



## Put Away *la Chancla*

A spanking may have been the norm back in the day, but Latinas still feeling the sting of their mother's slipper are disciplining differently. **by WANDA MEDINA**

**ANA LOPEZ** vividly remembers the spanking her mother gave her for not eating a plate of food at her *tía's* house two decades ago. "By the time I got home, my aunt had called my mother, who was waiting by the door holding the official Puerto Rican

*chancla*—a hard brown sandal with 'Puerto Rico' engraved on it in gold letters," Lopez recalls. "I tried to get past her, but before I could, she grabbed my pigtail and began whacking me on the butt and legs." Don't be surprised if this sounds

familiar. Many Latinas share similar stories of trying to outrun their slipper-wielding mamás. "When compared with American culture, Latinos have a strong sense of community as well as the hierarchy that maintains it—it's the parents who are in charge," says Jennifer Coloma, Ph.D., a Peruvian psychologist at the Children's Health Council in Palo Alto, California. This family structure is maintained through respect, humility, and tradition, values that old-school Latinas lived by. "We were tough because we wanted our children to behave a certain way," says Melania Soto, 74, a Dominican mother of three and grandmother of seven who lives in Brooklyn, New York. "Discipline showed them how to be better people. It made them listen to us."

For Lopez, who grew up in the Bronx, New York, the threat of *la chancla* was motivation enough to walk the straight and narrow. "The rules always applied, even when my mother was in a good mood," she says. "Don't speak unless spoken to, don't interrupt adult conversations or *novelas*, and eat what is cooked, not what you want," explains Lopez, mom of Joseph, 13, and twins Josephine and Joselyn, 5. "It could be your birthday, but if you messed up, you'd get a *pela*."

### ● Changing Our Ways

Physical punishment may have worked for the previous generation of mamás, but millennial moms are stepping away from hitting as a form of discipline. "Many parents today remember feeling scared,

embarrassed, or even mad at their parents, and they don't want to impose that on their own children," Dr. Coloma says. These lingering emotions are what keep Cristina Govar, of Rockwall, Texas, from following her mother's lead when reprimanding her 6-year-old daughter, Hedy. "I didn't trust my mom and worried that she'd punish me if I opened up to her," says the Mexican American. Now, she always talks to Hedy, making sure she understands the consequences of her actions.

While Latinas such as Govar have gone the way of opening up the lines of communication with their kids, they still believe that having respect for parental authority is a value worth preserving. "You can have a conversation yet still provide clear boundaries," Dr. Coloma says. "The trick is to be assertive when talking to children about right and wrong. They can sense it when you're anxious—it's in your tone and body language. That's why it's important to show them that you can be upset about a situation but still stay in control." No yelling or spanking.

If emotions start running high, Dr. Coloma suggests that you "regain your composure by stopping and taking a deep breath, so as not to do something you may regret later, which can bring on guilt, shame, and frustration—in other words, more emotions to deal with!"

### ● **Mixing Old and New**


Some Latina moms might not be whipping out a slipper these days when their kids act up, but that doesn't mean they subscribe to their

Anglo peers' parenting styles either. "My friend lets her children decide what they're going to do today—I don't understand that," says Lopez, who finds the "American" approach too lenient. "The kids even choose what's for dinner," something that would never fly with Lopez. "There are certain things that still work from the way we grew up: In my house, there's no discussion about what we're going to be eating, and I'm not giving you a choice about what to do with my time," she says.

So where does this leave Latinas who fall right in the middle of the strictness spectrum?

"We have to learn how to live in two worlds and take the best from both," Dr. Coloma says. "Our children are growing up in a society that's very different from the one we grew up in. In the U.S., it's about standing out from the crowd, while in our culture we're taught to be humble and follow along. Finding a balance can be beneficial, because they both have value. So if you have your fundamental parts in mind, you can choose between where you want to bend the old rules and what's not negotiable."

Which is exactly what Lopez is doing. "From the American side," I'm aware that not everything is the end of the world, so I choose my battles," she says. "On the Latina side, I refuse to plead with my kids to behave a certain way. They know there is a line they shouldn't cross." And if they ever forget it, Lopez uses another of her mother's favorite tactics: "I just give them a stare that goes straight through their body, and that puts them in their place."

 Instead of choosing between *la chancla* and the comparatively permissive Anglo style, this generation of Latina moms is finding a middle ground that works for them.



## Oh, No, She Didn't!

Has *Abuela* spanked the kids? Handle this one carefully—here's how.

If you're like most working Latina moms, your mother or *suegra* is your go-to babysitter—but you might not always agree on discipline techniques. Ideally, you'll discuss your preferred parenting style with her ahead of time. But just in case *Abuela*'s already given your sweetie a swift swat, try these helpful tips.

» **Acknowledge her intentions.** Avoid making your mother feel as if she's being criticized—she's only going to get defensive. Instead, tell her, "I know you're coming from a good place and want to guide them to make the right decisions, but hitting isn't acceptable to me."

» **Create a connection.** Approach the topic as a team by admitting that you often get frustrated with your kids. Ask her about discipline methods that work for her; then tell her what you've been trying. It's about letting her feel that she's helping you solve the problem.

» **Make it beneficial for her.** If *Abuela* is hesitant about modern discipline such as giving a defiant child a time-out, explain that it will give her a chance to cool down too. And who wouldn't want to feel less stressed?