

New study says children of poor immigrants can benefit when professionals recognize that mother knows best

May 26 2016, by Alex Russell

It can be a challenge for any mother in the United States to ensure her children get the best education and the best health care possible. It can be even more difficult when her English is limited and she feels inadequate for not understanding the system.

A new policy brief released by the Center for Poverty Research at the University of California, Davis, describes the informal as well as language barriers that Mexican immigrant mothers face in schools and health care settings. It also shows that mothers can partner with professionals who recognize how much they care for and understand their [children](#).

"Much of the relevant cultural capital in these settings is closely linked to material resources or education, so it's not just a matter of 'telling' immigrant mothers that they must arrive on time, or speak up when they have questions," said Ming-Cheng Lo, a professor of sociology at UC Davis and author of the study.

Immigrants may lack 'cultural capital'

Many of the challenges these mothers face, Lo found, has to do with lacking the kind of "cultural capital" that most Americans gain after years of socialization in a middle-class lifestyle and education. Cultural capital is a form of informal knowledge that makes it easier to navigate

social service institutions. It can include knowledge about how a system works, where to get help or how to conduct oneself in a style that staff and professionals consider knowledgeable and worthy of respect.

For many mothers, Lo found in her study, even help from someone who speaks Spanish may not be enough. One study participant said, "I don't want to say anything, because I'm afraid that what I might say wouldn't come out right. ... I don't know how to express myself in these situations ... even when they speak Spanish."

"When we see things in terms of individual decisions or efforts, it can be difficult to realize that not all individuals are equally equipped with the cultural and other resources to be making these decisions or efforts," said Lo.

While these mothers lacked cultural capital, they were able to leverage their capital as mothers to advocate on behalf of their children. As mothers, they cared deeply for their children and understood them well. Lo found that mothers were most successful when they could use these qualities as the basis for partnership and understanding with professionals at their children's schools and hospitals.

Lo interviewed 25 Mexican immigrant mothers with limited English-speaking ability about their experiences advocating for their children. Most of these mothers are undocumented immigrants, but have children who attend public school and access [health care](#). The policy brief is based on a study Lo published in *Sociological Perspectives* in February.

This new policy brief is one of 11 that are now available in both English and Spanish at the Center for Poverty Research website. All resources in Spanish are available in the section "Recursos en Español."

More information: Read the full policy brief on low-income

immigrant mothers.

English: [poverty.ucdavis.edu/policy-bri ... uld-benefit-children](https://poverty.ucdavis.edu/policy-brief/should-immigrants-receive-welfare-benefits-children)

Spanish: [poverty.ucdavis.edu/policy-bri ... beneficiar-los-ninos](https://poverty.ucdavis.edu/policy-brief/beneficiarios-los-ninos)

Provided by UC Davis

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