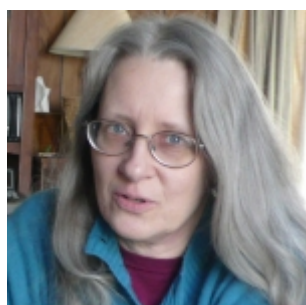


## BOOK review: Kids in the middle

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*Wendy M. Grossman takes a closer look at Vikki Katz's work on how children of immigrants 'broker' for their parents, focusing on Hispanic families in Los Angeles. In particular, she explores the impact of digital technology, and how this is helping or hindering in the brokering process. Wendy writes about the border wars between cyberspace and real life. She is the 2013 winner of the **Enigma Award** and she has **released** a number of books, articles, and music. [Header image credit: dorsal stream, CC BY-NC 2.0]*

'The family home has long been a "black box" in immigration research,' writes Vikki S. Katz at the end of *Kids in the middle: How children of immigrants negotiate community interactions for their families*. She set out to change this in studying how immigrants' children help the rest of their families to function in their new, alien communities.

In a **2014 interview**, Katz indicated that the five years since she completed her research have seen important changes, particularly with respect to media (see this **2013 Pew study** for more details). In 2009, although only half of Katz's Latino families had internet access, almost all had a computer, and all had at least one television. In more recent studies of Mexican families, many have sacrificed their cable TV subscriptions to afford broadband, and mobile phones are elbowing out landlines. Therein lies the challenge for this kind of research: not to be dismissed as out of date by the time it's published.

### Accessing services

Like many other demographic terms – think 'over-65s' – 'Latino' encompasses people from widely differing countries, backgrounds and abilities. In US usage it loosely means anyone of Hispanic origin. According to the US Census Bureau, in 2013 this group made up 48.3% of the population of Los Angeles County, and 38.4% of the population of California as a whole. So probably few people would expect Spanish speakers to struggle to use municipal services in such surroundings. And yet, Katz discovered, Los Angeles' official second language is unevenly distributed.



In the low-income urban area of Greater Crenshaw she studied from 2006 to 2009, Latinos were relative newcomers, joining an entrenched African-American community. Latinos were as much a minority immigrant community as the (for example) more sparse Russian-speaking communities studied by University of Miami associate professor Dina Birman. So if the speakers of an official second language struggle to find the resources they need, how much harder must it be for everyone else?

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Around the world

Publications

Resources

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As shown in Katz's study, accessing services in Greater Crenshaw is tough in any language. Katz's study included two local schools. One reflected the above demographic changes; the other had additional state funding as part of a pilot project to improve student performance in high-poverty areas, and these extra resources allowed it to provide bilingual staff and other aids. However, students and parents in both schools knew that anyone who could went elsewhere. In this environment, one teacher told Katz, the first job was to keep the students safe and only second to educate them.

Despite good intentions, Katz writes, professionals' understanding was limited by what they could imagine based on their own experience. When 11-year-old Luis had a bad day in school, no one realised he had been up all night in the emergency room helping his mother communicate with doctors treating his severely epileptic seven-year-old brother.

## Children's key role in brokering for adults

Most of 'Kids in the middle' focuses on the author's fieldwork with 20 families, in which she was assisted by bilingual researchers Beni Gonzalez and Michelle Hawks, both, like Katz, immigrant family brokers themselves. Katz had a personal question: how did immigrants cope, without her South African family's advanced degrees and native knowledge of English? In total, of the team's 22 child brokers, 17 were female; 12 were aged 12-14 (middle school), seven were aged 15-18 (high school); one, at 19, was attending community college; and two, 18 and 19, were pregnant and had dropped out of high school. Three were additionally stressed when communicating with anyone official by their **undocumented status**, a classification that includes everything from illegal immigrants to those brought by parents to the US as babies.

These children interpret bills, letters, naturalisation forms, newspaper articles and TV shows, help English-speaking doctors and Spanish-speaking parents discuss complex and sometimes embarrassing or distressing medical information, negotiate with employers, and defuse cultural misunderstandings. They are generally honest, hesitating, rather than lying when relaying to their parents their teachers' complaints. Most are proud of their developing skills, and value the close relationships they forge with their parents. Most accept the 'immigrant's bargain': parents sacrifice to give their children a better life, and in return, these children help them navigate an alien culture. Few discussed their brokering efforts with friends in similar situations, and some had additional support from members of their extended families.

The burden on children of this brokering was often invisible to outsiders. Liliana, 16, helped her landlord uncle collect rent and discuss maintenance with African-American tenants. Graciela, 13, brokered most of her housecleaner mother's interactions with her English-speaking employers, accompanying her to work during school vacations. She also helped neighbours with interviews for new housecleaning jobs. Aurora, 16, helped neighbours pay bills and attend appointments; when neighbours' recommendations were insufficient to find the new doctor her family needed, she successfully researched online. Once, at the emergency room, when she was too sick to broker effectively for her mother, it wasn't until another bilingual speaker was found that she could relax. In a similar situation, Graciela's mother had to find a Spanish-speaking janitor to assist.

## Helpful technology



In a 2010 journal article, Katz notes that for low-income immigrant families, media brokering involves helping parents navigate both foreign content and unfamiliar technology. In 'Kids in the middle', the internet was a particularly useful tool for those who had access: it helped them check their understanding of unfamiliar terms, find local resources and use maps to get driving directions or bus information. The main impediment was lack of access when parents either financially prioritised cable TV or were fearful about online safety. And sometimes parents removed internet access as a punishment.

In a post discussing more recent research among similar families, S. Craig Watkins advises that supporting parents' use of technology helps their children. Smartphones in particular have huge potential to ease the burden of brokering on all sides.

## Helping children as they broker for their parents

Immigrants' hopes for their children typically depend on education, yet brokering for parents, younger siblings, cousins and neighbours interfered with school. And teachers often then wrongly concluded that these children weren't trying or didn't care. All but one broker excelled at maths, but most struggled with language-heavy subjects like English and history in a system that expects parental involvement. The children disclosed details of their situation only to teachers who had earned their trust by demonstrating authentic caring – a clear mismatch in an environment where the reward for being a 'good kid' is being ignored.

There are no simple solutions for the burden on children brokering for their parents, and banning brokering would add to these families' struggles. Lacking the resources to provide dedicated translators, Greater Crenshaw institutions commonly pulled in Spanish-speaking staff ad hoc, but families tended to understand that these staff were being burdened.

Katz suggests that low-cost support efforts could usefully include: embedding segments on communicating effectively with doctors in health presentations made by school nurses; training teachers to appreciate the influence of students' home lives on their schoolwork; and teaching health providers techniques for communicating more effectively to child brokers and their parents. As communities change and become more diverse, in the UK, as in the US, such efforts will become increasingly important.

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