

# Supporting Coparenting Relationships for Hispanic Participants in Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education Programs

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## Overview

Positive, supportive relationships between people raising a child together promote the well-being of the caregivers<sup>a</sup> themselves, as well as their children's health and development.<sup>1-4</sup> As such, programs that serve mothers, fathers, and couples frequently incorporate supports designed to strengthen coparenting relationships. For example, many healthy marriage and relationship education (HMRE) programs work with couples to support not only the parents' romantic relationships, but also to improve parent-child and coparenting relationships.<sup>5,6</sup>

To effectively support coparenting relationships, HMRE programs should consider coparents' unique cultural, ethnic, and racial contexts. In particular, these programs should account for Hispanic<sup>b</sup> populations, which represent the second largest racial or ethnic group in the United States and one of the country's fastest-growing populations.<sup>7</sup> A diverse range of cultural values, beliefs, and attitudes can lead to differences in coparenting relationships, both within and between Hispanic families (and among other racial and ethnic groups). Furthermore, Latino

<sup>a</sup> In this brief, we use the terms "parent" and "caregiver" interchangeably to represent people who are involved in childrearing.

<sup>b</sup> Terms like Latine, Latinx, Latino, and Hispanic are frequently used interchangeably. In this brief, we use the term "Hispanic" based on feedback from a group of Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood (HMRF) practitioners who indicated that the families with whom they work identify most with this term. When citing existing research, we use the language from the original source.



## MAST CENTER RESEARCH

The Marriage Strengthening Research and Dissemination Center (MAST Center) conducts research on marriage and romantic relationships in the U.S. and healthy marriage and relationship education (HMRE) programs designed to strengthen these relationships. This research aims to identify critical research gaps, generate new knowledge, and help programs more effectively serve the individuals and families with whom they work. MAST Center research is concentrated in two areas:

- **Relationship Patterns & Trends.** Population-based research to better understand trends, predictors, dynamics, and outcomes of marriage and relationships in the United States.
- **Program Implementation & Evaluation.** Research that helps build knowledge about what works in HMRE programming, for whom, and in what context.

coparents may actively desire more tailored supports: In one previous study of HMRE programming, some Latino and Black married couples expressed a desire for more supports for navigating their role as coparents.<sup>8</sup> For a more detailed summary of the history of federally funded HMRE programming designed for Hispanic families, see Box A at the end of this brief.

HMRE programs that serve a racially and ethnically diverse range of families—and particularly those that work with Hispanic coparents—should incorporate specific, culturally appropriate strategies that are tailored to best support the populations they serve. This brief provides research-informed, practice-based, and contextually relevant considerations and strategies to help HMRE programs that serve Hispanic families better support these couples' coparenting relationships.

Following a brief summary of our methodology, this brief presents four important considerations for HMRE programs when serving Hispanic coparents. These considerations are based on insights from existing research studies and practice-based resources and are supplemented with input from four HMRE practitioners across three organizations (see Methods section for more information on contributing practitioners). For some considerations, we also include definitions of key terms.

1. Recognize that culture varies within and across Hispanic populations.
2. Consider how Hispanic culture may shape coparenting roles in unique ways.
3. Acknowledge that multiple family members may be coparents in Hispanic families.
4. Consider that family separation may play a significant role in coparenting relationships for some Hispanic families.

For each consideration, we also present multiple strategies for HMRE programs to better support Hispanic couples' coparenting relationships.

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## Methods

The strategies described in this brief were drawn from two sources: 1) a review of existing research studies and practice-based resources and 2) in-depth discussions with HMRE practitioners. From the review of research and resources, we identified four overarching considerations for supporting Hispanic coparents. We then conducted in-depth discussions with four expert HMRE practitioners (two program directors and two curriculum developers) to supplement the considerations described in the literature.

- Alison Espínola, LCSW, director of the Connected Couples, Connected Families program
- Norma Perez-Brena, PhD, director of the Strengthening Relationships/Strengthening Families program
- Karen Anzak-Muñoz, master trainer of Active Relationships Center curricula
- Kelly Simpson, LMFT, CEO of Active Relationships Center

We developed a discussion guide that aligned closely with the considerations we initially identified. To ensure that we captured a range of experiences from practitioners serving Hispanic populations, we spoke with two program directors and two curricula developers based in different regions of the United States and who serve different age groups and nativity statuses. The program directors serve either a predominately adult or adolescent Hispanic population, while the curriculum developers have experience adapting a relationship education curriculum for Hispanic couples. We reviewed discussion notes and transcripts and identified both common themes and strategies, which are incorporated into the considerations below. All quotes featured below are from our discussions with these practitioners.



## Considerations for Supporting Healthy Coparenting Relationships in HMRE Programs That Serve Hispanic Families

**Recognize that culture varies within and across Hispanic populations.**

The Hispanic diaspora in the United States is both diverse and nuanced with respect to heritage: More than 62 million Hispanic people in the United States trace their heritage to more than 20 countries, belong to multiple racial groups, speak various languages and dialects, and experienced differing circumstances that resulted in them living in the United States.<sup>9</sup> This diversity has important implications for programs that support Hispanic families. The practitioners we spoke with recognize this diversity and frequently talked about tailoring their programming to fit the specific needs of local Hispanic communities. One practitioner described adapting an adult HMRE curriculum for use with Spanish-speakers primarily in areas near the United States-Mexico border and including relevant discussion questions and activities that address living in this environment. An adolescent-focused program designed its activities with second-generation Mexican Americans—a large population in the programs' service area—in mind. For this program, capturing ongoing participant feedback through focus groups and a youth advisory board helps staff adjust programming as needed. Practitioners also recognize the importance of making continued adaptations as local demographics shift. For example, one program reported a recent migration of indigenous Mexicans to their service area and enrollment in their program. This population primarily speaks Mixtec,<sup>10</sup> a non-written, oral-based language with multiple variations.<sup>11</sup> The Mixtec-serving program acknowledged that it must consider major changes to its curriculum delivery, activities, staffing, and services to effectively serve the entire group.

Many HMRE programs take common approaches to better serve Hispanic families, including translating program materials into Spanish and hiring staff whose racial and ethnic backgrounds reflect the populations each program serves.<sup>12</sup> Although translation is a common strategy, practitioners also described how additional content tailoring may be needed to ensure accurate interpretation, in light of participants' varied countries of origin and dialect differences. Practitioners recommended that curricula include a prominent disclaimer that translations do not reflect all dialects, offer multiple interpretations of words,

### KEY TERMS

**Hispanic:** A pan-ethnic term describing people of any race who identify as being of Spanish-speaking background and who trace their origins to, or descent from, Spanish-speaking countries

**Diaspora:** The dispersion or spread of a people from their original homeland

and hire facilitators who can provide on-the-spot translations for specific groups being served. More broadly, practitioners emphasized the need to recruit and hire staff—from leadership to frontline staff—who understand the cultural nuances of the local Hispanic communities being served. One evaluation of Hispanic-oriented Responsible Fatherhood programs found that hiring facilitators with comparable identities to participants was an effective strategy to address Hispanic fathers’ cultural challenges, including language barriers and discrimination.<sup>13</sup> However, practitioners acknowledged that many program staff positions require certain educational requirements, which can be a barrier to those in the community who may otherwise want to enter the HMRE field—especially Hispanic men. One program is considering changing some of its educational requirements to diversify its staff and develop further connections to male participants.

*“... we do have some requirements that they [facilitators] have a bachelor’s degree and so on ... how is that limiting our ability to hire people, especially our younger fathers to be our facilitators? And is that limiting us in terms of making connections with our students? So that’s something that we’re thinking about and considering trialing to understand how those requirements are serving as gatekeepers towards other people having opportunities to be facilitators.”*

## Strategies

- 1 Hire program staff, in both facilitator and leadership roles, who are racially and ethnically representative of the program’s participant population.
- 2 Routinely solicit feedback from participants and staff to improve participants’ experience in the program.
- 3 Translate and tailor curricula to meet the unique characteristics and environment of the Hispanic populations within a community.
- 4 Review policies and practices that may limit opportunities for community members to serve as facilitators.

## Consider how Hispanic culture may shape coparenting roles in unique ways.

Cultural values like familismo,<sup>14</sup> simpatía,<sup>15</sup> machismo,<sup>16</sup> and respeto<sup>17</sup> shape familial processes in many Hispanic families. The practitioners with whom we spoke consistently described the influence of these cultural values on coparenting relationships. For example, one practitioner noted that simpatía and familismo lead participants to be intentional about collaborating for the good of their family and behaving in a harmonious way to maintain familial cohesion as they navigate multigenerational coparenting across two families. Research also shows that the extent to which Hispanic mothers and fathers demonstrate these values is associated with the quality of their coparenting relationship (i.e., coparenting in ways that are more/less supportive or undermining of their coparents’ efforts).<sup>18</sup>

In recognition that cultural values and acculturation levels differ among Hispanic participants, all practitioners clearly stated that there is no “one way” to coparent and offered diverse perspectives on approaches to coparenting. Program staff often utilize open, small group discussions to allow participants to explore different approaches to coparenting scenarios and learn from each other.

### KEY TERMS

**Familismo:** The high importance attributed to family loyalty, solidarity, and togetherness

**Machismo:** Adherence to traditional masculine and feminine gender roles

**Respeto:** Showing respect for self and others

**Simpatía:** Maintenance of interpersonal harmony



*“You get to talk about [what] your belief system is, but you also get to hear from others in your situation. We don’t group [participants] according to gender. We more group them according to what their role is in the family and they get to hear the other people in their group answer those questions and suddenly what happens is that their view is so widened that their way is not the only way. They’re not [arguing] because this isn’t [their] spouse. I [don’t] have to argue. These are just people that are saying it.”*

In another example, a practitioner from an adolescent-based program discussed respectful negotiation of generational differences in parenting decisions with grandparents or other elder relatives involved in coparenting.

*“So we give them that space to practice [having difficult conversations] and find a way to do it that aligns with their values where they’re not just talking back or saying I’m going to ignore your parenting advice but like, how do you respectfully do that while still maintaining family cohesion?”*

In addition, all practitioners emphasized the importance of skill building to encourage healthy relationship behaviors. Practitioners noted that adult participants often associated machismo with unequal participation in parenting activities. To address this association, one program coaches participating couples through active listening techniques to help them effectively communicate challenges and find resolutions for tasks (for example, the division of household chores).

## Strategies

- 1 Ensure that program staff understand and appreciate the diversity of ways in which couples can effectively coparent and how various Hispanic cultural values can shape these behaviors.
- 2 Focus on building skills that promote healthy relationship habits and are transferable across different relationships.
- 3 Create opportunities for participants to learn different approaches to coparenting from their peers.

## Acknowledge that multiple family members may be coparents in Hispanic families.

Familismo, a central value in Hispanic culture, has been widely discussed in literature and is generally defined as the tendency to have a strong commitment to one’s family.<sup>19</sup> The concept extends beyond the nuclear family to include grandparents, aunts, uncles, and other family members.<sup>20</sup> The significance of familismo in Hispanic families may encourage involvement of extended families in childrearing.<sup>14</sup>

*“And so there is this high focus on kind of collaborating for the good of the family, ideas about keeping family cohesion.”*

The practitioners with whom we spoke with commonly mentioned familismo and emphasized how family involvement may look different depending on who (i.e., adolescents or adults) a program is serving. For example, one practitioner whose program serves Hispanic adolescents shared that, for their participants, coparenting tends to occur across multiple individuals and generations since adolescent parents are likely to live in different households while in school. The program uses the term “team parenting” to emphasize family members’ varying degrees of involvement in coparenting. The same program conducts an activity where participants are asked to create a collage that represents the “players on their team”—i.e., everyone involved in coparenting—and how they work together to raise their children. The program found that, among extended family members, grandparents often hold an especially influential role in childrearing; as a result, the program created a lesson focused on how to coparent with grandparents.

*“We also are very intentional about ensuring that our examples in our lessons include multiple family forms. So sometimes we’re talking about, I don’t know, division of labor and you know, sometimes you think about who does laundry. Is it you or is it the child’s other parent or is it you and grandma. We’ll bring in examples that highlight different family forms, different coparents so that they’re seeing that and then we are really intentional about the same thing with our videos. We might have videos where two parents are discussing how to change a baby’s diaper, but we’ll have another video where a grandmother is talking to a baby, so then they can see different people.”*

In another example, a practitioner mentioned that they incorporate discussion questions into their curricula on coparenting with the extended family of a new partner, along with content on navigating dynamics in blended families. This curriculum also includes a genogram activity where participants develop a graphic representation of the relationships between family members and their involvement in parenting. Another program, which also serves adult Hispanic participants, invites family members to specific workshop sessions or refers them to other relevant parenting programs. Research findings also speak to the importance of familismo: An evaluation of Responsible Fatherhood programs serving mostly Hispanic fathers indicates that program staff strongly reinforce familismo throughout programming given its significant presence in fathers’ lives.<sup>13</sup>

## Strategies

- 1 Incorporate discussion questions and video examples that highlight the diversity of family structures.
- 2 Dedicate specific sessions to discussing coparenting-relevant topics with multiple family members.
- 3 Invite (and engage with) family members who may also serve as coparents to various activities hosted by the program.
- 4 Refer participants’ family members to any relevant in-house programming, such as fatherhood or parenting programs, to support their coparenting knowledge and skills.

## Consider that family separation may play a significant role in coparenting relationships for some Hispanic families.

Changes in immigration policies over the past few decades have led to more restrictive actions by the federal government on Hispanic communities—actions that shape family relationships and dynamics.<sup>21</sup> In the United States, repressive immigration and border policies have led to the separation of families—either by immigration officials’ force, or more indirectly through a “stepwise” pattern wherein one family member immigrates first and others follow.<sup>22</sup>

While all practitioners with whom we spoke acknowledged the need to address coparenting in the context of family separation, they noted these were not specific topics within their programming or curricula. For example, one practitioner shared that discussions about family separation do not arise in workshop sessions but instead occur during one-on-one conversations between participants and case managers. Another practitioner described incorporating other relevant components throughout their curricula, such as the impact of guilt and shame on separated parents and the importance of commitment for immigrant families. The adolescent-serving program shared that family separation does not typically impact their participants, but does impact participants’ other family members. However, in recognition that extended family members may play significant roles in coparenting, the program provides both hard and digital copies of all materials and offers a virtual programming option. Additionally, participants develop parenting plans that detail respective responsibilities of all family members; program staff encourage participants to reassess the plan if family structures change based on factors such as separation. Importantly, one

practitioner emphasized that, in situations of family separation, participants may not indicate that coparenting is a priority but instead may seek support in identifying financial needs and ensuring economic stability.

*“When those kinds of things are happening, the coparenting conversation is not a priority. Usually, they’re kind of coming in, and it’s more of a crisis conversation. It’s just like triaging needs and having a conversation about how dad’s going to be involved when he’s been deported is not important [in the moment].”*

Given unpredictable immigration policies and the significant implications of separation on child and family well-being,<sup>23</sup> there is a need for more research on the impacts of family separation due to immigration and forced deportation on coparenting relationship quality, and on additional supports for HMRE programs in addressing this topic among Hispanic participants.

*“We do need a lot more work on transnational coparenting and what does it mean to do that? Like I don’t think we know enough of it. I think right now there’s more work that has been done on what happens to youth and parents when they get separated and, you know, work on ambiguous loss and mental health. But what does it mean to coparent with family members when another one of the family members is not around and how do you manage that? And I don’t think that we know enough about that. So, I think we need more research on that for sure.”*

## Strategies

- 1 Incorporate sessions focused on topics relevant to separation, such as the impact of guilt and shame on separated parents.
- 2 Provide a virtual programming option or offer materials in both digital and paper form to increase accessibility to all participants.
- 3 Create space in individual case management sessions for participants to share their experiences with family separation.
- 4 Encourage participants to create parenting plans that outline respective roles and responsibilities of all individuals involved in coparenting.

## Conclusion

This brief has drawn from a review of existing research and practice guidance, supplemented by conversations with practitioners, to offer four coparenting considerations—along with relevant strategies—for HMRE practitioners working with Hispanic participants. As described above, practitioners must acknowledge the Hispanic population’s ethnic and cultural diversity; recognize how cultural values shape coparenting roles; understand the role of extended family members in coparenting; and consider the significance of family separation in coparenting relationships. We hope the considerations and strategies presented here are useful for HMRE practitioners as they work to better support and engage with Hispanic coparents.



As the Hispanic population in the United States grows, there is a continued need for more research on the unique nature of coparenting relationships among Hispanic families, and on the kinds of supports practitioners need to adapt HMRE programming to reflect this population's diverse family structures and cultural values. Our scan of existing literature suggests a need for more focused attention on coparenting among families with origins in various Latin American countries, particularly those outside of Mexico.<sup>24</sup> Furthermore, there is a significant gap in literature on the impacts of family separation on coparenting relationships for Hispanic families; one practitioner we interviewed called for additional research on this topic. Practitioners also mentioned the need to understand shifting population demographics, with one program director sharing challenges with engaging a growing Indigenous Mexican population in their community. Through continued research efforts and supports for practitioners, HMRE programs can more effectively enhance coparenting services that are tailored and responsive to their Hispanic communities.



### **Box A: Supporting Hispanic Families Through Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education Programming**

The Administration for Children and Families (ACF) in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) administers a range of programs for families, including Healthy Marriage and Relationship Education (HMRE). HMRE programs are designed to teach both youth and adult individuals—as well as unmarried, married, or coparenting couples—how to communicate effectively, manage conflict, identify signs of an unhealthy relationship, and apply other skills for developing and maintaining healthy relationships.<sup>25</sup>

Many HMRE programs, especially those that are federally funded, prioritize supporting more diverse families with unique strengths and challenges related to relationship formation, quality, and stability, including families with lower incomes and families of color. For example, HMRE programs funded from 2015-2020 (the most recent cohort for which complete data are available) were racially and ethnically diverse: About one quarter of adult clients enrolled during this time were Hispanic/Latino, one quarter were Black, and around 10 percent were Asian or Pacific Islanders.<sup>26</sup> ACF has supported these programs through specific initiatives to develop and deliver effective, culturally appropriate HMRE programming for racially and ethnically diverse families.

For example, the Hispanic Healthy Marriage Initiative (HHMI) was established in 2004 as a targeted strategy led by ACF to engage the Hispanic community and address the unique cultural, linguistic, demographic, and socioeconomic needs of children and families in the Hispanic community.<sup>27</sup> HHMI activities consisted of a series of roundtables, research and evaluation activities, conferences and forums, marriage “showcases,” training and technical assistance, supplemental curriculum development, and a promising practices guide.<sup>28</sup> HMRE programs continue to have an intentional focus on supporting Hispanic families, including the most recent cohort of federally funded HMRE grantees.<sup>29</sup> This cohort, funded in 2020, includes multiple programs that work primarily with Hispanic adults, couples, or youth and provide a range of different curriculum.



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## Acknowledgments

The authors are grateful to Alison Espínola, Dr. Norma Perez-Brena, Karen Anzak-Muñoz, and Kelly Simpson for sharing their time and critical perspectives on implementing and adapting HMRE programs for Hispanic populations. We would also like to thank the Steering Committee of the Marriage Strengthening Research and Dissemination Center (MAST Center) and María Ramos-Olazagasti for their feedback on earlier drafts of this brief, and Ria Shelton for her research support.

Editor: Brent Franklin

Designer: Krystal Figueroa

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## About the MAST Center

The Marriage Strengthening Research and Dissemination Center (MAST Center) conducts research on marriage and romantic relationships in the United States and healthy marriage and relationship education (HMRE) programs designed to strengthen these relationships. The MAST Center is made up of a team of national experts in marriage and relationship research and practice, led by Child Trends in partnership with the National Center for Family and Marriage Research at Bowling Green State University. The MAST Center is supported by grant #90PR0012 from the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation within the Administration for Children and Families in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The MAST Center is solely responsible for the contents of this brief, which do not necessarily represent the official views of the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, the Administration for Children and Families, or the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

## Suggested Citation

Logan, D., Kim, L., Wilson, A., Scott, M.E., & Zambrano, P. L. (2023). *Supporting coparenting relationships for Hispanic participants in healthy marriage and relationship education programs*. Child Trends. <https://mastresearchcenter.org/mast-center-research/supporting-coparenting-relationships-for-hispanic-participants-in-healthy-marriage-and-relationship-education-programs/>

