

Do you Recognize the Impact of Role-Reversal in Hispanic Families?

By Dr. Lourdes Ferrer

You are an eleventh-grade teacher. Rosa, a normally successful Hispanic student in your class, has been absent for several days. She finally shows up, but she consistently withdrawn and unmotivated.

After a week you ask her, "What's wrong Rosa? What is going on?"

She replies, "My mama has cancer. I found out when I had to translate for her when the doctor gave her the test results".

Rosa's mother can't speak English and depends on her daughter for almost everything that requires translation. Rosa is deeply concerned about her mother's welfare. She will have to assume a leading role in her mother's fight against cancer. The mother's lack of English proficiency has made her dependent on Rosa.

This is an example of a role-reversal situation that often occurs in families who are not fluent in English when they immigrate to the U.S. It has huge impact on many immigrant families.

The process of role reversal

Role-reversal occurs when the parents become dependent on their children and those parents lose significant ground in their function as leaders within their homes. When roles are reversed children are often exposed to information and take over responsibilities that should be the domain of their parents.

The discrepancy in the ability to use English, and to understand and navigate American culture and institutions, as well as, widening gaps in educational achievement between parents and their children often cause role reversal. The difference in the ability to function in English is probably the most significant factor in creating the gap.

The gap results in premature empowerment of children and diminished parental authority. Often, children are not emotionally mature enough to cope with the responsibility that is placed upon them.

Role reversal may not happen immediately when a family immigrates. Instead it takes place at a pace parallel to the rate at which the children become functional in English or the need for a translator occurs in the family.

All Hispanic families do not experience role reversal to the same degree

Role-reversal does not take place in every Hispanic family that immigrates. Hispanic families have characteristics that vary a great deal from family to family. They vary in their countries of origin, educational background, English and Spanish language proficiency, etc.

Not all Hispanic eat tacos nor dance Salsa! Not all Hispanic experience immigration the same way. They do not all experience role-reversal to the same degree, if at all. However, when they do experience it, it can be very damaging to the social structure and relationships within the family.

Hispanics generally place a very high value on family relationships and often have specific definition of roles and authority system within the family. It is a cultural architecture that has been passed on for generations. When role reversal occurs, it is like an earthquake shaking the family structure.

The process of learning English

If you were a Hispanic immigrant parent, and your family does not speak English, what would you experience? Well, as soon as you immigrate, you have to enroll your children in school. It is the law. Your children begin the process of moving rapidly through the different stages of language acquisition.

The first stages, known as the “silent period”, usually lasts less than a year. In this stage your children mostly listen while working hard to make sense of English. Your children then move through stages of: early production, speech emergence, intermediate fluency and then into age-appropriate fluency or proficiency.

Eventually, after some years, they may prefer English. They may even reach a point where speaking Spanish requires mental work. While children are moving up the ladder towards English proficiency, you as a parent are experiencing something different.

If you are like many Hispanic immigrant parents, you are too busy working; many times holding more than one job; and trying to make ends meet. You probably have employment that does not require strong English skills. Because you immigrated without skills in English, you prefer Spanish media.

You speak Spanish at home, watch Hispanic channels and only connect socially with Spanish-speaking individuals. You are disengaged from English media. You are embarrassed by the mistakes you might make and so, you avoid interactions

in English. You are too intimidated to engage in activities that will allow you to improve your English skills. Do you see how the linguistic gap begins to form?

The gap creates two problems. First, it makes communication at home more difficult. It challenges you as a parent to effectively communicate with your children when their preferred language is different from your own – they prefer English because they are under both educational and social pressure to use it.

Second, it often forces premature responsibility upon your child. They need to help you as a parent to function in an English speaking society. Many students at an early age become the parent's interpreters during doctor's appointments, parent-teacher conferences, shopping, and other activities. Your children don't have the maturity to handle the information that is transmitted in the adult world. It should not be the role of the child to become an interpreter.

Strategies to prevent role reversal

Role reversal can be prevented or lessened with the right kind of strategies:

1. Help Hispanic parents recognize that role-reversal exists. Awareness prepares them to avoid the consequences of it. If you know there is a possibility of a severe storm and that you could lose power, you might stock up on batteries, and candles, and other things. To be forewarned is be forearmed.

Information is a powerful armament. Public schools, churches, social service agencies, and other community service organizations are logical providers for that information.

2. The second strategy is to provide services. Develop community initiatives that encourage and sponsor enrollment of immigrants in programs where they can learn English, and in activities that encourage them to interact with fluent speakers of English.

When my skill in English was weak, I started attending church services in English instead of Spanish. At church I could interact with people who spoke English as their first language and listen to public speaking and singing in English.

3. Encourage Hispanic families to engage with English media. Watching a DVD of a movie that is in English with Spanish subtitles is an entertaining way to learn English words and language structure. (Watch the rating so that vulgarity is not learned). Listen to music that has English lyrics and practice singing the lyrics. I used get tapes of the English church service and practice saying the sentences in the car as I traveled to and from work.

4. Encourage Hispanic families to practice speaking English with their children in the home. Not to lose the Spanish language; not to abandon Hispanic culture, not all the time; but, have an English only night or time to practice English as a family. More, if they want to learn it quickly.

5. Help service providers to be aware of the potential emotional harm that children may experience as a result of role reversal. Hospitals, schools, large businesses, and other providers often have employees who can interpret. Help service providers develop the sensitivity to not utilize clients' children as interpreters unless there is no other alternative.

I have experienced what I am talking about

I know that I have primarily discussed role-reversal in the Hispanic family. That is because I am a Hispanic and immigrated here with my three children and we had to go through many of the processes that I have discussed here to avoid role reversal.

I have interviewed scores of Hispanic students in public schools to gather their perspectives. I believe that with these strategies, we can reverse the danger of role-reversal. You may find that these strategies work for other immigrants who come here without fluency in English.

About the Author: Dr. Lourdes Ferrer has her doctorate in Educational Leadership. She consults with regional and district school systems, regarding issues of Hispanic parental involvement, assessment, the No Child Left Behind Act, and Hispanic student initiatives. She is a motivational speaker and seminar presenter. www.drlourdes.net.

Copyright © 2007. Permission is given to reprint and distribute this article in its original form as long as the author information and website link are left in tact. The information must be reproduced without change and in its entirety.