

Unfamiliar, unfair, and unacknowledged

How Spanish-speaking families navigate learning and thinking differences compared to English-speaking families

Qualitative market research with Spanish-speaking parents whose children learn and think differently

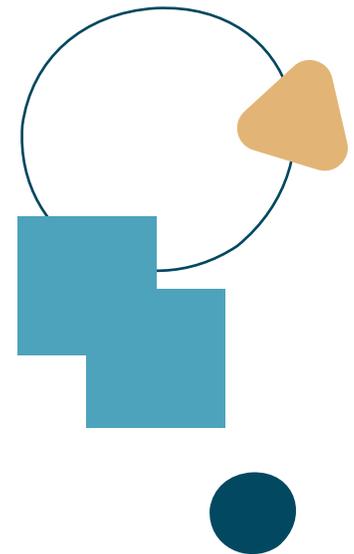
In the United States, Spanish is the most commonly spoken non-English language. As of 2019, nearly [42 million people were speaking Spanish at home](#). According to [some records](#), the number may even be higher — and it's growing. For those who speak Spanish at home, it's often their primary or only language. The Census reports that nearly [40% of Spanish-speakers](#) speak English "less than very well."

These families are often overlooked in discussions of learning and thinking differences. Their children's struggles may not be understood by the school. This can result in kids missing out on services they need. Or they may be [given the wrong kind of help](#).

Physicians could be an important source of information but in the U.S., only [6% of physicians speak Spanish](#). There's an urgent need to understand and serve these families.

Why this matters

Figuring out how to help kids with learning and thinking differences has almost always been centered around English-speaking students. That leaves a lot of families not knowing how to get support. Also, while there's some research on the general challenges that Spanish-speaking families face, we don't know enough about their day-to-day lives. Where do they get information? What's going well with their child's school? What's still hard to sort out? We need their perspectives.



Our approach

In 2023, Understood commissioned research in partnership with [UnidosUS](#). They're the largest Latino civil rights organization in the United States. The research was conducted using outside consultants. These included Ribnik Research for recruitment and Balboa Consulting for interviews.

We conducted 10 interviews and three focus groups. There were five parents, five young adults with their parents, and three focus groups with educators. All parents spoke Spanish as their primary language. Families had varied levels of English proficiency. They were all from different countries and had been living in the U.S. for different lengths of time. Their children had learning and thinking differences. Teachers were recruited from districts with >33% Spanish-speaking populations. They often spoke Spanish themselves. Interviews were conducted by a bilingual and bicultural moderator, mostly in Spanish.

Findings



Where it's similar

Low awareness, myths, school meetings, and moms who never give up

English-speaking and Spanish-speaking families had a lot in common.

- Neither started out knowing much about learning and thinking differences. When their child was struggling, an educator or a medical professional explained.
- They believed various myths about learning and thinking differences.
- They all found school meetings really hard. Spanish-speaking families found it taxing to have to use an interpreter in meetings – especially if their child had to do it.
- Young adults credited their mothers for never giving up. They say their moms fought to get them what they needed in school.



Where the paths diverge

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Unfamiliar

To a parent whose primary language is Spanish, both the U.S. education system and health care can be almost impossible to figure out.

“ Latino parents ... don't know what they can get for their kids and what to ask vs. the non-Latinos ”

– Parent

Unfair

If children speak both English and Spanish, they often can't get an evaluation until after a waiting period – even if they speak English well. When kids don't speak English well, teachers may not be able to tell why they're struggling in school. Is it because they're still learning English, or is it because they have learning and thinking differences?

“ I wish there was easy access to dual testing to see if it's the language vs. the disability getting in the way. It's the gray area [cases] where we are not really sure. ”

– Teacher

Unacknowledged

We heard stories of parents being asked not to speak Spanish at home by teachers. And most families couldn't get the recommended therapies for their child in Spanish.

School officials may not realize how important Spanish is for these families. It's a vital cultural asset. And it's often a child's only way to talk to family members.

Most of the children in the families we spoke to have layered identities. They may be immigrants or undocumented. They may be living below the poverty level. They may act as the family translator – and then code-switch among their friends. This makes learning and thinking differently (another identity) all the more daunting.

“ I got very nervous because I am an immigrant. I was not aware of the culture, the laws, the language. I did not know how the system worked. I thought it was maybe my fault she was not developing correctly and ... they would take my kids. For us immigrants, Latino ... they take advantage of you ... so you are scared. ”

– Parent

In sum

Spanish-speaking families face challenges all along the way when their child has learning and thinking differences. The systems for everything from early detection to getting help are built with English-speaking students in mind. But the stories we heard are filled with resilience, strength, and hope.

How we're acting on this

In partnership with [UnidosUS](#), Understood.org has created a digital Spanish-language [hub](#) as well as a Spanish-language [podcast](#). Additionally, based on this research, UnidosUS developed a curriculum for their [Padres Comprometidos Program](#) with eight local affiliates.

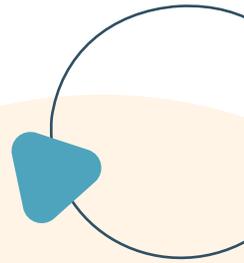
A note

We refer to Spanish-speaking families as one audience. But we recognize that this group includes people with a range of differences (country of origin, culture, time in U.S., etc.). We can't account for all of this in our research. Most of our respondents had a positive and uplifting "ending" to their story. This report does not reflect those who are still struggling to find help, and who are often unwilling to speak to us.

While our research was not intended to fully explore and enumerate systemic challenges, we'd be remiss to not state the systemic barriers Spanish-speaking families face, through no fault of their own. They're navigating an already complex process, often in a foreign country and language. They also face the barriers of racism and inequitable access to health care and education, among others.

For more info

We'd love to discuss this research with you, hear about your research, and partner with you on new research. Reach out at knowledge@understood.org.



Other reference materials

In developing this research, the team at Understood referenced a wide range of field literature. Some are noted above. These others, while not cited, were helpful background.

Weis, J. (2020, Nov 25). *Latino students misdiagnosed with learning disabilities raises questions about discrimination, bias*. Salud America.

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Jimenez, D. E., Bartels, S. J., Cardenas, V., & Alegría, M. (2013). Stigmatizing attitudes towards mental illness among racial/ethnic older adults in primary care. *International Journal of Geriatric Psychiatry*, 28(10): 1061–1068.

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