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# Research in Developmental Disabilities



## An examination of Anglo and Latino parenting practices: Relation to behavior problems in children with or without developmental delay



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### ABSTRACT

The transactional model of development has received empirical support in research on at-risk children. However, little is known about the role of ethnicity or child delay status (i.e., developmental delay [DD] or typical cognitive development [TD]) in the process of parents adapting to their child's behavior problems and special needs. We examined whether Latina ( $N=44$ ) and Anglo ( $N=147$ ) mothers of 3-year-old children with or without DD differed in their use of two parenting practices, maternal scaffolding and sensitivity. We also examined how the status and ethnic groups differed in child behavior problems at ages 3 and 5 and whether parenting predicted change in behavior problems over time in the ethnic and status groups. Analyses generally supported previous research on status group differences in behavior problems (DD higher) and parenting practices (TD higher). Parenting practices predicted a decrease in externalizing problems from child age 3 to 5 years among Latino families only. Child developmental status was not associated with change in behavior problems. Cultural perspectives on the transactional model of development and implications for intervention are discussed.

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## 1. Introduction

Parenting techniques and perceptions play a critical role in child development and are especially salient for children who have experienced early adversity or developmental compromise. The transactional model of development, which asserts that child characteristics and environmental factors reciprocally influence each other over the course of development, has received substantial empirical support in research on at-risk children (Pluess & Belsky, 2010; Sameroff & Chandler, 1975). In a study examining developmental status in preterm and full-term infants, the two groups displayed virtually identical social and cognitive skills by age 2 years; however, family factors, including maternal attitudes, accounted for 40–60% of the variance in such outcomes among preterm infants versus 15–30% in full-term infants (Greenberg & Crnic, 1988). Such research highlights the vital role of parenting for vulnerable children and suggests that parents must adapt to, and compensate for, an at-risk child's special needs. The present study of children with or without developmental delays examined the relation of parenting practices in Latino and Anglo (White, non-Hispanic) families to changes in child behavior problems.

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### 1.1. Parenting children with or without DD

Examining parenting practices is particularly important for vulnerable children who are at heightened risk for behavior problems and/or mental health disorders. In the present study, we focused on young children with developmental delay (DD) as a likely precursor to intellectual disability. It has been found that 2.5–4 times as many children with DD have serious emotional or behavior problems when compared to their typically developing (TD) peers (Baker, Neece, Fenning, Crnic, & Blacher, 2010; de Ruiter, Dekker, Verhulst, & Koot, 2007; Emerson, 2003; Emerson & Hatton, 2007; Koskentausta, Iivanaenen, & Almqvist, 2004). Studies have found, for example, that DD is associated with higher rates of depression (McGillivray & McCabe, 2007), the rate of ADHD among children with DD is over 3 times that of the general population (Baker et al., 2010), and autism spectrum disorder diagnoses are high among children with DD (Matson & Shoemaker, 2009). Furthermore, children with DD demonstrate difficulties with social adjustment as early as the preschool years and are generally less successful at developing and maintaining peer friendships (Solish, Perry, & Minnes, 2010). Given the disparity in the level of risk between children with DD and their TD peers, one may expect that environmental influences, such as parenting, may lead to differential outcomes as well.

Indeed, consistent with previous research examining the transactional model of development in vulnerable child populations, parenting practices have been shown to differ by child developmental status and to have different effects based on child status. The present study focused on two parenting practices, sensitivity and scaffolding, and their differential impact on children with or without DD. Sensitivity is defined here as the parent's attunement to her child's needs and goals and her resulting behavioral adjustment to take the child's needs and mood state into account (Belsky, Crnic, & Woodworth, 1995). Sensitivity among mothers of children with DD has been associated with such child benefits as improved social interaction (Mahoney & Perales, 2003), greater communication skills, and language gains (Hauser-Cram et al., 2001; Yoder & Warren, 2001). Maternal scaffolding, defined as the support and assistance that a mother provides to allow her child to succeed beyond what he would have been able to on his own (Baker, Fenning, Crnic, Baker, & Blacher, 2007), has also been shown to differentially impact children with or without DD. Baker et al. (2007) found that observed parental scaffolding at age 4 was a strong predictor of social skills at age 6 among children with DD but did not predict social skills among children with TD.

### 1.2. Latino and Anglo parenting

As many Western countries become increasingly diverse, the scientific community must approach this model of development from a culturally informed perspective. Though the Latino population in the United States accounts for 16% of all persons – and is growing at almost 9 times the rate of the Anglo American population (Humes, Jones, & Ramirez, 2011) – our understanding of parenting practices and the development of children with DD is based predominately on studies of Anglo families. Some researchers assert that Latino and Anglo parents generally impact their children through the same parental processes. The authors of a review of observational studies of parental sensitivity (Mesman, van IJzendoorn, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2012) found that though sensitivity was generally lower in ethnic minority families than in majority families, sensitivity had an equally positive impact on child development in minority families. Other research findings, however, have indicated that the processes by which parenting impacts child development differ by ethnicity. For instance, in a study of maternal control and infant attachment at 12 months, high physical control was associated with secure attachment in Puerto Rican mother–child dyads but with insecure-avoidant attachment for Anglo dyads (Carlson & Harwood, 2003). Given these findings, more research is needed to understand better the shared and distinct features of developmental trajectories in Latino and Anglo parent–child relationships, with a particular focus on children with DD.

### 1.3. Parenting differences by ethnic group and child delay status

An emerging body of research has combined investigations of ethnic group and child delay status differences. Relative to Anglo mothers of children with DD, Latina mothers of children with DD have reported viewing their children as less responsible for their behavior problems (Chavira, Lopez, Blacher, & Shapiro, 2000), and they have demonstrated more acceptance of their children's cognitive and practical limitations (Rueda, Monzo, Shapiro, Gomez, & Blacher, 2005). By contrast, Anglo mothers have been found to value and foster independence in children with DD more than Latina mothers do (Rueda et al., 2005). Additionally, Latina mothers have reported higher positive impact of their child with DD on the family in comparison to Anglo mothers (Blacher & Baker, 2007). Such research suggests that parents draw on cultural models of developmental delay (Rueda et al., 2005), which may lead them to adapt different approaches to parenting these at-risk children (Santiago & Wadsworth, 2010).

### 1.4. The present study

The present study addressed the following primary questions in a preschool-aged sample: (1) Do parenting styles (sensitivity and scaffolding in parent–child interactions) differ by child developmental status (TD, DD) and/or by mother ethnicity (Latino, Anglo)? (2) Do child behavior problems differ by child status and/or mother ethnicity? (3) Do parenting styles assessed at child age 3 predict change in child behavior problems over two years time, and does this relationship differ

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