

Answering the Call



The Collaboration to AdoptUsKids

Nuestra Familia, Nuestra Cultura:

(Our Family, Our Culture)

Promoting & Supporting Latino Families in
Adoption and Foster Care

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Terms Used in this Guide:

The terms *Latino* and *Hispanic* are often used interchangeably. In this guide we will use “Latino” or “Latina” to refer to persons who trace their roots to one of the Spanish or Portuguese speaking nations in the Americas. We use “Hispanic” when quoting from the U.S. census or other sources.

The term bicultural describes persons knowledgeable of, experienced with, and comfortable in both Latino culture and the dominant culture.

All Spanish-language terms are presented in *italics*.

A Consideration:

Any attempt to describe any group of people – especially one as diverse as that referred to as Hispanic or Latino – is a dangerous proposition! AdoptUsKids has made every attempt in this Guide not to stereotype or to suggest that Hispanics can be lumped together as one homogeneous group when, in fact, as we well know, people in the U.S. who identify as Hispanic trace their roots to twenty different countries of origin. The nature and high calling of social work expects us to meet each person as an individual with his/her own strengths and challenges. This Guide is an introduction – a beginning – for caseworkers who are given the privilege of working with Hispanic families. We expect and encourage you to make it your business to keep on learning through your respectful work with the resource families and hope this Guide will be a starting place for you.

★ *All family names used in this Guide are fictitious and are used as examples only.*

About AdoptUsKids



The Collaboration to AdoptUsKids is a federally funded, multi-faceted initiative of the Children’s Bureau, Department of Health & Human Services. The five-year project period began October 1, 2002 and ended September 30, 2007, funded through a cooperative agreement between the Children’s Bureau and the Adoption Exchange Association. The project was subsequently re-funded on October 1, 2007, through a new cooperative agreement. One of the components of AdoptUsKids was a multi-media (television, radio, print, web banner and ‘outdoor’) national recruitment campaign to bring in new families for the waiting children in foster care but also to “normalize” and raise awareness in the general public about the possibility of adopting children from foster care.

In partnership with The Advertising Council, these first-ever national campaigns – in both English and Spanish were created and distributed to thousands of media outlets around the country. The response to the ad campaign from Spanish-speaking Americans was unprecedented. Public systems have been working to increase State capacity in order to adequately serve these recruited families in a timely and respectful way. This Guide, *Nuestra Familia, Nuestra Cultura*, is an additional resource in this effort.

The Goal of this Guide

Children of Latino heritage now comprise 19% of the more than 500,000 children currently in foster care, an increase from 17% in 2003 and 15% in 1990.¹ In response, the federal government has mandated AdoptUsKids to recruit foster and adoptive parents through a national television, radio, print and Internet advertising campaign in Spanish. Thousands of Latino families have answered the call and expressed interest in foster care and adoption. AdoptUsKids reported 12,959 initial calls from Spanish-speaking prospective adoptive parents during the campaign's first three years. This Cultural Guide for adoptive and foster parent recruiters, trainers, and caseworkers is the logical “next step” in promoting more effective work with the Latino population.

The Guide provides background information about Latino family and cultural values to increase our understanding of Latinos in the United States. It offers workers in the child welfare field specific tips and techniques for overcoming challenges and increasing effectiveness in working with potential foster or adoptive parents of Latino heritage. In doing so, we draw heavily upon the experiences and suggestions of Latino foster and adoptive parents, Latino youth who are in foster care or who have been adopted, and bicultural, bilingual child welfare professionals.

Many of the suggestions offered in this Guide not only make sense in working with Latino families but also are applicable to working with all prospective foster and adoptive families regardless of ethnicity. Respect, relationship-building, courtesy: these values are the foundation of all good social work!

Three Important Points:

Before we begin, there are three important underlying points to be addressed: federal law with regard to recruitment of foster and adoptive parents; cultural competency; and how recruitment of Latino families benefits children.

1. The Multiethnic Placement Act – Interethnic Provisions (MEPA-IEP)

The Multiethnic Placement Act of 1994 as amended by the Interethnic Adoption Provisions of 1996 (MEPA-IEP) is one of a number of important federal laws and initiatives designed to break down barriers and obstacles to finding families for

thousands of children waiting to be adopted. MEPA-IEP “provides that neither the State nor any other entity in the State that receives funds from the Federal Government and is involved in adoption or foster care placements may--

(A) deny to any person the opportunity to become an adoptive or a foster parent, on the basis of the race, color, or national origin of the person, or of the child, involved; or

B) delay or deny the placement of a child for adoption or into foster care, on the basis of the race, color, or national origin of the adoptive or foster parent, or the child, involved.”²

Equally as important, MEPA-IEP requires states to “provide for the diligent recruitment and retention of foster and adoptive families that reflect the ethnic and racial diversity of children in the State for whom foster and adoptive homes are needed.” (42 U.S.C. § 622(b)(9) (1998).

2. Cultural Competency

Cultural competency starts with an understanding of how certain factors (history, religion, traditions and customs) shape the worldview of a group of people and allow their members to survive in the world.

“Becoming culturally competent is considered a lifelong process that requires continual study and effort.”³

What Does It Mean To Be A Culturally Competent Professional?

It begins with a commitment from the work... To succeed, workers need:

1. **an awareness and acceptance of cultural differences:** while all people share common basic needs, there are vast differences in how people of various cultures go about meeting those needs. Acceptance of the fact that each culture finds some behaviors, interactions or values more important or desirable than others... awareness and acceptance of differences in communication, life view and definitions of health and family are critical to successful outcomes.
2. **an awareness of their own cultural values:** recognize the influence of their own culture on how they think and act... how one defines “family,” identifies desirable life goals, views problems and even says hello are all influenced by the culture in which one functions

“Families want practitioners to embrace all of who they are, and to acknowledge and celebrate their history, legacy, and spirituality.”⁴

3. **an understanding of the “dynamics of difference” in the helping process:** when a worker of one culture interacts with a client from another, both may misjudge the other’s actions based on learned expectations... both will bring culturally prescribed patterns of communication, etiquette, and problem-solving. Without an understanding of their cultural differences, the dynamics most likely to occur between the two are misinterpretation or misjudgment.
4. **a basic knowledge about the client’s culture:** what does the client’s behavior signify in his or her group? This helps the worker assess a client on the norms of his or her own society, not on those of the dominant culture... workers must know what symbols are meaningful, how health is defined, and how primary support networks are configured... gaining enough knowledge to identify what information is needed, as well as knowing who to ask for information.
5. **the ability to adapt practice skills to fit the client’s cultural context:** the worker can adapt or adjust the helping approach to compensate for cultural differences. Styles of interviewing, who is included in “family”... can be changed to meet cultural needs.

Becoming culturally competent is a development process. It is not something that happens because one reads a book, attends a workshop, or happens to be a member of a minority group. It is a process born of commitment to provide quality services to all and a willingness to risk.

“Workers need fluency, a social work bent, and a proactive approach to advocacy.” -adoptive family recruiter

[Excerpted, with permission, from Terry L. Cross, MSW, LCSW, Executive Director, NICWA (National Indian Child Welfare Association) – originally written in 1988 for “Focal Point: The Bulletin of the Research and Training Center, Portland State University and reprinted in “Pathways Practice Digest, Spring, 2007, NICWA]

3. Benefits To Children In Foster Care With Or Adopted By Latino Families

Latino foster and adoptive parents and bicultural child welfare specialists offered the following responses:

- Many of our families are of modest educational and economic accomplishments. They may be more accepting of children who face academic challenges.
- The language Latinos use for family is a “uniting” vocabulary, which goes beyond blood relatives to include friends, neighbors, and *compadres* (honored friends involved in mentoring and raising the child). This mindset of inclusiveness bodes well for adopted children to be truly claimed and incorporated into the family.
- In general, Latinos are accustomed to large families. They may be very accepting of sibling groups. It is not unusual for a Latino couple to want to adopt two or three siblings.
- The Latino culture places great emphasis on the importance of family.
- Latinos often exhibit a great willingness to help other families, based on a strong value of community.
- Many Latinos have strong family and community rites and traditions which can help children develop attachments and positive identities.
- Latino families who still parent in the traditional way put emphasis on teaching their children the importance of respect of what is right and proper and tend to hold their children accountable for these values.
- In general, Latino families offer life-long connections, assistance, and support through the family value of inter-dependence.
- Those Latinos who place a high value on interdependence may exert less pressure on older youth to leave home.
- The children may be given the opportunity to become bilingual.

Indeed, this last benefit was mentioned by every youth interviewed for this Guide. Even those not of Latino origin by birth expressed appreciation of their growing bilingual skills. One teenager, an African-American, reported the awe with which his peers and teachers regard his ability to “speak perfect Spanish.”

Voces de los Niños

“I know a lot about Mexico and I am bilingual.” -Elena, age 18

“I look so much like my parents no one ever thinks I am adopted if I don't tell them.” -Susan, age 14

“I get my values from my adoptive mother's large, loving Latino family and the kids I grew up with and their families. I am proud of my values.” -Janet, age 43

“They protect me from bad things and bad people. They teach me right from wrong. They are strict but not too much.” -Miguel age 12.

“Last summer I got to stay with my aunt and cousins in Guatemala.” -Paul, age 13

“I am learning Spanish.” -Brian, age 16

“I can't think of any difficulties. Except maybe that my parents never adopted again, even though they wanted to, because the Spanish-speaking worker had retired and they didn't want to go through the process without her. Most Latino families have more kids, but we had just me and my older sister. I would have liked to have had more brothers or sisters.” -Elena, age 18

Part Two: Latinos in the U.S.



Who Are The Latinos?

Latinos comprise the largest minority population in our nation. At about 13% of the U.S. population, approximately one of every eight persons in the mainland U.S. is of Latino origin.

Did you pause at the word “mainland”? It reminds us that our nation includes the island of Puerto Rico, whose population of over 3.5 million includes a 90% majority of Latinos. Puerto Rico has a child welfare system as well as an adoption and foster care program similar to those found in the mainland states. As U.S. citizens at birth, Puerto Ricans are migrants, not immigrants, when they move from the island to the mainland.

Latinos in the mainland U.S. come from Puerto Rico and twenty different countries, each with its own culture and history. Some Latinos trace their roots to Spain, and the Spanish heritage that includes Greek, Roman, Celtic, and Moorish influence. Many Latinos identify more closely with ancestral First-Nations people, and their sophisticated civilizations that were in place prior to contact by the

Europeans. Latino culture in the states is rooted in the traditions, language, beliefs and customs of the Latin American nations. The Latinos are “a unique people who combined old world and new world customs, values, and traditions.”⁵

Country	Status
1. Argentina	Independent country
2. Bolivia	Independent country
3. Brazil	Independent country
4. Chile	Independent country
5. Colombia	Independent country
6. Costa Rica	Independent country
7. Cuba	Independent country
8. Dominican Republic	Independent country
9. Ecuador	Independent country
10. El Salvador	Independent country
11. Guatemala	Independent country
12. Haiti	Independent country
13. Honduras	Independent country
14. Mexico	Independent country
15. Nicaragua	Independent country
16. Panama	Independent country
17. Paraguay	Independent country
18. Peru	Independent country
19. Uruguay	Independent country
20. Venezuela	Independent country
21. Puerto Rico	US dependency

Because of the great diversity of backgrounds and heritage, as well as the inter-mixing of people from the “old and new” worlds, Latinos represent a variety of races and ethnic features. A search for the “typical” Latino will likely draw on stereotypes, when the reality is “not all Latinos are alike!” which is the case for other racial and ethnic groups.

Traditional Latino culture shares common language, traditions, and most important, a strong and well-defined set of values regarding family, community, and interpersonal interaction. When working with Latinos, one will need to take into account the many shared cultural aspects as well as an appreciation of the diversity that exists among Latino individuals and families.

Population Trends and Projections

The U.S. is the 5th largest Latino nation.

By 2050, the Latino population is projected to comprise one-fourth of the mainland U.S. population. Having surpassed African Americans, Latinos are currently the largest minority group in the United States.

On average Latinos are a young population. With a median age of 27.2, they are much younger than the population as a whole, whose average age is 36.2. About one-third of the Hispanic population is under age 18, compared with one-fourth of the total population.⁶

A study by the Casey Family Services indicates that the upcoming “next” U.S. generation:

*...is 17% Hispanic, 14% African American, and 4% Asian. One out of five kids is a child of an immigrant. One of ten is a child of a parent who is not an American citizen. This next generation is coming along at a time of enormous change in our country and the world. We are giving them a complicated world to grow up in.*⁷

The Latino population can be attributed only in part to immigration or migration. According to a recent Kaiser Foundation report, approximately 40% of the Latino population is comprised of (im)migrants to the US.⁸ Long before the “westward movement,” and even prior to the arrival of Western Europeans, Mexican ancestors occupied land that later became California and the U.S. Southwest: Texas, Arizona, New Mexico, Utah, Nevada, and part of Colorado. Many Mexican-Americans claim,

Part Three: Working Effectively with Latino Families

Key Ideas in Serving Latino Families

Language

AdoptUsKids has noted that jurisdictions are challenged to find ample Spanish-speaking staff to respond in a timely fashion to monolingual Spanish speakers who express interest in taking the next steps towards becoming foster or adoptive parents. Sometimes families may feel pressured to bring a neighbor or relative to translate and this may compromise their confidentiality or result in their lack of participation in the process.

A group of adoption and foster care professionals opined that the best choice is to have an adequate number of bicultural and bilingual staff. “Bicultural” social workers provide the bridge to help Latino families work within systems that may seem confusing or threatening.

Some felt that an interpreter can sometimes “add to the confusion,” or that “crucial information can be lost or misstated.” The group recommends that if interpretation is needed, the agency “can show its respect for the Latino applicants by hiring a top level [professionally trained] interpreter.”

“We need more infrastructure. Several counties in our state rely on just one interpreter instead of offering classes in Spanish. Our counties would definitely benefit from offering the classes in Spanish.” -bicultural adoption specialist

A “top level” interpreter will:

1. Respect the fact that every person has a different language ability, educational level, personality and life experience and will do all he or she can to convey the meaning of the spoken message;
2. Interpret for the speaker rather than the listener, conveying the intent, ideas, mood, and spirit of what the speaker is communicating;
3. Translate complete thoughts from beginning to end;
4. Have knowledge of the culture of the person who is speaking;

5. Appropriately fit the task. He or she will be able to maintain objectivity and have enough experience, maturity, wisdom and good common sense to know how best to communicate sensitive information;
6. Demonstrate confidence in their interpretations, minimizing hesitation, stumbling and uncertainty;
7. Be aware that their own facial expressions, mouth movements, tone of voice and body language are communication, and do his or her best to not draw attention to themselves. Instead, the interpreter sees himself or herself as the messenger or relay of communication between the speaking person and listener;
8. Concentrate on the speaker through eye contact and body position so that he or she is clear that the speaker's communication is the primary focus;
9. Present himself or herself as trustworthy, respectful, responsible, amenable and approachable and welcoming;
10. Be open to criticism and constantly seek new ways to improve themselves.

AdoptUsKids has found that a number of families who inquire on the Spanish-language line do have basic English skills but are more comfortable conversing in Spanish. A Latino family specialist explains why offering adoption or foster care classes in Spanish is more beneficial than providing an interpreter:

The training is a process where parents are introduced to new material. They need time to understand the material, to process it, and to be able to extrapolate information relevant to their situation. They also need time to ask questions and get clarification. This is often difficult when one is in the minority and may not want to hinder the flow of the conversation. Parents also raise concerns about being unable to contribute to the conversation due to language barriers.

Overwhelmingly, the Latino foster and adoptive parents interviewed for this Guide confirmed the primary importance of speaking Spanish. After all, language expresses more than what people think; it also conveys how people

feel. When asked what caseworkers can do to work successfully with Latino families towards adoption, one adoptive parent summarized the sentiment of many:

“Saber hablar español es primordial.”
(Knowing how to speak Spanish is fundamental.)

Offering services in the language of the clients is not only an effective approach but one that is legislatively mandated. The federal Civil Rights Law of 1964 requires states to offer services in their native language to persons with limited English proficiency (“LEP”). The law prohibits excluding persons from participation in federally funded programs due to language barriers. “Such exclusions, delays, or denials may constitute discrimination on the basis of national origin.”¹⁰

The federal government has also expressed its view about the quality of interpreters. It calls for these competency guidelines in Title VI of the Civil Rights Act:

- a) proficiency in both English and the other language,
- b) training that includes the skills and ethics of interpreting,
- c) knowledge in both languages of any specialized terms or concepts...
- d) sensitivity to the LEP person’s culture. ¹¹

Tips from foster and adoptive parents and specialists:

- Offer all written work and preparation classes, as well as any additional requirements such as a First Aid class, in both languages.
- Understand that in some communities, such as Cuban sections of Miami, there is no need to learn English because everyone speaks Spanish, and the community is fully self-sufficient. Look at this as a strength-based model.
- Evaluate each family individually. Do not automatically equate a lack of English with a lack of ability to communicate with schools or counselors or an inability to advocate for a child’s needs. Families often will already have a relative or family friend to help them navigate the English-speaking world.

- Be ready to fully explain details about the adoptive and foster parent process for the Spanish-speaking families to insure that they receive as much written information and an equal number of hours of adoption or foster care preparation as English-speakers receive.
- Maintain a list of professionals who can train in Spanish on varied adoption, foster care and parenting topics.
- Be creative! Consider alternative methods of transmitting information including audio tapes, DVD's, CD's, power point, and videos. Diligent efforts should be made in this regard and should reflect an understanding of adult learning and effective training techniques.

Language And Identity - A Caution About Assumptions:

Spanish may not be the primary language of every Latino person approaching your agency as an adoptive or foster care applicant. While many Latinos in the U.S. are bilingual, some do not speak Spanish at all. Many of the “second generation” and all of the “third generation” Latino adoptive parents interviewed for this Guide listed English as their “first language.”

Are you bilingual? yes

Was Spanish your first language?

No – English. My parents emphasized the need to acculturate and wanted us to have all the benefits that were available to ‘the white kids’.

Do not make assumptions about language. Instead ask the family their language preferences. Make allowances for individual differences within a family or extended family. One English-speaking adoptive family requested a Spanish-speaking caseworker to explain particular information to the family’s grandmother. A prospective foster father, fluent in spoken English and active in the preparation class discussions, asked for the written handouts and articles in Spanish. Remember that fluency in speech in a second language does not guarantee full comprehension of written materials. It cannot be assumed that because a person speaks Spanish that they can read it as well. Clarify with the family which language they are most comfortable using and make diligent efforts to accommodate their preference as best you can. Note that almost every state has laws requiring public agencies to accommodate the needs of limited English-speaking persons.

Understanding and Insight

The availability of Spanish-speaking staff to provide orientation materials, answer questions, teach foster care and adoption preparation classes, and conduct interviews and home visits is a huge step towards cultural competency. However, staff fluency alone does not guarantee that the Spanish-speaking clients will be well served.

Upon learning that several families who had completed her preparation class series had later withdrawn from the process, a pre-certification trainer re-contacted the families. They explained that even though they were assigned bilingual caseworkers, they did not feel that the workers really understood them even though they spoke Spanish. In one case the worker spoke a formalized Castilian style of Spanish learned in college, which can be quite different from the style of Spanish spoken by persons from Mexico, El Salvador, Puerto Rico, or other Spanish speaking countries. But even more of a barrier than the language style differences was the lack of insight into Latino family culture. Education about cultural expectations might have avoided losses of potential adoptive or foster parents.



*“Habla español pero no me entiende.”
(She speaks Spanish but she doesn’t understand me.)*
-prospective adoptive parent

“These families are so sweet and so loving. They have much to offer our children. But they need workers who understand their culture. Workers especially need to know the region the family is from. Do your homework. You cannot lump all Spanish-speakers together - that would be like lumping together a Brit and a North American!”

-bicultural adoption recruiter

Family Anecdote: The Carillos credit their success in the adoption process to their bilingual worker who had lived in Mexico and therefore “understood our way of thinking.” Although applications and information were not available in Spanish when they applied, their worker’s fluency assisted Mr. Carillo, whose English was limited, to fully participate. A “legal risk” toddler was placed in their home. The legal situation took a long time to be resolved, and the couple “lived in dread of losing our baby,” yet their commitment never wavered. Their “baby” is now attending college!

Understanding and Incorporating Latino Values

This section will help you incorporate the key ideas of language and understanding with specific Latino values and put it all into practice!

La Familia (Familismo)

In general, Latinos possess “a profound sense of the collective.”¹² It is the family, through intergenerational socialization, that provides the Latino a strong sense of identity, belonging, and support.

“Of the many powerful values that hold us together as a culture, the preeminent one is familismo, our strong family orientation. ... We look to family first to meet our needs and to facilitate resolution of our conflicts.”¹³

“Family” to the Latino includes more members than just “nuclear” parents and children. The Latino family is multi-generational, with grandparents or other extended family members often residing in the same home. These living arrangements provide resources for the care of young children as well as assistance to the elderly - both are seen as communal and cross-generational tasks. The strong family ties provide for a warm and caring extended family, built-in respite care when needed, and a generous and hospitable attitude. Often it is family members who provide most of the Latino’s social contacts.

Even when the separate generations reside in separate homes, the family psyche still includes all.

Not surprisingly, it is within the family circle that Latinos solve problems whenever possible. “We are a guarded and private people,” explains one adoptive mom. Another remembered growing up with the mantra: “Keep your business your business.”

Mexican and Cuban families in the U.S. with young children are twice as likely as other Latino-U.S. families to live with extended family; Puerto Rican-U.S. mainland families are seven times more likely to do so, due to the relative ease with which they can bring relatives to the mainland.¹⁴

Although it has sometimes been misjudged as not in adoptive children’s best interests, the tendency in Latino families to solve problems on their own may be in keeping with the majority of today’s adoptive families. On a post adoption survey of state adoptive parents, over half reported that they were able to

solve problems concerning their adopted children “without outside intervention” the majority of the time.¹⁵

In addition to its inclusion of multiple generations, Latino families often include non-related “kin” whose relationships are communal rather than genetic. Many Latinos adhere to the traditional, informal system of co-parenting (*compadrazgo*) in which venerated adults (*compadres* and *comadres*) are trusted to share child rearing and mentoring responsibilities. Similarly, *padrinos* and *madrinas* are the

godfathers and godmothers chosen to sponsor a child at the rite of baptism or other sacraments and to accept responsibility for assuring the child's religious upbringing. In some families, godparents are also expected to support the child financially should hard times strike the family, and to take on the role of parents to their godchild if something were to happen to the parents.

"The traditional Latino family is based on a model of inclusiveness; our children are truly and completely embraced." -bicultural adoption specialist

The permeable boundaries of the Latino family circle even allow for the inclusion of ex-spouses. While many persons give lip service to the "always room for one more" concept, few match or exceed the Latino's willingness to receive people into the family fold. There is a reason the saying *Mi casa es su casa* (*My home is your home*) originated in Spanish!

"Latinos are very family oriented. Realize if you invite Latino parents to an event, you are inviting the whole household. (Uncle, kids, grandma...) So you better have child care and food!"

-Latina adoptive mother

Implications for Practice:

- Embrace the entire family's involvement with the foster and adoption process. If Grandma is visiting, include her in your conversations. Recognize that all the extended family will influence the prospective foster or adoptive parent's decisions.
- When possible, include the extended family members in some of the training seminars and family orientation meetings. Recognize that the entire family will be intrinsically involved in caring for the child and supporting the parents, so educate the entire family. The better they can all understand foster and adoption issues, the more they will be committed over time.
- Guard against sharing too much information about any specific child with the extended family in the beginning. Be judicious about confidential and sensitive information. As with all families, a good rule of thumb to use with anyone besides the parents is to share information on a "need to know" basis.
- Check yourself for cultural competence when you examine the Latino family structure and mannerisms. Remember that Latino family



traditions do not always fit with the typical American middle class orientation to child rearing, which puts more emphasis on independence and individualism. Ask yourself if your judgments take cultural considerations into account.

- On the “family intimacy” scale, with enmeshment at one extreme and disconnect at the other, place the family in terms of culturally sensitive evaluation. Remember, for example, that independent living by a set age is a culturally linked value, not a universal measurement of emotional health. Latino families generally maintain a higher level of interaction, communication, and family problem-solving than do Anglo families in the United States.

“Family enmeshment is rarely considered an issue in tight-knit Latin American cultures.”¹⁶

Practitioners who understand the ties, obligations, and interdependence of the Latino family will have increased successes in working with this population towards adoption or foster care.

Family Anecdote: The large, “blended” Blasco family epitomizes traditional values of “*familismo*,” especially “caring for one’s own.” Legal guardians to Mrs. Blasco’s niece, they have learned to advocate for the girl’s special medical needs. Even with the responsibilities of three children – the niece and two children from Mrs. Blasco’s prior marriage, the Blascos accepted the challenge of becoming foster parents when a friend told them of the need. They started by caring for an infant, (now age thirteen) whom they later adopted, “because we got so attached to him.” Then they took in two children, at ages eleven and twelve, who have now been with them for five years. And last year the State placed a baby in their home. Grown and “on their own,” Mrs. Blasco’s two older children remain well connected in the family circle, assisting with child care when needed.

El Bienestar de los Niños (The well-being of children)

“Children
are the
cornerstone of
our families.”
-Latina adoptive
mother

The volume of responses from Spanish speakers to the AdoptUsKids Ad Campaign indicates the strong value Latinos place on family, the supreme importance of children and their well-being, and the cultural history of caring for the community’s children. The Latino view of children is summarized by one adoptive couple interview.

When asked to identify the most difficult part of the adoption process, instead of complaining about system delays or paperwork, the mom said,

“Hearing about what the kids have been through – it just breaks your heart. I cried sometimes during the training.” Her husband added, “Children are a gift that God gives to us; to hear how some parents don’t appreciate that and abuse them is so painful.”

In general, Latinos view children as gifts from the Creator. In traditional Latino culture parents who have many children or who are unable to raise their children may “loan” them to other relatives who are childless or financially more stable. This practice is not seen as giving away their children but rather as an extension of a system that might be described as an informal open adoption arrangement. The tantamount importance Latinos place upon children’s well-being can be seen in an adoptive mother’s response to our interview question her about motivation her to adopt. She explained that her Mexican-American husband agreed to adopt once he was convinced that *the children* could benefit from adoption: “I am older than my husband so I knew I would want to adopt. He did not want to until his sister in Mexico adopted; then he saw how happy adopted children could be.”



The importance of children can be seen in the many Latino traditions, such as *bautismos* (baptisms) and *quinceañeras* or *quinces*, (fifteenth birthday Parties), which are geared towards welcoming and honoring children and youth. These celebrations reinforce the rites of passages of children and the collective accomplishments of their immediate and extended families.

Overwhelmingly, the experienced social workers interviewed for this guide commented on the quickness and strength with which Latino foster and adoptive parents, and indeed the entire extended family, form attachments to the children placed in their homes.

“We support our children longer. Once they are grown and working, they are expected to help with household expenses, but they can live at home until they are ready to move out on their own. And they can come back if they discover that they weren’t ready.” -prospective Latina adoptive mother

In addition to the intensity and rapidity with which the families “claim” their foster and adopted children, the parenting styles in

Latino homes may also vary from those in the more dominant culture families. To the non-Latino, the Latino parents may sometimes be viewed as either too strict or too lenient. As well, Latino parents may be judged as overly involved in their

children's lives. In traditional Latino societies, young adults do not move out of their parents' homes until they marry.

"We are used to a big family with lots of activity. Our four -bedroom apartment now seems too quiet. We enjoy family activities. When we go on vacations we say to each other 'a kid would really like this.' We travel to the Dominican Republic once a year and we would like to share that experience with a child."

Family Anecdote: With a recently completed adoption homestudy, Mr. and Mrs. Esparza eagerly await the placement of a child "up to age eleven." These experienced parents of four grown children have much love, security, and stability to offer a new son or daughter. Why did these empty- nesters decide to adopt?

Implications for Practice:

- Accept that definitions of "success" in parenting may vary. For example, a "lenient" family may be more accepting of a child with challenging "behaviors." An "over-protective" family might help an abused or neglected child to feel safe.

"You get close to these kids and it doesn't matter even if you have them for only two months. It's hard to give them up, but you can't just adopt them all. If I had more space I would. It was so hard on us when a baby girl we got at two months was returned to her mother at two years - she was our little girl."

-Latina foster and adoptive mom

- Remember that Latinos tend to attach to and claim children early on. If the case plan calls for birthfamily reunification, or moving the child to another home, work diligently to help the entire extended family understand and support the plan. Communicate clearly why the move is in the child's best interest. Ask the family their ideas of healthy ways they can let go. Process these difficult moments by reminding them of the value placed on all families including birthfamilies.

"We bonded to them like they were our own. We had other children [from foster care] that came and left before these three and it was very painful. Over time, you see how you can grow to love them as your own child. It starts growing in you. You don't expect that to happen. Start as a foster parent, and you may end up with an adoption!"

-Latina foster and adoptive mom

Gender Roles and “Machismo”

Many Latino families tend towards gender roles that are traditional to their country of origin. The man is the “head of the family” but the woman is “*la jefa*” (the boss) in the home. A Latino professional recalled while growing up, a constant reminder his mother would recite to his father: “You may rule the roost but I rule the rooster!” And his father just smiled.

The traditional meaning of a “real man” or “macho” is a man who is protector of his family and community. In a new situation, he is the “scout” who goes ahead to make sure the path is safe. This may explain why many of the inquiry calls in response to the AdoptUsKids Spanish-Language Ad Campaign have been made by the men. After presenting themselves and asking basic questions, they will then turn the next steps over to their wives once they are satisfied that it is safe for the family to proceed. This example reflects the true meaning of “machismo”: the man’s taking very seriously the role of provider and protector of his family.

When asked about the kind of child they want to adopt, the man may say “You need to ask my wife about that.” Some workers have misinterpreted this as his lack of interest or opinion. Not so! The husband may well have a strong preference, such as for a boy, but this is his way of listening to his wife’s need to parent a particular kind of child. It is his way of taking care of his family and seeking the wishes of his wife. Machismo in its original form is deferential to women.

A benefit of such clearly defined gender roles is the great deal of organization it lends to domestic life. Tasks are completed and goals are accomplished due to clear expectations as to who does what. Latino families are likely to have the mother at home when the children are young, although in some sub-cultures, two-working-parent families are more the norm. Less common among Latinos, though, is the use of institutional day care. Usually a family member is available for childcare if the mother works outside the home.

“There is a modernizing of the stereotypes in our families. My mother had traditional values, but she also prepared me and educated me so that I could support myself and my children, and not be totally dependent upon a man.” -Latina adoptive mom

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-Latina adoptive mom

The Latino tendency towards maintaining traditional gender roles has led some practitioners to “pathologize” or misjudge the family by evaluating them from an incompatible world view. One Caucasian adoptive mom recalled that her adoption worker asked if she “resented” her Latino husband for “making” her stay home with the children instead of pursuing a career.

“The concept of male dominance in Latino culture had been misinterpreted by non- Latinos to mean a system based on sexual exploitation of the female. The missing component of this interpretation, not fully understood by Anglos and misinterpreted in the media is, however, is its relationship to protectiveness toward and idealization of women, as personified in the figure of the Virgin Mary. The dynamics of male superiority are often counterbalanced by the idea of “Marianismo” or veneration of Mary, through the doctrine of the Catholic church.”¹⁷

Implications for Practice:

- When working with a Latino family, show respect to the family hierarchy. Greet the man first. Be aware that he may not feel comfortable with an authority figure, especially with a female social worker. Always defer to him. Even when addressing a question or comment to the woman, glance at him, or gesture with your hands to indicate that he is included in the question. Intersperse the conversation with phrases such as “¿Está Ud. de acuerdo, Señor?” (Do you agree, Sir?) The wife will likely do most of the talking as she is expected to take the lead on internal home affairs, but your eye contact, nods and gestures in his direction will reassure the husband that you are not usurping his decision- making authority.
- Reframe the *machismo* concept to capture and build on positives. Remember that in this culture the man is the protector of his family, and the women are highly respected. Take your time to be sure the man understands the information given and has a chance to ask questions. He will need to feel fully informed before he decides whether this is a “safe path” for his wife.
- As with any family, you must discern who is really in charge and achieve this by watching the family interaction. Pay attention to who is present. Is there a grandmother in the room? She is most likely considered the matriarch of the family and, as an elder of the family, is due a high level of respect and deference. The rest of the family will notice how you treat the grandparents!

Key Values: Mutualidad and Personalismo, Respeto and Confianza

Mutualidad and Personalismo

With a strong sense of community, being part of a support network, and maintaining family unity (*mutualidad*), Latinos place a very high value on social relationships. Interdependence and symmetry (“we do for each other”) are expected in social relationships, as are sharing and cooperating rather than competing. Personal connections and relationships are held in high regard, reflected in *personalismo* as a key value. Latinos are known to turn away from agencies that focus more on policies and procedures than on relationships, especially when practices are perceived as impersonal, insensitive and alienating. Only through a personal relationship will any meaningful information- gathering and assessment occur.

The director of a successful Latino foster family program explained:

“We find that the Latino families immediately develop a personal relationship with the social worker. Successful programs encourage this. Latinos will refer to the social worker as “una muchacha buena” (a good girl) or “simpatico” (likeable). This kind of relationship does not mean that our workers cannot make an objective and thorough assessment of the family. They understand the need to make the family feel comfortable.”

When asked if they felt respected by their caseworker, many of the Latino foster and adoptive parents responded in a similar manner:

The Latino orientation differs greatly from what some would identify as traditional American values which emphasize independence and autonomy while encouraging separation, “standing on your own feet,” “pulling yourself up by your own bootstraps,” standing apart from others and relying on oneself. These values may be traced back to pioneering days when discovery and individual risks to venture off and explore uncharted places were honored and revered. In contrast, Latinos have endured through mutual generosity, collectivism and social harmony. Interdependence is the rule rather than the exception.

“Yes, she respected us very much. We felt that we could talk to her about anything. She became a part of the family.”
-adoptive parent

Implications for Practice

- Work within the values of *mutualidad* and *personalismo* by acknowledging and showing interest in each individual, upon every encounter. A group greeting (“Hello y’all” or “Hello kids”) might be considered offensive. Even at a class or support group, acknowledge each individual in turn.

Greet each family member and exchange a few pleasantries before moving on to the next person. Don't be surprised if shortly after you develop a relationship you are greeted or bid farewell with *un abrazo*, an embrace that signifies acceptance. Follow the family's lead, but regardless, greet each of the children, the grandmother, the aunt and uncle who are visiting, even the neighbor who dropped by, in an accepting way. The social fabric of Latinos is such that the "chitchat," which may seem superficial to the non-Latino, is a part of relationship-building.

- When you enter a Latino home, take off your hat – your “therapeutic hat,” that is. Allow the family to ask you personal questions such as “Are you married?” or “Do you have children?” These kinds of questions are not meant to be intrusive; rather, they are a vehicle for connecting and relating. Responding to personal questions (to the extent that one is comfortable) will allow the Latino family members to build a rapport with the social worker.
- Each program or agency should review its policies and procedures for compatibility with the Latino value of “*personalismo*.” For example, the agency may need to welcome “drop in” clients as opposed to having policies of “by appointment only.”
- Use a liaison to nurture the growing relationship and to maintain the family's interest. A liaison can keep the family engaged while they are waiting for a pre- adoption or foster care certification class to commence or a bilingual worker to be assigned. Examples of people who can serve as liaisons would include an experienced adoptive or foster parent or a member of a parent support organization. Ongoing communication also eases the potential of the family developing a mistaken perception that

“Darles a las familias hispanas más atención; llamarles más seguido. Las familias hispanas a veces se desesperan en el proceso.”

(Give Hispanic families more attention; call them often. Hispanic families at times become discouraged in the process.)

-adoptive parent

the agency has decided not to work with them, since oftentimes Latino families have not had positive experiences with government institutions. This type of personal connection reinforces “*personalismo*,” the need to feel connected to a particular staff and agency. It is also good “customer service” and has become an increasingly critical issue for all social service agencies to address.

Several successful Latino family recruitment programs employ a regular telephone check-in to maintain the family's interest and to help mitigate the stress

of “waiting” for child placement. One recruiter classified her role as “the go-between.” She might explain to families why their assigned worker has been unable to call them at the expected time. She may offer activities for families

to undertake while they wait, such as visiting a local Spanish-speaking parent support group. She will regularly send them brief adoption articles in Spanish.

A sign of the growing personal connection and acceptance may come in the form of an invitation to a church or family event. Families are very grateful for their social workers' participation in helping them find their children and they are honored when workers celebrate with them at a child's baptism or birthday. Your attendance at these events reinforces a sense of goodwill and trust. You may even have the opportunity to meet other family members or friends who may also be interested in adopting or fostering.

Implications for Practice:

- If you are able to accept an invitation, inform the family ahead of time that you may be coming for the religious portion of the event.
- If you attend a party celebration at their home, it is best that you attend alone or with another co-worker.
- If you are unsure about the appearance of a “conflict of interest,” check with your agency before accepting an invitation to a family function. (Many agencies understand the benefit of their foster care and adoption recruiters and workers participating in Latino family events.)

Value: *Respeto*

Closely tied to the values of *mutualidad* and *personalismo* is *Respeto*. This is considered to be the most fundamental and important value across the whole spectrum of Latino cultures.

In general, in Latino families, children are taught about politeness, manners and courtesy as tantamount to respect. They learn when to use “*Usted*” vs “*Tu*,” (the formal and informal words for the English pronoun “you,” which in Spanish have distinct uses that must be learned in order to show propriety and due respect.) Children are taught how to greet someone when they first enter the home or when they first meet as well as how to address them when they leave. Latino parents and other extended family members carefully teach children what to say and how to act. A high value is placed on doing this properly. Latinos will often say of a child who has learned these social lessons: “*Es un niño bien educado.*” (“He is a well educated child.”) This does not mean he or she is well educated in terms of schooling, but rather in terms of respectful social manners. Related concepts such as *dignidad*, which emphasizes maintaining a sense of worthiness through loyalty

in social relationships, and *simpatía*, or honoring the connectedness and close affiliations with significant others while avoiding negative interconnections, also influence Latino thoughts, feelings, and behaviors throughout life.

The Latino concept of individual respect extends to professionals. Attorneys, doctors, and teachers are especially held in high regard, as are members of the “helping professions” such as social workers. One sign of respect is using the professional’s title when addressing him or her instead of the name. Social workers may be addressed as “*maestra*” thereby showing respect for their education (masters degree) and authority. “*Respeto*” also assumes reciprocity. Latinos who do not feel respected by the professional may perceive this as a rejection, which will negatively impact the development and maintenance of a working relationship. The ideals of respect and not offending others as well as the concern with good relations and harmony are essential aspects of the Latino identity. Great care must go into relationship-building with anyone; however, it rests on a delicate balance when working with Latinos as it reflects an essential part of their “*orgullo*” or the pride they place in who they are personally and culturally.

“She was in such a big hurry!”

One State almost lost a foster home because the family was offended by a caseworker’s visit to a child in their care. The family was so proud that “*Abuelita*” (Grandma) was visiting from Mexico.

But when they started to introduce her, the caseworker rushed through the house to find the child she needed to see. This family later told the supervisor, “She was in such a big hurry!” Generally Latino families do not complain. Instead they may drop out of the process if offenses occur.

Implications for Practice:

- Find ways to bestow respect, such as noticing and commenting on a few niceties in the house or garden, or the sweet personalities or good behavior of the children. Take your time and allow these compliments and observations to precede the dissemination of information about agency policies and procedures.
- Let these principles guide your interactions and decisions:
 1. Respect for the client’s home and family is of utmost importance.
 2. Local etiquette should prevail.
 3. Careful work in establishing the role of the worker as a partner in helping is essential.

“Workers are sometimes uncomfortable that the Latino families will consider them and treat them as part of the family. They need to prepare themselves to accept this. Try to understand that the Latino family may need to view you as a family member temporarily in order to trust you and feel loyal to you. You will be challenged to think about what your role is.

-Latino adoption specialist

A Word About Food and Gifts

Latino families may communicate their respect and acceptance of you by offering you something to eat or drink. Many Latino parents and professionals interviewed for this Guide offered a cardinal rule: “Never decline. That would be seen as an insult.” Others say that it is okay to decline provided you acknowledge and honor the host and the offering. Do make it clear that it is not the food per se that you are rejecting. Adopt an effusive Latino style – saying something like, “Thank you. It smells delicious. Thank you so much. But I have just eaten lunch. You are so kind. Thank you.” Exude sincerity and warmth in the process.

Similarly, families may offer you small gifts such as trinkets from their homeland. These items also symbolize the family’s esteem for you. Most public agencies have strict regulations about workers not being able to accept gifts. As above, convey in words and facial expressions how much you appreciate the family’s thoughtfulness and generosity and tell them that the agency does not allow you to accept gifts. You want to avoid any potential effect that rejecting the gift may have on the trusting relationship you are building with the family. Make it known that you understand the symbol of honor that such a token represents but, unfortunately, you are not allowed to accept it.

Confianza

Confianza refers to rapport and trust – equally essential values in working with Latinos. To build a mutually trusting relationship, practitioners may need to recast their roles in a different light. They must help the family to see that they are equals, not subordinates. The ability to highlight certain similarities irrespective of cultural differences will further facilitate this trust.

Implications for Practice:

- To help Latinos to feel more comfortable and confident in talking about themselves and their families, start by telling them a bit about your own family. Share something about your childhood, or your family of origin, or your children. If you yourself have fostered or adopted a child, tell a bit about that experience.
- Use body language and physical positioning to help create a sense of equality. A caseworker who “conducts interviews” seated behind a desk writing in a notebook the entire time gives a very different message from the worker who situates herself in closer and equal proximity to the family members (such as sitting in a circle) and starts with a mutual conversation rather than a formal interview. (Note-taking can be interjected a bit later in the process, saying, “Excuse me while I write down some of what we have talked about so I remember correctly.”)

Confianza requires cooperation and compromise but it also requires an invitation to join in throughout the working relationship, as Latinos are taught to defer to the experts and offer an opinion only when asked. Their reticence is a sign of respect to you as a professional and should not be viewed as passivity on their part.

Implications for Practice:

- Do ask clear and specific questions to solicit each participant’s view. Try offering an occasional open-ended statement rather than a direct question. For example, “I wonder how the children in this family would adjust to a new sibling who often gets into trouble at school.” Experiment with diverse approaches to increase the family members’ comfort and participation.
- Explain that your role is to help support the family in their decision-making, not to make decisions for them. Tell them that you want to learn as much as you can about them so that you can help them to identify a child who will benefit from their unique experiences and skills. Assure them that you will help them to guard against decisions that could overextend any of the family members (especially the mother) beyond their capabilities. Promise to consult with them on every decision that will affect their family – and of course keep your promise and follow through.

An experienced bicultural professional explains:

“The largest challenge is building trust. These families may be hypervigilant about your acceptance of them – perhaps because they do not speak English as well as you do, or because they are of a lower social, economic, or education level than you, or because they have been in the U.S. less time than you. Workers must draw upon all their tools and strengths in their communications and relationship-building. When you start to work with a family, tell them that you will be discussing personal matters and that you are building a relationship together. Explain that some of the things you need to talk about may feel awkward, but that your shared comfort level will increase as you get to know each other.”

The concept of “*confianza*” also extends to the use of services and service providers. When the traditional Latino needs to see a doctor or call a plumber, for example, he turns to a “trusted” person in the community for a recommendation and often a personal introduction.

Implication for Practice:

- It’s important to recognize that Latino families have established a working relationship with you and that referrals to outside organizations may be perceived with mistrust.
- If you need to refer the family to an outside resource such as a mental health provider or special education evaluator, when possible try to use a “cultural link person” to form a bridge to the resource. This person may be someone from their family, a friend or adoptive or foster parent mentors.
- Pave the way for them. This may need to include your participation at the initial intake.
- Tell the family if you know the particular provider, as this will facilitate a possible transfer of *confianza* (trust) to that provider.

Humildad

In general, Latinos are socialized to be humble and modest and not to brag or bring attention to themselves since to do so means choosing to stand out and above others. In Latino culture, achievement is best measured by one’s ability to think of others before oneself. In families where there are a range of occupations such as the plumber, the cable installer, the construction worker or the doctor, no

one status is held over and above the others. Each person provides a service; it is the demonstrated commitment to work and to help others that is most important. A person's job status is not to be misconstrued as a position of power. In fact, it is often the case that Latinos have experiences with persons imposing their power, reinforcing their need to be cautious when working with authority or persons in power. It is advisable to demonstrate cultural proficiency by withholding any sense of power that your professional position prescribes when working with Latinos, as they are indeed the ones who are the experts of their own cultural experiences and cultural identity. It is preferable to strive for sensitivity to the power differential and stand on the side of humility in your interactions with them.

An expert offers this advice to workers:

“...act as a consultant or facilitator, rather than instructor,... so as not to replicate unbalanced power relationships,” and

“... encourage participants to experience a sense of personal power within the helping relationship.”¹⁸

Implications for Practice:

- In keeping with the value of *humildad*, present yourself modestly, with an unassuming demeanor. Avoid saying “I am so and so with an MSW from such and such university and I represent agency such and such.” A simple “My name is John” will do nicely. Do leave your business card upon the first meeting so the family will know how to contact you. There they can glean the information about your title, degree, and the like.
- Convey a sense of equality and cooperation by explaining your role: “I will be your *partner* in building a new or different family.” “I will *assist you* to define the kind of child you want to foster or adopt.”
- Remembering that Latinos will rarely take the lead in talking about their positive qualities (as this may be viewed as arrogant), use your interview skills and interpersonal skills to solicit information about successes and strengths. Ask them to tell you about personal experiences like their childhood memories, migration and challenges. Then coach them to articulate the strengths and skills that have resulted. You may have to take the lead in identifying these. For example, if the family has endured poverty, you might point to “patience,” “perseverance,” “the

ability to succeed despite limited resources,” and the “ability to delay gratification” as strengths they have demonstrated.

- Illustrate for the family how their experiences and positive qualities might be important in fostering a sense of hope, empowerment and accomplishment in their children.
 - ♦ One caseworker was better able to support and advocate for a childless couple who wanted to adopt a sibling group after she learned that they had taken in seven nieces and nephews for a year.
 - ♦ A Latina foster mother was coached by her caseworker to use her own childhood experience of racism to counsel and advise children on addressing discrimination.
 - ♦ Families who have a migration history can share their stories with their children reinforcing their individual and collective strengths.

Strong Work Ethic

On the whole, Latinos embrace a legacy of perseverance, ability to survive, and hard work. Few Latino immigrants or migrants would have survived in the U.S. without adherence to a strong work ethic. This important value is instilled throughout childhood. This emphasis on work ethic has contributed to multiple generations of immigrants seeking better job opportunities, even at the expense of leaving their families and familiar surroundings. In general, Latinos value getting things done. They take action and take risks when needed to improve their family’s well-being. Many Latino families may have more than one job. The Latino work ethic is encoded in a popular adage: “*Camaron que se duerme, se lo lleva la corriente.*” (The shrimp that sleeps gets carried away by the current.)

La Educación

Related to the strong work ethic is the Latino’s emphasis on education as the means to self and family betterment. Latino parents are quite strict about a common household rule: No matter what, you go to school. It is important to note that regardless of the adoptive parents’ educational level, the lack of formal education on their part is by no means a sign of their lack of value in education. The greatest gift Latino parents can offer their children is access to a good education - a reality that for many was not possible in their generation.

“Many of our Latino families are very pro-education because they know that education is everything. Many have strict rules, such as no TV until you do your homework.”

-Latina adoptive mom

In many Latino groups the term “*educación*” has two meanings. There is the education one receives in school. But there is an emphasis on “home education,” referring to the family’s responsibility to teach the children about social graces and character development. Home education focuses on internal strength, a sense of spiritual harmony, and compassion for others.

Implications for Practice:

- Make appointments and classes convenient for working people, especially those who juggle multiple jobs. Latinos may not have the luxury of taking time off from work. A culturally proficient organization will accommodate these families and offer services accordingly.
- Ask your Latino foster and adoptive parent applicants to describe their views on work, their work schedules, and how they plan to balance work responsibilities with child care needs. Then illustrate for them, and include in writing in your reports or homestudies, how their views and practices will benefit their children.
- Interview families about their own formal and informal education, and also about their hopes and plans for the education of their children. Inform them about scholarship opportunities for youth in or adopted from foster care.
- Keep in mind that many Latinos may have been professionals in their countries of origin, such as doctors or teachers. Because they are unable to speak English and/or lack U.S. Board certification, they may well have had to take less prestigious jobs in the U.S.

La Espiritualidad

“Que Dios Le Bendiga”

This “*bendición*” or blessing (“That God may bless, guide, and protect you”) is often stated by an elder in the home when a family member is undertaking a new venture, or sometimes simply when one is leaving the home to start the work day, to travel or visit, or to go to school. The custom indicates the Latino interconnectedness of everyday life with belief and spirituality.

Many Latinos maintain a strong religious or spiritual aspect to life, transmitted throughout generations from Latino ancestors. Anthropologists tell us that art and writings of the indigenous peoples of Mexico, Central, and South America reflect a “profound connection and spiritual focus”¹⁹ that predates the arrival of Western Europeans. In fact, one theory explains that the Spaniards found this population’s inherent goodness, gentleness, and humility to be so strong that they called them “*Indios*” from the phrase “*en Dios*” – a people who were “in God;” (and not because they thought they had landed in India.)²⁰

Ever since the contact and immersion with Christian missionaries, Latino peoples have found ways to interweave Christianity with their ancestral spiritual heritage. Catholics were the first missionaries to the “new world” and most Latinos are, at least nominally, Roman Catholic. However, a number identify with other religious groups - mostly Protestant denominations. And as in all groups, some persons do not participate in any organized faith. Many Latinos in the U.S. mix and balance various aspects of religion with their spiritual heritage.

Implications for Practice:

- Ask the family to describe their spiritual beliefs and religious practices if that is a practice allowable by your agency. Listen respectfully and demonstrate genuine interest. This will foster trust in you and the system you represent. Be sure to schedule visits and classes at times that will not interfere with religious activities or holidays.
- Depending on the family’s level of acculturation, the family may have an altar set up with candles, religious articles (i.e. statues of their favorite saints and rosaries) and pictures of deceased loved ones. Families take pride in such arrangements and feel a sense of pride in sharing stories of their loved ones who have died. Depending on your level of comfort, you may comment on a particular item of interest and ask the family their thoughts on what that particular relative might think about their plan of adopting or fostering.

A summary of **Latino family values** can be seen in the following communication a concerned “Tia” wrote for her great-niece – the first in the family to go away to college. Worried about dormitory life and undue influences, the Aunt composed this list:

Great Aunt Olga’s Rules for College:

- ★ Don’t tell anyone your family business.
- ★ Don’t lend money; don’t borrow money.
- ★ Don’t get involved in any “cults;” – you are Catholic; you stay Catholic!
- ★ Go to classes, not to protests! You are there to learn; not to get involved in politics.
- ★ Don’t bother with the boys. You are there to learn, not to find a husband.
- ★ Do your homework every day.
- ★ Go to every class every day.
- ★ Call your mother every day.

Working within Latino Cultural Characteristics

The scope of this Guide allows only for an overview about Hispanic culture. But as indicated earlier, Latinos are not a monolithic group. Latinos comprise many different nationalities and sub-groups. Even within the same national ethnic group, individual and family differences will be influenced by life experiences, education, level of acculturation, and the extent to which persons have integrated their two identities – as Latinos and as Americans. Pay attention to the possible variations, and by all means ask the family questions to clear up misunderstandings. Open-ended questions may work well (How can I make this process more comfortable for you? What would be the best way for us to get these forms filled out?). At the same time, develop a give and take – explain why you may need to end a visit at a certain time, for example.

One caveat to bear in mind:

“People are people, within the overlays of culture. The expectation of ‘cultural differences’ can become a barrier.”

-Latina therapist and adoptive parent

Orientation to Time

A Latino's orientation to time may differ from that of a non-Latino North American. Social expressions hint at this different view. In the U.S. we talk about "spending" time, as though time is a scarce commodity with a price tag. But in Latino cultures, one is more likely to hear people talk about *pasando el tiempo* ("passing time") as in *Es un placer pasar el tiempo contigo* ("It is a pleasure to pass the time with you.")

If you have lived in or traveled in the Latin American nations, you may have noted that, for the most part, Latinos do not rush. Latino orientation toward relationships and *comunidad* (community) play an important role in how one chooses to pass time. Perhaps the physical environments of their countries of origin play a role in inducing more relaxed attitudes toward time. After all, warm and sometimes hot climates can discourage high activity levels and may be more conducive to sitting, chatting and observing the surroundings. Latinos work hard, but when the work day ends, the activities of culture such as *musica* (music), *comida* (food) and *vida familiar* (family life) occur languidly and deliberately.

Implications for Practice:

- A cardinal rule to follow: Go slowly! Respect a different orientation, one which may be more "now" focused than future focused. Do not assume a lack of motivation if the family members do not arrive on time to an appointment or if they do not get their paperwork in "on time."
- Schedule appointments within a thirty minute timeframe. ("Is it okay that I meet with you between 9:00am and 9:30am?")
- Break the required paperwork into packets so families do not feel overwhelmed all at one time.
- A formulaic approach to adoption and foster care recruitment, education, preparation, and certification or home study process, especially one with rigid timetables, can work if the family is actively engaged in the process and enough "lead time" is included in the timetable. Advocate with your agency or supervisor for their commitment to an increased amount of time for interactions while at the same time clarifying with the family that time benchmarks are important to meet.

The consensus was unanimous among all the bilingual recruiters and social workers interviewed for this guide: *Working with Latino families takes twice as long!*

When asked what their foster care certifiers and adoption practitioners did to make the process more comfortable, the families of a Spanish-speaking support group gave a unanimous reply:

“Ellos tomaron el tiempo para conocer y comprender a nuestras familias.”

(They took the time to really get to know and understand our families.)

The requirement for increased time is related to the important Latino value of honoring each person and building a trusting personal relationship. Latino people are interested in making a connection and having a worker make a “connection” with them beyond just on a professional level. Connections with people are what move life in Latin America; therefore, the more you know about someone the better it is for both parties. In a culturally appropriate interview, a considerable amount of time is given to getting to know the individual person and that person’s family members, friends, spouse, children, and hobbies.

“When I initially speak to Spanish-speaking families, I spend at least several minutes discussing “them” and their family structure before talking about “official” business. And sometimes the “official” business never gets mentioned, which is also fine with the follow-up: “I’ll call you later about such and such.”

-bilingual adoption specialist

Linguistic Differences

Cultural differences in speech may well be rooted in language itself. Linguists have noted that Spanish requires ten percent more words and syllables to express an equivalent idea in English.²¹ If you compare the same passage written in English and then translated into Spanish (or vice versa) you will notice that the Spanish version is generally longer.

Differences exist not just in the words themselves, but also in the manners and styles of speech. The North American whose primary language is English usually avoids unnecessary chattiness and gets “down to business” after a brief greeting. “Small talk” may be viewed as a “waste of time.” Great value is placed on being concise, frank, and forthcoming. Especially when we have to turn down a request or give disappointing news, we strive to be direct and to get to the point quickly. From the Latino vantage point, conciseness or directness may seem hurried, harsh, or even impolite.

Generally speaking, the person whose primary language is Spanish tends towards more congenial fanfare. In Latin American countries, people stop what they are doing when you address them. They look you in the eye and smile. Their manner of speech is more leisurely. They answer questions with elaboration and detail beyond a simple “yes” or “no.” A certain amount of “chattiness” is viewed as an indication of respect - that you cared enough to take the time to fully explain yourself.

The English language is more precise and “to the point” whereas Spanish “travels” or “detours” (“se desvia”) through different places. It is not just that Spanish is a “wordier” language but the culture of Spanish-speaking people is different. For example:

English: How are you? How is your family?

Spanish: ¿Cómo estás? ¿Qué está pasando contigo? ¿Qué pasa en tu vida? ¿Cómo está la familia? Y tu mamá, ¿cómo sigue? Tu papá, ¿sigue trabajando en lo mismo? Y ¿qué de tus hermanos? ¿Cómo están ellos? ¿Siguen en la escuela? ¿Cuándo se gradúan?

(How are you? What is happening with you? What is going on in your life? How is your family? And your mother, how is it going with her? Your father, does he continue with the same employment? And what about your brothers? How are they? Are they continuing in school? When will they graduate?)

I have learned what some of the differences are of being bilingual and bicultural. To be truly bicultural, I would go beyond asking the short, curt version of the question but extend it as far out as possible to include not only the person but to include the person's family in all kinds of context (health, work, school, etc.). In essence, Spanish is a “wordier” language because Spanish-speaking people are people-focused and family-focused. They are either genuinely interested in, or feel it is their obligation to know, all the details about someone; to get involved on a real “human” level. This may be why North Americans (“gringos”) are perceived to be “cold” and come from a “cold” culture.

-bilingual adoption specialist

Rather than focusing on and rushing towards an outcome, Latinos enjoy the process of communication and interaction.

One recruitment team referred all the Latino family inquiry calls to a team member who grew up in “the deep South” of the U.S. Her familiarity with the tradition of “Southern Hospitality” prepared her well to engage in the Latino style of chit-chat and the more deliberate pace of spoken communication. She knew, and her team supported, the necessity for extended verbal exchange in order for the callers to feel comfortable enough to ask questions and encouraged enough to follow through to the next steps in the process.

A Word about “yes” and “no”

Those whose primary language is English have sometimes experienced confusion in interacting with Latinos over the use of “yes” and “no;” some have even wrongly concluded a “stretching” of the truth. The Latino hesitancy to say “no” has to do with social customs, not veracity. In a culture that places such focus on politeness and wanting to please others, gentle prodding may be needed to elicit an unpleasant or negative fact or opinion.

For example, one prospective adoptive mother who had stated that she would take “any child under age six,” verbally expressed interest when her practitioner presented information about a few different young children. But the astute worker noticed hesitancy in the mother’s voice and in her mannerisms. He consulted with his supervisor, and together the two detected a pattern: she had hesitated over child profiles indicating known or suspected prenatal alcohol exposure. With this insight, the worker was able to return to the woman prepared to discuss the effects of such exposure, and also to give her permission to clearly state if she did not want to be considered for a child with this background.

The hesitancy to disagree, to express a negative opinion, to expose a mistake or a weakness, or to place blame may also be tied into the perceived power differential between the Latino applicant and the social worker, especially so for applicants at lower educational or economic levels. The practitioner who can help families feel more comfortable and more as “equals” may be more successful at eliciting the full range of opinions and information. Gently “coaching” may be needed to help families see that it is acceptable and helpful for them to express a preference or opinion, to be honest about a past hardship or mistake that they have learned from, or to share a challenge or difficulty they want to overcome. As when working with families of any culture, social workers should utilize strengths-based language and model it in their interactions. For example, instead of focusing on the one of the prospective foster or adoptive family’s eight adult children who did not graduate from high school as a parental weakness or shortcoming, highlight

as a strength the seven who did receive their diplomas. In addition, you might consider setting an example by sharing one or two of your own disappointments, mistakes, or fears.

Again we can turn to the language structure itself to explain these cultural differences in assigning or accepting blame, using first person versus passive voice. The English subject-verb structure is more direct. We say, “I dropped the glass,” or “You got sauce on your shirt.”

The first English sentence may seem too self-blaming, and the second too accusatory, to the Latino ear. By contrast, Spanish can be largely “blameless” in nature, meaning there is always a way of stating things that does not make the person speaking responsible for any given situation. The Spanish speaker would say *El vaso se cayó* (“The glass dropped itself from me”) or *La salsa se me manchó la camisa* (“The salsa stained itself on my shirt.”) These sentence structures assign the “blame” on the object rather than the person who handles the object.

Implications for Practice:

- Pay attention to linguistic cultural differences. Remember that the efficiency and decisiveness of English-speaking North Americans may appear harsh or curt to the Latin ear. Modify your approach; slow down and soften it appropriately.
- Put your “let’s get to business” manner on hold for a bit as you use “small talk” to make connections with people.
- Be aware of your volume. Americans of non-Latino descent, as seen through Latino eyes, may seem not only rushed, but often loud, harsh and impolite. Use interpersonal skills and gentle encouragement to put the family at ease and help them see that they are your partners, not your subordinates.

Manners of Speech

An important cultural distinction between dominant U.S. culture and Latino culture is the manner in which we address each other. The past few decades have brought increased acceptance of informality in our interactions. It is not uncommon to be addressed by one’s first name even in business or professional situations.

In their traditional cultures, Latinos may consider using a first name quite insulting, especially when addressing an older person. An adoptive mom told of how demeaning her family finds the informality used towards their frail, elderly father. When they take him to a doctor's appointment, for example, the young receptionist greets him with "How are you doing, Roberto?" The daughters perceive their father's slight cringe of humiliation. In his Latino community Roberto is always addressed as "Señor Jimenez" or "Don Roberto," indicating the high regard Latinos bestow upon elders.

Implications for Practice:

- When working with a Latino family, address all the adults by "Señor" and "Señora," or "Mr." and "Mrs." Even when invited to call them by their first names, be aware of body language, particularly for the generation of grandparents, great aunts and great uncles, and assess their level of comfort.
- Address Latino adults in Spanish with formal pronouns, such as "Usted" or "Ustedes" for "you;" use "tu" only for children. A good rule of thumb is that it is better to begin more formally when initially working with Latino families and follow their lead for interacting and conversing more informally. It will most likely vary across generations with more traditional elders anticipating respect throughout.

Non-verbal communication


Many of us have grown up with the reprimand, "Look at me when I am talking to you!" Looking into a person's eyes during conversation shows respect; looking away is considered impolite. This is not always the case in Hispanic cultures. Although Latinos do look at each other during conversation, they may also glance aside or look downward occasionally to break the intensity, and to show deference to experts and persons in authority. Children may be taught to look downward when addressed by an adult as a sign of respect.

In addition to the cultural differences in eye contact, cultures may also vary in the meaning they assign to other non-verbal cues. For example, when a Latino nods his head, the gesture does not necessarily mean he has understood, or that he agrees. The nod may be used as a sign of respect, or an indication that he is listening.

Hand gestures are another example of a non-verbal cue that may cause misunderstandings. “Because some Latinos use exaggerated hand motions or vigorous gestures to augment their communications, they are “sometimes misperceived as being emotionally ‘out of control.’”²²

Some Latino sub-groups engage in quite a bit of physical touching, which can seem too forward or intrusive to persons of other cultures. Often handshakes between the men may be accompanied by *un abrazo* or hug as previously indicated; hugs between women are often the norm.

Implications for Practice:

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- Do not feel as though you have to reciprocate embraces if you are not comfortable with closeness. It’s important to be yourself, “*auténtico*” (*authentic*), rather than present yourself in ways that are not natural or comfortable to you.
 - Do keep potential non-verbal communication differences in mind. Observe how the family members talk to each other, and to you. Where do they look? How far apart do they stand?
 - Assess each individual and take cues from each one in order to interact appropriately according to the individual’s comfort level.
 - Continually ask questions to clarify what was intended and to confirm that the family has understood you.

Here are some additional tips from a group of bicultural adoption and foster care workers:

- Make eye contact, but not so intently that you might be perceived as staring or challenging.
- Give people space.
- Intersperse your conversation with smiles and nods.
- Glance away or glance downward every so often to show respect, especially when addressing the husband or male head of the household.

Additional Tips for Overcoming Challenges

This last section offers additional suggestions from our Latino foster and adoptive families and professionals on addressing some of the commonly identified “obstacles” that keep Latinos from becoming foster or adoptive parents.

Obstacle: Suspicion of Government Institutions

The Latinos’ distrust of large institutions may be traced to their experiences with bureaucracies in their countries of origin where these entities may be inefficient, or barely functional, or on the other hand, extremely punitive. Don’t underestimate direct experiences with human services in the U.S. or the “reputation” of agencies as experienced by others and communicated within the Latino community.



The Villalpando family from Texas decided to expand their family by adopting three children from foster care with the support of their family, community, and agency.

Latino families may have a negative image of “social workers” who are still held to their unfortunate legacy of “policing” Latino families in social service work. In addition, the child welfare agency carries the stigma of removing children from their homes. Latino families may not have had an opportunity to see the reunification or the permanency work done on behalf of children. Some may have experienced or perceived discriminatory treatment on the part of some agencies’ representatives. Still others may hold assumptions about what the social worker is looking for or what the “ideal adoptive family” might look like and wonder if they are consistent with that image.

Tips:

- Use “cultural brokers” such as experienced Latino foster and adoptive families as well as community elders, to educate the population about the agency’s work to protect children and preserve families.
- Network with community media to portray positive foster care and adoption stories.
- Focus on Hispanic grassroots organizations, indigenous community leaders, cultural events and Latino-friendly places where Latinos gather (neighborhood centers, farmers’ markets, church events) to forge connections with the population.

Obstacle: Lack of Understanding of Terminology

Latinos may not have adequate knowledge of how the complex child welfare system works, not unlike all families we serve, but to an even greater degree. In their countries of origin, institutionalized child protection services, foster care, and formalized adoption do not often function similarly to child welfare services in the U.S. A group of Spanish-speaking parents identified “not completely understanding the legal process and the formality of foster care” as the most difficult parts of the adoption and foster care processes.

Throughout the process it is important to provide the meaning of terms that may not translate well (example: “I am going to jot this down”) or for social work terminology or abbreviations that may not be generally understood (example: “postox baby”). Remember, Latino adults may present themselves as understanding because of fear that if they indicate that they don’t understand, it might give the social worker the impression that they have a hard time understanding anything. They may also be concerned they may be perceived as thinking that the social worker is unclear, which to them would be disrespectful and impolite. Therefore it is important to actively communicate and engage foster and adoptive parents in discussions and regularly invite them to ask questions and “check in” with them to make sure they understand and feel comfortable with the information.

Remember, Latino adults may present themselves as understanding because saying they don’t understand may give you as the worker the impression that they have a hard time understanding anything. It might also give you the impression that they think you’re unclear which to them would be disrespectful. Do your best to actively engage foster and adoptive parents in discussions and regularly invite them to ask questions.

Tips

- For a glossary of the Spanish translations of English adoption terms, visit: www.childwelfare.gov/glossary/terms_english_spanish_r-s.cfm
- Explain each step of the process. Give the family a short handout at the end of each pre-adoption class session or meeting, such as a list of “frequently asked questions” or a booklet about adoption. “Something to take home” helps reinforce the new terminology.
- *“You need to explain what “special needs” means – kids over a certain age, sibling groups, etc. If you ask a family if they can handle a child with “special needs” they may say no, thinking the term refers to medical challenges or mental delays. But if you ask them specifics – a child with ADHD? – they may answer differently because they have learned what that means or perhaps they have experience with that particular condition.”*

-bicultural adoption specialist

Obstacle: Requirements, Procedures, and Paperwork (“red tape”)

“Nosotros llamamos a muchos sitios, era mucho papeleo.”

(We called many places, there was much paperwork.)²³

The formality and the paperwork of the adoption or foster care certification process can be confusing or overwhelming. The process can appear to focus on rejecting applicants rather than recognizing and building on their strengths.

Latinos may not understand why they have to go through such personal interviews or fill out so many forms. The written assignments may be difficult. Some of the procedures are culturally insensitive because they are intrusiveness and therefore impolite, such as requesting detailed letters of reference, or requiring thorough medical examinations.

“Do not merely give the family the paperwork; you will not get it back. You have to sit with them over coffee and help them with the process – through conversation. My adoption home studies all have my handwriting all over them because I do the paperwork with the family, over a two- to three- hour conversation.”

-bicultural adoption specialist

Tips:

- Acknowledge the complexity of the requirements and offer to help the family in the completion of the forms as necessary.
- Break up the paperwork in packets to minimize overwhelming the family.
- Offer written questionnaires or other written assignments such as the “autobiography” in alternate formats. For example, some agencies allow families who have challenges with language or literacy to verbally give their autobiographies.
- Explain procedures and requirements slowly and repeatedly.
- Find ways to make the process transparent: clearer, easier to understand, and collaborative. Your role is to assist them as much as possible throughout the adoption process.
- Engage generous community leaders, cultural events and Latino-friendly places where Latinos gather (neighborhood centers, farmers’ markets, church events) to forge connections with the population.

Obstacle: Logistics

Transportation, child care, and inability to take time off from work have been cited as deterrents to Latino family participation in foster care certification or adoption preparation classes and follow up meetings. Sometimes logistics prevent a family from completing requirements such as fingerprinting or medical examinations.

Tips:

Evaluate your agency’s requirements for family convenience and advocate for culturally competent procedures.

- Find ways to enable families to get to the required preparation classes and support groups. Anticipate logistical problems and explore remedies in advance.

- Consider offering private classes if necessary.
- Offer child care and meals if possible.
- Offer evening or weekend sessions. Working Latino adults generally have less job flexibility to attend work-day appointments.
- Identify community providers who have expertise in working with this population and solicit their advice about logistics.
- Offer the family's references an alternative to writing a detailed letter. A questionnaire or a telephone interview might be suitable alternatives.

Here are examples of how some agencies addressed logistics:

- One agency arranged carpooling to meetings and classes.
- An agency in an urban area provided public transportation schedules and fares.
- One agency purchased portable finger-printing equipment and trained staff to use it. This avoided an extra “trip” for applicant families.
- One worker intervened to make the medical requirements more culturally appropriate for an older, widowed applicant. The worker located a Spanish-speaking health educator who was able to explain the benefit of preventative examinations.

Obstacle: Privacy and the Stigma of Infertility

Latino families may fear that they will not be judged as worthy as more established or more prosperous families. Within their culture that highly values family pride, discussing personal information may be a challenge. Latinos' religious beliefs may also intensify the stigma of infertility. Because the culture places such a high value on children, family, motherhood and virility, infertility is more of an issue than just shame – it is also an issue of grief and loss.

Tips:

- Remember the key values of *mutualidad*, *personalismo* and *respeto*. Evaluate your approach to see that you present yourself as an equal. Follow the cultural norms to demonstrate your respect and to put families at ease.
- Help the family grieve. Often their interaction with you will be the first time the family has talked about their experience with infertility. It may be their first time to acknowledge infertility as a loss. Be familiar with the seven core issues of adoption as well as infertility and be prepared to talk with families about grief and loss issues around infertility. Assist both parents to identify the best approaches for them to work through the grieving.

Here are suggestions from our experienced bicultural practitioners:

- Help the family with grieving at every stage. One excellent prospective foster family only wanted to foster children who were freed for adoption, because they were so hurt by the loss of the birthchild due to infertility. However, when the worker helped them to examine that issue and to grieve, then they were able to take more risk and say yes to non-legally freed children.
- Some Latinos believe that infertility is God's will that they not have children. Help them to see other possibilities. One program used a Latino priest to talk to a couple about the possibility of God's intending for them to become parents in another way.
- It may be difficult for men to talk about infertility, especially with a female worker. Consider bringing in a male social worker who can talk about it, offer a class on infertility issues in Spanish (which normalized the experience), or share stories about how other men have dealt with infertility, acknowledging that it is not uncommon.

Obstacle: Attitude Towards Therapy

The culturally different attitudes towards mental health services is a barrier that keeps some Latinos from completing an adoption or foster care application process. Some have been told, upon sharing with the caseworker a past loss or abusive situation, to “go to therapy” as a prerequisite for continuing the application process.

Latinos often perceive problems as an imbalance between body, mind and spirit. In the case of loss, recovery, or moving on from a painful situation, Latinos rely on family and social network support, as well as prayer and faith. They may turn to a traditional *curandero*, (faith or folk healer), *espiritista* (spiritualist) or *herbalista* (herbalist) or *boticario* (pharmacist) to address “mental health” needs, either in lieu of, or prior to, seeking psychological services. Elders in the family or community, as well as priests or other religious leaders, may offer supportive guidance towards healing from emotional wounds and losses.

“Our families come from humble backgrounds. Many have been abused or harshly disciplined. Some of the women have been married very young – perhaps even forcefully so. Workers need to look at each situation individually and not insist that the family ‘resolve it our way.’ Workers need to re-examine what is considered “helping” or therapeutic, and embrace a broader understanding of what constitutes help-seeking. There are varied forms of “therapy.”

-bicultural foster care and adoption specialist

Tips:

- Look for strengths in a culturally sensitive manner. Examine how the family has been able to survive hardships. Do not assume that a past loss or trauma has not been adequately “resolved” just because the individual did not partake of mental health counseling. Assess the family’s current functioning as a measure of their ability to cope with and move past an issue.
- Respect the cultural norm to first resolve problems within the family.
- As you would with any family, educate them about the propensity for past hurts to resurface when one takes on the challenge of parenting abused children. Then ask them to think about how they would address resurfacing pain from their own past issues.
- Apply the core Latino values of *familismo*, *personalismo*, and *confianza* when accessing or referring to outside intervention.
- Recognize that the family will need to develop a personal and trusting relationship with any service provider before they will open up and share family information or accept suggestions.

Family Anecdote: The Mendezes, a “first generation” Mexican-American couple, were married for fourteen years without having children. They turned to their faith in God and their religion to help them cope with this painful loss. It was their priest who suggested adoption once he felt that they had grieved sufficiently, and he put them in touch with the State worker. The couple fostered two Spanish-speaking siblings, whom they later adopted. A few years later they adopted a sibling trio. Now all five children (ages 4 through 12) are thriving in this permanent home. Although the parents’ English is limited, the children are all fully bilingual.

Obstacle: Attitudes/Prejudice Towards Cross-cultural Placements

In placing Latino children outside of their birth families, some social workers have expressed preference for placement into a Latino family. Similarly, some social workers have opined that placements of non-Latino children with Latino families are not in children’s best interests. Both of these are built on assumptions, or even isolated experiences of social workers, that children who are placed cross-culturally do not fare as well as children who are placed with a family of their own race or ethnicity; many studies demonstrate that these assumptions are inappropriately used as absolutes. Moreover, these practices that are based on these assumptions run the risk of violating the federal Multiethnic Placement Act (MEPA).

Although it has been the experience of adoption programs that Latino families may state that they want to adopt Latino children, agencies should treat all families in a nondiscriminatory fashion, as well as follow MEPA requirements to diligently recruit families who are reflect the race and ethnicity of children who are in foster care or who are likely to require foster care. Remember that MEPA does not allow the denial or delay of placement based on the race or ethnicity of either the child needing care or a prospective foster or adoptive family for the child. As with all cases, the individual needs of the specific child should be the primary consideration making the best adoptive placement decisions. Here are two such cases which exemplify caseworker bias regarding cross-cultural adoptions with Latino parents:

Case example # 1

Diana, a Latina foster-adoptive mom, had to advocate to continue providing foster care to three young Caucasian, not of Hispanic origin, siblings (ages 6 mos, 18 mos, and 3 years). The group was placed with her because the initial foster family that was contacted declined to take the children “due to their having head lice.” Once Diana eliminated the lice situation, the caseworker announced she was going to transfer the children to the foster family that declined them. Diana challenged the worker and the supervisor. She voiced her opinion that placing the children with a family who had at first declined them would not serve their best interests. She questioned why the agency deemed it “acceptable to give kids with lice to a Hispanic family, but to give them to a white family once they were clean.” The agency rescinded its decision to move the children from Diana’s home. Three years later, while they were still under her care, Diana discovered by accident through the newspaper that the sibling group was to be placed for adoption. She felt offended that the Department did not approach her first about adopting them. By then she had bonded to the children and

was ready to make her commitment permanent. Diana applied, and was accepted, as their legal adoptive parent. The children, now ages ten, eleven, and thirteen, are thriving, and have proudly mastered Spanish in Diana’s home.

Case example # 2:

When their adopted daughters reached ages eight and twelve, Marcos and Lisa were ready to fulfill their dream of adding a son to their family. Their parameters were: a child under age five, fully legally freed for adoption, and without major disabilities. One factor in which the couple was flexible was ethnicity. They were open to a Caucasian child as well as a Latino. Over a two-year period, their adoption worker submitted their home study to several caseworkers of little boys, but the family was never selected for placement. Explanations from workers included:

“I don’t think this boy will feel comfortable in a minority family.”

“They are such a good ‘resource’ – we shouldn’t ‘use them up’ for a child who will have other options.”

“They should wait until a Latino boy becomes freed for adoption.”

The family withdrew from the process when they learned that a beloved younger sister was to become a single mom. The sister moved in and lived with the family for several years. Had a little boy already been placed into their home, he would have grown up with two doting older sisters, a young aunt, a close-in-age cousin, and a loving extended family. This case occurred before the federal law (MEPA-IEP) was enacted. But some caseworkers may still cling to perceptions that deny cross-cultural placements with Latino families.

Of course, bias can work both ways. One Latina adoptive mom felt some discrimination in her agency “pushing us to adopt a Latino child,” as well as in her perception that the agency believed Latino children should always go into a Latino home. “Some people are really meant to parent a child with lots of issues, and then other people are not. They really need to match up people’s needs and skills. Otherwise, it is such a disservice to both the children and the families.”

Latinos who adopt non-Latino children are prone to societal views and prejudices similar to those experienced by other trans-cultural or trans-racial families. Latina foster and adoptive moms with non-Latino children have related incidents ranging from naïve questions such as “What hours are you on duty with the children?” (assuming the mom was a nanny) to mean-spirited comments, such as “Do your children all have different fathers?”

One Latina mom, whose adopted children include non-Latino Caucasians and African-Americans, created informational cards listing her adoption agency, a local adoptive parent group and the AdoptUsKids website. When approached by curious strangers, she politely explains that she wishes she had more time to talk, but she is glad to hear of their interest in adoption. Handing them a card, she says, “Here are some places you can call to get more information.” But there is one question she always answers, proudly and loudly to be sure her children hear as well: “Yes, they are all mine!”

Tips:

- Examine your placement decisions and question the decisions of peers in regard to adoptive placement decisions. Explore the benefits as well as the challenges to placing a child in a particular home. Ask yourself if you are looking objectively at the child’s best interests or focusing on your own personal values. Be aware that we are all shaped by our own culture and view the world through our “cultural lens.” Many agencies set up review committees or practices that have more than one social work making placement decisions, to lessen the potential for bias and to ensure compliance with MEPA.
- Help the Latino families become more culturally aware if they are fostering or adopting a child from a different Latino, or non-Latino, ethnic group. The language can be varied. Words can have different meanings. Also be aware of other ethnic differences such as history, food, and the like.

- Help prepare cross-cultural adoptive parents for societal reactions. Put them in touch, via a support group or a peer-mentoring situation, with similar families, or offer classes in transcultural adoptions for families who wish to attend them.

Obstacle: Communication in Advocating for Children

Some social workers have expressed concern that families who are not proficient in English will be unable to successfully advocate for their children in medical or school settings. Latino families with completed, approved home studies may be purposely overlooked as a fine resource for a given child due to this concern about language ability. It should be noted that non-English speaking families find ways to overcome these challenges in advocating for their birthchildren every day. Do not assume that it would be any different for a foster or adoptive child placed in their home. Lack of English proficiency is not a valid reason to reject a prospective adoptive or foster family, or to make a leap of assumption that they will not be able to adequately care for their child. As part of the adoptive home study process, social workers should address with all families how they will meet the needs of their prospective child's medical, educational, and social care.

Additional Suggestions from Foster and Adoptive Parents

Here are some of the responses received to the survey question, "What can caseworkers do to encourage more Latinos to become foster or adoptive parents?"

- Tell people how really rewarding it is. Prepare them for how hard it can be. Help them see that there are also risks with your birthchildren children too - things can go wrong.
- Offer the same classes in Spanish. Provide more materials in Spanish, including books and videos on adoption and foster care
- Explain to families that older children need a family too.
- Let Latino families know of the benefits, like the medical card, adoption assistance and post-adoption services. Latinos with limited education may have difficulty accessing this information.
- Teach more classes about what to expect from these children, especially when they are teenagers.

- ❑ Let people know about the many children who need loving attention and homes.
- ❑ Have a billboard that says yes, there are needy children in other countries, but many children here are starving for loving homes, a family, and attention. A lot of people don't know that U.S. children need to be adopted!
- ❑ Make some change to the system! It is so frustrating to hear about a child for adoption, then to find out that either their social worker withdrew them because they were "not ready for adoption" or that they already had an adoptive parent selected.
- ❑ Work with foster parents on a timeline during which you will help them determine if they want to adopt the child or, if not, will they help you move the child to a permanent home.
- ❑ Give these children a chance! The worker said about some of the children we were interested in, 'that one is too hard for you?' We should be able to judge if that is so. One little girl's worker took her off the adoption list because the girl said "I want to kill myself." Well of course she would feel that way seeing others get adopted and not her. You need to give us adoptive parents a chance to work with these children.
- ❑ Hire more Spanish-speaking workers.
- ❑ Call the families very often to encourage them.
- ❑ You must have fluent workers. You need someone to translate the formal documents correctly, but you also need someone who can speak in a down-to-earth fashion that families understand.
- ❑ Accept differences; don't be judgmental. We know a family who applied to do foster care, but because they cook in the traditional way and always have a pot of beans on the stove, their certifier wrote in the records that "their house smelled bad." This is racism. This dissuades other Latinos from even applying.
- ❑ Hispanic people are private people. We are reluctant to talk about personal family matters. Have a Hispanic caseworker with whom families can feel comfortable speaking.
- ❑ Let Latinos know that single adults can apply.
- ❑ Let Latinos know that you don't need to own a house or be a professional or need to speak English to adopt.

We recognize that a lot of information has been presented here. It is not expected, or necessary, that you become an expert in Latino culture in order to be effective in your professional role. The goal in producing this publication is to provide a framework to identify key issues that, once understood, will decrease cultural misunderstandings and facilitate positive working relationships with prospective adoptive and foster families who are Latino. We hope that this Guide has provided you the information, confidence, and encouragement to more effectively recruit, prepare, train, and place children with Latino adoptive and foster parents.

Appendix A – Cultural Competence Self-Assessment

* excerpted from Self-assessment developed by Tawara D. Goode, Georgetown University Child Development Center-UAP. Adapted with permission from *Promoting Cultural Competence and Cultural Diversity in Early Intervention and Early C Settings and Promoting Cultural Competence and Cultural Diversity for Personnel Providing Services and Supports to Children With Special Health Care Needs and Their Families* (June 1989; latest version July 2000)

Directions: Please enter A, B or C for each item listed below.
A = Things I do frequently
B = Things I do occasionally
C = Things I do rarely or never

Physical Environment, Materials & Resources

- I display pictures, posters, artwork and other decor that reflect the cultures and ethnic backgrounds of clients served by my program or agency.
- I ensure that printed information disseminated by my agency or program takes into account the average literacy levels of individuals and families receiving services.

Communication Styles

- When interacting with individuals and families who have limited English proficiency, I always keep in mind that:
 - Limitations in English proficiency are in no way a reflection of their level of intellectual functioning.
 - Their limited ability to speak the language of the dominant culture has no bearing on their ability to communicate effectively in their language of origin.
 - They may or may not be literate in their language of origin or English.
 - For individuals and families who speak languages other than English, I attempt to learn and use key words in their language so that I am better able to communicate with them during assessment, treatment or other interventions.
- When possible, I ensure that all notices and communiqués to individuals and families are written in their language of origin.

- I understand that it may be necessary to use alternatives to written communications for some individuals and families, as word -of -mouth may be a preferred method of receiving information.

Values & Attitudes

- I avoid imposing values that may conflict or be inconsistent with those of cultures or ethnic groups other than my own.
- I intervene in an appropriate manner when I observe other staff or clients within my program or agency engaging in behaviors that show cultural insensitivity, racial biases and prejudice.
- I understand and accept that family is defined differently by different cultures (e.g., extended family members, fictive kin, godparents).
- I accept and respect that male-female roles may vary significantly among different cultures and ethnic groups (e.g., who makes major decisions for the family).
- I understand that age and life-cycle factors must be considered in interactions with individuals and families (e.g., high value placed on the decision of elders, the role of eldest male or female in families, or roles and expectation of children within the family).
- Before visiting or providing services in the home setting, I seek information on acceptable behaviors, courtesies, customs and expectations that are unique to the culturally and ethnically diverse groups served by my program or agency.
- I take advantage of professional development and training to enhance my knowledge and skills in the provision of services and supports to culturally, ethnically, racially and linguistically diverse groups.

How to Use This Checklist

This checklist is intended to heighten the awareness and sensitivity of personnel to the importance of cultural and linguistic competence in health and human service settings. It provides concrete examples of the kinds of beliefs, attitudes, values and practices that foster cultural and linguistic competence at the individual or practitioner level. There is no answer key with correct responses. However, if you frequently responded “C,” you may not necessarily demonstrate beliefs, attitudes, values and practices that promote cultural and linguistic competence within health care delivery programs.

Appendix B - Recommended Resources

For Practitioners:

Children's Bureau website: www.childwelfare.gov

Capello, Doris Correa. Recruiting Hispanic Foster Parents: Issues of Culture, Language, and Social Policy. *Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Social Services*. Vol 87. No 4. 2006. www.familiesinsociety.org.

Velazquez, Jorge, McPhatter, Anna R., and Yang, KaYing. (2003.) *Perspectives on Cultural Competence: A Special Issue of Child Welfare League of America Journal*. www.cwla.org.

Parents Play a Vital Role in Recruitment and Retention. *Adoptalk*. Winter 2005. www.nacac.org.

The following chapters appear in *Culturally Diverse Parent-Child and Family Relationships: A Guide for Social Workers and Other Practitioners* (Webb, N.B., editor, 2001), available from Columbia University Press www.columbiaeducu/cup:

Bevin, T. *Parenting in Cuban American Families*
Zayas, L.H.; Canino, I.; Suarez, Z.E. *Parenting in Mainland Puerto Rican Families*

Garcia, E.C. *Parenting in Mexican American Families*
(reprints of these chapters may be obtained from Child Welfare Information Gateway, Children's Bureau/ACYF.

For Families and Practitioners:

Adoption and Race Articles: Available from Pact, An Adoption Alliance. www.pactadopt.org:

Hall, Beth. (2002.) *¿Quien Soy Yo? – Identity Issues in Transethnically-adopted Latino Children*.

Lin, Jeanne. (1998.) *Helping Your Child Develop a Positive Racial/Ethnic Identity*.

Dorner, Patricia Martinez. *ADOPCION: hablando con tu hijo. Talking To Your Child About Adoption.* Booklets available in English and Spanish from Adoption Counseling & Search, 206 Lochaven, San Antonio, TX 78213. PDorner@satx.rr.com.

Child Welfare Information Gateway offers a packet of information on adoption, available in Spanish and English. (www.childwelfare.gov/espanol). The packet includes some of the following articles and factsheets:

Adopción: Dónde empiezo?

Adoption: Where Do I Start?

Ayuda para la adopción para los niños adoptados del sistema de crianza temporal: Una hoja informativa para las familias

Adoption Assistance for Children Adopted From Foster Care: A Factsheet for Families

Buscando a parientes biológicos: una hoja informativa para las familias

Searching for Birth Relatives: A Factsheet for Families

Los beneficios para la adopción proveídos por los empleadores

Employer-Provided Adoption Benefits

Los costos de la adopción: una hoja informativa para las familias

Costs of Adopting: A Factsheet for Families

Cuidadores familiares y el sistema de bienestar infantil: una hoja informativa para las familias

Kinship Caregivers and the Child Welfare System: A Factsheet for Families

El impacto de la adopción en las personas adoptadas: una hoja informativa para las familias

Impact of Adoption on Adopted Persons: A Factsheet for Families

Opciones para la adopción: Una hoja informativa para familias

Adoption Options: A Fact Sheet for Families

Empezando el proceso: Paquete de información general sobre la adopción 1

Getting Started: Adoption General Information Packet 1

Financiando la Adopción: Paquete de Información General sobre la Adopción 2

Funding Adoption: Adoption General Information Packet 2

Buscando a parientes biológicos: Paquete de información general sobre la adopción 3

Searching for Birth Relatives: Adoption General Information Packet 3

El proceso del estudio de hogar para la adopción

The Adoption Home Study Process

Replanteamiento de las Practicas de Bienestar Infantil Según la Ley ASFA de 1997 (Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997): Guía de Recursos

Rethinking Child Welfare Practice Under the Adoption and Safe Families Act of 1997: A Resource Guide

Un vistazo a las opciones de la adopción: Una guía de orientación para las familias

Adoption Options At-a-Glance: A Companion Guide for Families

Endnotes



- ¹*Adoption and Foster Care Analysis and Reporting System*. (2006). Administration for Children and Families. www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/cb/stats_research/afcars
- ²Protection from Racial Discrimination in Adoption and Foster Care. Dept of Health and Human Services. www.hhs.gov/ocr/mepa/section1808a.
- ³Child Welfare Information Gateway. (2006). *Cultural Competency*. www.childwelfare.org.
- ⁴King, Gloria. (1999). *Race, Culture, and National Origin: the Issues, The Values*. The Evan B. Donaldson Adoption Institute. (1999). Anaheim Conference Summary. www.adoptioninstitute.org/proed/confessions/transtest. P. 3.
- ⁵Spaulding for Children. (1995). video: *Cultural Competency in Child Welfare*.
- ⁶U.S. Census. (2006). Press Release: *Nation's One-Third Minority*. www.USCensus.gov
- ⁷Woodruff, Judy. (2006). In Search of Generation Next. *The Voice*. Casey Family Services. Vol 7. P. 11.
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- ⁹Capello, Doris Correa. (2006). Recruiting Hispanic Foster Parents: Issues of Culture, Language, and Social Policy. *Families in Society: Journal of Contemporary Social Services*. www.familiesinsociety.org. P. 534.
- ¹⁰Suleiman, Layla. (2003). Beyond Cultural Competence: Language Access and Latino Civil Rights. *Child Welfare*. Vol. LXXXII #2. P. 190.
- ¹¹U.S. Dept of HHS. (2002). Policy Guidance on Title VI, Prohibition Against National Origin Discrimination as it Affects Persons with Limited English Proficiency. VI. Selecting Language Assistance Services. Section A: Considerations Related to the Competency of Interpreters and Translators. U.S. Dept of Health and Human Services. www.hhs.gov/ocr/lep.
- ¹²Condon, John. (1997). *Good Neighbors: Communicating with the Mexicans*. 2nd ed. P.3.
- ¹³IBID. Condon. P.4.

- ¹⁴Zayas, Luis; Canino, Ian; Suarez, Zulema. (2001). Parenting in Mainland Puerto Rican Families. *Culturally Diverse Parent-Child and Family Relationships*. P. 135.
- ¹⁵Fine, David. (2000). *Oregon Post Adoptive Family Survey*. Oregon Post Adoption Resource Center.
- ¹⁶Zayas, Luis; Canino, Ian; Suarez, Zulema. (2001). Parenting in Cuban American Families. *Culturally Diverse Parent-Child and Family Relationships*. P. 193
- ¹⁷Quintanilla, Maria. (2006.) *Hispanic/Latino Beliefs and Values*. Adoption Exchange Assoc. Conference. San Antonio, TX.
- ¹⁸Gutiérrez, Lorraine. (1995). Implications for Practice. *Family Resource Coalition Report: Empowerment and Latino Families*. Fall/Winter '94/'95. P. 7.
- ¹⁹Tello, Jerry. (1995). Spirituality, Religion, and Our Identity as a People. *Family Resource Coalition Report: Empowerment and Latino Families*. Fall/Winter '94/'95. P. 33.
- ²⁰IBID. Tello. P.33.
- ²¹Crouch, Ned. (2004). *Mexicans and Americans: Cracking the Cultural Code*. P.74.
- ²²Zayas, Luis; Canino, Ian; Suarez, Zulema. (2001). Parenting in Cuban American Families. *Culturally Diverse Parent-Child and Family Relationships*. P. 189.
- ²³Op.Cit. Capello. P. 533.



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