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Latino Children With Autism Are Often Diagnosed Later

Several barriers to care affect when and how Latino kids receive an autism diagnosis.

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About one in 54 children are diagnosed with an autism spectrum disorder. And while the developmental disorder affects children of all races, Latino children are less likely to be diagnosed with autism early on and tend to receive limited access to resources, according to an Arizona State University (ASU) researcher.

Kristina Lopez, PhD, an assistant professor in the ASU School of Social Work, told ASU News how she is addressing Latino disparities in autism diagnosis and treatment.

“Despite increased identification of autism among Latinx children over the past decade, they remain less likely to be identified with autism compared to Black and non-Latinx white children,” Lopez said. “If they are identified, they receive a later diagnosis and reduced quality of care, leaving them susceptible to poorer outcomes.”

Lopez pinpointed several barriers that affect how Latino children with autism are treated. For example, on the individual level, those with parents who don’t speak English are more likely to struggle accessing diagnostic services.

What’s more, implicit bias may impede the referral and diagnostic process—for instance, providers may assume a child from a Spanish-speaking household has delayed speech because they’re exposed to Spanish rather than just English. Such providers might tell a parent that their child is confused instead of sending them for an autism evaluation, leading to a later diagnosis and a loss of intervention time.

Lopez also highlights community barriers, such as the Latino community’s perception of health services and an overall distrust in providers.

“Lastly, at the policy level, barriers are embedded across state and federal health, mental health and education policies that determine autism screening timelines and requirements, access to and cost of diagnosis and treatments and level of care and support for children and families,” Lopez said.

Lopez wants to improve early screening, diagnosis and intervention among Latino children with autism to better identify the needs of these youngsters and their families. Lopez, who is Mexican American, believes that social workers could play an important role in identifying and supporting children with autism, especially minority children.

“Social workers are more likely to be trained to be aware of differences in race, ethnicity, culture, income, gender and ability as well as biases that exist within systems that produce disparities in access to diagnosis and treatment services,” she said.

She believes that social work programs should train people to identify children with autism as well as provide families with the resources necessary to access care.

One successful program Lopez has used to help Latino families understand autism and services available to them is Parents Taking Action (Padres en Acción in Spanish). The model trains Latina mothers of children with autism to share information about autism, advocacy and evidence-based techniques to improve social communication with other Latina mothers.

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