



Book review

Protective factors among Latino families involved with child welfare: A review of Spanish protective factor research on child maltreatment prevention in seven countries



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ABSTRACT

This article analyzes the panorama of published Spanish-language literature addressing protective factors and their role in the prevention of child maltreatment in Latino families. To our knowledge, this is the first time that the use of protective factors in English-language literature has been compared to their counterparts the Strengthening Families (SF) approach and Protective Factors Survey (PFS) frames our research process, which used reviewed literature to identify the presence of protective factors in seven Spanish-speaking countries: Chile, Colombia, Cuba, Mexico, Spain, Venezuela and the United States. Our findings shed light on the importance of family functioning in Spanish-language studies to date and validate the inclusion of family functioning as a protective factor in the PFS. Implications for policy and practice are discussed.

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1. Introduction

In 2012, nearly 700,000 children were substantiated victims of abuse and neglect (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [DHHS] [DHHS], 2013). Of these children, Latinos accounted for almost a quarter of all child maltreatment victims. Latino children are the largest minority population in the United States, composing 22% of the population and 60% of the children born to foreign-born families (Fry & Passel, 2009). Projected population increases and the substantial representation of Latino families in the child welfare system (Dettlaff, 2011), many of whom are undocumented, have created a need for continued study and alternative approaches to prevent child maltreatment in Latino populations.

One such alternative is the Center for the Study of Social Policy's Strengthening Families (SF) approach, which identifies early care and educational programs as a central point of influence with young children and families. This approach identifies five protective factors, linked both conceptually and empirically, to a reduction in child maltreatment: social support, concrete support in times of need, parental resilience, knowledge of parenting skills and child development, and the knowledge of healthy social and emotional development of young children

(Center for Study of Social Policy [CSSP], 2004). The protective factors listed make intuitive sense to practitioners and are imbedded in child abuse prevention approaches; however, the original SF literature review that determined the protective factors did not consider how those protective factors might differ by culture.

This paper has three primary aims. After providing the rationale for focusing on protective factors, we 1) review which protective factors have been studied in Latino families; 2) discuss how the terms are operationalized in research on Latino families; and 3) explore the ways in which Latino families experience protective factors. We conducted a literature review of protective factors within Latino populations using English and Spanish language databases and existing measures and their terminologies both in the United States and in Spanish-speaking populations abroad. Given the diversity of the Latino population in the United States, we opted to include international studies in our sample to uncover nuances and gain a deeper understanding of how a protective factors approach applies to Latinos.

The authors elected to use the Strengthening Families framework as a starting point because it is used in over thirty states (About Strengthening Families, 2015), many of which include significant Latino populations. While the Strengthening Families approach is being used with Latino families, the factors themselves have not been explored or validated with Latino families. The purpose of this review is to determine whether the protective factors in the SF approach are relevant

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for Latino populations. Because the factors in the Protective Factors Survey (PFS) were previously validated as a way to support the SF approach and a Spanish version of the Protective Factors Survey has recently been developed (Conrad-Hiebner, Shoemann, Counts, & Chang, 2015), we focused on the five protective factors included in this instrument (Counts, Buffington, Chang-Rios, Rasmussen, & Preacher, 2010). Determining the relevance of these protective factors to these Latinos provides valuable insights to practitioners both in the United States and in other English-speaking countries with significant Latino populations, as they work to reduce and prevent maltreatment and abuse in these communities.

1.1. Risk and protective factors: setting the stage

Risk and protective factors describe conditions under which problems wither and thrive (Fraser, Richman, & Galinski, 1999). Risk is the probability of a future event occurring given a certain set of conditions, also known as causes or markers of the problem. As the number of risk factors increases, so does the likelihood of the problem. Protective factors are different from risk factors; they predict future outcomes and modify or buffer risk factors (Rutter, 1987).

Although the statistical techniques used to collect and analyze data on risk and protective factors are virtually indistinguishable from each other, a protective factor lens has the potential to overcome the limitations of a risk model and significantly alter the reach and potentially the outcomes of child maltreatment prevention efforts. Child maltreatment prevention programs include programs for early childhood development, home visiting, parent education, and family support. When prevention programs focus on reducing risk factors, they may inadvertently impose barriers to services, which are subsequently described.

For parents to participate in child maltreatment prevention programs, they acknowledge their deficits, are court-mandated, or forced to participate. As a result, prevention programs that are based on a risk model might stigmatize parents and reduce their participation in programs (DePanfilis, & Office on Child Abuse and Neglect, Children's Bureau, 2006). The protective factors approach, however, could help overcome stigma. While parents may resist focusing on their deficits in a risk-focused program, they may be more open to approaches that build on strengths and foster resiliency, which could also improve retention (Oynski, Harrison, Spady, & McConnan, 1999; Toban & Lutzker, 2001).

Risk factors are not always the most accurate or reliable predictors of maltreatment. Many parents that possess multiple risk factors do not abuse their children, while some parents with no identified risk factors may maltreat their children (Ross & Vandivere, 2009). For example, the majority of parents with histories of child maltreatment do not maltreat their own children (Egeland, Bosquet, & Chung, 2002; Higgins, 1994; Parker, Piotrowski, & Peay, 1987). In addition, many risk factors (i.e., low maternal age) are static and cannot be influenced by programmatic strategies (Ross & Vandivere, 2009). Protective factors, on the other hand, are malleable and can be addressed by a continuum of programming, including traditional prevention programs in addition to early care and educational settings.

1.1.1. Protective factors in child maltreatment prevention programs

Protective factors are central components of parent education programs, which are designed to target attitudes and behaviors known to reduce the risk of maltreatment. Participation in these programs helped improve participants' well-being and communication skills, influenced their beliefs about corporal punishment as an ineffective discipline technique, provided realistic expectations for children, and encouraged parent-child interactions (Geeraert, Noortgate, Grietens, & Onghena, 2004; Kaminski, Valle, Filene, & Boyle, 2008; Lundahl, Nimer, & Parsons, 2006; MacLeod & Nelson, 2000; Repucci, Britner, & Woolard, 1997; Thomas & Zimmer-Gembeck, 2007).

Research on the effectiveness of parent education programs increasing protective factors has narrowly focused on family functioning and knowledge of child development with less attention on social and concrete support and nurturing and attachment (Geeraert et al., 2004; Kaminski et al., 2008). MacLeod and Nelson's (2000) review on family wellness included social and concrete support as moderator variables or components of programs but not as outcomes. Only a few of the 188 studies explored by Klevens and Whitaker's (2007) systematic review on maltreatment from 1980 to 2004 mentioned protective factors. Of the studies that did include protective factors, definitions and the exploration of protective factors were not consistent. The majority of studies on child maltreatment occurred prior to the development of the SF approach.

2. Method

To measure protective factors, technical assistance providers from the FRIENDS National Research Center, researchers from the University of Kansas – Center for Public Partnerships and Research, and a national workgroup composed of Community Based Child Abuse Prevention Programs (CBCAP) grantees developed the Protective Factors Survey (PFS). Because of national interest in and broad adoption of the SF approach, it was important for the PFS to align with the CSSP protective factors to the best extent possible. Three of the CSSP protective factors – social connections, concrete support in times of need, and knowledge of parenting and child development – correspond directly with the PFS (see Fig. 1). The PFS, however, does not include social emotional competence of children because it focuses on family-level protective factors. Additionally, nurturing and attachment were added and family parental resilience was narrowed to measure family functioning. The bonding between caregiver and child and a resulting secure attachment are critical to a child's social, emotional, and physical development, therefore were included as a protective factor (Center on the Developing Child at Harvard University, 2007; Crittenden, 1988; George & Main, 1979; Morton & Browne, 1998).

To conduct this review, we explored which protective factors appear in Spanish-language literature from sources published in Latin America and Spain. We first searched English- and Spanish-language library databases, open-access journal databases, and other widely used Internet search engines. Library databases were included from the University of Kansas, the Hispanic-American Periodicals Index from the University of California – Los Angeles, the University of São Paulo, and the Scientific Electronic Library Online (SciELO). Many results came from searching the *Latin America, the Caribbean, Spain and Portugal Scientific Journals Network* (REDALYC), which consists of 815 journals in education, health, psychology, sociology and other fields from leading institutions around the region. Finally, the Latin American Council of Social Sciences (CLACSO) yielded additional search results, as did scholarly searches from prominent web search engines.

Inclusion criteria were the: (a) extent to which commonalities were found between the five-factor PFS, the SF approach, and their Spanish counterparts; (b) degree to which the article addressed *protective factors* as a way to mitigate *risk factors* as opposed to focusing solely on risk behavior; and (c) whether researchers examined protective factors regarding a reduction in abuse within the family or whether they analyzed other factors such as drug abuse, pregnancy, or youth-on-youth violence. We then established search parameters to use on Spanish language databases based on the protective factors of the PFS (see Table 1 for a list of search terms). Initial search terms were necessarily broad to capture a wide view of the five protective factors components in the Spanish language literature. Those terms served to guide the literature review, sorting results to focus on child welfare and child maltreatment prevention and maintain consistency with the Strengthening Families approach.

In conducting our search, we first used the generally accepted translations *factores protectores* and *factores de protección* in our searches to

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