Social Capital: Strengthening Mexican-American Families through Parenting Education

Development of social capital was explored from a scientific evaluation of adult and teen parents (N = 102) who voluntarily participated in a parenting program. Most were unmarried, young, low-income, and Mexican-American. A strengths-based, culturally specific method was utilized to recruit and retain participants. After training, parents had significantly greater empathy, decreased belief in corporal punishment, fewer inappropriate expectations of children, less reversal of parent-child roles, and increased knowledge of positive discipline techniques. Developing social capital in communities and focusing on relational social capital optimizes the potential for increasing parenting knowledge and skills in Hispanic families.

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Social capital can be a useful theoretical basis for understanding how to work with at-risk communities to increase their capacities across a range of family issues. Social capital has been described with an emphasis on resources linked to a network of individuals who have membership in a group (Bourdieu, 1986). In this view, social capital is an asset, the value of which is determined by the size of the network and the volume of the capital (Bhandari & Yasunobu, 2009). Social capital also has been defined with an emphasis on the relationships among members of the networks (Coleman, 1990) and marked by reciprocity, information channels and flow of information, and norms enforced by sanctions (Bhandari & Yasunobu, 2009; Putnam, 1993).

In this study, the authors stress the importance of these definitions of social capital and demonstrate how incorporating each into parenting programs leads to greater knowledge of parenting and improved parenting skills of participants. The working definition of social capital in this study has two components. First, *capital* refers to commodities such as community access to expert resources and knowledge—the parenting classes as a community commodity or asset. Second, the concept of social capital incorporates the value of the relationships that exists among members of the family systems and members of larger social networks.

Mexican American Culture

In this study, the parenting intervention program was tailored to complement the normative roles and characteristics of Mexican American families. Although several aspects of Mexican-American culture are assets, the intervention focused on sociocentrism, *familismo*, and *compadrazgo*.

Mexican-Americans are sociocentric: their interdependence, social relationships, and the understanding of behaviors are largely dependent on the thoughts, feelings, and actions of others (Markus & Kitayama, 1991). When social pressures promote positive outcomes, sociocentrism is considered a cultural asset or social capital.

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Familismo, a strong family orientation, has been shown to be significantly greater in Mexican Americans than in European Americans. The strong family orientation is important in determining child and parenting outcomes because parents with a high degree of familismo may see family as an extension of the self (Vega, 1990). A bond between a primary caregiver and a child is strong even without considering familismo. However, familismo includes psychological, emotional, and social constructs beyond love. High levels of familismo lead to increased amounts of contact among extended family members.

To this end, the custom of having *padrinos* is strong and has been referred to as *compadrazgo* (Vidal, 1988). In the context of parenting, padrinos are non-biological godparents or honorary parents who play a role in child development. The parenting education intervention utilized this concept. Parenting instructors developed a relationship with parents essentially as padrinos to the parents and children. Such supportive social networks may be helpful in reducing stress, acting as buffers against threatening events, providing emotional support, and ultimately helping to increase parenting knowledge and beliefs (Osofsky & Thompson, 2000).

Family-Centered Parenting Intervention

The Nurturing Parenting Program (Bavolek, 1984) is an evidence-based program. It has been extensively field tested and validated with non-problem families as well as with abusive families. For this study, three curricula were used: (a) adult parents with children birth to 5 years, English; (b) adult parents with children birth to 5 years, Spanish; and (c) teen parents of children birth to 5 years, English. In the curricula, there are 24 class sessions of 2½ hours each for adult parents and 20 class sessions of 2½ hours each for teen parents.

Two formats were offered—regular and intensive. In the standard format, classes met once a week. Two intensive formats were offered—biweekly where classes met twice a week, and a daily intensive format for 1 month for parents enrolled in a welfare-to-work program.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study was to evaluate the effectiveness of a family-centered parenting program for Mexican American families using science-based curricula and evaluation tools. Five hypotheses were formulated:

1. Participation in the parenting program will significantly improve parents' attitudes in the these areas: (a) inappropriate expectations of children; (b) lack of empathy toward children's needs; (c) strong belief in the use of corporal punishment; (d) reversal of parent-child roles; and (e) oppression of children's power and independence.
2. Participation in the parenting program will significantly increase parents' knowledge of effective discipline techniques.
3. There will be no differences in the attitude or knowledge scores of adult parents and teen parents.
4. There will be no differences in the attitude or knowledge scores of parents who completed the class series in the standard format or in the intensive formats.
5. There will be no difference in the attitude or knowledge scores of parents who took the class in English or in Spanish.

STUDY DESIGN

The target audience consisted of Mexican American parents of preschool children in a southwestern border state. Complete pretest and posttest data were collected from 102 parents. The typical

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Parents (N = 102)

PARENT CHARACTERISTICS	PERCENT
Gender	
Female	93
Male	7
Age	
Teens	13
Twenties	44
Thirties	27
Forties and older	16
Education	
11th grade or less	58
High school or GED	23
Some college or a degree	18
Income	
Less than $8,000	40
$8,000-11,999	15
$12,000-17,999	14
$18,000 and above	18
No response	12
Marital Status	
Single	56
Married	44
Number of Children	
1	31
2	29
3	24
4 or more	16

participant was an unmarried Mexican American female in her twenties with one child, who had not completed high school, and who earned less than $8,000 a year (see Table 1). Most of the parents met federal guidelines for poverty and received some form of government assistance.

Procedures

Families were recruited for the parenting classes using a variety of methods. The Nurturing Parenting class series was offered by 17 parent educators who had received specialized training in the curriculum. Seven of the parent educators had bachelor's degrees in family studies; six were advanced undergraduate students in family studies; and four were paraprofessionals. Twelve were Hispanic and bilingual.

With the idea of *compadrazgo* in mind, several strategies were used to retain families in the parenting classes. Parent educators mailed postcards each week to thank parents for coming, alerting them to the topic for the upcoming class, and letting them know they were missed if absent. They also called families the day before each class to encourage attendance. Finally, a special graduation ceremony with certificates and gifts for the families was held for those who completed the program. The average completion rate for the parenting classes was 60%.

Classes were offered at schools, health offices, community centers, and family resource centers in six diverse communities within the county. The communities included a city with a population of 100,000 and a major university, a small city bordering Mexico and Texas, and a small agricultural village populated by monolingual Spanish-speaking migrant workers. Approximately half of the classes were conducted in English and half in Spanish.

Instruments

Data were collected at the first and last parenting class of each series. Parents completed the Adult-Adolescent Parenting Inventory (AAPI-2), the Nurturing Quiz (NQ), and the Family Social History Questionnaire (FSHQ) in either English or Spanish. Bilingual parent educators assisted those with low literacy skills.

Adult-Adolescent Parenting Inventory. The AAPI-2 assesses adolescent and adult parents in the following areas: (a) inappropriate expectations of children; (b) lack of empathy toward children's needs; (c) belief in the use of corporal punishment; (d) reversing parent-child roles; and (e) oppressing children's power and independence (Bavolek & Keene, 1999). Low scores indicate a high risk for abusive or neglectful parenting; high scores are desirable. In this study, internal reliabilities ranged from .54 to .90. The Oppression of Children's Power and Independence subscale was dropped from further analyses due to its low reliability (.54).

Nurturing Quiz. The Nurturing Quiz (NQ) is a 26-item assessment of parents' knowledge about effective discipline techniques such as praise, redirection, consequences, active listening, and "I" statements (Bavolek, 1984). To determine the reliability of the instrument for the sample,

a modified odd-even correlation was transformed using the Spearman-Brown prophecy formula. The split-half reliability was .76.

Family Social History Questionnaire. The 34-item FSHQ (Bavolek, 1984) gathered information on parent's age, gender, marital status, ethnicity, religion, education, occupation, income, and number and ages of children.

Analysis

For the AAPI data, the following groups were compared:

Group 1—English class in standard format with adult parents
Group 2—English class in standard format with teen parents
Group 3—English class in the intensive daily format with adult parents
Group 4—Spanish class in standard format with adult parents
Group 5—English class in standard format and open enrollment with adult parents

The curriculum comparison was made by first calculating improvement means (post-pre mean differences) for Groups 1 and 2, then contrasting the improvement means. That is, the curriculum comparison was made controlling for the standard format taught in English. Similarly, the format comparison was made using improvement means of Groups 1 and 3. Consequently, this comparison is specific to the adult English curriculum. Finally, the language comparison used improvement means for Groups 1 and 4, controlling for the adult curriculum and the standard format. The same groups were used in the NQ analysis, along with an additional group corresponding to adult curriculum, intensive (biweekly for 3 months) format, and Spanish language.

To put magnitudes of overall improvement estimates in perspective, model-based estimates of effect sizes were calculated. The effect size estimates used model estimates of the overall improvement mean in the numerator and model estimates of the pretest standard deviation in the denominator. The overall improvement mean was obtained by averaging the model estimates of the group improvement means.

FINDINGS

Posttest means were significantly higher than pretest means for the first AAPI construct, Inappropriate Expectations of Children (one-tailed, p value = 0.01). The improvement was estimated to be 0.70 points on the 10-point scale (standard error = 0.28). The model-based effect size, estimated to be 0.36, was moderately strong. Neither the group effect nor the testing occasion by group interaction effect was significant. None of the three contrasts was statistically significant. See Tables 2 and 3 for F-statistics, p values, and Least Square Means for all constructs.

For Lack of Empathy for Children's Needs, the improvement was short of statistical significance (one-tailed, p value = 0.06). The improvement was estimated to be 0.49 (standard error = 0.30). The model-based effect size was estimated at 0.21.

Parents exhibited a significant mean improvement from pretest to posttest on Strong Belief in the Use of Corporal Punishment (one-tailed, p value = 0.00). The improvement was estimated to be 1.17 (0.30). The model-based effect size was estimated at 0.55.

Averaged across all groups, the improvement from pretest to posttest 1.12 (0.26) for Reversal of Parent-Child Role Responsibilities was significant (one-tailed, p value = 0.00). The model-based effect size was estimated at 0.57. In addition, both the group and testing occasion by group interaction effects were significant. Of the three contrasts of interest, one contrast for the adult parent curriculum was significant (two-tailed, p value = 0.00). The improvement mean for teen parents (Group 2) was estimated to be 3.00 (0.88), greater than the improvement mean for adult parents (Group 1). Although estimates of teen parents' pretest scores were lower than that of adult parents, 3.80 (0.62) compared to 5.25 (0.69), estimates of their posttest scores were higher, 6.80 (0.62) compared to 5.25 (0.69). Consequently, the Group 1 model-based effect size was estimated to be 0.00 and the Group 2 teen parent effect size was 1.54. The estimated effect sizes for Groups 3, 4, and 5 were 0.35, 0.37, and 0.61, respectively.

The NQ was measured on a 26-point scale. Posttest means were estimated to be 2.71 (0.41)

Table 2. Source or Effect by Response Variables[a]

MODEL	STATISTIC	*P* VALUE
Testing Occasion		
Inappropriate expectations	$F_{1,73} = \mathbf{6.17}$	0.01
Empathy for children	$F_{1,73} = 2.59$	0.06
Belief in corporal punishment	$F_{1,73} = \mathbf{15.37}$	0.00
Parent-child role reversal	$F_{1,73} = \mathbf{18.31}$	0.00
Discipline techniques	$F_{1,95} = \mathbf{43.21}$	0.00
Group		
Inappropriate expectations	$F_{4,7} = 2.78$	0.11
Empathy for children	$F_{4,9} = 1.71$	0.23
Belief in corporal punishment	$F_{4,12} = 1.84$	0.19
Parent-child role reversal	$F_{4,73} = \mathbf{9.70}$	0.00
Discipline techniques	$F_{5,12} = 2.47$	0.09
Occasion X Group		
Inappropriate expectations	$F_{4,73} = 1.66$	0.17
Empathy for children	$F_{4,73} = 0.26$	0.90
Belief in corporal punishment	$F_{4,73} = 0.55$	0.70
Parent-child role reversal	$F_{4,73} = \mathbf{3.80}$	0.01
Discipline techniques	$F_{5,95} = 1.87$	0.11
Adult or Teen Curriculum		
Inappropriate expectations	$t_{73} = -1.73$	0.09
Empathy for children	$t_{73} = -0.99$	0.33
Belief in corporal punishment	$t_{73} = -1.02$	0.31
Parent-child role reversal	$t_{73} = \mathbf{-3.40}$	0.00
Discipline techniques	$t_{96} = 1.62$	0.11
Format		
Inappropriate expectations	$t_{73} = 0.23$	0.82
Empathy for children	$t_{73} = -0.67$	0.51
Belief in corporal punishment	$t_{73} = -0.19$	0.85
Parent-child role reversal	$t_{73} = -0.92$	0.36
Discipline techniques	$t_{96} = 0.70$	0.49
Language		
Inappropriate expectations	$t_{73} = 0.08$	0.94
Empathy for children	$t_{73} = -0.53$	0.60
Belief in corporal punishment	$t_{73} = -0.69$	0.49
Parent-child role reversal	$t_{73} = -0.98$	0.33
Discipline techniques	$t_{96} = 0.59$	0.55

[a]one-tailed *p*-value reported; bold are significant at $p < .05$

points higher than pretest means. This improvement was statistically significant (one-tailed, *p* value = 0.00). The model-based effect size was 0.76. No other effects were significant.

DISCUSSION

Parents who completed the program showed significant positive changes. They demonstrated greater knowledge of positive discipline techniques

Table 3. Adjusted Estimates of Pre-Test, Post-Test, and Post-Pre Differences

CONSTRUCT	PRE-TEST LS MEAN (*SE*)	POST-TEST LS MEAN (*SE*)	POST-PRE DIFFERENCE (*SE*)	EFFECT SIZE[a]	UPPER-TAILED *P*-VALUE
Adult Adolescent Parenting Inventory-2					
Inappropriate expectations of children	5.17 (0.26)	5.87 (0.26)	0.70 (0.28)	0.36	0.01
Lack of empathy toward children's needs	5.77 (0.41)	6.26 (0.41)	0.49 (0.30)	0.21	0.06
Strong belief in the use of corporal punishment	5.43 (0.37)	6.70 (0.37)	1.17 (0.30)	0.55	0.00
Reversing parent-child role responsibilities	4.99 (0.28)	6.11 (0.28)	1.12 (0.26)	0.57	0.00
Nurturing Quiz					
Knowledge of positive discipline techniques	15.95 (0.51)	18.67 (0.51)	2.71 (0.41)	0.76	0.00

[a]Model-based estimates of standard deviations used

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as redirection, time-out, and consequences. Parents made important attitudinal changes including an increase in empathy for children's needs and a decreased belief in the value and use of corporal punishment. They were less likely to reverse parent-child roles or to have inappropriate expectations of children. The findings were consistent across delivery format and language.

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Adult parents did not change in role reversal scores; however, teen parents showed great improvement in the Reversal of Parent-Child Role Responsibilities subscale. Teen parents had lower pretest scores and higher posttest scores than adult parents. Teen parents often reported having a baby so someone will love them, and expected the child to meet their emotional needs. The intervention proved effective in changing this inappropriate expectation.

Implications for Practitioners

There are several implications for those who deliver parenting education. First, it is important to select an evidence-based curriculum such as the Nurturing Parenting Program. Developers of evidence-based programs typically offer training and consultation and suggest evaluation tools.

Second, intensive programs are needed to create changes in at-risk populations. Brief programs such as Active Parenting (www.activeparenting.com) and STEP (Systematic Training for Effective Parenting, www.ciccparenting.org) are often effective for middle-class, well-functioning families. However, parents who experience poverty, lack of education, and lack of support seem to benefit from programs with at least 40 hours of instruction delivered over several months. The analysis indicated no significant drawbacks of having an intensive delivery system.

A third implication involves recruitment and retention. To recruit at-risk parents, classes were offered in the evenings at convenient neighborhood locations with food and children's programs. To retain parents, curricula must be engaging and instructors must establish genuine relationships. Parents who feel connected to the program content, the instructor, and peers make greater effort to

attend. At the end of classes, parents often want to continue attending and often ask for another series.

Social capital has been described as investment in social relations with expected returns (Lin, 2001). The returns evident in this study are to the family system and community. The concept of social capital incorporates the value of relationships among members of the family systems and members of larger social networks. The authors described their method as relationship-intensive recruiting and retaining of parents in parenting education classes. This allows all stakeholders to optimize the relational quality of the parenting educators and community members as well as optimizing relationships among members of the parenting education classes.

As members of the Cooperative Extension System and the New Mexico Agricultural Experiment Station, the authors value the relationship components of participants such as their histories, cultures, and beliefs. They acknowledge the importance of resources and work hard to create expertly facilitated parenting education classes. It is the combination of high-quality resources and an in-depth understanding of the relational components of participants that led to sustained success in working with the parents in Mexican American communities.

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