



## Developmental outcomes of toddlers of young Latina mothers: Cultural, family, and parenting factors



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### ABSTRACT

Children of adolescent mothers are at risk for poor developmental outcomes. This study is among the first to examine how cultural, family, and parenting factors prospectively predict the cognitive and language development of children of young Latina mothers ( $N = 170$ ;  $M_{\text{age}} = 17.9$  years). Mothers were interviewed and observed interacting with their children at 18 months (W1). Children were tested at 18 (W1) and 24 (W2) months. Mothers' cultural orientation (W1) was related to aspects of the childrearing environment (W1), which in turn had implications for the children's development (W2). Specifically, a stronger orientation toward American culture was related to higher mother-reported engagement in parenting by their own mothers (grandmothers), which in turn predicted stronger gains in cognitive and expressive language functioning from W1 to W2. A stronger Latino orientation related to the display of more directiveness and greater mother-reported engagement by the children's biological fathers; directiveness, in turn, predicted fewer gains in cognitive functioning only when father engagement was low and did not predict expressive language development. Finally, mothers' display of more positive affect, a stronger American orientation, and higher grandmother engagement uniquely predicted gains in W2 expressive language functioning. Implications for intervention are discussed.

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### 1. Developmental outcomes of toddlers of young Latina mothers: cultural, family, and parenting factors

Children of adolescent mothers are at risk for poor developmental outcomes across domains, including cognitive and language functioning (Whitman, Borkowski, Keogh, & Weed, 2001). These deficits are related to family demographic characteristics; adolescent mothers are more likely than their non-parenting peers to come from lower socio-economic-status (SES) backgrounds and have lower educational attainment. They are also more likely than adult mothers to be single and live in poverty (Mollborn & Dennis, 2012). Consistent with this disadvantaged background, adolescent mothers show higher rates of problematic parenting behaviors than adult mothers, such as more detachment, intrusiveness, and hostility, and less sensitivity (Berlin, Brady-Smith, & Brooks-Gunn, 2002). However, few studies have examined how individual differences in the parenting of adolescent mothers relate to their children's development, and these studies have rarely included Latinas in their samples. Thus, little is known about the childrearing context and parenting behaviors that underlie the development of cognitive and language skills in children of Latina adolescent mothers. This is concerning, as birthrates

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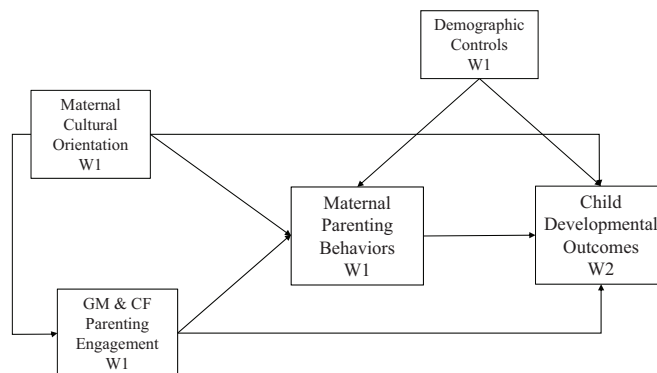


Fig. 1. Conceptual model.

of Latina adolescents are substantially higher than those of any other group in the United States (US; [Martin, Hamilton, Osterman, Curtin, & Mathews, 2013](#)).

In the current study, we tested prospective relations of aspects of the childrearing context and the parenting behaviors of young Latina mothers to their toddlers' cognitive and language functioning (see [Fig. 1](#) for conceptual model). Guided by an ecological framework ([Bronfenbrenner & Morris, 1998](#)), which highlights the importance of both the immediate and the broader contexts in which individuals are embedded in shaping their behavior and development, we examined the young mothers' parenting and the children's development within their larger cultural and family context. Traditional Latino values include a deep sense of familismo (feelings of reciprocity, solidarity, and family member interdependence; [Vega, 1995](#)). Latina mothers are more likely to turn to family members for help and advice than mothers from other groups. Moreover, grandmothers have an influential role within the extended family and are commonly involved in the care of grandchildren ([Shorris, 1992](#)). Latino cultural traditions also emphasize the woman's role as mother and wife and the importance of forming a new family ([Shorris, 1992](#)). Similarly, in the case of early or unplanned pregnancies, biological fathers are encouraged to assume their paternal role ([García-Coll & Vázquez García, 1996](#)). Consistent with this cultural background, young Latina mothers are more likely to be in long-term relationships and reside with partners than are African American (AA) and European American (EA) adolescent mothers ([Moore, Florsheim, & Butner, 2007](#); [Wasserman, Brunelli, Rauh, & Alvarado, 1994](#)). Moreover, Latina adolescents identify their own mothers (grandmothers) and the children's fathers as the family members most commonly involved in the care of their children ([Grau, Wilson, Weller, Castellanos, & Duran, 2012](#)). Thus, we sought to understand how their involvement impacted the childrearing context and the children's development.

Furthermore, because cultural values influence family members' roles and their childrearing practices ([Harkness & Super, 2002](#); [Rogoff, 2003](#)), and these practices in turn influence child development, we considered how mothers' cultural orientation was reflected in the engagement by these family members, the mothers' parenting behaviors, and their children's development. Given that Latinos vary in the extent to which they endorse American and Latino values, we assessed mothers' cultural orientation toward both the American (i.e., acculturation: degree to which they endorse values and behaviors of the mainstream American culture) and the Latino cultures (i.e., enculturation: degree to which they endorse values and behaviors of the Latino culture), and tested a model in which these orientations influence child development directly and/or through their effects on the childrearing context, specifically the level of involvement by grandmothers and the children's biological fathers, and aspects of the mothers' parenting. Further, in the model, the differential levels of involvement by these family members are thought to influence child development both (a) directly, through the parenting interactions they have with the children; and (b) indirectly, via the effect that their involvement has on the young mothers' parenting, which in turn influences child development.

### 1.1. Children's cognitive and language functioning

Children of adolescent mothers show cognitive and language deficits that start during the second year of life and become more pronounced with development ([Whitman et al., 2001](#)). These deficits have been observed in toddlers of different ethnic backgrounds ([Jahromi, Guimond, Umaña-Taylor, Updegraff, & Toomey, 2014](#); [Whitman et al., 2001](#)), with children scoring up to one standard deviation below the population mean on standardized measures of cognitive functioning at 24 months. Nonetheless, few studies have examined parenting and family factors linked to these outcomes.

#### 1.1.1. Cultural orientation and children's cognitive and language functioning

To our knowledge, no studies investigated the role of cultural orientation on children's functioning among young Latina mothers. Research on young children of Latino adult parents suggests that parental acculturation relates to children's cognitive and language functioning. Specifically, using parental nativity or language preference as proxies for acculturation, studies found young children of US-born or English-speaking Latino parents scored higher than those

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