

# PRACTICE NOTES

For North Carolina's Child Welfare Workers

From the NC Division of Social Services and the Family and Children's Resource Program

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*In summarizing recent research, we try to give you new ideas for refining your practice. However, this publication is not intended to replace child welfare training, regular supervision, or peer consultation—only to enhance them.*

## Let us hear from you!

If you would like to comment about something that appears in this or any other issue of *Children's Services Practice Notes*, please do so! Address your comments to:

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## WORKING WITH LATINO FAMILIES

Latinos are the fastest growing population in the United States. In fact, they are now the largest minority group in America. By 2050 one out of every four Americans will be Latino (Census, 2000).

The implications of this demographic trend for North Carolina's child welfare workers are monumental. In the years to come, an increasing number of the families and children involved with the child welfare system will be of Spanish-speak-

ing heritage, and practitioners and agencies need to take steps now to ensure that our state's Latinos will be well served.

This issue of the newsletter aims to prepare you for this change by sharing background information about Latinos, exploring their experience of the child welfare system, and by offering suggestions and insights to help you achieve safety, permanence, and well-being for Latino children and their families. ♦

## LATINOS IN NORTH CAROLINA

Many of North Carolina's county departments of social services, health departments, and other community service agencies are experiencing a steady rise in the numbers of Latino families they serve, and with good reason: North Carolina's Hispanic population is growing faster than any population in the state. In fact, our state has the fastest growing Hispanic population in the U.S.

Given the fact that North Carolina historically has not had a large number of Hispanic residents, it is not surprising that some helping professionals find it challenging to work with this population. Because they are unfamiliar with Latinos, these professionals lack the foundation they need to understand, communicate with, and support Latino families. This article will provide some of the information they will need to begin building this essential foundation.

## ABOUT LATINOS

*Latinos* are people of Latin American

ancestry. *Hispanics* are people who trace their heritage back to any Spanish-speaking country. While we acknowledge this important distinction, in this newsletter we use these terms interchangeably to refer to people whose roots are from the Spanish-speaking countries of North America, Central America, South America, the Caribbean, and Spain.

Latinos are an extremely diverse group—they include individuals with a wide range of characteristics from many different countries, regions, socioeconomic backgrounds, cultures, and races. Therefore it is important not to think of Latinos as a massive, uniform ethnic group.

In this newsletter, particularly in the descriptions of generational issues and Latino culture, we share information in an attempt to support your *cont. p. 2*



**North Carolina has the fastest growing Latino population in the United States.**

## LATINOS IN NORTH CAROLINA *continued from page 1*

practice. However, readers should not assume everything we say applies to all Latinos. This would be like taking a description of North Carolinians (who are themselves a very diverse group) and assuming it held true for every American from Florida to Alaska. To avoid giving offense and to increase your chances of building a positive relationship, when approaching a Latino family it is best to avoid assumptions, to treat them as individuals, and to let them tell you about themselves in their own words.

### NC'S DEMOGRAPHICS

In their introduction to North Carolina Latino demographics, Silberman and Martinez (*in press*) note that over the past decade, the Hispanic population in North Carolina has grown 394%. In 1990 Latinos accounted for 1.04% of the state's population. Today they number 378,963 and comprise 4.7% of the population (Census, 1990; Census 2000).

A significant portion of this growth can be attributed to immigration. Latinos coming to the U.S. are motivated by the same things that motivate other immigrants—an attraction to our freedom and values and/or a desire to improve their lives and the lives of their children.

This growth in the state's Latino population can also be attributed to a rising number of Hispanic births. In the 1990s annual Hispanic births in North Carolina increased more than 500%, from 1,752 in 1990 to 9,484 in 1999 (Silberman & Martinez).

It must also be noted that other Latinos, many of them migrant farm workers, also live in North Carolina and are not included in the population figures above. In 2000 it was estimated that migrant and seasonal farm workers and their families in North Carolina numbered 156,893. Of these, 24,872 were children, 60% of whom were under age 12 (Larson, 2000). Many of these workers and their families are Latino. The N.C. Employment Security Commission estimates there are **at least** 58,000 Hispanic migrants in the state.

Most of N.C.'s Latinos trace their heritage to one of three countries: Mexico (65%),

Puerto Rico (8.2%), and Cuba (1.9%). The remaining 24.8% are from other Central or South American countries, or other Spanish-speaking countries (Census 2000).

Nearly two-thirds of North Carolina's Hispanics are foreign born (64.2%). Almost all of the state's foreign-born Latinos are noncitizens (58.3%)—only 5.9% have been naturalized (Silberman & Martinez, *in press*). All Puerto Ricans are born U.S. citizens.

Since so many are recent immigrants, it is likely North Carolina's Latinos face significant language barriers. More than one-third of the Hispanics in North Carolina (34%) speak English poorly or not at all (Silberman & Martinez, *in press*).

### CHILD WELFARE

Historically, the child welfare system in the U.S. has struggled with serving minority children and families. This struggle, which is often discussed in terms of disproportionate representation and "differential" treatment, is most pronounced when it comes to serving African Americans (see *Practice Notes*, vol. 6, no. 2). Because these issues have been such a concern for our largest minority population, it makes sense that as individuals and as a system we should watch carefully to ensure that disproportionate representation, "differential" treatment, or other issues do not become a concern for Latinos, too.

In North Carolina the child welfare experience of Latino children resembles the experience of non-Hispanics when it comes such measures as the number of times they enter foster care and their chances of entering placement following an initial substantiation (NCDSS, 2002). In terms of achieving permanence in a timely way, North Carolina may actually be doing a somewhat better job with Latino children: in 2001, the median length of stay in foster care for Hispanic children was 382 days, compared to 438 days for non-Hispanic children.

We also know which North Carolina counties are seeing the most Latinos in connection with child welfare. Between July

1996 and December 2001, 1,865 Hispanic children entered DSS placement authority for the first time in their lives (in North Carolina). Eleven of North

Carolina's 100 counties cared for half of these children: Cumberland, Mecklenberg, New Hanover, Guilford, Cleveland, Wake, Durham, Johnston, Forsyth, Buncombe, and Onslow. This is not surprising, since the state's highest populations of Latino U.S. citizens live in Cumberland, Mecklenberg, Wake, and Onslow counties—each has over 20,000 Hispanic residents (Census 2000).

### GENERATIONAL ISSUES

In addition to country of origin and other background issues, Latino families differ with regard to the length of time they have spent in the U.S. These differences are often expressed in terms of a person being first, second, or third generation Latino.

*First generation Latinos* were born in another country and came to the U.S. These families are most likely to adhere to the traditional Latino values described in the following section, and to have less proficiency in English. Children in these families may speak English well (Union County DSS, 2002).

*Second generation Latinos* are born in the U.S. to immigrant parents. Most of these families speak English in their own homes but speak Spanish to their parents. Educated and raised here, many second generation Latinos have assimilated into American culture (Union County DSS, 2002).

*Third generation Latinos* (fourth generation, etc.), the descendants of Spanish-speaking immigrants, may have lost much of the connection to Latino culture and the Spanish language, but may still be very proud of their heritage.

It may be helpful to think about generational differences among Latinos as the result of the process of acculturation, which is defined as adaptation or loss of one's cultural values and behaviors as *cont. p. 3*



One of three Latinos in North Carolina speaks English poorly or not at all.

a result of contact with another culture. Acculturation can have both positive and negative consequences. Hispanics who embrace mainstream American culture may be better able to take advantage of our country's economic and educational resources.

Yet in the process of adopting the ways and values of the dominant culture they may weaken protective connections to their families, communities, and cultural traditions, which may in turn make them more susceptible to mainstream social problems. For example, although most first generation Mexican American women consume little alcohol, research has shown that successive generations come to approximate the drinking patterns of the general population of American women (Grayson, 2001), putting them at greater risk for alcohol abuse.

## TRADITIONAL CULTURE

Despite their differences, traditional Latinos from diverse countries often have common values and cultural norms, such as:

**Familismo (family).** The family is at the center of everyday life, providing members with support and a deep sense of belonging, identity, and purpose. Traits/actions that reflect a Latino's role in the family include:

- Obedience and respect towards authority figures
- Honesty, helpfulness, generosity, and loyalty towards the family
- Responsibility, sacrifice, and hard work for the benefit of the family

*Familismo* is particularly important for Hispanic mothers, since they are the family's primary nurturers and caretakers. Mothers play a vital role in preservation of the family as a unit, as well as in sustaining contact with the extended family (Castellanos, 1986).

Because family is so central, Latinos hesitate to go outside their communities for help, and they treat strangers with caution. Especially if they are new to this country, Latinos may be reluctant to ask public agencies for assistance. Instead, they will turn to those they know for help (Grayson, 2001).

**Value of Children.** Latino families are child-centered. Parents are often very affectionate, and may playfully call young children *papito* (little father) or *mamita* (little mother). Yet in some homes (but certainly not all) children are expected to be seen and not heard (Union County, 2002; Pajewski & Enriquez, 1996).

The value Latinos place on children is reflected in the size of their families: 13% of Hispanic households in North Carolina have four children under age 18, compared with just 3% of non-Hispanics. Nationally, the average Latino household contains 3.63 people; non-Hispanics average 2.6 people per household (Census, 2000).

**Personalismo.** Traditional Latinos place great value on close interpersonal relationships. They like to think of themselves as being friendly and hospitable and strive to be viewed as *simpatico*, a term that encompasses "such qualities as being charming, congenial, agreeable, open, and outgoing. Behaviors or qualities that express this cultural norm include loyalty, honesty, and generosity toward one's friends; hospitality towards others; a sense of mutual trust; and a willingness to help others" (Castellanos, 1986).

From the perspective of *personalismo* it may be irrational to engage in confrontation, even if it is warranted. Thus, Latinos may avoid being a bearer of bad news or upsetting anyone. To avoid disappointing people, Latinos may say what they think the other party wants to hear or give ambiguous responses (De Mente, 1996).

**Respeto** (respect). A core Latino conviction is that all people deserve to be treated with respect and courtesy. "Older Latinos expect and receive respect from younger Latinos . . . . Related to *respeto* are qualities such as humility, deference, submissiveness, and obedience" (Castellanos, 1986).

## RELIGION AND SPIRITUALITY

Faith plays a critical role in the everyday lives of most Latinos. Most are Christian, with the majority belonging to the Roman Catholic Church. As it does for many people, religion offers Latinos a sense of direction in their lives and guidance in the education and raising of their children. Participating in church also gives Hispanics a sense of belonging to a community, something very important to immigrants who have left the communities they know behind.

Depending on where they are from (and other factors), some Latinos also believe in or practice *spiritismo* and/or *santeria*, non-Christian faiths from the Americas and Africa. These individuals may see these beliefs as perfectly compatible with the Christianity they practice. They may also seek medical or mental health care from folk healers known as *curanderos*.

While some of these beliefs and practices may be strange to us, we must take care to show respect for our clients' beliefs and traditions, which are time-honored and an important source of strength (Pajewski & Enriquez, 1996).

**Dignidad** (dignity). "Latinos often strive to present themselves in a dignified manner, especially in public. The violation of one's dignity by another (seen as a lack of *respeto*) is experienced as shameful and humiliating. Qualities associated with *dignidad* are a sense of self-respect and self-pride, such as might be demonstrated through responsibility and hard work" (Castellanos, 1986).

## CONCLUSION

A growing number of Latinos are calling North Carolina home. They bring with them a culture that has shaped and supported Hispanics for centuries. Yet like any immigrant group, Latinos are under pressure to adopt the practices of mainstream American culture, though doing so may cause them a great sense of loss and impair their ability to function.

Rather than adding to this pressure, child welfare workers should make every effort to learn about Latinos and find out how they have traditionally solved problems. ♦

See page 7 for references.

## AGENCY STRIVES TO ADAPT TO DRAMATIC INCREASE IN LATINO CLIENTS: AN INTERVIEW WITH UNION COUNTY DSS

In the 1990s Union County DSS made a concerted effort to improve its services to Latinos. Part of this decision stemmed from the agency's desire to fulfill its mission to serve people in need. Part of it was driven by demographics: Union County saw its Latino population increase from around 750 in 1990 to 7,637 in 2000, an increase of more than 1,000%.

When they heard about what Union DSS was doing, other agencies expressed a desire to learn the "secrets" of their success. Union County responded by delivering workshops about serving Hispanics. In addition, agency employees were featured in the video, *The Latino Perspective* (see below). As part of our ongoing effort to spotlight innovative and successful practice in child welfare, *Practice Notes* interviewed Union County DSS's Ed Moss, Tommy Lopez, Gilberto Colón, and Rodney Little.

**CSPN: When did you realize you needed to improve your agency's ability to serve Latino families?**

**Moss:** I'm over the public assistance program. It became obvious to me that as Latinos began to come in for Medicaid and food stamps, we were just beginning to see the tip of the iceberg.

**CSPN: How did you expand your services to Latinos?**

**Moss:** One of our bilingual, bicultural staff members told me early on, "Ed, once the word gets out in the community, once the families understand there's somebody here who genuinely cares about them, they're going to



**"I don't think we would have been so successful if we hadn't been able to recruit people who were bilingual and bicultural."—Ed Moss**

come in for these services." And we have seen that.

We've been blessed here with a lot of acceptance in the community. I think DSS has played a driving force, but the health department has played an important role in this too, and they're right next door to us. That has helped us tremendously with the families that sometimes don't have transportation.

**CSPN: Are you working more with other agencies that serve Latinos?**

**Colón:** We're in the process of establishing a position in the community called the Hispanic Outreach Specialist, which will serve

as a liaison between English-speaking foster families and the Hispanic community.

**Lopez:** That position is a joint venture between the United Way, Red Cross, and a whole bunch of community agencies, including the Catholic archdiocese.

**Little:** Our director, Roy Young, is heading up the task force establishing that position, which I think is remarkable. Often directors delegate involvement in efforts like this, but our director is taking a hands-on approach by being a chairperson of this task force. I think it is important that efforts to reach out to the Latino community come from all levels. If it only comes from the bottom up, where the service delivery occurs, there's never going to be any dramatic policy or procedural changes.

**CSPN: Are there other factors you think were essential to your success in this area?**

**Moss:** I don't think we'd have been so successful if not for folks we were able to recruit and get to come to Union County, people who were bilingual (*who speak both English and Spanish*) and bicultural (*who are themselves Latino*).

**CSPN: How did you do that?**

**Moss:** I can remember back in the mid-90s when we first began to be aware of the need for more bilingual and Latino workers on our staff. I asked state personnel whether, when we send out recruiting announcements, we can require folks to be bilingual. They said you can't limit the person to be bilingual, but you can put on there that you desire that trait. That's what we began doing and, slowly but surely, things fell into place.

**Lopez:** I came to Union County DSS in 1995 from another county where I had been a Work First worker and then a family foster care worker. Then I heard *cont. p. 5*

### TRAINING RESOURCE

The *Latino Perspective* is a cultural diversity training video produced in North Carolina by Union County DSS in partnership with the Mecklenburg County Departments of Social Services and Health and sponsored by the N.C. Association of County Directors of Social Services. An excellent resource for training individuals and groups, the *Latino Perspective* uses a discussion format to share characteristics of Latino culture, dispel common misconceptions, identify areas of common misunderstanding, and offer suggestions for how to better serve our state's growing Hispanic community.

The *Latino Perspective* costs \$30. To order, send a purchase order to: NCACDSS, "The Latino Perspective" c/o NCACDSS, 3824 Barrett Drive Suite 102, Raleigh, NC 27609. For further information, contact Denelle Manley (919/786-4016; denellemanley@mindspring.com).

about the job and I came. I've loved it here ever since.

**Moss:** We were not able, over the decade, to recruit a lot of bicultural staff, although we tried. We had bilingual staff, but had very, very few bicultural. But we do have some staff with a bicultural perspective—for example, in addition to Tommy and Roberto we have a brother and sister team right now, originally from Guatemala, and a few others.

**Little:** Particularly in CPS, there's a real difference between having that interpreter who communicates from one language to another and having someone like Tommy who's done CPS investigations himself. Because if you are a social worker and you have that background, it is a very different style of communicating and listening. You lose so much when you don't have staff who are bicultural *and* can do investigations.

**CSPN: What were other barriers you encountered?**

**Lopez:** One of the barriers that still exists is fear. People are afraid: "Oh, you speak Spanish, you're different." Yet it's no different. You don't provide services any differently. You just take into consideration the need, the culture.

**Moss:** Another barrier not just in North Carolina but nationally when working with first generation Latinos—in a lot of these countries of origin they do not have human service programs. So we're going to have to somehow educate families about the importance and the need for them to major in human services subjects when they go to college, when they go to school. We need to build a larger base of bicultural social workers who can provide these services—there's not enough of these folks out there right now. It's a critical shortage, you've actually got to go out and search for them. We need more people who say, "I want to be a Latino social worker."

**Lopez:** The other side of that is that we've got to have our institutions of higher education committed to providing a culturally-competent training program, a culturally competent degree outside of traditional educational hours to enable Latinos and others to go to school and provide for their families at the same time.

**CSPN: Is prejudice among agency staff something you have had to deal with?**

**Moss:** I think in the beginning we recognized that within our own agency we had barriers to delivering effective



**"One of the barriers is fear. Fear of someone who's different."  
—Tommy Lopez**

services. These families, when they came into our reception area, for example, had to wait for someone to see them who could speak their languages. So yes, there were definite things that we identified. So first of all we educated our own staff and we got the word out that *of course* civil rights apply to anyone who comes in, whether or not they speak English.

**Colón:** Once they work with Latinos, English-speaking social workers realize *they have the same problems that I have, essentially, as a human being.*

**Little:** I believe it doesn't matter what culture we are from, we were all created equal. If we lose that perspective and we start to isolate people because the way they look, the way they speak, the color of their skin, or the color of their eyes, we've forgotten what social work is, and we need to get back to that. ♦

## TIPS FOR AGENCIES

- **Recruit Bicultural Employees.** Bicultural employees may be able to meet the needs of Latino clients better than someone who can just speak the language. To find prospective bicultural employees, contact universities in other parts of the U.S. that have large Latino populations (e.g., Florida, Texas, California, New York), as well as universities in Puerto Rico and Central and South America.
- **Collaborate with Others to Develop Community Resources.** Agencies should consider pooling their resources and sharing strategies for reaching out to Latinos. Some, such as the health department, may have more experience and therefore more information to share about what works and what doesn't. Also, consider reaching out to groups and organizations important to the Latino community, especially the Catholic Church. Set up a task force in your community. Apply for grants to fund programs.
- **Educate Employees.** Misunderstandings, prejudice, and resentment are common results of increased contact with unfamiliar cultural groups. Every employee from every part of the agency will benefit from cultural competency training and frank discussions of the challenges and rewards of serving a new client population.
- **Open Your Agency Up to Latinos.** To support Latinos, agencies must welcome and accommodate them by providing interpreters, signs and forms in Spanish, and employees who understand and are sensitive to Latino culture. Agencies should also reach out to Hispanics and educate them about the agency and the services available to them. Developing a positive relationship with the broader Spanish-speaking community can make it easier to recruit Latino foster and adoptive parents and may even improve an agency's overall ability to respond to—and prevent—child maltreatment.

## WORKING WITH FIRST GENERATION LATINO FAMILIES

*Editor's Note: Special thanks to Union County DSS for sharing the information and providing direction for the development of this article and this issue of Practice Notes.*

As stated earlier in this issue, nearly two-thirds of the current North Carolina Hispanic population is foreign born. Given this fact, it is highly likely that many of the Latino parents you will be interacting with as a child welfare worker will be first generation.

To enhance your ability to support these families and protect their children, this article will explore common first generation Latino attitudes about authority, discuss issues that may come up in your work with them, and offer suggestions that will help you build trusting, constructive relationships with Latino families.

### VIEWS OF AUTHORITY

First generation Latinos' views of authority are influenced by their experiences in their countries of origin, by Latino cultural norms, and by their experiences here in America.

Although conditions differ among and even within countries, authorities in many Latinos' home countries can be extremely punitive and corrupt. Because attracting the attention of the authorities can have such negative consequences, people learn not to seek official help, even if they have been victimized or are in need. This tendency is further reinforced by the Latino cultural norm of *familismo* which, because of its emphasis on ties to and reliance on relatives and friends, makes people reluctant to go outside their family or community for help.

Some Latinos have also had negative experiences of authority here in the U.S. If they or a family member are here illegally, Latinos may shun authorities because they fear deportation. There also have been reports of Hispanics who have been arrested for minor offenses but spent days or

**As is the case when working with any family, when working with Latinos the first and foremost issue is always the safety of the children.**

weeks in jail due to the lack of translators or attorneys who speak Spanish.

Latinos may also have negative encounters with their employers or landlords. Many of North Carolina's Spanish-speaking immigrants come as

agricultural workers, and in that capacity are subject to low wages, unsanitary conditions, toxic chemicals (herbicides, pesticides), and fraud on the part of employers. If they are undocumented, speak no English, or are simply unaware of their rights, Latinos can be exploited by landlords and other businesses.

All these things, taken together, can cause Latinos to fear and distrust authorities and to assume that people in positions of power do not respect them or their culture. This attitude towards authority may be responsible for missed court appearances or other appointments.

*cont. p. 7*

## WHY WE SHOULDN'T USE FAMILY MEMBERS AS INTERPRETERS

Many North Carolina counties still have few Latino residents. As a result, many county DSS's may be at a loss when they need someone to act as an interpreter when working with a non-English-speaking family.

In these circumstances, agencies and workers may be tempted to use bilingual children or family members as interpreters. As Union County DSS's Rodney Little and Tommy Lopez explain, this is a temptation to which they should not yield:

### CSPN: Is the issue confidentiality?

**Little:** There's that, but it's more the position it puts the child in in terms of the structure of power in the family. I'm thinking about a child who is lower in the family hierarchy than the lead male. Now, because you've asked him to speak for you, the child's got more power because he can interpret and twist the

meaning of what's being said. Or, he may be harmed by being exposed to information about his family that he is not developmentally ready to hear. Or, he may get in trouble for telling the truth.

It puts the child in a very precarious position.

**Lopez:** The traditional Latino family is as it used to be in the American family in the 1950s, with "Father Knows Best." That's all you need to think of.

Never, ever put a child in that position.



**"It puts the child in a very precarious position."  
—Rodney Little**

## OVERCOMING COMMON BARRIERS TO INTERVENTION

**Distrust of Authority.** Distrust of authority figures is a significant barrier to child welfare intervention with Latino families. Yet it is not a concern unique to Latinos, since most families involved with DSS are distrustful and resentful of initial attempts at intervention. Workers can overcome this barrier the same way they overcome it with other families—by being open, warm, and clear about their objectives. Knowledge of and comfort with Latino culture are also tremendously helpful in overcoming this barrier.

**Lack of Cultural Awareness.** A worker's ignorance of Latino cultural norms and values can be a serious obstacle to child welfare intervention. For example, personal rapport and relationship to others—especially family members—is cherished among Latinos. Yet someone unfamiliar with Latino culture might look at Hispanic families and label their relationships as codependent or enmeshed (Grayson, 2001). Similarly, a worker might see reluctance to discuss family matters with an outsider as guilt or resistance rather than as an expression of *familismo*. If one is unfamiliar with a culture, there are limitless opportunities for miscommunication and misunderstanding.

The key to overcoming this barrier is self-education. To familiarize themselves with Latino culture, workers should ask Hispanic coworkers, friends, and clients to help them learn about Hispanic culture. As a secondary approach, they should seek out books, music, movies, and cultural and community events.

**Language** is another significant hurdle for child welfare agencies. To overcome this barrier, they need certain resources, including:

- **Translators.** These professionals translate documents, write client materials in Spanish, and read materials from different countries. Translators must be well-trained in the nuances of the language, culture, particular Hispanic country, etc.
- **Interpreters.** These individuals communicate verbally with clients. Their job is to convey information without changing what the interviewer says. Interpreters unfamiliar with the discipline of interpreting or with child welfare work may interfere by interjecting their own biases and observations into discussions.
- **Bilingual staff.** If they are fluent, bilingual staff have a clear advantage over interpreters in that they have a much better understanding of child welfare work and the agency's role in the family's life.
- **Bicultural staff.** These are agency employees of Spanish-speaking heritage, individuals who bring with them an understanding of the homes of the Latinos in the community—what their experiences are, what they feel when DSS knocks on their door.

Many believe that an agency cannot adequately address the issues of the Latino population by simply translating forms and hiring interpreters. To do this, agencies must employ bicultural staff. As one CPS supervisor explained: "I don't know what it feels like to be first, second, or third generation Latino. You can em-

cont. p. 8

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ploy people to translate and to be interpreters, but you have to have at least one person who is almost an in-house consultant to help you with that.”

### **Family Hierarchy and Gender Issues.**

In traditional Latino families there is usually a clear hierarchy where the head of the household is the oldest male. This person ultimately makes all important decisions for the family. Especially during the initial contact, if it is appropriate and consistent with agency policy, child welfare workers should ask to speak first with the head of the household. Explain your role and the purpose of your visit to this person and, if you wish to speak with other members of the household, ask this person's permission to do so.

If the child welfare worker is a woman, she may have a great deal more success in her interactions with the male head of the household if she treats him deferentially—for example, by letting him

ask many of the questions. At issue here is the head of the household's dignity and, by extension, the dignity of the entire family.

If a child welfare worker disregards hierarchy she may experience delays or difficulty working with the family. For example, the mother may say, “I have to talk to my husband about this.” This is not a stalling tactic, she really must consult her husband. Or the mother may fall silent, stymied by the social worker's failure to involve the father.

### **JOINING WITH THE FAMILY**

- **Avoid assumptions.** Take the time to find out about each family's beliefs and values.
- **Show respect.** Try and talk to the male head of household first. Obtain permission from him to speak to other family members. Be particularly respectful of the elderly.
- **Actively engage the father/head**

**of household** by asking for his opinion/decision. You may wish to say, “Senor, we need a decision from you, we need your help.”

- **Be clear and be yourself.** Be genuine, frank, firm, and polite.
- **Learn Spanish.** Simply making an effort is a sign of respect. A good beginning would be to learn to say *Hola, como está? Me llamo . . .* (Hello, how are you? My name is . . .).
- **Speak clearly,** but not loudly (Latinos speak Spanish, they are not deaf).
- **Recognize the importance of family.** Devote the time and energy necessary to meet as many members of the family as you can. Be ready to help families maintain their traditional family system, even in the face of great obstacles.
- **Don't let language or cultural differences throw you off** from what you know about helping people. ♦

## **IN THIS ISSUE: WORKING WITH LATINO FAMILIES**