

# Culture and Parenting: Family Models Are Not One-Size-Fits-All



**F**amily process models guide theories and research about family functioning and child development outcomes. Theory and research, in turn, inform policies and services aimed at families. But are widely accepted models valid across cultural groups? Surprisingly few studies have sought to answer that question, despite widespread acknowledgement that parenting is culturally defined. The related issue of heterogeneity within cultural groups has also largely been ignored.

To address these gaps, FPG researchers examined the utility of two family process models for families with young children from five cultural groups: European American (EA), African American (AA), primarily English-speaking and primarily Spanish-speaking Hispanic (EH and SH), and Asian (AS). The researchers used secondary data representing the five groups (N=9,500) derived from the ECLS-B, a larger nationally representative study of children born in 2001 that collected data when children were 9 months, 24 months, and preschool age (3-5 years old).

## The Family Investment (FIM) and Family Stress (FSM) Models

The study tested the validity of two models, the FIM and FSM, both of which articulate mediating mechanisms (parenting and other proximal family processes) linking family demographic variables to child outcomes. Neither model addresses culture as a moderator of family processes, however. Using the conceptual model shown in Figure 1, FPG investigators explored the relationships between cultural group, sociodemographic variables, various mediators, and children's academic outcomes.

**Study participants**

Families . . . . . 98% mothers

Child's race/ethnicity identified by parent respondent as:

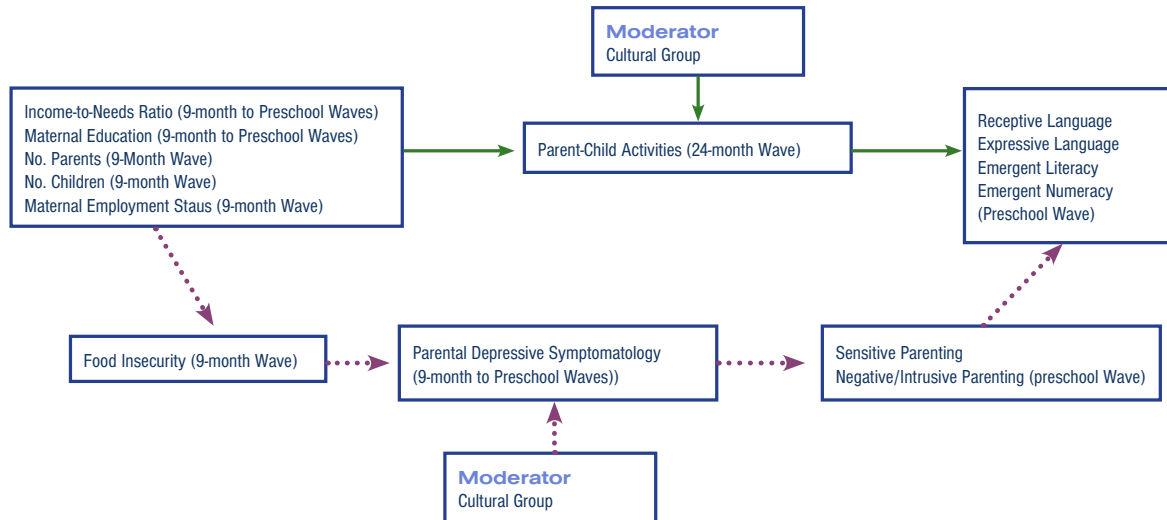
- European American (EA) . . . . . 48%
- African American (AA) . . . . . 18%
- Asian (AS) . . . . . 13%
- Spanish-Speaking Hispanic (SH) . . . 11%
- English-Speaking Hispanic (EH) . . . 10%

For 26% of children, parents were born outside the U.S. (primarily SH & AS)

Average age at preschool assessment = 52.95 months

**Figure 1.**

Conceptual model. Family Investment Model (FM) is indicated by solid green lines and Family Stress Model (FSM) is indicated by dashed purple lines. Each indicated was entered into the model separately.



## Findings

Investigators used path analysis to examine the extent to which the FIM and FSM mediators serve as explanatory mechanisms across cultural groups, linking family demographics and children’s school readiness. The study’s findings indicate that the FIM and FSM may **not** be equally relevant for all groups and that some parenting behaviors exhibit cultural variation. Specifically:

1. The validity of the FIM was supported nearly exclusively for EAs.
2. There were mixed findings for the FSM, with the strongest evidence supporting its validity for EAs, AAs, and SHs.
3. There was little support for either model for EH and AS families.
4. There was little concordance of results between EH and SH families, with results for SHs appearing more similar to AA families.

Table 1 depicts these findings by family process model and mediator. The only mediating variable that was supported for a cultural group other than EAs was the FSM’s *sensitive parenting* variable, which was also salient for AA and SH children. (Sensitive parenting scores were based on direct observation of two dimensions of parent-child interactions: parental emotional support and cognitive stimulation.) This finding is confirmed by the fact that positive parenting initiatives that promote parental warmth and nurturing have been successfully implemented in various cultural groups. The support for the *parent-child activities* (FIM) and *negative/intrusive parenting* (FSM) variables linking family sociodemographics and child outcomes solely for EAs indicates that different mechanisms may be at work for non-EA cultural groups.

**Table 1.**

Path analysis support for mediators, by family process model and cultural group

Models and Mediators	Cultural Group				
	EA	AA	EH	SH	AS
FIM					
Parent-child activities	X	-	-	-	-
FSM					
Sensitive parenting	X	X	-	X	-
Negative/intrusive parenting	X	-	-	-	-

## Implications

The study’s results raise significant questions about the validity of the FIM and FSM for culturally diverse families with young children. The findings highlight the importance of ensuring that researchers and policymakers do not conceptualize parenting solely based on theoretical models primarily validated with middle-class EA populations, using their values and practices. In addition:

The disparities in findings for the EH and SH groups are a reminder that within-group variability is an important (and often neglected) research and policy consideration. Language status may be a meaningful proxy for estimating underlying group differences that influence cultural practices, including parenting.

The study’s lack of support for demographic variables such as number of children and parents in the home and maternal employment status indicate that some demographic indicators may vary for some cultural groups in their predictive utility. Cultural variance in the meaning of family demographics raises questions about face-value conceptualizations of “at-risk” families.

Existing family process models have limited validity for EH and AS families, highlighting the need for family process research in these groups. ■

## To Learn More

Iruka, I.U., LaForett, D.R., & Odom, E.C. (2012). Examining the validity of the family investment and stress models and relationship to children’s school readiness across five cultural groups. *Journal of Family Psychology*, 13(10):1-12. DOI: 10.1037/a0028290.