**Title**: Parenting Stress and Parent Engagement in Community Early Intervention Services for Autism: Differences by Parent Ethnicity

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**Introduction**: The U.S. Surgeon General’s recent advisory highlights the significant levels of stress parents (i.e., parents and other primary caregivers) are experiencing in the United States today (DHHS, 2024). Parenting stress levels are often magnified for caregivers of autistic children(Barroso et al., 2018)and are linked to poorer child outcomes in early intervention (Osborne et al., 2007; Stadnick et al., 2015). Links between parenting stress and child outcomes may be attributed to parent engagement in child services (Haine-Schlagel et al., 2019). However, Latino families and other racial/ethnic minority group often experience unique stressors and barriers to service engagement (e.g., discrimination; limited service knowledge and access to information about autism; Magaña et el., 2013; Lopez, 2014), and thus may experience different patterns of parenting stress and engagement. The present study aimed to understand: (1) racial/ethnic differences in parenting stress for parents of children receiving community EI services for autism/social communication delays, and (2) whether race/ethnicity moderates the link between parenting stress and parent participatory engagement.

**Method**: The present study is a secondary data analysis from a community effectiveness trial of an evidence-based intervention (Project ImPACT; Improving Parents As Communication Teachers) supporting social communication for young children. Participants included 49 caregivers (53% Latino; 37% White Non-Latino; 10% Other) and their young children (ages 12 to 36 months) participating in usual care EI sessions (n = 37 families) or in sessions with interventionists delivering Project ImPACT (n = 12 families). Parents reported family demographics and completed the Parenting Stress Index 4th edition Short Form (Abidin, 2012) during a baseline survey. Parent participatory engagement was assessed from video recordings of EI sessions assessed across three intervals (months 0-1, 2-3, and 4; n=96), using the Parent Participatory Engagement Measure (PPEM) Observational Coding System (Haine-Schlagel & Martinez, 2014). Multiple linear regression assessed differences in parenting stress by ethnicity (Aim 1), and parenting stress x ethnicity interactions in relation to engagement (Aim 2), controlling for experimental group (usual care or Project ImPACT). Caregiver race/ethnicity was coded as a three-level variable: White Non-Latino, Latino, or Other.

**Results**: A trend-level difference in baseline parenting stress was found such that Latino families (B = 14.79, p=.05), but not other Non-White racial/ethnic groups (B=12.13, p=0.23), experience higher levels of parenting stress than White Non-Latino caregivers. Baseline measures of parenting stress were not significantly associated with observed parent engagement (*B* = -0.002*, t* = -0.44, p = 0.662). The association between parenting stress and parent engagement was not significantly moderated by caregiver race/ethnicity (stress x Latinx: *B* = 0.18, *t* = 1.52, p = 0.137; stress x Other: *B* = 0.006, *t* = 0.32, p = 0.753).

**Discussion:** Findings suggest that Latino families experience higher levels of parenting stress than White Non-Latino families, which may relate to the unique challenges they face in navigating developmental services (Magaña et el., 2013), and speaks to the need to provide cultural responsive care to Latino families participating in EI services. Though it is surprising that parenting stress was not linearly associated with parent engagement, it may be that the relationship in this service population is non-linear, such that moderate levels of stress may motivate parents to engage while high levels of stress may hinder parent engagement. Future research should explore potential non-linear associations as well as other potential determinants of parent engagement (e.g., parent treatment expectancies, parent motivation).

**References:**

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