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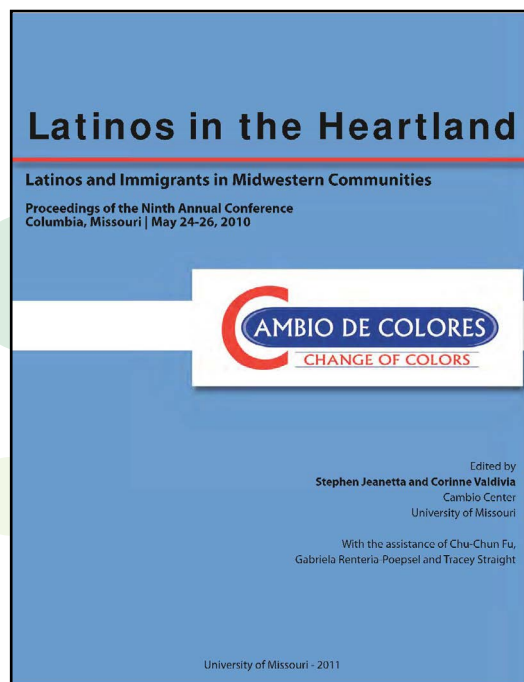
## Teaching the Right Curriculum: Strengthening the Values of Latino Families

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## ► Teaching the Right Curriculum: Strengthening the Values of Latino Families

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### Abstract

Research in the field of family studies shows increasing evidence that the health of the couple relationship in a family has significant impact on children's development. In practice, however, addressing this vital part of healthy family functioning and stability is often overlooked. While many curricula exist to provide families with healthy relationship/healthy marriage education, often the teaching materials, the format, and the facilitators need many changes to be successful in working with a Latino audience. The University of Missouri Connecting for Families program created a program for low-income parents that works for Latino families with the goal of building healthy relationships, which help foster healthy children. Each lesson has been piloted and revised to best fit the needs of the target audience.

### Introduction

Pedro and Patricia have been married for eight years. What they love most about each other is that he is uncommonly patient and respectful while she is especially vital and strong-minded. As a result of the Connecting for Children (CFC) program, these are the strengths they now know and can improve on. They also know that he can be more communicative and quicker to respond; she can be less headstrong and more deliberative. While they've always known this about each other, earlier this year they learned how to work with that knowledge to improve their marriage.

There is a growing need for culturally relevant services to target Hispanic families. Educational couple's relationship programs in Spanish are a new trend that has been very effective in delivering the message that healthy relationships can act as a protective factor for families.

Latino families face significant barriers that make lasting relationships difficult to sustain. Current statistics show that Latinos have the highest rate of teen pregnancy, the greatest rate of out-of-wedlock births, and Latino families are 200% more likely to live in poverty than white families (Hispanic Healthy Marriage Initiative, 2009).

Latino couples, individuals, and families that live and interact in the U.S. go into a process of cultural adaptation or acculturation that requires developing skills to function within two different cultural contexts. This process reveals changing behaviors as they deal with the unique stressors created by the immigration process, and the reality of surviving in a different culture and society.

The lack of a healthy communication creates a host of negative consequences for the parents and children in these fragile families. Fragile families, meaning those with low levels of income and education, with young children and few resources to rely upon for support, face significant barriers to reaching or maintaining a healthy marriage. The stressors of finding and maintaining a level of employment that meets basic needs, finding and maintaining quality affordable child care, the process of acculturation, as well as other stressors, exacerbate the existing challenging tasks of healthy communication and managing differences.

On average, children reared in a two-parent home tend to have fewer behavior problems and higher education status (Mincy et al., 2004). Similarly, couples in a healthy relationship are more likely to enjoy health benefits (Brotherson & Duncan, 2004), and are less likely to be depressed, have alcohol problems, or commit suicide (Nock, 2005). A parent's marital status is also associated with the financial stability of the family. The financial discrepancy between two-parent and single-parent families is severe; 38.4%

of children in female-headed households live in poverty compared to only 8.4% of children in married-couple households (National Centre for Children and Poverty, 2006).

## Program Overview

In October 2007, University of Missouri Extension partnered with Head Start on a \$2.4 million dollar grant from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. This program aimed to develop and deliver projects targeting Head Start-eligible families including Latino families.

The purpose of CFC is to provide participants with the necessary skills and resources to help them build stronger, healthier relationships that will benefit their children, families, and society. Another principle of the CFC program is to improve participants' chances for relationship success by giving families the opportunity to build friendships with others in similar situations and thus form informal social support networks. Participants not only learn skills critical for relationship success, but they are also in an environment where they learn about each other. It is clear that spending time with other couples that are successful in their relationships improves the odds for their own success.

*Instruction.* Couples' Retreats are anchored by Mary Ortwein's adaptation of Bernard Guerney's Relationship Enhancement program called *Love's Cradle* that guides couples to develop skills that will enhance their communication and a healthy relationship: Showing Understanding, Expression Skill, Discussion Skill, Problem Solving Skill, and Managing Conflict.

For our Follow-up Sessions, there were relatively few curricula that had been developed for our target population; therefore, another element of this program was the development and implementation of a curriculum designed specifically for low-income and low-resource families with young children. MU Extension specialists created the Connecting for Families curriculum specifically for this project, and a culturally sensitive version for the Spanish-speaking population.

*Topics.* The topics for our Follow-up Sessions came directly from research on fragile families. Good communication skills, having fun together, and having a positive support system are themes that run through all healthy relationships; therefore, our goal with this curriculum was to help couples develop the skills to excel in all three areas. Additionally, Ooms and Wilson (2004) identified several guiding principles and topics to be included. Based on their research and information from our participants, the two-hour modules included:

- **Couple Communication:** This module focuses on the importance of healthy communication in couple relationships and emphasizes that children learn better communication skills when their parent(s) model good communication skills.
- **Family Ties:** This module focuses on complexities in families, and how extended family relationships and ex-partners influence the immediate family.
- **Fire Prevention: Managing Conflict in Couple Relationships:** This module discusses factors that can influence what one hears his or her partner saying, such as mood and expectations.
- **Getting to Know You:** This module includes a personality inventory activity to get participants thinking about their personality and how that can affect their relationships.
- **Healthy Minds:** This module identifies stress and common stressors for parents, the importance of seeking medical help for potential mental health problems, as well as symptoms of postpartum depression and the importance of seeking help.

- **Healthy Relationships:** This module focuses on what makes a healthy relationship and a healthy marriage as well as the benefits of both for adults and for children involved.
- **Just Cool It! Managing Anger in Couple Relationships:** This module includes discussions of anger triggers, children and anger, and strategies for dealing with anger.
- **Lighten Up – Love and Laughter:** This module includes a discussion of factors that cause stress for parents, gives participants an opportunity to talk about fun things they do together, and includes a discussion of activities to do in their area or throughout the state.
- **Money, Money, Money:** This module addresses the importance of communicating about spending, how to use a spending plan, as well as resources each person possesses (time, skills, people they know, etc.).
- **Parenting with Love:** This module focuses primarily on using positive discipline and distinguishes between punishment and discipline.
- **Safety and Health:** This module addresses the importance of child proofing, as well as strategies and goal setting for keeping children safe and healthy.
- **To Work:** This module addresses advantages and disadvantages of working, how work affects family and how family affects work, and the steps to take to get the job you want.

## Method

*Session format.* The CFC program provides families with relationship and parenting skills in Spanish during an all-expenses-paid weekend Retreat. According to top relationship education researchers, having fun and spending quality time together is important for any relationship program (Stanley, Markman, & Whitton, 2002). Weekend Retreats are a popular marriage education format for middle- to upper-income couples, and both the literature and the project team's experience show this format can be helpful in educating low-income families as well. A Retreat format allows couples the time to kindle or rekindle their romance and to spend quality time together to work on relationship issues while having a relationship expert and a support system immediately available.

Participants are given a pre-program questionnaire to complete after signing in and a post-program questionnaire at the end of the Retreat and at the completion of every four-lesson module. In addition, participants are asked to write comments about the Retreat, including thoughts about the facilitators, the overall program, and the facilities.

## Results

In just nine months, 82 Latino couples (166 adults with 240 children) participated in one of nine weekend Retreats in Spanish, totaling 16 hours of marriage and relationship education for each couple. In fact, the Latino recruitment efforts accounted for 40% of all couples (both English- and Spanish-speaking) recruited for the overall project.

Evaluation results show that although most participants expressed satisfaction with the Retreats, some indicated that they were initially hesitant to participate. One male participant said, "I thought this was not a good idea at first. I didn't really want to participate, but after awhile it got easier." Another participant said, "The longer we were together as a group in and out of class it was easier to open up and share." Following a Retreat, a Latino participant said, "This is a very good program for Latinos." Many who participated indicated that the program gave them the opportunity to build a closer connection with their partners.

Pre- and post-program questionnaires revealed that participants acquired important relationship skills while participating in CFC. With regard to conflict management, before participating in the program, 78% of participants indicated that they “Agreed” or “Strongly Agreed” that they could resolve conflicts respectfully, fairly, and to the satisfaction of both parties. After participating in at least one portion of the program, the rate increased to 92% of participants. Additionally, there was an increase in the number of participants that indicated that they could work with their child’s other parent to raise the child together.

## **Discussion**

The Connecting for Children program has yielded great success as well as some challenges. Throughout the process, the project team has documented the lessons that would be helpful, should other programs choose to replicate.

*Collaboration.* Pairing MU Extension, the local Health Department, and the Centro Latino in Columbia was a natural fit that fostered content expertise and recruitment success.

*Logistics.* Throughout our first year we discovered several aspects of program design that needed to be adapted over time. Program staff initially planned to hold Follow-up Sessions soon after the weekend retreats were done. However, it turned out that participants had to wait several months before attending Follow-up Sessions due to logistics. Although this was not ideal, it gave staff time to build rapport with the families. We have a higher rate of retention of the original participants in the program, 80% of the families at the follow up session were families present at the retreat two years before! Originally, families were allowed to bring their families and a child care provider to the events, and although families enjoyed the experience, it proved to be cost ineffective. Now child care stipends are offered to families that find their own child care. Participants receive financial incentives as part of the program. For documentation purposes, it was found that using gift cards to local retailers and gas cards were the preferable method of payment. Weekend trainings are long and participants need the information to be well presented and meaningful. Trainings were adapted to include a great amount of fun, educational activities, as well as the opportunity to practice the skills. The Connecting for Families curricula has been piloted with our Spanish-speaking audience and reviewed and is currently in print, while the evaluation is ongoing.

*Recruitment.* It was learned that developing rapport with participants is vital to recruitment. Taking the time to socialize and develop personal relationships has fostered continued participation and interest in the program. As participants become comfortable with the trainer and the other participants, they are more likely to feel a sense of ownership in the program. It was also found that it is critical to join forces with established programs and organizations that already serve the Latino community. The local health department has a parenting program for Latino families, and 80% of the families served were recruited as a result of that partnership.

*Reflection.* Our program has provided the space and the opportunity for the creation of informal support networks as a way for couples to deal with acculturation processes and daily life stressors. Creating networks of support has been particularly important with the couples we have served. The first set of couples to attend a program session became very close with one another and formed friendships that lasted beyond the weekend session. These couples arranged on their own to meet together on a weekend, gathering at one couples’ home for food and fellowship, sharing tips on available work and giving each other emotional support. They found friendship and a feeling of belonging, security, and wellbeing. This example shows the importance of continuing programming, not only to extend relationship education, but to build support networks for fragile families.