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Studies find Latino toddlers lag behind others in cognitive growth

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

Berkeley – Two new studies led by University of California, Berkeley, researchers find that immigrant Latina mothers, who typically live in poor neighborhoods, give birth to healthy babies, but their toddlers start to lag behind middle-class white children in basic language and cognitive skills by 2 or 3 years of age.

The findings, based on a nationwide tracking study of 8,114 infants born in 2001, appear this week in the *Maternal and Child Health Journal*, and a companion report will be published in the medical journal *Pediatrics*. The researchers are based at UC Berkeley's Institute of Human Development, UCLA's School of Medicine and the University of Pittsburgh medical center.

They report that Latina mothers from the poorest group – those of Mexican heritage, who speak Spanish rather than English at home, and who are least acculturated – give birth to healthy babies whose weight equals that of the average newborn of middle-class (non-Latino) white mothers. These women also are no more likely than white mothers to give birth prematurely, which can jeopardize the early brain growth of infants.

The Mexican American mothers "display remarkably sound prenatal practices and healthy diets, more beneficial habits than any other group in the U.S.," said Bruce Fuller, a professor of education and public policy at UC Berkeley, who led both studies. He noted that pregnant Latina women also smoke and drink alcohol far less than their African American and white counterparts.

But while robust births contribute to the earliest cognitive growth of Latino toddlers, Fuller said these youngsters are falling behind the pace of white children's language and mental development by the time they turn 2 or 3.

Basic cognition proficiencies for infants at 9 to 15 months of age – such as comprehending their mother's speech and beginning to use their own words and gestures –were found to be statistically equal between Latino and white children, said Fuller. But by 24- to 36-months of age, Mexican-American toddlers lag behind their white counterparts by up to a half-year in terms of word comprehension, speaking with greater complexity and working with their mothers on simple learning tasks as assessed in English or Spanish, the researchers found.

The study team points to low levels of maternal education, larger family size, and uneven learning practices in the home to explain their findings. Just one-fifth of Mexican American and one-third of all Latina mothers had completed any college courses, compared with almost two-thirds of white mothers. Almost three-fifths of Mexican American toddlers were growing up in families earning less than $25,000 per year, relative to just one-fifth of white families.

"The great majority of young Latino children benefit from two warm and caring parents at home," Fuller said. "But the reading activities, educational games, and performing the ABCs for Grandma, so often witnessed in middle-class homes, are less consistently seen in poor Latino households."

The study also identifies assorted factors contributing to the health and mental growth of all toddlers, regardless of their ethnic and class origins. For example, they found that:

- Female toddlers fare better overall, displaying stronger linguistic and cognitive gains between 9 and 30 months of age, compared with boys.
- Toddlers with employed mothers show significantly stronger mental development than those raised by stay-at-home mothers, even after taking into account maternal education and family income.
- Early cognitive growth is limited in families with more children in the home.
- Toddlers who were not breastfed, along with male toddlers, are more likely to show early signs of childhood obesity.
- Toddlers whose mothers had received fertility treatments fared no better or worse than others.

Fuller said the results involving Latino mothers and children may inform the debate over President Obama's move to strengthen aid for young families with infants and toddlers through his economic stimulus package. It expands by about $3 billion both Head Start preschools and the newer Early Head Start program. These programs are designed to improve the care of infants and toddlers in low-income neighborhoods.

Last month, the U.S. House of Representatives authorized spending $8 billion in early childhood challenge grants to encourage states to broaden early childhood education. The bill next moves to the U.S. Senate. Meanwhile, Obama is pushing for a new home-visiting program, contained within health care legislation which would send trained professionals into the homes of expectant mothers to improve prenatal practices and infant development.

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NOTE: Journalists may view advance copies and supporting graphics at ihd.berkeley.edu. Use the case-sensitive password: *Latinotoddlers.* For help contacting Latina women with toddlers, call Kathleen Maclay in UC Berkeley Media Relations at (510) 643-5351 or *kmaclay@berkeley.edu*.

To contact Professor Bruce Fuller at UC Berkeley, call (510) 642-9163 or (415) 595-4320. To reach pediatric investigator Dr. Alice Kuo at UCLA's School of Medicine, call (310) 741-1657.

Three child development experts, not connected with the research team, are prepared to comment on the reports: Professor Jeanne Brooks-Gunn at Columbia University, (212) 678-3369; Professor Cynthia García Coll at Brown University, (401) 487-4590; and Professor Eugene Garcia at Arizona State University, (602) 496-1152.