

ODS+ENDS, December 2009

Working with Bicultural Populations to Reduce Risk-taking and Unhealthy Behaviors

Latinos are the largest and quickest growing minority population in the United States. According to 2005 data from the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System, a greater proportion of Colorado's Latino youth engage in several risky behaviors, compared to their peers. ***While just under 76 percent of all Colorado youth reported having drunk alcohol during their lifetime, 83.6 percent of Hispanic youth reported doing so.*** In addition, 34.5 percent of Hispanic youth report binge drinking (consuming 5 or more drinks on one occasion) in the past 30 days, compared to under 30 percent of their Caucasian peers. Similar disparities also exist for indicators gauging violent acts (e.g., physical fights), mental health, and the misuse of other substances.

Researchers have looked at how individuals adapt to living in a new environment and culture to better understand some of the reasons Latino youth may be more at-risk for engaging in unhealthy behaviors. According to the theory of assimilation, individuals lose their ethnic cultural identity and adopt the new, dominant culture's values, norms, and behaviors¹. Research has linked this process to increased negative behaviors in Latino youth, with the more assimilated youth (identifying greatly with American culture) demonstrating higher levels of substance use than less assimilated youth. Bacallao and Smokowski, however, note that developing a bicultural identity may serve as a protective factor for youth. If a youth is able maintain strong ties to his family and ethnic culture while also successfully adapting to the dominant culture (creating a bicultural identity), he is more easily able to navigate everyday situations whether he is at home, school, with friends, or in public.

More recent research has noted, though, that even those who can operate successfully in a bicultural world cope with stress not felt by those individuals who operate only within the dominant culture. Stress that may arise for youth living in two cultures may include "conflict and gaps between generations in the family, the need to learn many languages, [and] peer pressure to preserve their culture of origin²."

Although it is still unclear how adjusting to new cultures may impact any individual, practitioners can take certain measures to best serve clients who are living in or between multiple cultures:

- ***Recognize the difficulties bicultural clients may face in navigating unfamiliar environments, rules, and norms on a daily basis and what stress this may cause in their lives***
- ***Rely on culturally appropriate evidence-based practices and programs that have been tested and shown to be effective in your population of focus***
- ***Engage intermediaries, if appropriate, in your work; these individuals are already engaged in and trusted by the community and can provide insight and access to potential clients***

¹ Bacallao, Martica L. and Paul R. Smokowski. "Entre Dos Mundos" (Between Two Worlds): Bicultural Skills Training with Latino Immigrant Families. *The Journal of Primary Prevention* 26(6): 485-509, 2005.

² Frances McClelland Institute. Living in Two Cultures: Implications for Latino Adolescent Health. *Research Link* 1(6), 2009.