



Summary of Issues to be Considered in Program Implementation





Summary of Issues to be Considered in Program Implementation

This memo summarizes themes and guidance on the topics of engaging Hispanic families, developing program structures, and establishing trust with program participants as it relates to marriage programs as discussed during the Administration for Children and Families Hispanic Healthy Marriage Research meeting. The findings and recommendations in this memo are drawn from discussions at the Supporting Healthy Marriage and Hispanic Healthy Marriage Initiative Joint Research Meeting held on September 12-13, 2005 in Washington, DC and a research meeting held in conjunction with the Hispanic Healthy Marriage National Conference May 11, 2006 in San Antonio, TX.

This memo is not intended to be a complete discussion of these issues, but rather to summarize the advice received from researchers and practitioners in the Hispanic community at the research meeting and is for discussion purposes only.

Introduction

Practitioners with experience delivering services to Hispanic families contributed suggestions and strategies as guidance for marriage education providers working in Latino communities. “What we know” is a limited but growing knowledge base given that marriage education is a new program area for social services and the diversity of Hispanic families in the U.S. Whereas this memo contains an overview of broad strategies on how to provide outreach and effective engagement to a rapidly-growing population in the U.S., caution should be taken not to generalize from the current knowledge. Although further research is still needed in this area, practitioners can make use of existing knowledge when developing programs that specifically target Hispanic families.

What Do We Know?

Engaging Hispanic Families: Thinking through program structure and content

A first step in working with Hispanic families is to understand more specifically what population programs are working with, rather than classifying families as generically “Latino.” Although most Hispanics living in the U.S. are from Latin and South American countries, they are a very heterogeneous group with diverse backgrounds, beliefs and immigration experiences. Recent research has begun to address the heterogeneity of Hispanics living in the U.S. by studying the role intermarriage between Latinos from different countries of origin plays on the assimilation and integration process (Qian et al, 2004). This intermarriage among Latinos with different backgrounds will undoubtedly continue to create an even more diverse Latino population in the U.S. In addition to being aware of the diversity among Latinos, program developers should also consider how an individual entered into the acculturation process as this could impact interventions designed for immigrant Latinos (Cabassa, 2003). Equally important to consider is whether or not a program is designed for working with “mainstream Hispanics” or migrant populations as each group has unique and distinct characteristics. A greater understanding of the program population, their values around family structure and gender roles, and the types of interventions and supportive services available will support program development. A sample of relevant questions for program developers includes:

- Are families Mexican in origin? Central or South American?
- Are they first or second generation immigrants?





- What is their family immigration pattern (are parents/siblings/extended family also in the United States?)
- What is the level of acculturation present in the family?
 - Did the family members enter into the acculturation process voluntarily?
 - What is the family's acculturation pattern? Is the goal total acculturation, or is the family seeking to achieve a level of biculturalism?

There are also cultural values that can guide program design, marketing and outreach strategies, and content development. Although not all program participants will have the same values, examples of some common values may include:

- Latino marriages are embedded in cultural values of *"familismo,"* meaning there is more emphasis on child rearing, family activity and family obligation than on the function of the couple.
- In many Latino families, the family is the central unit rather than the couple. "Parenthood" is often described as more important than "Partnership," and children may be considered the unifying factor that strengthens the couple relationship.
- There is heavy emphasis among Latino families on interdependence of family members, and extended family members are often heavily involved in couple decision-making and child rearing decisions. When a couple needs help, they often turn first to their family or feel obliged to consult family members before discussing problems elsewhere. Hispanic families may be less likely to hold the same belief as many U.S. families that a couple is autonomous or independent from the larger family.
- Marriage educators must also be aware that many Latino families live in multi-generational homes with parents, grand-parents, aunts, and other members of the extended family who may be closely involved in decision-making that affects the couple.
- Despite stereotypes of *"macho"* Latino males, many Latino fathers are highly involved in child-rearing and nurturing their kids
- Many Hispanics place emphasis on work and having a strong work ethic, which can translate into willingness to sacrifice in order to support other family members.
- Latino mothers traditionally value respect and obedience in parenting, which can be interpreted as being less child-centered than Anglo-Saxon culture.

In order to translate these common values into program approaches for marriage education services, programs serving large Hispanic populations should consider presenting marriage education as a family program, related to children rather than focusing exclusively on couples. Program developers should consider including child care and activities geared toward strengthening the family unit as many Hispanic couples will not even attend education programs if they must leave children at home. This does not have to be in conflict with a program's focus on offering marriage education. It may simply be the case that program developers could lean more heavily on family systems theory when developing their curricula and program components, focusing on the "we" and how couple interactions affect the family as a whole, rather than "I".





Programs may also have to develop different marketing messages that explain marriage education

services in terms of why they are good for families rather than relying heavily on “couple” language and images. Programs can incorporate into their marketing materials and curriculum topics messages about why is it important to focus on the couple in Hispanic families, drawing on the following themes:

- The couple is the heart of the family, while existing within a larger family context
- Children learn to form healthy relationships primarily from their parents/the couple
- Children need a model of what makes a healthy couple – how couples relate, discuss and resolve conflict is the basis of the skills they themselves develop in these areas
- Children respond to consistent messages: parents have to be a team
- Conflict between parents has a negative effect on children
- A mother’s conflict with the father may negatively affect the child’s relationship with the father

Marketing messages, outreach materials, and curricula should not focus exclusively on “marriage” since some Latino couples cannot legally be married in this country; or they may be waiting to marry when they can return to their country of origin. Marketing materials may want to use both “spouse” language and “couple” language, such as:

- Strong couples and strong marriages are the foundation of a strong family
- It takes a healthy couple to raise a healthy family
- To be a good parent, you have to be a good partner
- You can make a difference in your relationship

When developing marketing messages, it is also important to be aware of the inter-ethnic and intra-ethnic challenges present within the Hispanic population. Program developers should not rely solely on simple translations of English messages when working with Hispanic couples. A solid understanding of cultural ideals and concepts is crucial in order to convey the most accurate message.

Findings in a study by Charles Negy, of the University of Central Florida, indicate trends among Mexican and Mexican-American couples that can inform program content. Both groups report concerns about effective communication, problem-solving, and managing aggression. Both groups also report disagreements over finances, having experienced high levels of distress in their family of origin, and report less overall relationship satisfaction than their non-Hispanic white counterparts. In response to those concerns, marriage education programs targeting Latino couples can focus on offering curricula and activities that emphasize the following, while promoting the idea that family harmony leads of marital harmony:

- Communication skills practice
- Problem-solving skills
- Conflict resolution skills
- Parenting skills





Using a strengths-based, client-centered, personal approach in developing and delivering services can help build trust. It may also counteract racism faced by many Hispanics when interacting with social service institutions and the helping professions. Hispanic cultural traditions translate into a number of strengths that couples can build on, such as:

- *Familismo* can translate into strong family connections and support for mothers and fathers in raising their children. Programs can discuss ways in which *familismo* can support couples and ways in which it may also contribute to conflict within the couple.
- Connections across generations can also mean parents have support and help from aunts, uncles, cousins and grandparents.
- A strong work ethic can also be applied to the work of building strong families and marriages.

One strategy for program developers is to work with families in the community to create the program. Programs might ask what Latino couples need to make their couple and family life more satisfying. Involving couples from the community in program design and specifically asking what strong couple relationships look like will help in the development of a program that is culturally appropriate and specific to that particular community. Program developers should consider what venues are available for gathering community input into the initial program design to ensure it reflects actual community needs and concerns. Frequently obtaining feedback and incorporating participant input as the program evolves and matures should also be part of program implementation plans.

Another strategy is for program facilitators to assume that parents know how to parent and that they know something about marriage and relationships. There is a sense that program leaders, experts or counselors try to “tell you what to do” without acknowledging that people have their own knowledge and expertise to draw from. Participants may interpret directional teaching as discriminatory and racist.

Engaging Hispanic Men

Designing services that engage Hispanic men can be challenging. Hispanic men may have the perception that there is a lot of help and support for the mothers of their children, but not a lot for the fathers. Further, machismo is a prevalent characteristic ascribed to Latino men, many of whom value being the head of the family, and retaining control of key decisions in their households. Gaining respect in their community and fighting for their families is important to young Latino men. Machismo can contribute to both positive and negative behaviors: it can inspire men to take responsibility for their family and act responsibly, but can also manifest itself in treating their wives and girlfriends poorly. As this may occur with some couples, program developers should have a working relationship with local domestic violence programs and implement referral procedures if a need for more specialized services is identified.

According to Dr. Robert Reyes, of Messiah College, another important characteristic of Latino men is the desire to provide financial support for the family. Among some Latino groups, the ability for men to financially support their family is becoming increasingly difficult as Latina women are finding employment more readily available than men in some communities. This inability to “live up to” the traditional norm may result in the male’s withdrawal from identifying with the family unit. Program developers should consider this possibility when engaging Hispanic men and may choose to incorporate





elements of family resource management into their program. Strategies for reaching this population include:

- Provide a much-needed outlet for men to talk about their role as sons, who they are to their parents, and their role as partners/husbands and fathers.
- Tell fathers that they are important for their babies, and support the notion that fathers also need supports and venues to talk about their transitions to parenthood. Acknowledge that this shift may affect their relationship with their wife/girlfriend/partner.
- Consider developing marketing messages that speak to the importance of men's roles in their families.
- Address family resource management and economic concerns.

Building Trust

Building trust in a community is essential for Latino parents to access program services. This takes time and can be difficult to achieve, especially if a new program is being offered by an unknown provider. One strategy for connecting with Latino families is to offer activities and curricula that include children and extended family.

Once families are enrolled in a program curriculum facilitators may consider beginning the workshops with a focus on the family, not just the couple. Ideas include:

- What is their role in the family?
- How have family and cultural traditions shaped their roles as husbands/wives/partners and parents?
- How has the family's immigration history influenced expectations for your roles?
- Who are their role models for marriage and parenting in their families?
- Who among the extended family participates in the day-to-day support of their family and children? How do extended family members support them?
- What are the challenges of being a part of your extended family?

From there, facilitators can then move into topics more specific to the couple. This process can create a forum for couples to define what topics are important to them. Allowing couples to define their concerns and identify the subjects that are of greatest importance to them will help gain participant buy-in.

Facilitators should avoid using directional teaching that sends a "you should do this" message to program participants. Programs are unlikely to be successful with Hispanic couples if they come across as being run by "experts" who are telling parents how to raise their children and how to be a better spouse. Successful practitioners recommend that facilitators gain insights and direction from families and employ a strength-based approach to program delivery. Even if a program is not able to provide for all of the cultural norms and needs of Hispanic couples, the presence of a trusted facilitator within an organization is a key factor to the continued participation of Hispanic couples.





Generally, Hispanic couples in an unfamiliar setting may appear to be distant at first, and program staff should not be easily discouraged. It will take time to establish that the program is interested in understanding and meeting their needs, cares about their input, and cares about the best interests of the families. In the United States, professional social service training programs and family therapy professionals are taught that becoming too close to the client is perceived as unprofessional. Participants may perceive this style of professionalism as being cold and impersonal. It is believed that program staff will be more successful if they make personal connections with potential and current program participants. Marriage education program staff should be aware of the need to strike a balance between maintaining a healthy boundary with clients while, at the same time, being able to establish a “relational” approach. Some strategies to build trust between participants and the program include:

- Provide home visits, as opposed to office visits, to establish connections with Latino families.
- Use community-based resources such as churches, priests, workplaces, and housing developments to learn about the values and needs of the community.
- Hire Latino facilitators.
- Plan activities that are centered around sharing food (preferably not pizza and sandwiches): make it a fiesta!

What Do We Still Need to Know?

There is much to learn about “what works and with whom” in the marriage education arena; this is especially true in services for Hispanics. Although some promising practices are emerging in this field, there is a great deal that policy makers, program developers, researchers and practitioners still need to know about delivering effective marriage education services to Latino couples. Service delivery issues are related to program structure, recruitment and retention strategies. However, there is also a need to know more about the importance of cultural adaptation. Some key issues to consider in tailoring curricula to meet the needs of Hispanic couples include:

- Generational difference among Latino families based on length of time in the United States
- Acculturation and biculturalism
- Diversity among Latinos based on country of origin
- Cultural values related to gender, parenting and family
- Immigration
- Religion
- Poverty
- Discrimination





References

Cabassa, Leopoldo J. *Measuring Acculturation: Where We Are and Where We Need to Go*. *Hispanic Journal of Behavioral Sciences* 25(2) (2003): 127-146.

Qian, Zhenchao, and José A. Cobas. "Latinos' mate selection: nacional origin, racial, and nativity differences." *Social Science Reasearch* 33 (2004): 225-247.

