**Title**: What Affects Defensive Responding?: Investigating the Effects of Parental Stress, Knowledge, and Family Empowerment on Defensive Response in Latinx Families of Children with Disabilities

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**Introduction**: Latinx families of children with disabilities often experience unique challenges due to cultural, linguistic, and systemic barriers that impact their interactions with educational and support services (Rodriguez et al., 2019; Zarate et al., 2021). Research has shown that these families face heightened levels of parental stress, which can influence their engagement with service providers and lead to defensive responding during interactions (Moreno & Lopez, 2018). Defensive responding, characterized by behaviors such as heightened emotional reactivity, resistance, or denial, can create obstacles in collaborative problem-solving and advocacy for children’s educational needs (Gonzalez et al., 2020). Understanding the factors that contribute to defensive responding is critical, as it not only affects family-school partnerships but also shapes the educational outcomes and well-being of children with disabilities (Aceves & Cisneros, 2017). This study investigates how parental stress, knowledge, and family empowerment impact defensive responding in Latinx families of children with disabilities. While previous research has established that parental stress is a significant predictor of defensive behaviors (Jimenez et al., 2022), less is known about how family knowledge and empowerment interact with stress to influence such responses.

**Method**: We performed regression analyses in R (R Core Team, 2021) employing 96 Latinx parents of children with intellectual and developmental disabilities. The outcome was defensive responding, and the predictors included knowledge, empowerment, and parental stress, which consists of parental distress (PD), parental child dysfunctional interaction (PCDI), and difficult child (DC). We focused on the following analyses. First, we examined the direct effects of knowledge, parental stress, and empowerment on defensive responding. Second, we investigated how knowledge mediated the association between empowerment and defensive responding. Finally, we investigated the effect of knowledge on defensive responding through PCDI, the mediator.

**Results**: Parental stress is positively related to defensive responding. Specifically, parental child dysfunctional interaction (PCDI) and difficult child (DC) are associated with defensive responding. Knowledge has a positive effect on defensive responding. In other words, parents who are more knowledgeable and under stress tend to respond more defensively. Additionally, knowledge mediates the relationship between empowerment and defensive responding. Put another way, empowerment is likely to influence knowledge, which likely increases defensive responding. The association between knowledge and defensive responding is mediated by PCDI. It is noteworthy to see that knowledge tends to increase PCDI, resulting in stronger defensive responses.

**Discussion:** The findings from this study indicate that parental stress is positively associated with defensive responding, particularly in relation to two specific dimensions: parental-child dysfunctional interaction (PCDI) and perceptions of the child as difficult (DC). These findings suggest that when parents perceive a strained relationship with their child or view their child as challenging, they are more likely to respond defensively. Additionally, parental knowledge plays a significant role in influencing defensive responding. Specifically, parents who are more knowledgeable and simultaneously experience high levels of stress tend to exhibit greater defensive behaviors. Moreover, knowledge serves as a mediator in the relationship between empowerment and defensive responding. In other words, empowerment likely increases parental knowledge, which, in turn, enhances defensive responding. Furthermore, the connection between knowledge and defensive responding is mediated by PCDI, as increased parental knowledge tends to exacerbate PCDI, which then strengthens defensive responding. These findings highlight the need for future research to examine the interplay between parental stress, knowledge, empowerment, and defensive responding, emphasizing the need for targeted interventions that address not only stress and defensive behaviors but also the nuances of parental-child interactions and perceptions of empowerment.

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