

Adolescent health brief

Characterizing low-income Latina adolescent mothers: Living arrangements, psychological adjustment, and use of services

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Abstract

This study examined language, living arrangements, and various outcomes among Latina adolescent mothers. Living with mothers was associated with increased self-esteem for all adolescents, and lower depression for English-speaking and bilingual adolescents only. Spanish speakers reported higher welfare enrollment and better educational outcomes. Living with partners appeared to have negative implications. © 2006 Society for Adolescent Medicine. All rights reserved.

Keywords:

Adolescent pregnancy; Latinas; Living arrangements; Psychologic adjustment; Education; Social welfare

Despite the overall decrease in adolescent pregnancy, birth rates among Latinas remain higher than other ethnic groups [1], which is important considering that adolescent mothers and their children are likely to face significant stress and poor long-term outcomes [2]. For this reason, the primary aim of the present study was to explore how living arrangements (i.e., living with mothers or partners) and language background were associated with psychosocial adjustment, educational outcomes, and use of services among 13- to 19-year-old low-income parenting Latina adolescents who use Women Infants and Children (WIC) services in Southern California.

Methods

The participants were 304 low-income Latina adolescent mothers participating in the Public Health Foundation Enterprises' WIC program.

During their WIC appointment, the first 10 adolescent mothers from 55 WIC centers who came in on a specified day were asked by the staff to complete a survey regarding income, family structure, use of services (e.g., food stamps, welfare

[Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF)], Medicaid, involvement in the Cal-Learn [California program assisting young parents with school completion and childcare] program, knowledge of Cal-Learn), education (e.g., currently attending school, plans to obtain a general educational development credential (GED), highest grade completed), self-esteem [3], and depression (Center for Epidemiologic Studies Depression Scale [CES-D]) [4]. The self-esteem measure has been used previously in samples of parenting and nonparenting Latina adolescents [5,6]. The CES-D is used commonly in low-income Latino samples, including those of pregnant Latina women and adolescents, and has been shown to have good psychometric properties in a number of studies [7,8]. No one refused participation in the study (non-Latina adolescents were not included in the present study). Surveys were available in both English and Spanish, and adolescents completed them privately while they waited for their appointment.

Participants were between 13 and 19 years old (mean = 17.70 y, SD = 1.22 y). Seventy-six (25%) of the girls reported speaking primarily English, 172 (56%) reported speaking primarily Spanish, and 56 (19%) reported speaking both languages equally. Their household income ranged from \$0 to \$2,000 per month. Spanish-speaking adolescent mothers reported being in the United States for fewer years (mean = 10.34 y, SD = 6.31 y) than bilingual (mean = 15.33 y, SD = 4.06 y) and English-speaking adolescent mothers (mean = 17.19 y, SD = 2.39 y), $F(3, 295) = 49.74, p < .001$.

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Table 1
Adjustment, education, and use of services by language group^a

	English speaking	Bilingual	Spanish speaking	F (df)
	Mean (SD) [n]	Mean (SD) [n]	Mean (SD) [n]	
Self-esteem	23.44 (4.62) [75]	21.44 (5.36) [52]	19.16 (5.01) [160]	19.58 ^{‡a} (2, 284)
Depression	14.63 (9.46) [73]	18.57 (9.30) [53]	16.92 (9.02) [156]	2.99 ^{†b} (2, 279)
Educational attainment	10.99 (1.22) [76]	10.45 (1.29) [55]	9.74 (1.92) [154]	15.40 ^{‡a} (2, 280)
Age	17.79 (1.25) [76]	17.59 (1.19) [56]	17.71 (1.22) [160]	.43 (2, 281)
Percentage within each language group who				$\chi^2(2)$
Currently attend school	51%	54%	36%	8.21 [†]
Intend to obtain GED/graduate	89%	91%	66%	19.19 [‡]
Receive TANF	30%	13%	17%	7.62 [†]
Receive food stamps	15%	5%	18%	5.39*
Receive Medicaid	69%	61%	66%	.95
Know about Cal-Learn	49%	14%	24%	14.71 [‡]
Are enrolled in Cal-Learn	18%	8%	7%	7.10 [†]

Note: Adolescent age was controlled for in the first 3 analyses reported here. Sample sizes vary because of missing data.

* $p < .10$, [†] $p < .05$, [‡] $p < .001$.

^a Spanish speakers were different from both English speakers ($p < .001$), and bilingual adolescents ($p < .05$).

^b Bilingual adolescents were more depressed than English speakers ($p < .05$), but not Spanish speakers.

Results

Because the age of the adolescents in the sample was skewed toward older adolescents and because age was associated with study variables, multivariate analyses of covariance controlling for age were conducted to examine language group differences and interaction effects whenever the dependent variable was continuous. To control for age when the dependent variable was categorical, χ^2 analyses were conducted separately for adolescents less than the median age of 18 years (range = 13–17 y) and for those study participants between 18 and 19 years old.

Language group differences

A multivariate analysis of covariance controlling for age revealed that Spanish-speaking adolescents had lower self-esteem and less education than both English-speaking and bilingual adolescents. Bilingual adolescents exhibited more depressive symptoms, significantly more than English speakers, but not Spanish speakers. χ^2 analyses indicated that a lower proportion of Spanish speakers currently attended school or intended to obtain a GED or graduate from high school than their peers.

Overall, 20% of all adolescents reported receiving TANF, 15% received food stamps, 65% received Medicaid, 33% knew about Cal-Learn, and 9.7% were in Cal-Learn. A significantly higher proportion of the English speakers received TANF, knew about Cal-Learn, and were enrolled in Cal-Learn than Spanish-speaking or bilingual adolescents (Table 1).

Living arrangements, adjustments, and educational attainment

To determine if living arrangements with mothers or partners were related to self-esteem, depression, and educa-

tional attainment, a $3 \times 2 \times 2$ (language \times living with mother \times living with partner) multivariate analysis of covariance controlling for age was conducted. Adolescents living with their mothers had higher self-esteem (mean = 21.40, SD = 5.40) than those who did not (mean = 20.02, SD = 5.12), regardless of language background ($F[1, 276] = 3.93$, $p < .05$). There was a significant interaction such that English-speaking and bilingual girls who lived with their mothers were less depressed (mean = 14.38, SD = 9.83; mean = 19.37, SD = 9.44, respectively) than those who did not ($F[2, 271] = 4.52$, $p < .05$) (mean = 14.74, SD = 8.71; mean = 15.00, SD = 8.46, respectively). Living with partners was not associated with psychosocial adjustment.

For educational attainment, a language group by living arrangement interaction was observed ($F[2, 271] = 5.90$, $p < .01$), such that for Spanish speakers only, living with one's mother was associated with higher educational attainment (mean = 10.36, SD = 1.33; mean = 9.33, SD = 2.10, respectively). χ^2 analyses revealed that among Spanish speakers, about half of adolescents who lived with their mothers were in school, compared with 23% of those who did not live with their mothers. Spanish speakers who lived with their mothers reported having plans to complete their education (83% vs. 48%). Interestingly, of the Spanish speakers who lived with their partners, 25% reported currently attending school, compared with 51% of adolescents who did not. There were no significant findings for English-speaking and bilingual adolescents (Table 2).

Living arrangements and use of services

A series of χ^2 tests for each language group separately indicated that Spanish speakers who did not live with

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