

Familias Unidas: A Family-Centered Ecodevelopmental Intervention to Reduce Risk for Problem Behavior Among Hispanic Adolescents

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This paper describes the theoretical and empirical foundations of Familias Unidas, a multilevel, family-centered intervention designed to prevent problem behavior in Hispanic adolescents. The main theoretical tenets for the intervention model; an ecological–developmental perspective, the centrality of ethnic and cultural themes, application of empowerment principles, and a family focus are reviewed. The literature on the risk and protective factors that provided the justification for the intervention’s targeted mediators and the core clinical applications that are intended to alter them are discussed. Familias Unidas engages Hispanic immigrant parents into an empowerment process in which they first build a strong parent-support network and then use the network to increase knowledge of culturally relevant parenting, strengthen parenting skills, and then apply these new skills in a series of activities designed to reduce risks frequently found in poor, urban environments. The available evidence supporting the efficacy of Familias Unidas is summarized, as are future goals and a current, second-generation application of the intervention.

KEY WORDS: Hispanic; family; intervention; adolescents; problem behavior.

Over the last decade, the U.S. Hispanic population increased by 57% with a high percentage of this growth due to immigration (Guzmán, 2001; Schmidley, 2001). The majority of these immigrant families settle in the central city areas of large metropolitan areas (Therrien & Ramirez, 2000), frequently in poor, high-crime neighborhoods where creating effective family life is a formidable challenge. Economically disadvantaged neighborhoods typically lack the physical and social resources that

help socialize children and adolescents toward health and well-being and instead tend to place them at higher risk for most psychosocial problems including conduct disorders and substance abuse (Children’s Defense Fund, 1991; Tolan & Gorman-Smith, 1997). These neighborhoods often lack the kinds of structures that promote “social capital” (Coleman, 1988), those collective associations among residents and participation in the life of the community that are beneficial for child and adolescent development. Parenting becomes more difficult in these environments because there are fewer resources that families can use to assist them in raising their children. In such contexts, parents and families may be alone in creating ways to facilitate their adolescents’ developmental needs for a coherent sense of self, a view of oneself as competent person, effective behavioral and emotional regulation, and strong bonds to society’s conventional social structures (Furstenberg, Cook, Eccles, Elder, & Sameroff, 1999).

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The realities of urban living may be compounded for recently immigrated Hispanic families who are often marginalized and isolated in their new environments. Often these parents lack the knowledge and skills necessary to negotiate social systems that are new to them. They may be unaware of how different American norms and values are from those of their country of origin, may be unaccustomed to interacting with the kinds of large American social systems (e.g., schools) that provide socializing structures for youth, and may have different expectations for their child's developmental course. Their lack of knowledge and skills place these parents at even greater disadvantage of accessing and building supports and other resources to help them parent their children effectively in America.

This paper describes Familias Unidas (United Families), a family-centered ecodevelopmental preventive intervention designed to reduce risk for adolescent problem behaviors. The intervention targets Hispanic immigrant parents and their 12–14-year-old youth from an urban community (Miami, Florida). Families are recruited into the intervention because they are immigrants and they live in high-risk neighborhoods, rather than because the youth is already experiencing problems. The intervention is designed to help parents raise their children successfully, address the sense of isolation from community that many immigrants experience, and build the knowledge and skills that will help them adapt to American society and create a supportive protective social ecology for their youth. Familias Unidas is built on four foundational theoretical tenets. The first of these tenets is the importance of an ecological–developmental, or contextualist, perspective for understanding the development of adolescent problem behavior (Szapocznik & Coatsworth, 1999; Tolan, Guerra, & Kendall, 1995). The second tenet is that cultural beliefs and practices permeate all aspects of the social ecology and their nature must be taken into account when developing an intervention. Third, the concept and principles of empowerment are fundamental to the process of program implementation for Familias Unidas. The fourth foundational theoretical perspective is a focus on the family as the central socialization agent of children and adolescents and thus, a critical context for intervention. The development of the intervention was guided by these theoretical tenets and by a review of the literature on risk and protective factors for adolescent problem behavior that led us to focus our intervention on promoting four aspects of parenting and adolescent adjustment that protect against the devel-

opment of problem behavior: (a) parental investment, (b) adolescent social competence, (c) self-regulation, and (d) academic achievement and school bonding.

This paper is organized in three sections. The first section explains the theoretical and empirical foundations from which Familias Unidas was designed. The second section briefly describes the intervention's main parameters and activities. The third section describes some results from our evaluation of the program to date.

THEORETICAL AND EMPIRICAL FOUNDATIONS OF FAMILIAS UNIDAS

The Familias Unidas intervention is a family-centered, multilevel preventive intervention designed to link together groups of recently immigrated Hispanic parents and to empower them to take the leadership in structuring their adolescent's social ecology. The intervention aims to accomplish this goal by enhancing parents' knowledge about adolescent development in a multicultural urban environment in the United States and by assisting parents in developing the kinds of parenting skills that will help them reduce risks and enhance protection in important developmental domains for their adolescents such as family, school, and peers. The intervention's philosophies and clinical techniques are a blend of cognitive change strategies, behavioral skill training, and empowerment processes. Together these are intended to facilitate parents' creation of a social ecology that is rich with positive, supportive interconnections, including a parenting network that will provide sufficient social capital from which these immigrant parents can draw assistance in raising their youth.

Ecodevelopmental Framework

Familias Unidas is founded on the ecodevelopmental framework (Szapocznik & Coatsworth, 1999) that conceptualizes the multidimensional processes involved in the development of adolescent problem behavior according to the multiple social contexts influencing development (e.g., family, school, and peers), the interrelations among those contexts, and the changing nature of the contexts over time. Ecodevelopmental theory's three primary elements are (a) a focus on social ecological theory; (b) an integration of developmental theory; and (c) an emphasis on social interactions.

The ecodevelopmental framework organizes the multiple influences on human development according to four of the primary systemic levels outlined by Bronfenbrenner: microsystems, mesosystems, exosystems, and macrosystems (see Bronfenbrenner, 1979, 1986). *Microsystems* are those settings in which the child participates directly, such as the family, school, peer group, and neighborhood/community. An important characteristic of microsystem functioning is that the within-system reciprocal relationships increase in number and complexity with development. An increase in number and complexity of relations, as long as they are reciprocal in nature, provide richer contexts (i.e., protection) for enhanced development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). *Mesosystems* are relations between microsystems (e.g., parent–school or parent–peer relationships). A main principle of mesosystemic functioning is that the stronger and more complementary the linkages between systems, the more positive the influence of this mesosystem on a child’s development (Garbarino & Abramowitz, 1992). For example, a family–school mesosystem in which parents and teachers hold similar values for the child’s social and academic development, where parents communicate a positive orientation toward school by encouraging school activities (e.g., checking homework), and where parents and teachers maintain a relationship that values and is supportive of the missions of both school and family, is likely to have a positive influence on a child’s academic and social development. *Exosystems* are entirely independent of the child, and their influence on development operates indirectly through their effect on mesosystemic relationships and on the functioning of individuals within the child’s microsystems. For example, parents from urban neighborhoods who have a broad social support network on which they can rely for assistance with daily tasks and for emotional and instrumental support in stressful times are more likely to parent the child in a positive nurturing manner (DeGarmo & Forgatch, 1997; Taylor, 1996). *Macrosystems* are society’s broad ideological and cultural patterns. They are the “cultural blueprints” that influence the development of the ecosystems. Political, social, and cultural ideologies shape individual development by enriching or impoverishing microsystems, mesosystems, and exosystems.

Ecodevelopmental theory also maintains a developmental perspective. It is concerned with both the changing nature of youth behavior across time and the dynamic changes in the characteristics and breadth of the social ecology (Boyce et al., 1998; Cairns, Elder, & Costello, 1996). Thus, an important

element of ecodevelopmental theory is understanding how changes in the structure, organization, integration, and functioning of the child’s social ecology over time influence the development of adolescent problem behavior.

Ecodevelopmental theory also derives considerable uniqueness from structural family therapy (Minuchin, 1974; Szapocznik & Kurtines, 1989). The structural element of the ecodevelopmental framework postulates that risk and protection can be conceptualized, and are evidenced, in the patterns of relationships and direct transactions between individuals within and across the different domains and levels of the social ecology. This notion is reflected well in how we operationalize the mesosystems. In contrast to the common “cross-domain” approach that investigates how functioning in one microsystem moderates functioning in another (e.g., style of parenting influences adolescent interactions with peers), we are also interested in the pattern of direct interactions between members of the microsystems (e.g., quality of parents interactions with their adolescent’s peers).

Ecodevelopmental theory suggests that for interventions to be maximally successful they should intervene in multiple domains and levels of the social ecology. Familias Unidas is comparable in this respect to other preventive interventions that also target risk and protective processes in different ecological domains (family, school, and peers; e.g., Conduct Problems Prevention Research Group, 2000; Dishion & Kavanagh, 2000) and at different levels of the social ecology (micro, meso, and exosystems; e.g., Perry et al., 2000; Sanders, 1999). Familias Unidas, however, is somewhat unique to preventive interventions because its activities *emphasize* changing behaviors and functioning in the exosystem and mesosystems as often as within microsystems. Our prior work has identified that exosystem and mesosystem functioning contains considerable risk or protection for Hispanic families and that functioning at these levels of the social ecology are independent and unique predictors of adolescent behavior problems, even after accounting for risk at the microsystem level (Coatsworth, Pantin, McBride, Briones, & Szapocznik, in press). Figure 1 provides an overview of the targets and goals at each of the four specified levels for the Familias Unidas intervention model.

Ethnicity and Culture

Attention to how ethnicity and Hispanic culture influence ecodevelopmental processes is another

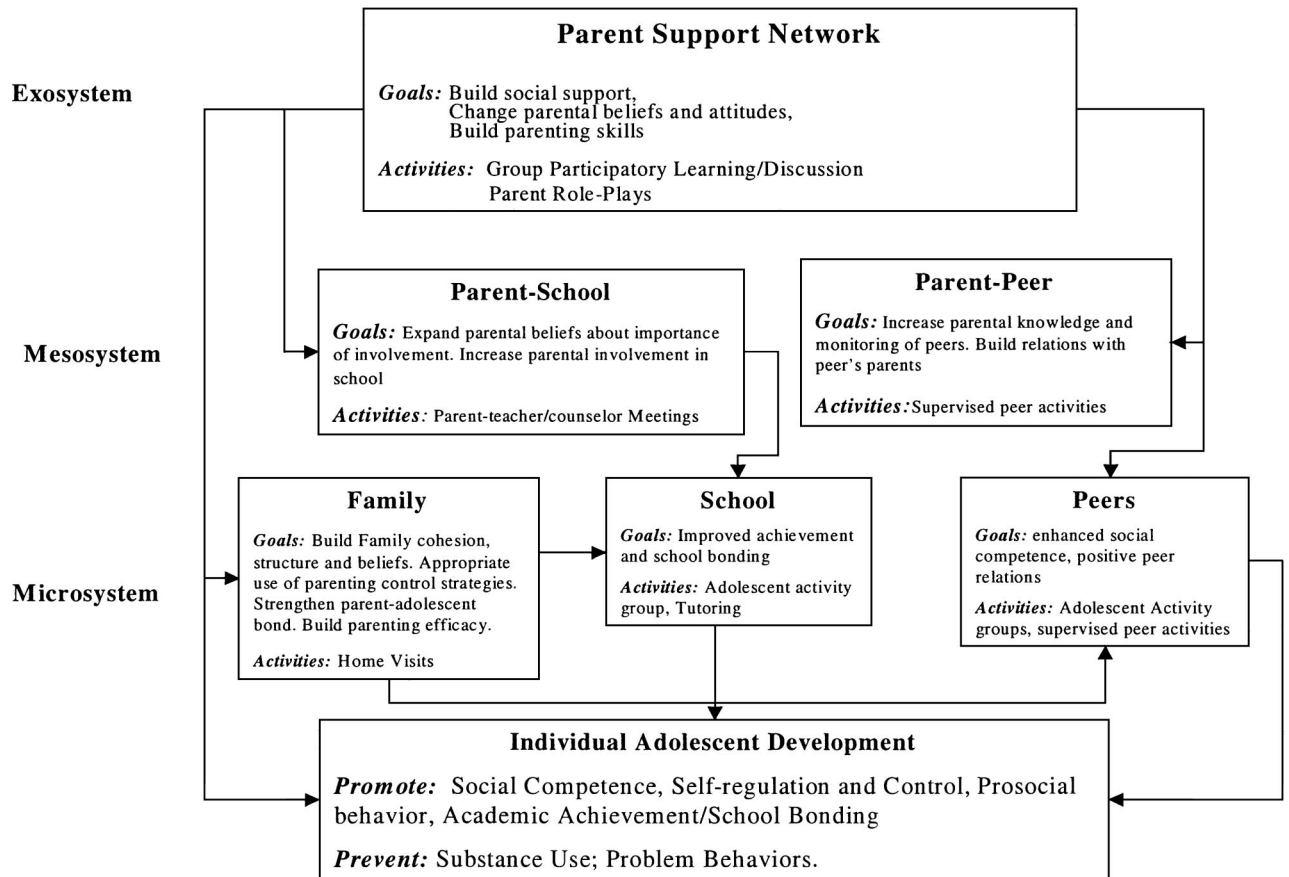


Fig. 1. Intervention goals and activities in the four specified levels of the Familias Unidas intervention model.

guiding theme of Familias Unidas. The ecodevelopmental framework provides Familias Unidas with an organizing structure from which to view how risk and protective processes may operate within and between interwoven social contexts of development. But it is culture, broadly defined as common values, attitudes, knowledge, and skills of a group of people (Santisteban, Muir-Malcolm, Mitrani, & Szapocznik, 2002), that provides Familias Unidas with the specific behaviors and the meaning of those behaviors that ultimately create ecodevelopmental risk and protection. We should note that throughout this paper we refer to the population being served by Familias Unidas as Hispanic. Yet, we also recognize that these families emigrated from different countries and that considerable heterogeneity of cultural orientation exists within this group. Where appropriate, we identify how Familias Unidas accommodates families from different Hispanic heritage. Culture and ethnicity are conceptualized as influencing every aspect of one's daily life (Koss-Chioino & Vargas, 1999) and

thus, issues of ethnicity and culture are integrated into all aspects of the intervention, from the underlying theoretical, philosophical, and empirical foundations, to the specific content of the intervention, to the format of the intervention activities. For this population, the themes of immigration and acculturation are primary and have influenced the intervention design considerably.

Some of the issues that individuals and families confront during immigration and during the process of acculturation have been implicated in the development of adolescent problem behaviors (Szapocznik & Kurtines, 1979; Vega & Gill, 1998). A substantial body of literature indicates that individuals who are able to become "bicultural" by integrating aspects of their own culture with aspects of the dominant culture (Szapocznik & Kurtines, 1989) tend to have better overall adaptation than do those individuals who are not bicultural (Berry & Sam, 1996; Felix-Ortiz & Newcomb, 1995). Results from one of our prior prevention studies in which we implemented an

intervention we called “Bicultural Effectiveness Training,” indicated that educating parents about American culture and promoting biculturalism (i.e., endorsement of both Hispanic and American cultural values) could help parents to better understand and handle their acculturating adolescents and the contexts that they encounter (Szapocznik et al., 1986). Our clinical work extending from that intervention suggests that immigration and acculturative stresses for Hispanic families generally fall into four categories: economic and financial, marginalization from mainstream social institutions in the host society, lack of knowledge about the new culture, and differential levels of acculturation between parents and their adolescents (Pantin, Schwartz, Coatsworth, Briones, & Szapocznik, in press). Each of these influences the extent to which Hispanic parents are able to create a social ecology that promotes healthy adolescent development.

Poverty and economic deprivation represent a primary stressor in the lives of Hispanic immigrants, as many are undereducated and possess few marketable job skills (Zea, Diehl, & Porterfield, 1996). As a result, they often move into low-income areas characterized by poverty, transience, high crime rates, and lack of opportunity. Other Hispanic immigrants often encounter downward economic mobility upon entering the United States (Suárez-Orozco & Suárez-Orozco, 2001). For example, individuals trained as physicians in a Latin American country may find that because of language barriers, accreditation problems, or unfamiliarity with newer medical technology, she can only find work as a medical assistant or laboratory technician. As a consequence of either this downward mobility in some cases or lack of skills in other cases, Hispanic immigrants’ earning potentials may be severely compromised and they may be limited to living in lower income urban neighborhoods. As noted earlier, these neighborhoods may amplify risk for adolescent problem behavior.

Soon after arriving in the United States, many Hispanic immigrant families experience feelings of marginalization from the mainstream social institutions (Garrison, Roy, & Azar, 1999). Often these families have left communities in their countries of origin in which communal values emphasized the needs of the family over the individual and which contained complex cooperative networks that provided extensive support for childrearing (Garcia Coll, Meyer, & Brillón, 1995). These families find themselves in unfamiliar communities that have very different value structures and that espouse an individualistic orienta-

tion rather the collectivist values of their homeland, and that ultimately fail to provide the level of social support to which they are accustomed. We have found that even in a city such as Miami, with a large Hispanic population and a powerful Hispanic political voice, recent Hispanic immigrants experience feelings of marginalization, isolation, and separation (Pantin et al., in press) that can negatively affect parenting values and practices as well as the quality of the parent-child relationship (Gil, Wagner, & Vega, 2000; Santisteban, Coatsworth, Briones, Saud, & Szapocznik, 2001). The stress and feelings of isolation that immigrant parents experience decrease their opportunities, and perhaps willingness, to acquire culturally appropriate parenting techniques (Dumas & Wahler, 1983). Moreover, without friends, family, or other sources of support, and in the face of cultural and financial stressors, parents may not have the emotional resources necessary to remain invested in their adolescent’s life (Leon & Dziegielewski, 2000).

Language barriers may also contribute to marginalization, as lack of English proficiency prevents Hispanic immigrants from involving themselves sufficiently in their community and its institutions. The longer Hispanic immigrants remain without learning English, the more they remain marginalized from American society (Baptiste, 1993). Hispanic immigrant parents’ inability to speak English also affects their families economically by decreasing the likelihood that they will be able to find jobs outside of manual labor (Zea et al., 1996). Difficulties with English also often result in a reversal of normative parent-adolescent roles, where adolescents serve as translators, authorities on the local culture, and vital links to world outside the family. As a result, parental authority is undermined, adolescents are left without parental guidance, and youth are placed into roles that are not developmentally appropriate (Szapocznik, Robbins, Mitrani, Santisteban, & Williams, in press).

Hispanic immigrants are also marginalized from conventional social institutions because of a lack of knowledge about American society (Leon & Dziegielewski, 2000). Parents’ lack of familiarity and knowledge about the common value orientations that guide daily activities in their new host culture serves to isolate them from the important developmental contexts of their children’s social environments (cf. Szapocznik & Kurtines, 1993). For example, Hispanic immigrant parents are generally not aware of the responsibility that American culture places on parents to monitor teens’ behavior and school performance. In most Hispanic countries, the community as a whole

shares the responsibility for monitoring, supervising, and managing adolescent activities. Immigrants from these countries are often unaware that American culture, especially in urban areas, does not generally endorse community supervision of adolescents (Pantin et al., in press). If not corrected, this lack of parental awareness may translate into unsupervised adolescent activities and increase the likelihood of adolescent problem behaviors. Comparably, Hispanic immigrant parents often do not share the American view that direct parental involvement with the school is needed. Instead they experience what has been called a “power-distance” phenomenon (Hofstede, 1980) in which the large school system is seen as an institution that deserves great respect and reverence and something that parents should not interfere with. This attitude contrasts with the mainstream American cultural expectation that parents will be involved with their youth’s schooling and should at least have direct knowledge of what happens within the school, if not more active interaction with teachers and school administrators. Hispanic immigrant parents, who generally lack knowledge about the American school systems and about the need to communicate with the school, tend not to intervene in their adolescents’ school lives. Many immigrant Hispanic parents, however, do have an interest in becoming involved in their youth’s schooling, but may require specific direction such as educating them about the American school system and helping them establish working relationships with teachers and other school personnel (Gallimore, Goldenberg, & Weisner, 1993).

Differential acculturation or intrafamilial acculturation conflict also poses significant stress for the immigrant Hispanic family and may increase risk for adolescent problem behavior (Szapocznik & Kurtines, 1993; Zayas & Solari, 1994). Research has shown that immigrant children and adolescents tend to adapt quickly to their new country and to its culture, whereas immigrant parents often remain faithful to their culture of origin (De la Rosa, Vega, & Radisch, 2000). Adolescent immigrants may begin to internalize individualistic “American” behaviors, attitudes, values, and habits soon after arriving in the United States (Baptiste, 1993), whereas parent’s adaptation might be more prolonged. Parental authority, which is generally considered to be beyond question in Hispanic cultures, is undermined by this individualistic and self-directed orientation (Santisteban et al., 2002). Traditionally oriented parents may perceive their adolescent’s developing individualistic value system as a rejection of Hispanic values, whereas in turn,

the acculturating adolescent may perceive his parents as overly demanding and controlling. This differential rate of acculturation serves to amplify normative parent–adolescent conflict and predisposes adolescents to problem behavior (Felix-Ortiz, Fernandez, & Newcomb, 1998). In many cases, Hispanic immigrant parents do not know how to handle acculturated, Americanized adolescents, and following multiple unsuccessful attempts to reestablish their authority, these parents may become frustrated and disinvested in their teens (Kurtines & Szapocznik, 1996). *Familias Unidas* works to help parents recognize the changing value structure of their adolescent, see the strains of the acculturation process, and develop skills that will help the parents operate in a multicultural society.

Empowerment

Empowerment of Hispanic immigrant families is both a foundational theoretical tenet and a practical goal of *Familias Unidas*. The intervention processes are built on principles of empowerment, some of which include a belief that all individuals have strengths, that society is organized to provide people with choices and the power to exercise those choices, that assistance should be given proactively and positively in the spirit of partnership and participatory decision-making, and that interventions should promote a sense of problem solving, and interdependence with supportive social networks that have the potential to be self-sustaining (Cornell University Empowerment Group, 1989; Dunst & Trivette, 1987). Consistent with these principles, a primary objective of the intervention is to involve parents in an ongoing process of mutual respect, critical reflection, caring, and group participation so that they can gain greater access and control over their lives and important social resources (Cornell University Empowerment Group, 1989).

A Family Focus

In *Familias Unidas*, all intervention activities are organized around strengthening the family and placing the family in charge of enhancing protective processes and decreasing risk within and across social systems. We purposely constructed *Familias Unidas* as a *family-centered* intervention, because we believe that positive change for the family must be achieved *through and by* the parents. In addition to the mounting literature that has identified important family risk

and protective factors, the broad research base of family intervention science (Liddle, Santisteban, Levant, & Bray, 2002) has demonstrated that different family-based intervention strategies are effective in altering family processes and in reducing risk for the development of problem behaviors (e.g., Alexander, Pugh, & Parsons, 1998; Ashery, Robertson, & Kumpfer, 1998; Szapocznik & Williams, 2000; Taylor & Biglan, 1998).

Although testing the mechanisms by which many of these family-focused interventions operate (e.g., through changing specific family processes, rather than through other mechanisms) remains an important area for empirical study (Kazdin, 2001), we propose that conceptually family-based interventions may be particularly influential for several reasons. First, the family is the most powerful socializing system for healthy child and adolescent development. Parents can more readily shape their child's social ecology through direct daily interactions with their children/adolescents, and through their interactions with others who influence their child's development (e.g., teachers, peers; Szapocznik & Coatsworth, 1999). Second, transforming parents to alter their direct interactions with their child and with the other influential socializing agents in their child's world (e.g., schools, peers) sets forth a cumulative protective process by which interacting factors and processes converge and accrue over time to foster healthy and adaptive development (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Yoshikawa, 1994).

In designing Familias Unidas, we have drawn from the substantial theoretical and empirical literature that underscores the powerful effect that both global family processes and specific parenting practices have on child and adolescent developmental outcomes including academic achievement, social competence, and behavior problems (e.g., Loeber & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1986; Patterson, Reid, & Dishion, 1992). This literature provides the empirical foundations for the family and parenting processes targeted for change in Familias Unidas.

The processes and content of Familias Unidas focuses on four major family processes that are linked with child and adolescent adaptation: *cohesion*, *structure*, *beliefs*, and *conflict* (Florsheim, Tolan, & Gorman-Smith, 1996; Patterson & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1984; Tolan, Gorman-Smith, Huessmann, & Zelli, 1997). High levels of family cohesion, as reflected in the extent to which family members share a warm bond, feel close to each other, spend time together, share feelings, and generally communicate

openly and clearly, tends to protect children and adolescents from negative developmental outcomes (Cox & Brooks-Gunn, 1999). These aspects of family cohesion and closeness are congruent with Hispanic family values (Marin & Marin, 1991; Santisteban et al., 2002). Families with high levels of structure that are organized with clear rules and expectations for behavior, consistent enforcement of the rules, and specific and appropriate roles and responsibilities for each family member also tend to be protective for poor outcomes such as behavior problems and substance abuse (Tolan et al., 1997). In contrast to the protective function of cohesive and structured families, when families support deviant or unrealistic beliefs for the development of their children or are characterized by high levels of conflict, their children are more likely to show signs of aggression (Florsheim et al., 1996; Patterson & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1984). When parents possess the kinds of skills that allow them to manage conflict appropriately in a style that indicates mutual respect for others' views and does not escalate to high levels of emotionality, then the negative effects on child development may be negated. In some cases conflict may actually be constructive for development, because effective conflict management by parents and other family members models an appropriate way for handling one's anger and other negative emotions (Davies & Cummings, 1994; Gottman, Katz, & Hooven, 1996). In many Hispanic families, the marked hierarchical structure and the values of maintaining respect for those in positions of authority may actually restrict the levels of negativity and diffuse conflict (Santisteban et al., 2002). When Hispanic adolescents adopt more "American" values, they may feel more free to express disagreement with their parents that can cause an increase in level of family conflict. If parents are not equipped to handle this, then greater problems may ensue. In helping families build cohesion and structure, Familias Unidas also emphasizes teaching parents effective conflict resolution skills.

Familias Unidas also targets for change several specific parenting practices that are strongly linked with child and adolescent behavior. These practices can be organized in two broad dimensions, the first relating to the amount and type of *behavioral control* exerted by the parent and the second to the *quality of the emotional relationship* between parent and child (Collins, Maccoby, Steinberg, Hetherington, & Bornstein, 2000). The dimension of behavioral control reflects a set of parenting strategies that is characterized by parents communicating clear rules and standards for behavior, supervising and monitoring

the child's whereabouts and with whom the child spends time, and imposing consistent discipline when rules are not followed. Teaching parents to use appropriate "levels" of these kinds of strategies may be critically important for interventions. Effective discipline and monitoring can reduce adolescents' exposure to dangerous situations and deviant peer groups and thereby, the likelihood that they will develop behavior problems (Dishion & McMahon, 1998; Loeber & Dishion, 1984; Patterson & Stouthamer-Loeber, 1984). In contrast, if parental behavioral control methods are inconsistent, are primarily power-assertive methods such as threats, direct commands, and physical force, or if parents control "psychologically," then effects on child and adolescent behavior tend to be negative (Barber, 1996; Hoffman, 1960). Critical to Familias Unidas' efforts to teach parents appropriate use of these behavioral control strategies is the understanding that Hispanic parents' child-rearing values and parenting practices tend to differ from those of mainstream Anglo-American parents (Santisteban et al., 2002; Zayas & Solari, 1994). Hispanic parents tend to value and socialize their children toward obedience, respect, and conformity, whereas Anglo parents place greater emphasis on independence and self-directedness (Zayas & Solari, 1994). Traditional Hispanic parents tend to use more behavioral control and provide fewer opportunities for promoting their adolescent's autonomous behavior than educated White American parents might. Moreover, Hispanic adolescents may tend to interpret parent's stronger discipline practices as reflecting parental feelings of caring and love, whereas Anglo adolescents interpret them as signs of rejection (Mason, Walker-Barnes, Blaustein, & Martinez-Arrue, 1998).

The second dimension of parenting targeted in the intervention reflects the quality of the parent-child emotional relationship. In general, a rich body of research demonstrates that the better the emotional relationship between parent and child, as characterized by behaviors such as open and effective communication, expressions of warmth, support and acceptance, sensitivity to the child's emotional state, responsiveness to the child's needs, and parental availability, the more positive the developmental outcomes in children and adolescents (Florsheim et al., 1996; Rutter, 1979; Werner, 1986). Lack of these relationship qualities tends to be related to negative outcomes. One positive parenting practice that appears to be particularly important for healthy adoles-

cent psychosocial development in American culture is autonomy granting, or the extent to which parents provide appropriate support for their adolescent's emerging autonomy. Parents who are able to provide support for their adolescent's increasing maturity and autonomy tend to promote positive developmental outcomes in their youth including intrinsic motivation, a strong sense of self, academic achievement, and fewer behavior problems (Furstenberg et al., 1999; Gray & Steinberg, 1999; Grolnick & Ryan, 1989). Intervention activities teach positive parenting strategies to strengthen the emotional bond between parents and children.

To become a successful parent, one must believe that she has the skills and abilities to handle the myriad of challenges that arise when parenting a child or an adolescent. Parents with high self-efficacy believe that they can effectively carry out their parenting responsibilities and also have more positive expectations for change. Often, immigrant Hispanic parents lack the beliefs and the confidence that they can carry out the kinds of parenting strategies that may be required to provide their child with positive developmental contexts, especially given their new cultural context. One of the goals of Familias Unidas is to help parents develop a sense of confidence and competence so that they can initiate and persist in their parenting efforts despite frequent challenges. In general positive parental efficacy beliefs have a strong relationship with specific positive parenting practices across diverse ethnic groups (Coleman & Karraker, 1998). Parents with higher self-efficacy tend to be more involved with their child's schools (Swick & Broadway, 1997), and the quality of their parenting may be less susceptible to effects stress or emotional distress (Gondoli & Silverberg, 1997). Efficacy beliefs are influenced most directly by performance accomplishments (Bandura, 1977). Thus, Familias Unidas focuses on building efficacy through actual and authentic experiences. Parents begin by setting small achievable goals, and as they gain an increasing sense of control with respect to parenting and their specific life circumstances, then they can target changes that may be more difficult to affect.

PRINCIPAL INTERVENTION TARGETS OF FAMILIAS UNIDAS

The Familias Unidas intervention model was designed to influence four aspects of parental

functioning and adolescent development that have been identified as protective for the development of adolescent problem behavior: (a) parental investment and involvement, (b) adolescent self-regulation and control, (c) adolescent social competence, and (d) academic achievement and school bonding. In selecting these targets, we chose aspects of adjustment that bridged conventional and culturally specific views of adolescent adjustment (Castro, Boyer, & Balcazar, 2000). For example, healthy adjustment for both Hispanic and non-Hispanic youth would involve effective interactions with prosocial peers, strong attachments to parents and school, and some degree of self-control (Castro et al., 2000). As a family-centered intervention, Familias Unidas attends most strongly to influencing parental investment that we believe will, in turn, influence the three other indicators of adaptation.

Parental Investment

Parental investment is defined broadly as parents taking responsibility and leadership in providing structured, supportive environments for positive youth development. Parental investment is conceptualized as processes that occur across social ecological domains and can be evidenced in the quality of the parenting functions and the positive interactions parents have with their youth directly, with their youth's peers and peer's parents, and with their child's school personnel. This perspective is consistent with other models of parental involvement (Grolnick & Slowiaczek, 1994) and with the concept of "family management" that attends to the variety of parenting practices that parents use to structure and influence the daily experiences of their youth both in the home and in the external world (Furstenberg et al., 1999). Familias Unidas focuses on three qualitatively different aspects of parenting: parent's direct behavioral involvement (e.g., spending time with the adolescent in fun family activities), direct affective involvement (e.g., communicating parental warmth and respect for the adolescent's emotions), and cognitive involvement (e.g., structuring and organizing experiences, particularly for the school and peer domains). The broad concept of parental investment or involvement that includes both promotive and protective forms of parenting has strong positive relations with adolescent health, competence and well-being, and negative relations with problem behavior and substance

use (Furstenberg et al., 1999; Loeber, Green, Lahey, Frick, & McBurnett, 2000).

Self-Regulation and Control

Adolescent self-regulation and control is an intervention target because of the theoretical and empirical evidence indicating the important role that emotional and behavioral control, or the inverse, emotional and behavioral dysregulation, plays in the development of adolescent problem behavior and substance use (Caspi, Henry, McGee, Moffit, & Siva, 1995; Tarter et al., 1999). Developmentally, youth acquire greater control over and ability to regulate their behavioral and affective expressions as they develop more complex cognitive abilities and greater social skills (Tarter et al., 1999). Children who have difficult temperaments characterized by high physical activity levels and high negative emotionality may have more difficulty developing adequate self-control, in part because their negative disposition is often reinforced by poor family environments and rejecting isolating peers. In turn, these processes place such youth on a trajectory that greatly elevates the risk for problem behavior in adolescence. Good or poor self-regulation may be linked to later problem behavior either directly or by influencing other risk and protective factors that may be more proximal to the outcomes such as academic competence and exposure to deviant peers (Wills, Sandy, & Yaeger, 2000).

Social Competence

Adolescents' social competence, the ability to successfully interact within the peer environment, is a major developmental task of this age group and a clear indicator of positive adaptation (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998). Social competence is a broad integrative construct that has been defined in many ways, but usually refers to the behavioral effectiveness of one's social transactions with a prosocial peer group (Masten & Coatsworth, 1995, 1998). This entails an adolescent's ability to flexibly and adaptively respond to the social demands of the environment and usually involves effective use of social skills such as decision making, problem solving, conflict resolution, and peer resistance skills (Waters & Sroufe, 1983). Children and adolescents who lack such skills show a greater likelihood of conflict with peers, associating with

deviant peer groups, delinquency, and substance use (Hawkins, Catalano, & Miller, 1992; Werner, 1986).

Academic Achievement and School Bonding

Many theories of child and adolescent development advocate for the importance of academic achievement and school bonding as a protective factor against the development of problem behavior and for the successful transition to adult roles (Catalano & Hawkins, 1996; Masten & Coatsworth, 1998; Schulenburg, Maggs, & Hurrelman, 1997). These theories propose that academic achievement and a strong bond with one's school as represented by a positive emotional link with teachers and classmates and strong commitments and personal investment to succeed in school will increase the likelihood of youth engaging in developmentally positive behaviors and decrease the likelihood that they will engage in maladaptive behaviors. Empirically, school bonding and academic achievement have been shown to be protective against a variety of maladaptive outcomes in adolescence and young adulthood including school dropout, conduct problems, delinquency, and substance use (Bryant, Schulenberg, Bachman, O'Malley, & Johnston, 2000; Maguin & Loeber, 1996; Simons-Morton, Crump, Haynie, & Saylor, 1999). The protective effect of school bonding on antisocial behavior may be most evident and most critical during adolescence when the developmental trajectories appear to decline for school bonding, academic motivation and achievement (Simmons & Blyth, 1987), and increase for antisocial behaviors (Moffit, 1993). Some evidence suggests that this effect might be most pronounced for those at highest risk, for example, those with low self-regulation and control (Henry, Caspi, Moffit, Harrington, & Silva, 1999). School bonding and academic achievement also appear to be amenable to intervention (Abbott et al., 1998; Hawkins, Guo, Hill, Battin-Pearson, & Abbott, 2001).

A growing body of empirical studies documents the cross-sectional and longitudinal relations among parental investment, self-regulation and control, social competence, and academic achievement and school bonding. For example, parental investment, as reflected in effective behavioral control and positive parenting strategies, is directly related to later social competence (Grolnick & Ryan, 1989; Masten et al., 1988). Children and youth who grow up in homes characterized by supportive and nurturing parenting tend to have positive peer and school adjustment (Pettit,

Bates, & Dodge, 1997). Parents who provide clear and consistent structure, give positive verbal encouragement and reinforcement, and support their adolescents emotionally are more likely to foster their adolescents' development of positive coping and conflict resolution, better means for handling their own negative emotional states, and better social competence (Dishion, French, & Patterson, 1995; Gottman et al., 1996; Wills & Cleary, 1996). In contrast, children and adolescents with unsupportive and neglectful parents or who grow up in homes with high levels of conflict and aggression tend to have fewer of the positive social skills required to interact successfully with peers and are more likely to behave in an aggressive or antisocial manner (Brody & Flor, 1998; Schwartz, Dodge, Pettit, & Bates, 1997). *Familias Unidas* teaches parents these skills and helps them develop their own conflict management skills that will assist them in demonstrating complex social skills such as affective awareness, empathy, and effective conflict management to their own children. In turn, their children are more likely to control their own negative emotions, handle conflict better, and show sensitivity and be responsive to peers (Herrera & Dunn, 1997; Lindsey, Mize, & Pettit, 1997).

Family and parenting processes also have strong relations with self-regulation and control. Problems in adolescent self-regulation, such as undercontrol, aggression, and noncompliance, have been linked longitudinally with prior harsh parenting (Rothbaum & Weisz, 1994). Processes of self-regulation have also been shown to mediate the link between harsh parenting and later adolescent substance use (Brody & Ge, 2001). Furthermore, lack of self-regulation as indicated by inattention, impulsivity, and aggressive behavior is predictive of school problems and association with deviant peers (Dawes, Tarter, & Kirschi, 1997).

Broad indicators of parenting quality and parental involvement have also been shown to have strong relations with academic competence, achievement, and school bonding (Grolnick & Ryan, 1989; Masten et al., 1988). For example, Slaughter-Defoe (1995) found that parental investment behaviors (e.g., warm and caring relationship, effective discipline, and control) and parental beliefs and values about their children's academic worth were correlated over time with child and adolescent school performance and achievement aspirations. Parental involvement appears to be an important element for adolescent school success, whether that involvement takes place in the form of direct participation in the school

activities, communication of clear values and expectations for academic success, or creating a home environment conducive to learning and monitoring their adolescent' homework and learning activities (Epstein, 1996; Jarrett, 1995; Patrikakou, Weissberg, & Rubenstein, 1999). These interrelations among these protective factors are important for Familias Unidas because they imply that influencing one factor, for example, parental investment, may have cascading effect on the other factors. Many of the intervention activities are designed with this in mind.

DESCRIPTION OF THE FAMILIAS UNIDAS INTERVENTION ACTIVITIES

This section provides a brief description of the Familias Unidas intervention. More complete information about the clinical aspects of the intervention is available elsewhere (Pantin et al., in press). The activities of the intervention are directed toward engaging minority parents from poor urban neighborhoods into a participatory, empowerment process that will assist them in overcoming some of the immigration/acculturation stresses they are experiencing, increase their critical understanding of risk and protection in their child's social ecology, and develop the skills that will help them work within their new cultural environment and interact effectively with the social structures of American society. The parental empowerment process of Familias Unidas builds over the course of the intervention. It begins with facilitating the development of small (10–12 parents) supportive parental social networks, and creating a group process by which parents explore acculturation issues, share knowledge of and experiences with parenting in their new culture, and learn new parenting skills. Parents are encouraged to identify adaptive and maladaptive patterns of interactions within and across three primary social ecological domains: family, school, and peers. Then, within these small support networks, parents plan group activities that will help restructure the way they interact with others across these domains to reduce risk and increase protection for their adolescents. Finally, with the support of a Familias Unidas facilitator, the parents carry out these activities. Planning and implementing these restructuring activities reinforces the participants' sense of efficacy and parenting skills.

The primary intervention format used in Familias Unidas is a multifamily or multiparent group format that we refer to as parent support networks (PSN).

Ideally, PSN will meet approximately every week during the school year. These groups contain a blend of problem-posing/participatory discussion and skill-building activities. Familias Unidas does not use a highly structured didactic format, as many psychoeducational prevention programs do, rather it has adapted a "problem-posing and participatory-learning" approach, pioneered by Freire (1983) for use with marginalized populations. This technique engages parents in a series of discussion and action experiences that help build a sense of self-efficacy and competence. As a group, the parents, guided by the facilitators' specific questions, are encouraged to share their own parenting experiences, to identify risk and protective processes that are occurring in their adolescents' social environment, and to pose possible solutions to those problems. Freire (1983) found that this respectful and collaborative approach was more successful for marginalized people than was didactic presentation. Role-plays are used within the PSN to demonstrate, build, and practice specific parenting skills. The intervention process also takes parents through a series of steps in which they create "action plans" to address some of the risks they have identified in the social worlds of their children.

Familias Unidas activities are guided by an emphasis on the intervention process as distinct from the intervention's content. Although certain content, or subject matter, such as teaching about specific parenting behaviors, is crucial to the Familias Unidas intervention, engaging parents in the empowerment process in which they are changing maladaptive patterns of interaction is also a central goal. The Familias Unidas facilitators are trained to use the different "content" that parents bring to the meetings (e.g., my child is failing in school, and I only find out when it is too late) to shape and build the change "process" (e.g., establishing open, proactive channels of communication with the school and developing an academic plan for their child).

The Familias Unidas intervention contains six "core" intervention activities for all participants and one indicated intervention for only the families demonstrating the most need. The core interventions are PSN, family meetings/home visits, parent-adolescent discussion circles, adolescent activity groups, supervised peer activities, and school counselor meetings. Family therapy is provided as an indicated intervention for those families in greatest need. The intervention activities are implemented across four phases: engagement, group formation, cognitive change and skills building, and restructuring, each

Table I. Goals, Activities and Expected Effects of the Familias Unidas Intervention by Intervention Phase

Intervention phase	Goals	Activities/techniques	Expected effects
Engagement	Enhance parent perception of intervention as credible and responsive. Increase parental motivation to participate	Home visits Joining Problem-solving barriers	Strong alliance with parent and facilitator Increased likelihood of participation
Group formation	Establish supportive alliances among parents. Build cohesive group	Parent support network Accepting, sharing, and supportive dialogue Acknowledge commonalities and differences	Effective working relationships for empowerment processes Group cohesion
Cognitive change/skills building,	Learn about adolescent development extend attitudes and beliefs Enhance parenting skills	Parent support network Participatory dialogue about family, school, and peers Role-plays to build parenting skills	Increased knowledge about risk and protection for adolescent development Group cohesion Enhanced parenting skills for family, school, and peer domains Enhanced parenting efficacy "Action Plans" for restructuring activities
Restructuring	Improve interactions between parents and Adolescent and other family members School personnel Adolescent's peers and peers' parents	Family meeting/home visits Parent-adolescent discussion circles Adolescent activity groups Tutoring Social skills building Supervised peer activities Parent-teacher/parent-counselor meetings	Enhanced parenting efficacy Increased family cohesion, decreased conflict, improved conflict management Strong parent-adolescent relationship Strong parent-school mesosystem Strong parent-peer mesosystem Improved adolescent social competence, academic achievement Positive interactions with prosocial peers

characterized by distinct goals and activities. Table I provides an overview of the Familias Unidas activities and goals across phases.

Engagement Phase

Clinically, the process of engagement involves building alliances with family members, helping parents see the applicability of the intervention for their lives and their adolescent's future, and building motivation and interest to participate. Consistent with our prior work in the treatment area, we conceptualized engagement in Familias Unidas as beginning with the first phone call to the parent (Szapocznik et al., 1988).

The engagement process continues with a visit to each family's home by trained Familias Unidas facilitators prior to the formal beginning of the intervention activities. This initial home visit has three main objectives. The first is to explain the format and goals of the intervention, so that family members understand what they are being asked to do. Facilitators

outline the specifics of Familias Unidas, highlighting parent's involvement in the PSN and how this will help build connections to the facilitator and to other parents in the neighborhood. Second, the facilitators work to increase the parents' motivation to participate by identifying specific stresses the family is experiencing and then personalizing the potential of the intervention to help their family confront them. Third, the facilitator elicits the family's perceived barriers to involvement in the intervention and problem-solves with the family ways that they can be overcome. Research indicates that specific barriers to participation, such as time constraints, lack of transportation, lack of child care, lack of time due to the necessity of holding multiple jobs, fear of being out at night in their own neighborhoods, negative experiences with institutions and professionals, language/cultural barriers, and stressful life events, may interfere with participation (Spoth, Redmond, & Shinn, 2000). These barriers may be more salient for individuals from lower socioeconomic backgrounds, who commonly lack the resources to manage these obstacles (Tolan & McKay, 1996).

Group Formation Phase

The first few sessions of the PSNs we have termed the group formation phase. There are several important functions of the PSNs. First, it is the vehicle through which the entire intervention is delivered and is the hub of the empowerment process. All intervention activities are either implemented or conceived within the PSN. Second, it also has the function of providing support for immigrant parents and of connecting them to other isolated Hispanic immigrant parents who are having similar stress experiences and whose adolescents are confronting similar risks. Operating at the child's exosystem level, the goal is to build friendships and working relationships among the parent-group members that are likely to continue outside of the group and beyond intervention termination. Third, it serves as the primary context for exploring parents' values, attitudes, and beliefs, their sense of parenting efficacy, and for building parenting and family management skills.

During the group formation phase, the main process goal of the PSN is to achieve group cohesion. The facilitator has the difficult task of establishing alliances with multiple participants who must each feel like they have been understood, supported, and that they have something to gain from participating in intervention sessions. Yet, ultimately, to build a strong and cohesive PSN, the facilitator must use the individual alliance she has formed with each member to build alliances among the network members themselves. Facilitators do this by engaging parents in "group bonding" discussions, in which parents share information about their lives, their countries of origin and their immigration experiences. These intervention techniques are consonant with Hispanic values; acceptance rather than pressure toward disclosure, a supportive and emotive tone, rather than a structured behavioral approach, and interest in the individual rather than a focus on a specific contract or intervention goal (Falicov, 1998).

Cognitive Change and Skills-Building Phase

The third phase of the intervention, the cognitive change and skills-building phase, also takes place entirely within the PSNs. During this phase, facilitators rely on a problem-posing and participatory approach. This technique maintains a respect for individual cultural values and attitudes while simultaneously raising issues regarding the differences between parents'

values and the values of mainstream American culture. Facilitated discussion includes exploring parents' goals for their children in the family, school, and peer domains, parents' concerns about adapting to a multicultural environment and how their values are and are not compatible with mainstream American society, how different parenting attitudes, beliefs, and practices can heighten risk for problem behavior in American society, how the acculturative stresses they are experiencing may influence adolescent adaptation, and how they can develop the kinds of skills that will help them manage acculturative stress and the quality of their adolescent's social ecology. Structured role-plays help parents practice specific parenting skills.

When the content of these participatory discussions turns to the family domain, parents explore the effects of acculturation and immigration stress on family relationships with particular emphasis on differential acculturation and intrafamilial acculturation conflict. The group discusses the contrasts between Hispanic family values such as "familism" (i.e., strong feelings of loyalty, reciprocity, and solidarity among family members; Marin & Marin, 1991) and mainstream Anglo-American family values that tend to emphasize individualism and individual accomplishments. Parents explore how their youth's own acculturation pressures may lead toward a slight decrease in their focus on family and toward a slight increase in their own autonomous behavior. Further discussion and group role-plays focus on how parents can maintain sound communication, positive affective bonding, and a supportive relationship with their adolescents, skills and characteristics that represent positive adaptation in both Hispanic and Anglo-American cultures (Castro et al., 2000).

Group discussions of the school domain focus on exploring and extending parents' beliefs about their relationships with the school and on learning how to establish mutually supportive interactions with key school personnel (teachers, guidance counselors, principal, etc.). The first objective of these participatory discussions is to help the parents understand that in mainstream American society parents are expected to take on an involved and meaningful role in their child's education both at home and in the school. Considerable time is spent on discussing the importance of parental involvement within the American school system and on helping parent's acculturate to the view that their active and direct relationship with the school is beneficial to their adolescent's school performance. Parents are also taught that they

can promote their adolescent's academic achievement and school bonding through "in-home learning strategies" (Jarrett, 1995), such as implementing house rules around homework and monitoring completion of assignments

With regard to the peer domain, participatory discussions and role-play activities center around parents' cultural views of community monitoring of youth and how parents' acculturative stress may compromise their own ability to adequately monitor their youth's activities, and what parents can do about these issues. Parents discuss the kinds of parenting strategies they have used to influence their adolescent's peer relationships and share examples of effective and ineffective methods. Facilitators reinforce examples that highlight effective youth-monitoring strategies including making sure that as parents they are getting to know their child's peers directly, are carefully examining their child's peer relationships and rejecting those that appear to be negative influences and supporting those that are positive, developing a relationship with the parents of their adolescent's peers, directly "chaperoning," and using their growing social network to help them keep an eye out for their child (Jarrett, 1995).

The culmination of the cognitive change and skills-building phase in the PSN process is the development of "action plans" that detail one or more activities that the parents would like to carry out in an effort to change the structure (i.e. patterns of interactions) of their youth's social ecology. These action plans are partially guided in process by the format of the Familias Unidas intervention, but the parents determine the content of the activities. The activities that the parents design for the family, school, and peer domains are carried out in the restructuring phase.

Restructuring Phase

The activities of the restructuring phase include family meetings/home visits, parent-adolescent discussion circles, adolescent activity groups, supervised peer activities, parent-teacher/parent-counselor meetings, and brief structural family therapy. Restructuring activities are the "active" elements of the empowerment process with the main objectives being to change how parents interact with their adolescent, with personnel from their adolescent's school, and with their adolescent's peers and parents of those peers.

Approximately once a month throughout the intervention, Familias Unidas facilitators conduct a *family meeting/home visit* with each family. The primary purpose of these visits is to help parents apply the concepts and skills acquired during the PSNs (e.g., effective behavior management, communication skills, conflict resolution) to their family life. Facilitators help parents understand how these skills are relevant to their specific needs and concerns and provide direct coaching to parents as they practice the skills in vivo with family members. Thus, parents are reinforced for applying the skills, and the facilitator can work directly with parents and family members to restructure maladaptive family interactions. These personalized visits also help continue the process of engaging families and sustain high levels of parent's motivation to participate in the intervention.

Within the PSNs, parents organize *parent-adolescent discussion circles*, which are designed to enhance parent-child communication skills, examine parental expectations for their children, promote parental awareness of and sensitivity to their children's developmental level, needs, competencies, and interests, and increase parental responsiveness to the child's changing developmental trajectory. In this activity, parents can practice the skills they have learned in the PSN in a safe and supportive context that is also more realistic than the parent-to-parent role-plays used to learn the skills. Parents practice directly with their adolescents and receive feedback from the facilitator and other parents on their use of effective communication, active listening, and promotive parenting strategies, such as exploration of adolescent interests and talents, encouragement for developing talents and constructive problem-solving. Discussion circles are also introduced as an initial step toward establishing regular parent-child discussions and toward increasing adolescent's comfort with speaking to their parents about difficult topics.

The PSNs also help to design, organize, and implement *adolescent activity groups* in which their adolescents will learn new skills and competencies. The parents' active roles orchestrating this activity, even if they are not directly implementing it, is consistent with our belief that interventions must be conducted in such a way that they continuously empower the parents, place them in leadership roles, build their self-efficacy, and reinforce them and their children that they are agents for change. During these meetings adolescents may participate in activities designed to improve academic achievement and school bonding (e.g., tutoring), activities to develop self-regulation

(e.g., stress management skills) and activities to develop social competence skills (e.g., adolescent discussion circles, cooperative games).

Information from the PSN participatory discussion is also used as content for the process of designing, organizing, and implementing a series of parent-directed *supervised peer activities*. Although these activities may include anything from picnics to going to the movies, they build and reinforce a process in which parents are involved and active participants in their child's peer world. Through these activities, parents begin to build positive relationships with their child's peers, get to know the parents of their child's peers, and monitor/supervise their child's peer activities. The process that parents go through in setting up this activity helps reinforce their parenting skills, build and strengthen their relationship with their adolescent while simultaneously reinforcing their role as an authority figure to their adolescents. Parents call and introduce themselves to the parents of their adolescent's friends that reinforces parental efficacy and parental authority and also begins to establish a broader support and parental management network.

Parent-teacher/parent-counselor meetings are included to help form strong and positive relationship between parents and school personnel. Many of these parents have had very little proactive interactions with American schools, and instead their interactions are a reaction to some academic or behavioral problem their child is having. The intention of this activity is to increase the parent's knowledge of the different kinds of services available to students in the school, the procedures for how parents can contact and remain involved with the school, the mechanisms by which parents can monitor their youth's academic performance, and the ways they can advocate for her/him if needed. This kind of activity may be particularly important because many parents report home-learning activities, whereas few report open communication with teachers and other school personnel (Patrikakou & Weissberg, 2000). Moreover, inner-city schools tend to be notoriously poor at efforts to engage parents to participate more actively in the school's activities (Furstenberg et al., 1999), thereby increasing parents' responsibility to do so. Parents are encouraged to set up individualized meetings with their children's teachers to gather information about their child's academic strengths and weaknesses and advice about what parents can do to support their child's academic success and to develop shared goals and a plan for enhancing the child's academic achievement and school bonding.

For those families in greatest need, *brief structural family therapy* (Szapocznik & Kurtines, 1989) is provided. During the course of the intervention, our formal research and clinical assessments identify the families who demonstrate the greatest deficits in family functioning, or who may be experiencing a family crisis. A brief period of weekly therapy sessions (4–8 weeks) for those who need it reinforce Familias Unidas concepts, while addressing specific and more severe family problems. Families are also connected with other community resources when appropriate to reinforce our ecodevelopmental framework.

APPLICATION AND EVALUATION

We recently completed an experimental field trial of the Familias Unidas intervention with 167 Hispanic families of sixth and seventh graders from three middle schools in Miami. Families were randomly assigned to an intervention or nonintervention control condition. Eight small cohorts of 20–25 families were randomized, with approximately 60% of the participants in cohort assigned to the experimental group. Our evaluation of the program to date has focused on three primary questions: (1) what family and broader system factors predict who will engage into our intervention?; (2) to what degree was the intervention effective in modifying the proximal hypothesized mechanisms of parental investment, school bonding and academic achievement, self-regulation/behavior problems, and social competence?; and (3) which demographic interpersonal and group process variables help us understand variability in intervention effects?

Evaluation of Engagement

From the outset of Familias Unidas, we were aware that one of the considerable clinical challenges that must be addressed in family-based preventive interventions is how to engage families into the intervention and how to ensure their ongoing participation (Prinz & Miller, 1996). Our own work on engaging families into treatment interventions supports the view that family systems factors are critical for understanding an individual's motivation and ability to participate (Coatsworth, Santisteban, McBride, & Szapocznik, 2001; Santisteban et al., 1996; Szapocznik et al., 1988). Using data from the 96 families assigned to the Familias Unidas intervention, we examined whether family systems factors (family support, family organization/order, and family

cohesion) would add to the prediction of intervention engagement beyond variables indexing demographics, family need, and perceived barriers (Perrino, Coatsworth, Briones, Pantin, & Szapocznik, 2001).

Results from this study indicated that parents were more likely to engage into the intervention when they came from families with lower household incomes, perceived themselves as low on investment in their child's life prior to the intervention, and came from families with less overall support, less cohesion, and less organization. Indeed, it appears that broader family systems factors are important for engaging families and that our engagement strategies were most effective for families with poorer overall family functioning.

Intervention Efficacy

The initial efficacy evaluation from our experimental field trial is promising (Pantin et al., 2001). Results of mixed model analyses of variance examining change over 12 months revealed that participants that received the Familias Unidas intervention showed more improvement in parental investment, and more consistent declines in problems of self-regulation/behavior problems than did participants in the control condition. Intervention and control group participants did not show significantly different changes in school bonding/academic achievement or social competence over this period. Moreover, analyses revealed a dosage effect such that families that participated in more intervention sessions showed significantly greater improvements in parental investment. These results indicate that in accordance with the theoretical model, the Familias Unidas intervention was influencing the developmental process most proximal to its intervention activities. Low rates of reported substance use in this sample have limited our ability to examine a mediation model in which the intervention's effects on parental investment and adolescent adjustment indicators mediate development of adolescent problem behaviors. Longer term outcome data may allow us to examine that hypothesis.

Variability in Intervention Effects

Although the evaluation of Familias Unidas indicated that the intervention group improved more than the control group, our clinical experience and evaluations of our treatment programs have convinced us of the importance of examining the variability of effects *within* the treatment groups and the charac-

teristics of group members and group process that are related to the variability (Santisteban et al., 1997, 2001). In Familias Unidas, we found that individuals assigned to different cohorts did indeed demonstrate different patterns of intervention results on the outcome of parental investment (Coatsworth, Perrino, Briones, Pantin, & Szapocznik, 2002). Significant differences in the trajectories of parental investment across cohorts were evident among the experimental condition, the control condition, and in the interaction across conditions. Intervention effect sizes across the eight cohorts ranged from a low of -0.8 to a high of 1.2 . Although the groups showing better or worse outcomes did not differ on baseline levels of family and individual functioning, groups with better outcomes were more likely to contain participants from higher SES who were more acculturated. In general, results also suggested that groups with stronger effects also showed better clinical processes, including more cohesion, higher levels of group leadership, more positive affective involvement, and less negative affective involvement.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The Familias Unidas intervention, a multilevel selective preventive intervention for urban poor Hispanic immigrant families, shows promise in its ability to engage participants and alter important parenting practices linked to later adolescent problem behaviors. The essence of the program of research at the Center for Family Studies is to design, test, and refine interventions based on information about for whom intervention is working, for whom it is not working, and whether we can improve the effectiveness across a wider population. The value of the Familias Unidas intervention rests in part on the accrual of data across a number of studies and with respect to two specific research areas that will help us refine and improve the intervention. First, our program of research continues to examine the intervention's effects on hypothesized proximal mediators and on distal developmental outcomes such as conduct disorder and substance abuse. Familias Unidas's developmental model predicts that working with families and parents to change the structure (i.e., interactions) of an adolescent's social ecology will change the likelihood of negative developmental outcomes. The future work of this project includes more refined tests of the developmental model through longitudinal multilevel mediation modeling (Krull & McKinnon, 1999) and tests of the specific mechanisms by which the intervention had its effect (Kazdin, 2001). Because the base rates of

substance use and serious problem behavior were low in our first waves of data collection, we were unable to effectively evaluate whether we had a preventive effect on these outcomes. Follow-up of the adolescents as they transition in to high school is an important feature of the project, because participants will enter a period of increased risk for delinquency, substance use, and other problem behavior (Schulenberg et al., 1997), and if any preventive effects of the Familias Unidas intervention exist, they are more likely to be evident at that time.

A second avenue of research for our program is careful analysis of the clinical processes of the intervention. We are currently involved in a study to code the kinds of facilitator and participant interactions that take place within the intervention sessions. We assume that some of the variability found in our intervention effects will be due to the facilitator's style implementation and to the quality of parent-to-parent interactions within the PSNs. These kinds of analyses of clinical processes that occur within the intervention are an underused technique in prevention science. However, they can provide a rich source of data for further refinement of the intervention techniques and practices during the redesign phase of interventions.

Finally, the Familias Unidas intervention model is now being applied in an intervention to prevent risky sexual behavior in adolescents (Pantin, Schwartz, Sullivan, & Szapocznik, 2001). Although some of the content of the intervention will be decidedly different for this new application, the principles and processes of the intervention, empowering parents, teaching parenting skills, strengthening relationships within and across social ecological domains, using a problem-posing, participatory learning format in a multiparent group format, will remain intact. Many of the parenting skills targeted are also similar, yet some differences are also notable. For example, the new application teaches parents to communicate effectively with their adolescents, but includes an additional focus on issues of risky sexuality. We believe that the flexible model of Familias Unidas and the promising preliminary outcomes are likely to generalize to other negative adolescent outcomes such as risky sexual behavior.

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