

Understanding Your Child Through Self-Compassion: A Parenting Curriculum For Latinx Families

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Abstract:

Latinx children and youth continue to struggle with mental health disorders at an alarming rate. Although mental health services and policies have been implemented to make treatment more accessible, unique cultural and systemic factors continue to pose barriers for the Latinx community to seek mental health services. Self-compassion and cultural customs such as familism play a large role as protective factors against developing mental health challenges. The focus of the curriculum is on *self-compassion*, an important strengths-based concept that has been shown to aid in increasing parental resilience, mindfulness, emotional self-regulation, and capacity for caregiving for themselves and their children. By familiarizing and strengthening parents’ capacity for self-compassion, they can parent through modeling. The curriculum also acknowledges the importance of Latinx values in parenting while providing opportunities to question and re-frame these values towards their kindest, most compassionate, and least judgmental interpretations. In short, this is the strength of a self-compassion orientation.

Introduction:

In the United States, approximately 13-20% of children live with a mental disorder every year, resulting in an estimated \$247 billion in mental health costs (Okwori, 2022). Despite making up a large portion of the U.S. population, Latinx communities face many unique challenges, including documentation status, lack of access to mental health care, lack of financial resources, limited understanding of the U.S. mental health care system, language barriers, and increased stigma (Jimenez et al., 2020). Latinx families are more likely to have members with ACEs as a result of traumatic events, emotional abuse, physical abuse, sexual abuse, household substance abuse, mental illness, witness to interpersonal violence, parental separation or divorce, incarceration within the family, poverty, and neglect (LaBrenz et al., 2019). For this reason, it is important to recognize and understand risk and protective factors, and interventions that show positive effects on children and parents’ mental health and well-being. Self-compassion has been shown to promote positive parental and child attachments, happiness, reduced parental stress and overall improved mental health outcomes.

Methods:

- The target population for this curriculum proposal is low-income Latinx parents of children with mental health challenges. This population was selected due to the large influence that parents pose on the wellbeing of their children and the strong association between parental conflict and mental health challenges among children in high conflict households (LeCloux et al., 2017; Rice & Tan, 2017; Similä et al., 2017; Stewart et al., 2022). In addition, this population can greatly benefit from the practice of self-compassion due to its positive impact on parenting (Jefferson et al., 2020; Lathren et al., 2020; Mancini et al., 2022) and its high resonance with *familismo*, a cultural characteristic prevalent within Latinx communities which involves placing the family’s needs over one’s self (Kapke et al., 2016).
- This group will ideally be taking place in a community-based mental health or wellness center that also includes services for children and youth with mental health disorders, the group facilitators should make arrangements with the center to be able to provide appropriate childcare or youth-focused services are available during the group.
- Participants for the curriculum will be recruited through social media platforms and flyers posted at community parks, wellness centers, churches, and health clinics. The flyers will be available in English. In addition to posting flyers, community members working for the host center will engage in face-to-face recruitment in the same locations where the flyers will be posted.

Results:

Description of Curriculum *Understanding Your Child Through Self-Compassion* is a **5 session, 2 hours each session** curriculum for low income, Latinx families of children with mental health disorders to promote self-compassion and mindfulness and improve overall mental health among themselves and their children.

Session 1: **Introduction-** will briefly highlight the prevalence of and impact of mental illness on children and youth. The facilitator will introduce main topic of self-compassion, starting a discussion with participants on their own perception of their level of self-compassion and experience with self-compassion growing up. Participants will be given a pre-test self-compassion short form scale adapted by Kristin Neff.

Session 2: **Self-Compassion-** will continue with self-compassion education, educating/discussing with participants how they can implement self-compassion alongside important cultural values such as familism, respect, obedience, and other cultural values.

Session 3: **Mindfulness** will combine self-compassion with mindfulness by noticing areas in their lives where parents experience self-judgment and criticism through handouts and activities.

In Session 4: **Positive Skills for Everyday Parenting**, the facilitator will apply new knowledge and skills to everyday parenting of children with mental health challenges. Positive and effective skills will build upon Latinx cultural values as well as different styles based upon unique interests and personalities.

In Session 5: **Closing**, participants will review lessons learned and skills gained through the curriculum. Participants will retake the self-compassion short form scale adapted by Kristin Neff (Raes et al., 2011) and compare it to the initial score completed at Session 1.

Goals and Objectives

The goal of this curriculum is to improve mental wellbeing among low income, Latinx parents and their children who have mental health challenges through the promotion of self-compassion and mindfulness among parents. The objectives of this curriculum are:

Objective 1: Increase self-compassion among parents

Objective 2: Increase the skills of mindfulness among parents

Objective 3: Increase parental capacity to support children with mental health challenges by modeling self-compassion and using improved skills associated with self-compassion and mindfulness

Summary of Findings

- In a meta-analysis of 18 studies, Suh and Jeong (2021) investigated the role of self-compassion as a **protective factor against Suicidal Thoughts and Behaviors** (STB) and Non-Suicidal Self-Injury (NSSI).
- **Self-compassion** in relation to **parenting children with mental health challenges was associated with higher life satisfaction, happiness, hope for the future, better outcomes** for parenting stress, more functional relationships with their children, higher goal reengagement after a failed goal, and less irritation by their child’s behavior and a **reduction of depressive symptoms** and **parental stress** (Neff & Faso, 2014). Neff and Faso (2014) emphasized higher levels of self-compassion among parents raising children with Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) **increased their emotional resiliency** and experienced **greater life satisfaction** compared to those lacking self-compassion.
- Self-compassion also played a role in **promoting early parental attachment** (Lathren et al., 2020; Mancini et al., 2022).
- In another systematic review and meta-analysis of 13 studies with 809 participants, Jefferson et al. (2020) found that self-compassion and mindfulness-centered parenting interventions **significantly improved parental self-compassion**.

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Implications:

Implications for Social Work Practice, Policy, and Research

- Mental health disorders affect 13-20% of youth (Okwori, 2022). When left untreated, mental health disorders, such as depression and anxiety may further result in death by suicide. The prevalence of suicide has also increased, impacting youth ages 10-24 years and contributing to the second leading cause of death in the United States and the fourth leading cause worldwide (Curtin & Garnett, 2023; Godshall et al., 2024; SAMSHA, 2024). Family dysfunction patterns resulting from abrupt family changes, family conflict, family trauma, parent instability, and other stressors play a large role in contributing to higher stress and poor mental health outcomes for both children and parents (Rice & Tan, 2017). Self-compassion has the potential to curb these problems and has been correlated with less depression and anxiety and higher levels of optimism and happiness (Neff, 2003, 2014; Neff & Faso, 2014; Shenaar-Golan et al., 2021). Self-compassion has also been found to buffer against non-suicidal self-injury and suicidal thoughts and behaviors (Suh & Jeong, 2021). In relation to parenting, self-compassion has shown positive implications for parents and their children. It further promotes early parental attachment and reduces isolation and sense of rejection (Lathren et al., 2020; Mancini et al., 2022).
- Despite the implementation of policies, fear, stigma, and the lack of culturally specific resources in the Latinx community continue to prevent these individuals from seeking services. For these reasons, there needs to be a shift in community mental health that promotes and provides access to free or low-cost parenting classes tailored to the Latinx community. Policy changes also need to address the political and economic conditions faced by the Latinx immigrant community. In fact, community or mental health agencies, in general, fail to acknowledge the unique obstacles and challenges that the Latinx community face.
- Due to an overall lack of research on parenting interventions for the Latinx community, additional research is needed to explore how parenting curriculum can positively influence the mental health and behaviors of young children. Familism is a core value of the Latinx community that allows them to connect as a unit; however, the research also suggests that familism can promote self-abandonment and increased pressure on youth (Hernández et al., 2010; Wasserman et al., 2024). Future research should integrate familism in a way that promotes putting one’s own needs and self-compassion as a means to strengthen the family unit

Conclusions:

In conclusion, mental health disparities continue to be an area for concern as mental health diagnosis and suicidal behaviors continue to climb among Latinx adolescents. Latinx individuals are exposed to various levels of oppression, discrimination, and adverse childhood experiences that place them at risk of developing a multitude of physical and mental health disorders. However, Latinx communities continue to face a plethora of barriers to access and receive mental health services, and in fact, they are the least likely to seek mental health services across other groups. Latinx families required culturally adapted interventions that consider their culture, background, traditions, and strengths. Using an approach such as self-compassion which is easily adapted to be culturally sensitive and relates to Latinx values such as familismo and respeto show potential for improving parenting outcomes.

References:

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