Gender differences in the relation between mothering behaviors and the emergence of child behavior problems among Mexican American preschoolers

Margaret O’Brien Caughya
Tatiana Peredob
Margaret Tresch Owenb
Nazly Hasanizadehb

aUniversity of Texas School of Public Health
bUniversity of Texas at Dallas
Behavior problems in early childhood

• Behavior problems peak at age 2 and generally decline thereafter.

• Behavior problems among boys decline less rapidly than among girls.

• Theories of gender differences
  – Differences in child skills (language, inhibitory control)
  – Differences in parent socialization practices
Behavior problems among Latinos

- Most available data comes from cross-sectional studies.
  - Levels of behavior problems similar
  - Risk factors for behavior problems similar
  - Some unique factors (acculturation, traditional values)

- No longitudinal data available on Latino children regarding emergence of behavior problems during early childhood.
Study questions

• What patterns of change in behavior problems are exhibited among Latino preschoolers?

• Are mothering qualities associated with patterns of change in behavior problems?

• Do these patterns differ by child gender?
Dallas Preschool Readiness Project

- 224 Latino preschoolers recruited at age 2½
  - 209 had a primary caregiver who was their mother and Latina
  - Visited in their homes twice (ages 2½ and 3½); 93% follow-up rate (n = 195)

- Demographic characteristics
  - Low income (57% below 100% federal poverty level)
  - Most (78%) foreign-born and Spanish-speaking (80%); primarily from Mexico (96%)
Measures

- **CBCL** (parent-reported at both ages)
- **Maternal behavior** (2½ yrs) (NICHD SECCYD “Three Bags”)
  - Sensitivity
  - Cognitive stimulation
  - Positive regard
  - Negative regard
  - Detachment
  - Intrusiveness
- **Covariates**
  - Maternal education
  - Family income
  - Maternal acculturation
  - Child language skills
  - Child inhibitory control skills
    - Snack delay (both ages)
    - Wrapped gift (both ages)
    - Forbidden toy (age 2½ only)
No gender differences at age 2½. Significantly higher externalizing problems among boys at age 3½.
Maternal behavior by child gender

No differences in maternal behavior by child gender.
Maternal behavior composite

Sensitivity Composite

- Intrusiveness
  - Cognitive stimulation
  + Positive regard
  - Negative regard
  - Detachment

χ² (2) = 4.11, p = .13, CFI = 1.0, TLI = 1.0, RMSEA = .07
## Predicting change in behavior problems

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Total Problems</th>
<th>Externalizing Problems</th>
<th>Internalizing Problems</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Child gender (1 = girl)</strong></td>
<td>ns</td>
<td>† (negative)</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Problem behavior (age 2½)</strong></td>
<td>*** (positive)</td>
<td>*** (positive)</td>
<td>*** (positive)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Maternal sensitivity composite</strong></td>
<td>ns</td>
<td>ns</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Maternal intrusiveness</strong></td>
<td>* (positive)</td>
<td>** (positive)</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sensitivity x gender</strong></td>
<td>ns</td>
<td>ns</td>
<td>ns</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Intrusiveness x gender</strong></td>
<td>** (negative)</td>
<td>** (negative)</td>
<td>† (negative)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

†p < .10; *p < .05; **p < .01; ***p < .001

Covariates: maternal education, family income-to-needs ratio, child receptive language ability, child inhibitory control skills at both ages 2½ and 3½
Maternal intrusiveness and change in externalizing problems


*p < .05
What explains this?

• Girls vs. boys in high intrusiveness group
  – No differences in maternal behavior
  – No differences in child behavior/characteristics

• Girls vs. boys with high levels of externalizing problems at age $2\frac{1}{2}$
  – Girls: $n = 13$; Boys: $n = 21$
  – Girls more likely to experience mod/high maternal intrusiveness (62% vs. 43%)
How is “intrusiveness” defined?

- Adult-centered rather than child-centered
- Markers:
  - Insisting the child do something
  - Not allowing the child to make choices
  - Physically restricting child’s movements
  - Doesn’t modify parental behavior in response to child
- “Directive” parenting more normative in Latino populations (Halgunseth, Ispa, & Rudy, 2006)
What about acculturation?

# participants

- Mexican oriented: 127
- Bicultural: 64
- American oriented: 11
Maternal directiveness and change in problem behaviors

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Mother’s Acculturation</th>
<th>Mexican-oriented</th>
<th>Bicultural</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Boys</td>
<td></td>
<td>*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Girls</td>
<td>**</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*p < .05; **p < .01

Children of Mexican-oriented mothers

**p < .01
Children of bicultural mothers

*\( p < .05 \)
Conclusions and future directions

• Maternal behavior must be interpreted within cultural context
• Maternal directiveness is associated with a greater decline in externalizing problems among girls compared to boys.
  – Reason for this difference is unclear
  – May be moderated by acculturation
• Sample is limited in terms of variability in acculturation
  – Need for future research
Dallas Preschool Readiness Project

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Principal Investigators
Margaret O’Brien Caughey, Sc.D.
Margaret Tresch Owen, Ph.D.

Project Director
Jerry Roberson, Dr.P.H., M.A.

Lab Manager
Jamie Hurst, Ph.D.

Home Visit Coordinators
Plaststilla Arnold
Carmen Gonzalez
Bunnoi McDaniel
Clare Stevens
Ana-Maria Mata-Otero, Ph.D.

Coding/Data Management
Melissa Amos
Adriana Villa Baird
Nazly Hasanizadeh
Caroline Mejias
Tatiana Peredo
Junie Shrestha
Piper Duarte