

# IMPACT

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*IMPACT is a series of publications highlighting how UC Davis' College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences makes a difference in the lives of Californians. Through research, teaching, and outreach programs, UC Davis research touches almost all aspects of Californian life. Today, millions of people eat safer foods, breathe cleaner air, and drink healthier water with the help of our researchers. We're making discovery work -- for California and the world.*

## MEXICAN AMERICAN FAMILIES

### THE ISSUE

Mexican Americans will soon be the largest ethnic group in California, and children of Mexican-origin families will play an important role in the future of California. The interaction of how Mexican culture and traditional family values affect their children's performance in a competing culture is being studied at the University of California, Davis, in order to understand the social and cultural factors that lead to the success or failure of Mexican American youth.

In any culture, some children adapt well to cultural and environmental stresses, but others struggle and succumb to pressures such as substance abuse and dropping out of school. Basic factors that help children overcome adversity may be widespread among different cultures. However, family strategies for survival are influenced by culture and tradition.

Understanding how Mexican-origin family values contribute to resilience and adaptation is important to understanding how children of Mexican heritage make successful transitions into adolescence in the U.S.

This extensive study is the first of its kind to examine values in Mexican-origin families and how they relate to adolescent development in the U.S.

### WHAT WE'RE DOING

Professor Rand Conger, specializing in human development and family studies at UC Davis, focuses



on community-based studies of families, children, and adolescents. He is concerned with how social, cultural, and economic factors influence family interaction processes and how these processes, in turn, affect the emotional and behavioral functioning of family members.

In this study, 600 Mexican American families in the Sacramento area are being interviewed to determine the factors that keep their children well adjusted and healthy during the transition to adolescence. The families studied will be representative of Mexican-origin families in California with regard to income, education, and family history.

Conger's team of 25 bilingual interviewers, many from the Mexican American community, will interview children and their parents starting when the child is

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in fifth grade. The in-depth research will follow the development of these children during the next several years as they experience the crucial transition from late childhood to early adolescence, a period of increasing social, cognitive, and biological challenges.

Families are being studied in terms of how they communicate, resolve conflicts, and demonstrate respect across generations, and which factors make differences for the successful development of children.

The project will also consider how parents and children deal with the differences between mainstream U.S. and traditional Mexican values, and which approaches to dealing with possible cultural conflicts help promote the well-being of both parents and children.

Colleagues working with Conger include professors Ana Mari Cauce from the University of Washington, William Vega from the University of Medicine and Dentistry of New Jersey, Katherine Conger from UC Davis, and graduate student Dannelle Larsen-Rife from UC Davis.

Other collaborators include psychology professor Keith Widaman, human development and family studies faculty Xiaojia Ge and Lenna Ontai-Grzebik from UC Davis, and several faculty from Michigan State, Arizona State, and Utah State universities.

The National Institute on Drug Abuse and the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism funded more than \$5 million to conduct this important study.

## **A SHARED VISION**

Particularly in times of stress, families must cope to stay together. It is important to understand how different cultures handle social pressures -- drugs, school drop-out, unemployment, divorce -- so that programs and services can be provided to keep families together and functioning well. Conger believes that several traditional cultural factors provide stability, protection, and support to Mexican American adolescents, including a strong sense of family, involved and supportive parents, and cross-generational respect.

Once the factors that contribute to adolescent success or failure are determined, programs can be created to assist the growing and influential population of Mexican-origin adolescents in California during the period from childhood to adolescence to adulthood.

The California State Department of Social Services, the National Hispanic Science Network, school districts, and other youth-serving agencies can use the information from this study to promote the well-being of Mexican American families and children.

Helping families raise successful children benefits everyone in the Sacramento area and California as a whole. Given the rapid growth in the Mexican American population across the United States, this work can also assist families and communities nationwide.

That's impact – UC Davis researchers working with families and communities to develop programs that enrich the lives of parents and youth from the many diverse cultures that contribute to the uniqueness of California.

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## **CONTACTS**

Rand Conger  
Department of Human and Community Development  
(530) 754-7357  
rdconger@ucdavis.edu

### **College of Agricultural and Environmental Sciences**

Neal Van Alfen, Dean  
(530) 752-1605  
nkvanalfen@ucdavis.edu

Ann Filmer, Senior Writer  
(530) 754-6788  
afilmer@ucdavis.edu

<http://caes.ucdavis.edu>

