

# Helping Latino Parents Learn Skills to Manage Their Children's Mental Health Care

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## What was the research about?

Many children have mental illnesses such as depression. These illnesses can affect a child's physical health and overall well-being. Children with mental illnesses may also struggle to do well in school. Latino children with mental illnesses are half as likely to get mental health care as white non-Latino children. Latino families often report that they have a hard time getting care. When they do get care, they may be unhappy with it. The research team created an education program to teach Latino parents and caregivers skills to help their children get the mental health care they need. Researchers call these skills parent activation skills.

Parent activation skills include

- Having confidence in one's ability to help one's child get the mental health care that he or she needs
- Knowing when and where to get help
- Getting one's child's needs met at each healthcare visit

The research team wanted to know if the educational program improved parent activation skills in Latino parents. The team also wanted to know if the educational program improved children's mental healthcare visit attendance, parents' ability to work with school systems on children's mental health-related needs, and parents' mental health. The

research team compared parents in the educational program and parents in a support group.

## What were the results?

Compared with parents in the support group, parents in the educational program had more improvement in parent activation skills after three months. Parents in the educational program also improved their skills for working with their children's school systems and became more involved in their children's school lives. There were no differences between the two groups in how parents' mental health or children's mental health visit attendance changed during the study.

## Who was in the study?

The study included 181 Latino parents who had children with mental health needs. Families lived in a medium-sized city in North Carolina. The average age of parents was 36.

## What did the research team do?

To design the program, the research team used input from two groups: Latino parents who had children with mental health needs and Latino teens with mental health needs. The study took place in one mental health clinic run by Spanish-speaking staff. Parents joined the study when setting up a visit for their child.

The research team assigned patients to one of two groups by chance. Both groups had a similar number of patients insured by Medicaid. Parents in the first group went to four one-hour educational sessions

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over four weeks. A member of the research team led each session. Each session included teaching, discussion, and role play. The sessions focused on taking care of children's mental health needs, working with doctors, and working with school systems.

Parents in the second group went to four one-hour support group sessions over four weeks. Parents shared experiences and advice. A member of the research team helped lead the discussion, but parents chose the direction of the conversation.

All study activities took place in Spanish. The research team interviewed both groups of parents before the study and then one month and three months after the sessions ended.

### **What were the limits of the study?**

The study took place in one mental health clinic in North Carolina; results may be different in other clinics. Also, the study was relatively small. The results

may be different with a larger group of parents. Parents who took part in the study may have been more open to learn new skills than those who didn't join the study. The educational program might not work the same for parents who didn't choose to join the study.

Future studies could see if the program works as well in different places or with larger groups of parents. Future studies could also see if parents who go through the educational program keep their activation skills beyond three months.

### **How can people use the results?**

Mental health clinics that serve Latino parents could offer an educational program like the one in this study to help parents of children with mental health needs improve their parent activation skills.

*To learn more about this project, visit [pcori.org/Thomas039](http://pcori.org/Thomas039).*