



The Influence of Childhood Trauma on Latino Immigrant Parenting and Intergenerational Healing

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Abstract

This literature review focuses on the causes and effects of intergenerational trauma in Latino communities. It begins with childhood experiences in Latin American countries such as Honduras, Mexico, Guatemala, and El Salvador. Poverty in these areas was a big reason as to why children had more responsibilities and less time for education. However, the belief in *familismo* and *respeto* helped families support and guide one another, especially through hard times. After families migrate to the U.S., expectations can change as parents encourage education, while children may face language barriers and discrimination. These changes and family conflicts can affect mental health, which is often overlooked due to stigma and a lack of mental health awareness. Future research should look into how communication, mental health awareness, and family support can minimize dismissive attitudes toward mental health. This literature review shows how intergenerational trauma cannot be explained by one factor alone, and minimizing its negative effects should be a shared effort among families.

Keywords: intergenerational trauma, Latino families, immigrant families, parenting, mental health

Introduction

Intergenerational trauma is important to study, as difficult experiences do not always end with the person who experienced them. However, this does not mean every Latino child with immigrant parents will experience harmful parenting. Instead, it shows that it is worthy to examine what happens between generations and to analyze changes and continuities rather than looking at each generation separately. Many of the families grew up in Latin American countries where children were expected to work, help with household responsibilities, care for younger siblings, and respect parental authority. These experiences can influence how children understand the balance between work and school, education as a whole, and how their own future children should contribute to their family. How parenting can change or continue can also depend on the environment. After families migrate to the U.S., children can experience less poverty, meaning more access to educational opportunities, which parents often encourage. Gender roles may not be as strongly enforced, which can also contribute to a better understanding of independence for children. This literature review shows how different experiences can make it difficult for generations to fully understand each other when they have vastly different experiences. Sometimes, understanding something fully may require a higher level of vulnerability and stepping into another person's shoes.

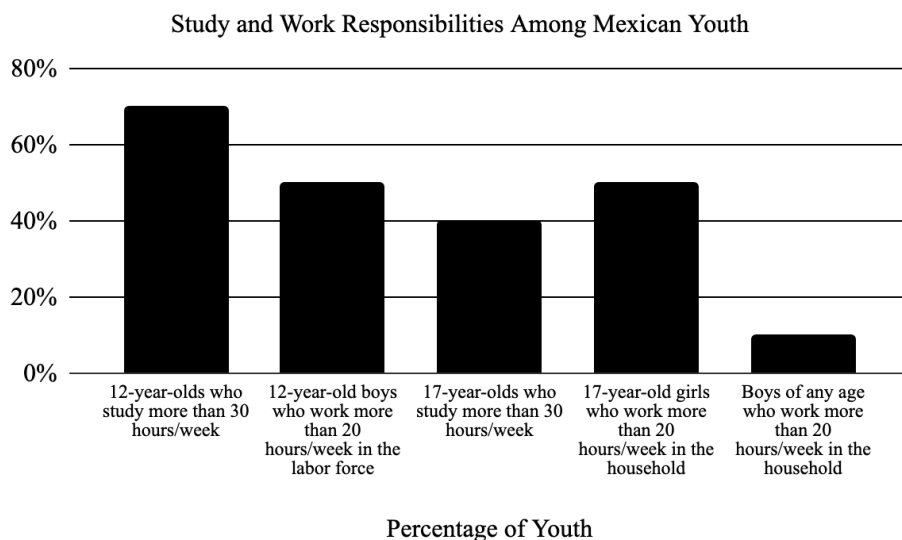


Childhood Experiences in Latin American Countries

Across many Latin American countries, children were the backbone of their family structures. They were introduced to adult-like responsibilities at an early age, with these tasks often differentiated by gender and age. Given the high level of poverty, young boys and men were expected to contribute to the workforce, while young girls and women were often expected to remain home and complete domestic tasks. Children were also students who spent several hours studying at home and at school. However, as families increasingly depended on them, school attendance and time spent studying often declined.

In Guatemala, a common form of labor was working on coffee plantations. While most children between 10 and 15 performed the most tasks, children as young as 3 to 5 began harvesting and collecting fruit (Ayala-Carrillo et al., 2014). In Mexico, children under 14 were prohibited from working, while those between 14 and 15 could only work up to six hours a day and could not perform dangerous labor or work that interfered with education. Despite these laws, they were frequently violated so children could generate income for their families (Levison et al., 2001). This shows that even in places with some governmental protections, work could become something children were accustomed to throughout their lives, potentially creating a generational cycle in which working long hours became normalized and education was less prioritized.

With more responsibilities and children aging, there was a decline in studying. Mexican girls around 12 years old spend 30 hours or more per week studying, but this declined as they became older. By around age 17, they spent more time completing domestic tasks (Levison et al., 2001). Roughly 70% of 12-year-olds studied more than 30 hours per week, compared with 40% of 17-year-olds. Researchers also found differences in how boys and girls divided their time between labor and household responsibilities. The statistics are shown in Figure 1.



El Salvador also showed how migration could affect children's responsibilities. When families received money from relatives who had migrated, children were less likely to participate in paid labor, but this did not mean they stopped working altogether. Instead, some of the time children had previously spent in paid work shifted toward unpaid family work. Around 10% of children between ages 10 and 18 were involved in unpaid non-wage labor. (Acosta, 2011). Girls

in households receiving money from relatives who had migrated were more likely to remain in school because they reduced both wage and non-wage labor. Boys did not show the same increase in schooling and were more likely to shift from paid labor into unpaid family work (Acosta, 2011).

In Honduras, mothers' involvement in household decision-making was also connected to children's education. Researchers examined 6,579 adolescents between the ages of 12 and 16 who lived with their mothers and found that greater maternal decision-making was associated with higher school enrollment. This was especially true for girls (Hendrick & Marteleto, 2017). This demonstrates that Honduran mothers were more likely to prioritize education and that children in Latin American countries did not always lack an education completely.

Reasons Behind Child Labor

Poverty was a major factor in why children were expected to work and contribute to their families so early. Although education was important, parents were not always able to afford schooling and daycare, making labor and household responsibilities necessary forms of childcare and financial relief (Beegle et al., 2001). This was also connected to generational traditions, as parents had often been taught the value of hard work from an early age themselves. These expectations could continue across generations. This does not necessarily mean parents were intentionally limiting their children's childhoods or education as in many cases, poverty demanded sacrifices from the entire family.

Young girls also contributed through household responsibilities, including cooking, caring for newborns and younger siblings, and other domestic tasks. Women in some rural areas also participated in agricultural labor by milking cows or feeding pigs (Beegle et al., 2001). In Guatemala, girls were also expected to eventually have children, as reproduction was seen as a way to maintain the family workforce. (Ayala-Carrillo et al., 2014). This also helps explain why early marriage was common in Guatemalan farmworker families, with roughly 18% of girls marrying between ages 11 and 14 and about 35% marrying around ages 15 or 16 (Ayala-Carrillo et al., 2014). Girls were therefore expected to take on adult roles such as becoming wives and mothers at an unusually early age.

In the families studied by Ayala-Carrillo et al. (2014), boys from 10 to 15 would work the most, generating around 18% of the income, with women over 18 generating around 22%. However, most men over 18 who were seen as the heads of the households and were fathers and husbands generated over half of the entire family's income. This shows that children contributed significantly to their family's income, but because they would not receive payments for their labor, it would be added to their father's income (Ayala-Carrillo et al., 2014). This explains that even with the excessive amount of child labor, they weren't always recognized for their contributions, potentially making children feel that their work was simply expected of them rather than valued.

In Guatemala, migration was also important for finding employment. Families needed to know where and when labor was in demand, how to reach farms and plantations, and how to perform the work effectively. This knowledge was taught and passed down to younger generations (Ayala-Carrillo et al., 2014). Guatemalans would often migrate to Mexico because

of the expansion of coffee cultivation, where wages had greater value and crossing the border was less expensive than migrating to the United States (Ayala-Carrillo et al., 2014).

Gender Roles

Gender roles were reinforced through the expectations adults placed on children. Young boys were viewed as becoming successful men when they were obedient, respectful, and hardworking, qualities that would help them become providers. Young girls were often praised when they helped at home and responded well to authority. Over time, these expectations could become ingrained in children, teaching them that completing their responsibilities increased parental pride. In Guatemala, men were primarily associated with economic roles, while women were responsible for more social and domestic tasks. These traditional gender roles reinforced a patriarchal structure in which women held less authority. Even when women worked in sales or services, they were often paid less than men and continued to perform more unpaid labor (Maupin & Hackman, 2023).

Gender expectations were also reflected in marriage laws and family structures. In Guatemala, a 2015 law prohibited marriage for girls under 18, although 16-year-olds could still marry with judicial permission (Maupin & Hackman, 2023). At the same time, men and women recognized differences in responsibilities, with women spending more time in childcare and household work, while men often viewed themselves as responsible for more purchases and other responsibilities (Maupin & Hackman, 2023). Many men also reported wanting to spend more time in childcare than their fathers had, although roughly 74% of men did not expect their wives to work for money (Maupin & Hackman, 2023). This is important because men may be trying to change these cycles by spending more time with their children. However, if excessive, this can unintentionally minimize the role mothers have in their households, which may reinforce gender inequalities. A way to balance both parental roles could be for women to eventually work in the same fields as men, although the process toward that will be difficult.

Sibling Dynamics

Older siblings often took on responsibilities for younger siblings, including feeding them, preparing them for the day, bathing them, and helping with homework (East & Hamill, 2013). Sibling caregiving could increase children's responsibilities and cause them to grow up quickly because they were functioning as a secondary parent. Heavy caregiving expectations were associated with working earlier and attending school less frequently (East & Hamill, 2013). Older sisters were especially likely to provide sibling care. Roughly 7% of youth who provided little sibling care missed school frequently, compared with 28% of those who provided sibling care daily (East & Hamill, 2013).

However, sibling caregiving was not entirely negative. It could increase emotional intelligence, teaching skills, empathy, self-reliance, and an understanding of social dynamics. Being looked up to by younger siblings could also provide older children with a sense of purpose within the family (East & Hamill, 2013). This shows that the same responsibility could have both positive and negative effects depending on how much responsibility children were expected to carry.

Sibling order also influenced how parents treated their children. Younger siblings could experience more discipline alongside greater parental affection, while older siblings could experience discipline with less affection. At the same time, parents did not necessarily treat children differently without reason; age, gender, personality, and maturity could influence parental expectations (McHale et al., 2005). Siblings who were close in age, the same gender, or responsible for similar tasks often spent more time together. (Updegraff et al., 2005).

Familismo and Respeto

Families also parented according to beliefs surrounding respeto, which involves more than simple respect. Children were expected to recognize parental authority and behave according to family expectations. Respect could strengthen familism by encouraging children to maintain family closeness and conform to parental expectations, which could reduce negative conflict in parent-child relationships (Son et al., 2024). However, excessive control could cause children to respond with hostility, defensiveness, or resistance.

Salvadoran families also placed a strong emphasis on familismo, which valued family loyalty, interdependence, and respect for parents. In the study, adolescents described close relationships with their parents and recognized the hardships their parents had experienced as immigrants (Jensen & Dost-Gözkán, 2015). In Mexican American and other Latine families, respeto could also guide children toward cultural values and strengthen family connections (Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2020). When families strongly valued familism, youth were more likely to prioritize family relationships and avoid conflict, which was associated with lower levels of parent-child conflict (Son et al., 2024).

Children were taught very specific roles from a young age. Boys were expected to work, contribute income, and eventually provide for their families, while girls were expected to cook, care for younger children, help with household work, and eventually become wives and mothers. Children were also expected to obey their parents and put family responsibilities before their own needs. These expectations could later be repeated within their own families through the responsibilities they gave their children, the way they disciplined them, and what they considered necessary for a “good” child. This overall demonstrates how childhood experiences or lack thereof, can continue into the next generation and contribute to generational trauma.

Migrating to the United States

As previously mentioned, the amount of labor worked was only able to provide temporary relief, but it could never solve poverty as a whole. After years of families suffering from constant financial difficulties and unstable employment, migrating to the U.S. started to become seriously considered as a way to break away from the cycle of child labor, lack of education, and limited economic opportunities. Parents described employment in Mexico as less stable, more physically demanding, and less fairly compensated than employment in the United States (Valdez et al., 2022). However, the thought process behind this decision wasn't easy or straightforward for many families. First, the journey to migrate and cross the border was incredibly dangerous. For some families, leaving was difficult because their home country was where they were born and where their culture, family, and community were. They could feel

stuck between wanting better opportunities for themselves and their children while also feeling like leaving meant giving up the place they had always called home.

At the same time, not everyone believed that the opportunities in the United States were worth leaving their home country. Many were very attached to their families and did not want to leave them behind, which relates back to the belief of familismo and how it strengthens the sense of community. Others simply preferred their home countries, describing them as more calm or “más tranquilo.” Some also mentioned experiencing racism in the U.S., which led them to return back home. This shows how the United States was not always viewed as the ideal place that people from poorer countries would automatically want to move to.

The journey itself also discouraged some people from migrating because of the dangers involved. Research on 305 Mexican and Central American migrants found that people faced dangers such as violence, threats, kidnapping, detention, and environmental hazards during the journey. Younger migrants and those traveling with children were also more likely to report experiencing these dangers (Mathis et al., 2026). This shows that migration was not simply a choice between poverty and better opportunities, since families also had to consider the serious risks of getting to the United States.

Even when people did migrate, it did not always mean they stayed. Some youth returned because they were deported, while others returned because they missed home, did not get along with relatives, experienced racism, or simply were not satisfied with their lives in the United States. It wasn't always a straightforward decision of leaving a poor country for a better one. Family, culture, safety, economic opportunities, and personal experiences all played a role in whether someone left, stayed, or eventually came back.

Importance of Education

One of the biggest reasons parents wanted to come to the United States was because they believed their children could have better educational opportunities. As discussed earlier, many of these parents grew up in environments where children were expected to work and contribute to their families, sometimes leaving little time for education. Their lack of education was not always because they did not value school, but because their families needed them to work. After coming to the United States, however, parents began to see education as one of the main responsibilities they wanted their children to have. Some parents specifically told their children that they had a responsibility to study because they did not want them to experience the same struggles they had (Valdez et al., 2022).

For some parents, their children's education also represented something they had personally missed out on. Some described disliking school when they were younger, having to work to help their families, or having family circumstances that made college unrealistic. Because of these experiences, some parents seemed to view their children's education as a chance to accomplish something that they were unable to accomplish themselves. They were willing to continue working hard so their children would not have to work and attend school at the same time. In this way, education became part of the sacrifice parents were willing to make after migrating.

However, this transition was probably not equally easy for every child. A child who had already been able to focus mostly on school in their home country may have had an easier time adjusting to the expectations of American schools. For children who had spent most of their childhood working, especially those who arrived as teenagers, suddenly having school become their main responsibility could have been a major change. The change depended not only on having better educational opportunities in the United States, but also on whether families were able to support their children through that change.

This support was not guaranteed either. One young woman from Mexico came to the United States hoping to save enough money to attend college in Mexico, but after arriving, she received little support from her relatives and eventually became homeless. She later returned to Mexico because she believed she would have more family support there to raise her child. Other young women also returned to Mexico to give birth because they felt they would have more support from their families there (Sidamon-Eristoff et al., 2022). This shows that moving to the United States did not automatically mean that someone's life or education would improve. The opportunities available in the country mattered, but family support and familismo could still determine whether someone was actually able to take advantage of those opportunities.

Parent-Child Conflict

As adolescents grew up in the U.S., they were learning how to balance different parts of their identity. They would still hold onto their cultural heritage and values from their parents, but with racial discrimination at school, they started to feel a sense of isolation. This led to family conflicts, as it was often difficult for parents to have their own expectations while not considering what their teenagers were going through. For instance, it was common for Latino teenagers to act as language brokers, which were those who would translate for their parents who did not speak English (Benner & Graham, 2011). As a result of this, many language brokers reported experiencing more discrimination during their first two years of high school. They also experienced receiving lower grades than they deserved, receiving unfair discipline, being treated differently, or being treated as if others were superior to them, mainly due to racial differences or assumptions about their English abilities. This is important because if school was not seen as an accepting environment for these teenagers, it might make them less likely to follow academic expectations from their parents, leading to more family disagreements and a change in the “respeto” dynamic with their parents. It was often that parents might see this as rebellious behavior, leading to more misunderstandings.

The parents' generation may have experienced limited education, poverty, and language barriers themselves, so they may see their children's access to American education as an opportunity that should be taken seriously. Their children, however, are growing up with opportunities their parents did not have while also facing problems that are specific to their own generation. A parent may think, “I sacrificed so you could have this opportunity,” while the teenager may feel that their parent does not understand what they are dealing with outside the home. The parents might not be seeing how difficult the transition is for their teenagers.

The conflict is therefore not simply about a teenager being rebellious or a parent being controlling. It can come from two generations having completely different



experiences of what it means to succeed, struggle, and belong. However, it also means that while their parents may not understand this, these teens who would eventually grow up to be parents themselves may understand more about cultural differences and the effects of discrimination with their future kids.

Childhood Trauma and Its Effects Across Generations

Those same teenagers eventually grew into adults and began raising children of their own. Unlike their parents, they spent much more of their childhood in the U.S., meaning they were exposed to American schools, culture, and different ideas about independence while still being raised with the values their parents brought into the family. When they became parents, they could carry some of the same expectations they grew up with, such as respeto and familismo, while also having different ideas about independence and how children should be raised.

Growing up in the U.S. may have given this generation a different understanding of parenting than their parents had. This could mean that newer generations of parents combine parts of the values they were raised with while also developing different ways of interacting with their own children. They may still value education, family, and responsibility while being more open to their children having different opinions and experiences.

Immigrant parents described being heavily involved in their children's education, monitoring their children, using their own experiences as examples, and emphasizing education as a way for their children to have opportunities they did not have themselves (Valdez et al., 2022). This means that the adolescents who grew up in the United States could later become parents who still strongly valued education and family, but might approach those expectations differently and less strictly. However, they may not always recognize that some of their parenting behaviors came directly from how they were raised. This is where the cycle can both continue and change.

Mental-Health Awareness and Pathways Toward Intergenerational Healing

One of the biggest difficulties in changing these patterns is recognizing them. Parents may not have grown up with the psychological vocabulary that younger generations have access to today. Experiences that a teenager might describe as emotional neglect, chronic stress, or trauma may simply be remembered by a parent as "how things were." Latinx parents can experience difficulties recognizing mental-health problems and may also experience stigma surrounding mental-health treatment (De Silva et al., 2020). At the same time, parental stress and mental-health difficulties can affect family relationships and parenting (Lozano et al., 2024). Communication becomes especially important because parents and children may not always understand stress in the same way. Cultural stress can create another problem because parents and adolescents may experience the same stressful situation differently, and differences in their levels of cultural stress were linked to poorer communication and depressive symptoms (Lee et al., 2026). A parent may think they are teaching their child to be strong because that is how they learned to deal with problems, while the child may feel like their emotions are being ignored. This does not mean that one generation understands mental health better than the other, but it does show how changes in mental-health awareness can change the way families communicate about problems that may have been difficult to discuss before.

Breaking these patterns requires more than blaming parents for behaviors they learned from their own environments. Intergenerational trauma research emphasizes that these patterns are connected to historical, cultural, family, and structural experiences (Cerdeña et al., 2021). Parental psychological distress and communication can also influence how these experiences affect children (Ochoa et al., 2022). Children can recognize their parents' sacrifices while still acknowledging their own emotional experiences. Family therapy, communication, and greater mental-health awareness can create opportunities for these patterns to change.

When parents and children are able to discuss difficult experiences without immediately dismissing each other, they have more opportunities to understand where their differences come from. Family-based treatment may also help because it addresses relationships rather than only treating one person. A 2025 review found that family-based interventions for immigrant and refugee children generally improved children's mental-health outcomes, although research specifically targeting intergenerational trauma remains limited (Hong et al., 2025).

Conclusion

How intergenerational parenting can change or continue can depend on the environment. After families migrate to the U.S., children can experience less poverty, meaning more access to educational opportunities, which parents often encourage. Gender roles may not be as strongly enforced, which can also contribute to a better understanding of independence for children. However, new challenges can arise, such as feelings of isolation, bullying, language barriers, and understanding one's identity. Not only are these children growing into teenagers, which already brings different experiences, but these new challenges on top of it can lead to potential family-child conflicts. Teenagers are now learning that perhaps they do not follow every strict parental expectation, but when vocalizing their mental health experiences, it may be difficult to receive the validation they deserve when their parents never had long-term exposure to those types of topics. Instead, their parents may have resorted to bottling their emotions up, rarely discussing difficult topics, and expecting their children to react in the same way.

This means these teenagers can continue these cycles when they become parents on some level. However, due to exposure to American norms, schools, and workplaces, they may have a more balanced mindset and approach to parenting, suggesting a change and a break in some traumatic or difficult cycles. However, their past in their countries and how they were raised can still leave effects on their understanding of their children, who may never step foot in those cultural countries. The importance of looking at these experiences together is that intergenerational trauma cannot be explained by one experience or one generation. This also means that parents should not automatically be viewed as the cause of these problems when some may have grown up without the language, resources, or mental health awareness needed to understand their own experiences. At the same time, understanding where these behaviors come from does not mean that harmful patterns cannot be changed.

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