

Bad behavior may not be a result of bad parenting, but a lack of common language

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Most parents will admit that talking with a teenage child is difficult at times. It is even more challenging when parents and children don't speak the same language fluently—a reality for a growing number of immigrant families in the United States.

New research from Iowa State University suggests this language barrier can have negative consequences for adolescent self-control and aggressive behavior. Thomas Schofield, lead author and assistant professor of human development and family studies at Iowa State, says better understanding this dynamic and improving communication between [parents](#) and teens may have major social implications.

"When teens of immigrant parents struggle, we assume either that the parents are doing something wrong, or that our culture is insufficiently supportive of immigrants. That's why I'm really excited about this research," Schofield said. "Our results show that there's no need for blame here; there are no villains. Removing this language barrier between immigrants and their [children](#) is a solution we can all focus on together."

In two separate studies, Schofield and his colleagues used data of observed interactions between mothers and children in Mexican-origin families. In both samples, positive discipline and warm parenting increased self-control and decreased aggression in adolescents, but only when mother and child were proficient in a common language. If there was a [language barrier](#) and mothers were harsh, adolescents had less self-

control and were more aggressive. The research is published in the *Journal of Research on Adolescence*.

Day-to-day communication was not the problem. These language barriers affect more complex conversations necessary for effective parenting - for example, parents explaining rules or teens talking with their parents about concerns. Schofield says adults sometimes take for granted the shared understanding communication creates - a process that all teens are still learning and trying to figure out (regardless of linguistic background).

"Parents want to make sure our kids understand why we're doing what we're doing, and particularly to explain our actions if we've been inconsistent or insensitive. If adolescents grow weary of jumping that linguistic hurdle when communicating with their immigrant parents, over time they may start to fill that need to communicate with someone else. People do this in any relationship. We stop trying to make it work with the person who can't, and we find someone else who can," Schofield said.

Many teens will naturally turn to their peers instead. It's not that children don't feel loved or feel their parents are bad; it's just too hard to communicate about complex issues, Schofield said. And if their peers are also children of immigrant parents, they may start to see this disconnect from their parents as the norm, Schofield said. This is why families can continue to struggle for several generations post-immigration, even when language is no longer a barrier.

Breaking down the language barrier

If future studies support this link between language and parenting, then Schofield thinks the solution is simple. We support immigrant parents in learning proficient English and children of immigrants to become

proficient in their home language. While simple in theory, Schofield understands it will be difficult to execute. However, the need is great; more than 16 million children in the U.S. have at least one immigrant parent, he said.

Rand Conger and Richard Robins, University of California-Davis; Scott Coltrane, University of Oregon; and Ross Parke, University of California-Riverside; all contributed to this research.

A difference in interpretation

Researchers recognize that even when families share a common language, each member may have a different interpretation of family dynamics and behavior. In a separate paper, Schofield, Parke, Coltrane and Jennifer Weaver, Boise State University, examined the ratings of parents by children, observers and parents in research studies.

They found that the differences offer greater insight as to what's really happening in families and how it affects children. For example, when parents enhance or exaggerate their ratings - saying they're warm and less harsh, even though the child and independent observers say otherwise—children are more likely to be depressed and lonely. However, if parents are more critical of their own behavior (relative to other raters of their behavior), children have higher self-worth. The results are published in the *Journal of Family Psychology*.

"This does not suggest that parents should be hard on themselves, but that children benefit when parents are reflective and self-aware to how they're perceived by their children and other people," Schofield said. "Parenting is a relationship, a 50-50 blend of two people's perspectives."

Researchers typically average the differences reported by parents, children and observers, or focus solely on factors reported by all three.

Schofield says this study shows that such an approach ignores dynamics that are meaningful to understand.

Reinforcing the findings on communication barriers disrupting the parenting process, these differences between reporters of parent behavior were even more strongly linked with child social and emotional development among Latino families than they were among Euro-American families.

Provided by Iowa State University

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