities, such as working with specialists in culturally competent practices; hiring and integrating culturally diverse staff in program planning activities; ensuring that practitioners have the linguistic skills to communicate with families; conducting research on new culturally competent interventions and approaches; advocating for cultural competence throughout the child welfare system; and developing inter-agency and cross-sector collaborations (Earner 2007; Ortiz-Hendricks 2005; Rivera & Earner 2006).

Implications for Practice

For Latino families involved in the child welfare system to successfully engage and actively participate in the helping process toward change, services must respond to their cultural needs and strengths (Altman & Michael 2007; Dawson & Berry 2002). This response typically requires opening up the relationships between staff and clients. It also frequently demands that

child welfare practitioners engage with families in the places where they live, that is, in their local communities (Rycraft & Dettlaff 2010). This community-based approach, specifically one that focuses on the assets of families and their extended support systems, dovetails with a cultural competence model.

Family engagement

As engagement is an interpersonal process involving empathy, commitment and the building of trust or *confianza* in the helping relationship, it does not occur overnight (Negroni-Rodríguez & Morales, 2001). Child welfare practitioners must be flexible, open, and willing to accept the engagement as a mutual learning process—this is an attitude that informs practice. The work environment needs to foster respect, curiosity, and acceptance. Once *confianza* is obtained, it is important to begin to negotiate the structure, characteristics, and extent of the family's engagement and participation in the case planning process. Some would argue that while establishing that level of trust, the process of engagement has already begun (Altman 2008). With this approach, we can shed greater light on the issues of racism, prejudice, discrimination and oppression toward the Latino community and others. When practitioners open up, they can recognize more readily that despite the issues that may bring families to the attention of the child welfare agencies, these same families are experts on their own families. As such they need to be actively involved in planning and making decisions for their children and youth.

Preparing staff at all levels for this work requires ongoing training. The asset-based approach mentioned earlier, when implemented, demands that child welfare practitioners listen and learn about the cultures of the persons they seek to engage in the helping process. When working with Latino immigrants, for example, it means learning about the culture of their home countries, understanding their immigrant status and experiences, their reasons for migration, and

the ways that migration has impacted family dynamics (Dettlaff, Earner, & Phillips 2009; Dettlaff & Rycraft 2010). Training for workers who deal with immigrant populations should be about understanding the migration experience and identifying strengths that families have to cope with stressful situations within the family, among other important issues (Altman & Michael 2007; Earner 2007). With training, reinforcement, and appropriate supervision, practitioners can apply active listening skills to their interactions with families and identify which strengths and resources can be utilized in the help-seeking and intervention processes towards change.

The importance of community relations and community involvement

The importance that Latinos tend to put into community relations can be a strong source of support, and this recognition brings implications for child welfare practice. Staff should explore how these systems of support could influence family help-seeking behaviors and their capacity to achieve service plans' goals. Delgado (2007) offers an analytical lens to assess the broader community level engagement, noting four main factors: 1) the level of service provision and willingness of local community organizations to get involved; 2) agency capability, such as having culturally competent staff; 3) relationship with the community (positive, neutral, negative); and, 4) willingness to collaborate.

Finding innovative ways to integrate the community in different efforts-- such as child abuse prevention campaigns--requires a willingness to think outside of the box, or at least get staff out of the office. While census data, questionnaires, surveys, interviews, and ecological-maps are useful instruments to gather information, walks around the neighborhoods, attendance to town meetings, and visits to local establishments are important. Some staff members in child welfare organizations do not know the neighborhoods where they work, but they should.

Talking with community leaders and members to make themselves familiar with the local history, cultural traditions, and values can add real value to the child welfare practice. Staff personnel at all levels may be delighted by the receptivity of community members when the latter are approached by respectful and sympathetic listeners. When families are given the right opportunity, they can share information related to their problems, help-seeking patterns, and sources of support.

The practice of going into and learning about the local community helps build cultural competence. In addition to “walking around,” more formal types of assessment and interaction should be planned. Along with other service agencies in the community, child welfare organizations can undertake community assessments (sometimes called “environmental scans”), employ asset-mapping exercises, and participate in local cultural events. Through these activities the agency raises staff visibility as they express a genuine interest in getting to know the community where their families live (Rivera 2002). They also begin to better understand the inter-related systems of care that exist through a network of extended family, neighbors, and local leaders.

From this work, it becomes more apparent that opening to and involving community organizations into child welfare practices require an emphasis on inter-disciplinary and cross-sector collaboration (Rycraft & Dettlaff 2009). A commitment on the part of agencies to embrace different constituencies and sectors (public, private, and nonprofit) must be at the base of that effort. Beyond wishful thinking about diversity, agencies need to create real opportunities to involve the families and communities in the governance and decision-making concerning certain agency practices (Kettner 2002). But, without administrative adaptations and changes by the agency, partnerships between families and communities and the child welfare agency that

serves them will not develop. As practitioners, supervisors, and policy advisors, we can advocate for these changes now.

Expanding our knowledge base

Still, more research is needed on a variety of important points. We need to know more about the factors that bring Latinos families into the child welfare system, their help-seeking behaviors, and their service utilization patterns (Earner 2007). We also need to understand the challenges that the child welfare system has in reaching out to them; possible reasons that may influence under-utilization and under-service must be seriously examined (Dettlaff & Rycraft 2009). Furthermore, as there is a need for more coordinated and integrated services across different systems of care, we need to expand our knowledge base on the development and evaluation of collaborative initiatives involving a variety of public and private agencies and community sectors.

Further research on staff training and capacity building is needed to incorporate best practices related to the planning and delivery services in a coordinated and integrated manner. We need to turn the lens on our own knowledge, skills, and attitudes towards culturally diverse populations. We need trainings that enable staffs at child welfare organizations to become more open to other cultures, more active listeners, and more involved in the communities where they work with Latino families. Finally, we need rigorous evaluations of training to tell us what kinds of training works best as well as evaluations of the child welfare agencies' practice in order to better identify the ways in which service organizations must change to provide an environment where a culturally competent practice can thrive.

Conclusion

Child welfare practitioners and policy makers committed to developing a culturally competent practice will find the process of working with and learning from the Latino community very exciting and rewarding. In this path, the significant degree of diversity within the Latino population will be seen not as a hurdle but as a tremendous opportunity to engage families and communities in working together towards the safety and well being of children and youth. This chapter has briefly discussed the organizational and practical components of a cultural competency model, with its emphases on asset-based and community-oriented approaches.

Developing cultural competence is a dynamic and evolutionary process that includes not only self-awareness but also a purposeful expansion of knowledge and skills. The fundamental precepts of cultural competence include respecting and valuing differences among participants. A culturally competent approach to services requires that policy makers, managers, and practitioners at all levels examine and potentially transform each component of the child welfare system to respond more effectively to the needs and strengths of Latino families. Hopefully, this chapter will promote a dialogue and foster bridges of communication that can help us to unite forces towards a shared goal, which is the safety and well-being of all our children and youth.

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