



The Development and Early Home Experiences of Young Latino Boys

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Why research on low-income Hispanic children and families matters

Hispanic or Latino children currently make up roughly 1 in 4 of all children in the United States,^a and by 2050 are projected to make up 1 in 3, similar to the number of white children.^b Given this increase, how Hispanic children fare will have a profound impact on the social and economic well-being of the country as a whole. Notably, though, 5.7 million Hispanic children, or one third of all Hispanic children in the United States, are in poverty, more than in any other racial/ethnic group.^c Nearly two thirds of Hispanic children live in low-income families, defined as having incomes of less than two times the federal poverty level.^d Despite their high levels of economic need, Hispanics, particularly those in immigrant families, have lower rates of participation in many government support programs when compared with other racial/ethnic minority groups.^{e-g} High-quality, research-based information on the characteristics, experiences, and diversity of Hispanic children and families is needed to inform programs and policies supporting the sizable population of low-income Hispanic families and children.

^a Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics. (2015). America's children: Key national indicators of well-being, 2015, Table POP3. Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office. Retrieved from <http://www.childstats.gov/americaschildren/tables.asp>

^b Ibid.

^c DeNavas-Walt, C., & Proctor, B.D. (2015). Income and Poverty in the United States: 2014, Table B-2, Current Population Reports, P60-252. Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Commerce, U.S. Census Bureau. Retrieved from <http://www.census.gov/content/dam/Census/library/publications/2015/demo/p60-252.pdf#TableB-2>

^d Lopez, M. H., & Velasco, G. (2011). Childhood poverty among Hispanics sets record, leads nation. Washington, D.C.: Pew Research Hispanic Center. Retrieved from <http://www.pewhispanic.org/2011/09/28/childhood-poverty-among-hispanics-sets-record-leads-nation/>

^e Williams, S. (2013). Public assistance participation among U.S. children in poverty, 2010. Bowling Green, Ohio: National Center for Family & Marriage Research. Retrieved from <http://www.bgsu.edu/content/dam/BGSU/college-of-arts-and-sciences/NCFMR/documents/FP/FP-13-02.pdf>

^f Lichter, D., Sanders, S., & Johnson, K. (2015). Behind at the starting line: Poverty among Hispanic infants. Durham, NH: University of New Hampshire, Carsey School of Public Policy. Retrieved from <http://scholars.unh.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1250&context=carsey>

^g Child Trends Databank. (2014). Health care coverage. Bethesda, MD: Child Trends. Retrieved from <http://www.childtrends.org/?indicators=health-care-coverage>

Overview

My Brother's Keeper (MBK) is a call-to-arms initiative focused on improving the life conditions of boys of color, including Latino boys.^{1,a} This brief is a response to that call. Latino children in general, and Latino boys in particular, lag behind their white peers on important indicators of later workforce success, such as educational attainment and academic achievement.² Although some of these differences can be attributed to socio-economic disparities, research also indicates that Latino boys lag behind their female counterparts across many outcomes.^{3,4,5}

This brief compares the development and early home environment of Latino boys to those of two peer groups—white boys and Latina girls—from birth to kindergarten entry. We chose these two comparisons to understand how Latino boys' early development differs across ethnicity (compared to white boys, holding gender constant) and across gender (compared to Latina girls, holding ethnicity constant). Our focus is on the early childhood period because this is a time when children develop the foundational cognitive, language, and socio-emotional skills they need for formal schooling and for later life success, and because home and family experiences during this early period tend to have long-lasting effects on children.⁶ Understanding the nature of differences in development and early home environment can inspire interventions that would help Latino boys thrive.

We used data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Birth Cohort (ECLS-B) to compare (1) early socio-emotional and cognitive developmental indicators, and (2) the early home environment, including parents' resources, parental investments, and family functioning, of Latino boys to those of both white boys and Latina girls. We did this at multiple time points—9 months, 24 months, preschool (approximately 48 months), and kindergarten entry.

^a We use the terms Hispanic and Latino interchangeably. Both terms refer to individuals living in the United States with Spanish or Latin American ancestry (i.e., heritage of Mexico, Puerto Rico, Cuba, etc.).

Key findings and implications

We found that Latino boys have many of the cognitive and socio-emotional skills important for school success. They tend to live in homes characterized by high levels of family functioning despite fewer available parental resources and investments. However, there are some differences in the cognitive developmental outcomes (in particular, language) and home experiences of Latino boys compared to their white male and Latina female peers.

Overall, from 24 months through kindergarten entry, the differences between Latino boys and Latina girls are fewer, not as persistent, and smaller in magnitude than the differences between Latino boys and white boys.

Developmental outcomes

- At 9 months, after controlling for household resources, there are no differences in the general cognitive skills (e.g., language, active exploration, and problem-solving) of Latino boys and girls and white boys.
- Latino boys lag behind Latina girls on a measure of cognitive skills at 24 months and on a measure of language skills (i.e., ability to reproduce a narrative in their own words) at preschool. By kindergarten entry, the early advantage Latina girls had over Latino boys in language skills disappears.
- At preschool age (approximately 48 months), Latino boys lag behind white boys on all academic measures—math (e.g., recognizing numbers, shapes), early reading (e.g., letter identification, conventions of print), and language skills—but

not on social skills (i.e., parental report of children's affect, temperament, and sociability during play).

- At kindergarten entry, Latino boys continue to lag behind white boys on math and language, but not on early reading skills, where there are no differences between the groups. Latino boys' social skills continue to be at the same level as white boys' at this point.

Early home environment

- While there are large differences in the *parental resources* (e.g., education, poverty) and *parental investments* (e.g., number of books in the home, reading and storytelling with children) of Latino versus white families, Latino boys, on average, are growing up in homes where *family functioning* (i.e., parenting stress, maternal depressive symptoms, and couple happiness) is mostly no different from that of white boys.
- There are a few small advantages for Latina girls over Latino boys in their early home environment. There is more frequent singing, which is another way to promote language skills, and lower coparenting conflict, which is associated with family harmony and children's adjustment.

Our findings suggest that programs and policies interested in addressing the achievement gap among Latinos should target both boys *and* girls of color as early as 9 months, and earlier if possible. Programs and policies should also target mothers and fathers by investing in parents' education as well as by encouraging parents to interact with their children in ways that support early cognitive and social development.

Data

We used data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Survey—Birth Cohort, a large-scale study that followed a nationally representative sample of 10,700 children born in 2001 from birth to kindergarten.^a The study includes four rounds of data collected when the children were approximately 9 months, 24 months, 48 months (preschool round) and kindergarten-aged. The sample analyzed in this brief was limited to boys and girls who were identified by their parents as Hispanic/Latino and boys who were identified as non-Hispanic/Latino white. We omitted from our sample cases where the parent interview respondent was not the biological mother ($n = 50$); and children who were not assessed at kindergarten ($n = 100$). Our final analytical sample includes a total of 5,200 children. Sixty-eight percent of these children were identified as non-Hispanic, white by their parents and 32 percent were identified as Hispanic/Latino. Hispanic/Latino boys and girls were roughly equally represented in the sample; these were independent samples.

We assessed two sets of outcomes: development and early home environment. Developmental outcomes include children's socio-emotional and cognitive skills measured using a set of direct child assessments and parent-report measures. We measured home environment outcomes using mothers' reports about their family's functioning (i.e., maternal depressive symptoms, coparenting

conflict, parenting stress, couple happiness) and household resources (i.e., education, employment, poverty status). We measured parental investments (i.e., mother and father-report of singing, storytelling, and reading frequency; mother-report of number of books in the home). We used 130 percent of the federal poverty threshold, an ECLS-B constructed variable, to define poverty status because it is used with some federal assistance programs, such as Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). All analyses are weighted, adjusting for differential nonresponse at the kindergarten wave, attrition over time, and the initial probabilities of selection into the ECLS-B sample. All estimates, except for household resources, are adjusted for maternal and paternal education, maternal and paternal employment, and poverty status (below 130 percent). All group differences cited in this brief are significant at the .05 level. Effect size differences for all scores were computed and the magnitude of effect sizes was determined using Cohen's (1988) conventions for small (less than .2), medium (.2 to .5), and large (greater than .5) effects.

There are several limitations that need to be acknowledged. We could not include paternal reports of many variables because they were not included by the ECLS-B. Moreover, the measure of literacy activities in the home is somewhat limited, focusing on the frequency rather than the quality of these parental inputs. Most measures of family functioning and investments that were used relied on mother- and father-reported survey data rather than observational data.

^a National Center for Education Statistics. (2005). *Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Birth Cohort: 9-Month Public Use Data File User's Manual*. Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education.

Findings

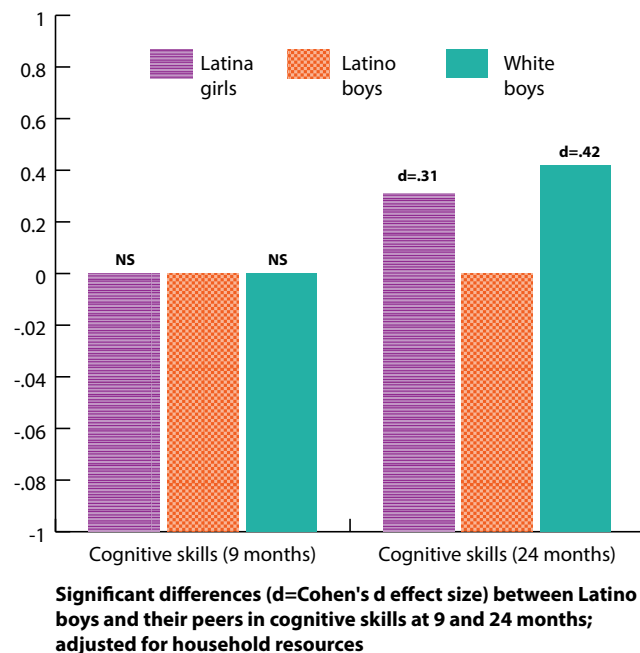
At kindergarten, Latino boys have many of the skills (e.g., social and early reading skills) important for school success. However, we found differences in cognitive and language skills from 24 months up to kindergarten entry.

Latino boys live in homes characterized by levels of family functioning comparable to those experienced by white boys, despite fewer available parental resources and investments (Figures 1 through 6). There are fewer differences in the early home environments of Latino boys and Latina girls.

Developmental outcomes

Early disparities begin at 24 months. At 9 months of age, Latino boys score similarly to both white boys and Latina girls on a measure of cognitive skill ability (i.e., language, active exploration, and problem-solving). But by 24 months, Latino boys score lower on this assessment than both Latina girls and white boys (Figure 1).

Figure 1. At 9 months, Latino boys' cognitive skills (e.g., language, active exploration, problem-solving) are similar to white boys' and Latina girls'. But by 24 months, Latino boys' cognitive skills are lower than white boys' and Latina girls'.



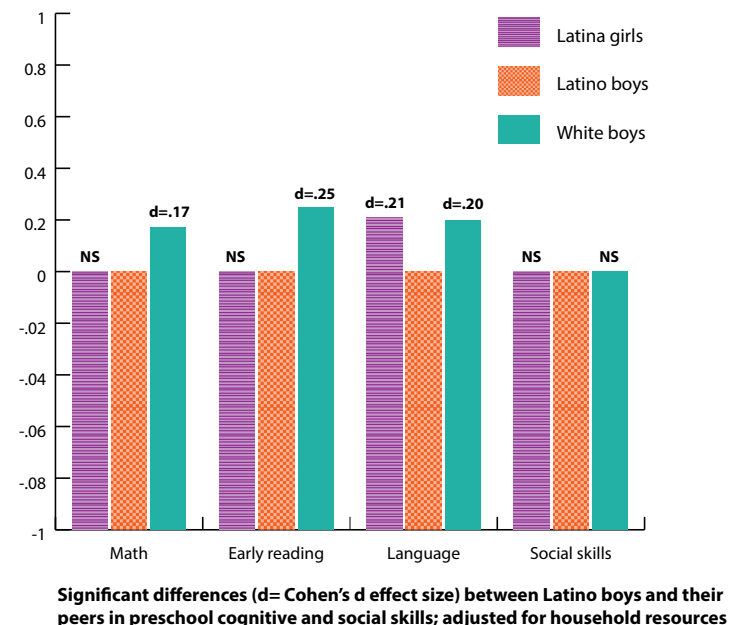
Source: Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Birth Cohort, 2001-2008

At preschool age (i.e., 48 months) and kindergarten entry, Latino boys have significantly fewer expressive language skills (i.e., ability to reproduce a narrative in their own words) and math skills (e.g., recognizing numbers, shapes, etc.) than their white peers. These differences are of small to medium magnitude (Cohen, 1988; Figures 2 and 3). Although at preschool, Latino boys' early reading skills (i.e., letter identification, conventions of print, phonological awareness) also lag behind white boys', at kindergarten entry, this is no longer the case.

At preschool age, Latino boys have fewer language skills than Latina girls, but this difference disappears by kindergarten entry. These differences are of small to medium magnitude (Cohen, 1988; Figures 2 and 3). At preschool age and up to entry to kindergarten, Latino boys' math and early reading skills are not different from Latina girls'.

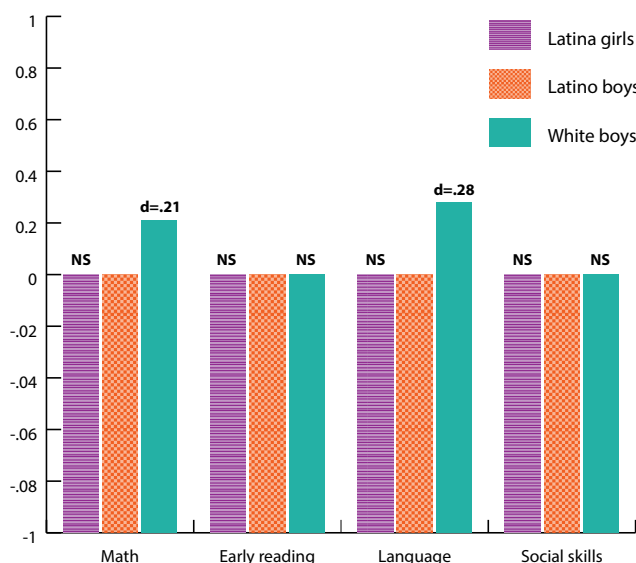
At preschool age and kindergarten entry, Latino boys have social skills (i.e., parental report of children's affect, temperament, and sociability during play) similar to those of both white boys and Latina girls (Figure 2 and 3).

Figure 2. At preschool, Latino boys had fewer math (e.g., recognizing numbers, shapes) and early reading (i.e., letter identification, conventions of print) skills than white boys, and fewer expressive language skills (i.e., ability to reproduce a narrative in their own words) than white boys and Latina girls.



Source: Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Birth Cohort, 2001-2008

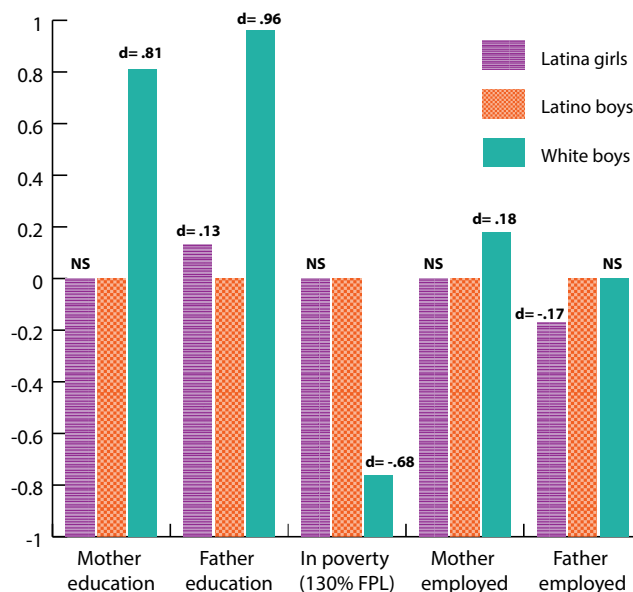
Figure 3. At kindergarten, Latino boys' early reading and social skills were similar to those of white boys and Latina girls, but they had fewer math skills (e.g., recognizing numbers, shapes) and expressive language skills (i.e., ability to reproduce a narrative in their own words) than white boys.



Significant differences (d = Cohen's d effect size) between Latino boys and their peers in kindergarten cognitive and social skills; adjusted for household resources

Source: Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Birth Cohort, 2001-2008

Figure 4. Compared to white boys, on average, Latino boys had mothers or fathers with lower educational attainment; Latino boys were less likely than white boys to have a mother who was employed and were more likely than white boys to live in poverty.



Significant differences (d = Cohen's d effect size) between Latino boys and their peers in household resources at 9 months

Source: Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Birth Cohort, 2001-2008

Early home environment

The household resources of Latino boys differ from those of white boys. On average, Latino boys have mothers and fathers with lower educational attainment than white boys. Latino boys are less likely than white boys to have a mother who is employed and are more likely than white boys to live in a household with income at or below 130 percent of the federal poverty threshold. Differences in parental education and poverty status between Latino and white boys are large in magnitude (Figure 4).

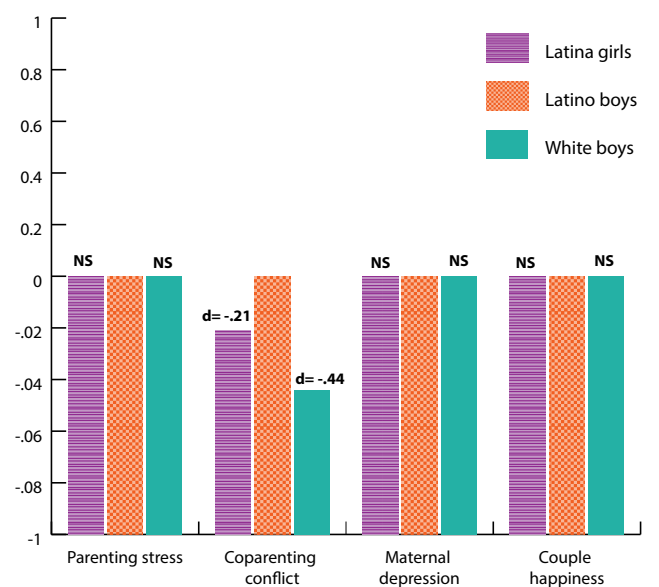
The household resources of Latino boys differ from those of Latina girls in terms of paternal education and employment, but not in terms of poverty status, maternal education, and maternal employment. Latino boys are more likely than Latina girls to have an employed father. On average, Latino boys had fathers with lower educational attainment than Latina girls. These differences, however, are small in magnitude (Figure 4).



There are few differences in the family functioning of Latino boys' and white boys' families. Across early childhood, Latino boys have mothers who report similar levels of parenting stress, depressive symptoms, and couple happiness as white boys. Latino boys have mothers, however, who are more likely to report coparenting conflict than white mothers (Figure 5).

There are few differences in the family functioning of Latino boys and Latina girls. Across early childhood, Latino boys have mothers who report similar levels of parenting stress, depressive symptoms, and couple happiness as Latina girls. Latina girls have mothers who report, on average, less co-parenting conflict than Latino boys (Figure 5).

Figure 5. Throughout early childhood, Latino boys have mothers who reported similar levels of mental health as mothers of white boys and Latina girls, but were more likely to have mothers who reported coparenting conflict than white boys and Latina girls.



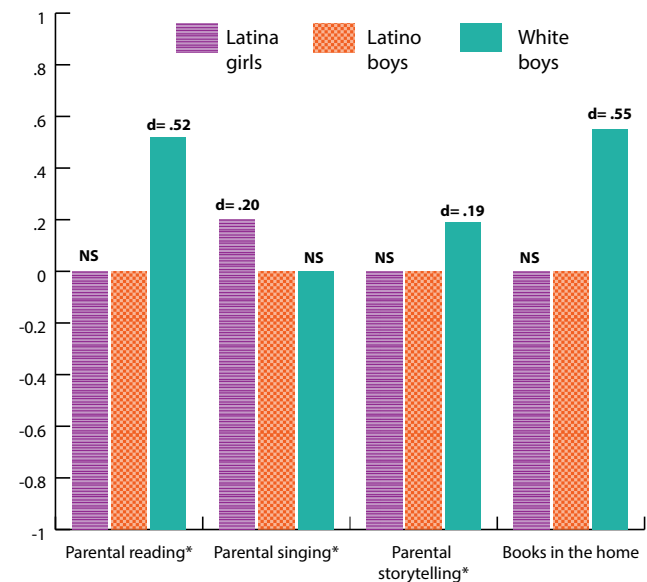
Significant differences (d= Cohen's d effect size) between Latino boys and their peers in family functioning; adjusted for household resources

Source: Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Birth Cohort, 2001-2008

There are small-to-large group differences in the home literacy environment of Latino and white boys. Compared to white boys, Latino boys are less frequently read to or told stories by a parent and have fewer children's books in their homes. There are no differences in how often Latino and white parents sing to their sons (Figure 6).

There are few differences in the home literacy environment of Latino boys and Latina girls. Although compared to Latino boys, Latina girls are sung to more frequently by their parents, there are no differences in how often Latino parents report reading or telling stories to their boys versus girls, or how many children's books there are in the home (Figure 6).

Figure 6. Compared to white boys, Latino boys were less frequently read to or told stories and had fewer children's books.



Significant differences (d= Cohen's d effect size) between Latino boys and their peers in parental investments; adjusted for household resources

*Parental reading, singing, and storytelling is a composite of mother and father-reports for children living in two-parent households and is mother-report only for children living in one-parent households.

Source: Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Birth Cohort, 2001-2008



Summary and implications

The goal of this brief was to identify whether there are differences in key developmental outcomes and home experiences of young Latino boys and their peers, and, when any differences emerge, whether these differences persist over time. After controlling for household resources, the largest group differences in early developmental outcomes are between Latino and white boys. Although Latino and white boys' general cognitive skills are the same at 9 months of age, differences are found by 24 months, with Latino boys demonstrating less advanced skills than their white peers in most areas. Many of these differences are large and remain so as children mature and enter kindergarten. However, Latino boys have social skills similar to those of white boys at both preschool and kindergarten, and early reading skills similar to those of white boys at kindergarten. Although Latina girls have a slight cognitive advantage over Latino boys in toddlerhood, these advantages disappear by kindergarten.

The largest difference between the groups is in family resources. Latino boys and girls are more likely than white boys to live in households with incomes at or near poverty and with mothers who have lower levels of education; they are also less likely to be engaged in reading and storytelling with their parents. Our findings suggest that programs and policies aimed at addressing the achievement gap among Latinos should target both boys and girls of color as early as 9 months, or earlier. Programs and policies should also target mothers and fathers, by investing in their education and encouraging them to interact with their children in ways that support early cognitive and social development. Programs such as "Abriendo Puertas/Opening Doors" aim to foster children's early development by improving Latino parents' practices and knowledge of children's early learning and socio-emotional development.^{7b} Other national programs such as Early Head Start and home visiting aim to build socio-emotional, intellectual, and physical skills in infants and toddlers by providing supports and resources to both parents and children.⁸

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^b Abriendo Puertas/Opening Doors is a non-profit that teaches recent Latino immigrants in the United States the skills needed to raise their young children ages zero to 5 years.

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About the Center

The National Research Center on Hispanic Children & Families is a hub of research to help programs and policy better serve low-income Hispanics across three priority areas—poverty reduction and economic self-sufficiency, healthy marriage and responsible fatherhood, and early care and education. The Center was established in 2013 by a five-year cooperative agreement from the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) within the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to Child Trends in partnership with Abt Associates and New York University, University of North Carolina at Greensboro, and University of Maryland, College Park. This publication was made possible by Grant Number 90PH0025 from OPRE. Its contents are solely the responsibility of the authors and do not necessarily represent the official views of OPRE, ACF, or HHS.

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