Parenting in Immigrant Families: How Contexts Shape Behaviors

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Introduction

A substantial literature has documented the importance of parenting styles and the home environment in shaping children's development and well-being. Differences in parents' warmth and support for children; supervision and monitoring; disciplinary practices; interaction styles; and frequency of playing with, reading to, eating with, and otherwise spending time with children have all been shown to affect children's cognitive and social development. In seeking to improve children's well-being, and to reduce the transmission of disadvantage from parents to children, policymakers have increased investments in parenting programs, including voluntary home visiting programs and classroom based parenting instruction, intended to instruct parents on how to interact with their children in the most supportive ways. Parenting programs have been shown to strengthen parent-child relationships, increase children's cognitive development, and increase positive health behaviors (Hill et al. 2011; Howard and Brooks-Gunn 2009). As immigrant families form a growing share of US families with children, parenting programs in this country will increasingly target immigrant families. In order to add important nuance to the current literature on parenting practices in the United States and to guide the development of parenting supports for immigrant families, we study parenting in immigrant families with young children, focusing on the contextual factors – both supports and obstacles – that affect parenting practices and styles, and highlighting unexplained differences in parenting patterns across national origin groups that may reveal cultural influences.

Parenting practices are strongly shaped by economic resources, limitations on parents' time, parents' work lives, parental mental health, and sources of social and community support, as well as by cultural beliefs (Astone and McLanahan 1991; Cabrera et al. 2011; Gibson-Davis 2008; Lareau 2011; Martin, Razza, and Brooks-Gunn 2012). Immigrant parents are more likely than US-born parents to have low socioeconomic status. Just over one-quarter (26 percent) of children of immigrants live in families with income below the poverty line. In addition, immigrant parents face additional constrains that may affect their children's well-being, such as limited English proficiency or undocumented immigrant status. Just under one-quarter (24 percent) of children of immigrants live in a household in which nobody over the age of 14 is English proficient. The great majority (87 percent) of children under age 18 with foreign-born parents are US born and are US citizens, but about one third (32 percent) have at least one undocumented immigrant parent. Immigrant parents may experience threats to mental health when they are fleeing violence in the home country, have traumatic migration experiences, and/or experience stress due to separation from friends and family in the home country or the difficulties of adjusting to a new context and culture. Immigrant parents may have less social support than other parents, because their extended families are not present. At the same time, immigrant parents are more likely to be part of two-parent families, and may benefit from the social support of strong co-ethnic communities or residence in multifamily households. Understanding the complex contexts in which immigrant families

reside is important for understanding the parenting practices and styles observed in immigrant families, and for designing interventions to help parents support their children as best possible.

Questions

In this paper, we will examine the contexts in which immigrant parents work to support their children's growth and development – including community environments, socioeconomic status, working lives, and immigration background. We will explore the relationship between these contexts and the parenting practices and levels of warmth, responsiveness, and discipline in immigrant families from different world regions. And we will explore how differences in parenting practices are associated with differences in child well-being, looking at variation within immigrant groups. Such research can highlight supports that may be helpful for immigrant parents and inform the development of parenting interventions tailored for immigrant parents.

Specifically, we ask:

1. What are the contexts in which immigrant parents of young children are parenting? What types of constraints to parenting do they face in terms of work lives, mental health, marital status and relationship quality, social support, and language barriers or other factors related to their integration in the United States?
2. How do these contexts shape parenting styles and practices in immigrant families? Do stressful contexts affect the parenting practices of some parents more than others? If so, what seems to explain these differences?
3. What is the relationship between parenting practices and children's socio-emotional and cognitive development within diverse immigrant groups?

Background

There is only limited research available on differences in parenting practices among immigrants of different national origins (Cabrera et al. 2006). This work tends to compare foreign-born parents overall to US-born parents, and show that along some of the most commonly used parenting measure, immigrant parents show less warmth, engage less frequently in supportive activities, and/or demonstrate greater authoritarianism than US-born parents. This is particularly true among immigrants who have arrived to the United States more recently, or who appear less assimilated based on their English speaking ability (Cabrera et al. 2006; Driscoll, Russell, and Crockett 2007; Glick et al. 2012; Ispa et al. 2004a). A more limited set of studies has uncovered differences in parenting among national origin groups from Latin America (Figueroa-Moseley et al. 2006; Schmitz 2005).

Such studies rarely interrogate the reasons behind these observed differences. Although prior work has explored how contexts – minority position, economic and work stress, and family structure and social support – shape parenting practices in African American families, much less work has explored such relationships among immigrant families. Yet, as outlined above, we know that immigrant parents are disproportionately likely to operate in stressful circumstances. Indeed, evidence suggests that all

foreign-born parents, regardless of race/ethnicity, experience greater parenting stress than US-born parents (Yu and Singh 2012).

Our study contributes to this limited literature in several ways. First, we provide a nuanced look at the circumstances faced by parents of young children, exploring information not available in the Census Bureau data that are generally used to look at the socioeconomic contexts faced by immigrant families with young children. Second, we connect these contexts to different measures of parenting practices and child well-being, to highlight the ways in which the different strengths and challenges faced by different immigrant parents shape their parenting practices, and potentially explain observed differences between immigrant and US-born parents. We look at such patterns among immigrant parents overall, and then look separately at Chinese, Mexican, and other Latin American and other Asian immigrant parents, to capture the diversity of immigrant experiences. And we explore how different parenting practices affect children, exploring different associations across immigrant groups.

Proposed study: Data and methods

Data

In this study, we make use of two panels of survey data collected through the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study (ECLS), conducted by the US Department of Education National Center for Education Statistics. The ECLS-B (birth cohort) contains information on a nationally representative sample of approximately 11,000 children born in the United States in 2001. Mothers were interviewed about their parenting and about their children when children were approximately 9 months old (2001-02), 2 years old (2003-04), and 4 years old/preschool age (2005-06), as well as when children were in kindergarten (2006-2007). As explained below, the study also included observations by interviewers and tape recorded mother-child interactions. Both the parent interview and the early care and education provider interview were translated into Spanish. If the parent or provider felt more comfortable speaking in a language other than English or Spanish, translators were utilized when available. The study oversampled children in Chinese origin and other Asian and Pacific Islander origin families. The baseline sample contains approximately 2,200 Hispanic/Latino children, 1,250 Asian or Pacific Islander children, and 2,300 who live in a household where the primary language spoken is something other than English. Previous analysis of the ECLS-B, using different measures, have been able to separate out particular circumstances of Mexican immigrant families, Chinese immigrant families, and those of other Latino immigrants and other Asian immigrants. We also include data from the newer panel of the ECLS-K (kindergarten cohort) study, which contains a sample of children who were in kindergarten in the 2010-11 school year. The ECLS-K has similar numbers of Latino and Asian families as the ECLS-B. The same translation procedures were followed as for the ECLS-B, and the ECLS-K also oversampled children in Asian and Pacific Islander families.

Measures

In addition to containing diverse samples of children in immigrant families, the ECLS-B and ECLS-K data are uniquely well suited to this study because they contain detailed measures of parents' immigration histories, work lives, mental health, social and community support, poverty and material hardship, and parenting practices and the home environment, and many measures of child well-being.

Immigration history, socioeconomic status, and context. In terms of immigration, the surveys ask about mothers' country of birth, age of migration to the United States, citizenship status, the language used at home and English proficiency in reading, writing, speaking and listening. The surveys explore work status by looking at mothers' employment status, occupation, industry, the numbers of hours worked, and the type of work schedule (daytime, overnight, irregular, etc.). Economic circumstances and material hardship are explored through household income and wealth, access to benefits, food sufficiency, housing type, and neighborhood characteristics. We include measures of marital and cohabiting status, as well as relationship quality as reported by the mother. Mental health is measured using the 12-item version of the Center for Epidemiological Studies Depression (CES-D) scale. Social and community support are measured through asking parents how often they see friends, whether they have sources of support when needed, frequency of participation in community and church activities, and whether parents know many of their neighbors. We also consider the presence of other relatives in the household in looking at social support. Our models control for other basic demographics that may vary among immigrant families such as parental age and educational attainment and children's age and gender.

Parenting. The ECLS-B and ECLS-K data include rich sets of measures of parenting styles and activities. First, both include some form of the Home Observation for Measurement of the Environment (HOME) Inventory. This scale differs by child age, but generally includes both self-reported measures of the frequency of family involvement in different activities with children, as well as interviewer observations of the mother's interaction with children during the at-home interview. Parents report on the frequency of activities such as reading, telling stories, singing songs, going on errands, playing, going on various types of outings, and eating together. Interviewers code parental responsiveness along six dimensions, measuring the frequency of different types of behaviors during the interview. Second, the two-year and preschool waves of the ECLS-B asked mothers to undertake different activities with their children and video recorded the parent-child interaction. Trained researchers then observed and coded the interactions to rate parenting along several dimensions, which vary by age. The ECLS-K contains additional measures such as parent-reported measures of discipline, warmth, and supportiveness, as well as measures of the amount of time that parents spend with children during the week and on weekends, and measures of parents' involvement in their children's schooling.

Child Well-Being. The ECLS has numerous measures of child well-being, which vary by child age. In examining the impact of parenting on child well-being, we focus on measures of cognitive development and measures of social and emotional development. To measure cognitive skills, the ECLS-B includes two different direct assessments – the Bayley Scale of Infant Development short form, used in the 9-

month and two-year-old waves, and the ECLS-B Cognitive Assessment Battery, used in the preschool and kindergarten waves. To measure children's social and emotional development, the two-year-old to kindergarten waves ask parents and early educators about children's social and emotional development, using the Preschool and Kindergarten Behavior Scales–Second Edition (PKBS-2) and the Social Skills Ratings System (SSRS). The ECLS-K 2010/11 includes direct assessments of children's reading, math, science knowledge, as well as assessments of executive function – cognitive flexibility and working memory. Teachers are asked to rate children's academic achievement in language and literacy, science, and mathematical thinking. To measure social and emotional skills, the ECLS-K 2010/11 asks parents and teachers to rate children's social skills, problem behaviors, and learning behaviors, such as eagerness to learn, persistence in completing tasks, paying attention, etc.

Analytic strategy

To study how contexts shape parenting in immigrant families, we analyze both the ECLS-B and ECLS-K datasets, separately, to make use of all available measures in each dataset and then combine data from the kindergarten years of both studies, to increase our statistical power and our ability to look at national origin subgroups. First, we look at the different contexts – socioeconomic well-being, work lives, community characteristics, mental health, and social support – in which immigrant parents from different origins operate. Next, we look at how parenting practices vary among national origin groups in both datasets, using parenting measures from all years of the ECLS-B and the kindergarten year of the ECLS-K. Then, we explore how contexts affect parenting practices and the extent to which contexts account for differences in parenting between immigrant and US-born parents and between different national origin groups. Last, we examine how parenting practices are correlated with child well-being, measured as cognitive and social/emotional development, in order to understand which parenting practices and styles are associated with greater child well-being, and which seem to be neutral or negative for child well-being. We focus here on associations between parenting and child well-being within immigrant groups, rather than across national-origin groups for two reasons. First, prior literature has shown that parenting practices that have negative implications for child well-being among some ethnic groups appear to be neutral for child well-being in other ethnic groups (Brooks-Gunn and Markman 2005; Cabrera et al. 2006; Ispa et al. 2004b). Second, we recognize that both parenting practices and child well-being may be affected by unobservable factors, leading us to observe spurious correlations between parenting practices and children's development. Examining correlations within immigrant groups may help reduce some of the variation in unobservable characteristics.

Anticipated results

We expect to find substantial variation in contexts faced by immigrant parents from different origins. Prior data has shown that different immigrant groups have very different average rates of educational attainment, poverty, material hardship, English proficiency, and labor force participation among mothers. Family structure also varies substantially by immigrant origins. Changes in migration streams over time have led to different durations of US residence among different immigrant groups. We also expect to find substantial variation in socioeconomic contexts within immigrant groups. What is less clear is how mental health, social support, parenting stress, and other subjective experiences might vary

among immigrant parents. We are not sure whether to expect large or small variation in mental health and social support within and between immigrant origin groups.

Second, we expect to find that differences in contexts play a strong role in explaining the differences parenting styles and practices that have been observed in prior literature. We expect that socioeconomic circumstances, levels of assimilation (measured through years in the United States and English proficiency), mental health, and social support will all explain substantial portions of differences in parenting between different immigrant groups and within immigrant groups. We expect that social support, including presence of extended family and community involvement, can weigh against the negative impact of low socioeconomic status on parenting.

Third, based on evidence that parenting styles have differential impacts in different racial and ethnic groups within the United States, we expect to find that different parenting practices have different correlations with child well-being among different immigrant groups. We expect that some parenting practices that are normative within an immigrant group will have neutral effects on child well-being, even if such parenting practices are associated with lower child well-being among US-born families. However, we expect to find that certain parenting practices, particularly low parental warmth, are universally associated with lower child well-being, across immigrant groups.

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