

PROMOTING SUPPORTIVE PARENTING IN IMMIGRANT FAMILIES WITH YOUNG CHILDREN THROUGH SNAP

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This brief is part of a series on child and parent well-being in immigrant families.

Background

In 2023, 18% of US children living in poverty were in immigrant families.^{1,2} This means about 3.3 million children lived in households earning \$30,900 or less per year (for a family of four with two children).

Families living in poverty are more likely to experience food insecurity, lower school readiness, and emotional stress.^{3,4,5} Parents often struggle to meet their families' basic needs, which can lead to high levels of stress, depression, and burnout.^{6,7,8} *Compared to US-born families, immigrant parents of young children are at an even higher risk of food insecurity.*⁹

The federal government offers social safety net programs, such as the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP), to support individuals and families with low-incomes meet basic needs. SNAP – formerly known as food stamps – helps families buy food and groceries at authorized distributors to improve food security. Research shows that *SNAP reduces food insecurity and healthcare usage, and improves children's health, development, and educational success.*^{10,11,12}

Yet many immigrant families face limited access to SNAP because of strict eligibility rules and other barriers. As a result, *fewer income-eligible immigrant families with young children are enrolling in SNAP than in the past.*^{13,14} Lower usage of SNAP among immigrant families has been linked to state policies that exclude them, stigma or fear of deportation, and challenges like language barriers or lack of program knowledge.^{15,16,17,18}

When immigrant parents and their children can't access SNAP benefits, it can harm their health and well-being. This brief reports on research examining how the receipt of SNAP impacts parenting and family well-being among immigrant parents.

Who are the Children of Immigrants?

- 1 in 4 children in the U.S. live with an immigrant parent.
- 88% of these children were born in the U.S.
- 49% of these children live in families with low-incomes.



What is Food Insecurity?

- Not having enough food or worrying about running out of food.

Who Qualifies for SNAP?

- Most adults must be lawful permanent residents with 5 or more years in the US.
- US citizen children can get SNAP even if parents don't qualify.
- Household income usually at or below 130% of the Federal Poverty Level (\$40,560/year for a family of 4).

What did we find?

Key Takeaway: Receiving SNAP was linked to *more supportive parenting* among immigrant parents with low incomes and young children. This suggests *SNAP may play a key role in promoting child well-being.*

What is Supportive Parenting?

- When parents spend time helping their child learn and grow through everyday activities.

This might look like...

- Reading or telling stories with a baby at 9 months old, or going to the library with a toddler.

Quantitative Findings

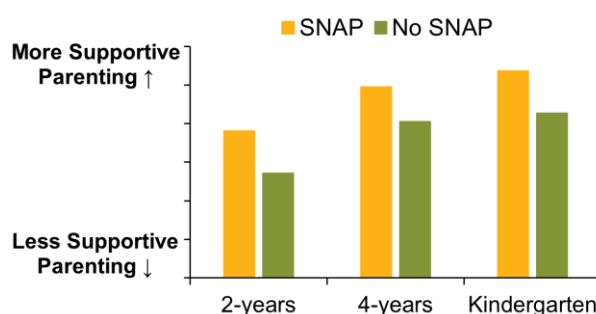
- Immigrant parents with low-incomes who received SNAP when their child was 9 months had *higher levels of supportive parenting* when children were 2- and 4-years old, and starting kindergarten.
- These associations were consistent over time and adjusted for family and child characteristics.

Qualitative Findings

- Parents described how SNAP reduced stress and brought peace of mind, helping them feel more secure and emotionally available for their children.

"I mean, with the benefit of food stamps, you don't have that stress of having to use the money you earn to buy food, so whether you like it or not, it takes that stress off your mind and you can be happier"

Figure 1. Supportive Parenting Over Time



Note. Higher scores indicate more supportive parenting behaviors. Values shown are standardized.

Source: U.S. Dept. of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Birth Cohort (ECLS-B).

- Families shared how SNAP allowed them to spend more quality time together and engage in everyday activities that support child development.

"Because of these food stamps and fresh food, I can go to different places for free or for \$2. For example, at the Children's Museum, we need to pay \$9.50 per person for our family. It would be around \$40, but for this card we can pay just \$8. This card helped me to teach my children by just visiting different places and learning"

Implications

- **Research:** SNAP benefits may do more than address food insecurity – they can also reduce stress and support positive parenting by helping parents spend more quality time with their children.
- **Practice:** Professionals who work with immigrant families should share information about SNAP and help eligible families enroll, as participation may directly support parent-child connection.
- **Policy:** Policy makers should expand access to SNAP by increasing outreach, reducing paperwork, and addressing barriers that prevent eligible immigrant families from enrolling.

How did we conduct this research?

This study used a mixed-methods approach. Quantitative analyses were conducted in a subsample of immigrant parents with low-income from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study – Birth Cohort (ECLS-B; $N=1,050$). The ECLS-B is a nationally representative survey of children born in the U.S. in 2001. Qualitative data came from focus groups with 35 immigrant parents in two states with different social policies. Focus groups were analyzed for patterns in response to the research questions.

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