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Father-figure Presence and Externalizing and Internalizing Problems in Mexican and Dominican American Children

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Abstract

This study examined whether various types of father-figure presence in Mexican ($n = 414$)- and Dominican- American ($n = 336$) households measured at baseline predicted child mental health functioning one year later. Results of linear regression analyses showed that the impact of household structure on child functioning was significant and differed by ethnicity. For Mexican-American children, residing with a step-father or other adult male predicted increased externalizing problems compared to children residing their biological father. For Dominican-American children, residing with no father figure predicted increased externalizing problems compared to children residing with a biological father. Implications for practice and future research are discussed.

Keywords

household structure; father figures; Mexican American; Dominican American; externalizing problems; internalizing problems

Ecological frameworks (e.g., Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994) posit that all adults who reside with children have the potential, albeit to varying degrees, to influence child wellbeing. Extensive research documents the integral roles that mothers *and* fathers play in child functioning (Bögels, Helleman, van Deursen, Römer, & van der Meulen, 2014). Latino fathers, however, have been relatively neglected in the literature even though more than a quarter of U.S. children are Latinx (Cabrera, Aldoney, & Tamis-LeMonda, 2014). In many ways, Latinx household structures differ from non-Latinx black and white households (Turner, Guzman, Wildsmith, & Scott, 2015). The majority of Latinx homes have a father figure. Specifically, 73% of Latinx fathers live with all of their biological children (Karberg, Guzman, Cook, Scott, & Cabrera, 2017), and relative to black and white children of low-income parents, Latinx children of low-income immigrant parents are even more likely to reside with their biological father (Karberg et al., 2017; Turner et al., 2015). Additionally,

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approximately one quarter of Latinx children reside with an unrelated adult (Turner et al., 2015).

Despite the common but varied presence of father figures in Latinx homes, only a few previous studies have examined Latinx family structures. Even less attention has been directed to the impact that father figures who are not biological fathers have on child functioning. Narrowly focusing on the impact of biological parents on children risks overlooking the potential significant influence of other resident male figures – related and unrelated (Turner et al., 2015). To address this gap, the present study explores whether the presence of a father figure, and specifically, whether the type of father figure present in the home predicts externalizing and internalizing problems in young Latinx children.

The Influence of Father Figures

As with children of all racial/ethnic backgrounds, young Latinx children spend a great deal of time with the adults in their home. Most scholars agree that the presence of a male figure in a child's life has important developmental implications, and some posit that that father figures provide a unique contribution because their family roles and interactions with children are often distinct from mothers (Baker, Kainz, & Reynolds, 2018; Cabrera, Volling, & Barr, 2018; Jeynes, 2016; Pleck, 2007). Moreover, a recent meta-analysis found statistically significant effects for the unique influence of fathers on youth social, psychological, and academic outcomes across age groups and for sons and daughters (Jeynes, 2016). Other previous studies show that father figures play a distinct role for children regardless of whether they are the child's biological father (Mascaro, Hackett, Rentscher, Mehl, & Rilling, 2017), but developmental studies with non-biological father figures are rare and have mixed results. For example, previous research documents that step-fathers, compared to biological fathers, may exhibit more negativity and abuse toward children (Alexandre, Nadanovsky, Moraes, & Reichnheim, 2010), while other studies have shown that relative to non-residential biological fathers, step-fathers exhibit increased nurturing behaviors to bolster their relationships with mothers (Manning & Brown, 2013).

Virtually no research has examined how father figures who are not romantically involved versus those who are romantically involved with a child's mother may differentially impact young children. Only a few studies to date have included non-romantic father figures, although these studies did not differentiate non-romantic father figures from other father figures. Dubowitz et al. (2001) compared outcomes of six-year-old children whom received support from biological fathers versus non-biological father figures. In their study, non-biological fathers included any type of father figure identified by the child, and results indicated no differences by father-figure type regarding children's cognitive development and depressive symptoms. Meuwissen and England (2016) found father-figure support was associated with executive functioning in early/middle childhood, whereas another study found no association between type of father-figure presence and child behavioral functioning (Marshall, English, & Stewart, 2001). Discrepancies found in fathering studies suggest the need for more research on the influence of various types of father figures on children.

Household Structures of Latinx Children

As with all families, father-figure research is important for Latinx families. Latinx children, especially those of immigrant parents, are likely to reside with father figures, including their biological fathers and also others (e.g., grandfathers, uncles, non-related adult male boarders; Yoshikawa, 2011). Findings from national surveys indicate that most U.S. Latino fathers are married or cohabitating with their partner and live with all their children (Karberg et al., 2017). On the other hand, Latino fathers may be separated from their children for significant time periods due to immigration and/or socioeconomic circumstances (e.g., migrant farming; Aguilera-Guzmán, Salgado de Snyder, Romero, & Medina-Mora, 2004), leaving children at home with other adults, such as grandparents. Indeed, the majority of Latinx homes in the U.S. (56%) contain a resident grandparent (Vespa, Lewis, & Kreider, 2013).

From an ecological perspective (i.e., Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994), the presence of a grandparent or any other adult in the home will have an influence on the child(ren) in that home, regardless of the specific caregiving responsibilities they assume. Specifically, the interactions between children and adults will have an effect on child development that ranges from minimal to significant depending on the quality (positive or negative) and frequency of the interactions. Additionally, resident adults such as grandparents have been shown to indirectly influence children by providing support to the mother, which in turn facilitates parenting efficacy (Krishnakumar & Black, 2003). Such findings highlight the need to explore how the presence of adults is associated with child development in diverse households. In the present study, we focus specifically on the presence of male adults given our interest in fathers and father figures.

The Mediating Roles of Social Support and Mothers' Parenting Practices

Latino fathers, like all fathers, are believed to impact their children both directly (i.e., father-child interactions, socialization of values) and indirectly (i.e., socioeconomic resources, influence on the family system). Past research indicates children have better cognitive, social, and mental health functioning when their fathers have positive relationships with their mothers (Brock & Kochanska, 2015). Fathers' support of mothers and mothers' reports of positive relationships with fathers have been linked to fewer child internalizing problems and healthier child development (Taylor, Conger, Robins, & Widaman, 2015). Moreover, mothers who receive support are more likely to engage in positive parenting, which further promotes healthy child functioning (Leidy, Guerra, & Toro, 2012; Serrano-Villar, Huang, & Calzada, 2016). Collectively, this literature highlights the importance of studying fathers' indirect influence on children through their impact on mothers' perceived support and parenting behaviors.

Latinx Child Mental Health

In the present study, we consider presence of father figures on child mental health functioning. Mental health problems in childhood, broadly conceptualized as internalizing (anxiety, depression) or externalizing (aggression, hyperactivity, conduct problems)

problems, are relatively prevalent; approximately 1 in 7 young children (i.e., 2- to 8-year-olds) in the U.S. experience mental health problems (CDC, 2016), which is particularly concerning given that these problems often persist into adulthood (Kim-Cohen et al., 2003). Mental health problems reflect a confluence of factors, both innate (e.g., genetic vulnerability, temperament, personality) and external (e.g., stressful life experiences, interpersonal difficulties; Hankin, 2006). However, daily interactions that occur within the home environment are the most proximal influence on children's mental health functioning (Liddle, 2016).

Research on mental health in young Latinx children is scant but there is some evidence that shows Latinx adolescents, relative to their non-Latinx peers, are more likely to experience mental health problems (Ramirez, Gallion, Aguilar, & Dembeck, 2017). Specifically, disproportionately high rates of depression (Isasi, Rastogi, & Molina, 2016) and suicidality (Guzman, Koons, & Postolache, 2009; Kann et al., 2016; Price & Khubchandani, 2017) have been documented in Latinx youth. Research on mental health in early childhood is important for informing prevention efforts to address these disparities.

Mexican- and Dominican-Origin Families

In New York City (NYC), the location of the present study, the Latinx population has historically come from Puerto Rico and the Dominican Republic. However recently, Mexican immigration to NYC has increased by more than 50% which is the largest increase of any other major immigrant group in the city (New York City Department of City Planning, 2013). Such epidemiological changes result in unique social environments for each specific Latinx ethnic group that influences a variety of factors (e.g., SES, informal ethnic group networks, human capital) shown to impact family processes and child mental health (Yoshikawa, 2011).

Indeed, despite their shared Latinx heritage, MAs and Dominican Americans (DAs) differ on an array of sociodemographic characteristics. In NYC, MA homes have lower levels of formal education, fewer employment opportunities, higher levels of poverty, overcrowding, and instability relative to DA households (Yoshikawa, 2011). Furthermore, DAs have access to more informal supports and networks given their population's longer-standing historical presence in NYC. Many DA families in NYC are part of multi-generational ethnic enclaves that provide valuable social support to newly arriving immigrants (Calzada et al., 2017), whereas MA families are more likely to be scattered throughout the city with fewer informal supports available to them upon immigrating to NYC (Smith, 2005). Given the influence that such differences have on parenting and household structures within Latinx families, we found it important to include these two ethnic subgroups in the present study.

The Present Study

In the present study, we advance understanding of how households that vary in father-figure presence directly and indirectly (via social support and mothers' parenting practices) influence young children in Latinx families. We focus on Latinx families from two ethnic subgroups, Mexican American and Dominican American, to account for the rich diversity of

the Latinx population. Including multiple ethnic subgroups in research allows clinicians to better serve all Latinx children.

The first aim of our study was to describe household structures based on father-figure presence, attending to ethnic group differences. The second aim was to investigate if father-figure presence predicted children's externalizing and internalizing problems. We hypothesized that children who resided with a biological father would experience the least, and children who resided with no father-figure would experience the most, externalizing and internalizing problems. We expected mothers of children residing with a father figure to receive more social support and thus, use more positive parenting practices with positive impacts on children as evidenced by fewer externalizing and internalizing problems.

Methods

Participants

Participants were drawn from an ongoing longitudinal study examining early childhood development of MA and DA children conducted in NYC ($N = 750$). Inclusion criteria were mothers who identified as MA or DA and had a child in pre-k/kindergarten in one of 24 public elementary schools in NYC. Mother-child dyads were enrolled between 2010 and 2013. The children in the study were on average 4 years ($SD = .58$) and evenly distributed across gender (51% girls). MA ($n = 414$) and DA ($n = 336$) samples differed on most demographic characteristics (see Table 1).

Procedure

Recruitment occurred in NYC public schools within pre-k/kindergarten classrooms. Families were recruited at the beginning of the school year and interested mothers were consented and scheduled for an appointment with a bilingual research assistant at their child's school. Baseline data was collected from mothers who participated in an in-person interview in the language of choice (English or Spanish). Most mother assessments (98% of MA and 76% of DA) were conducted in Spanish. Interview duration was approximately 90 minutes and mothers were paid \$35. Demographic variables, type of father-figure presence, social support, and parenting items were drawn from baseline data. Mother ratings of child functioning were drawn from follow-up data collected at the end of first grade.

Measures

Father-figure presence

Father-figure presence was categorized into four groups. Children who resided with: (a) biological mother and biological father, (b) biological mother and step-father (c), biological mother and other adult male, and (d) biological mother and no father figure. Categories were created based on mothers' responses to questions regarding her marital status and household composition. Mothers in the former two categories (biological father, step-father) were married, and mothers in the latter two categories (other adult male, no adult male) were single, never married, divorced, separated, or widowed. The father figures in the *other adult*

male category were father figures who were *not* romantically involved with the mother and were primarily grandfathers, older siblings, and other male relatives.

Family support

The Multidimensional Scale of Perceived Social Support (MSPSS; Zimet, Dahlem, Zimet, & Farley, 1988) is a 12-item scale that measures support from various networks (i.e., family, friends). We used the support from family subscale, which included four items with response options ranging from 1 (*very strongly disagree*) to 7 (*very strongly agree*). Mothers were instructed to consider “family members who live in the home” when answering items (e.g., “I get the emotional help and support I need from my family”). Higher scores indicated higher levels of mother perceived social support. (MA $\alpha=.86$; DA $\alpha=.87$).

Parenting

Parenting practices were assessed using the Parenting Practices Interview (PPI; Webster-Stratton, 1998) and the Parenting Styles and Dimensions Questionnaire (PSD; Robinson, Madleco, Frost Olsen, & Hart, 1995). A harsh parenting scale, consisting of 15 items rated on a five-point Likert scale, measured the use of physical punishment (e.g., spanking) and verbal punishment (e.g., yelling, threatening; MA and DA $\alpha = .74$). A positive parenting scale, consisting of 12 items, measured the use of positive parenting practices (e.g., praise, responsiveness, warmth; MA $\alpha = .78$; DA $\alpha = .72$). Higher scores indicated higher levels of harsh and positive parenting behaviors.

Child internalizing and externalizing problems

The Behavior Assessment System for Children-2 Parent Rating Scale (BASC-2 PRS; Reynolds, & Kamphaus, 2004) is a measure of child behavior and emotional functioning for children between the ages of 2.5 and 18 years that has been standardized in Spanish and English. The BASC-2 externalizing problems composite scale includes subscales of aggression (14 items) and conduct problems (17 items). Items include “Bullies others” for aggression and “Breaks the rules” for conduct problems. The BASC Internalizing Problems composite scale includes subscales of depression (19 items), anxiety (17 items) and somatization (20 items). Items include “Is sad” for depression, “Worries a lot of the time” for anxiety, and “Complains about health” for somatization. Participants respond to each item on a four-point Likert scale ranging from 0 (*never*) to 4 (*almost always*). Higher scores indicated more problems (MA externalizing $\alpha = .73$; DA externalizing $\alpha = .66$; MA internalizing $\alpha = .72$; DA internalizing $\alpha = .62$).

Demographics

A demographic form measured poverty status (poverty/not poverty), maternal immigrant status (foreign-born/U.S.-born), maternal employment (employed/unemployed), child gender (girl/boy), child age, maternal age, and total number of people residing in the home.

Data Analysis

Missing data

Maximum likelihood estimation was used to generate 20 imputed datasets, wherein missing data was imputed for all variables with any missing data. Additionally, several covariates were included in the analyses to reduce bias resulting from missing data including child gender, child age, maternal age, maternal employment status, poverty status, maternal immigration status, and total number of people living in the home. Seventy-five percent of the baseline participants participated at follow-up. Attrition analyses comparing families who participated in both data collection waves and those who dropped out showed no significant differences in demographic and study variables.

Main analyses

Mediation analysis was conducted to test whether mother perceived social support and maternal parenting mediated the relations between type of father-figure presence and child mental health functioning. Because no statistically significant indirect effects were observed, direct effects were estimated using linear regression models. A total of 10 regression models were estimated. Child externalizing and internalizing behaviors at follow-up (end of first grade) were regressed on household structure (biological father as reference group), social support (total score), and parenting (positive and harsh). Positive and harsh parenting practices were regressed on household structure and perceived support. Perceived support was regressed on household structure. Covariates were included in each regression model. All analyses were conducted separately by ethnicity. Regression analyses were conducted using Mplus 7 statistical software due to its ability to analyze both cross-sectional and longitudinal data, single-level and multilevel data, and data that contains missing values (Mplus, 2019).

Results

Our first aim was to describe household structure for MA and DA children. As shown in Table 1, MA children were significantly more likely to live with their biological fathers, whereas DA children were more likely to live with no father-figure. Most MA children (81.7%) resided with their biological fathers and with a higher number of total people. Only 53.5% of DA children resided with their biological fathers and 25.7% lived with no father figure. Compared to MA mothers, DA mothers reported a higher level of social support as well as more positive parenting and less harsh parenting. MA and DA children did not statistically differ in mother-rated externalizing and internalizing behavior problems.

Our second aim was to examine how father-figure presence was associated with child functioning (Table 2). Although we found no indirect effects, we identified several significant direct effects. In the MA sample, relative to biological father presence, step-father presence predicted an increase of 5.33 points ($p < .01$) in mother-reported externalizing behavior problem scores at the end of first grade. That is, MA children who lived with their step-father, as opposed to their biological father, were rated as having more externalizing behavior problems at the end of first grade. Similarly, the presence of *other adult male*

predicted an increase of 4.46 points ($p < .01$) in externalizing problem score. No significant difference was found between children living with no father figure and children living with their biological fathers. The presence of a step-father was associated with a 0.36-point decrease in positive parenting scores, whereas perceived support was associated with a 0.12-point increase in positive parenting scores. In other words, the presence of a step-father compared to the presence of a biological father was associated with less positive parenting (i.e., 0.36 points), and mother-perceived support from relatives in the home was associated with more positive parenting (i.e., 0.12 points). However, neither social support nor positive parenting predicted externalizing problems. In contrast, harsh parenting emerged as a significant predictor of externalizing problems ($B = 7.53, p < .001$).

In the DA sample, relative to children living with their biological fathers, having no father-figure presence predicted a 4.78-point ($p < .01$) increase in externalizing problem scores. Children who resided with a step-father or *other adult male* experienced no statistically significant differences in externalizing or internalizing problems compared to children from biological father homes. As in the MA sample, harsh parenting was significantly associated with externalizing problems ($B = 9.75, p < .001$). As in the MA model, social support and positive parenting were not found to be significant predictors of child externalizing behaviors. Only harsh parenting emerged as a significant predictor of internalizing problems in both the MA ($B = 8.06, p < .001$) and DA ($B = 7.30, p < .001$) samples.

Discussion

Father presence has been identified as common and significant to Latinx children's mental health functioning, but past research has been limited and has relied primarily on studies of biological fathers. Given the significant diversity of household compositions within the Latinx population, this study sought to extend previous literature by examining the association between father-figure presence and child functioning, attending to diversity across types of father figures and ethnic groups (MAs and DAs). Our findings suggest the presence of fathers figures in the home predicts child externalizing and internalizing behaviors, with significant differences found between types of father figures.

Our first aim was to contribute to the understanding of the diverse ways in which Latinx households are structured by describing the presence of different types of father figures. Consistent with estimates from national surveys (e.g., Karberg et al., 2017), the majority of MA children in our study resided with two parents. Specifically, over 80% lived with their biological father, an additional 5% lived with a step-father, and less than 7% lived with no father figure in the home. More diversity was observed in the DA sample; barely over half of DA children resided with their biological fathers, and over 25% of DA children lived with no father figure. Importantly, though, both ethnic groups (7% MA; 14% DA) had homes in which other adult males, such as siblings, cousins, uncles, grandfathers, or fictive kin lived with single mothers.

Living with other adults was also common for married mothers. On average, three adults resided in homes of married mothers, with some homes containing up to 14 adults. These adults were primarily grandmothers, grandfathers, and uncles. The extended Latinx family

systems in the U.S., which reflect both cultural values and socioeconomic necessity, have important implications for child development. To illustrate, Calzada, Tamis-LeMonda, & Yoshikawa (2012), found the presence of extended family networks was beneficial when family members provided childrearing and financial support. At the same time, additional adult residents contributed to instability in household structure and overcrowding, causing increased stress.

Accordingly, our second aim was to examine father-figure presence in relation to child mental health functioning. We expected that living with a biological father, compared to other household compositions (i.e., step-father, other adult male, no father-figure), would be associated with fewer externalizing and internalizing problems, mediated by social support to mothers, and by maternal parenting practices. We found no evidence of mediation, but children living with biological fathers showed less externalizing behavior problems compared with children living with step-fathers (MA children), other adult males (MA children), or no father-figure (DA children). Our findings suggest that father figures exert a stronger direct influence on child mental health functioning as opposed to an indirect influence through the mothers' behaviors.

It is unclear why the presence of step-fathers and other adult males were risk factors for MA children but not DA children. As noted above, the link between father-figure presence and child functioning was not explained by social support perceived by mothers or by maternal parenting practices. However, MA children living with step-fathers, relative to biological fathers, had mothers who reported lower levels of positive parenting, which was not the case for DA mothers. It is possible that step-fathers in MA families, too, engaged in less positive parenting and/or more harsh parenting, and the collective impact of compromised parenting practices from both mother and father figure explains the higher risk for externalizing problems.

Regarding the presence of other adult males, perhaps the ethnic group differences observed in the present study are related to the stability (or instability) of their presence in the homes of MA relative to DA children. There is some evidence that MA homes specifically, include household members who perpetually come and go and often work long hours, reducing their contribution to caregiving (Yoshikawa, 2011). Changing household compositions generate instability and difficulty in creating and maintaining routines important to the developing child (McCoy & Raver, 2014). Moreover, adult males who are in the home for short periods of time or who spend long hours outside of the home working may be less likely to assume a father-figure role with resident children, and if they do, the disruption of that relationship may increase risk for behavior problems (Bronfenbrenner & Ceci, 1994). Data on household stability and on the relationship quality between father figures and children were not collected in the present study but should be investigated in future research. It is worth noting the present study findings suggest no impact of father-figure presence on child internalizing problems. Past studies on father presence have also found weak or no relation with child internalizing problems (e.g., Brock & Kochanska, 2015) possibly because fathers exert stronger influence on more extrinsic aspects of child functioning, such as social behaviors (Leidy et al., 2013).

Practice Implications

Our findings have important practical implications for those serving low-income Latinx families. First, our findings implicating harsh/authoritarian parenting as a risk factor for child mental health problems suggest a need for mental health professionals, such as clinical social workers, to implement effective, yet culturally-sensitive parenting interventions aimed at promoting non-harsh strategies for dealing with child misbehavior. Targeting father-figure parenting practices may be an important initial step in this regard, as immigrant Latino fathers are often disciplinarians (Parra-Cardona, Cordova, Holtrop, Villarruel, & Wieling, 2008). Often Latinx fathers face the challenge of redefining their parental roles when family structures and childrearing expectations change as a result of immigrating to the U.S. (Behnke, Taylor & Parra-Cardona, 2008). Thus, an important first step in working with Latinx father figures may be helping them navigate their role as a father-figure within a new cultural environment. For instance, in their study on a cultural adaptation of a parenting intervention with Latinx families, Parra-Cardona et al. (2017) found that fathers benefited from additional sessions on how immigration and acculturation stressors influence parenting. A second focus for clinical social workers may be to assist father figures in parenting in ways that uphold their cultural values. *Respeto* (respect for authority), *familismo* (centering the family's needs over that of an individual's), and *buen educación* (an emphasis on proper behavior) have all been described as values that Latinx parents strive to inculcate in their children, with direct implications for parental roles and parenting practices (Calzada, Fernandez, & Cortes, 2010).

Additionally, clinicians should consider the unique composition of *each* family they encounter given that our study found that father-figure presence (and absence) predicted child functioning in ways that differed by child ethnicity. Because Latinx homes often contain multiple adults, clinicians should be prepared to navigate complex family subsystems to understand and effectively treat family processes that impact young children. Previous research that has examined Latinx parent engagement in interventions have found that including pertinent household members, rather than only the mother and/or father, in child interventions is critical because parenting responsibilities are often shared among several family members (Parra-Cardona et al., 2009). Clinicians, then, should be prepared to help families specify the roles of each adult parental figure, identify how future childrearing decisions are made, and resolve discrepancies between parent figures. This clinical focus may be especially important in homes with shifting household structures (e.g., that result from immigration or migrant labor). Including other important adults, and specifically father figures, may mitigate the negative effects associated with the absence of biological fathers.

Because the underlying mechanisms by which various father figures influence Latinx child functioning remains unclear, there is a strong need for community-based participatory research (CBPR) to inform interventions with Latinx families. CBPR is an approach to intervention research that actively engages the community in the design and implementation of programs (Parra-Cardona, 2009). Accordingly, the identification and treatment of mental health problems within a Latinx community should result from a collaborative process between researchers, clinicians, and Latinx families. Historically, attendance among low-income and minority parents in parenting programs has been low (Brown, Adebeye,

Yusuf, & Chaudhary, 2018). Research on cultural adaptation of interventions further stresses the importance of considering culture and culturally-related barriers, including language, to engaging Latinx families (Calzada et al., 2010; Parra-Cardona et al., 2017). Providing culturally relevant meals, daytime and evening attendance options, childcare, transportation, and monetary incentives may also significantly increase Latinx parent participation (Dawson-McClure, Calzada, & Brotman, 2017).

Additionally, an alternative to clinician-delivered parenting programs that may bolster attendance is the use of parent-led programs (Brown et al., 2018). Research demonstrates that parents can be efficacious in delivering interventions for mental health-related childhood issues (e.g., Barry, Holloway, & Gunning, 2019). Parent-led support groups have been shown to result in positive family and child outcomes such as reduced parental stress and child maltreatment (Polinsky, Pion-Berlin, Williams, Long, & Wolf, 2010).

Limitations and Future Directions

The present study utilized a large sample, highlighted ethnic group differences, and incorporated longitudinal data. Despite these strengths, the study had limitations. We found no support of mediation, perhaps because of limitations in our measures. For example, our measure of maternal perceived support (MSPSS) examined perceived support from all family members in the home rather than specifically from the father figure. Future research should focus on how co-parenting and relationship quality between mothers and fathers influences both parenting (mother and father) behaviors and child functioning overtime. No data was collected on fathers' parenting practices, which may interact with maternal parenting practices in ways that obscure the direct effects of father-figure presence on maternal parenting practices. More generally, data on the relationship between different types of father figures and children, including disruptions in these relationships over time, is necessary to fully explore the ways in which father-figure presence shapes family processes and child development.

Our study focused on the influence of father-figure presence, mothering behaviors, and perceived maternal support on child externalizing and internalizing problems. In future studies, it is important to explore additional ecological factors known to influence fathering, including the father's relationship with other household members, paternal mental health and stress, and cultural beliefs (Cabrera et al., 2014). Further, in cases where household instability is present, researchers should attend to the implications of disrupted adult-child relationships, specifically between fathers and children. Despite these limitations, our study highlighted the rich household diversity among Mexican- and Dominican- American families while examining the understudied topic of the presence of father figures in relation to the mental health functioning of young Latinx children.

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Table 1:

Descriptive Characteristics of Mexican American and Dominican American Youth (N = 750)

Characteristics	MA (n =414)	DA(n =336)	Test Statistic
	M(SD) / %	M(SD) / %	
Father-figure presence			
Bio father	81.7	53.5	69.8 ^{a***}
Step-father	4.6	6.9	1.85 ^a
Other adult male	7.1	13.9	9.38 ^{a**}
No male	6.6	25.7	52.04 ^{a***}
Social support	5.90(1.22)	6.22(.99)	-3.92 ^{b***}
Parenting			
Positive	4.11(.60)	4.33(.46)	-5.50 ^{b***}
Harsh	1.76(.39)	1.68(.39)	2.70 ^{b*}
Child functioning (1 st grade spring)			
Externalizing	46.55(8.19)	47.89(9.93)	-1.73 ^b
Internalizing	52.55(10.34)	51.87(9.58)	.79 ^b
Gender (girl)	52.2	49.7	.45 ^a
Age	4.38(.60)	4.47(.58)	-2.05 ^{b*}
Mother age	31.12(5.66)	33.61(7.64)	-5.10 ^{b***}
Mother employment (employed)	30.4	66.0	90.02 ^{a***}
Poverty status (poverty)	82.1	56.0	57.25 ^{a***}
Immigration status (foreign born)	97.8	84.4	51.28 ^{a***}
Total # of people living in home	5.67(1.89)	4.41(1.37)	10.13 ^{b***}

Note.^a chi-square^b *t*-test, MA = Mexican American, DA = Dominican American*
 $p < .05$ **
 $p < .01$ ***
 $p < .001$

Linear Regression Analysis: Family Structure, Support, and Parenting at Baseline and Child Functioning at End of 1st Grade (N = 750)

Table 2:

Externalizing						
Predictor	MA (n=414)			DA (n= 336)		
	B	95% CI	z	B	95% CI	z
Fr-fig. presence	-	-	-	-	-	-
Bio-father (ref)	5.33	1.48,9.19	2.71**	3.72	-42.7,86	1.76
Step-father	4.46	1.36,7.56	2.82**	1.45	-1.84,4.75	0.87
Other adult male	3.12	-.37,6.61	1.75	4.78	2.08,4.75	3.47**
No male	-0.01	-.68,.67	-0.03	-.72	-1.74,.31	-1.37
Support	-1.03	-2.43,.68	-1.43	.22	-2.20,2.64	0.18
Positive parenting	7.53	-2.43,.37	6.78***	9.75	7.16, 12.33	7.39***
Harsh parenting	.20	***	.24	***		
Total R ²						
Internalizing						
Predictor	MA			DA		
	B	95% CI	z	B	95% CI	z
Fr-fig. presence	-	-	-	-	-	-
Bio-father (ref)	2.07	-2.62,6.78	.87	1.55	-3.26,6.35	0.63
Step-father	3.46	-42.7,33	1.75	2.03	-1.34,5.39	1.18
Other adult male	2.98	-1.56,7.52	1.29	1.60	-1.22,4.43	1.11
No male	-0.05	-.89,.80	-0.12	-0.28	-1.35,.79	-0.51
Support	0.62	-1.14,2.37	0.69	1.96	-49.5,34	1.57
Positive parenting	8.06	5.39,10.73	5.92***	7.30	4.44,10.16	5.00***
Harsh parenting	.13	***	.13	***		
Total R ²						
Positive Parenting						

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Externalizing						
MA (n=414)						
Predictor	B	95% CI	z	B	95% CI	z
Fr-fig. presence						
Bio-father (ref)	-	-	-	-	-	-
Step-father	-0.13	-.63,-.09	-2.59*	-0.16	-.37,.03	-1.52
Other adult male	-0.05	-.34,.13	-0.88	-0.08	-.22,.08	-0.97
No male	-0.00	-.23,.25	0.07	-0.02	-.14,.11	-0.28
Support	-0.27	.08,.18	5.66***	0.07	.02,.12	2.63**
Harsh parenting	-0.04	-.21,.08	-0.82	-0.19	-.31,-.06	-2.91**
Total R ²	.10***.08**					
Harsh Parenting						
MA						
Predictor	B	95% CI	z	B	95% CI	z
Fr-fig. presence						
Bio-father (ref)	-	-	-	-	-	-
Step-father	0.02	-.16,.20	0.22	-0.09	-.26,.08	-1.04
Other adult male	-0.02	-.17,.14	-0.21	0.03	-.09,.16	0.52
No male	-0.00	-.17,.16	-0.01	0.01	-.10,.12	0.18
Support	-0.02	-.05,.01	-1.11	0.02	-.06,.08	-0.86
Positive parenting	-0.02	-.09,.04	-0.82	-0.14	-.23,-.05	-2.92**
Total R ²	.03.09**					
Social Support						
MA						
Predictor	B	95% CI	z	B	95% CI	z

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Externalizing						
			DA (n= 336)			
			MA (n=414)		B	z
Predictor	B	95% CI	B	95% CI	B	z
Fr-fig. presence	-	-	-	-	-	-
Bio-father (ref)	-0.39	-.95,.16	-1.39	-.28,.57	0.14	0.65
Step-father	-0.10	-.57,.36	-0.44	-.36,.28	-0.04	-0.26
Other adult male	-0.48	-1.00,.03	-1.85	-.40,.14	-0.13	-0.94
No male	.05*				.05*	
Total R ²						

* $p < .05$

** $p < .01$

*** $p < .001$