Always Aware (Siempre Pendiente): Latina Mothers’ Parenting in High-Risk Neighborhoods

Rosario Ceballo, Traci M. Kennedy, Allyson Bregman, and Quyen Epstein-Ngo
University of Michigan

Poor mothers contend with numerous economic and environmental stressors that may severely tax their resources for parenting. This study relied on qualitative interviews with 49 low-income Latina mothers to examine how parenting practices are used when facing neighborhood poverty and the threat of community violence. Several themes emerged in the interviews regarding mothers’ approaches to parenting. First, Latina mothers in our sample relied on three strategies previously identified in the literature: (a) strict monitoring, (b) physical and/or social withdrawal from the neighborhood, and (c) engagement in positive, enriching activities for children. In concert with these strategies, these mothers also emphasized the importance of (d) establishing strong parent–child communication as essential to effective parenting in challenging environments. Furthermore, two overarching, culturally salient parental goals were identified: (a) fostering principles of educación in their children and (b) maintaining astute parental awareness (estar pendiente) of children’s physical as well as emotional states. Our findings illuminated culturally specific meanings that accompany parenting practices for low-income Latina mothers and underscored the importance of adapting culturally sensitive interventions for parents.

Keywords: community violence, Latino/a, neighborhood, parenting, poverty

Living in severe poverty presents parents and children with a conglomeration of environmental stressors, including poorer municipal services, grossly underfunded schools, deteriorating housing conditions, and an ever-present threat of community violence (Evans, 2004). Compounding the influence of environmental stressors, poor parents must also contend with greater economic strain, more stressful life events, and more demanding social networks. Financial and environmental stressors are likely to take a burden-some toll on the psychological well-being of low-income mothers, further exacerbating the many demands of parenting and, in turn, impairing mothers’ ability to parent effectively (McLoyd, 1998). Several studies present evidence of these pathways among Latino parents (Dennis, Parke, Coltrane, Blacher, & Borthwick-Duffy, 2003; Parke et al., 2004; Prelow, Weaver, Bowman, & Swenson, 2010). Despite the current acknowledgment that environmental and cultural contexts are bound to influence parenting behavior, research on parenting among Latino families remains remarkably sparse (Domenech Rodriguez, Donovick, & Crowley, 2009; Prelow et al., 2010). In this study, we relied on qualitative interviews to examine parenting among low-income Latina mothers residing in high-crime neighborhoods.

According to recent estimates, Latinos are the fastest growing ethnic minority group in the United States (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007). Notably, however, Latinos represent a highly diverse group, with different ethnicities, socioeconomic classes, immigration histories, and acculturative stressors. With the term Latino, we are specifically referring to people who trace their ethnic heritage to Central and South America, Caribbean countries and territories, or Mexico. It is estimated that Latinos constitute nearly 15% of the total U.S. population and that 23% of Latinos are living below the poverty line. Among children living in poverty, Latino youth are disproportionately overrepresented (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007).

For the current study, we drew on the theoretical framework supplied in Darling and Steinberg’s (1993) contextual model of parenting styles. In their model, parental socialization goals directly influence both parenting styles and parenting practices. Parenting styles encompass the emotional climate with which parental behaviors are expressed and displayed across a range of parent–child interactions, conveying parents’ emotional attitudes toward their child (e.g., tone of voice, inattention). Whereas parenting styles are independent of any specific content, parenting practices are behaviors applied within specific content areas that operate toward specific socialization domains. For instance, the parental practices of attending school functions or helping children with homework would benefit the socialization goal of school achievement. Over several decades, researchers have studied parenting within the boundaries delineated by Baumrind’s typology of authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive parenting styles, with the crowning of authoritative parenting as the gold standard asso-
icated with the best child outcomes. More recently, however, researchers have shown that these categorizations of parenting do not necessarily fit Latino parents well (Domenech Rodríguez et al., 2009), and moreover, authoritarian styles may be more beneficial in certain contexts, such as when families reside in dangerous neighborhoods. In such contexts, a focus on more authoritarian control may help keep children safe (Gonzales, Cauce, Friedman, & Mason, 1996).

Not only have Latino parenting practices been understudied, but the investigation of Latino parenting within specific socio-economic and environmental contexts is sparser still (Prelow et al., 2010). Our study begins to address this gap in the field. Because traditional measures of parenting do not fully capture successful parenting among racial/ethnic minority parents living in poor neighborhoods (Domenech Rodríguez et al., 2009), the use of qualitative methodology is an apt approach for generating new knowledge. Moreover, qualitative methods offer a unique contribution by allowing us to more fully understand parenting practices as explained by mothers in their own words, without imposing the constraints of researchers’ predefined categories or variables. Thus, our primary purpose was to identify and describe the parenting goals and practices that Latina mothers use in low-income, high-crime neighborhoods. Few studies have focused on parental goals and, by extension, the relation between parenting goals and specific parenting practices. Our study prioritizes understanding Latina mothers’ own perceptions of the parenting practices they rely on in response to challenging neighborhood conditions and the culturally salient goals and meanings that underlie their parenting practices.

African American Mothers’ Parenting in Poverty

Findings on parenting among impoverished African American families can help establish a framework from which to study parenting among Latino families specifically. A number of qualitative studies have identified efficacious parenting practices used by African American mothers residing in dangerous neighborhoods. These strategies reflect adaptive parental responses to multiple environmental risks (Jarrett, 1995, 1997; Maton, Hrabowski, & Greif, 1998). Furstenberg (1993) reported that resourceful parents develop a highly individualistic style of family management, segregating their children from peers and adults in the community and confining children to the home as much as possible. Along similar lines, Jarrett (1995, 1997) highlighted three parenting practices used by African American parents facing neighborhood stressors: (a) strict parental monitoring, (b) physical and/or social withdrawal from one’s neighborhood, and (c) engagement in positive, resource-rich activities.

First, as typically defined, parental monitoring consists of regular supervision and knowledge of children’s whereabouts, activities, and friendships (Stattin & Kerr, 2000). Parents intensely monitor their children’s activities and social networks; they impose strict curfews, demand to know where their children are at all times, and insist on chaperoning activities. Second, parents establish physical and social withdrawal from the community in direct and nuanced ways. Not only do parents restrict contact with the community, but they nurture an “ideology of distinctiveness,” a term coined by Burton and Jarrett (2000). Children are taught that they are different, albeit “better,” than their disreputable peers. Lastly, parents rely on resource-seeking strategies, spending considerable amounts of time and effort in identifying enriching, extracurricular opportunities (Burton & Jarrett, 2000). Examples of positive, well-supervised activities include church clubs, sports teams, and after-school tutoring. Accordingly, family boundaries must be cohesive enough to protect children from negative external influences, while being simultaneously flexible enough to allow access to opportunities.

Latina Mothers’ Parenting in Poverty

Despite the tremendous heterogeneity that exists among Latinos, the Spanish language and shared cultural values, such as familismo, respeto, and educación, are among the commonalities frequently shared across Latino families (Cruz-Santiago & Ramirez Garcia, 2011). The cultural value of familismo encompasses strong feelings of family unity and loyalty, prioritizing family over individual needs, and relying on the family for instrumental and emotional support (Calzada, Fernandez, & Cortes, 2010; Cauce & Domenech Rodríguez, 2002). Here, “family” assumes its broadest definition, reaching beyond the nuclear family to include extended family kin. Respeto (respect) emphasizes proper levels of decorum, politeness, and deferential behavior, especially toward older individuals and authority figures, with the ultimate purpose of facilitating harmonious social relationships (Calzada et al., 2010; Cauce & Domenech Rodríguez, 2002). Compared with European American families, Latina mothers and children place a higher value on indicators of respect (Dixon, Graber, & Brooks-Gunn, 2008). Lastly, the value of educación not only refers to the importance of academic learning but also entails a multitude of rich inferences regarding moral values, integrity, and good upbringing (Reese, Balzano, Gallimore, & Goldenberg, 1995). Both academic and moral learning are thus interwoven within the cultural construct of educación.

The extant research on Latino parenting underscores an important connection between cultural values and parenting practices. When participating in focus groups, Mexican immigrant parents stress their desire to instill values of familismo and respeto in their children as a superordinate goal for their parenting (Cruz-Santiago & Ramirez Garcia, 2011). Halgunseth, Ispa, and Rudy (2006) cogently link Latino parents’ use of control with the three cultural values discussed herein. Of particular interest, they note that Latino parents’ use of control tends to be domain-specific, as in controlling extrafamilial contacts more than inside-home behaviors. In sum, values of familismo, respeto, and educación are associated with uses of more behavioral control as well as with expressions of greater warmth and support among Latino parents (Cauce & Domenech Rodríguez, 2002; Cruz-Santiago & Ramirez Garcia, 2011; Romero & Ruiz, 2007).

In keeping with ecological models of development and family processes, Latino parents who contend with stressful neighborhood environments identify neighborhood stressors as a critical challenge to their parenting efforts (Cruz-Santiago & Ramirez Garcia, 2011; Perreira, Chapman, & Stein, 2006). Research has consistently found that parental monitoring is associated with an array of positive outcomes for youth irrespective of race/ethnicity and across low- and middle-income levels (Le et al., 2008). Among Latino families, beneficial associations between parental control/monitoring and child outcomes have been found for substance use, deviant behavior, and academic aspirations (Halgunseth et al.,...
The Current Study

The current study is a qualitative investigation of Latina mothers’ parenting goals and practices within the context of high-crime, urban neighborhoods. Two research questions guided this investigation: (1) What parenting practices are identified by Latina mothers in response to neighborhood stressors and community violence? and (2) Are there parenting goals or culturally specific meanings that Latina mothers attribute to their parenting in dangerous neighborhoods? In other words, are parenting practices among Latina mothers associated with the endorsement of certain overarching parental goals or cultural values, such as *familismo* or *respeto*? By focusing on a within-group sample of Latina mothers, the current investigation avoided a comparative race-based design that simply documents differences between racial/ethnic groups (Garcia Coll et al., 1996; Halgunseth et al., 2006). Instead, we focused on understanding the underlying values and integrative goals associated with Latina mothers’ parenting. Hence, our study sought to understand how parenting is conceptually framed and given meaning by Latino cultural values when living within the context of poverty and high-crime neighborhoods.

Method

Sample

This study was part of a larger project that included 104 mother–child pairs residing in economically disadvantaged Detroit, Michigan, neighborhoods. Although 50 mothers in the original sample were Latina, one interview was excluded because of a recording error, yielding a final sample of 49 mothers with a child in the fourth or fifth grade. Participating mothers lived in two census tracts where 28% and 27% of families lived below the poverty threshold, compared with 9% of families in the United States as a whole (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). In 2008, the violent crime rate in Detroit was 1,924 per 100,000 residents, compared with the national average of 455 per 100,000 residents (Federal Bureau of Investigation, 2009).

The women who were interviewed for this study included biological mothers (92%), grandmothers (4%), and legal guardians (4%). (For the sake of brevity, we henceforth refer to these women simply as the “mothers.”) Among the mothers, 78% identified as Mexican or Mexican American, 10% as Puerto Rican, and 4% as Cuban. Mothers’ mean age was 35 years ($SD = 5.75$), and 63% were married at the time of the interview. Twenty-six percent of the women were single parenting, being single, separated, or divorced and without a live-in partner at the time of the interview. The mothers had an average of 3.3 children ($SD = 1.28$) and 5.2 people living in their homes ($SD = 1.69$). Although 57% of the mothers were born outside of the United States, they had been living in the United States for an average of 12 years ($SD = 8.67$). On the whole, the mothers represented a highly impoverished and financially stressed group. Forty-nine percent of the mothers reported annual personal incomes under $10,000, 49% had received government assistance at some time, and 51% had not acquired high school diplomas.

Procedure

All of our research materials were provided in both English and Spanish; written material was first translated into Spanish and later back-translated into English by bilingual, native Spanish speakers. Recruitment letters and consent forms were distributed to all fourth- and fifth-grade students at two elementary schools. Fifty-eight percent of the eligible students at one school and 77% at the other school received parental consent to participate in the study. All mothers of participating students were then contacted for interviews. Seventy percent of these mothers were recruited and interviewed across a span of 2 years. Graduate and undergraduate research assistants conducted interviews with the women in their homes or at local fast food restaurants. Twenty-five mothers, who opted to complete the interview in Spanish, were interviewed by a bilingual, Latina woman. Interviews took about 2 hr to complete and comprised semistructured, open-ended questions and several quantitative measures. Mothers received $50 as compensation for their time and assistance.

The present study focused explicitly on the mothers’ qualitative interviews. Our semistructured interview protocol relied on a standard set of 10 question prompts:

1. Do you feel that your neighborhood has a positive effect on your child? How?
2. Do you feel that your neighborhood has a negative effect on your child? How?
3. What are the most serious dangers faced by children in your neighborhood?
4. Do you feel you can help your child handle the dangers s/he faces in your neighborhood? How?
5. How often do you worry about the dangers your child faces in your neighborhood?
6. Do you talk to your child about the dangers in your neighborhood? How often?
7. In order for kids to be successful growing up in your neighborhood, what advice would you give a mother raising a son?
8. In order for kids to be successful growing up in your neighborhood, what advice would you give a mother raising a daughter?
9. What do you do to try to prevent your neighborhood from having a harmful effect on your child?
10. Are there other adults in your neighborhood who guide your child toward success?

Interviewers were instructed to ask as many follow-up questions as possible to gain a deeper understanding of mothers’ parenting experiences. Interviews were tape recorded and later transcribed. Interviews that were conducted in Spanish were first transcribed in Spanish and then translated into English by native Spanish speakers.

Qualitative Interview Coding

The qualitative data analysis pursued a method of “analytic induction” in which the analysis is first deductive, beginning with theory-derived hypotheses or concepts, and then turns to an inductive approach whereby the researcher searches for patterns and emergent themes (Patton, 2002). On this basis, the initial establishment of coding categories relied on prior research. Based on previous findings with low-income African American mothers, the interviews were first coded to determine whether the Latina mothers in our study similarly used three parenting practices: (a) strict monitoring, (b) physical and social withdrawal from the neighborhood, and (c) engagement in positive, enriching activities. To guard against confirmation bias, coders were all undergraduate students who were unfamiliar with the literature, and indeed, our coders identified “negative cases” whereby a majority of the sample did not meet a coding criteria.

Turning to an inductive approach in the second round of coding, our goal was to identify additional, recurrent themes in mothers’ approaches to parenting. Following grounded theory procedures (Strauss & Corbin, 1998), the first and second authors conducted line-by-line readings of about half of the interview texts, using an open coding process to identify distinct parenting practices. In an effort to remain as close to the participants’ own words and meanings as possible, we identified categories based on descriptions of parenting practices (Miles & Huberman, 1994). This process led to the identification of one other parenting practice: (d) an emphasis on parent–child communication. We next turned to a specific examination of mother–child communication about neighborhood violence. Violence-specific communication was coded into two categories, reflecting communication as (a) warnings or (b) explanations.

Lastly, readings of the interviews were conducted to understand the cultural meanings associated with parenting behaviors. After reading all of the interviews in the original language in which the interviews were conducted, the first author identified two recurrent, overarching parental goals: (a) the importance of educación and (b) the necessity of being acutely aware (pendiente) of children in both physical and emotional realms. Following lengthy discussions about the parameters of these categories with the second author, coding criteria were established. Consequently, parenting goals were not independent of the previously described parenting practices. Thus, a total of four parenting practices (monitoring, withdrawal, activity engagement, and communication) and two culturally salient parenting goals (educación and awareness) were dichotomously coded as being present (1) or not present (0) in each interview transcript. A detailed description of all coding categories and criteria is provided in Table 1, along with the percentage of mothers who were coded as endorsing each category.

Once the coding framework was established, we created a coding manual with detailed instructions and examples. Two types of reliability were established: accuracy and intercoder reliability (Weber, 1990). Two undergraduate research assistants were trained on the coding procedures and completed several practice rounds of coding on interviews from a different study. Coders discussed their coding with each other and with the first and second authors following each practice round to determine clear coding criteria. Coders’ ratings on the practice interviews were compared with those of the second author to establish initial accuracy. Once each coder’s agreement with the second author reached 85%, accuracy was deemed adequate and the coders began coding the interviews for the present study. Percentage agreement was used as the index of intercoder reliability by dividing the number of agreed-on codes by the total number of codes (Neuendorf, 2002). The intercoder reliability for all of these interviews fell above 85%. In the following sections, mothers are identified with initials to protect participants’ confidentiality.

Results

In recounting the challenges faced by parents in their neighborhood, a majority of the mothers described community violence as a constant, daily threat in their lives. Mothers identified the most serious dangers encountered by children in their neighborhood as gang activity, drug dealers, guns, shootings, robberies, abandoned houses, and unsafe traffic. One of the mothers (PP) described a shooting: “When we first living here, I didn’t want them [her children] outside, because it was two years ago, somebody got shot in our front yard. They said it was a teenage boy that was shot.” Another mother (AD2) explained that her older son’s friend had been shot and killed. She said, “He [her son’s friend] was killed. He was only 10. And my son, it really hurt him. He was moping around for a good while."

In response to our first research question, three parenting practices, previously highlighted in the literature as used by African American mothers in high-risk, urban neighborhoods, were also identified by our sample of Latina mothers: strict monitoring, withdrawal from the neighborhood, and engagement in positive activities. Because these parenting practices are well documented in the literature, we only briefly discuss their use in our sample. A fourth, additional practice was emphasized as a critical component of parenting: maintaining strong parent–child communication. Other intentional parenting practices were mentioned by smaller groups of mothers such as being an involved parent (16%) and providing love, affection, and warmth to their children (6%).

Strict Parental Monitoring

A majority of the mothers (61%) discussed strict monitoring as a critical part of their parenting arsenal and their efforts to keep children safe. These mothers described monitoring as keeping a “tight leash” (TY), supervising children “24 hours a day” (YR), keeping children “in my eyesight” (TR), and having their child “always with me . . . never, never goes alone, never” (CR). In particular, children’s outdoor activities were severely restricted. For example, RR said, “They [her children] don’t go nowhere; they just stay with us,” and VB echoed this sentiment:
At every moment, I’m just watching them [her children] and if they want to go out somewhere, I’ll take them myself. Or if they want to play, I let them play out in front, but I sit in front so that I can be watching them.

Watching children closely allowed mothers to monitor not simply activities, but friendships, acquaintances, and peers as well. OL explained, “I don’t let him [her son] be alone outside, because when he’s outside, I’m always close to see who’s passing by, with whom he’s talking.” TY explained,

I don’t let them [her children] go anywhere. We only live six houses from the store. They’re not allowed to walk to the store. . . . I don’t let them stay out at people’s houses. You have to watch them! You have to know who they’re playing with, who they’re talking to, who they’re hanging with and judge from there.

In sum, parenting embodied chronic surveillance of children for these mothers.

### Withdrawal Strategies

Combined with firm monitoring, 35% of the mothers reported engaging in withdrawal strategies, consisting of physical or social withdrawal from their neighborhood. For some, monitoring children around-the-clock meant that children were hardly ever allowed to play outside and were thus literally withdrawn or hidden from their neighborhoods. AC2 revealed that “the only place she [her daughter] goes is to school.” Citing a similar refrain, PP said, “I really don’t let them out. I have them closed in,” and DF declared, “I don’t let them go out, and if we do go out, I go elsewhere, out of the neighborhood. So, I mean, they don’t even go outside to play.” Not surprisingly, visiting other children’s homes was typically forbidden.

In addition to physical withdrawal from the neighborhood, some mothers restricted social exchanges. Several mothers, like TR, AC2, PP, JM, MB, and OB, advised their children not to talk to anyone and certainly “don’t trust anyone.” Parents and children alike avoided meaningful contact with neighbors. For example, LV said, “We don’t talk with, well, we have almost no communication with the neighbors. We just greet each other.” MR2 noted, “They [her children] don’t talk to anyone either. The only adults that they talk with is with my family and with, at school.” In a striking example that underscores the social boundaries erected by mothers, OB confessed that her daughter was allowed to play with another child, but only through their fence. Consequently, the underlying message given to children was that to protect themselves, they must avoid being “contaminated” by neighboring children and families.

### Engagement in Positive, Enriching Activities

Twenty percent of the mothers reported purposely engaging their children in positive activities, mentioning a number of different enriching activities, including school- or community-based sports teams, church activities, school programs (e.g., musical concerts), and after-school classes (e.g., tutoring). For some mothers, engagement in positive activities worked in conjunction with withdrawal strategies because they specifically sought activities that were located outside of their neighborhoods. For instance, MR1 said, “I don’t take them [her children] any place around here.

### Table 1

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Parenting practice/goal</th>
<th>% coded</th>
<th>Descriptive criteria</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Strict monitoring</td>
<td>61</td>
<td>This category was coded as present when mothers relied on two or more of the following strategies: (a) intensive monitoring of their child’s activities, whereabouts, and social networks; (b) insistence on knowing where their child is at all times, (c) seeking and maintaining knowledge about their child’s friends and their friends’ parents, and (d) enforcing tight supervision (e.g., strict curfews, chaperoning events).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Physical or social withdrawal</td>
<td>35</td>
<td>This variable was coded as present when mothers engaged in the following types of behavior: limiting contact with nonfamily members, limiting time spent in the neighborhood, restricting children’s participation in neighborhood activities, confining children to the home as much as possible, and erecting symbolic boundaries that set the family apart.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Engagement in positive activities</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>This parental practice was coded as present if mothers supported children’s participation in (a) at least two extracurricular activities or (b) in one extracurricular activity and their relationship with one nonfamilial adult who engages them in positive activities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication</td>
<td>63</td>
<td>This category was coded as present when mothers discussed communication as a central component of their parenting. More specifically, mothers stressed the need to talk frequently, believed in the importance of listening, and asked their child many questions.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication: warnings</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>Warnings were simple and straightforward directives in which mothers literally warned their children about neighborhood dangers. For example, if a mother tells a child to avoid dangerous people or to stay away from certain places, this variable was coded as present.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Communication: explanations</td>
<td>65</td>
<td>This variable was coded as present if mothers explained to children why they should follow certain safety rules or discussed the reasons why violence occurs or why some individuals commit acts of violence.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Educación</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>This variable was coded as present if mothers emphasized the importance of education in raising their children. This construct included valuing academic goals, in addition to valuing broader concepts of moral, principled behavior.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Awareness (estar pendiente)</td>
<td>33</td>
<td>This category reflected mothers’ emphasis of the importance of being acutely aware of children’s activities and emotional well-being. This entails monitoring and a keen interest in children’s psychological state.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
The McDonald’s around here, I don’t even take them around there. I take ’em far, to the suburbs is where.” ER similarly recounted,

My son, he’s not street wise, because I keep him so active, away from the community itself. I keep my kids very occupied, recreational center, the church activities. I always be finding programs, after-school programs, summer programs. I’ll be enlisting them in so many programs. And I really go out, out of my area to find them. And they’re not in my area. Actually, most of my, most of all my activities for the children is like three miles away from home. They’re never in the community. It’s out of the community. And I have to pay money for it.

Other mothers, however, found a number of activities within their neighborhoods or schools. Moreover, these activities were viewed as important alternatives to simply hanging out on the streets. PC1 explained,

As long as the kid is busy and you know where they are all the time, and you participate in whatever they do, they can be under control. If they have no time to be in trouble, then they won’t be in trouble.

In sum, keeping children busy or “keep[ing] them involved in everything that is positive” (MR1) was a deliberate and important parenting practice.

Parent–Child Communication

A large portion of the mothers (63%) declared that parent–child communication was an imperative for successful parenting and recounted many instances of fostering dialogues with their children. For example, mothers said, “We talk all the time” (LP), “I tell them about everything. I’m really open with my children” (TY), “I tell him to come and talk to me if something happens. I try to keep an open line of communication” (MS2), “The more you talk to them, the more they’re gonna listen” (AD1), “It’s always good to communicate with your children” (NA), and “Communication is important to me. We can talk just about everything” (CT). Open communication did not preclude strict parenting; rather, as several mothers explained, communication can complement strict parenting. JK explained,

Anything they got a question about, they always come to me. I leave that open. I’m a strict parent, but not as strict as where you’d be scared to, you know, come to me and tell me something. I got to leave that line open.

Several mothers indicated that open communication must be established early, when children are young. For instance, JM encouraged other mothers to “talk to them [children] about everything while they are growing, tell them from the time they are small.”

In keeping with a strong emphasis on communication, a few mothers declared that nothing was off limits for discussion, even topics that they were uncomfortable with or that their own mothers had not discussed. AS explained, “I talk to them about everything. I talk to them about drugs. I talk to them about the danger one has, if, let’s suppose that they’re in a gang.” Likewise, TY stressed honesty: “Be honest with them right away. You know, like my children are young, but they know about babies, about sex, about drugs, about it all.” Whereas some mothers noted that different conversations should occur with boys and girls, most underscored the need to talk with all children regardless of the child’s gender.

For instance, VB said, “Because at least with my son, even though he’s a boy, I talk to him about, about everything.”

When the mothers were asked what advice they would give to other mothers to successfully raise children in their neighborhoods, our mothers implored other parents to foster communication with their children. In response to this question, AC2 said,

To have a good relationship with your kids. I mean, [pause], I learned here, to talk to her when she gets out of school, ask her how her day went, what she’s been doing in school. For her to have company for me. I tell her just tell me, even if you think I’m going to get mad. I mean, just tell me the thing. If you’re wrong, I will try to advise you, give you advice, whatever advice I give you. From there, you take what you want, and the rest, if you don’t want to take the rest, you take whatever you want. Then, we have a good relationship.

Equally fervent in her advice, MS1 explained,

Well, that she has to be aware of them [children] and that she has to talk with them, to have more communication. A lot of times, that about the gangs and everything that we see is because the parents don’t have communication, because they both work and all that and because of this, because they don’t communicate with their children and because sometimes the children look out for communicating with other people. I tell my child, “It doesn’t matter, everything you want to tell me, let it be good or bad. You just tell me and don’t think that I’m going to punish you because it’s wrong. I’m going to advise you, and if you need to be scolded, sure, I’m going to scold you, but don’t hesitate telling me. Always, always tell me everything that happens to you in school, let it be good, let it be bad.

Warnings about neighborhood violence. With regard to communication about neighborhood violence specifically, mothers’ discussions encompassed two descriptive categories: warnings and explanations. Warnings entailed directives to follow in order to stay safe, and 65% of the mothers reported issuing warnings to their children. Children were repeatedly told which neighborhood places to avoid, what to do if they heard shooting, how to avoid interactions with strangers, and so on. For example, AS told her daughter “that when there are fights there, to come in the house, because one never knows if there will be shooting.” Mothers gave children warnings frequently and routinely, even on a daily basis, and children were warned about how to stay safe, not simply in their neighborhoods but also in their schools. MS1 explained, “One has to try to warn our children about the dangers, even in school. There is a lot of danger also in school. I think that there is more danger inside the schools than outside them.” After someone brought a gun to her son’s school, MB explained how she and her husband incorporated new warnings into their discussions: “If somebody starts shooting in the school, it’s a possibility, because it happens everywhere. I mean, [we discuss] what to do, how to act.” Furthermore, MB described the warnings as a daily drill: “We go through the drill. You have to be careful. You always have to be aware of your surroundings: who’s doing what, what looks out of the ordinary, you know, out of place.”

Explanations about neighborhood violence. Other conversations about neighborhood violence took a more explanatory tone, with 65% of the mothers going beyond warnings to explain the reasons why violence occurred, why people behaved violently, or
why mothers enforced certain safety precautions. For instance, JK explained,

Any time they [her children] have a question or “Well, Mommy, why can’t we go outside?” I’ll sit down and I’ll tell them honestly. I’ll sit down and tell them the truth, like it is, and that I worry about them and that I don’t want them, you know, out there in that kind of stuff, and they accept it.

To explain why some people fight in their neighborhood, NR said,

I have to sit them down and tell them [her children]. “Well, there are some people who don’t have, you know, self control or they don’t have a good education. Or they just like to live like that, that way. And it’s wrong.”

In a similar fashion, GK remembered,

We had an incident toward the end of the summer, down the street from us. A couple of guys had jumped out of a car, and they started shooting down the street, at another house. The kids, of course, ran home, you know, and we sat down and we talked about, you know, how dangerous guns are and what could possibly may have happened, maybe with gangs, or could have been due to drugs. So we talk constantly. We have our private talks at least two to three times a week, but in the meantime, anything that comes up, we sit and we talk about everyday problems. We talk about everything. We have what we call our quiet time, our private time, where we sit down and we talk about different things that have gone on.

**Limited communication about neighborhood violence.** The emphasis these mothers placed on parent–child communication stands in stark contrast to a smaller group of mothers (about 35%) who did not endorse communication as an important aspect of their parenting or in response to violence specifically. Rather than discuss neighborhood dangers, these mothers preferred to hide dangers from their children. YR crystallized this view when asked whether she could help her child manage neighborhood dangers. She responded, “As parents, we have to do everything possible so that they don’t see [the dangers].” DF would not explain how neighborhood graffiti was associated with the local gangs. “Usually I just say that it is just kids drawing, you know, because I don’t really want them to know nothing,” she explained. Similarly, AG1 described how she would hide neighborhood violence from her son. “I wouldn’t let him see it. You know, if something was going on outside, I wouldn’t let him see it,” she insisted. Even when her son personally experienced violence, AG1 nevertheless avoided discussing it. Her son was sleeping in her parent’s house when intruders broke in to steal and shot her father in the leg. Still, AG1 professed, “When he experienced that with the shooting, you know, he knows that they broke in, and, but, no, we don’t really sit and discuss that.”

Some of these mothers insisted that their children do not witness violence and therefore do not need to discuss community violence. Referring to her son, NA said, “He has never seen that [robberies], no, never, never.” Other mothers avoided discussions about neighborhood violence because they thought their children were too young to understand or because they felt ill equipped to handle such discussions. YR explained, “I don’t tell them either. What’s the cause of violence? Why is this neighbor fighting with the other? She [her daughter] still hasn’t reached the age to understand why that happens.” Along similar lines, GB said, “I don’t talk to them. I feel that the more you tell them, the more they would want to see what it’s about,” and DF admitted, “I don’t know what to really say if they were to see something.”

**Educación**

Our second research question referred to exploring parental goals and culturally specific meanings associated with Latina mothers’ parenting in dangerous neighborhoods. Among our sample, 43% identified education as a paramount and overarching goal. These mothers strove to parent their children in all ways that fostered their developing into well-educated people in the broadest of terms. Specific to school-based education, mothers stressed the importance of education, encouraging their children to prioritize schoolwork, to study hard, and to stay in school. Valuing education was manifested in numerous comments, such as “You got to stay in school” (LP), “I want you to get a good education” (PP), “Go to school, to learn whatever [you] got to learn” (AC2), and “School first. School first. No matter what, school first” (AD2).

Beyond simply valuing academic achievement, however, these mothers endorsed a broader conceptualization of education or educación as an overarching parenting goal for their children. Educación represents a Latino cultural value that emphasizes the importance of acquiring good moral values, integrity, and decency as a person in addition to academic learning (Reese et al., 1995). Most commonly, mothers described this goal as teaching children morals, distinguishing right from wrong or good from bad. For instance, LR said, “I sit down with my children and describe to them the right and wrong.” TR professed,

I try to teach them, you know, the morals of life. You can’t control what [other] people do or say, so it’s kind of hard. You can just teach your children what’s right and wrong, and what they should and shouldn’t do.

In contrast to many uncontrollable neighborhood forces, providing children with a moral upbringing was something mothers believed they could control. VB confidently asserted,

I feel capable of helping him [her son] to know what is good and what is bad. Since he is already a boy that is 10 years old, he needs to start knowing, to learn about the good things of life and the bad things of life. Because right now, in this country, there is a lot of bad.

Mothers sometimes blamed societal problems on parents who did not provide such values to their children. To account for violence perpetrated by teens, AC1 reasoned, “It’s because, in fact, there are boys that are on their own, wasted. But I imagine that they are not guided by an adult hand.” Similarly, CR described gang members as “a different set of kids from different areas. They have different morals. They have different upbringings than our kids.”

Raising well-educated children, in this sense, children who are honest, principled, and moral people or bien educado, was interwoven with values of familismo. That is, these mothers saw providing children with an educación as a serious parental responsibility, rooted in the importance of one’s family. To underscore this perspective, MS1 declared, “Education doesn’t start at school. It starts with the family, inside home. From home is where the child is going to get out prepared for school, not from school to home.” BS also explained this parental responsibility: “If we want a good education for our children, we need to teach them ourselves because we are the main ones responsible for them to walk
straight.” When explaining these values to her son, NA drew a comparison to neighborhood gang members and highlighted the absence of strong family influences. She said,

These guys [gang members] are, well, guys that don’t go to school. They left school for some reason or other. They failed or they didn’t have parents. They didn’t have help. Then, I explain to him that, that he has me. And that he has his father, and that he also has himself . . . to discern and to know, to distinguish good from bad.

Notably, a primary vehicle for educating children about moral values was to highlight familial role models and thereby teach by setting examples. This view was clearly articulated by YR who said, “I think the most important things are good examples, a good example within the family,” and TZI whose advice to other mothers was to “be a good example to your children.” Not only did these mothers talk about making moral decisions, but they also demonstrated how to be a good person. Emphasizing this point, NR said,

I think a mother has to be a good example for her kids. And you want a child to have a good education and a good, to grow up to be a good person. Well, you have to set an example first.

Always Aware (Siempre Pendiente)

Another pressing parental goal was the imperative to be siempre pendiente or always watchful and aware of one’s children, as mentioned by 33% of the mothers. Although this parental awareness encompassed what we have previously described as strict monitoring (e.g., vigilantly supervising children’s whereabouts, peers, and activities), it also presented a broader notion of monitoring children’s emotional and psychological states. More specifically, astute awareness incorporated keeping track of their children in not simply physical domains but emotional realms as well. Of these mothers, many used the Spanish phrase estar pendiente and underscored the importance of being watchful and aware of children’s moods, feelings, and outlooks on life with striking urgency. For example, mothers said, “I am always very watchful of what could happen” (LD), “If one is not aware, in any moment, a bad thing could happen” (DE), “I am always aware of what’s going on with them [her children]” (MG), and “always, always be watchful of what they’re doing” (OL). Some mothers, like PC2, repeated this refrain, reassuring herself and the interviewer throughout the interview.

The rationale for such intensive scrutiny was that it would allow mothers to swiftly detect the presence of dangers or developing problems. By virtue of being completely aware of what children were doing and feeling, mothers could detect problems and intervene immediately. LD explained,

Well, I am always aware of them. Always, despite the fact that I work and all, I give myself time for everything, to be with them, to work. And one, as a mother, well, then right away, right away, one feels the danger. You see the change in the kid and you say, “What’s happening?” Yes, and because I am always on the lookout for them, I can tell if they change or don’t change.

FS underscored taking note of behavioral changes in children: “Watch the children you let him [a son] with. And if you see any change in behavior in your child, keep them from that kid, because that kid is influencing. And you don’t want that.” The need to be acutely aware of their children was, for some mothers, heightened by their immigration histories. For example, LD elaborated, “We come from another country. I feel that in this country, people are more open, like there’s more freedom. And then, well then, I see what kind of friends they hang around with, everything, everything, I am aware of.” To be successful in their vigilance and to avoid alienating children from overly intrusive parents, these mothers stressed the need to simultaneously foster close relationships based on open communication. Rather than being annoyed by parental intrusiveness, children in stressful environments may interpret and even understand such parental vigilance as a form of caring. In sum, OL explained,

Well, this, you see, to always be near, always be his friend. To make him tell you everything, to tell all the time how he feels and to ask him what he feels. To have a friendship with the child, so that if he has a problem, he will tell [you]. That from the time he is small, it’s necessary to create like a communication between the son, that would be open all the time, with his parents. And that he tells them [parents] what is happening, what they [peers] do to him, and this way, one can be watchful and know what things, in what things he’s involved, or what things. How do you say? What things they’re trying to get him into, who is trying to get him to do things or what things they’re trying to, trying to tell him or trying to make him do.

Discussion

As an exploratory study, this investigation outlined rich interpretations about the links between parenting practices, overarching parental goals, neighborhood adversity, and cultural values among low-income Latina mothers. Moreover, our findings illuminated culturally specific meanings that accompany specific parenting practices. Our findings contribute to the literature by highlighting parenting goals and practices used by Latina mothers who raise children in high-risk neighborhoods. With regard to our first research question, Latina mothers in our study reported using three parenting practices that are similarly endorsed by African American mothers residing in poor neighborhoods: strict monitoring, physical and social withdrawal, and engagement in positive activities (Burton & Jarrett, 2000; Jarrett, 1995, 1997). Irrespective of racial/ethnic categorizations, certain parenting practices may have evolved as resilient responses to hostile and threatening environments. Furthermore, discussions about neighborhood violence, classified as warnings or explanations in our study, resembled the family protection strategies (e.g., enforcing rules and precautions) identified in African American families (Burton & Jarrett, 2000).

Far more work is needed to explore family communication about violence and what is most conducive to the well-being of children in different environmental contexts.

Of the primary parenting practices identified, substantially fewer mothers discussed using withdrawal and engagement in positive activities relative to communication and monitoring. It is important to note that our semistructured interview protocol did not inquire about the use of any specific, predefined parenting practices. In fact, our open-ended questions were purposely chosen to encourage mothers to discuss any of the ways in which they helped their children and to thereby guard against interviewer bias. Therefore, the parenting practices that each mother discussed may not represent an exhaustive list. In other words, we can report that 20% of the mothers discussed engagement in positive activities, but we cannot confirm that other mothers did not use this parenting practice. Nevertheless, it is possible that certain practices are, in
fact, used less frequently. Both withdrawal and engagement in positive activities can require resources that may be unavailable to many mothers. Alternatively, it could be the case that other adults, like fathers, assumed responsibility for engaging children in positive activities. Another possibility is that mothers viewed activity involvement as more important for older children and exerted greater effort to steer teenagers into activities, away from negative influences.

Furthermore, we sought to identify other parenting practices that Latina mothers viewed as critical to parenting in high-crime neighborhoods. In particular, the mothers emphasized promoting good parent–child communication as an important tenet of parenting. Indeed, promoting parent–child communication was the most widely endorsed parenting practice among our sample. This confirmed other findings on the importance of communication and close family relationships within Latino families (Perreira et al., 2006). Mexican immigrant parents strove to build trust and communication as a means of establishing close relationships with their adolescents (Cruz-Santiago & Ramirez Garcia, 2011). Even Mexican American adolescents, speaking among themselves in focus groups, identified communication as essential to good parent–child relationships (Crockett, Brown, Russell, & Shen, 2007). In addition, close parent–child relationships can buffer children from certain stressors, like the conflict engendered by father–child acculturation gaps (Schofield, Parke, Kim, & Coltrane, 2008).

Nevertheless, a smaller percentage of mothers purposefully avoided talking with their children about neighborhood violence. Some mothers may simply feel uncomfortable discussing the sensitive issues raised by community violence. Indeed, these mothers may even have difficulty contending with their own fears about violence. Alternatively, they may view their children as too young to fully comprehend such discussions or they may believe that discussing violence only serves to exacerbate the emotional distress resulting from violent events. Finally, several mothers indicated that they chose not to talk about neighborhood violence because their children did not witness violence. In fact, many parents tend to underestimate the extent of community violence to which their children are exposed (Ceballo, Dahl, Aretakis, & Ramirez, 2001). By opening lines of communication about violence, mothers could gain valuable and accurate information about their children’s exposure to violence.

Without exception, bidirectional influences are a part of all relationships, and children’s comfort with talking to their parents must also be considered. As Kerr and Stattin (2000) theorized, parental knowledge about children’s lives may be based on keeping track of children or on the often unmeasured aspects of children’s willingness to share information with their parents. Among a large sample of Swedish families, Kerr, Stattin, and Burk (2010) provided longitudinal evidence that youth disclosure contributed to parental knowledge of adolescents’ activities, whereas monitoring efforts per se (e.g., control and solicitation) did not. In actuality, the parental task of monitoring children may elicit family interactions, creating opportunities for youth to feel comfortable talking to and sharing information with parents (Romero & Ruiz, 2007; Stattin & Kerr, 2000). Hence, the coupling of monitoring with good communication, as proposed by mothers in our study, may be a particularly efficacious approach to parenting not only in high-risk neighborhoods but across socioeconomic contexts.

Our second research question consisted of exploring the parental goals and cultural meanings associated with Latina mothers’ parenting in high-risk neighborhoods. Many of the parenting practices reported by our mothers complemented the cultural value of familismo, identified as an important value for many Latino families (Halgunseth et al., 2006; Perreira et al., 2006). As previously noted, familismo is defined as prioritizing family needs, unity, and loyalty (Calzada et al., 2010). Mothers’ use of withdrawal strategies, drawing families inward and away from external influences, can work in concert with values of familismo. Likewise, an emphasis on communication can enhance familismo, such that maintaining harmonious parent–child relationships via frequent communication will likely bolster family cohesion.

Although the parenting practices discussed by Latina mothers may be similar to those employed by parents of different racial/ethnic groups, the meaning attributed to parenting practices may remain culturally specific as scholars such as Chao (2001) have shown. For instance, in Chinese households, Chao (1994) proposed that parents demonstrate warmth for children via restrictiveness. For Latinos, in particular, Halgunseth and colleagues (2006) posited that values of familismo, respeto, and educación coincide with parental practices, such as monitoring, that may be accompanied by emotional support and positive affective tones. In this sense, parental monitoring among Latina mothers may not reflect a stern reliance on constant supervision and instead suggests the cultivation of warm, close, and supportive parent–child relationships. Such a conceptualization is supported by prior results detailing the ways that Latino parents balance firm monitoring with high levels of emotional warmth (Cruz-Santiago & Ramirez Garcia, 2011; Domenech Rodriguez et al., 2009; Manongdo & Ramirez Garcia, 2007). Accordingly, Crockett and colleagues (2007) reported that Mexican American adolescents viewed parental monitoring as a form of caring. Relatedly, our findings suggest that monitoring among low-income Latina mothers may represent, and may be understood by children as representing, expressions of care, concern, and investment. Youth in high-crime neighborhoods may have a heightened appreciation for their parents’ monitoring efforts, relative to youth in safer contexts, and may therefore welcome their parents’ protection from the real dangers in their daily lives.

Conceptually, researchers have sought to identify and measure a number of discrete parenting practices. Despite its ability to facilitate research, such an approach may not accurately resemble the ways in which parents conceive of their role as parents. Alternatively, in dangerous neighborhoods, mothers may endorse overarching parental goals, such as educación for children and ever-vigilant awareness or being pendiente for parents. Likewise, Latino immigrant parents in North Carolina expressed fears about the dangers in this country and similarly stressed a need for “constant vigilance” (Perreira et al., 2006, p. 1401). Monitoring, withdrawal, positive activities, and communication may all serve as specific parenting practices for obtaining larger parental goals. Rather than implementing discrete practices, mothers may pursue a coherent, overall approach to parenting. A variety of parenting practices, all interrelated, may help mothers reach goals of establishing close ties with children, raising children who are bien educado, and maintaining awareness of children’s lives.

Extrapolating from our findings, mothers depicted the ideal mother as a woman who was aware of her child’s every move,
thought, and feeling while maintaining a close and harmonious relationship with her child. Mothers strove to provide their children with a home steeped in safety and protection from external influences. Furthermore, mothers assumed a primary role as educators of children within the home, responsible for their moral upbringing. Such an ideal mother fits traditional gender stereotypes of marianismo, valuing the self-sacrificing, all-giving, “virgin” mother (Guilamo-Ramos et al., 2007). However, constant vigilance of children, a reluctance to rely on nonfamilial support, and the pressure to serve as an example may place undue burdens on Latinas. Thus, an important topic for future work is the extent to which such parenting ideals may create unobtainable goals and thereby lead to mothers’ emotional distress.

In addition to the contributions made, it is important to note the limitations inherent in our qualitative study. Relying on a small sample naturally limits the generalizability of our results. The parenting practices identified among our sample of primarily Mexican American mothers in Detroit may not apply to mothers of other ethnicities or residing in other areas. In addition, we did not ask mothers about their legal status, and it is quite possible that documented and undocumented mothers will use different parenting practices. The extent to which developmental considerations (e.g., age of oldest child) influenced our findings also remains unclear. Finally, because our interviews were exclusively conducted with mothers, our findings were subject to the biases associated with self-report data, and future work with multiple informants is warranted.

Rather than passively responding to environmental stressors, Latina mothers in our study exercised parental control by firmly monitoring, limiting access to neighborhood venues, seeking positive activities, and fostering communication. Ultimately, mothers drew strength from their reliance on cultural resources when broader structural support systems were unavailable. Our findings are thus consistent with a strengths-based approach and helpful to professionals who work closely with Latino families in recognizing and most optimally complementing the strengths on which Latina mothers draw. Most important, our findings can contribute to frameworks for making culturally sensitive adaptations to parent training programs and other parent-focused interventions. Put simply, prevention efforts that target parenting among Latino families would be remiss to overlook the cultural meanings embedded in parenting.

References


Received January 2, 2012
Revised received June 14, 2012
Accepted June 18, 2012