

# Child Discipline and Physical Abuse in Immigrant Latino Families: Reducing Violence and Misunderstandings

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*This article examines common areas of misunderstanding between professionals and low-income Latino families concerning issues of physical abuse. It argues that low-income immigrant children deserve the same protection from harsh physical punishment as all other children. This article suggests culturally competent ways for counselors to work with Latino families to eliminate all forms of violence toward children including corporal punishment. Finally, this article argues that the systemic stresses on low-income Latino immigrant families must be acknowledged and reduced when addressing child discipline and abuse.*

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Latino parents who engage in harsh physical discipline need help, but they are far from homogeneous and their needs vary. Some are loving and devoted parents who practice traditional forms of child rearing that may include an authoritarian style and harsh corporal punishment, side by side with high levels of intimacy and support. Some Latino parents are incorrectly accused of abusing or neglecting their children because non-Latino professionals are puzzled by their unfamiliar yet harmless practices. Finally, some Latino parents, like parents from other groups, punish their children in cruel and malicious ways that would be considered abusive in any culture. This article aims to help counselors work more effectively with low-income immigrant Latino families on issues of discipline and physical abuse.

The literature on Latinos and child abuse is contradictory and inadequate. Problems include reporting biases (Ards, Chung, & Myers, 1998), failure to distinguish between culture and poverty (Zayas, 1992), and ethnic lumping (Fontes, 1995) in which researchers study Latinos from vastly different backgrounds and experiences as if they were a monolithic group. Despite these limitations, some modest conclusions can be reached: Latino families do not approve of or support child abuse (e.g., Giovannoni & Becerra, 1979), and, on the whole, Latino parents tend to exhibit both greater intimacy and more protective behaviors and strictness than non-Hispanic Whites (Rauh, Wasserman, & Brunelli, 1990; Zayas & Solari, 1994). The literature is so incomplete, however, that we researchers cannot determine whether rates of child maltreatment are higher or lower for Latinos compared with other groups when matched for socioeconomic status (SES).

In a sense, the relative prevalence does not really matter. It is known that child abuse occurs among some families in

all groups. This article focuses on Latinos not because they might be at higher risk for physical abuse but rather because (a) preventive efforts are most likely to be effective if they are tailored to the needs of the group they are meant to address (Fontes, Cruz, & Tabachnick, 2001), (b) professionals frequently offend and therefore alienate Latino parents when they discuss concerns about disciplinary techniques, and (c) professionals are often puzzled about how to handle harsh punishment in a family that differs from them culturally. This article does not provide definitive answers for working with all Latino families. Rather, it suggests areas of concern and provides general guidelines for professionals who may feel stymied in their work with Latino families who use harsh corporal punishment.

## LATINOS

The word *Latino* or *Hispanic* usually describes people whose ancestors come from the Spanish-speaking countries of Latin America. The word *Latino* is also used to describe people of Spanish and Indian descent whose ancestors have always lived in areas of the Southwest United States that were once part of Mexico. The word *Latino* describes diverse ethnic cultural groups, not a singular religious or racial group. Latinos engage in a variety of religious and spiritual practices, and may be White, Black, Indian, or Asian. Latinos most often identify themselves by their national origin, as Dominicans or Mexicans, for instance.

Latinos are one of the fastest growing ethnic groups in the United States, due to both immigration and high rates of childbearing, and already constitute more than 12% of the U.S. population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2001). In addition, this is a young population with relatively high rates of births to teen and single mothers. Compared with non-Hispanic Whites,

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Hispanic parents are typically younger, less educated, employed at lower paying jobs, and financially poorer—conditions that put their children at greater risk for negative social, health, and developmental outcomes (Zayas, 1992) including child abuse. That said, it should be noted that most Latino parents raise their children lovingly and without major problems.

Some Latinos have been in the United States for generations and speak no Spanish, others have just arrived and speak no English, and of course many Latinos speak fluent English and Spanish. The first language of many people who are called "Latinos" is an indigenous language, such as Maya from Mexico and Guatemala or Quechua from Ecuador (Fontes, 2000b). When working with a Latino family, it is important to ask about the language or languages that they prefer to speak. Some United States Latinos are highly educated, some are illiterate, and most are in between. Counselors should not assume that the people they work with have low levels of formal education simply because they do not speak English fluently.

This article focuses on working-class and poor Latinos who are immigrants or whose parents immigrated to the United States and who preserve many customs and beliefs from their Latin American origins. These are the people who are least acculturated and therefore may be most challenging to non-Latino professionals. Traditionally oriented Latino families may be more likely to use an authoritarian style of parenting and demand obedience and respect from their children (Falicov, 1998). These practices clash with the child-rearing norms of the dominant culture and sometimes bring immigrant Latinos into contact with counselors and the child protection system. In addition, studies consistently establish a link between both familial and neighborhood poverty and physical child abuse (e.g., Drake & Pandey, 1996), thereby increasing the likelihood that professionals who work with low-SES Latino immigrants will face issues of physical child abuse.

It is impossible to describe a unitary Latino culture. The peoples of Latin America and Latinos in the United States are far too heterogeneous. Historical influences cause diverse Latino cultures to evolve constantly (Falicov, 1998). Individual Latinos grow to accept and reject aspects of their culture in different ways throughout their lives. Every person who is a Latino is also an individual, differing from others on questions of individual and family history, geographic origin, migration experience, social class, religion, dreams, values, and so on. Despite a preference for limiting discussions to people from specific countries, rather than engaging in broad ethnic generalizations (Fontes, 1993), in this article I make some cultural generalizations about low-income Latino immigrants. The suggestions given here are not meant as exact recipes for counseling but rather as general orientations for working with low-income immigrant Latino families.

### CORPORAL PUNISHMENT AND PHYSICAL ABUSE

Straus (1994) defined corporal punishment as "the use of physical force with the intention of causing a child to ex-

perience pain, but not injury, for the purpose of correction or control of the child's behavior" (p. 4). Public health advocates have described corporal punishment as "a form of intrafamilial violence associated with short and long-term adverse mental health outcomes" (Stewart et al., 2000, p. 257). Corporal punishment in the United States presents a complex picture, with high but decreasing rates of general approval, and a population increasingly divided regarding its use (Straus & Mathur, 1994). The approval of corporal punishment in the United States decreased dramatically from 94% in 1968 to 68% in 1994 (Straus & Mathur, 1996). Whereas in 1968 there was almost universal approval in the United States for parents spanking children, regardless of demographic variables, by 1994 disagreements were evident, with greater approval noted among African Americans, Southerners, and those with fewer years of formal education (Straus & Mathur, 1996). Unfortunately, data concerning Latinos are limited. Frequently, Latinos are simply excluded from the sample or are miscoded as African American or White (Ortega, Guillean, & Najera, 1996).

The actual use of corporal punishment in the United States is also decreasing (Daro & Gelles, 1992; Straus, 1994). Even so, corporal punishment is still used widely, and Giles-Sims, Straus, and Sugarman (1995) have reported that "almost all children in the United States are spanked by their parents at some point in their lives" (p. 170).

How do we draw the line between corporal punishment and physical abuse? Graziano (1994) hypothesized that there is a continuum, ranging from low to high violence. On one end are extremely violent acts that almost anyone would agree constitute physical abuse, such as those that result in death or permanent injury. On the other end of the spectrum are those actions that most people do not consider abusive, such as a gentle slap to a toddler's hand when the toddler reaches for a hot stove.

[However], the central portion of this spectrum, where accepted discipline begins to shade into abuse, does not carry a standard definition by which all persons agree on exactly where on the continuum acceptable discipline becomes abuse. What is deemed acceptable by some will be considered abusive by others. (Graziano, 1994, p. 415)

In most areas, state law is of little help in defining the line between corporal punishment and physical abuse because the language used, such as "leaving a mark" or "resulting in physical or psychological damage," leaves room for interpretation (Michaelis, 1993). In this article, I refer to the middle of this spectrum of behaviors as "harsh physical punishment," knowing that even this term is open to question because any two individuals could easily debate about what is "harsh."

What is the connection between the two ends of the spectrum, corporal punishment and physical abuse? Straus (1994) defined physical abuse as any "attack on a child that results in an injury" (p. 9). Many episodes of physical abuse begin as disciplinary encounters. That is, a parent or

other caretaker uses corporal punishment with the intention of punishing, teaching, or correcting a child's misbehavior, but the child is injured because of an accident or excessive use of force. For example, in one family I know, the mother intended to slap her child across the face, but the daughter turned her head and the mother's fingernail caught her eye. The mother was so afraid of authorities that she failed to seek medical care, and the daughter ended up blind in one eye. This was a case of corporal punishment that resulted in permanent injury, and therefore can be classified as physical abuse.

Routinely using corporal punishment leads many parents to engage in physical abuse because milder forms of corporal punishment lose their effectiveness over time and because the parents' reliance on physical methods of control results in a decreased ability to control the child through nonphysical means (Graziano, 1994). Furthermore, the higher the number of disciplinary encounters, the more likely it is that a child will be abused (Straus, 1994).

Although research shows that family stress contributes to a greater likelihood of physical abuse, it is unclear which stressors are most important in this regard for Latino families. Cultural and familial factors may mitigate certain stressors so that, for example, although children who live in crowded quarters are generally subjected to higher levels of physical abuse, this may be less true if the cohabitants are members of the extended family (Youssef, Attia, & Kamel, 1998). In studies among non-Latino and mixed populations, the following stressors have been correlated with physical child abuse: paternal unemployment (Gillham et al., 1998), poverty, single-parent families, parental substance abuse (Davis, 1990; Flanzer, 1990), social isolation (Coohey, 1996), and physical abuse of the mother by the father (Ross, 1996).

The implication of these findings is that to reduce levels of physical abuse, counselors must help parents reduce the number and severity of disciplinary encounters with their children (by learning effective nonphysical means of instruction), reduce or eliminate their use of corporal punishment, and reduce parental isolation and stress. When working with Latino parents, counselors must be sure to engage in these strategies in culturally competent ways.

### CULTURE IN DISCIPLINE AND ABUSE

In the last few years, a number of social scientists and mental health practitioners have begun to explore connections between physical abuse, discipline, and culture (e.g., DeYoung & Zigler, 1994; Fontes, 2000b). These works typically concern African American parents (see Bradley, 1998) and religious issues with fundamentalist Christian parents (e.g., Swan, 1998). Again, research on Latino parents is limited (e.g., Coohey, 2001; Negroni, 1998; Wissow, 2001; Zayas & Solari, 1994).

Child rearing is highly influenced by ethnic culture. What children need to learn and the methods considered best for teaching them are passed down from one generation to an-

other as cultural knowledge. Norms concerning acceptable child rearing and punishment vary by culture. For example, in the Pacific Island nation of Palau, parents commonly tie the leg of a toddler with a rope to a post or door when the parents are unable to supervise the child directly, such as when they are farming. In Palau, parents also commonly spank children with a broom, breaking the skin and leaving bruises, when the children do not do homework or chores (Collier, McClure, Collier, Otto, & Polloi, 1999). Although these practices would be considered abusive in the United States, the common United States practices of circumcising male infants, denying children food between mealtimes, and forcing infants to cry themselves to sleep at night alone would be considered abusive in some cultures (Korbin & Spilsbury, 1999).

Even within the United States, cultural subgroups vary widely in the methods they use to enforce discipline and gain compliance. For example, in the 1980s studies reported that African Americans are more likely to punish their children with an electric cord, belt, or switch applied to the back or bottom; European Americans are more likely to use a paddle or an open hand to the bottom; and Asian American parents may be more likely to slap a child's face and pull hair (Queesh, 1989; Showers & Bandman, 1986). Although these cultural differences influence the kinds of physical punishments used, it should be noted that they do not determine whether they constitute abuse in any given instance because each one of these methods can be applied gently or with great force, frequently or rarely.

### LATINO NORMS OF RAISING CHILDREN

Being a parent and especially a mother is highly valued in Latino cultures (Falicov, 1998), and young children are prized and often indulged. Latinos tend to value closeness and interconnectedness among extended family members. This is called *familismo*, and includes a sense of family obligation, respect for older people, and responsibility to care for all members of the family. Family is a source of pride, strength, identity, and concrete help. For this reason, it is important that children be well behaved (*bien educado*) and represent the family well in public. Unlike many Anglo-American parents, who prefer to keep up a conflict-free public image, Latino parents who observe their children acting disobediently or disrespectfully in public are likely to respond immediately and in public—placing them at greater risk for reports to child protection authorities (Fontes, 2000b).

Above all, Latino parents want their children to be safe and protected. This may be particularly true of recent immigrants who are bewildered by all the potential dangers of their new country. They are unlikely to leave their children with caretakers other than family members, even when professionals might believe a child would be better off in an established child care center than at home with a member of the extended family.

Latino parents expect their children to follow orders. They tend to be more strict and authoritarian than both

non-Latino White and African American parents (Zayas, 1992). They tend to foster closeness, dependence, obedience, and family loyalty, which is different from the predominant culture that values autonomy and independence (Falicov, 1998). This difference can lead to generational tension concerning the expectations at home and the norms children learn in school and through watching television (Vasquez-Nuttall & Romero-García, 1989).

When Latino children disobey, their parents often respond harshly, sometimes resorting to corporal punishment (Zayas & Solari, 1994). Educated parents are likely to speak with their children *and* use corporal punishment. Parents who have fewer years of formal education may simply respond punitively. The more educated and acculturated the family is, the closer their child discipline norms are to those of the dominant culture.

Sometimes punishment involves a symbolic element (Díaz, 1999). For instance, a child who curses may be slapped across the mouth (*a tapaboca*). A child who has done or said something considered stupid may be knuckled on the top of the head (*a cocotazo*). A child who has been disrespectful may be made to kneel on uncooked rice with bare knees. A young child who seems out of control may be placed in a bathtub of cold water (Negroni, 1998). A child who has been disobedient may be made to stand facing the wall with his arms outstretched, holding a bible in each hand. A child who has stolen something may have her hands slapped. Whether these punishments constitute physical abuse depends on their severity and how often they are used.

Counselors should be careful to distinguish between a single episode of physical abuse by caring parents that stems from an acceptable disciplinary method that has gone awry (e.g., a parent who grabbed a child too hard and left a mark on the arm) and intentional abuse in which physical and psychological damage is evident. Although both need to be taken seriously and reported to protective services, in the first case, education and stress reduction are apt to be the most appropriate paths. In the second case, the parent may be evidencing severe psychological disturbance, substance abuse problems, or a genuine dislike of the child. These factors must be resolved through more extensive interventions before skills training can prove beneficial.

### COUNSELING FAMILIES WHO USE HARSH CORPORAL PUNISHMENT

If the parents' disciplinary methods constitute physical abuse as defined by state law, and the counselor is aware of an abusive episode or considers the child at risk, the counselor is obliged to file a report with child protective services or the police (Michaelis, 1993). This holds true regardless of the family's cultural background. Filing a report *without a family's knowledge* is apt to increase their feelings of isolation and mistrust and should only be done *when absolutely necessary to protect the child's immediate safety*. Rather, coun-

selors should try to file with protective services in a collaborative way by explaining their legal obligations to the parents and having them present during the phone call to protective services. In this way, the parents hear exactly what is being said about them. This can help the counselor maintain a relationship with the family.

Depending on the severity of the situation, protective services may choose not to investigate or may investigate and allow the family to proceed in their work with the counselor, avoiding foster care and other more extreme interventions. If families feel their trust has been breached through the filing of the report, they have the right to choose to work with another counselor. In any case, the report will not be a surprise to parents who have received adequate information at the beginning of the counseling relationship about the counselor's legal obligations.

Frequently, counselors work with families in which concerns about discipline emerge long before a reportable incident is suspected or revealed. This opens a window for preventing child abuse and averting intrusive interventions. Even when a counselor files a report with protective services, in most cases the counselor's responsibility does not end with filing the report but extends to working with a family over time to reduce the likelihood of further abusive episodes. The remainder of this article focuses on this ongoing work with families, regardless of the involvement of protective services.

When counselors are uncertain whether a given incident constitutes physical abuse, they should consult with a colleague or supervisor. In addition, counselors can call their state protective service agency, describe the case without revealing the clients' names, and ask for advice. The intake workers often make an assessment as to whether the behaviors are sufficiently indicative of abuse to merit filing a report, and they may specify what additional information would be helpful.

Counselors in many settings wonder what to do about situations when discipline seems harsh but does not cross into the illegal category of physical abuse or when child protective authorities do not consider the incidents sufficiently severe to intervene. After counselors have fulfilled their legal and ethical obligations in such cases, they still face this moral question. Parents have a legal right to use corporal punishment with their children (Bitensky, 1998). Therefore, if counselors see their job as eliminating physical abuse only, then they might want to advise parents on how to punish their children gently without being culpable of physical abuse—for instance, by using one strike with an open hand on a clothed bottom, only, and not engaging in this spanking while angry or more than once a day. As stated earlier, however, counselors should remember that the use of even mild forms of corporal punishment leads to an increased likelihood of physical abuse. Whatever suggestions are made to the parents in an attempt to find better ways to discipline a child without committing abuse, the drawbacks to using even mild forms of corporal punishment must be considered carefully.

Considering that even forms of corporal punishment that do not qualify as illegal physical abuse have been correlated with a variety of negative outcomes for children (Straus, 1994), I believe that counselors have a professional obligation to work toward the elimination of corporal punishment. This will eliminate its potential harm. This obligation is particularly important, I believe, when considering minority children who already face discrimination, higher rates of poverty, and other obstacles. Failing to address issues of corporal punishment among minority families because of a fear of imposing the dominant norms on oppressed people leaves minority children at increased potential risk.

### ***Building Opposition to Corporal Punishment Among Latino Families***

When people immigrate to the United States, they are obliged to adjust to their host society in myriad ways, some of which they enjoy and others of which they resent. For example, they may live in a cold climate, although they would prefer to live in a warmer one. They may be forced to speak English, although they might prefer to continue speaking their first language. Similarly, some parents might prefer to continue using frequent corporal punishment, or punishment techniques that are considered "harsh" in their new country, but might be persuaded to stop by the counselor because of the *appearance of abuse* this produces among their children's friends and among professionals including school personnel, and the negative ways this could affect the family. They also might decide to forgo corporal punishment when they discover what researchers have uncovered about its potential harmful effect on their children (e.g., Strauss & Lauer, 1992). At this point, a reader might wonder, Is this coercion to acculturate or is it sound advice? Given that corporal punishment has never been found to benefit children more than attentive parenting without it, and that avoiding it reduces the likelihood of disruptive child protection interventions, I believe it is sound advice. Furthermore, the elimination of corporal punishment can be presented in ways that build on Latino family strengths, such as loyalty, cohesiveness, and respect (Falicov, 1998).

Counselors often wonder how to assist Latino immigrant parents to move toward abandoning their use of corporal punishment. One option is to explain the laws and inform parents of the implications of their continued actions (e.g., If you do not stop leaving bruises on your children, Protective Services might take away your children and you might end up in jail). A second option is to have parents carefully consider the effectiveness of their actions. For example, counselors can ask parents the following questions: "Is your disciplinary method effective and agreeable to you? How do you feel when you hit your child? How often would you like to hit your child? Are you tired of punishing?" Some parents respond well to questions that help them tune in to their children's responses, such as "What do you think your child is thinking and feeling while being spanked?" Upon questioning, many parents will readily admit that as time

goes on they find themselves using corporal punishment more often and hitting harder than in the past. A frustrated parent who is asked, "If there was a more effective method of discipline, would you use it?" will often respond affirmatively, opening the door for skill building.

Counselors can suggest that eliminating corporal punishment is an ideal to work toward, an ideal that some families achieve immediately by simply eliminating it from their vocabulary of behaviors and that other families approach by significantly reducing its use. The next section reviews how referring to three cultural norms will better enable counselors to help Latino parents reconsider their use of corporal punishment, adding cultural competence to the more general ideas presented earlier.

### ***Using Cultural Norms to Resist Corporal Punishment***

*Ambition—If you teach them without hitting them, your children are more likely to achieve better grades, get better jobs, and be more economically successful in the United States. Methods of encouraging "good behavior" that are not based on punishment are more likely to result in your children thinking for themselves, rather than depending on others telling them what to do.*

Like others, Latino parents want their children to grow up safely, get good jobs, and be caring family members and "decent people" (*hecha y derecha*) who make their parents proud. When working with a Latino family, it is important to address these motivations directly. Many United States Latinos come from countries with recent histories of slavery and colonization. In these past circumstances, parents were probably saving their children's lives by teaching them how to obey authorities without question (Payne, 1989). We can safely assume, however, that few Latinos hope their children will grow up to hold the menial jobs in which this kind of obedience might be valued. Rather, they hope their children will grow up to hold jobs in which they will think for themselves, initiate ideas, and eventually supervise others. Counselors can inform Latino parents about, and help them to explore, the position that children need to have an internalized sense of values to achieve these higher status positions and that nonviolent methods of child raising teach children how to think and reason, not simply avoid punishment (Popkin, 1998). In addition, they may be impressed with the research showing that frequent use of corporal punishment reduces the likelihood of upward social mobility (Straus & Mathur, 1996) and has been associated with lower economic achievement in adulthood (Straus, 1994).

*Aggression and delinquency—Your children are more likely to be aggressive and less likely to be successful in school if you use corporal punishment. Children who experience corporal punishment are more likely to commit crimes as adults than children who experience attentive parenting without corporal punishment.*

Being polite, gentle, and civil are high priorities among traditional Latino families, and are even embedded in the Spanish language (Falicov, 1998). Many Latino parents place

faith in education as the key to success in the United States. They are likely to be surprised by research showing that children (including Latinos) who are punished corporally at home are more likely to be aggressive with their classmates (Strassberg, Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 1994) and more likely to engage in delinquent and criminal behavior in childhood and adulthood (Straus, 1994; Straus & Lauer, 1992). It can be helpful to discuss this research with parents and explain to them that when they are physically forceful with their children, they are modeling that physical force is the way to get what one wants. To explain the importance of modeling in educating children, counselors can mention examples that are not related to violence but would be familiar to the parents. For example, a counselor might speak about how when we want a child to learn a given behavior—from tying shoes to cooking to using a hammer—we usually show them first, and the children copy what we do. By hitting, parents are inadvertently teaching children to hit others to get their way.

Maximizing family relationships and avoiding mental health problems—*Your children are more likely to confide in you if they do not feel threatened by you. Corporal punishment in childhood is associated with later depression and substance abuse. Children who were punished physically are more likely to be victims or perpetrators of violence at home when they start families of their own.*

Latinos often show great family loyalty and may be hesitant to criticize or even question the way they themselves were disciplined as children. Latino parents are apt to turn their back on a professional who seems to be criticizing the way their own parents raised them. One useful counseling tactic is to explain to parents that the world is changing and that although their own parents undoubtedly did what they viewed as best, parenting in the United States today simply requires a different approach (Fontes, 1993). Asking Latino parents about what they felt and thought when they were punished physically as children facilitates exploration of relevant issues. They are apt to report *fear and anger*, although they may minimize these by saying that now they appreciate the way their parents taught them respect and the *difference between right and wrong*. Counselors should suggest that it is possible to teach these important lessons without instilling fear and that doing so will improve family communication and reduce the possibility of other negative psychological outcomes. After reviewing with parents current research on the connection between corporal punishment and depression, substance abuse, and other mental health problems (Straus, 1994), counselors should provide parents with concrete training in how to educate a child without corporal punishment. Even parents who express commitment to forgoing their usual methods cannot do so without concrete tools.

As with all parents, Latino parents may reject pleas to develop alternatives to corporal punishment by saying that they themselves were punished physically, and they turned out “okay” (Stewart et al., 2000). I respond by extending Straus’s (1994) *smoking analogy*. Although not all cigarette

smokers die of smoking-related illnesses, many do, and others may have more minor health problems (e.g., a chronic cough) resulting from the smoking. No one would say that smoking is harmless because not everyone who smokes suffers the most severe outcome. Similarly, not all people who were punished physically become suicidal or end up in jail. Some do, however, and others suffer more subtle harm such as depression or impaired relationships. Because no benefit has been shown to derive from corporal punishment as compared with a loving, attentive parenting approach without it, then corporal punishment should be eliminated.

### *Supporting Nonviolent Parenting in Latino Families*

The aforementioned material describes several ways that Latino cultural norms can be used to build parental opposition to corporal punishment and is meant to be suggestive rather than exhaustive. I have heard Latino parents comment that “In the United States, parents train their dogs but let their children run wild.” For Latino parents to agree to stop using corporal punishment, they need to be given a set of effective alternatives. Counselors can supplement sessions with culturally sensitive parenting programs (e.g., Popkin, 1998), books (e.g., Faber & Mazlich, 1991), and examples of attentive parenting in popular culture (e.g., the televised Bill Cosby Show).

For parents to give up corporal punishment, they need to establish an effective alternative system of instruction and discipline. Research supports the notion that three kinds of parenting behaviors constitute such a system: those that promote the parent-child relationship, those that reinforce positive behaviors, and those that decrease undesired behaviors (Howard, 1996). Parents who resort to frequent or severe corporal punishment are likely to rely too much on punitive techniques, without using the other methods. They may underutilize other ways to gain compliance: through building their relationship with their children, reinforcing positive behaviors, and decreasing undesired behaviors through means other than punishment (e.g., distracting the child).

Latino parents who agree to attempt to raise their children without corporal punishment deserve the counselor’s support and empathy, especially during the transition period. Latino parents may be subject to criticism and even scorn from their friends and family when they forswear corporal punishment. Raising children is a community activity for many Latino families, where extended family members, friends, and even neighbors contribute to a child’s upbringing through sharing resources and freely “correcting” bad behavior. As one Puerto Rican man who was raised in a small town on the Island said, “When I was a boy, I really had to stay out of trouble on my street because if I did anything wrong—whack! I could get it from any of my neighbors as easily as my parents. There was no hiding.” (R. Irrizary, personal communication, April 1999). Some Latinos maintain this sense of a village for raising their children by living in tight-knit Latino

neighborhoods in the United States, where extended family members, godparents, and friends from the pre-immigration community live within a few blocks of each other.

If parents intend to abandon their use of corporal punishment, they will probably wish to gain support from their circle of family and friends. A child's established negative behaviors often resist change, and may even initially worsen (Gil, 1996), causing parents to doubt the usefulness of abandoning corporal punishment. Counselors need to help parents figure out ways to handle these initial pressures and prevent a new set of problems from arising.

### *Prevention Programming*

Historically, counselors have been at the forefront of programs to prevent a variety of mental health and social problems (McLeod, 1998). Counselors should institute prevention programs designed to reach all parents. Depending on their work settings, counselors can offer parent education, social events, and community-building activities that decrease parental isolation and give parents an opportunity to learn about positive parenting. Some of these programs should be offered in Spanish and directed to the specific needs of the Latino population. For example, a school counselor could offer a session on Changing Unwanted Behaviors, or Effective Discipline With Teenagers, or When Parents and Children Are From Different Worlds. For these efforts to succeed, counselors should enlist concerned Latino parents to help plan the sessions and to personally solicit parent participation among their Latino neighbors and friends. The most effective teaching technique may be the affirmation by other Latino parents that learning nonphysical forms of discipline is important and that these techniques do work (B. De León, personal communication, October 25, 1999).

When discussing the sensitive topic of physical abuse, it is important to acknowledge the many strengths of traditional Latino parenting, including physical affection, respect, generosity, paternal involvement, and close family ties. Most Latino parents who use corporal punishment already shape their children's behavior in other ways (e.g., through praise and modeling). Counselors should observe the effective ways parents teach and demonstrate affection toward their children, clearly point these out to parents, and encourage them to engage in these behaviors more deliberately and frequently. Also, parents can be shown ways to vary and enhance existing skills by incorporating new skills. By taking this approach, parents are less likely to perceive the counselor as recommending foreign techniques or insulting their existing parenting strategies. Finally, counselors can ask parents about their ideal for family functioning and help them work through some of the stressors that may have pushed them to stray from their own ideal model (Zayas, 1992).

The following example illustrates many of the techniques described earlier, as well as some of the social stressors described in a later section.

Cristina and her parents moved from Mexico to the United States when she was 14. Two years later, she spoke fluent English, demanded a telephone in her room, and acted like her peers born in the United States. In contrast, her parents, who were working in food service with other Latinos, spoke almost no English and found themselves increasingly dependent on Cristina's help as a linguistic and cultural interpreter. For example, only Cristina answered the telephone. If she was not home, her parents would just let it ring. Perhaps because she was an only child, Cristina's parents had raised her indulgently, rarely disciplining her physically and often working overtime to buy her clothes and shoes that were beyond their means. One day, Cristina spoke in a way that her mother found disrespectful and ungrateful. Furious, her mother slapped her across the face, hard. The next day at school, Cristina showed the mark to the guidance counselor. The counselor called a meeting after school that very day. The mother arrived at the counselor's office with a cousin—the father refused to attend. The mother said she wanted the cousin to interpret and asked the school interpreter to leave the room—she was afraid of gossip. The session lasted almost 2 hours. Cristina and her mother wept profusely, moving quickly from blame about the specific incident to discussing their anguish about how their roles had changed since their move and how difficult the parents' dependence on their daughter was for all involved. The counselor listened empathically and helped the mother and daughter articulate how much they loved each other, but how much stress each was experiencing. They brainstormed ways to relieve Cristina of her "parentified" role. The counselor informed the family about a local social service agency for immigrants that provided many services, including interpreting and free classes in English as a second language. Toward the end of the first hour, the counselor informed the mother that, in the United States, slapping a child hard across the face might be considered abusive. She affirmed the mother's loving parenting and the circumstances that led up to the slap. She informed the mother that she would have to call a state agency charged with protecting children. She placed the call while Cristina, her mother, and the cousin listened. At the end of the call, she reported to the family that the agency probably would not investigate this time but that they would keep the family's name on file, to reconsider if there were further incidents. The counselor told Cristina that she did the right thing in seeking help, and the mother agreed. Although there were further conflicts between the daughter and her parents, as can be expected in any family, the parents never resorted to violence again.

In the aforementioned example, we see a family that has strayed from its own ideal form of parenting, partly due to immigration stress. The counselor helped the family identify the stress, helped them experience emotional closeness, explained the workings of the child protection system in the United States, fulfilled her legal obligation, referred the family to appropriate resources, and established a warm personal relationship with the family members who were present. All this was accomplished in one extended family session, followed by brief sessions with the daughter throughout the school year.

### **SOCIAL STRESSORS FOR LATINO IMMIGRANT FAMILIES**

In the United States, most professionals hold a highly individualistic view of child maltreatment (Fontes, 1995). That is, maltreatment is seen as something that parents inflict on children, whereas the issues of child poverty and hunger, inadequate housing and health care, overcrowded

and underfunded schools, and dangerous neighborhoods are viewed as something other than child maltreatment. This is not true in other nations, where concerns about human rights and children's basic human needs dominate the discourse on child maltreatment (Finkelhor & Korbin, 1988). Before focusing on possible family dysfunction, counselors would be well advised to consider the interactive effects of social stress, individual psychology, poverty, and culture on child maltreatment (Zayas, 1992). Certainly, improving the material and social conditions of Latino families will not only benefit children directly, it will also make parenting easier and less stressful for low-income Latino immigrants. Therefore, counselors who care about the well-being of their immigrant Latino clients would be well advised to work to bring about changes on a systemic level, in addition to their activities within sessions.

Furthermore, in the case of recent immigrants, culture shock colors almost every aspect of daily life (Winkelman, 1994) and may complicate obtaining an accurate assessment of parenting. Stressors for low-income Latino immigrant families include cultural differences; the need to learn a new language; the impact of bilingualism on cognitive functioning, personality, and worldview; prejudice and discrimination; disruptions in the family life cycle; anxious daily interactions with people outside the ethnic group (Canino & Canino, 1980); confusing interactions with institutions such as schools, courts, hospitals, and immigration; fear of deportation for those who are undocumented; and coping with the aftereffects of trauma for refugees.

Helping parents cope with these stressors is apt to improve parenting and reduce levels of physical abuse. Counselors may also need to intervene in ways that stretch the traditional counseling role, through political activism (e.g., petitioning civil authorities for better legal protections for immigrants; Fontes, 2001); advocacy (e.g., helping parents manage their relationships with social services), and counseling on immigration issues (e.g., helping families understand how their differing levels of acculturation affect them; Falicov, 1998; Smart & Smart, 1995).

Professionals should work to reduce the isolation of immigrant families. Extended family members, godparents, neighborhood friends, and clergy may be able to provide physical and emotional support to families and even serve as formal or informal foster parents, when necessary. Sometimes a teacher or school counselor can be enlisted to watch over or meet regularly with a child. Reducing parental isolation through parent aides, English or reading classes, and vocational education is also likely to benefit children (Valdés, 1996).

### LIMITATIONS AND RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

This article is necessarily a partial examination of all the factors contributing to decisions about corporal punishment and physical abuse, for Latino immigrant families and counseling professionals alike. For example, this article fails to address the counseling implications in families in which wife

battering and child abuse occur together, which is the case in approximately half of all child-abusing families (Shipman, Rossman, & West, 1999). This article neglects situations in which sexual and physical child abuse occur simultaneously, necessitating a more comprehensive and extensive intervention. This article also neglects the relationship between corporal punishment and psychological maltreatment, an area that has not been investigated with United States Latinos. Other areas that merit further research and theoretical elaboration include the interaction of gender and culture in discipline, differences in intervention effectiveness according to the parents' and children's learning styles, and how social service and educational institutions can be redesigned to more adequately meet the needs of their Latino clients. Counseling researchers should examine the effectiveness of specific interventions for physical abuse with specific populations. Finally, researchers are encouraged to incorporate special ethical safeguards when investigating cultural issues in family violence (Fontes, 1998).

### CONCLUSION

In sum, I recommend that counselors do the following when concerned about the harshness or frequency of physical discipline in a Latino family:

1. Join with all members of the family by interacting with them in a warm, professional manner. Follow guidelines for cultural competence (Falicov, 1998), remembering that the relationships established with all members of the family are of utmost importance.
2. Ask in a nonblaming way about the incident or incidents that raised concern (following state guidelines pertaining to reporting child abuse and neglect). If it is necessary to file a report, counselors should do so in the most supportive way possible.
3. Briefly assess the parents, the child, their relationships, and the major stressors in the family's life (Fontes, 2000a). If the people and relationships are essentially stable and loving, follow the steps below (a, b, c). If the family evidences severe psychological disturbance, other forms of violence, substance abuse, or unmanageable chaos, more comprehensive interventions and referrals may be required.
  - a. Discuss with the parents the ways their current disciplinary practices are and are not working for them. Suggest that effective alternatives will better prepare the child for future success and achievement.
  - b. Engage with the parents in using alternatives to corporal punishment and monitoring their success. Help parents notice and celebrate each small move toward parenting without violence.
  - c. Help the parents reduce their isolation and stress.

When used with an attitude of genuine caring, these interventions should enable counselors to help low-income immigrant Latino families raise their children without violence.



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