Adolescence is contemporarily defined as a transitional period in life between childhood and adulthood that typically takes place between the ages of 13 and 18. Factors such as the onset of puberty and the assumption of adult responsibilities are characteristics define adolescence. Adolescence can be characterized by rebellion, becoming self-aware, and developing a sense of identity. One of the most important features of adolescence is the propensity of these teenagers to want to have their own space and become individuals. Parents become crucial leaders of their children by helping guide them into adulthood by teaching them skills that will create good habits for the future.

There are some shared characteristics of adolescence that transcend cultural and ethnic divides. The concept of adolescence is not universal, in fact, adolescence is a culturally constructed definition that only emerged few centuries ago in Europe. In some languages, there is no equivalent term clearly demarcating a period of psychological and personal development. For many newcomers to the contemporary United States, adolescence is a new concept. Many Latinos, specifically Mexicans, who were not raised with these same perception fall into this category.
Perspectives on Individual, Collectivism, and Assimilation

At the very foundation of the adolescent time frame lie two differing cultural experiences: the individual versus the collectivist. In traditional Mexico, the collectivist, family-orientated, perspective dominates how life goals are pursued. Family is always taken into consideration and dictates how youth must respond to life decisions. Contrary to this model, there exists a propensity to emphasize the individual in the United States. Here, parents are expected to allow a child to grow as an independent, strong human being.

The transitional phase from Mexican collectivism towards American individuality is referred to as the process of assimilation. Authors M. Patricia Fernández Kelly and Richard Schauffler in “The New Second Generation” view assimilation in two facets: descriptive and normative. The descriptive aspect defines the range of adjustments towards the environment and points to the manner in which immigrants blend into larger societies. In the normative sense, assimilation is linked to the expectation that foreigners will shed, or at least, contain their native cultures while embracing the norms and standards of the host country (Portes 30).

Researcher Charles Hirschman highlights assimilation as an “intergenerational process.” Immigrants—the first generation—are handicapped by their newcomer status and rarely are expected to achieve socioeconomic parity with native populations. The second generation, through the faculty of public education, are expected in theory to internalize the immigrant belief in the American Dream and accomplish the same standard of living as any other native ethnic group (Portes 55-56).

Adolescence cont.

This work-intensive life coupled with the typical large Mexican family, resulted in significant responsibilities for everyone, children included.

Many Mexican families were born on “el rancho” or the farm. On “el rancho”, the survival of the family depended on everyone pitching in to do his or her own part. Due to the long working hours in “el rancho” and their large families, young Mexican adolescents found themselves becoming young mothers and fathers to their siblings. Young girls had to learn how to cook, clean, maintain a home, and care for their siblings. Young boys often worked in the fields or farm with their fathers in order to help them support the large family. Parents were still a part of their lives, but they expected a great deal from their children. Typically, education was not a priority for these families because it was a luxury that most people in “el rancho” could not afford to give their children, even if they wanted to. As a result, adolescents could not develop the sense of independence that is often associated with the traditional American view of adolescence. The shared unit and interdependent nature of the Mexican family made adolescence a different experience.

Across the United States, it is common to find 2nd generation Mexicans adolescents struggling to reconcile the world their parents grew up in and the American culture and “way of life” that they live in. The combination of both these worlds has resulted in a mixed view of what adolescence and its significance for Mexican-American youth. The adolescents find that they are neither “de aqui or de alla”.

Adolescence cont.

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Adolescence cont.
Identity within the Mexican Community

The process of assimilation will naturally experience a backlash, a desire to maintain the cultural distinctiveness that has defined the Mexican community for so long. So, what effect does this have for the second generation? There is an identity crisis, which particularly is skewed towards acknowledging oneself as a foreigner. According to the PEW Hispanic Center’s National Survey of Latinos, 41% of second-generation Latinos refer to themselves first by the country of origin of their parents, with only 33% using American first followed by 21% referring to themselves as Latino/Hispanic first. Going along with this trend, we find a stronger reaffirmation of ethnic identity. This has been accredited to the stronger emphasis and prominence of the Hispanic culture in mainstream society. However, more so than this, there is less of a general emphasis on assimilating into the American culture by parents. Statistics indicate that nearly 40% of second-generation Latinos recognized that their parents promoted pride in their country of origin. On the other hand, there were only 24% of individuals who felt that the American identity was being promoted. Compared to the first and third generations, second-generation youths are definitely found in the middle, between the two extremes in the process of assimilation (PEW – see graph).

In The Mexican Transnational Family Experience in South Bend, authors Katharine Feeley and Erin Jelm discuss how parents need to understand and recognize the different social environment and public pressures that their children face in contrast to their own youth experiences in Mexico. In particular, Feeley and Jelm highlight how children today need to be recognized and reaffirmed as unique and distinguishable individuals from other people (Feeley and Jelm 6). In the process of this individualistic attitude, schooling becomes a focal point of interest. Education reaffirms this perception that youth can and do define themselves, without any other individual’s influence or input.
Unlike their female counterparts, adolescent males generally suffer from more physically violent problems. They are generally more prone to participate in criminal actions and delinquency. This propensity can be somewhat attributed to two main causes: the socioeconomic setting that they find themselves in and the idea of “machismo” that they are taught as youths. More so than any other ethnic group, Mexican Americans experience from what psychologist Deborah Gorman-Smith calls “struggling families.” In essence, this refers to the inconsistent familial structure in which these youths find themselves. This is not to be understood as indicating that there is no family structure. Instead, it should be understood as families struggle to address the social needs that a youth requires in his/her life. For Mexican American male adolescents, Gorman-Smith found that there was a significant cultural handicap. Parents followed their traditional beliefs in raising their children and often found it difficult to accept the values promoted by the broader mainstream community (Gorman-Smith 452). These beliefs have often translated to adolescent difficulties in assimilating to the American culture.

For these male youths, education is viewed as socially different from the day-to-day life experiences that they consider as significant for themselves. Tracing back to family experience, education is relatively a mystery and, males, more so than females, view the education system as not connected to their practical needs. Education is viewed as an uncomfortable institution that is not geared towards them. Gorman-Smith particularly highlights this when she speaks about parents being unable to communicate with teachers and not understanding the schooling system of the United States. Seeing this, adolescent males feel a certain level of uselessness towards continuing school. In addition, the economic circumstances of their depleted neighborhoods inspire little to be had with respect to socioeconomic improvement (Gorman-Smith 452-453).

In my research conducted in the local South Bend Juvenile Correctional Facility, I mentored a youth named Julio. He was a Mexican-American adolescent male who was found guilty of possession of a firearm and drug substance. When he spoke about education, he viewed it as something that was not for him. On one instance, he explicitly showed his frustration with math by saying, “I’m really stupid. I won’t get it.” For Julio, education was an obstacle, not an opportunity. He often acknowledged that he wanted to go to college but he never really sincerely thought it was a viable option.

Besides the socioeconomic setting, Mexican American adolescent males also struggle with the idea of “machismo.” In this concept, traditional Mexican culture dictates that males are expected to assert their masculinity and express their pride no matter the circumstances. Accordingly, this idea of “machismo” has created a certain frustration amongst Mexican American youth entering adulthood when they recognize their socioeconomic limitations. Authors Jon Glass and Jesse Owens highlight that second generation Mexican Americans become frustrated and seek an alternative mode to express their “machismo.” These youths are desperate to fulfill the traditional image of a strong, confident, independent male who is fearless and not undermined (Glass, Owens 257). However, when mainstream American culture and assimilation do not seem to be enough, what do these male youths often resort to? The answer is: Gangs.
As part of this backlash to assimilation, gang life can provide both a clear identity and a form of acceptance. Gangs become almost this alternative option to assimilation for adolescent men. They often create an assuring family atmosphere to today’s male youth. Gangs are particularly a daunting reality for the Hispanic youth. According to the National Gang Center, Hispanics constitute 49% of all gang members nationally. We are talking about half of the nation’s total gang membership! Within the Latino (Mexican) second generation community, it is estimated that 41% know at least one close relative in a gang. This statistic is the highest in the nation and for any Latino generation, too (PEW - see graph). For this reason, gangs are of particular interest and are significant to study when considering Mexican youth, especially in the second generation. Although both males and females enter into gang life, statistics particularly show that males are more susceptible to gang influence. Because of this, male experience in gang life is what I will focus on here.

Unlike the stereotype of unorganized, ruthless, and violent would suggest, researchers Nikki M. Ruble and William L. Turner identify gangs as a “highly complex organization, structure, process, and functionality” (Ruble, Turner 117). In essence, gangs come to serve a clear and relevant purpose. They provide that social status, identity, cohesion, and self-esteem that often is lacking in all youths, especially amongst the Mexican population. Furthermore, the very individuals who join together are not random. The emotional closeness and sense of support for one another is established in childhood. Gangs recruit members through social connections and pre-identified youth.

One of my informants named Yunuen is an ex-gang member. He spoke about this idea. Growing up in a single parent household and recognizing the social exclusion that he felt at a societal level, he identified his gang as more than a hooligan cult or group; he defined it as family and an outlet to self-recognition. According to him, “Gang life was my escape from the pain of living. People see the crimes and the issues that come with it. But they don’t see what it means for us. Is gang life wrong (explicit word use) yeah? I ain’t saying that, but people don’t know what it means to be ignored... I grew up in a bad neighborhood. This was my way of being somebody. I needed it. I needed to feel loved.” Looking back on his story, Yunuen recognized the exclusion that he felt as part of an outcasted society.

Similar to the case of a family, gang life, as I stated earlier, also consists of structure and organization. There is clear hierarchy and leadership qualities are identified early. Yunuen was viewed as a leader after two years in the gang. “People respected me and I was responsible for getting (explicit) done. Nobody messed with me. Man, I was ranked. When I was younger, following what old folks (referring to mainstream society in this context) wanted was pointless. As far as I was concerned, school, jobs, all that crap was not going to get me anywhere. I saw how bad life was in my ‘hood. So, I got what I could.” Through this quote, some positives do immediately surface. Individuality, courage, loyalty and responsibility are qualities that one can easily identify.
Ruble and Turner would not consider the leadership abilities of Yunuen to be unique in a gang. Ruble and Turner identify this propensity for strong gang leadership and a commitment towards the gang as an intended result by the gang itself. For them, this reality is due to the explicit practice of member selectivity. Gangs, on a parallel level to school, carefully choose those individuals who demonstrate the most promise, particularly amongst their leadership rank. This selective process is done through a series of rigorous initiations and heavy scrutinizing during an individual’s time as a recruit (lowest rank in a gang). Upon acceptance into a gang, a dress code and strict guidelines are provided to the new member. As Ruble and Turner acknowledge, contrary to widespread opinion, gangs do contain a fair amount of discipline and commitment (Ruble, Turner 124-125).

The positive attributes of gang life would seem to indicate that members are not truly criminals, instead misguided youth. For second generation Mexican American men, traditional qualities such as family importance and the American concept of individuality as well as self-expression intersect and overlap in gang life. As shown, gangs have become one key alternative to the process of assimilation and have become an outlet to societal adaptation. Researcher Debbie Smith recognized this truth when she worked with four second-generation Mexican American male youths. She realized how these youths valued family and emphasized their relationship with close relatives. Smith was present to see these young men participate in numerous family events. Although they were actively involved in delinquent actions, they expressed sincerity to Smith when it came to the importance of family. For Smith, these youth were not in the mold of an irresponsible, immoral criminal. Instead, she grew to love their commitment towards family and was able to recognize a parallel perspective when it came to gang involvement. These Mexican American youths viewed the gang as an extension of their family. As such, they protected the gang’s values and self-interests (Smith, Whitmore 37-38, 68-69).
Challenges Facing Adolescent Latinas

It is estimated by the US Department of Health and Human Services, that in 2050, one third of the under 19 population in the United States will be Latino. Female Mexican-American adolescents make up a significant part of this predicted population. Like their male counterparts, female Mexican-American adolescents also face many challenges.

The most obvious and difficult challenge is teen pregnancy among the Latino population. Latinas face an “elevated risk of teen pregnancy and non-marital births” (National Campaign to Prevent Teen Pregnancy, Ravaelli). As an important issue that effects Mexican-American adolescents, and Latinas in general, the perils of Latina teen pregnancy have been well documented. For the purposes of this project I will discuss some of the reasons adolescent Mexican-American adolescents engage in this risky behavior.

As discussed in the first section, Mexican adolescent women were often the caregivers of the youngest children in their families. These adolescent girls are conditioned at a very young age that they were expected to behave as “little mothers”. Looking back at traditional Mexican culture, it was not uncommon to find instances of a girl being married at a young age, sometimes as young as 15 and baring children soon after (Hirsch).

It is very possible that today’s Mexican-American adolescent girls are themselves children of teenage or young mothers. As a result, today’s Mexican-American adolescent females have grown up in a culture where teen pregnancy is not uncommon or unexpected.

In my work with parents of Mexican-American adolescents, most say that they came to the United States in search of a better life and to give their children a future that involved education and hopefully, a professional career. I have never heard any parent express that they want their daughters to be teen mothers. But, Mexican-American adolescent girls are left in the dark when it comes many things such as sex, dating, and relationships that be influences as to whether or not they will engage in risky behavior that leads to teen pregnancy.

In an interview with my informant Maria*, I asked her what she knew about sex and what message did she receive from her parents about having sex. Maria was unknowledgeable about sex, “All I know about sex is what I’ve heard in school and what my friends tell me”. Upon further questioning I asked her if the issue ever came up in her house and how her parents addressed it. According to Maria, her parents never explicitly talked to her about sex, but she knew that she was not “allowed to do it” because her parents would be disappointed and ashamed if other people found out or if she became pregnant. Maria said her parents would often remind her not to be a “volada” (flirtatious) and not to confuse “libertad (liberty) with libertinaje (licentiousness). Maria’s parents often say “just because you are here doesn’t mean you can act like the Americans”, referring to the perceived sexual liberty of American teenagers.

Maria’s experiences coincide with the research that states that “traditional notions about sexuality often conflict with what is considered normative in the larger US culture” (Ravaelli). Like many traditional Mexican parents, Maria’s parent believe that informing their child about sex is in a way condoning or accepting that it. Adolescent females are purposely and unfairly left in the dark more so than their brothers (Ravaelli 561). This double standard is an explicit translation of machismo expressed by the parents on their daughters.

In my research I have found that there are some parent that are very strict about dating by not allowing their daughters to date at all or very relaxed and go so far as allowing their daughters to date men 5 or 6 years older. What is the common thread is that if their daughters are dating, they want to be involved and personally know the male.

Adolescent Mexican-American girls need to be aware of the dangers for which they are at risk. Parents are doing a disservice by not talking to their kids. If parents do not responsibly speak to their sons and daughters, then they leave them at risk of being told something that is untrue or a myth. Teen pregnancy is only one of many issues these adolescents face. Studies indicate that Latinas are adolescent Hispanic females are more likely to be depressed or have suicidal thoughts compared to other adolescents (Cespedes, Huey). Adolescent Latinas must informed and guided in order to sidestep the many challenges and pitfalls that they face.
De Niña a Mujer and the Quinceañera

In Hispanic culture, the “quinceañera” is an important event that symbolizes the passage from childhood to womanhood. The quinceañera marks the 15th birthday of a Hispanic adolescent female. This is a special birthday that has its foundation in that this party is a “coming out into society” event, similar to the debutant balls found in across the United States. As previously stated, it was not uncommon for 15 year old Mexican girls to get married, thus the quinceañera celebration was an event that was created to declare a daughter eligible for marriage or for her parents to entertain suitors.

For transnational adolescents and their parents, the quinceañera is a way of holding on to their roots, but at the same time celebrating who they are and the progress they have made in the country (Davalos 116).

Perspective on the quinceañera vary, for example, the Catholic Church uses the quinceañera as a way to bring young adults to church for the mandatory preparation classes. As one woman who teaches these preparation classes told me, “we take it very seriously when the girls don’t show up for their preparation classes. If they don’t come, the Fr. will not perform the ceremony and there will be no party”. As a way of reaffirming the Catholic Church and chastity, an important part of the ceremony is when the quinceañera places a bouquet of flowers at the altar of the Virgin of Guadalupe as a way of commemorating “La Morenita” and promising to maintain the purity of the Virgin.

The idea of transitioning from a girl to a woman is expressed several times during the celebration. At one point the party typically stops so that the Quinceañera can be presented with her “la ultima muñeca”, the last doll or toy she will be given. This act symbolizes the end of childhood, by giving the quinceañera the last doll she is being told that this phase in life is acknowledged as having passed, but not without recognition. As soon the last doll is given another padrino steps forward and gives the quinceañera zapatillas. This is known as “el cambio de zapatillas” where the quinceañera takes off her shoes and puts on her first pair of high heels. Once again, this part of the celebration is full of symbolism, the quinceañera is finally acknowledged as a woman by getting her high heels.

As found in research, the quinceañera is a way for an adolescent to say, “its ok to be a woman” (Davalos 116). The quinceañera has and immense amount of cultural significance to Latinos and to Mexican-American adolescents, but it might also explain why these adolescents have a difficult time understanding their gender and cultural identity. This party is celebrating their womanhood and giving them the message that it is time to be a woman and have interaction with males, but without the proper guidance and information, an adolescent might make decisions, such as having sex, that they are not ready for. In order to avoid this perils and their consequences, parents must be proactive and involved.

Photo by Ruby Amezquita
Citizenship Status and Adolescents

There are an estimated 2.1 million undocumented children and young adults that reside in the United States (immigrationpolicy.org). Without the proper documentation, it is very difficult for undocumented students to continue their education because they would not be eligible to receive financial aid from the United States government. In order to receive financial aid the student needs to be a naturalized or native born citizen.

Supposing that the undocumented student is able to pay for his or her education, they would still need a valid SSN or Visa to work in most professional careers.

Not having the proper documentation inhibits the potential of the student. For adolescents in high school, their undocumented status is a deterrent from continuing their education.

From my field work, the students that do not have their “papers” often do not see the point of going to high school if there is no chance of attending college and using the degree.

The citizenship status of adolescents plays into the unfortunate fact that 22.8% of Hispanics between 16-24 drop out of high school (Pew Hispanic Center). Adolescents need the incentive to stay in school and not fall into the pitfalls of gang life or teen pregnancy. This incentive can come from having citizenship and being able to attend school and use their degrees.

The DREAM ACT is a proposed bill that would grant citizenship to the 65,000 undocumented student that graduate from high school every year and cannot continue with their education (immigrationpolicy.org).

With the passage and implementation of the DREAM ACT Mexican-American adolescents can finally have the opportunity to live the “American Dream”.

Photo: Ruby Amezquita
Taken at St. Adalbert’s Youth Group

http://1.bp.blogspot.com/_NUZ_fM-TQKQ/TjhHeNwU0I/AAAAAAAASLc/BjMt5mQr45s/
The most common theme we found in our research is that the role of parents in the lives of adolescents is the greatest influence that anyone can have on them. Parents are the first role models that adolescents have in this crucial phase of life, thus it is important for parents to be present in the lives of their children. In an interview with John Marchese, a former community worker in Chicago that spend many years working with Mexican–American adolescents, he gave me a list of tips that parents should do with their adolescents.

Parents should:

- Be involved in the lives of their children—They need guidance and support that only an involved parent can give them.
- Encourage your child to excel academically—Mexican immigrants typically do not have extensive academic education, but that does not mean you cannot help your child. If you can’t help them with their homework, encourage them to stay in school and keep trying. If your child is undocumented encourage them to continue their studies until comprehensive immigration reform passes.
- Address the issue, do not ignore them—It is not easy to deal with issues such as gangs or pregnancy, but this is the everyday reality your child faces, talk about these issues and let them know you support them and are there if they need advise or someone to trust.
- Don’t think they don’t need you—Yes, friends are important to your kids, but they still need a parental figure. Take the first step and listen to your adolescent, it might be the beginning of understanding them better.
Resources for Adolescents

The problems that Mexican-American adolescents face are difficult, but if you are an adolescent or a parent of one there are people who can help you. For those from South Bend and in need of assistance with an adolescent St. Adlabert has a youth group that meets every Monday from 6:30-9. At this mentorship group college students from Michiana help mentor the youth of South Bend. We discuss many issues that were covered in this brief and partake in culturally enriching activities that celebrate the Mexican-American/Latino culture. We work on building self-esteem, leadership skills and help with college preparation. If you think that no one understands you or you cannot help your adolescent, we are here to help.

La Casa de Amistad also has a youth group run by Notre Dame graduate, Guadalupe Gomez. Mexican-American adolescents face many obstacles that get in the way of their success, but with the help of parents and youth groups they can overcome these challenges and triumph.

If you are interested in joining either youth group please contact:

Guadalupe Gomez-La Casa De Amistad lupegomez1@gmail.com
Ruby Amezquita-St. Adalbert’s Mentorship ramezqui@nd.edu

Both Photos by Photo by Rocio Aguiñaga
Sources:


Gutierrez, Luis. Personal Interview. 27 November 2010.


Pew Hispanic Center.


Brief Produced By:

Ruby Amezquita and Jonathan Lopez

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