

## BRIEF REPORT

# Gender Differences in the Relation Between Mothering Behaviors and Child-Behavior Problems Among Hispanic Preschoolers

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This is a report of an examination of gender differences in behavior problems and a prediction of their changes from 2.5 to 3.5 years from mothering qualities among 209 low-income Hispanic children. Externalizing behaviors declined over this time somewhat more for girls than for boys. Fewer externalizing behavior problems at age 3.5 were correlated with more supportive and less intrusive mothering at 2.5, but only for boys, and increases in externalizing behavior among boys were uniquely predicted by greater maternal intrusiveness. Implications for understanding parental control factors among Hispanic families are discussed.

*Keywords:* behavior problems, gender differences, Hispanics

Behavior problems in children are responsible for a significant reduction in quality of life due to increased risk of academic failure, juvenile delinquency, and reduced adult productivity (U.S. Public Health Service, 2000). Despite the fact that Hispanic children represent the fastest growing ethnic group among children in the United States (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 2009), there are limited data available regarding problem behaviors among young Hispanic children. Much of what is known about behavior problems in early childhood comes from studies including few or no Hispanic children (Hardaway, Wilson, Shaw, & Dishion, 2012; Meunier, Bisceglia, & Jenkins, 2012; Morris, Silk, Steinberg, Terranova, & Kithakye, 2010; Supplee, Skuban, Shaw, & Prout, 2009; Tremblay et al., 2004).

Early childhood marks an important developmental period in problem behaviors. Externalizing behaviors, including inattention, hyperactivity, impulsivity, defiant behavior, and aggression (Alink et al., 2006; Keenan & Shaw, 1997), emerge in early childhood.

For most children, externalizing behaviors follow a normative developmental trajectory and are first observed around 12 months of age, increase from 12 to 24 months of age, and decline steadily into childhood and adolescence (Alink et al., 2006; National Institute of Child Health and Human Development [NICHD], Early Child Care Research Network [ECCRN], 2004). Distinctions can be made in this early childhood period between typical and atypical levels of problem behaviors. Children who do not learn to regulate their externalizing behaviors such as aggression and impulsivity during the preschool years may be at serious risk for ongoing difficulties (Alink et al., 2006; Côté, Vaillancourt, LeBlanc, Nagin, & Tremblay, 2006).

Parenting qualities are associated with childhood behavioral difficulties (Shaw, Gilliom, Ingoldsby, & Nagin, 2003; Tamis-LeMonda, Briggs, McClowry, & Snow, 2009) and have been the focus of interventions with children's behavioral problems (Brotman et al., 2011; Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group, 2011). Children with behavior problems are more likely to come from families characterized by low income. It has been theorized that household poverty is associated with poor child outcomes because poverty increases parent stress and depression which in turn is associated with less sensitivity and more harsh, inconsistent discipline (McLoyd, 1998; Mesman, van Ijzendoorn, & Bakermans-Kranenburg, 2012; Yoshikawa, Aber, & Beardslee, 2012). Studies of risk factors associated with behavior problems for Hispanic children have similarly implicated low income, maternal depression, and negative parenting strategies (Hill, Bush, & Roosa, 2003; Ispa et al., 2004; La Roche, Turner, & Kalick, 1995; McCabe, Yeh, Lau, Argote, & Liang, 2010; Perez & Fox, 2008).

From an ecocultural perspective, parents' socialization priorities are viewed as being significantly influenced by the expectations

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and norms of the parent's specific cultural group (Livas-Dlott et al., 2010). Calzada and her colleagues (Calzada, Fernandez, & Cortes, 2010; Calzada, Huang, Anicama, Fernandez, & Brotman, 2012) focused on the cultural value of *respeto*, which emphasizes obedience and deference toward adults, as an important determinant of Latino parenting practices. This is consistent with descriptions in the literature of Latino parents as more authoritarian, directive, and/or controlling (Carlson & Harwood, 2003; Chaudhuri, Easterbrooks, & Davis, 2009; Halgunseth, Ispa, & Rudy, 2006; Ispa et al., 2004; Parke et al., 2004). In a sample of Mexican American mothers with 4–5-year-old children, Calzada and colleagues found that higher endorsement of a cultural value of *respeto* was associated with higher levels of authoritarian parenting, which was associated with higher levels of internalizing and externalizing problem behaviors in children 1 year later (Calzada, Barajas-Gonzalez, Huang, & Brotman, 2015; Calzada et al., 2012).

A considerable number of researchers have reported more externalizing problems among boys than girls, and it has been suggested these differences result from gender differences in language and self-regulation abilities favoring girls and/or socialization differences. Keenan and Shaw (1997) suggested that parents' socialization practices more often include efforts with girls than with boys to diminish aggressive behaviors and encourage perspective-taking and sharing. However, much of what is known about behavior problems and parenting in early childhood comes from studies with few or no Hispanic participants. Those that do include Hispanic children used cross-sectional designs or had limited sample sizes (Hill et al., 2003; McCabe et al., 2010; O'Donnell, Stein, Machabanski, & Cress, 1982; Parke et al., 2004; Weiss, Goebel, Page, Wilson, & Warda, 1999). To our knowledge, no studies have examined gender differences in behavior problems longitudinally across early childhood in Hispanic children, nor have they addressed associated parenting practices by child gender.

The purpose of the current study was to address the gap in knowledge regarding the emergence of behavior problems among Hispanic preschoolers. This study specifically measures childhood problem behaviors from ages 2.5 to 3.5 because the transition from toddlerhood into early childhood represents an important developmental time frame during which behavior problems typically start to decline (Achenbach, Howell, Quay, Conners & Bates, 1991). We draw from a data set that includes a relatively large sample of Hispanic preschoolers (predominantly of Mexican origin and Spanish speaking) that included two assessment points (ages 2.5 and 3.5 years) to address three research questions. First, what levels and patterns of change in behavior problems are observed in this sample of Hispanic preschoolers? Second, are changes in behavior problems among Hispanic preschoolers across this early period associated with differences in qualities of mothering? Third, are patterns of behavior change and/or associations with mother-child interactions the same for boys and girls? We hypothesized that overall levels of problem behaviors would decline from ages 2.5 to 3.5 and that more sensitive and less intrusive mothering would be associated with lower levels of and a steeper decline in behavior problems. We also hypothesized that externalizing behaviors would decline more for girls than for boys across these ages. In terms of mothers' socialization values, we hypothesized that greater endorsement of *respeto* would be associated with higher levels of externalizing problems.

## Method

### Participants and Procedure

Participants were drawn from a larger longitudinal study of behavioral development and school readiness among low-income, ethnic minority preschoolers that included 407 preschool children, 224 (55%) of whom were Hispanic. Of those, 15 were excluded because the primary caregiver was the father or was not Hispanic. Of the remaining 209 children, just over half (110, 53%) were boys. More than 90% of the families lived below 150% of the federal poverty level, and 44% of mothers had less than a high school education. Most children (86%) lived in two-parent households. Most of the mothers (78%) were born outside the United States, primarily in Mexico (96%). Most mothers (62%) were Spanish-language dominant, and about a third was bilingual. Child language preference based on maternal report indicated 84% preferred to speak Spanish at Time 1.

Two bilingual data collectors visited families in their homes at age 2.5 and again 1 year later. Of the 209 families who completed the initial home visit, 195 (93.3%) completed the follow-up visit. Those lost to follow-up did not differ in terms of child-behavior problems at age 2.5, maternal behavior, or family income.

### Measures

**Child-behavior problems.** During both home visits, the mother completed the Child Behavior Checklist (CBCL; Achenbach, 1991). *T* scores for the Externalizing Problems scale were used for this analysis.

**Maternal behavior.** Characteristics of maternal behavior were assessed at age 2.5 using a 15-min "3-Bags" videotaped interaction (NICHD ECCRN, 1999). Toy stimuli (i.e., a picture book, a small toy kitchen, and a small toy house) were contained in three numbered bags, with one toy in each bag. Mother and child were instructed to spend a total of 15 min with the contents of each bag in order, dividing their time between the bags as they saw fit. Global ratings (1 = *not characteristic*; 5 = *highly characteristic*) of maternal sensitivity, intrusiveness, detachment, cognitive stimulation, positive regard, and negative regard were rated by a rating team that included three who were bilingual. Interrater reliability was calculated based on an intraclass correlation coefficient (ICC; Shrout & Fleiss, 1979) determined from independent double coding of 28% of the videotapes of the Hispanic mother-child dyads and ranged from .79 to .85 for each of the six maternal behavior rating items.

**Cultural socialization values.** The degree to which mothers' socialization values aligned with traditional Latino values was measured using the Cultural Socialization of Latino Children (CSLC) scale (Calzada et al., 2012). The *Respeto* subscale includes such statements as "I believe that children should obey no matter what," and the Independence subscale includes such statements as "I encourage my child to ask questions about what is happening around him." The internal reliability coefficients for *Respeto* and Independence were .83 and .77, respectively.

**Covariates.** Covariates included household demographics, child language ability, and child inhibitory control skills. Receptive language ability was assessed at Time 2 using the *Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test-Revised* (PPVT-R; Dunn & Dunn, 1981)

for English-speaking children and the *Test de Vocabulario en Imagenes Peabody* (TVIP) for Spanish-speaking children (Dunn, Padilla, Lugo, & Dunn, 1986).

Deficits in child inhibitory control have been associated with higher rates of externalizing problem behaviors (Eisenberg et al., 2004; Murray & Kochanska, 2002; Olson, Sameroff, Kerr, Lopez, & Wellman, 2005). We assessed child inhibitory control using three tasks at age 2.5 (i.e., Snack Delay and Wrapped Gift/Wait for Bow; Kochanska, Murray, & Harlan, 2000); and Forbidden Toy, (NICHD ECCRN, 1998) and two tasks at age 3.5 (i.e., Snack Delay and Wrapped Gift/Wait for Bow); we dropped Forbidden Toy due to time constraints. In the Snack Delay task (Kochanska et al., 2000), children were asked to wait until a bell was rung before eating a chocolate candy in four trials lasting 10 s, 20 s, 30 s, and 15 s, respectively. In the Wrapped Gift task (Kochanska et al., 2000), the visitor instructed the child not to peek while a gift was wrapped directly behind them (60 s). During the Wait for Bow phase, the visitor instructed the child not to touch the gift while she left the room to get a bow (90 s). The child and visitor played with an attractive toy car that moves on its own after it is shaken ("Shake 'N Go Racer" by Fisher-Price) in the Forbidden Toy task. After 60 s of back and forth play with the visitor, the child was asked not to touch or play with the car until the visitor returned to the room (150 s). Interrater reliability, calculated using an ICC (Shrout & Fleiss, 1979) for all three tasks, was .99 based on 15% of cases for the Snack Delay task, .90–.99 across the latencies measured for the phases based on 21% of cases for the Wrapped Gift task, and .95 based on 16% of cases for the Forbidden Toy task. Composite indexes of inhibitory control for each time point were created based on results of confirmatory factor analyses indicating a single, underlying factor (Caughy, Mills, Owen, & Hurst, 2013).

## Results

Descriptive data by child gender for child-behavior problems, maternal behavior, and maternal socialization are reported in Table 1. There were no differences in observed maternal behavior or socialization values by child gender. There were no gender differences in child-behavior problems at age 2.5, but at age 3.5, boys

Table 1  
*Gender Differences in Maternal Behavior and Child-Behavior Problems*

Characteristic	Boys: Mean (SD)	Girls: Mean (SD)	<i>t</i>
Externalizing Problems, age 2.5	51.46 (9.04)	49.91 (8.52)	1.28
Externalizing Problems, age 3.5	49.93 (9.31)	46.30 (9.68)	2.67**
Maternal behavior			
Sensitivity	3.31 (.82)	3.41 (.93)	.82
Cognitive stimulation	3.50 (.86)	3.45 (.89)	.34
Positive regard	3.61 (.79)	3.69 (.92)	.64
Negative regard	1.25 (.62)	1.23 (.64)	.24
Detachment	1.34 (.63)	1.32 (.62)	.23
Intrusiveness	2.71 (1.10)	2.61 (1.04)	.65
Maternal socialization values			
Independence	4.45 (.39)	4.48 (.47)	.40
Respeto	4.18 (.52)	4.22 (.54)	.59

+  $p < .10$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ .

Table 2  
*Intercorrelations of Maternal and Child Characteristics at Age 2.5 With Externalizing Problems at Age 3.5*

Characteristic	Full Sample	Boys	Girls
Maternal behavior			
Sensitivity	-.141 <sup>+</sup>	-.287**	.014
Cognitive stimulation	-.136 <sup>+</sup>	-.272**	.012
Positive regard	-.083	-.158	.001
Negative regard	.041	.083	.000
Intrusiveness	.113	.206*	.002
Detachment	.047	.022	.068
Socialization values			
Independence	.078	.012	.170
Respeto	-.093	-.168	-.014
Child language ability (age 3.5)	-.174*	-.334**	.027
Child inhibitory control skills (age 2.5)	-.069	-.051	-.038
Child inhibitory control skills (age 3.5)	-.225**	-.299**	-.046

+  $p < .10$ . \*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ .

had higher levels of externalizing problems,  $t(193) = 2.67, p < .01$ . The average decline in externalizing problems for girls was 3.71 points,  $t(89) = 5.10, p < .001$ , and the average decline for boys was 1.56 points,  $t(104) = 1.93, p = .06$ . Apparently the emergence of significantly higher externalizing problems among boys at age 3.5 was the result of a faster decline among girls.

Intercorrelations between maternal, family, and child variables at 2.5 and behavior problems at 3.5 are displayed in Table 2. For girls, there was some evidence that higher levels of maternal sensitivity and cognitive stimulation at age 2.5 were associated with lower levels of externalizing behaviors at age 3.5, although this correlation did not reach customary levels of significance. The association was stronger for boys. Higher levels of maternal sensitivity and cognitive stimulation at age 2.5 were significantly associated with lower levels of externalizing behaviors at age 3.5. Furthermore, higher levels of maternal intrusiveness at 2.5 were associated with higher levels of externalizing problems for boys, but not girls. Better child-language ability and inhibitory control skills at 3.5 were both associated with lower child-behavior problems at 3.5, but again, only among boys. Socialization values were not correlated with externalizing problems.

Results of a confirmatory factor analysis indicated the best fit model for the maternal behavior variables reflected a single factor for five of the measures (sensitivity, cognitive stimulation, positive regard, negative regard, and detachment),  $\chi^2(2) = 4.11, p = .13$ , comparative fit index (CFI) = 1.0, Tucker–Lewis fit index (TLI) = .99, root-mean-square error of approximation (RMSEA) = .07. A Maternal Sensitivity composite factor was created by summing these five indicators (with negative regard and detachment inverted), and Maternal Intrusiveness was retained as a separate factor.

Results of multivariate analyses of the effects of parenting and child gender on change in behavior problems between ages 2.5 and 3.5, controlling for demographic, child language, and inhibitory control variables, are reported in Table 3. Continuous independent variables were centered to facilitate interpretation. In the first model, we included the main effects for maternal behavior as well as interactions between maternal behavior and child gender. Due to lack of significance, we dropped the interaction between Maternal Sensitivity and child gender in Model 2. There was a significant

Table 3  
 Multivariate Linear Regression Predicting Change in Externalizing Behaviors From Age 2.5 to Age 3.5

Variable	Model 1		Model 2		Model 3	
	<i>b</i> ( <i>SE</i> )	<i>t</i>	<i>b</i> ( <i>SE</i> )	<i>t</i>	<i>b</i> ( <i>SE</i> )	<i>t</i>
Constant	52.99 (2.47)	21.44***	53.34 (2.44)	21.83***	53.64 (2.56)	20.93***
Child gender (1 = girl)	-2.86 (.96)	-3.00**	-2.88 (.96)	-3.01**	-2.82 (1.04)	-2.71**
Maternal language (1 = English/Bilingual)	-1.56 (.99)	-1.58	-1.69 (.98)	-1.72 <sup>+</sup>	-1.97 (1.04)	-1.90 <sup>+</sup>
Maternal education (1 = <HS)	.27 (.99)	.28	.19 (.99)	.19	.48 (1.04)	.46
Family average income-to-needs ratio	.91 (1.20)	.78	.83 (1.20)	.69	.65 (1.34)	.48
Child receptive language ability	-.06 (.04)	-1.53	-.06 (.04)	-1.54	-.06 (.04)	-1.30
Child inhibitory control, age 2.5	.32 (.24)	1.32	.34 (.24)	1.41	.44 (.26)	1.68 <sup>+</sup>
Child inhibitory control, age 3.5	-.50 (.23)	-2.16*	-.53 (.23)	-2.30*	-.56 (.25)	-2.26*
Problem behaviors, age 2.5	.76 (.06)	13.72***	.76 (.06)	13.68***	.75 (.06)	12.74***
Maternal sensitivity composite, age 2.5	.15 (.28)	.54	.32 (.20)	1.57	.30 (.23)	1.30
Maternal Sensitivity × Gender	.35 (.40)	.87	—	—	—	—
Maternal Intrusiveness, age 2.5	1.90 (.68)	2.80**	2.12 (.62)	3.36**	1.98 (.67)	-2.95**
Maternal Intrusiveness × Gender	-1.72 (1.03)	-1.67 <sup>+</sup>	-2.24 (.85)	-2.64**	-1.59 (.93)	-1.72 <sup>+</sup>
Socialization values: Independence	—	—	—	—	-1.94 (1.47)	-1.32
Socialization values: <i>Respeto</i>	—	—	—	—	1.13 (1.14)	.99

<sup>+</sup>  $p < .10$ . \*  $p < .05$ . \*\*  $p < .01$ . \*\*\*  $p < .001$ .

main effect for Maternal Intrusiveness as well as a significant interaction with gender. Results of a simple slopes analysis (Preacher, Curran, & Bauer, 2004, 2006) indicated Maternal Intrusiveness at age 2.5 was significantly associated with increasing Externalizing Problems among boys,  $b = 2.12$ ,  $SE(b) = .53$ ,  $t = 3.37$ ,  $p < .01$ , but not girls,  $b = -.12$ ,  $SE(b) = .70$ ,  $t = -.17$ ,  $p = .87$ . In Model 3, we added the main effects of Maternal Socialization values of *respeto* and independence as well as the interaction between the two. These effects were not significant. Interactions between socialization values and gender were also not significant.

## Discussion

Of the few previously published studies on behavior problems during early childhood among Hispanic children, only two involved relatively large samples (e.g., more than 60 participants; Ispa et al., 2004; O'Donnell et al., 1982), and only three (Gamble & Modry-Mandell, 2008; Ispa et al., 2004; La Roche et al., 1995) applied a longitudinal design. There is a clear need for more information on problem-behavior development in this rapidly growing demographic group. Using a sample of over 200 Hispanic children studied longitudinally, we found similarities in the trajectory of development of problem behaviors when compared with existing studies of other populations. Externalizing problems generally declined from age 2.5 to age 3.5 years, albeit faster among girls than boys. This pattern fits with declines reported in the literature (Coie & Dodge, 1998; Hartup, 1974; Tremblay, 2000). The faster rate of decline for girls is consistent with the view that gender differences in problem behaviors emerge primarily due to a more rapid decline in externalizing behaviors among girls (Keenan & Shaw, 1997). Notably, the average difference in externalizing problems at age 3.5 between boys and girls was small, about three points, or less than a third of a standard deviation.

Our findings regarding parenting and child-behavior problems are consistent with research on other populations indicating that parenting characterized by sensitivity, warmth, and clear expectations for behavior is associated with lower levels of behavior problems. For boys, higher levels of sensitive engaged parenting

and less intrusiveness at age 2.5 were each associated with fewer externalizing problem behaviors 1 year later. A finding from the present study that may be unique to Hispanics is that when both maternal parenting-behavior qualities were examined in multivariate analyses, intrusiveness, but not sensitivity, was uniquely associated with an increase in externalizing problems, but only among boys.

This gender difference cannot readily be attributed to greater maternal intrusiveness with boys than with girls, given the absence of any different treatment for boys and girls observed in maternal behavior. The finding that girls had fewer externalizing problems at 3.5 and greater declines than boys may provide one explanation. Children who are more susceptible to problem behaviors may be more sensitive to both positive and negative parenting qualities (Lakes, Vargas, Riggs, Schmidt, & Baird, 2011). Given that young boys tend to have higher levels of externalizing problems, congruent with our findings of minimal decline in boys' problem behaviors over this period in early childhood, our findings suggest it may be more critical for mothers to be less intrusive with boys than with girls.

Interpretation of the relation of intrusiveness to boys' behavior should also be made with careful consideration of the cultural context of participating families. Markers of maternal intrusiveness include (a) not allowing a child to make choices in his or her play with the toys provided and (b) rejecting or not acknowledging input from the child, thereby undermining child autonomy. Our findings that maternal intrusiveness is associated with more externalizing problem behaviors among Mexican American boys contrasts with the literature on parenting in Hispanic populations and child outcomes. Researchers have found that intrusiveness in Mexican American mothers is not associated with poorer child competence outcomes in the same way as it may be in other ethnic groups (Ispa et al., 2004; Whiteside-Mansell, Bradley, & McKelvey, 2009). However, none of these studies have examined gender differences in pathways from maternal intrusiveness/directiveness to child outcomes. Both qualitative and quantitative evidence has indicated that Hispanic mothers are more likely to support auton-

omy/independence among boys, but being more demanding of girls (Domenech Rodríguez, Donovanick, & Crowley, 2009; Guilamo-Ramos et al., 2007). It is possible that higher levels of directiveness with boys leads to higher levels of externalizing problems because this maternal behavior conflicts with boys' socialization of independence.

Our failure to find a relation between socialization values and child-behavior outcomes contrasts with the findings of Calzada and colleagues (2012), who found that socialization of independence was directly associated with higher levels of externalizing problems among Mexican American 5-year-olds, and socialization of *respeto* was indirectly associated with higher externalizing problems through higher levels of authoritarian parenting. The differences between these findings and ours may be due to the younger ages of children followed in the present study and highlight the need for additional research to elucidate the role of parental socialization values in the development of young children of Mexican origin.

Reports of gender-moderated pathways from maternal behavior to child outcomes, even in non-Latino populations, are exceedingly rare (Baumrind, 1989; Hart, DeWolf, Wozniak, & Burts, 1992; NICHD ECCRN, 2008). We identified only two studies using Hispanic samples, both of Mexican origin and both reporting parenting effects only for boys (Taylor, Larsen-Rife, Conger, & Widaman, 2012; Updegraff, Delgado, & Wheeler, 2009). Whether differences in parental behaviors with boys and girls among Hispanic parents result in differential outcomes in problem behaviors requires further study.

There are several limitations to the present study. Families were predominantly low income, limiting generalizability to more economically diverse populations. Another limitation is the exclusive focus on mothering behaviors and not including fathering behaviors in relation to child-behavior problems. Fathers are important socialization agents for Hispanic children (Cabrera & Bradley, 2012), and the majority of children in this study was living with a father or father figure. In addition, almost a third of the children were living in a household with extended family members. It is important to examine relations between multiple family members and child outcomes for Hispanic families. Another limitation is that participants were combined across generational status and country of origin, which may impact findings. However, because a large majority of participants were first generation immigrants and of Mexican origin, we were unable to examine differences based on generational status or country of origin. Finally, this was a short-term longitudinal study, with behavior outcomes assessed 1 year after initial study enrollment. As we follow these children into school, we will examine whether the patterns identified in this report persist over time.

Despite these limitations, this study makes an important contribution to the limited data on the development of behavior problems during early childhood among Hispanics. The identification of parenting qualities related to increases in behavior problems in young Hispanic boys provides an important target for parenting education and guidance. Parenting education during early childhood is an oft-cited intervention for supporting healthy child development, and it is important that interventions be sensitive to cultural differences among the families they serve. Faced with a difficult-to-control child, many parents respond with increased directives and demands. Our findings suggest that among Latino

families, overly directive responses may be associated with increased problem behavior, at least among boys. Replication of these findings is needed, but evidence from this study of the links between maternal intrusiveness and preschool boys' externalizing problem behaviors suggests approaches to culturally appropriate educational guidance that may be beneficial.

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