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CULTURALLY INFORMED STRATEGIES FOR SUPPORTING LATINO FAMILIES IN AUTISM CARE: A PRACTICE BRIEF

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This practice brief outlines an innovative, research-grounded approach to improving autism services for Latino families—particularly mothers, fathers, and professionals—through culturally responsive, bilingual, and identity-grounded strategies. Anchored in empirical findings and grounded in cultural values such as familismo and personalismo, the brief addresses urgent gaps in service delivery, with a focus on New Mexico's underserved communities. By promoting cultural humility, antiracism, and inclusive care, this model offers practitioners actionable tools to advance health equity and social justice in autism care.

Introduction

Latino children remain disproportionately underdiagnosed or misdiagnosed with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) compared to their non-Latino white peers (Magaña et al., 2013; Wiggins et al., 2020). This disparity stems from systemic issues such as language barriers, cultural stigma, insufficient bilingual services, and a lack of culturally responsive care. While ASD prevalence is increasing—with the CDC (2025) reporting 1 in 31 children diagnosed nationally—Latino families continue to encounter late diagnoses, limited access to services, and inadequate provider engagement (Zuckerman et al., 2017).

This practice brief presents a culturally informed model for supporting Latino families of children with ASD, drawing upon qualitative research with Latina mothers (Bobadilla, 2023b), Hispanic fathers (Bobadilla, 2021), and professionals serving this community (Bobadilla et al., 2024). It aims to close knowledge and service gaps by promoting culturally competent, community-centered, and linguistically inclusive practices in autism care.

Emerging Practice: Cultural Strengths as Clinical Tools

The proposed model centers Latino cultural values—familismo (loyalty and interconnectedness), personalismo (warmth and trust), and respeto (respect across roles and generations)—as foundational components of family-centered care. These values shape how families make decisions, seek support, and interact with professionals. By integrating these relational norms into autism care frameworks, social workers, educators, and healthcare providers can foster stronger trust, compliance, and collaboration (Cruz et al., 2024; Magaña & Smith, 2006).

Key Practice Recommendations

- Use family-inclusive care planning that acknowledges collective decision-making norms.
- Ensure bilingual access across all services and documentation.
- Recruit and train culturally competent professionals, ideally from the communities served.
- Collaborate with promotoras (community health workers) to bridge trust and engagement gaps.
- Normalize parental advocacy as a strength, not a challenge, in care settings.

Relevance to New Mexico

New Mexico is home to a significant Latino population, comprising nearly 50% of the state's demographic. Yet, autism services across the state remain largely monolingual and disconnected from community needs. Research has shown that Latino families in New Mexico often delay seeking diagnoses due to provider mistrust, stigma, and fear of discrimination (Bobadilla, 2023a). By grounding practice in culturally informed strategies, this brief offers targeted solutions for one of the state's most pressing health disparities.



Knowledge and Attitude Gaps

This brief addresses the following critical gaps in workforce practice:

- Limited understanding of how Latino values influence family roles and communication.
- Implicit bias that can pathologize culturally normative behavior.
- Lack of bilingual and bicultural staff, contributing to low service utilization and trust.
- Minimal training on culturally grounded engagement strategies and stigma reduction.

Research consistently shows that culturally incongruent services result in delayed diagnoses, misdiagnoses, and ineffective interventions (Zuckerman et al., 2014; Durkin et al., 2010).

Urgency and Timeliness

This is a critical moment to act. Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) diagnoses have risen steadily in recent years, with current estimates indicating that 1 in 31 children in the United States is diagnosed with ASD (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2025). Concurrently, New Mexico's Latino population—currently comprising nearly 50% of the state's residents—is growing, yet remains disproportionately underserved in autism diagnosis and care (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020; Magaña et al., 2013). Research has consistently shown that Latino children are diagnosed later and receive fewer services than their non-Latino white peers, often due to systemic barriers such as language access, limited provider training, and cultural stigma (Zuckerman et al., 2014; Wiggins et al., 2020). These disparities delay early intervention, which is critical to improving developmental outcomes (Maenner et al., 2023). Moreover, both federal and state mandates—including those tied to Medicaid reimbursement and educational services—require agencies to demonstrate cultural and linguistic competency in service delivery (Office of Minority Health, 2013). This practice brief presents a timely, evidence-informed framework to address these urgent disparities and to align practice with both ethical imperatives and policy expectations.

Promoting Anti-Racism, Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Social Justice (ADEISJ) Principles

This practice brief is grounded in the principles of anti-racism, anti-oppression, and justice:

- Cultural humility: Encouraging professionals to learn from families, not about them.
- Antiracist practice: Disrupting deficit-based narratives about Latino families.
- Equity and inclusion: Ensuring language and access equity through systemic changes.
- Justice-centered training: Preparing professionals to recognize and resist institutional barriers in autism care.

These goals directly align with the National Association of Social Workers (2021) Code of Ethics and its call to dismantle structural inequities in service delivery.

Research Integration

This brief synthesizes findings from qualitative research on Latino caregiving experiences (Bobadilla, 2023a, 2023b), as well as literature on disparities in autism diagnosis (Magaña et al., 2013; Wiggins et al., 2020) and effective interventions (Zuckerman et al., 2014; Cruz et al., 2024). Key themes include:

- Delayed diagnosis due to cultural mismatch and provider assumptions.
- High levels of maternal role strain, especially in single-parent or multilingual households.
- Lack of father engagement in most intervention models, despite research suggesting cultural importance.
- Positive outcomes from bilingual outreach, parent peer support groups, and culturally grounded provider training.

This brief uniquely contributes practitioner-facing guidance based on first-hand community voices and rigorous thematic analysis.

Call to Action

To improve autism care for Latino families, institutions and professionals must:

- Invest in bilingual recruitment, training, and supervision pipelines.
- Revise diagnostic and intake protocols to include cultural strengths-based frameworks.
- Mandate cultural humility training for all autism service providers.
- Support community-led programs and elevate Latino parental voices in service design.

Culturally responsive autism care is not only best practice—it is a justice imperative.

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