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Parenting Challenges**

Inside this Issue

- 1 Parenting Challenges**
Parenting a Disabled Child
- 2 Cross-cultural Understanding: Helping Hispanic Families**
- 3 When Parents Disagree**
- 4 Editorial Advisory Board and Staff**
Invitation to Dialogue

Family and Youth Institute
201 Gibbons Building
Colorado State University
Fort Collins CO 80523-1501

970-491-6358 or 491-2292

Parenting Challenges

—Cheryl Asmus

This *Briefs* edition looks at just a few of the many challenges parents face. The first article gives a mother's story of the trials, heartaches and joy of parenting a disabled child. Victor Baez reminds us that parenting differences, although affected by culture, go deeper than cultural differences. Margaret Miller discusses differences within families. All three articles recognize variations in parenting—which may be learned from childhood or may be an adaptation to unplanned circumstances—and appreciate the validity of these differences.

—Cheryl Asmus, Ph.D., is coordinator of the Family and Youth Institute.

Parenting a Disabled Child

—Jennifer D. Van Norman

Jennifer Rose was a red-haired, blue-eyed, plump and seemingly healthy 10-month-old little girl on the day she suddenly went into a seizure. Her babysitter called an ambulance and Jennifer was rushed to intensive care. She was diagnosed with shaken baby syndrome, "strangulation syndrome" and brain trauma from a massive head injury. She fought for her life and doctors offered little hope that she would survive.

Jennifer's condition improved and was termed miraculous. However, she would never be like most other children. She was diagnosed with cerebral palsy, spastic quadriplegia, and developmental de-

lays. She had a tracheotomy and gastrointestinal feeding tube. Jennifer was placed with our family (her relatives) in Colorado and requires constant care.

Now 4½ years old, Jennifer has come a long way since her release from the hospital. She has use of her right hand, feeds herself, imitates words and sounds, and even uses simple sentences. I was overjoyed the day she said, "Chi-chi, come" to our pet Chihuahua.

People, even professionals and policy makers, often cannot comprehend the enormous commitment necessary to raise a disabled child. The time involved with meetings, medical appointments, therapy, and paperwork is intense.

The amount of paperwork is unfathomable to the average person. There is paperwork for Supplemental Security Income (SSI), Medicaid, Aid to the Needy and Disabled, local support agencies, Handicapped Children's Program, and any other program for which the child may qualify. For example, SSI requires a 23-page handwritten form with copies of medical and school records, income verification and signed medical releases.

Each medical condition requires a specialist; forget about the average pediatrician. Anyone who has contact with my child asks, "Why? Who? How did it happen?" Each medical specialist; agency personnel; school teacher; physical, occupational or speech therapist; bus driver; and church child care provider needs to know the circumstances and diagnoses of

my child's disabilities and wants this documented in mountains of forms that are all necessary for eligibility, service or treatment. Programs do not overlap, and each requires its own paperwork.

Add all the pressures of family life with those of a disabled child, and parents become overwhelmed and overstressed. Providers and policy makers need to consider the circumstances of these parents, who may be abrupt or irritable when asked to fill out just one more form or provide one more signature.

Even with all this, the joy of having little Jennifer far outweighs the frustrations. Each small developmental step that most take for granted is cause of celebration – each smile or word, a triumph in our family.

— Jennifer Van Norman is a stay-at-home mom of four children, one of whom is disabled.

Cross-cultural Understanding: Helping Hispanic Families

—Victor Baez

The proportion of Hispanics¹ in Colorado will increase from the current 14.3 percent of the population to 20.5 percent in 2025.² A significant proportion of this growth is the result of immigration.

This increased presence of Hispanics affects all aspects of life in the state, including the delivery of education and human services. Professionals who serve families need information and insights that will allow them to better understand family functioning, and thus help parents carry out their role as parents. General knowledge of families and cultures help, but it is also important to understand individual differences.

Human Differences

This essay presents ideas related to understanding human differences, the potential impact of these

differences on professional relationships, and insights on how professionals can use these ideas in their work with Hispanic families. Key to this approach is a transactional view of human differences. In this view, an appropriate understanding of differences begins with the following points:

- we must be careful of over-generalizations that can lead to stereotyping;
- diversity exists within diversity, i.e., differences within a group can be as large as differences between groups;
- members of any group may share important characteristics with members of their own group, but also with members of other groups (e.g., a Mexican American parent shares the experience of being a parent with parents from other cultural groups).³

In addition, a necessary assumption in all cross-cultural work with families is that parents want what is best for their children. At times they may not know what is most appropriate under the circumstances, but they do not intend to harm or stand in the way of their children's success. In other words, parenting is learned and is culturally bound. The parenting techniques appropriate in a small town in rural Mexico may not be the most appropriate for raising a child in an urban environment in the United States.

Practice Implications

The following elements are essential for beginning to develop the knowledge and skills needed for work with Hispanic families.

Knowledge and competence begin with self-awareness. Knowing ourselves includes, for example, an understanding of how our family of origin contributed to making us who we are. "Our sense of uniqueness, of being rooted in one space to one group, comes from our membership in families."⁴ Self-knowledge in re-

lation to family and parenting will make us better able to understand Hispanic families. Remember that all parents, regardless of ethnic background, share the experience of being parents.

Ethnicity is only one aspect of a person's identity. Religious background, where we live, economic class, and age all influence our sense of identity. Patterns of discipline, for example, within Hispanic families are influenced by these contexts. Disciplinary patterns are likely to differ for an impoverished family and a middle class family, or an urban family and a rural family.

In order to provide the best service to families facing a crisis situation, for example, related to a teen-aged daughter who has run away, it is not enough to learn descriptive cultural information. Knowing that in Hispanic culture, parents are generally more protective of girls than of boys may be helpful, but it is not enough. We must also know something about runaways in general and the family patterns in this particular family.

Ethnicity and ethnic belonging may not be reflected in how we carry out our lives from day to day. It is usually not possible to predict behavior from ethnicity. Although some Hispanic families are said to be paternalistic, it is not possible from this to predict how particular fathers, mothers and children will behave in particular situations.

Understanding someone else's experiences requires that we realize that those who are actually experiencing the situation are the experts. Others are outsiders to that experience. Outsiders must rely on the experts to come to any meaningful understanding of the situation.

Finally, since many Hispanic families are immigrants, it is important to understand a unique impact of immigration on family life. Margaret Mead⁵ pointed out that, un-



like traditional cultures in which children learn from their forebears and more modern societies in which both adults and children learn from peers, in immigrant cultures adults learn from children. Children adapt to the new circumstances more quickly than parents and take on the unique position of teaching their parents the new ways. The repercussions on all aspects of family life can be profound. Parents come to depend on their children for such basic situations as bank transactions and dealing with neighbors.

Consideration of human differences and practice implications will help professionals develop cross-cultural sensitivity in working with Hispanic families.

—Victor Baez, Ph.D., is an associate professor of social work at Colorado State University.

References

¹ Hispanics are defined as people who are from or who have ancestry in the Spanish speaking countries of Latin America. In Colorado, a large majority of this population is from or has ancestry in Mexico.

²U.S. Census Bureau. <http://www.census.gov/statab>

³Baez, V. & Oltjenbruns, K. (2000). Diversity within diversity. In Morgan, D. (Ed.), *Meeting the Needs of Our Clients Creatively*. New York: Baywood Publishing Company.

⁴McAdoo, H. P. (1993). *Family Ethnicity: Strength in Diversity*. Newbury Park, CA: Sage.

⁵Mead, Margaret. (1970) *Culture and Commitment: A Study of the Generation Gap*. New York: Doubleday and Co.



When Parents Disagree

—Margaret Miller

At a recent parent support group, one participant worried aloud that she and her husband disagreed about how to raise and discipline their 3-year-old son. She and her husband grew up with very different examples of discipline. She wondered if they could ever agree about child rearing, and she was concerned that their son did not receive consistent rules from both parents.

This is a problem many professionals may be asked to address. Joining two people who have been raised by profoundly different methods and expecting them to be in harmony about how to raise their own children is not easy. When people fall in love and consider marriage and families, they usually don't think to ask, "Are you for spanking or not for spanking?"

One of the biggest sources of marital stress is disagreement about child rearing. For children, major parental disagreement is a source of mixed messages and confusion that may undermine the attitudes, values and behaviors parents hope to teach. Whatever the nature of the disagreement, it can impact all family members and lead to erosion of parental authority, as children learn to play one parent against the other.

If the children are young, parents have time to negotiate some agreement about the major aspects of child rearing. Martha Erickson, Director of Children, Youth and Family Consortium at the University of Minnesota, suggests these steps.

- Sit down together and list the aspects of child rearing on which you DO agree. For example, what goals do you have for your child (say by the time he is 15) and what values do you want him or her to learn?

- Identify the standards of behavior that you agree are realistic for your child's age.

- List strategies you both think are important. For instance, you may disagree about punishments, but you

may agree that both parents should set an example of respect and honesty. Or you may agree that it's important to tell your child you appreciate it when she or he does what you ask.

After you've identified points of agreement, list areas of disagreement. Talk openly, calmly and respectfully about what each of you believes and where you learned those beliefs. Together, use your childhood memories to help you identify the things you want to repeat and the things you'd like to leave behind. Identify how incidents in your childhood made you feel—understanding that nobody's childhood is perfect. Do you want to repeat behaviors that left you with negative feelings?

Identify child-rearing sources to which you can turn, understanding that together you may need to learn new strategies to replace the old ways that are a source of conflict. Colorado State University Cooperative Extension county offices and local community agencies can suggest parenting resources and classes. Librarians can suggest practical books about raising children.

Agree to a regular time to check in with each other about how you're doing together as parents. Give new strategies a chance to take hold and give your child a chance to learn that mom and dad are working together. Do not expect your child's behavior to change immediately, just because you are trying a new tactic together.

If, after giving these steps a good try, your marital conflicts continue, seek professional counseling. It will be in the best interests of your child and your marriage to develop a plan as early as possible. It's far easier to learn to strategize together about appropriate toddlers' television watching than it is to wait until the issues are far more serious, such as drug use or school truancy.

—Margaret Miller is a Colorado State University Cooperative Extension director in El Paso County.

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Invitation to dialogue

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Contact FYI at:

Family and Youth Institute
201 Gibbons Building
Colorado State University
Fort Collins, CO. 80523-1501
Phone: 970-491-6358
Fax: 970-491-7859
E-mail: clasmus@lamar.colostate.edu



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