



Latino Parents Report Positive Co-parenting and Parent-Child Interactions that Vary by Gender and Nativity

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Introduction

The goal of federal healthy marriage and relationship education (HMRE) programs and related services for low-income, married couples with children is to strengthen the quality and stability of couples' relationships and ultimately improve the well-being of children.¹

Healthy family relationships are foundational to the well-being of families and children.^{2,3,4} This brief provides evidence about how low-income, married Latino fathers *and* Latina mothers seeking programmatic services to improve their relationship outcomes report on their co-parenting and parenting relationships 12 months after they enrolled into a program. We present mothers' and fathers' reports by their nativity status (i.e., born in the United States vs. foreign-born) because research has found that Latinos born in the United States have different resources and views about their relationships than Latino parents who were born elsewhere and subsequently immigrated to the United States.^{5,6,7,8,9} These data on how Latino parents view their relationships with each other—and their interactions with their children—at 12 months after enrollment into the program are particularly beneficial because they will help programs tailor their services to meet the needs of families by identifying their strengths and challenges. Such data on Latino parents' co-parenting and parenting relationships can help enhance the effectiveness of programs and help programs judiciously allocate limited resources and offer targeted content that lines up with the lived experiences of these families.

We used data from the Supporting Healthy Marriage (SHM) evaluation, an impact and implementation evaluation of HMRE programs,^{10,11} and asked three questions pertinent to low-income, married Latino fathers and Latina mothers^a who signed up to participate in the SHM programs and were in the control group:

1. What is the quality of their co-parenting relationship (i.e., cooperation and conflict)?
2. What are their parenting practices (i.e., parent involvement and discipline) and how does parent involvement vary by their child's age? What are their levels of parenting quality (i.e., warmth)?
3. How do mothers' and fathers' co-parenting and parent-child relationships vary by nativity status?

The SHM evaluation presents a unique opportunity to use rich data to gain insight into how Latino fathers and Latina mothers perceive their relationships with each other as co-parents and with their children as parents, and whether these vary by parents' nativity status. There is limited in-depth information about how Latino fathers and Latina mothers perceive their co-parenting relationships with their partners. Most of the evidence on co-parenting is based on maternal reports so it remains unclear whether fathers perceive their co-parenting relationship in the same way. Moreover, the research on family functioning treats Latinos as a homogenous group. Understanding how key family dynamics differ by nativity status is an important step toward unpacking the heterogeneity in this population, with significant implications for how to better serve these diverse families.⁵

Key Findings

Co-parenting relationships are generally strong among Latinos, but this varies by nativity.

- Overall, Latino fathers and Latina mothers agreed that they had a cooperative relationship with their partners and that they rarely experienced co-parenting conflict.

^a The sample of mothers and fathers in our study were not necessarily partnered to each other (see Data and Sample for details).

- Immigrant Latino fathers had a more positive perception of their co-parenting relationships (i.e., more cooperation and less conflict) than immigrant Latina mothers. There were no differences between U.S.-born fathers and mothers in their perceptions of their co-parenting relationship.
- A lower percentage of immigrant Latino fathers (46.2%) and mothers (40.4%) reported getting along very well with their partner than their U.S.-born counterparts (57.1% for fathers and 51.6% for mothers). Immigrant Latino fathers, on average, also reported more conflict with their partners than U.S.-born fathers.

Parenting practices among Latinos varies by both gender and nativity.

- Overall, Latino fathers and mothers reported high levels (i.e., a few times a week or every day) of involvement with their children and frequent (i.e., a few times a week or every day) warm interactions with them.
- Likewise, Latino fathers and mothers reported rarely (i.e., never or a few times a month) using harsh discipline (i.e., spanking or hitting), and reported low levels of parenting stress (e.g., most respondents strongly disagreed that parenting is more work than pleasure).
- Regardless of their nativity status, Latino fathers reported being less warm and involved than Latina mothers. However, immigrant fathers reported using verbal and harsh discipline less often than immigrant mothers.
- Immigrant Latino fathers reported being less involved with their younger children and less frequently using verbal and harsh discipline, relative to fathers born in the United States.
- Immigrant Latina mothers reported slightly less involvement (i.e., a few times a week) with their younger children than mothers born in the United States.
- Immigrant Latina mothers reported higher levels of parenting stress than U.S.-born mothers.



Implications for Programs

- **Programs that provide services to couples to strengthen their relationships are important investments, even for parents who are not facing serious difficulties at time of enrollment**, as was the case among participants in our study. These investments may have a preventive function and may help families maintain healthy and positive relationships as they and their children age and as they face life's challenges. Investing in preventive and supportive services should be a norm in a society that values the well-being of children and families.
- **Programs can maximize their effectiveness by carefully tailoring services to support positive parenting behaviors within the families they serve.** For example, Latino parents use verbal discipline very infrequently with their young children and most report never hitting or spanking them. Programs can encourage parents to continue this trend and provide additional options for positive discipline.
- **Programs may have frequent opportunities to acknowledge, validate, and support mothers' actions.** For example, despite reporting more parenting stress than Latina mothers born in the United States, immigrant Latina mothers reported very frequently showing affection to their children, being involved with them in daily activities (e.g., reading, playing), and rarely—if ever—using verbal or harsh discipline. These findings suggest that, although immigrant mothers face challenges due to poverty and adjustment to a new country, they nevertheless prioritize their children and ensure that their parental stress does not spill over to their parenting.
- **Programs can do more to help fathers and mothers become more aware of their partners' needs and be more supportive as co-parents.** This support may be an area of need especially for immigrant parents who, in general, reported more discordance in their perception of their relationships.

- **HMRE programs that serve low-income married couples could be enhanced by increasing practitioners' awareness that fathers and mothers have different needs and different perceptions of the types of relationship support they need.** Targeted support for mothers and fathers can make these programs more successful in improving relationship outcomes for fathers *and* mothers in married families.

Strong Co-parenting and Parent-Child Interactions Benefit Children's Development

Co-parenting relationships

Co-parenting is defined as the extent to which couples work together as a team to manage their parenting responsibilities, and includes the extent to which parents cooperate with one another and agree or disagree about child rearing.¹² Longitudinal studies suggest that parents who enjoy a supportive co-parenting relationship (characterized by high levels of communication) during their children's toddler years tend to provide positive parenting experiences (e.g., sensitivity, responsiveness), which helps children develop social skills at preschool age.¹³ Concurrent studies also find that when mothers report low level of coparenting support (e.g., father respecting mother's decisions regarding the child), they perceive more externalizing behaviors among their kindergarteners.¹⁴ The few studies examining Latino parents' co-parenting have shown that Latina mothers and fathers who report more co-parenting conflict display less positive parenting (i.e., responsiveness, sensitivity, cognitive stimulation) with their infants during semi-structured teaching tasks.⁵ Mexican fathers and mothers who have a more positive perception of the parenting alliance (i.e., are supportive of each other's childrearing practices) report higher-quality fathering.⁶ When studies have examined differences by nativity status, they find that immigrant Latinos have a stronger sense of family cohesion (i.e., familism beliefs) and higher co-parenting quality (e.g., communication with partners) than non-immigrant Latinos, and that parents from Mexican and other Latino backgrounds reported similar levels of co-parenting conflict.^{5,15,16} Overall, there is limited information about the quality of the co-parenting relationship among Latina mothers *and* fathers; the way in which co-parenting relationships might vary depending on the age of the child; and whether parents' ability to co-parent varies by nativity status. These factors each influence differential experiences and perspectives about family life. In this study, we specifically address these gaps.

Parenting practices and quality

Parent practices and behaviors encompass everything parents do on a daily basis to support their children's development. The quality of parenting and the broader family environment are unequivocally the most significant drivers of children's well-being and healthy development.¹⁷ From birth, children depend on their parents' consistent love, protection, and support to grow and become healthy, independent, and well-adjusted.¹⁸ Parents engage in an array of cognitively stimulating activities such as reading or engaging in play, communicating with children about school or friends, spending time in shared activities, showing love and affection, and using developmentally appropriate strategies to discipline them.¹⁹ Children of all ages need emotional support and caregiving, but as children gain basic skills such as feeding themselves or dressing, parents adjust their time and spend more time and resources with younger children than with their older counterparts.^{20,21}

The degree to which parents provide developmentally appropriate and high-quality parenting determines children's outcomes to a substantial degree.¹⁸ For younger children, being read to regularly is strongly related to development of language skills. Latina mothers who read to their young children (birth to age 5) a few times per week are more likely to have children with better math, reading, and social skills than mothers who read less often.^{21,23} Studies show that Latina mothers are generally warm and affectionate with their children^{24,25,26} and are observed to be relatively responsive to their children's needs.^{5,25}

Most Latino men reside in the same household as their children²² and, consequently, engage in relatively high levels of involvement in caregiving with their infants (e.g., bathing)²⁷ and physical play (e.g., tickling), compared to fathers from other ethnic groups.^{25,28} This caregiving continues into their children's school-age years, with Latino fathers reporting similar levels of involvement to mothers in activities such as playing and going to events with their child.²⁹ Promoting high levels of paternal involvement in the early years is important because fathers have both short- and long-term impacts on children's academic and social skills.^{30,31,32,33} Studies of adolescent boys indicate that adolescents whose fathers are highly involved (e.g., communicate and offer guidance) have more positive peer relationships than adolescents whose fathers are not.^{34,35}

The context in which parents rear their children is an important determinant of their parenting practices and the quality of their parenting. Among Latinos, a significant context is whether they were born in the United States or elsewhere. Immigrant parents, on average, have access to fewer resources, experience more stressors, and face more challenges (such as linguistic barriers) than U.S.-born parents.^{8,9} These challenges can undermine healthy and positive relationships. There is evidence that U.S.-born Mexican American mothers, who are likely to have more resources than immigrant mothers, show more warmth in their interactions with their infants than immigrant Mexican mothers.^{5,26} In terms of disciplining their young children, studies find that Latino parents—regardless of nativity status—reported using verbal discipline (i.e., shouting) infrequently and never using harsh discipline (i.e., hitting or spanking).³⁸ Overall, these findings suggest that the context of parenting can be very challenging for Latina immigrant mothers and their children. Many find themselves with limited income, low levels of education, and without proficient English skills, navigating a complex and unfamiliar system in the United States that often marginalizes instead of supporting them. For this brief, we examine how Latina mothers' and fathers' parenting practices and behaviors vary by their nativity status to understand both the challenges and the strengths of these families.

Data and Measures

Data and sample

We used data from the SHM evaluation, a randomized treatment and control study launched in 2003 to develop, implement, and test the effectiveness of federally funded marriage education programs targeting low-income, married couples.^b The SHM sample consisted of 6,298 couples (12,596 individuals) who had a child under age 18 or were expecting a child at the time they entered the study. Couples were from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds, and one child (less than age 14) in each family was randomly selected after the baseline data collection to be the focus of any child-related measures gathered in the subsequent data collection activities. Follow-up data collection activities were conducted 12 and 30 months after the baseline data collection, which was conducted prior to random assignment. The data we used in our analysis came from the parent survey at the 12-month data collection, except for two demographic variables (i.e., parent education and years living in the United States), which were only asked in the baseline parent survey. The parent survey was conducted with both mothers and fathers.



Our sample for this analysis is limited to fathers and mothers who (1) self-identified as Hispanic/Latino of any race, (2) participated in the 12-month follow-up survey, (3) were in the control group, and (4) responded to questions about a focal child at the 12-month follow-up survey. Participants were told that, if eligible, they would be assigned at random to the SHM program or to a group not enrolled in SHM, but which could still access other services available in the community. Treatment group participants were provided relationship and marriage education services (e.g., group workshops based on relationship education curricula, family support services). Control group participants were provided a list of relationship and family support services and resources (e.g., parenting classes, mental health services). We used data from the 12-month follow-up survey, which contains extensive data on the variables of interest (i.e., parenting and co-parenting relationships). We only included parents from the control group to avoid the confounding effects of the intervention program.

We selected our sample of fathers and mothers based on self-identification as Hispanic. This resulted in an analytic sample of N=1,081 Latino fathers and N=1,182 Latina mothers. Because we selected fathers and mothers separately, some of the Latino fathers (n=151) and some of the Latina mothers in our sample (n=252) had a spouse/partner who did not self-identify as Hispanic in the sample (see Table 1). A small number of parents in our sample did not have a spouse or partner at the time of the 12-month follow-up (see Table 1).

^b Hsueh, JoAnn, and Knox, Virginia. Supporting Healthy Marriage Evaluation: Eight Sites within the United States, 2003-2013. Inter-university Consortium for Political and Social Research [distributor], 2014-12-19. <https://doi.org/10.3886/ICPSR34420.v2>

At the 12-month follow-up survey, a large majority of the parents in our sample reported being married and living with the focal child for at least half of the time. About two thirds of fathers and mothers were immigrants, among whom half had lived in the United States for at least 10 years. Most parents in our sample had at least a high school diploma, and most fathers worked full time, whereas most mothers were unemployed (see Table 1).

Several of the co-parenting and parenting items were only asked of a subsample of fathers and mothers due to the design of the questions (see Table 2). For example, parent involvement included three different sets of items asked of parents of children ages 5 or younger (i.e., 4 years and 11 months), ages 5 to 9 (i.e., 8 years 11 months), and ages 9 to 15. As a result, the sample sizes for the corresponding variables were smaller than the full analytic sample.

Table 1. Sample Demographics of Latino Parents ^{a,b}

	Father	Mother
Nativity status		
U.S.-born	362 (33.5%)	452 (38.2%)
Immigrant ^c	718 (66.5%)	730 (61.8%)
Years in the U.S. (immigrant parents only)^d		
5 years or fewer	112 (15.4%)	184 (24.6%)
6 to 9 years	149 (20.7%)	169 (22.6%)
10 to 14 years	178 (24.7%)	153 (20.5%)
15 years or longer	286 (39.4%)	242 (32.4%)
English proficiency (how well parent speaks English)		
Very well	448 (41.5%)	514 (43.5%)
Well	223 (20.6%)	197 (16.7%)
Not well	319 (29.5%)	286 (24.2%)
Not at all	90 (8.3%)	185 (15.7%)
Marital status		
Married, living together	1023 (94.8%)	1079 (91.6%)
Married, living apart	7 (0.6%)	2 (0.2%)
Divorced	12 (1.1%)	9 (0.8%)
Separated	37 (3.4%)	88 (7.5%)
Education (completed high school)		
Yes	683 (63.5%)	823 (70.0%)
No	393 (36.5%)	355 (30.1%)
Employment status		
Full-time (≥35 hours)	709 (61.1%)	310 (26.5%)
Part-time (< 35 hours)	110 (10.4%)	204 (17.4%)
Unemployed/not in the labor force	241 (22.7%)	656 (56.1%)
Focal child's age		
4 years and 11 months or younger	541 (50.1%)	590 (49.9%)
5 years to 8 years 11 months	247 (22.9%)	265 (22.4%)
9 to 15 years	292 (27.0%)	327 (27.7%)
Living with focal child at 12-month follow-up survey		
Yes (at least half the time)	1042 (96.6%)	1178 (99.7%)
No	38 (3.5%)	4 (.3%)

	Father	Mother
Focal child's relationship to parents		
Biological/adoptee to both parents	775 (85.0%)	832 (83.0%)
Stepchild to husband	113 (12.4%)	143 (14.3%)
Stepchild to wife	18 (2.0%)	20 (2.0%)
Other relationships	6 (0.7%)	7 (0.7%)

Source: The Supporting Healthy Marriage (SHM) evaluation, 12-month follow-up questionnaire.

^aAll variables were measured at the 12-month follow-up survey, except for years in the United States and education, which were only measured at the baseline survey.

^bPercentages are based on the number of non-missing cases for each variable.

^cAs specified in the SHM questionnaire, U.S.-born included parents born in the 50 states or Washington, DC and excluded those born in United States territories.

^dParents' years in the United States was only asked at baseline; the number of parents that reported being born outside the U.S. at baseline (fathers = 725 and mothers = 748) was different from the number of parents that reported this at the 12-month follow-up (see Nativity Status). The percentages shown here are based on the 12-month survey.

Measures

Co-parenting relationships

Overall co-parenting quality was measured with one item: Parents were asked to select the statement that best described their relationship with their spouse when it comes to parenting. Parents rated the item on a 3-point scale from "getting along very well" to "not getting along well at all."

Cooperative co-parenting was measured with four items on how fathers and mothers supported each other as parents (e.g., "When I have to make rules for the child(ren), [spouse] backs me up."). Items were rated by both fathers and mothers on a 4-point scale from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." An average score across the items was created for fathers and mothers.

Conflict co-parenting was measured by asking parents about the frequency of their disagreements on issues related to the child(ren), such as "setting rules for or disciplining the child(ren)." Fathers and mothers rated five items on a 4-point scale from "never" to "often," and ratings were averaged across the items. All items on co-parenting relationships were only asked of fathers and mothers who had seen their spouse at least once or twice over the past three months (see Table 2).

Parenting practices and quality

Parenting stress was measured with three items (e.g., "I feel trapped by my responsibilities as a parent."), and fathers and mothers rated each item on a 4-point scale from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." Ratings across the items were averaged for each parent.

Parent involvement was assessed with different items for each focal child age group (i.e., 4 years and 11 months or younger, 5 years to 8 years 11 months, and ages 9 to 15), and fathers and mothers rated how often they had engaged in various activities with the focal child over the past month (e.g., "played inside with games or toys," "talked with child about his/her friends," and "talked about a book child was reading"). Parents of the children in each group rated four items on a 4-point scale from "never" to "every day or almost every day," and an average score across the items was created for fathers and mothers of each group.

Warmth was measured with three items (e.g., "told child that you loved him/her over the past month") that fathers and mothers rated on a 4-point scale from "never" to "every day or almost every day." An average score across the items was created for fathers and mothers. Items were only asked of parents who had spent time with the child or contacted the child via mail, phone, or texts at least once or twice in the past month (see Table 2).

Verbal and harsh discipline were each measured by one item on a 4-point scale from "never" to "every day or almost every day." Items were only asked of parents who had spent time with the child or contacted the child virtually at least once or twice in the past month (see Table 2).

Analytic approach

First, we tested the internal reliability of items designed to measure specific constructs (i.e., constructs measured by multiple items), such as parent involvement. Results showed that all constructs had a standardized Cronbach's α greater than .70, except for *parent involvement* for mothers for each of the three focal child age groups ($\alpha = .649, .574$, and $.631$, respectively) and *parent involvement* for fathers whose focal child was 9 to 15 years old ($\alpha = .690$).

We next computed descriptive statistics (i.e., sample means/percentages and standard deviations) for all variables that assessed co-parenting relationships and parenting for fathers and mothers, and by their nativity status (e.g., U.S.-born and immigrant mothers). We then conducted several statistical tests to evaluate whether there were significant differences in fathers' and mothers' reports by their nativity status. We compared and evaluated the reports of fathers and mothers of the same nativity status (e.g., U.S.-born fathers vs. U.S.-born mothers) and compared U.S.-born fathers to immigrant fathers and U.S.-born mothers to immigrant mothers.

When comparing composite variables created from multiple items (average scale scores) and variables on verbal and harsh discipline, which were treated as continuous variables,^c we used an independent samples t-test to assess whether observed differences in group means were statistically significant (e.g., mean ratings of U.S.-born fathers vs. mean ratings of immigrant fathers on *aggravation*). However, because the composite score of warmth was skewed (*skewness* = -3.99 and *kurtosis* = 20.48 for mothers; *skewness* = -2.38 and *kurtosis* = 6.19 for fathers), we used a nonparametric test equivalent to an independent sample t-test (Mann-Whitney *U* test) to examine the differences between fathers and mothers and by their nativity status. We also conducted paired samples t-tests using a sample of fathers and mothers who were couples (930 fathers and 930 mothers, or 82% of the analytic sample), and all significant comparisons under the independent samples t-tests remained. In addition, the Pearson correlations between fathers and mothers were small (mostly between 0.2 and 0.3), suggesting that independent t-tests are suitable for comparing fathers and mothers. Therefore, we only presented the findings from the independent samples t-tests.

For comparisons on the single categorical variable (i.e., overall co-parenting quality), we used a chi-square test of independence to determine whether there was a statistically significant association between fathers' and mothers' ratings on overall co-parenting quality and whether there was an association when parent nativity status was considered. In addition to testing the association between overall co-parenting quality ratings and parent type (father and mother) and nativity status, we used pairwise z-tests to evaluate whether differences in the percentages (proportions) of fathers and mothers selecting each of the response options were statistically significant. For example, we tested whether there was a significant difference in the percentages of fathers and mothers who reported getting along very well.

When comparing group differences between (or within) fathers and mothers by nativity status (see Table 3), we used a Bonferroni adjusted alpha level of .0125 (i.e., Bonferroni adjusted alpha level = $.05/4 = .0125$). This adjustment was made to account for the four comparisons we made for each variable (i.e., U.S.-born fathers vs. immigrant fathers, U.S.-born fathers vs. U.S.-born mothers, immigrant fathers vs. immigrant mothers, and U.S.-born mothers vs. immigrant mothers). All group differences noted in Table 3 are statistically significant at the adjusted alpha level.

Moreover, we also calculated effect sizes for each of the significant group differences. We used Hedges' *g* to measure effect sizes for independent t-tests because the sample sizes for the groups under comparison were different. We used Cramer's *V* to measure effect sizes for chi-square test of independence on a 2 x 3 contingency table.



^c Categorical variables with four or more response categories can be treated as continuous variables (Norman, 2010; Sullivan & Artino, 2013)

Limitations

While our study is based on a large, diverse sample of Latino couples seeking services to support and strengthen their relationships, our analysis and findings have several limitations. Generally, the SHM evaluation was designed to assess the effectiveness of HMRE programs and the sample that was used for this purpose was not chosen to represent the population of low-income, married Latino couples with children in the United States, nor those members of this population who were looking for the types of services offered by these programs. Additionally, the 12-month follow-up data for the SHM evaluation were collected from 2008 to 2010, so the findings from this analysis may not necessarily reflect the patterns of parenting and co-parenting relationships of similar parents today (those who are interested in SHM services) or the general population of Latino parents. We used data from the 12-month follow-up survey because it contains extensive data on mothers' and fathers' parenting and co-parenting relationships, but—due to attrition of approximately 18 percent of the sample—it may not represent the full sample enrolled in the SHM evaluations at baseline. Specifically, compared to the married/cohabiting Hispanic couples with children in the general population represented in the 2007-2009 American Community Survey, Hispanic couples in the SHM evaluation at baseline were younger, had been married for fewer years, had fewer and younger children, were less likely to be immigrants, had more human capital (i.e., more years of education), were more likely to report speaking English, and had higher earnings but lower labor force participation.³⁹ Although the findings in this brief do not necessarily generalize to the broader Hispanic population in the United States, the SHM is the only dataset (among 20 national datasets) that contains extensive information on co-parenting and parenting relationships among a relatively large sample of Latino parents.³⁹ Therefore, it is ideal for exploring the family relationships that are key to the family life of low-income, married Hispanic parents in the United States.

Table 2. Parenting Constructs and Measures Used

Construct	Survey items	Response options	Data restrictions
Co-parenting relationships			
Overall co-parenting quality (1 item)	<i>"Which of the following statements best describes your relationship with [spouse] when it comes to parenting?"</i>	1 = we get along very well 2 = we get along okay 3 = we do not get along well at all	Only asked of mothers and fathers who had seen their spouse at least once or twice over the past three months
Cooperative co-parenting^b (4 items)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>"When there is a problem with the child(ren), [spouse] and I work out a good solution together."</i> <i>"[spouse] acts like the kind of parent I want for my child(ren)."</i> <i>"When I'm having a rough day with the child(ren), I can turn to [spouse] for support and advice."</i> <i>"When I have to make rules for the child(ren), [spouse] backs me up."</i> 	1 = strongly disagree 2 = disagree 3 = agree 4 = strongly agree	Same as above
Conflict co-parenting (5 items)	<p><i>"How often do you and [spouse] disagree about..."</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <i>setting rules for or disciplining the child(ren)?"</i> <i>the activities that the child(ren) participate in?"</i> <i>how money is spent on the child(ren)?"</i> <i>who does childcare tasks?"</i> <i>the amount of time each of you spend with the children?"</i> 	1 = never 2 = hardly ever 3 = sometimes 4 = often	Same as above

Construct	Survey items	Response options	Data restrictions
Parenting			
Parenting stress^b (3 items)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> "I feel trapped by my responsibilities as a parent." "I find that taking care of my child(ren) is more work than pleasure." "By the end of a long hard day I find it hard to be warm and loving toward my child(ren)." 	1 = strongly disagree 2 = disagree 3 = agree 4 = strongly agree	--
Parent involvement^b (4 items)	"About how often in the past month have you... <ul style="list-style-type: none"> played inside with games and toys with the focal child?" taken the focal child for a walk or to play outside?" sung songs or nursery rhymes with the focal child?" read books or told stories to the focal child?" 	1 = never 2 = a few times this past month 3 = a few times a week 4 = every day or almost every day	Only asked of mothers and fathers whose focal child was 4 years 11 months or younger
Parent involvement^b (4 items)	"About how often in the past month have you... <ul style="list-style-type: none"> talked with the focal child about school, grades, and/or other things that he/she does at school?" spent time with the focal child doing one of his/her favorite activities, like shopping, playing a sport, going to a movie, watching TV, or playing videogames?" talked with the focal child about his/her friends?" read a book with the focal child or talked about a book he/she was reading?" 	1 = never 2 = a few times this past month 3 = a few times a week 4 = every day or almost every day	Only asked of mothers and fathers whose focal child was 5 years to 8 years 11 months
Parent involvement^b (4 items)	"About how often in the past month have you... <ul style="list-style-type: none"> talked with the focal child about school, grades, and/or other things that he/she does at school?" spent time with the focal child doing one of his/her favorite activities, like shopping, playing a sport, going to a movie, play, museum, or concert?" talked with the focal child about his/her friends or dating relationships?" talked about a book the focal child was reading?" 	1 = never 2 = a few times this past month 3 = a few times a week 4 = every day or almost every day	Only asked of mothers and fathers whose focal child was 9 to 15 years
Warmth^b (3 items)	"Over the past month, how often have you... <ul style="list-style-type: none"> told the focal child that you love him/her?" praised the focal child or told him/her that you appreciated something that he/she did?" laughed with the focal child?" 	1 = never 2 = a few times this past month 3 = a few times a week 4 = every day or almost every day	Only asked of mothers and fathers who had contact with the focal child at least once or twice during the past month

Construct	Survey items	Response options	Data restrictions
Parenting			
Verbal discipline^b (1 item)	<i>"Over the past month, how often have you yelled, shouted, screamed at, or threatened the focal child because you were mad at him/her?"</i>	1 = never 2 = a few times this past month 3 = a few times a week 4 = every day or almost every day	Same as above
Harsh discipline^b (1 item)	<i>"Over the past month, how often have you hit, spanked, grabbed or used physical punishment with the focal child?"</i>	1 = never 2 = a few times this past month 3 = a few times a week 4 = every day or almost every day	Same as above

Source: The Supporting Healthy Marriage (SHM) evaluation, 12-month follow-up questionnaire.

^aAll variables were measured at the 12-month follow-up survey.

^bThe order of the response options shown here was reversed from the original order so that a higher score represents a higher or stronger endorsement of the construct.

Table 3. Descriptive Data on Parenting and Co-parenting Relationships for Fathers and Mothers by Nativity Status

	Fathers		Mothers		Hedges' g/ Cramer's V ¹
	Mean (SD)/Percentage		Mean (SD)/Percentage		
	U.S.-Born	Immigrant	U.S.-Born	Immigrant	
Overall co-parenting quality					.11 ^e , .09 ^f , .11 ^g
We get along very well	57.1% ^a	46.2%	51.6% ^d	40.4%	
We get along okay	39.5% ^a	51.3%	43.4% ^d	54.4%	
We do not get along well at all	3.4%	2.4% ^c	5.0%	5.2%	
Cooperative co-parenting	3.35 (.59)	3.38 (.52) ^c	3.29 (.67)	3.24 (.62)	.25
Conflict co-parenting	1.83 (.67) ^a	1.72 (.68) ^c	1.90 (.67)	1.86 (.72)	.17, .21
Parenting stress	1.68 (.60)	1.78 (.59)	1.61 (.60) ^d	1.75 (.57)	.24
Parent involvement (4 years 11 months or younger)	3.24 (.65) ^{a,b}	3.02 (.71) ^c	3.61 (.47) ^d	3.41 (.57)	.32, .66, .60, .37
Parent involvement (5 years and 8 years 11 months)	3.13 (.75) ^b	3.14 (.65) ^c	3.64 (.43)	3.49 (.49)	.87, .61
Parent involvement (9 to 15 years)	2.82 (.73) ^b	2.85 (.67) ^c	3.26 (.57)	3.21 (.61)	.69, .55
Warmth	3.78 (.48) ^b	3.72 (.50) ^c	3.90 (.31)	3.87 (.32)	.30, .36
Verbal discipline	1.90 (.95) ^a	1.70 (.81) ^c	1.91 (.95)	2.00 (.94)	.24, .35
Harsh discipline	1.24 (.54) ^a	1.13 (.38) ^c	1.25 (.54)	1.20 (.50)	.25, .16

Source: The Supporting Healthy Marriage (SHM) evaluation, 12-month follow-up questionnaire.

Note: All pairwise differences indicated with the notation below are statistically significant at $p < .0125$.

^aDifference between means/percentages of U.S.-born and immigrant fathers.

^bDifference between means/percentages of U.S.-born fathers and U.S.-born mothers.

^cDifference between means/percentages of immigrant fathers and immigrant mothers.

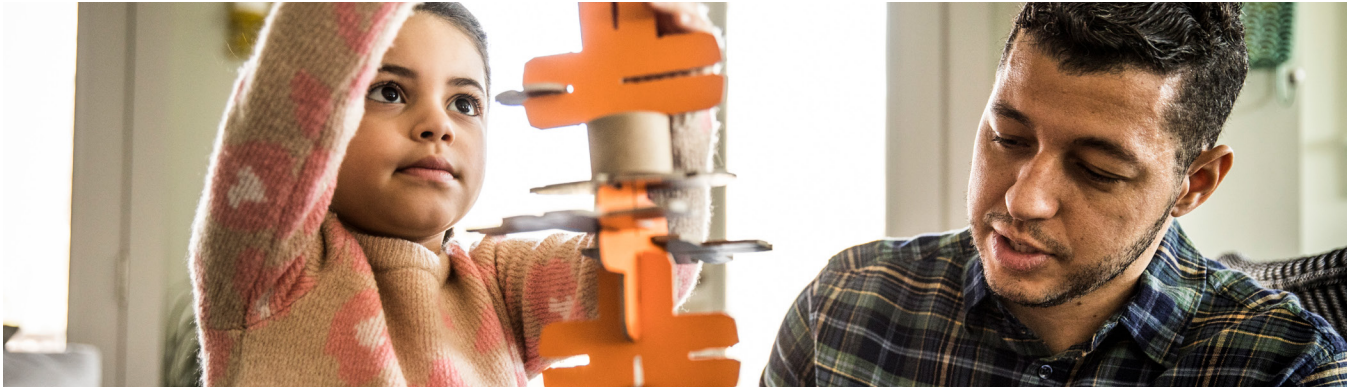
^dDifference between means/percentages of U.S.-born and immigrant mothers.

^eDifference between U.S.-born and immigrant fathers' responses across the full set of response categories.

^fDifference between immigrant fathers' and mothers' responses across the full set of response categories.

^gDifference between U.S.-born and immigrant mothers' responses across the full set of response categories.

¹ Cramer's V and Hedges' g effect sizes are only reported for group comparisons that are statistically significant, and are shown in the order of significance indicated by superscripts within each row.



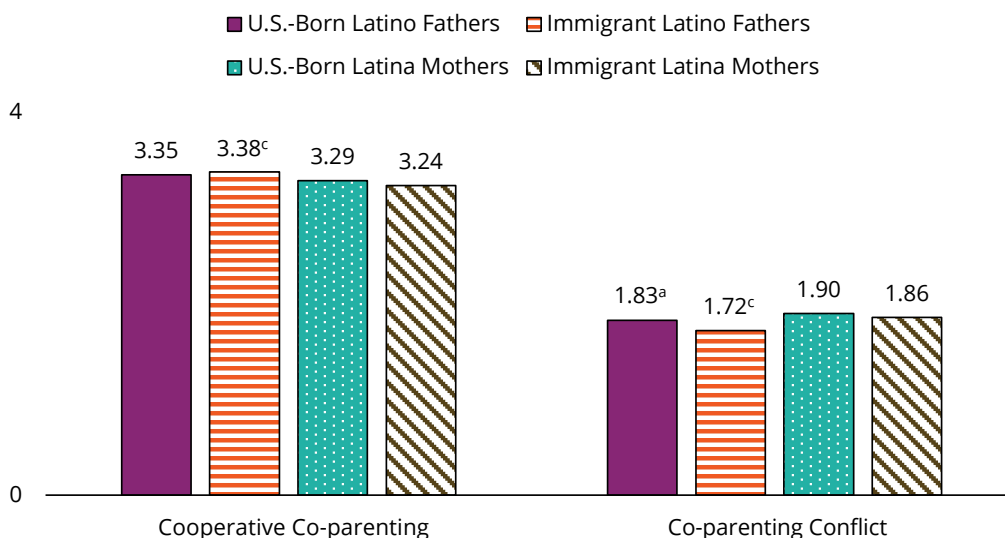
Findings

Co-parenting relationships

Comparisons within all fathers and all mothers, by nativity status. As shown in Table 3, we found that a higher percentage of U.S.-born fathers than immigrant fathers reported getting along very well with their partner. This was also true of both U.S.-born and immigrant mothers. However, U.S.-born fathers also reported higher levels of co-parenting conflict than immigrant fathers; there were no differences between U.S.-born and immigrant mothers. Although the effect sizes for these differences were small, the findings suggest that immigrant Latino parents may experience lower-quality co-parenting relationships than U.S.-born Latino parents.

Comparisons between fathers and mothers of the same nativity status. When we compared fathers to mothers within the same nativity status, we found that both parents were equally likely to report getting along very well with their partners as co-parents; however, immigrant fathers felt more strongly than immigrant mothers that they had a cooperative co-parenting relationship with their spouse. Immigrant mothers also reported more co-parenting conflict than immigrant fathers. These differences, although significant, were relatively small. There were no significant differences between U.S.-born mothers and fathers in their perceptions of co-parenting relationships.

Figure 1. Average ratings on cooperative co-parenting and co-parenting conflict for U.S.-born and immigrant Latino fathers and Latina mothers



Source: The Supporting Healthy Marriage (SHM) evaluation, 12-month follow-up questionnaire.

Note: All pairwise differences indicated with the notation below are significant at $p < .0125$.

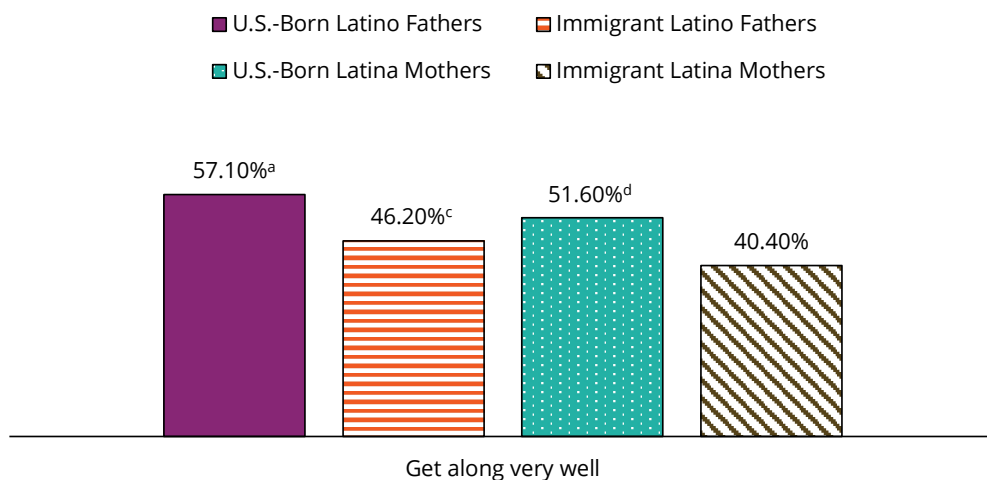
^a U.S.-born fathers versus immigrant fathers

^b U.S.-born fathers versus U.S.-born mothers

^c Immigrant fathers versus immigrant mothers

^d U.S.-born mothers versus immigrant mothers

Figure 2. Average ratings (percentage) on overall co-parenting quality for U.S.-born and immigrant Latino fathers and Latina mothers



Source: The Supporting Healthy Marriage (SHM) evaluation, 12-month follow-up questionnaire.

Note: All pairwise differences indicated with the notation below are significant at $p < .0125$.

^a U.S.-born fathers versus immigrant fathers

^b U.S.-born fathers versus U.S.-born mothers

^c Immigrant fathers versus immigrant mothers

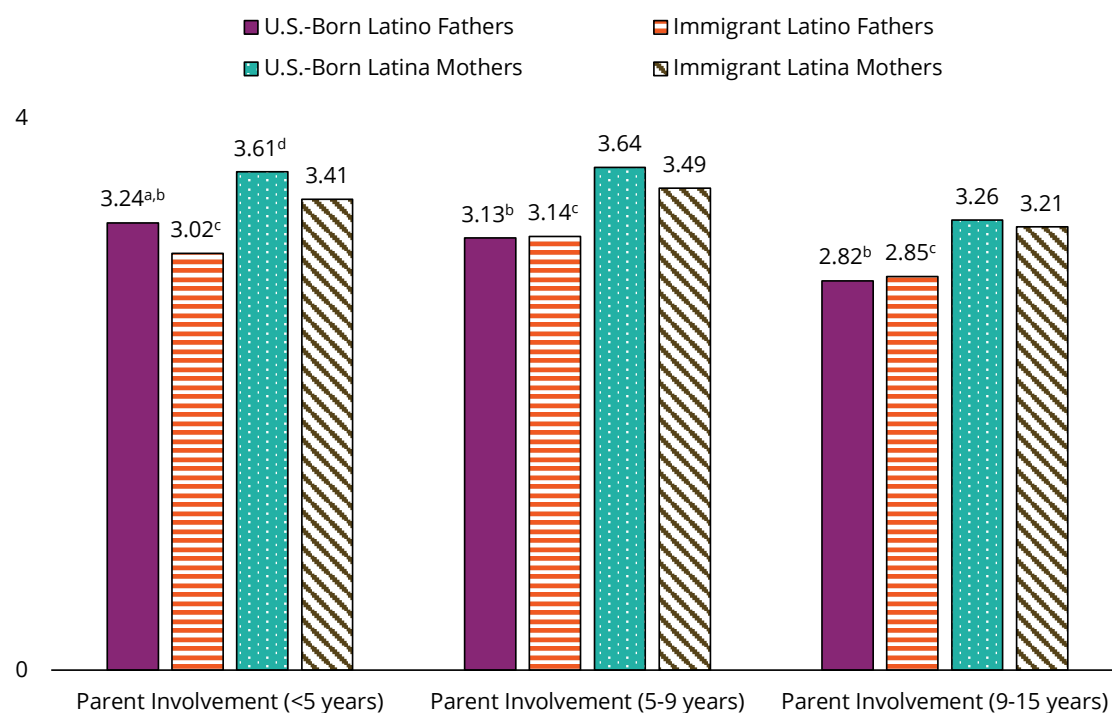
^d U.S.-born mothers versus immigrant mothers

Parenting practices and quality

Comparisons within all fathers and all mothers, by nativity status. When we examined differences among fathers and mothers by nativity status, we found that immigrant fathers reported being less involved with young children (i.e., younger than age 5 years) than U.S.-born fathers, but also using less frequent verbal and harsh discipline. The effect sizes for these differences were relatively small. Moreover, immigrant mothers reported feeling more parenting stress and being less involved with their younger children (less than age 5) than U.S.-born mothers. These differences were relatively small. U.S.-born and immigrant mothers did not differ in their reports on being warm toward their children or in their use of verbal and harsh discipline.

Comparisons between fathers and mothers of the same nativity status. When we compared fathers to mothers of the same nativity status, we found no differences in parenting stress. Across all groups, parents reported below average levels in our scale of parenting stress. Regardless of nativity status, mothers reported being more involved with their children in all age groups than fathers; these differences were moderate to large. Mothers were also more likely to report being warm than fathers of the same nativity status; these differences were small. In terms of discipline, we found small differences between immigrant mothers and fathers: Immigrant fathers reported using verbal and harsh discipline less often than immigrant mothers, while U.S.-born mothers and fathers were equally likely to report using harsh and verbal discipline. Finally, immigrant mothers reported more use of verbal and harsh discipline than immigrant fathers; these differences were relatively small.

Figure 3. Average ratings of parent involvement for U.S.-born and immigrant Latino fathers and Latina mothers for children younger than age 5, ages 5 to 9, and ages 9 to 15



Source: The Supporting Healthy Marriage (SHM) evaluation, 12-month follow-up questionnaire.

Note: All pairwise differences indicated with the notation below are significant at $p < .0125$.

^a U.S.-born fathers versus immigrant fathers

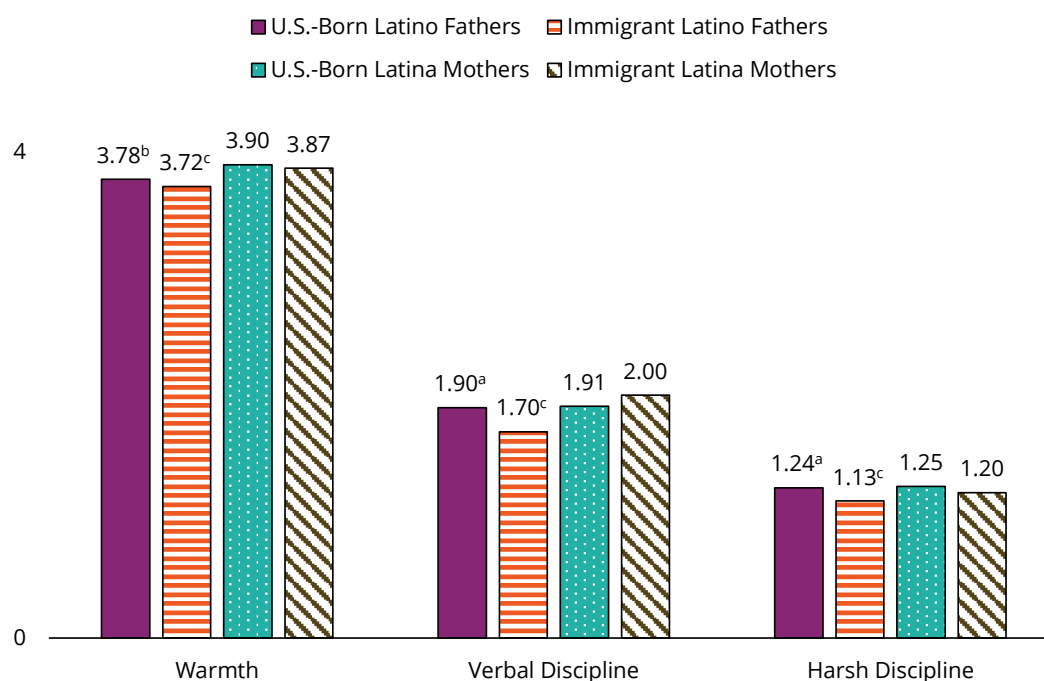
^b U.S.-born fathers versus U.S.-born mothers

^c Immigrant fathers versus immigrant mothers

^d U.S.-born mothers versus immigrant mothers



Figure 4. Average ratings of warmth, verbal discipline, and harsh discipline for U.S.-born and immigrant Latino fathers and Latina mothers



Source: The Supporting Healthy Marriage (SHM) evaluation, 12-month follow-up questionnaire.

Note: All pairwise differences indicated with the notation below are significant at $p < .0125$. Verbal discipline includes yelling, shouting, screaming at, or threatening the child. Harsh discipline includes hitting, spanking, grabbing, or using physical punishment with the child.

^a U.S.-born fathers versus immigrant fathers

^b U.S.-born fathers versus U.S.-born mothers

^c Immigrant fathers versus immigrant mothers

^d U.S.-born mothers versus immigrant mothers

Overall, these findings suggest that Latina mothers are generally more involved and warmer with their children than Latino fathers, regardless of nativity status. However, when it comes to discipline, immigrant Latina mothers were more likely to use verbal and harsh discipline than immigrant Latino fathers.

Summary and Implications

This brief has described how low-income married Latino fathers and mothers who participated in the SHM study perceived their relationships with their children and with each other as co-parents. We focused on co-parenting and parenting relationships because these are the ingredients of supportive and stable families that are critical for child and adult well-being. HMRE programs have targeted these domains in interventions with families. We looked at within-group differences by parents' nativity status (e.g., immigrant fathers vs. U.S.-born fathers, and immigrant mothers vs. U.S.-born mothers) because nativity status is a significant contextual determinant of family processes.

Couple and co-parenting relationships

Our findings show clear strengths in relationships among Latinos and suggest possible aspects of these relationships that could benefit from programmatic attention. Overall, most Latino parents participating in the SHM study perceived their co-parenting relationship as very positive, and reported low levels of co-parenting conflict and disagreement about how to discipline children or how to spend money and time on them. The fact that many parents sought out services to improve their relationship is a positive sign that suggests a deep awareness that relationships must be nurtured and supported over time to remain stable and positive.

The fact that many parents sought out services to improve their relationship is a positive sign that suggests a deep awareness that relationships must be nurtured and supported over time to remain stable and positive.

A closer look at differences in these family processes by nativity status revealed that, compared to immigrant Latina mothers, immigrant Latino fathers reported feeling more positive about their co-parenting relationship and perceived less co-parenting conflict. There were no differences between fathers and mothers who were U.S.-born. These discrepancies suggest that programs serving Latino couples should focus not just on supporting co-parenting, per se, but also on addressing disagreement between parents—especially for immigrant parents—and on addressing the root causes of disagreements. If one parenting partner feels that the relationship is working (or working less well) while the other partner feels differently, this may suggest potential conflict and challenges that can deepen over time. Research has shown that parents who do not see eye-to-eye tend to parent less positively, which in turn impacts children's behavior.⁵ Thus, it is important that programs encourage both fathers and mothers to listen to and understand how their partners are feeling about their shared parenting, and work toward a shared perception of how they are supporting each other as parents.

Parenting

Overall, based on their reporting, both Latino fathers and Latina mothers in our sample frequently engaged positively with their children, rarely engaged in negative parenting behaviors such as shouting or screaming, and never hit or spanked their children. Our findings support the view that Latino children are reared in relatively supportive and positive home environments.^{40,41}

We also found small but significant differences in levels of parent involvement and discipline that varied by parents' gender. Compared to mothers of the same nativity status, Latino fathers reported being less involved with their children. However, immigrant fathers reported using slightly less frequent verbal and harsh discipline than immigrant mothers, but these differences were not meaningfully significant. Programs should praise Latina mothers for their infrequent use of verbal and harsh discipline while encouraging them to eliminate it altogether by providing more options for positive discipline and increasing the level positive engagement from fathers. These suggested programmatic efforts are backed by good evidence that even low levels of negative discipline can be detrimental for children's well-being and that paternal involvement is beneficial for children, independent of mothers' involvement.^{42,22} Increasing fathers' involvement could also have a positive effect on mothers' parenting.⁵ Simply put, if fathers are less involved with their children, then mothers are doing the lion's share of parenting; this will, in turn, increase mothers' stress and reduce the quality of their parenting.^{23,24} Increasing positive engagement from fathers and providing alternatives for positive discipline can have beneficial effects for the entire family.



When we compared differences among fathers and among mothers, we found that—compared to Latino fathers born in the United States—immigrant fathers reported being less involved with their younger children. We found similar results for immigrant mothers. Overall, our findings on the differences in the parenting and co-parenting relationships by parent gender and nativity status help understand the perceived homogeneity among Latinos. The findings also suggest that not all Latinos would benefit from the same types of services, or from services in the same dosage levels. Immigrant parents' perceptions about their relationships with their partners and children are significantly different from the perspectives of parents born in the United States; these perspectives also differ by parents' gender. Programs should be mindful of these differences and modify programmatic content accordingly. For example, programmatic content directed at immigrant parents should include more information about the benefits of regularly playing and engaging children in different activities that facilitate learning, and should include programmatic content that strengthens the co-parenting relationship.^{25,26,27} Practitioners can try to understand these differences and integrate them into their practices. These findings also highlight the importance of evaluating intervention effects on Latino parents who were born in the United States versus those born elsewhere.

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About the Center

The National Research Center on Hispanic Children & Families (Center) 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 is led by Child Trends, in partnership with Duke University, University of North Carolina at Greensboro, and University of Maryland, College Park. The Center is supported by grant #90PH0028 from the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation within the Administration for Children and Families in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

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