



THEIR MOTHERS' GIFTS

by Katherine de la Peña



Young Hispanic parents are often reluctant to let non-family members take care of their children. Professional literature indicates that this same characteristic may be the reason that they are less likely to enroll their children in preschool programs than parents of other ethnic groups. Educators warn that this creates a disadvantage for children from Hispanic families when they enter the mainstream American school environment and many of their peers from other backgrounds have already had at least two years of formal educational experience. The conclusion is drawn that staying home with their families, who many times live below the poverty level, puts them at a disadvantage because their parents do not have the necessary skills to effectively encourage development. My experience has taught me otherwise. Parents of young children in the South Texas Rio Grande Valley region, especially mothers, exhibit unrivaled courage, self-sacrifice, and unyielding hope for themselves and their children. Almost without exception they are caring, nurturing advocates who hold their children in the highest regard. In addition, their unique ways of encouraging child development within the values of their culture, ensure their children's success as they, themselves, define it. The mothers living in the poor neighborhoods and colonias of South Texas have gifts to share and lessons to teach. Perhaps one way of bridging gaps between cultures is starting first with an awareness and then an understanding of the valuable lessons that parents from all cultures can teach each other.

I arrived in the Rio Grande Valley over twenty years ago. Within a few years I found myself working with parents of very young children with developmental delays. Most of the parents lived in poverty and most were Mexican-American. When I began this work, I was not yet a parent myself and I was more concerned with imparting my formally acquired wisdom than listening to their needs and

building on their strengths. I presented strategies to encourage their child's development, but never took the time to recognize the successful strategies that already existed in the homes I visited. Over the years, I have built relationships with many of these parents, mostly mothers, and I have become humbled by their determination to survive in spite of numerous socioeconomic challenges and in their natural ability to do what is right for their children. It is said that we parent most like we were parented ourselves and I suppose that even though my own mother lives thousands of miles away, I have raised my children much as she raised me. Still, I have learned much from the mothers in the Rio Grande Valley who have opened their homes and their lives to me. In some cases I have chosen to adopt their way of mothering as my own. Their stories are inspiring and heart-warming and demonstrate the strength and determination of motherhood that, although it manifests itself in various ways, is common across all cultures.



The mothers whose stories I tell are mostly young and do not have an education beyond high school. Some are illegal residents whose children have a right to an education in the United States. Others were born and raised on this side of the border. Most are single parents and although supported by a larger family network, they may feel isolated with no transportation to venture beyond the confines of their immediate neighborhood. Nearly seventy percent of the families in the Valley live below the poverty level and exist on public assistance for housing, food, and health care. Some speak Spanish well, but most use a mixture of Spanish and English called Tex-Mex. A few prefer English. All are mothers of young children with developmental delays or disabilities and all are struggling to provide the best life they can for their children.

The mothers in the Rio Grande Valley draw from generations of support and guidance. The concept that "it takes a village to raise a child" is widely accepted and the children benefit from the corps of caretakers

they have watching over them. One of the most memorable caretakers I have met during my years of working with families was a woman named Elida. Elida was the great-grandmother of a little girl named Ana who had a vision loss due to lack of oxygen as a result of an episode where she stopped breathing. Ana's mother was a single mother, 17 years old, and a student. Her grandmother was 33 and worked full time. So Ana's care became the responsibility of Great-Grandma Elida. Elida had raised eight children, and a dozen or so grandchildren. Ana was her only great-grandchild. Each week I showed up prepared to give advice on how to help her visually impaired granddaughter. Elida listened respectfully, nodding and smiling. Then she proceeded to tell me that she planned to raise Ana in the same manner that she had raised all her other children and grandchildren, because, after all, Ana was more like them than different. Of course she was right and I resolved to listen more and offer advice less.

It was not long after arriving in the Rio Grande Valley, that I learned the story of "el mal de ojo," or the evil eye, as it is called in English. The custom says that if you admire something or someone by gazing longingly at it or extending a warm compliment, you must touch it – including people – or the object or person will experience misfortune. A beautiful vase or lamp might break; a child might get sick. I had difficulty believing that an admiring look could cause harm, but I do believe in the extraordinary powers of the mind, and I embraced the Valley custom of touching one another to demonstrate goodwill.

Many of the mothers I visited, believed their child had a developmental problem because someone had given the infant el mal de ojo or had given the mothers, themselves, el mal de ojo when they were pregnant. There were ways to break the curse if it was caught soon enough. Often I have seen a mother or a grandmother praying over a sick child with an egg and making small signs of the cross all over the child's body as they whisper Spanish prayers. Then at the end, they break the egg in a dish and float small crosses made out of grass or reeds in the yolk, all in an effort to ward off the curse of the evil eye. And it works! I have witnessed many children calm down, often fall asleep and, perhaps because of the sleep, wake up stronger. I am not sure of the significance of the

egg yolk or the floating crosses but I believe the undivided attention, the soft nurturing voice, the caring touch, and the assurance of the presence of God are not only appropriate but also extremely comforting to children...and to mothers.

A majority of the children in our early intervention program qualify for services because they have a language delay. The usual agreed upon strategies for helping children develop language in a home environment include reading books and using parallel talk, a method of following the child's lead and describing his actions and presumed thoughts as a way of connecting words to experience. Neither strategy works well with mothers in the Valley. Books brought to them for use with their child are often stored safely on top of the refrigerator, thought too valuable to be given to a child. Busy mothers living in close quarters with extended family members feel uncomfortable with the constant chatter of parallel talk.

But the mothers have their own unique ways of communicating with their children and teaching them concepts. For one, the children are never far from their mother's side and children are encouraged to take an active part in all family interactions and activities, providing them with a wide experience base from which to build more skills. Children accompany their families to the grocery store, to weddings, funerals, parent meetings and late night dances. Mothers actually prefer that their children accompany them everywhere. They are too valuable to be left behind.

These mothers are also skilled at communicating their messages through body language, gestures and a mutually agreed upon regional sign language system. A Mexican-American mother in the Valley need not utter a single word but only look at her child, eyebrows raised, and move her hand, palm upward, as if slicing the air back and forth, for him to know that he had better stop his misbehavior or further action will soon be taken. Similarly, a fist with forefinger and thumb outstretched and slightly separated means "ahorita" and signals the child to wait just a moment more. All mothers use the signs. All children understand them, even children with disabilities or developmental delays. They are passed down from generation to generation and they are effective at teaching language and communicating ideas.

There may be a flaw in an American culture that expects all children to be parented in the same manner in order to later succeed in school. I question the logic of encouraging families to give up their young children to the formalization of preschool when their homes offer them love, support, a wealth of positive experiences, and mothers who are phenomenal role models. We risk damaging the strong bond between mother and child and totally missing the lessons they have to teach. The mothers in the Rio Grande Valley are not only effective advocates for their children, they skillfully provide the nurturance that is necessary for their children to develop into happy productive adults. We cannot overlook their gifts. Doing so is not only ignoring a potential community resource but it may also adversely affect the eventual success of their children.

Kathy de la Peña serves the AAHBEI Governing Board as Member-at-Large for the Southwest Region. She lives in Texas and is the Director of the Early Childhood Intervention Program at Region One Education Service Center in Edinburg. Their program serves over 400 families in two counties. She has a BA in Deaf Education, an MEd in Special Education, and an EdD in Educational Leadership.