

The Early Home Environment of Latino Children: A Research Synthesis

Natasha J. Cabrera and Avery Hennigar



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INTRODUCTION

Children's growth and development depend on their early experiences at home, which are, in turn, the foundation for their later development and functioning.¹⁻³ Children's early experiences at home (i.e., their early home environment) are broadly conceptualized as the physical and psychological space in which children grow and develop, and includes the family resources (e.g., education and income) available to the child, parental investments of time and money (e.g., engaging in literacy learning activities), and family functioning processes (e.g., quality of marital relationship).

The dynamic interplay between a child and their environment is central to understanding human development.⁴ Children who grow up in stable, low-conflict, two-parent families tend to fare better, on average, than children growing up in other family types—at least in the United States.^{5,6} Family resources—especially parental education and family income—are important for children because these are tied to the quality of the home environment.^{7,8} Children who grow up in families that provide an enriching and stimulating environment—and whose parents engage them in learning activities, use positive discipline, and provide structured experiences through routines—are more likely to develop the skills needed to succeed in school and beyond.^{7,9}

Although the developmental science field is becoming increasingly responsive to the changing demographics in the United States, much of the research to date on children's early home environments has focused on white, middle-class families.¹⁰ Consequently, much less is known about the early home experiences of Latino children, even though Latinos constitute the largest racial/ethnic minority group of children.¹¹ To address this critical gap, this report:

1. Synthesizes existing research on the early home environments of Latino children and their families to better understand the nature of their early home experiences and how these experiences are linked to children's developmental trajectories.
2. Provides an analytical review of this literature to highlight what is known and to identify gaps in research.
3. Draws conclusions and implications for research, programs, and policies interested in serving Latino children and their families.

Key Findings

Our review of the research suggests that the evidence on how the early home experiences of Latino children help them grow and develop is limited in scope and breadth and is largely not based on theoretically driven research. It is striking that most of this research has focused more on the adversities that Latino families face, rather than on their strengths, that it confounds ethnicity and socioeconomic status (SES), and that it does not consider the heterogeneity of Latinos in the United States.

Summary of the research: What do we know?

- **The research suggests that the early home environments of Latino children include both positive and less positive attributes.** On the one hand, many Latino children live in relatively stable two-parent households with parents who are steadily employed. On the other hand, many Latino children live with parents who have low levels of education and are likely to experience economic hardship.
- **The literature on early experiences focuses disproportionately on challenges and adversity.** These studies focus on Latino children's delays in developing language skills and their lack of literacy skills, compared to their non-Latino peers.
- **Much of the extant research centers on a specific set of parental investments, especially literacy support at home and mother-child relationships.** These studies have found that, on average, and compared to non-Latinas, Latina mothers spend less time engaged in literacy activities such as reading; fathers are also reported to read less often, although the quality of their reading activities may be higher than that of mothers.
- **Most studies on parental resources focus on maternal education.** These studies have found that maternal education among Latinas may be more predictive of children's development than income. Across ethnic groups, mothers with more education are more likely to engage in frequent literacy activities and homework assistance than mothers with less education.
- **Studies on family functioning have focused primarily on parenting stress and the quality of the co-parenting relationship.** These studies reveal that increased parenting stress is associated with children's behavior problems, and that supportive co-parenting is associated with responsive parenting and social competence for children.
- **Only a few studies have examined socialization practices.** These descriptive studies have found that cultural beliefs and values such as *familismo* and *respeto* are related to parenting practices, which, in turn, are related to children's behaviors.
- **Studies that have examined maternal behaviors find that Latina mothers are warm and loving but are not very sensitive and responsive to their children's needs** (e.g., scaffold, following children's cues in play), which is important for cognitive development.
- **Most studies we reviewed focused on cognitive and achievement outcomes; fewer focused on social and**

emotional development. These studies find that Latino children's cognitive and language skills often lag behind those of their white peers, whereas their social skills compare favorably with, or exceed, their peers.

- **Much of the research treats Latinos as a homogenous group.** Findings based on a particular group—for example, Mexican Americans, who are the largest ethnic group in the United States and the most frequently studied—are then implicitly or explicitly generalized to all Latinos in the United States.

Summary of the research: What are the gaps?

- **Most of the research on Latino children's early home environments has not been guided by theoretical frameworks that identify the aspects of the home environment that are critical for children's development.** In fact, it is mostly correlational, based on samples of convenience, and not longitudinal; as such, it has limited generalizability.
- **Existing research on Latino families focuses predominately on risk factors that emphasize a deficit approach (i.e., focus mostly on adversity or challenges) and neglects the conditions that can promote social adaptation.** For example, the extant research understudies the ways in which resources (such as living in two-parent families) are associated with family functioning and children's development. We know little about how Latinos learn to adapt to the cultural norms of the United States while also maintaining some norms of their country of heritage (i.e., becoming bicultural)—adaptive behavior that seems likely to lead to positive outcomes for children and families.
- **Of the key dimensions of the home environment (e.g., resources, family functioning, parents' investments), we know the least about the cultural context of development.** For example, the field has understudied how cultural socialization processes and cultural norms, beliefs, values, or expectations are embedded in parenting and children's development. Most studies do not operationalize cultural variables and provide little empirical evidence that cultural factors protect young children.
- **Little is also known about how parenting practices like family routines, which are important socialization mechanisms for the transmission of cultural norms and values, promote cognitive and social competence.** The latter is an area of development in which Latino children often compare favorably with, or exceed, their peers.

- **There is little understanding of how various forms of instability (e.g., household chaos) may be associated with children's development.** Immigrant families, for example, often experience unique sources of instability and stress that may be related to their immigration status and may affect children's development.
- **Research on family functioning is also very limited.** There is little empirical research on marital quality, anxiety, and stressors that go beyond economic factors, such as those related to immigration status. Similarly, existing research has paid little attention to indicators of psychological well-being, such as optimism.
- **Studies of Latinos have focused largely on one social identity—being Latino—and have rarely acknowledged other social dimensions such as gender, nativity status, or language.** The study of intersectionality of identity is largely nonexistent in this literature.

Implications for research

- **There is an urgent need to conduct research on Latinos that is grounded in theory and that balances a focus on deficits with a focus on strengths.** We need better theoretical models that recognize the interplay of multiple protective factors, such as family structure and promotive parenting practices (e.g., routines). Although most Latino children live in two-parent families, many also live with parents who experience sustained stress and anxiety due to economic hardship, immigration status, balancing work and family, finding appropriate schools or child care for their children, and parenting in a new country. What coping skills do these families have and which do they need to develop?
- **A greater focus is needed on the intersectionality of SES, ethnicity, nativity, language, and immigration status.** Focusing on one factor and statistically controlling for others is an approach that is inadequate and has little practical significance.
- **More systematic and theoretically rigorous research is needed to understand how specific aspects of the home environment (e.g., routines) of Latino children support their development—not just cognitively (e.g., language and math), but also socially, physically, and mentally across the lifespan.** We need a focus on the mechanisms or pathways of development.
- **We need research that acknowledges the bidirectional influence of mothers, fathers, and children, as well as extended kin.** Parents influence

children's development, but children also influence parents' behaviors.

Implications for program and practice

- **Culture is more than food and language.** Programs targeted to Latinos must recognize that culture encompasses every aspect of an individual's life. The cultural context of Latinos in the United States is bicultural: They are navigating and embracing aspects of the cultural context of the host society while consciously retaining important aspects of their culture of heritage. Toward this end, children and parents should be supported in strengthening their native language while becoming proficient in English. Promoting bilingualism should be an important goal of programs for both children and families.
- **The heterogeneity of the Latino population should be an important consideration for program delivery, and a one-size-fits-all approach may not be effective.** Latinos in the United States vary in terms of educational levels, immigration history, language, SES, and religion. Programs should recognize that Latino families are complex entities with diverse economic experiences, family structure, resources, and immigration history.
- **Most young Latino children live with their fathers and mothers.** Programs targeted at families and children must involve fathers. As a group, Latino fathers have a strong sense of the importance of the family and share with their partners in the day-to-day care of their children.
- **Programs should build on families' strengths and nurture them.** Latinos families' strong family orientation, work ethic, and high motivation to help their children should be strengthened and used as a platform from which to address the multiple challenges they face. Programmatic efforts should focus on maintaining positive marital and parenting relationships, especially at key developmental transitions; helping families secure high-quality child care and schools; and strengthening available coping mechanisms.
- **Programs should make a concerted effort to provide services that reduce parenting stress and other sources of stress.** Parents who are less stressed have higher-quality interactions with their children, which promotes their well-being and development.

Background and Scope of the Review

To achieve our overall goals, we first contextualize our findings through a basic demographic picture of Latino children and their families in the United States. We then review a theoretical framework, based on developmental ecological systems and family systems frameworks (see Figure 1), that describes the early home experiences of children from birth to age 8, and how these experiences relate to their development. We broadly conceptualize the early home environment as the physical and psychological space where children grow and develop (see Figure 1). Our theoretical framework is also consistent with principles of family investment models and includes structural characteristics of the home environment such as household resources (e.g., books, toys), as well as process-type characteristics that include family functioning (e.g., relationships among parents, children, and other adult caregivers) and parental investments (e.g., parenting practices). We use this theoretical framework to synthesize the empirical research and identify aspects of the home environment that have been examined and neglected. Studies that focused solely on other environments where children might spend time, such as the neighborhood or schools and child care, were not included unless they examined the intersection between these other environments and the home. We close by drawing conclusions about what we know about the early experiences of Latino children, highlighting areas of research that merit further attention, and connecting what we have learned from research to implications for policies and programs.

Methodology of the Review: Process and Highlights

This review includes studies published since 2000 on the home environment of children from birth to age 8. To be included, studies had to include Latino families as the primary sample of analysis, or any subsample of Latino families. To locate relevant empirical studies, we used a variety of search terms, including *Latino*, *low-income*, *early home environment*, *parenting*, *household resources*, *parental investments*, *family functioning*, and *early childhood development* in various combinations in the following academic databases: Academic Search Complete, ERIC, PsycInfo, and PsycArticles, as well as in Google Scholar. We also reviewed the reference lists of key articles and included studies within the scope of this review that did not appear in our initial searches. Based on these broad parameters, we identified 63 studies for inclusion (see [Summary Information of Studies Reviewed in The Early Home Environment of Latino Children: A Research Synthesis](#)).

Latino children in the United States: A brief portrait

Latino children are the largest and fastest-growing racial/ethnic group among children, making up 1 in 4 of all children today in the United States.¹¹ Latino children also differ from their non-Latino peers in several key ways. Although over 90 percent of Latino children are U.S.-born, close to half have at least one parent who is an immigrant and more than 60 percent speak a language other than English at home.¹²⁻¹⁴ However, this is rapidly changing. Since 2000, the U.S.-born Latino population has continued to grow at a faster rate than the immigrant population.¹⁵ From 2000 to 2010, there were 9.6 million Latino births in the United States and 6.5 million newly arrived Latino immigrants; overall, U.S. births accounted for 60 percent of the growth in the Latino population since 2000.¹⁵

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Nearly one third (30%) of Latino children live in poverty, nearly two thirds (62%) live in households with low incomes, and over one third (37%) live in neighborhoods with high concentrations of poverty.¹⁴ In 2014, approximately 13.1 million Latinos and 5.7 million Latino children lived below the poverty line.¹⁶ The poverty rate for Latinos was 24 percent, compared with 26 percent for black Americans and 10 percent for whites.¹⁷ There is also significant variability in the economic experiences among groups of Latinos in terms of immigration history, religion, and language. Analyzing data from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Kindergarten Cohort (ECLS-K), Crosnoe (2007) found that children from Mexican-immigrant families had the lowest socioeconomic status and the highest level of poverty of four ethnic groups (native-born White, native-born African American, native-born Latino, and Mexican immigrant).¹⁸ On average, Latino and black households have 6 and 7 times less wealth (\$98,000 and \$85,000, respectively) than white households (\$656,000).¹⁹ (Wealth was calculated using the Survey of Consumer Finance [SCF] net worth figures but excluded consumer durable goods such as cars and furniture.) Reasons for this disparity include low levels of education, lack of English language proficiency, job and pay discrimination, and gender-wage inequalities.^{19,20} Although there have been improvements,

there are still educational attainment gaps and income gaps between Latino and white households. In 2014, the median household income for Latinos reached 61 percent of white household income, but this is just six percentage points higher than in 1970. However, among Hispanics, the number of people with a bachelor's degree or higher has tripled since 1971.²¹

Despite growing up poor, the experiences of many Latino children could be considered protective and promotive. For instance, most Latino children live in two-parent families,¹⁴ which has been found to be the most protective living arrangement for children.⁹ Latino children also typically grow up surrounded by a strong social network, including extended kin, that can provide support and opportunities for co-parenting.²² Moreover, Latina mothers are more likely to experience stable family life than black families during children's early years and to experience less income instability than other groups, which may contribute to less disruption in the family and less stress for parents.^{23,24} Other sources that can promote positive adaptation include Latinos' high motivation regarding their children's success, orientation toward the family,²⁵ and potential for bilingualism and biculturalism.²⁶ These potential promotive and protective factors may be related directly to children's development or may operate through early home experiences which, in turn, can directly influence children's development.

Latinos are also incredibly diverse in terms of their country of heritage, generational status, and (increasingly) geography.¹⁴ For example, while those of Mexican origin continue to be the largest Latino group, the share from other Latino countries is growing. Today, Salvadorans, Cubans, Dominicans, Guatemalans, and Colombians each have populations of more than 1 million in the United States, a number that continues to grow.²⁷ Across subgroups of Latinos, people of different ethnic backgrounds experience different health outcomes—both physical and mental.^{28,29} Moreover, the social structure of Latino families varies across subgroups, with differences in rates of cohabitation by extended family members and overall family size.^{30,31} There are also differences based on immigration status in prenatal practices and breastfeeding.^{32,33} These factors are all likely to influence young children's development.^{1,34,35}

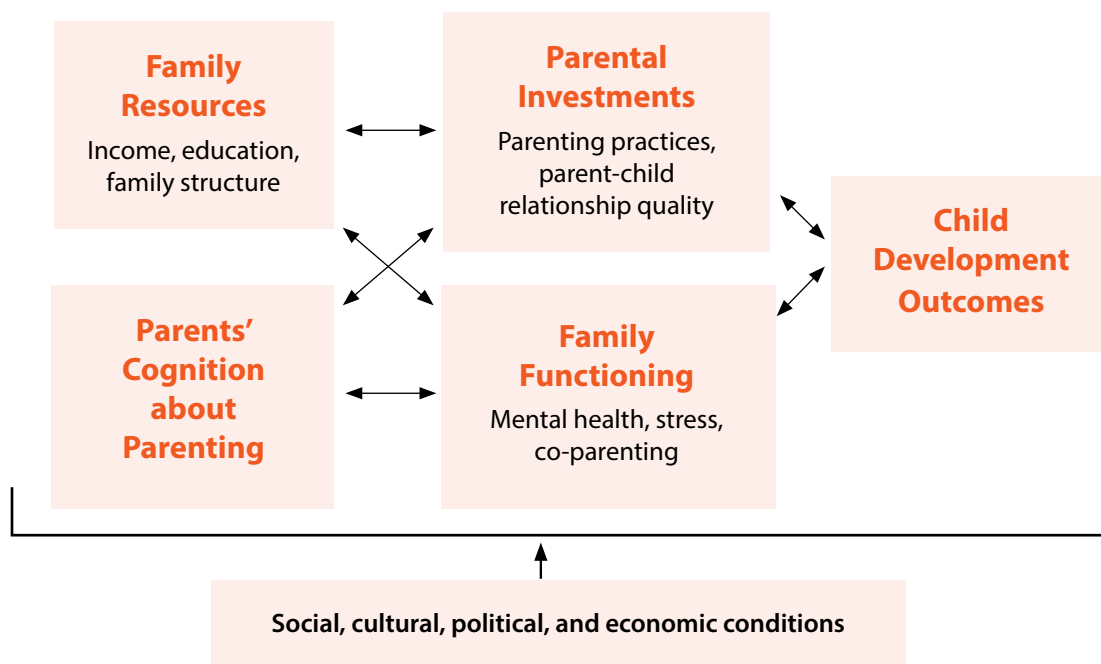
Conceptual/Theoretical Frameworks

The dynamic interplay between children and their environments is best reflected in the idea that children develop in an ecological developmental family system. In this system, the child reciprocally interacts with caring adults over time and across settings.³⁶⁻³⁸ The most prominent theoretical models to examine the interplay between early home experiences and children's development include family investment models,³⁹ attachment theory,^{40,41} cultural theories,^{42,43} and models of how ethnic-minority children develop competencies.⁴⁴ These theories reflect interdisciplinary perspectives and enable researchers to identify and select key variables of the home environment and to identify the processes or mechanisms that empirically link them to children's development. Ecocultural theories, in particular, are important tools to help us determine what aspects of development are culturally universal and what aspects might be more culture-specific. Collectively, these models have in common the assumption that parenting, especially in the early ages, is filtered to the child through parenting behaviors and practices that are reflected in the way parents organize the home and the types of experiences they provide for their children.^{45,46}

[D]espite the availability of theoretical models available to the field, most of the research reviewed for this synthesis is not guided by theoretical frameworks.

Articulating the theoretical assumptions of a research study leads to questions of why and how. It enables researchers to intellectually transition from simply describing a phenomenon they have observed to explaining and generalizing about various aspects of that phenomenon. Testing theories to determine whether they explain Latino children's development is critical to building evidence-based knowledge that can best inform programs and policies. Thus, it is striking that, despite the availability of theoretical models available to the field, most of the research reviewed for this synthesis is not guided by theoretical frameworks. The few studies guided by theory have been based on general principles of family investment models, the integrative model, and ecological models of development. In addition, these studies have focused on a set of narrow early home experiences and processes that can be categorized as follows: (1) family resources, (2) parents' investments, and (3) family functioning (see Figure 1).

Figure 1. Conceptual Model



Note. Graphic adapted from: Cabrera, N. J., Fitzgerald, H. E., Bradley, R. H., & Roggman, L. (2014). The ecology of father-child relationships: An expanded model. *Journal of Family Theory & Review*, 6(4), 336-354.

Empirical Research on the Early Home Experiences of Latino Children

Family resources

Researchers have widely studied the way in which family resources (e.g., parents' education and income) and family structure relate to children's outcomes.^{47,48} The importance of family resources for children's well-being is framed within investment models. This body of research finds that when parents have higher levels of education and income, children tend to experience higher-quality home environments and better academic skills.^{49,50}

Parents' education and income. A handful of studies have tested the effects of maternal education on children's outcomes with Latino populations. In these studies, Latina mothers' levels of education were associated with children's development.⁵¹⁻⁵³ Using the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Kindergarten, which included a sample of 1,375 Latino families, Suizzo and Stapleton (2007) found that maternal education explained more variance in mothers' involvement at home than income alone.⁵³ In a study of 73 Latino children, Lopez, Gallimore, Garnier, and Reese (2007) found that parents' education predicted literacy activities at home, which in turn predicted early Spanish literacy and English language proficiencies at kindergarten entry; this, in turn, predicted math achievement when children were in middle school.⁵¹ In a separate study, which included 650 Latino children in Head Start, McWayne, Melzi, Limlingan, and Schick (2016) found that, for Spanish-speaking Latino parents, maternal education predicted mothers' involvement in school and at home, but for English-speaking Latino parents, employment was related to maternal engagement at home.⁵²

Studies that examined how parents' education matters for children have used large-scale datasets to test whether indicators of SES (e.g., maternal education and income) are related to children's outcomes (e.g., language skills, academic achievement) through their impact on parental investments (e.g., literacy activities, maternal supportiveness) and the quality of the home environment. Mistry and colleagues found that, among both immigrant and nonimmigrant families, resources of education and income were channeled to children through investments of time in literacy activities and learning materials.⁵⁴ Similar findings were reported by Iruka and colleagues, who found that Latinos (Spanish-speaking-only households) with more education and income had children with better cognitive skills because they could engage in literacy activities with their children.⁵⁵ Researchers on another study using the same dataset found that, for Latino

families—compared to other racial and ethnic groups—investing in learning materials and activities that stimulate language development (i.e., frequency of mothers reading, talking, singing, and playing with their child) was the most consistent mediator between proxy indicators of SES and children’s preacademic skills, including receptive and expressive language, literacy, and numeracy skills.⁵⁶

Employment. The association between Latino parents’ employment, parenting, and children’s outcomes has received little attention in research. Gennetian and Rodrigues (2017) found that Latino and white fathers who experienced reductions in paid work increased their time spent with their children, although the quality and other impacts of such investments were not assessed.⁵⁷ Waldfogel, Han, and Brooks-Gunn (2002) examined maternal employment in a large sample that included Latinos, finding evidence of some persistent adverse effects of mothers being employed during the first year of their children’s lives.⁵⁸ However, they also found some positive effects of mothers being employed during the second and third years of their children’s lives on cognitive outcomes for non-Latino white children, but not for African American or Latino children—even after controlling for family characteristics likely associated with maternal employment.



Family structure. Family structure is considered a resource because children living in two-parent households are more likely to have increased household income and spend more time with their parents, and to participate more frequently in cognitively stimulating activities at home, relative to children in single-parent families.⁵⁹ Fuller and colleagues (2009) reported that most Mexican American fathers (83 percent) and white fathers (90 percent) lived in the home with their children.³⁰ However, we found no studies that examined whether living in two-parent families was a protective factor

for Latino children or whether it influenced their development directly, as the family investment model would suggest. Whether living in two-parent families operates in the same way for Latino children as it does for other children is an open empirical question.

Latina mothers’ levels of education can set the stage for children’s long-term success, beyond income alone. And, when parents have more resources, they are likely to invest them in their children.

Overall, the findings from these studies are relatively consistent with the larger literature, which has found that maternal education is an important predictor of the types of home activities that promote development. These findings suggest that Latina mothers’ levels of education can set the stage for children’s long-term success, beyond income alone. No studies we reviewed examined fathers’ education levels or the mechanism by which paternal education matters for children. The findings also support

the idea that when parents have more resources, they are likely to invest them in their children. However, the effect sizes of all these studies are relatively small, suggesting that while money and education are important, other factors not accounted for in this model also play a role in children’s outcomes.

Parents’ investments

The ways in which parents contribute to or invest (both time and money) in their children’s development have been studied widely.^{48,59} Parents directly influence their children through their interactions and through parenting practices such as reading, playing, spending time together, and other activities. Scholars interested in how parents influence children’s development have focused not just on the quantity of these activities (e.g., how often parents read to their children), but also on the quality of these interactions (e.g., how responsive parents are to their children’s needs). In this section, we describe studies that focused on parenting practices and on the quality of parent-child relationships.

Parenting practices. Theoretically, parents can directly influence their children’s development in various ways.⁵⁹ For example, parents can engage in literacy activities such as reading, playing games, and engaging in other activities (e.g., taking children to the park to play), and by participating in other social outings (e.g., shopping). The studies we reviewed

focused primarily on mothers'—and in a few cases, fathers'—literacy activities, the availability of learning materials in the home, discipline practices, and socialization practices.

Literacy activities. Most studies included in our synthesis focused on Latino mothers' literacy behaviors, including reading at home with their young children. Boyce and colleagues (2004) examined mothers' book-sharing behaviors and the vocabulary development of 33- to 47-month-olds during a mother-child reading task involving 47 immigrant Latina mother-child dyads.⁶⁰ They found that, during reading, Latina mothers enhanced children's attention to printed text, and promoted interactions and conversations about the book content, but engaged less often in complex literacy strategies (e.g., elaborating on children's ideas, soliciting predictions). In another study—this one with a diverse sample that included Dominican, Mexican, Black, and Chinese mothers and their 4-year-old children—Luo, Tamis-LeMonda, Kuchirko, Ng, and Liang (2014) found that all mothers were low in dialogic emphasis (the extent to which they asked their children about the story), which was a predictor of children's own storytelling skills a year later.⁶¹ Latino mothers were more likely than Chinese mothers to emphasize emotions when they spoke to their children about the story. Mothers who engaged in more complex reading behaviors (e.g., dialogic emphasis or asking children about the story extensively) had children with larger vocabularies, even after controlling for mothers' own vocabulary. Using the same dataset, Luo and Tamis-LeMonda (2017) found that Mexican mothers asked more behavioral questions than Dominican, Chinese, or African American mothers.⁶²



Studies that have used national samples of Latinos have reported similar findings. Using the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study-Birth Cohort (ECLS-B), Cabrera, Shannon, West, and Brooks-Gunn (2006) examined mother-infant interactions and fathers' engagement with their infants, finding that mothers who were observed engaging in sensitive parenting that included cognitive stimulation (e.g., verbal interaction) had infants who scored higher on a test of cognition; fathers' engagement in literacy activities (e.g., reading) was not related to infants' cognition.⁶³ Using the same dataset with toddlers and after controlling for SES, Guerrero and colleagues (2013) found that Mexican American mothers engaged less often in cognitive facilitation (i.e., maternal communication encouraging children to think through and facilitate a task), oral language, and preliterate skills at home with their toddlers than white mothers, who were more likely to be of higher SES than Latina mothers.⁶⁴ And using the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY), a national sample of 12,686 men and women that includes Latinos, Pachter, Auinger, Palmer, and Weitzman (2006) found that mothers who were observed providing more emotional support and cognitive stimulation to their 6- to 9-year-olds also reported fewer behavior problems.⁶⁵ In 2016, using the same dataset, Cabrera, Malin, Kuhns, and West (2017) found that fathers less frequently engaged in literacy activities (reading, singing, telling stories) across the early childhood period than mothers.¹

Our literature review identified a few studies that focused on fathers. In a small descriptive sample of 26 fathers, Ortiz (2000) found that most fathers reported reading to their children weekly.⁶⁶ Using the ECLS-B, Cabrera and colleagues (2006) found that fathers were modestly engaged in literacy activities with their 9-month-olds.⁶³ However, fathers' engagement in literacy activities such as singing, storytelling, and reading to their babies was not related to infants' scores on a cognitive test.

Only two studies on literacy included both parents. In a study of low-income parents, including Latino fathers, whose children were enrolled in Early Head Start, Malin, Cabrera, and Rowe (2014) found that Latina mothers read more often to their children than fathers, but that fathers used more metalingual talk (e.g., using questions that start with *wh-*, such as *when*, *what*, and *who*), a marker of quality of reading; this, in turn, predicted children's receptive skills.⁶⁷ Sims and Coley (2016), in a secondary data analysis of the ECLS-B, found that Mexican American fathers reported low rates of storytelling and reading to their children compared to Mexican American mothers.⁶⁸ However, Spanish-speaking Mexican American mothers reported the lowest rates of language inputs with their children. Approximately one third of Mexican American parents in the ECLS-B had less than a high school education, which could help account for these results (see Cabrera et al., 2006). The researchers also found significant associations between maternal and paternal literacy activities (e.g., reading, storytelling) and children's language and reading skills, but the effect sizes between these parenting behaviors

and children's skills were consistently small. Using the same dataset, Cabrera, Malin, Kuhns, and West (2017) found that the frequency of mothers' and fathers' literacy activities—which included reading, storytelling, and singing—was the strongest predictor of children's cognitive and social skills at kindergarten entry, but the size of the effect was small.¹

As with the research on reading in general, only a couple of studies have examined the mechanisms through which literacy activities are channeled to Latino children. In a study of the early home environment of 122 low-SES Latino



mothers and their preschool-age children, Farver, Xu, Eppe, and Lonigan (2006) interviewed mothers about their home literacy practices and their children's literacy behaviors and language skills.⁶⁹ Using path analyses, the researchers found that, after controlling for children's age and learning opportunities, mothers' involvement in literacy and children's language scores were mediated by children's interest in reading. In another study, Malin and colleagues (2014) found that Latina mothers' and fathers' reading was related to increased children's receptive vocabulary a year later because it enhanced children's interest in a reading task.⁶⁷ Schick, Melzi, and Obregón (2017) explored characteristics of book-sharing interactions between low-income Latina mothers and their young children.⁷⁰ They found that mothers who provided embellished elaboration during shared book reading had children with more advanced language skills six months later.

Learning materials in the home. The presence of learning materials in the home is an important indicator of the quality of the home environment, which is directly related to parents' resources and children's outcomes. Only a few studies in our synthesis examined the types of books and learning materials Latino children have in their homes. Tomopoulos and colleagues (2006) found that simply having books in the home predicted Latino children's cognitive and receptive language three months later.⁷¹ In particular, the availability of educational toys in the home predicted receptive vocabulary three months later. In another small-scale study, Trainin, Wessels, Nelson, and Vadasy (2017) found that having more books in the home was linked to an improvement in young children's academic achievement.⁷²

Discipline practices. Only two studies explored maternal discipline practices. Slade and Wissow (2004) found that Latino and black children who were spanked frequently before age two were less likely to be reported by mothers as exhibiting behavior problems than white non-Latino children who were not spanked.⁷³ However, Berlin and colleagues (2009) used cross-lagged path analysis to explore the reciprocal patterns of toddlers' fussiness and parents' verbal punishment and spanking in approximately 2,500 low-income white, African American, and Mexican American mothers and their toddlers.⁷⁴ Overall, they found that for all children, spanking at age one predicted children's aggressive behavior at age two and lower Bayley mental development scores at age three. However, verbal punishment was not associated with children's aggressive behavior or cognitive scores at any time. Furthermore, children's aggressive behavior problems or lower Bayley scores at any age did not predict spanking or verbal punishment, suggesting that harsh discipline (i.e., spanking) may be driven by parents rather than motivated by children acting out. However, at age two, there was a significant interaction effect for the prediction of cognitive development between spanking at age one and maternal race/ethnicity. For less acculturated Mexican Americans, verbal punishment at age two predicted higher Bayley scores at age three, relative to white families.

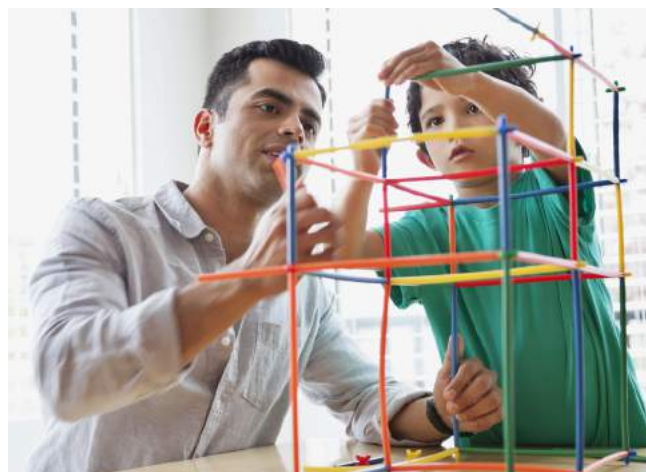
Socialization practices. Sociocultural theories contend that children's participation in culturally structured activities (e.g., family visits) and family routines (e.g., eating meals together) reflects their parents' cultural norms and beliefs. Latino parents who endorse *respeto* and have a general Latino orientation tend to use more direct or authoritarian parenting practices to organize children's early home experiences.^{75,76} Through participating in culturally structured activities, parents teach children about norms, values, and practices that help them adapt in that particular cultural context.⁴³ Any routines of daily life are mechanisms of cultural transmission and a measure of family cultural adaptation.⁷⁷

With some exceptions, there are limited studies on how Latino parents pass the values and norms of their cultural groups to their children, with few studies focused on some aspect of socialization. One small-scale study examined the behavioral strategies parents used to help children follow rules and comply with directives (Livas-Dlott, Fuller, &

Stein 2010), finding that Latina mothers observed in daily home activities typically used direct verbal commands to get their children to comply with their demands.⁷⁸ Ng, Tamis-LeMonda, and Godfrey (2012) explored parents' socialization goals in a sample of low-income mothers that included Dominican and Mexican immigrant mothers.⁷⁹ They found more similarities between Mexican and Dominican mothers in how they rated their socialization goals for their children compared to African American mothers, suggesting that mothers' socialization goals for their children may be culturally specific. Another study that examined the emotion-socialization practices used by Latina mothers found that these mothers were more likely to minimize or not respond to their children's negative emotions than European-American mothers.⁸⁰ Yet another study on cultural socialization found that mothers' ethnic-racial identity was indirectly but significantly associated with children's ethnic-racial identification through mothers' cultural socialization practices (e.g., having toys for their child that represent their ethnic/cultural background).⁸¹

In summary, the bulk of studies on parenting practices reviewed in this section focused on literacy-type activities (mostly involving mothers), with very few addressing other aspects of parenting, such as discipline practices or socialization practices. Overall, the findings are consistent with studies conducted with non-Latino children, which have found that maternal reading is related to children's vocabularies; however, in these cases, the effect sizes are small and the mechanisms by which this occurs are unclear. Moreover, these studies are mostly correlational and based on small, low-income samples of convenience, so the ability to determine causation or generalize to other samples is limited. While some studies used nationally representative datasets, they rarely analyzed subgroups by ethnicity, but rather drew comparisons across racial/ethnic groups, often from a deficit perspective.

The quality of parent-child relationships. The quality of parent-child relationships has been operationalized as the degree to which parents are responsive and sensitive to their children's needs, are warm and loving, and use positive ways to discipline (e.g., reasoning rather than spanking). In contrast to sensitive and responsive parents, parents who are intrusive and negative tend to have children who exhibit negative behaviors.



Several of the studies reviewed for this synthesis examined the quality of the parent-child relationship. Ispa and colleagues (2004) looked at maternal intrusiveness and warmth during observed interactions between mothers and children in a sample of diverse parents, including Mexican American mothers, who participated in the Early Head Start Research and Evaluation Project (EHSREP).⁸² They found that maternal intrusiveness predicted increases in children's negativity across race and ethnicity, and that maternal warmth did not moderate this relationship for Mexican American mothers. In another study using the same dataset, Ispa and colleagues (2013) found that, over five years, all groups declined in directiveness (e.g., commands), but Mexican American mothers declined the most.⁸³ Directiveness was associated with children's behavior problems for all groups, although the association was smallest for Mexican American children.

Using a sample of 9-month-old Latino children drawn from the ECLS-B, Cabrera and colleagues (2006) found that Mexican American mothers had lower responsiveness (e.g., follow the child's cue, provide scaffolding during play) scores than other mothers; however, this was not due to differences in SES, but rather parents' proficiencies in English, which is a proxy for acculturation.⁶³ Furthermore, the researchers found that higher maternal interaction scores were associated with higher cognitive scores in the infants, but fathers' engagement (i.e., frequency of literacy activities, caregiving, and physical play) was not. Using the same dataset, Fuller and colleagues (2010) found that Latino mothers had lower-quality interactions with their infants (i.e., they offered less praise and encouragement during parent-child interactions), which was then related to lower cognitive skills at 9 months.⁸⁴ Fuller and colleagues also showed that Latino mothers

displayed warmth (i.e., hugging and being loving), but this was not related to cognitive skills.⁸⁵ Using the Student-Teacher Relationship scale, Gamble and Modry-Mandell (2008) found that mothers who were warm and reported strong endorsement of familism (i.e., strong family cohesion) had children with fewer behavior problems (as rated by teachers) than those who did not endorse these values.⁸⁶ These findings suggest that Latino mothers are warm and loving, but that they may not engage in responsive and sensitive parenting that encourages children to take turns during play, explore their environment, and be autonomous, all of which are predictive of children's cognitive skills.

[P]rograms focused on reducing stress and increasing the quality of parent-child interactions can pay off by improving children's outcomes.

Marti, Bonillo, Jane, Fisher, and Duch (2016) studied 106 children recruited from Head Start centers to find that Latina mothers with high cumulative risks (e.g., level of education, teen parenting, less stable living arrangements) were less likely to be supportive than Latina mothers with fewer risks.⁸⁷ In turn, these cumulative risks had an indirect effect on children's social competence and behavior problems through the mother-child relationship (as reported by the mothers), but this study did not control for income. In an observational study of mother-child interactions with 322 infants and their Latina mothers, Lin, Crnic, Luecken, and Gonzales (2017) found

that reduced maternal sensitivity when infants were 6 weeks old was associated with negativity at 12 months and, in turn, behavior problems at 18 months.⁸⁸ This pattern was only significant for girls' internalizing problems.

Overall, the studies on the quality of mother-child interactions paint an inconsistent picture: Some studies report low sensitivity among Latina mothers and others do not, with some suggesting that poverty and other stressors may take a toll on parenting. Moreover, few studies have examined the quality of the father-child relationship, with only a couple focusing on the quality of paternal language inputs. Nevertheless, the studies reviewed here suggest that programs focused on reducing stress and increasing the quality of parent-child interactions can pay off by improving children's outcomes.

Family functioning

Family functioning—including how parents get along with each other and their psychological functioning—has important effects on children's development because the family is the primary environment for development in young children. In our synthesis, we identified studies that examined maternal depression, parents' stress, and the quality of the co-parenting relationship.

Maternal depression. Using the NLSY, Pachter, Auinger, Palmer, and Weitzman (2006) found that the effects of maternal depression on children's behavior problems were partially mediated through parenting (e.g., the quality of the emotional support and cognitive stimulation in the home as measured by the HOME scale) in samples of Latino and white mothers.⁶⁵ Another study focused on an intervention to improve maternal depression to mitigate children's behavior problems.⁸⁹ This study found intervention effects: Mothers in the treatment group had fewer reported symptoms of depression and rated their children's aggressive behavior lower following the intervention.

Parents' stress. Few studies in our synthesis focused on parenting stress. Behnke and colleagues (2008) explored the association between economic stress and parenting in 509 Mexican American and white fathers and mothers.⁹⁰ The researchers found that family cohesion mediated the relationship between stress and parenting, but that Mexican American fathers reported higher levels of family cohesion when faced with economic pressure, relative to European American parents and Mexican American mothers. Ceballos and Bratton (2010) conducted a randomized controlled study of the effectiveness of a Child Parent Relationship Therapy program with 48 low-income Latino immigrant mothers (one father was included) and their children.⁹¹ Participating mothers reported significant decreases in parenting stress, which was negatively related to children's behavior problems.

There are no studies on paternal depression or the quality of the marital relationship or how extended kin might act as sources of support.

The quality of the co-parenting relationship. A key aspect of family functioning that influences children's development is the quality of the co-parenting relationship—that is, the degree to which parents work as a team to raise their children.

Yu and colleagues (2008) found that fathers who highly endorsed the Mexican cultural value of *simpatía* had partners who reported higher relationships adjustment at over time.⁹² Additionally, fathers who highly endorsed *respeto* (sympathy and respect) had partners who reported less parental agreement on child rearing and less maternal satisfaction with their partner as a parent. In a study of an ethnically and racially diverse sample of mothers and their 24-month-old children from the EHSREP, Cabrera, Ryan, Mitchell, Shannon, and Tamis-LeMonda (2008) found that minority nonresident fathers were more likely to be romantically involved with their children's mothers and in their children's lives than white nonresident fathers.⁹³ In a nationally representative sample of 735 Mexican American parents and their 9-month-old children participating in the ECLS-B, Cabrera, Shannon, and La Taillade (2009) found that co-parenting conflict had a significant negative effect on parenting behaviors (i.e., mother-infant interaction and father engagement).⁹⁴ However, the effects of the co-parenting conflict on fathers' caregiving behaviors varied by fathers' level of acculturation: When conflict was high between the parents, acculturated fathers engaged in more caregiving than less acculturated fathers. The study did not find support for the association between co-parenting conflict and infants' social development.

In a sample of Mexican American couples with a child enrolled in Head Start, Sotomayor-Peterson, Figueredo, Christensen, and Taylor (2012) found that shared parenting (i.e., how mothers and fathers feel they work together in childrearing tasks) predicted a positive emotional climate within the family (i.e., expressing positive emotions to family members).⁹⁵ In other words, parents who were more satisfied with shared parenting had a more positive family environment. They also found that family solidarity and avoidance of confrontation was associated with feeling more satisfied with shared parenting. Barnett, Mortensen, Gonzalez, and Gonzales (2016) studied 71 Mexican-origin mothers and their toddlers to find that mothers living in more disadvantaged neighborhoods reported less co-parenting cooperation when they also reported less adherence to values of *familism*.⁹⁶



In summary, the research community has paid little attention to the role of family functioning in young children's development in Latino families. Of the few studies on this topic, most have focused on maternal depression, parenting stress, and the co-parenting relationship, although several have identified factors that might explain these associations. There are no studies on paternal depression or the quality of the marital relationship, or of how other extended kin (grandparents, siblings, etc.) might act as sources of co-parenting support on children's outcomes.

Key Takeaways from the Literature Review

- Overall, the literature reviewed for this synthesis is comprised of descriptive, small-scale studies of Latinos, is largely correlational in nature, and is not theoretically grounded. A handful of studies based on secondary data analysis of large-scale, nationally representative studies compare Latinos to their white and black peers.
- The most studied family resource is maternal education and income. Both education and income matter for children's development, but the effect sizes appear to be small.
- Overall, mothers' and fathers' investments (i.e., time spent in literacy activities) in children's learning and development is relatively modest. Although fathers seem to spend less time engaged in activities such as reading, the quality of their reading to children is higher than mothers' and therefore more significant for children's language skills.
- Overall, Latina mothers are observed to be less sensitive to their children than other mothers, but their children do not exhibit the negative outcomes (lower cognitive scores and behavioral difficulties) that are observed in other groups whose mothers are less sensitive.
- The view that cultural values such as *familismo* and *respeto* are central to the well-being of children is not strongly or consistently supported by the available literature, which is not very rigorous or systematic.
- Co-parenting support among Latino couples is a significant family functioning process that is related to parenting behaviors.

- There are virtually no studies of the importance of extended kin for Latinos. There is some indication that Latino mothers who get support from their own mothers and who feel strongly about the value of the family have a greater sense of self-efficacy than mothers who do not.
- Latina mothers who report high levels of depression symptoms and parenting stress are less emotionally supportive of their children than mothers with better mental health; this, in turn, relates to more behavioral problems.

Limitations

This literature review suggests that the field has a very narrow view of Latino children's development. Although many of the following apply to the broader study of child development, the research on Latinos is characterized by several striking limitations:

- Most studies we reviewed for this synthesis focused on a few select aspects of the home environment, including mothers' education, mothers' parenting knowledge, maternal investments, and parenting stress or co-parenting. Virtually no studies addressed other aspects of the home environment—such as family structure, chaos or disorganization of the physical home environment, family processes such as parents' decision-making patterns, cultural beliefs about childrearing, and family routines—that have also been theoretically linked to children's development.
- Most studies on parental investments have focused on a select type of investments (e.g., literacy activities such as reading) that are likely to promote cognitive outcomes. Only a handful of studies focused on other types of investments, such as parents' sensitivity or culture-related practices that are linked more specifically to social skills and self-regulation.
- Most of the research we reviewed was focused on deficits, comparing the development of Latino children to that of white children and consistently reinforcing the many ways in which Latino children lag behind their peers. Little research has focused on bilingualism as a developmental competence. Similarly, there is scant research on the protective and promotive factors (including *familismo* and living in two-parent families) that may buffer children from the negative effects of economic disadvantage.
- Most studies on Latino families have not addressed the heterogeneity of Latinos and, consequently, the potential variability within groups. Samples for studies on Latinos appear to be selected based on the demographic characteristics of the community where the research is conducted, but it is unclear what percentage of the total Latino population they represent because little population-based information is provided. The issue of sampling or selection of Latinos in the United States has clear implications for programs and policies. If most studies are based on Mexican Americans, who have unique immigration patterns and SES characteristics, then the generalizability of the studies to other groups—that may have different historical patterns of immigration and citizenship and socioeconomic characteristics—is invalid at best and misleading at worst.
- Almost twice as many studies have been conducted on Latino children's cognitive skills, mostly from a deficit perspective, as on their social skills.
- Most of this research has several methodological limitations, including the overrepresentation of convenient samples whose findings cannot be generalized. Very few studies have included national samples that would enable us to draw conclusions that may be generalizable. Most of the available research is correlational and few studies are longitudinal. Many studies confound SES and ethnicity, which is rarely reflected in the conclusions they draw.
- As with the mainstream literature as a whole, most studies on Latino families have focused solely on mothers. The downside of this approach is that findings of parenting effects might overestimate maternal effects. Lack of attention to fathers is problematic because research shows that fathers' contributions to children's development are unique—and in addition to—the contribution of mothers. Future research should include fathers to test not only for unique effects, but also for joint effects of parents' contributions to children's development.

[M]ost of the research on Latinos has been conducted on the adversities faced by these families, and less on their potential strengths.

Recommendations for a Research Agenda

These limitations point to specific recommendations for future research.

- **Engage in more qualitative research** to improve the field's understanding of the cultural context of Latino children, and to differentiate processes that might be specific to a cultural group from processes that might be more universal. Understanding what is culture-specific can also shed light on the mechanisms that might explain how Latino children's early experiences matter for their development.
- **Conduct more studies guided by dynamic systems, social relationship, and sociocultural theories** to better understand developmental processes in Latino children. We need studies that do not confound SES and ethnicity, which can obfuscate within-group variability. Future studies should include diverse ethnic and SES samples, which would enable researchers to examine class differences while holding ethnicity constant.
- **Focus more on the quality of the home environment.** While a number of studies examined the home literacy environment, these studies measured frequency rather than quality. Few studies in our synthesis used a measure of the quality of the home.
- **Further examine the role of family functioning and extended kin.** Some studies looked at the quality of fathers' and mothers' co-parenting, and a few looked at grandmothers and mothers (and siblings) as important influences on children. However, these studies are limited in number and scope and do not account for the impact of social networks on children's development.
- **Pay more attention to the role of cultural (and geographic) context.** We need studies that examine how culture influences a wide array of family processes, including roles, decision-making patterns, and cognitions and practices about childrearing and child development. There are no studies on biculturalism or ethnotheories, and just a handful of studies that look at culture in some way, but these do not treat culture as a dynamic concept.
- **Conduct more research on how culture is transmitted in a bicultural context.** Very few studies have examined how parents establish routines, or how they engage in ethnic-racial socialization or emotional socialization in a cultural context. How do parents integrate into their routines and practices the values and beliefs that can be attributed to their country of origin, as well as the beliefs and values that can be attributed to the host country?
- **Engage in studies that go beyond one microsystem (the home) to include others such as peer relationships.** We found no studies that examined the development of peer friendships among Latino children from birth to age 8.
- **Conduct more research on how family structure conveys benefits to children.** A voluminous body of research has shown that children who grow up in two-parent families are, on average, better off than those who do not, but we do not know whether this is true for Latinos. We need to ask whether these types of stable families are beneficial for Latino children.
- **More thoroughly examine how features of employment (shift work, seasonal work, long hours) interact with family functioning (parent-child interactions) and children's outcomes.** This is an important consideration because parents who work in low-paying jobs may have to work long hours, which can result in less quality time with their children. Long work hours, unconventional shift work, and work schedules that vary or are unpredictable may cause anxiety and stress and disrupt family routines; at worst, these can lead to parents' stress, depression, and alienation from the family.⁹⁷ Thus, promoting employment may be the right strategy for economic self-sufficiency, but it can also disrupt family functioning. We need to understand this relationship.
- **Explore how culture contributes to children's development.** Much research has focused on key beliefs and values (*respeto*), but there is little empirical support for how these beliefs shape the experiences of Latino children in the early years.
- **Conduct more studies that consider acculturation and nativity status.** We need studies that include acculturation and nativity status as significant mediators or moderators of the link among family resources, parenting, and child outcomes.
- **Future work should highlight the variability within ethnic minority groups—not just across ethnic groups.** Most studies to date on Latino families typically have not addressed the heterogeneity of Latinos and, consequently, the potential variability within groups.

Conclusions

This review aimed to provide an analytical synthesis of research on the early home experiences of Latino children across four dimensions: parents' cognitions, attitudes, and beliefs; family resources; parental investments; and family functioning. Overall, our review shows that most of the research on Latinos has been conducted on the adversities faced by these families, and less on their potential strengths. Many Latino children live in two-parent families with parents who have low levels of education and income but are likely to be working.^{98,99} In terms of parental investments, Latino children live in relatively stimulating homes with two parents who read to them somewhat frequently and often have access to educational materials such as books.¹

This review also highlights gaps in research on Latino families. Future studies should take a broader lens and focus on developing theoretical models that integrate the mechanisms by which the early experiences of Latino children relate to their development across multiple domains. The cultural context—including the tendency for Latino children to live with two parents, as well as their family values and social orientation—should be the central focus of the research agenda on Latino children. This research must also explore within-group variability and test for universal practices that promote child development across groups.



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About the Authors

Natasha Cabrera, PhD, is co-investigator of the National Research Center on Hispanic Children & Families, co-leading the research area on healthy marriage and responsible fatherhood. She is a professor in the Department of Human Development and Quantitative Methodology, College of Education, at University of Maryland, College Park and a 2015 Russell Sage visiting fellow. Her research focuses on father involvement and children's social development; ethnic and cultural variations in fathering and mothering behaviors; family processes in a social and cultural context; and the mechanisms that link early experiences to children's school readiness.

Avery Hennigar, MPH, is a doctoral student in the Department of Human Development at the University of Maryland, College Park. Avery's research explores the early home environment of low-income, ethnic minority families, and how mothers and fathers parenting practices are related to the cognitive and social development of young children. She also studies how interventions can be most effective for at-risk families and the application of research to policy.

About the Center

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