Culture Counts:
Engaging Black and Latino Parents of Young Children in Family Support Programs

Executive Summary

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Family support programs[1] are designed to strengthen family functioning by providing parents with access to educational opportunities, economic support, and social networks.[i] In order for these programs to be successful, they must work to actively engage their participants. This is especially true for programs targeting black and Latino families. In 2012, 52 percent of Hispanic and 65 percent of black three- to six-year-olds (not yet in kindergarten) attended center-based early care and education programs.[ii] Research has found that black and Latino parents, in general, are less likely to engage in and benefit from parenting programs.[iii]

The purpose of this brief is to provide readers with a better understanding of the cultural and contextual factors that affect the engagement of black and Latino families in a variety of programs and services. Strategies for engaging black and Latino parents with young children were identified from literature on parent education and training, health, mental health services, and early childhood education programs. The brief also explores how cultural adaptation of existing programs and practices may be a necessary, albeit nuanced, process for engaging parents of diverse backgrounds.

Why engage parents in family support programs?
The concept of *engaging* parents has become a cornerstone of programs and policies designed to support the healthy growth and development of young children.[iv] Emphasis on the critical role that parents play in their child's development and learning has grown over the last few decades, in part due to research examining the influence parents have on children's outcomes. Parental "engagement" refers to their level of participation or involvement in programs and services, and the effect this has on specific outcomes.[v]

Despite the benefits of parental engagement in a variety of program types, not all parents are equally engaged.[vi] Research suggests that Latino and black parents encounter more-frequent barriers to engagement than other families do.[vii] Barriers to engagement for Latino and black parents in family-based services can be conceptualized as being "structural" (e.g., lack of time, needing transportation), "attitudinal" (e.g., perceptions of the value of services, beliefs about practitioners), or "cultural" (e.g., mismatch in cultural beliefs between practitioners and parents).[viii] While structural barriers are mainly logistical and can be fairly easily addressed, attitudinal and cultural barriers are more difficult to address, given that the solutions require an understanding of families' values, beliefs, and cultures, and possibly changes in program or staff approach and practices.

Despite the challenges inherent in addressing cultural barriers, it is imperative for family support programs to incorporate the cultural values and beliefs of the families they serve, lest their programs and services remain inaccessible to the populations they are intended to support. Programs designed to support positive parenting practices benefit from an understanding of the cultural capital (i.e., material

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[1] Family support programs are broadly defined as programs that provide resources to enable parents to successfully support themselves so they can provide a stable, enriching environment for their children.

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resources, social networks, cultural beliefs, and personal life orientation) that parents draw on to direct their actions and make decisions.[ix] Efforts to engage and support diverse families also require an understanding of parenting behaviors that differ across ethnic groups.[x]

Addressing cultural barriers to engagement

Researchers have identified a number of strategies that can help programs address cultural barriers to engagement. These include adopting a culturally-informed approach to program design, culturally adapting existing programs, and framing programs and services to align with culturally-specific goals and issues.

A culturally-informed approach to program design incorporates cultural considerations into the design of the program at the outset;[xi] for example, by collaborating with cultural "informants" during initial planning phases to gather input on program content and implementation processes. A culturally-informed approach also enables programs to use strategies that are relevant to and consistent with parents' goals and values. Programs that take this approach (e.g., ParentCorps, Abriendo Puertas/ Opening Doors) tend to have high rates of participation and positive effects on parents.[xii]

Existing programs may be adapted or revised to reflect the reality of participants' experiences, by increasing the cultural relevance of programs and services for black and Latino parents and children.[xiii] A three-phase process to culturally adapting existing programs includes:

1. **a rigorous review of the alignment of program concepts/techniques with the targeted participants' culture(s), and a community needs assessment;**

2. **the initial adaptation of materials and strategies to enhance their cultural appropriateness; and**

3. **finalizing and field testing these adaptations.**

Cultural adaptation should be conducted with caution, as modifying core components of effective interventions could potentially reduce their capacity to produce positive effects; cultural adaptations should maintain fidelity to an established model while *also* promoting cultural relevance.

Other strategies to address cultural barriers to engagement include framing programs and services to align with culturally-specific goals and issues;[xiv] for example, naming and advertising parent training programs in ways that align with families' cultural beliefs and values. There is some evidence that providing programs and services in the primary language of the target group may be beneficial to engagement.[xv] There is also limited evidence that ethnic similarities between parents and program staff may matter to retention in parent-training programs.[xvi]

Considerations for programs and policymakers

Policymakers should consider: promoting a shared understanding of what is meant by parent engagement; supporting partnerships with community-based organizations to engage parents; fostering a culturally- and linguistically-diverse workforce; and calling for rigorous research.

Program developers should consider: employing a collaborative approach to program design; developing culturally-informed parenting frameworks; offering multiple opportunities for engagement; addressing structural, attitudinal, and cultural barriers to engagement; performing thoughtful adaptations to programs; and revisiting cultural considerations often.

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