

A new look at the development of minority children

17 December 2013, by Halima Cherif

A new University of Maryland-led study challenges the assumption that minority and immigrant children are most often disadvantaged or at-risk. The study, led by Dr. Natasha Cabrera, an associate professor in the College of Education's Department of Human Development and Quantitative Methodology, also sheds light on the strengths and assets that ethnic and racial minority families bring to raising healthy, well-adjusted children.

The report encourages researchers and policymakers to pay closer attention to how minority families and communities promote [children's](#) development, so that their efforts can be better supported with informed programs and interventions.

The study's findings reveal that [minority children](#) possess unsuspected strengths in three domains of development: social competence, language, and [ethnic identity](#). Many low-income minority children exceed their peers in self-regulation, the ability to manage behavior, emotions, and attention, which strongly influences social skills and academic success.

Past research has commonly shown that low-income, African American children face expressive obstacles and that [bilingual children](#) struggle to acquire vocabulary and understand the meanings of words, but Dr. Cabrera's study reveals the limitations of that research. African American children, it turns out, command oral narrative skills which may uniquely help them read, and they produce narratives of higher quality and possess greater narrative comprehension than their white peers. Bilingual children have similar advantages, including better executive control in nonverbal tasks requiring conflict resolution. In later childhood and adolescence, the formation of a strong ethnic identity promotes self-esteem as well as positive peer and family relationships.

A growing number of younger minority adults are civically active, leading them to exhibit more positive and less risky behaviors and to engage in citizenship and sustaining their communities.

So what are the sources of these good outcomes in ethnic and racial minority children? Dr. Cabrera's study argues for the beneficial effects of three aspects of family life—orientation and obligation, discipline, and cultural socialization. We know that families play critical roles in giving children love, support, and care and in teaching them culturally and socially relevant values, beliefs, and expectations. Somewhat less recognized is the strong cohesion in many minority families that encourages children to self-regulate and to avoid antisocial behavior and deviance.

While a lot of attention has been paid to the negative effects of strict discipline in minority homes, the positive effects of protection and care in the context of parental warmth are now coming to light. Finally, Dr. Cabrera points out that teaching children about the family's culture and fostering their identification with its values, beliefs, and rituals offers such benefits as higher self-esteem, a greater sense of belonging, and a more positive outlook that helps protect them from discrimination and prejudice.

Significantly, Dr. Cabrera's study also identifies gaps in the existing research on minority children. It notes that the bulk of research to date has been conducted with Latino and African American children and calls for more research on the cultural aspects of family dynamics among Asian American and Native American children.

More information: Read the policy report here: www.srkd.org/sites/default/files/2013/12/27/2013-12-27-272-final.pdf

Provided by University of Maryland

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