Attributes of Parenting in Native American Families

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INTRODUCTION

There is a general concept within society about what comprises positive parenting, including specific parenting styles and strategies that are more beneficial than others. However, the extent to which the strategies actually differ between families is an issue largely overlooked. The specific ways in which individuals are socialized to parent are influenced by various factors, such as culture, religion, family history, social support, and geographic location. In fact, research suggests that beliefs about childrearing are adopted from one’s culture of origin and are often resistant to change (Bielig & Kim, 1998). Childrearing practices, potentially a source of tradition, are often based on shared beliefs within a culture about the proper way to raise children. The importance of studying parenting interactions is obvious, as parents’ childrearing decisions affect children’s development.

The roots of Native American childrearing practices, interpersonal relationships, and family dynamics are deeply etched in history as they have been passed down from generation to generation. Theoretical articles suggest that Native American parents may have different parenting styles than the majority/colonial dominant (Barlow & Walkup, 1998; Glover, 2001; Jones, Kophart, Langley, Parker, Shenny, & Weeks, 2001; and Leffey, 1973). However, few empirically based studies regarding these topics have been published. Empirical data on parenting strategies and styles, and on problem behaviors in children within the Native American community are necessary to aid clinicians working with Native American parents. This is especially true because most clinicians working with this population are not Native American themselves and thus not typically familiar with Native American cultural beliefs and customs (Barlow & Dauphinais & King, 1992; Walkup, 1998; and Wilkinson, 1980). In the absence of normative data on standardized measures, anecdotal information becomes the primary source for intervention. The current study examined parenting characteristics within a Native American population using both descriptive and well-standardized measures of parenting and child behavior.

METHOD

Participants

A total of 47 parents of children aged 5-12 years participated. Please see Table 1. Most parents were married or living with a partner, and were the biological mother of the child. The average age of parents was 35.77 years (range 20-58), and average age child was 8.45 yrs (range 5-12). There were more female children (n=27) than male children (n=20). Approximately 30% of the parents were Native American (n=14), with 20% White (n=9) and 20% Other (n=9) ethnicities. Approximately 38% of the participants were from reservation settings, 30% from rural settings, 23% from urban areas, and 5% were from “other” or unknown.

Procedure

Participants were recruited from the Midwestern United States and were contacted by word of mouth as well as at pow wows, fairs, and other cultural events. Flyers were distributed to some participants, who later contacted the researchers to receive a packet in the mail. Completed packets were returned via pre-paid postage. Other participants received packets at the event, and either completed and returned the packet at the event, or returned the completed packet by mail. Finally, some participants received packets from previous participants who agreed to distribute packets to eligible families; these completed packets were returned via pre-paid postage. All participants were paid $10 for their participation.

MEASURES

Demographic Questionnaire

Native American Parenting Scale (NAPS) (Newcomb, 2005). This was designed to assess involvement of relatives in childrearing; parenting confidence and discipline; and expectations regarding formal education and traditional native values.

Native American Acculturation Scale (NAAS) (Garrett & Pichette, 2000). This assesses level of acculturation along a continuum from traditional Native American to assimilated mainstream American culture.


RESULTS (continued)

Parenting Scale (PS) Total 3.17 1.05 6.69 x 10⁻⁴ PSS-Family Total 15.72 4.96 1993

ECBI Total 30.76 8.45 2.45 x 10⁻⁴

PS Total 3.17 1.05 6.69 x 10⁻⁴ PSS-Family Total 15.72 4.96 1993

ERB Problem 2.16 0.82 1.42 x 10⁻⁴

PS Total 3.17 1.05 6.69 x 10⁻⁴ PSS-Family Total 15.72 4.96 1993

PSS-Fa/Fr, PS-Fr/Fa, ECBI, PS, PSS-Fa/Fr, and PSS-Fr/Fa are all comparable to those obtained in their respective community. scores of the participating families. Review of the NAPS responses indicated that for the majority of families, one or both parents were primarily responsible for childrearing. However, in most cases, a significant role in childrearing was also shared with extended family members. These family members included grandparents, great grandparents, step-parents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and older siblings.

Confidence in parenting was high, with most reporting they made good decisions regarding childrearing, were consistent with their discipline, and experienced relatively low levels of frustration with their children. Parents also reported being primarily responsible for discipline and teaching their child right from wrong and self-care skills.

This study utilized well-standardized and accepted measures as well as a newly developed measure in order to collect descriptive and normative data on parenting styles/strategies and family characteristics of a diverse sample of Native Americans living in the Midwestern United States.

Families reported a range of parenting practices. In some ways, their reports closely resembled those found in previous literature examining characteristics of Native American families. For example, parents reported extensive involvement of extended family members in childrearing, and they valued knowledge of traditional Native American beliefs for their children. However, parents also placed high emphasis on formal education for their children, and indicated that formal education did not interfere with their children retaining traditional values. In setting educational goals for their children, 58% reported wanting their children to attend college, while 32% reported wanting their child to receive a graduate education. In rating their goals for traditional and mainstream values for their children, about 94% indicated that both traditional and mainstream values were important. These data are consistent with the NAAS scores.

Some clinical implications have emerged from the results of the current study. The data demonstrated that Native Americans in this sample are similar in some aspects of their parenting to what has been reported in previous literature (e.g., reliance on extended family members). However, there have been significant changes from previous literature in some aspects of parenting as well (e.g., value of formal education). These findings underscore the importance of appreciating and understanding the context in which a family operates so as to improve the therapeutic relationship and ensure best therapeutic progress.

Strengths of this study include the assessment of tribal affiliation, reservation vs. urban vs. rural location, reliance on traditional parenting practices, and a measure of acculturation, along with standardized measures of parent and child behavior. Future research with a larger, and more diverse sample, is needed. Inclusion of both descriptive and standardized measures is likely to yield rich data, that will be useful in comparing results of future studies with those of past studies.