

The Effect of Acculturation on the Meaning of Mothers' Behaviors

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Research has shown that acculturation influences the effectiveness of psychological treatment (Wilson, 2005), underscoring the importance of therapists' sensitivity to the effects of culture and the process of acculturation in their clients. A key element of cultural competence is understanding the meanings different behaviors have for people from different races and cultures. For example, in contrast to English-speaking Latino mothers, Spanish-speaking mothers have been found to be more strict (Buriel, 1993) and to use more physical guidance when interacting with their children (Halgunseth, Ispa, & Rudy, 2006). It is not known whether the meaning of these behaviors for the children is similar for these families differing in their level of acculturation. The purpose of this study is to examine the connection between the way Spanish-speaking and English-speaking Latino mothers interact with their children and their reports of their own depressive symptoms and their children's behavior problems.

The sample consisted of 49 English-speaking and 20 Spanish-speaking Latino mother-child dyads. The children, aged 2 through 8 years, were all referred to Parent-Child Interaction Therapy for treatment of disruptive behaviors. Spanish-speaking mothers were less likely than English-speaking mothers to have been involved in drugs or to have been neglectful. Spanish-speaking mothers tended to be more directive, but gave similar amounts of praise, criticisms, and descriptive statements. No differences were observed between groups in the level of depressive symptoms endorsed, parental stress, or the intensity or number of child behavior problems reported. However, among English-speaking Latino mothers, increases in the number of directive statements and total verbalizations correlated with increases in report of depressive symptoms and child behavior problems. In contrast, among Spanish-speaking Latino mothers, fewer directives and less total speech correlated with greater numbers of depressive symptoms and numbers of behavior problems. These findings suggest that Latino mothers' interaction style may have different meaning for children depending on the level of their acculturation to American language and culture. Implications for clinical practice will be discussed.

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