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Parenting Young Children: Comparison of a Psychoeducational Program in Mexico and the United States*

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The purpose of this study was to compare the cross-cultural effectiveness of a psychoeducational program with 82 Mexican and 63 American mothers with very young children. The 10-hour program was presented by trained facilitators in Mexico and the United States to small groups of mothers. Results showed that the both groups of mothers significantly increased their expectations and use of nurturing strategies and reduced their use of verbal and corporal punishment with their young children following the program. In addition, the reported frequency of child behavior problems decreased significantly at post-test. The similar results obtained

across cultures were explained based on research finding similar parenting practices with young children between Mexican and American parents.

The study of childrearing in Mexico and other Latin American countries is extremely limited (Solis-Camara & Diaz, 1991). Some knowledge has been derived from ethnographic work (Diaz-Guerrero, 1975; Fromm & Maccoby, 1970) and from studies of rural populations (Bronstein, 1994; Cancian, 1964). Most of what we know comes indirectly from studies with Hispanic families living in the United States (Dumka, Roosa, & Jackson, 1997; Knight, Bernal, Garza, Cota, & Ocampo, 1993; Mindel, 1980; Moreno, 1997). Not surprisingly, an inconsistent picture emerges from this literature. For example, Julian, McKenry, and McKelvey (1994) reported descriptions of Hispanic parents ranging from permissive to rigid, and from authoritarian to affectionate and nurturing.

There are a number of factors that may contribute to these inconsistent findings. Among those that may contaminate cross-culture comparisons are the inadequacy of the measures used (Vega, 1990), varying levels of families' acculturation (Taylor, Hurley, & Riley, 1986), and differing ancestries of participating subjects (e.g., Cuban, Mexican, Puerto Rican). Further complicating the picture is additional factors within culture that are known to influence parenting practices. These *determinants* of parenting (Belsky, 1990) include marital satisfaction and parental beliefs about discipline (Simons, Beaman, Conger, & Chao, 1993), maternal age and education (Kelley, Power, & Wimbush, 1992), family socioeconomic status (SES), marital status, number of children living in the home (Fox, Platz, & Bentley, 1995), among others.

One way to minimize the potential confounds inherent in cross-cultural parenting research is to study families in their native country. Recently, a series of studies was conducted with parents of very young children living in Mexico (Solis-Camara & Fox, 1995, 1996; Fox & Solis-Camara, 1997). These studies collected demographic information on factors that are known to influence parenting practices: SES, marital status, parent age, and education. A general finding across these studies was the remarkable similarity between the developmental expectations and parenting practices of Mexican and American parents with young children, aged one to five years. This

conclusion seemed reasonable when considering the similar challenges that very young children present to their parents regardless of culture (Bornstein, 1991) and the corresponding bidirectional influences that result (Maccoby, 1992). The type of parental responses to these normal, but challenging behaviors of young children does not seem to differ significantly between cultures (Solis-Camara & Fox, 1996), particularly when important parental factors such as education level are controlled (Laosa, 1981).

Assuming that the parenting practices used to raise young children are more similar than different between Mexican and American cultures, perhaps psychoeducational programs that strengthen appropriate parenting practices in the U.S., also have application potential in Mexico. Recent research has demonstrated the effectiveness of a psychoeducational program with American parents of young children (Fox & Fox, 1992) in reducing harsh parenting practices and related child behavior problems (Brenner, Nicholson & Fox, 1999). More specifically, outcomes of this program have consistently included reductions in parental use of verbal and corporal punishment, increases in positive nurturing behaviors, and decreases in child behavior problems (Brenner, Nicholson & Fox, 1999; Fox, Anderson, Fox & Rodriguez, 1991). The reduction in parental use of verbal and corporal punishment is particularly noteworthy given that these harsh parenting practices are a more powerful predictor of children's behavior problems than demographic variables (marital status, education, socioeconomic status) or other parenting practices (parental expectations, nurturing behaviors) (Brenner & Fox, 1998).

The purpose of the present study was to determine if a psychoeducational program proven to effectively reduce negative parenting practices in the U.S. could produce similar results with a sample of parents living in Mexico. Given the similar challenging behaviors presented by all young children and the comparable strategies used by parents to respond to these behaviors in Mexico and the U.S., our hypothesis was that we would find the program equally effective with Mexican families.

Method

Subjects

The Mexican sample included 82 mothers with an average age of 31 years ($SD = 4.89$, range = 21-46). Most of these mothers were married (81%) and middle socioeconomic status, using Stevens & Cho's (1985) classification method that relies on the primary wage earner's occupation. Maternal education levels included less than high school through some post-secondary education (38%) and college graduates (62%). The U.S. sample included 63 mothers with an average age of 32 years ($SD = 6.04$, range = 21–48). About half of these mothers were married (52%) and were middle socioeconomic status. Mothers were either high school graduates including some post-secondary education (52%) or college graduates (48%). Relatively few fathers from each sample attended the program and were not included in the data analyses.

Mexican mothers had an average of 1.84 children (range = 1-6) and U.S. mothers had 1.9 children (range = 1-8). Mothers with more than one child were asked to select one child between the ages of one and five years old to serve as the focus child for the parent education program. The Mexican sample included 38 girls and 44 boys (Mean Age = 2.71 years, $SD = 1.07$) and the U.S. sample included 36 girls and 27 boys (Mean Age = 2.81 years, $SD = 1.28$). Focus children in the U.S. sample included 54% Caucasian, 35% African Americans, and 11% other (Hispanic, Asian); the Mexican children were all native Mexicans.

Psychoeducational Program

The parenting curriculum, entitled the STAR Parenting Program, was specifically designed to meet the needs of parents of one- to five-year-old children (Fox & Fox, 1992). Studies demonstrating the effectiveness of STAR with American samples are available (Brenner, Nicholson & Fox, 1999; Fox, Anderson, Fox & Rodriguez, 1991; Nicholson, Anderson, Fox & Brenner, 1999; Nicholson, Janz & Fox, 1998). The STAR parenting program has a preventive, educational

philosophy that builds on existing family strengths. The curriculum is divided into four major segments.

The first segment of the program addresses how young children influence their parents' thoughts and feelings (e.g., "When my child talks back to me, I feel angry and worry that my child is becoming disrespectful"), and how these internal events may lead to parent reactions (e.g., yelling for the talking back). To encourage parents to gradually adopt a more thoughtful parenting style, a simple cognitive strategy is introduced. Using a familiar stop-and-go traffic light with an imbedded STAR acronym, parents are taught to Stop (red light) and Think (yellow light) about their present thoughts and feelings *before* responding to their children's behaviors. The goal is to gradually slow down the parent's response time in order to allow the parent sufficient time to consider their present thoughts and feelings and how they might alter them (e.g., count to ten, take deep breaths), if necessary, before responding. Parents are given a brightly-colored card displaying the STAR strategy to place somewhere in their home to remind them to use the new strategy with their child. Home practice also is assigned to have parents use this cognitive strategy and report back on its effectiveness during the next session.

The second segment of the curriculum focuses on the parent's expectations for their children. Parents are presented with basic information about child development, which is then connected to the STAR cognitive strategy with the addition of the letter A for Ask (yellow light). Parents are taught to Ask themselves about the fairness of their expectations while continuing to Stop and Think about their own thoughts and feelings. If they find that their expectations are not age-appropriate, parents are encouraged to alter their expectations before they respond to their child. Home practice encourages parents to monitor their developmental expectations. Their success with this added strategy is reviewed in the next session.

The third and fourth segments of the curriculum emphasize how the parent will Respond (green light in the STAR cognitive strategy) to the child. In order to build on existing family strengths, this segment begins by having parents share their own nurturing strategies that encourage their children's development and transmit their family

values and culture (e.g., reading, cooking, telling stories, playtime). Existing nurturing skills are then augmented with specific nurturing strategies such as giving good instructions and effective positive reinforcement. Parents are encouraged to positively respond to their child's good behavior through the use of rewards and positive attention. Home practice emphasizes the continued use of the STAR acronym with special attention to nurturing. Finally, the fourth segment specifically addresses discipline. Parents are taught general guidelines and strategies for setting limits on their children's behavior, such as redirection, ignoring, natural consequences, and time-out. Parents learn age-appropriate techniques to help address their child's challenging behavior, such as the use of redirection for younger children and natural consequences for older children. Specific directions are offered to facilitate the use of these skills most effectively within the unique environments of each of the families (e.g., how to use time out appropriately in a small apartment with other siblings present). Home practice encourages parents to apply these new techniques, integrating all of the course segments with the use of the STAR acronym. Parents received workbooks for in-class exercises and for in-home applications of the parenting concepts. For the purpose of this study, all materials used by Mexican parents were translated into Spanish by the first author.

Procedures

Parents were solicited in a number of ways including advertising posters and brochures distributed at schools, child care centers, and community agencies, orientation presentations, referral, and word-of-mouth. The 10-hour psychoeducational program was delivered to small groups of parents (6-12 participants/group) in a variety of community settings that were familiar and convenient for parents (day care centers, preschools). Typically, refreshments and free child care were available and attendance prizes were used to create a positive learning atmosphere. The format for each session included: (1) a review of homework practice; (2) presentation of new concepts through lecture, role-playing, examples, and discussion; (3) applying the new material to real situations presented by the parents; (4) a question and answer period; and (5) assignment of new homework practice.

Facilitators had a minimum of a bachelor's degree. They participated in a 20-hours of training to lead the psychoeducational program. Facilitators received a STAR Parenting Leader's Guide to aid in the implementation of the program (Fox & Fox, 1992). Facilitators in Mexico received a Leader's Guide translated into Spanish by the first author. Research has supported the effectiveness of this facilitator training program (Fox & Parroni-Hennick, 1996).

Instruments

Parents completed instruments measuring both parenting behaviors and child behavior problems during the first class meeting and at the conclusion of the parent education program. A family information form was completed to obtain basic demographic information. A shortened form of the 100-item *Parent Behavior Checklist* (PBC; Fox, 1994), a self-report measure of parenting behaviors and expectations for parents of young children aged one to five years old, was used. The short form of the PBC includes 32 items with three subscales: *Discipline* - 10 items that assess parental responses to children's challenging behaviors (e.g., "When my child has a temper tantrum, I spank him/her"), *Nurturing*- 10 items that measure specific positive parent behaviors that promote a child's psychological growth (e.g., "I praise my child for learning new things"), and *Expectations*— 12 items that measure parents' developmental expectations (e.g., "My child should be old enough to share toys"). All items are rated using a four-point frequency scale. More effective parenting strategies are associated with lower scores on Discipline, higher scores on Nurturing, and midrange scores on Expectations. All scores are converted into uniform T-scores to allow for comparisons across parents of differently aged children. In a representative sample of 1,056 mothers from a large, urban area (Fox, 1992), internal consistencies for each subscale on the shortened PC were: Discipline = .85, Nurturing = .73, and Expectations = .93. The shortened PBC subscales also correlated significantly with the longer, original PBC subscales: Discipline = .92, Nurturing = .91, and Expectations = .97. Developmental sensitivity of the PBC was shown by its ability to distinguish between parents with children of different ages (Fox & Bentley, 1992). In one study, responses on the PBC were

not influenced by a social desirability response set (Peters & Fox, 1993).

For the Mexican sample, the PBC was initially translated into Spanish by the first author, a bilingual researcher living in Guadalajara, Mexico. Words common to the different dialects of Spanish were used. With a sample of 221 Mexican mothers, Solfs-Camara and Fox (1995) reported the following coefficient alpha values for the three PBC subscales: Discipline = .87, Nurturing = .83, and Expectations = .95. Test-retest reliabilities computed for a subsample of 49 Mexican mothers were .88 for Discipline, .91 for Nurturing, and .96 for Expectations.

An adapted version of the *Behavior Screening Questionnaire* (BSQ; Richman & Graham, 1971), a measure of emotional and behavioral problems in preschool children, was used. This instrument, comprised of seven behaviors typical of young children (whining, tantrums), were presented and rated by parents on a four-point Likert scale ranging from always/almost always to never/almost never. The possible range of scores on this adapted measure was 7-28. Inter-rater reliabilities for the BSQ have been reported between .77 and .94. High scores on this scale are indicative of more behavior problems in young children.

Results

Initial analyses indicated that there were no differences between the Mexican and American samples on parent education or age, family SES, number of children in the family, and the focus children's gender or age ($p > .05$). There was a significant effect for marriage ($p < .001$), with more of the Mexican mothers married (81 %) than American mothers (52%). At pretest, American mothers did not differ significantly from their Mexican counterparts on the PBC's expectation scale, but they did differ on the nurturing ($p < .001$) and discipline scales ($p = .01$). American mothers had higher nurturing scores ($M = 48.0$) than Mexican mothers ($M = 40.6$) and lower discipline scores ($M = 48.7$) than Mexican mothers ($M = 53.3$). Mexican mothers reported significantly fewer child behavior problems on the BSQ at pretest ($M = 14.1$) than American mothers ($M = 15.5$).

Table 1 shows the means and standard deviations of each dependent measure for the Mexican and American groups at pretest and post-test. For the present study, the first question of interest was to determine if the psychoeducational program significantly changed the mothers' scores on the dependent measures from pretest to post-test, regardless of group (time effect). The second question was whether this program had a differential impact on Mexican and American mothers (group X time interaction effect).

A 2 x 2, repeated-measures, multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) was computed with group (Mexican, American) and time (pretest, posttest) as the independent variables and the T-scores from the three PBC subscales (nurturing, discipline, expectations) as the dependent variables. The MANOVA yielded a significant time effect [$F(3,141) = 41.09, p < .001$]. Univariate F-tests indicated that mothers significantly changed from pretest to post-test on the PBC's nurturing [$F = 58.27, p < .001$; pretest $M = 43.8$, post-test = $M = 49.7$), discipline [$F = 88.13, p < .001$; pretest $M = 51.3$, post-test = $M = 43.4$), and expectations subscales [$F = 4.38, p = .038$; pretest $M = 46.4$, post-test = $M = 48.5$]. The MANOVA also found a significant group x time interaction effect [$F(3, 141) = 8.92 < .001$]. Univariate F-tests indicated that Mexican mothers reduced their discipline scores [$F = 21.13, p < .001$] and increased their nurturing scores [$F = 9.67, p = .002$] more than American mothers; the expectations interaction effect was not significant ($p = .26$).

The frequency of child behavior problems also significantly decreased following the psychoeducational program. A MANOVA with pretest and post-test scores from the BSQ found a significant time effect [$F(1, 141) = 30.16, p < .001$] but not a significant group X time interaction effect. A univariate F-test showed that mothers reported fewer child behavior problems at posttest ($M = 13.4$) compared to their pretest level ($M = 14.7$).

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to compare the cross-cultural effectiveness of a psychoeducational program with Mexican and American mothers with young children. All mothers participating in this

program, regardless of culture, showed significant decreases in their use of verbal and corporal punishment and the frequency of reported child behavior problems. In addition, significant increases were found for parental expectations and nurturing practices. The parental decreases in the use of verbal and corporal punishment and the increases in nurturing were even more pronounced for the Mexican mothers than the American mothers. The more significant impact of the program on Mexican mothers may be due in part to their lower nurturing scores and higher discipline scores at pretest. The Mexican and American samples initially differed on marital status. A secondary analysis of the pretest and post-test data controlling for marital status and group (Mexican, American) was not significant. Consequently, the psychoeducational program was similarly effective for married and unmarried mothers.

The findings of the present study are noteworthy for a number of reasons. Mothers participating in this program showed reductions in their reliance on harsh punishment and also reported reductions in their child's behavior problems. These findings are congruent with the research from Loeber and Dishion (1983). They found that inconsistent and harsh discipline practices, poor monitoring of a child's behavior, and minimal positive parental involvement were indicative of behavior problems in children. As mothers in the present study learned to become more patient in their interactions with their young children, while incorporating alternative discipline techniques, they experienced an improvement in their child's behaviors. As part of the psychoeducational program, mothers were taught a number of proven behavior management techniques such as looking ahead, giving good instructions, positive reinforcement, redirection, planned ignoring and time-out. Rogers-Wiese (1992) suggested that these types of behavior management techniques are the most effective approaches for dealing with ineffective parent-child interactions and for improving overall family relationships.

The psychoeducational program used in this study has proven effective with American families (Brenner, Nicholson & Fox, 1999; Fox, Anderson, Fox & Rodriguez, 1991; Nicholson, Anderson, Fox, & Brenner, 1999; Nicholson, Janz & Fox, 1998). The present results provide preliminary evidence that it also is effective with Mexican

mothers. Considering that parenting practices with very young children as measured by the Parent Behavior Checklist do not differ significantly between the Mexican and American cultures, it seems reasonable that programs tailored to alter these practices would be effective across cultures. For this present program adaptation to be successful, it was important to have the program taught in the language of the parent by a trained facilitator from the same culture and monitored by a researcher living in Mexico (first author). This cross-cultural research model helped minimize many of the potential obstacles frequently encountered in conducting research across different countries (Bornstein, 1991; establishing collegial relationships, building laboratories, recruiting participants, coping with interruptions in postal and telephone service).

Footnotes

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Appendix

Table 1: Means and Standard Deviations Scores for Each Dependent Variable by the Mexican and American Samples

	Mexican Mothers				American Mothers			
	Pretest		Post-test		Pretest		Post-test	
	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD	M	SD
Parent Behavior Checklist								
Nurturing	40.6	9.3	48.5	11.1	48.0	10.9	51.3	9.4
Discipline	53.3	10.5	42.2	8.6	48.7	10.6	44.9	10.1
Expectations	46.6	12.5	49.6	12.3	46.2	13.5	47.1	11.4
Behavior Screening Questionnaire	14.1	3.1	13.1	3.1	15.5	3.9	13.7	3.4