



The role of fathers in reducing dating violence victimization and sexual risk behaviors among a national sample of Black adolescents



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ABSTRACT

Purpose: Structural equation modeling (SEM) was used to explore the impact of father-figures' involvement on reducing both dating violence and sexual risk among a national sample of Black American youth well as the possible mediating effect of dating violence on the relationship between father figure involvement and sexual risk behaviors.

Methods: To explore this phenomenon, sexually active Black adolescents between the ages of 13–21 with a romantic partner in the previous 18 months were selected (N = 422) from wave II of the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health.

Results: The analyses indicated that overall, perceived closeness to father figures reduced dating violence victimization among Black youth. When separated by gender, our hypothesis for male respondents was supported indicating that perceived closeness with their father figures resulted in a reduction in dating violence. However, the same hypothesis was not supported for female respondents. On the other hand, perceived closeness to father figures resulted in lower sexual risk behaviors for girls.

Conclusion: Given the study's findings, researchers, practitioners, and policy makers should consider the importance of the father–child relationship in reducing problem behaviors among Black adolescents. In particular, emphasis should be given to the quality of the father–child relationship rather than general father involvement in reducing dating violence victimization and risky sexual behavior among sexually experienced Black adolescents.

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1. Introduction

As the empirical literature on father involvement in the lives of their children has advanced over the past 40 years, scholars have concluded that father involvement is a multidimensional construct (Adamsons & Johnson, 2013; Lamb, Pleck, Charnov, & Levine, 1985; Palkovitz, 2007; Pleck, 2010). Most recently, in their meta-analysis of the impact of nonresidential father involvement on child wellbeing, Adamsons and Johnson (2013) identified two pertinent dimensions of father involvement: (1) the affective climate, which included the quality of the father child relationship and father's level of involvement in the child's activities, and (2) the behavioral climate, which included the level of father–

child contact and the father's level of financial provision. Informed by Adamsons and Johnson's (2013) conceptualization, for the purpose of this study, father involvement is defined using three widely accepted dimensions: (1) the level of contact between the adolescent and their father-figure, (2) the level of closeness the adolescent reports feeling to their father-figure, and (3) the overall level of shared activities the adolescent reports engaging in with their father-figure.

Although there has been debate among fatherhood researchers about the impact of father–child contact on child and adolescent emotional and behavioral outcomes (Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Amato & Rezac, 1994; Choi & Jackson, 2011; Hetherington, Cox, & Cox, 1978), we chose to include contact as a dimension of father involvement because its impact has not been tested in regard to adolescent dating violence and risky sexual behavior. Support for the selection of the remaining dimensions is found widely throughout the fatherhood literature. Remarking upon the nature of father–child relationships from early childhood through adolescence, Lamb and Lewis (2013) suggest that the security of children and adolescents' attachment to their fathers impact the trajectory of internalizing and externalizing behaviors, and the development of cognitive and social skills.

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As such, Fagan and Palkovitz (2007) support the notion that father-child relationships that are characterized by closeness and paternal engagement support enhanced child/adolescent wellbeing by way of promoting a secure emotional climate that ensures the child/adolescent that their father will be present and supportive when they're in need. Additionally, related meta-analytic reviews purport that closeness between nonresident fathers and their children is positively associated with overall child wellbeing (Adamsons & Johnson, 2013; Amato & Gilbreth, 1999).

1.1. Theoretical framework

Social Cognitive Theory (Bandura, 1986) posits that personal, behavioral, and environmental factors influence one another in a bidirectional, reciprocal fashion. In other words, a person's on-going functioning is a product of a continuous interaction between cognitive, behavioral, and contextual factors. Meanwhile, Social Control Theory (Hirschi, 1969), notes that an individual's bonds and attachments significantly influences behaviors. Thus, both theories suggest that significant relationships such as those a child has with his/her parents are important in influencing child outcomes. Therefore, it is sensible that for Black adolescents, their perceptions of how close they are to their fathers is associated with a lower prevalence of dating violence and sexual risk behaviors more so than the activities they engage in with their fathers. Still, more research is needed to elucidate the relationship between father-child closeness, father activity, and adolescent dating violence and contraception use.

To date, researchers have noted that children who live apart from their fathers usually experience greater behavioral problems in school, engage in more delinquent behaviors, and experience greater internalizing and externalizing behaviors than their peers in two parent households (Leonard et al., 2009; Carlson, 2006). This is particularly true for Black youth, of whom approximately 65% of are living in single, female-headed households (Julion, Gross, Barclay-McLaughlin, & Fogg, 2007; Fields, 2003). While Blacks make up roughly 12% of the population in the United States (U.S.), they account for 25% of people arrested and 50% of the prison system (Aronson, Whitehead, & Baber, 2003). This is particularly detrimental to Black youth because according to Travis, Cincotta McBride and Solomon (2005) 15% of incarcerated men are fathers.

There is near consensus among researchers of the significant role that fathers play in the well being of their children. According to Caldwell, Rafferty, Reischl, DeLoney and Brooks (2010), "researchers have begun to examine the influence of father involvement on the health and well-being of their children. Both resident and non-residential fathers have been found to contribute to positive child outcomes, particularly when quality rather than quantity of time is considered". In particular, it has been noted that Black youth are typically exposed to and engage in more violence and earlier sexual initiation than their counterparts of other races (Blum et al., 2000); thus, creating a trajectory for poor health outcomes. While the majority of interventions has focused around working with the youth themselves or involved their mothers (Dancy, Crittenden, & Talashek, 2006; Dilorio, McCarty, & Denzmore, 2006), the role that fathers play in reducing risk behaviors among their adolescent children needs to be explored.

While the majority of literature on the role of fathers on the well being of their children have examined this relationship between biological fathers (both residential and non-residential), this study attempts to go a step further and include other male father figures (role models) who may not have a biological connection to the youth. In particular for Black youth, biological fathers for one reason or another may not be present in their lives. However, other male figures such as stepfathers, uncles, grandfathers and other male role models may take on this role and have a significant impact on youth behavior (Cobb-Clark & Tekin, DOI: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1007/s11150-013-9194-9>). In their study of fathers and youth risk behaviors, Cobb-Clark and Tekin found that

although a non-residential father isn't ideal, a father-like replacement does have positive effects on youth, particularly boys. A stepfather tends to reduce delinquent behavior, and having a father figure who puts in a significant quantity of time around a child is important.

However, while research has begun to explore the role of fathers and father figures on reducing risk behaviors among adolescents', to date the researchers have not discovered any research that has looked at the impact of Black fathers and father figures on reducing the incidence of dating violence and sexual risk behaviors among Black youth.

1.1.1. Dating violence

Defined as physical, sexual, and/or psychological/emotional abuse in a dating relationship, also including stalking, dating violence often starts with teasing and name-calling, which many adolescents consider a "normal" part of relationships (Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, 2012). However, these behaviors often lead to more serious violence such as rape and physical assault in late adolescence and adulthood (Centers for Disease Control & Prevention, 2012; St Mars & Valdez, 2007). Data from the 2013 Youth Risk Behavior Survey (YRBS) indicate that the prevalence of dating violence among adolescents range from 7%–14.8% nationally.

In particular, Black adolescents seem to experience dating violence at rates similar to or higher than their counterparts. For instance, Black females reported physical dating violence at rates similar to their White counterparts (12.3%, 12.9% respectively) but slightly lower than their Hispanic peers (13.6%). On the other hand, Black males reported experiencing physical dating violence at rates slightly higher than their counterparts from other racial/ethnic backgrounds (6.4% White males, 8.2% Black males, and 7% Hispanic males). The prevalence of sexual dating violence among adolescents nationally appears to be similar to the rates of physical dating violence, with almost 9% of Black adolescents' reporting being forced to engage in some form of sexual activity with someone they were dating when they did not want to (YRBS, 2013). The results of the latest YRBS are comparable to results of dating violence among other researchers (Holt & Espelage, 2005; Raiford, Wingood, & DiClemente, 2009; Watson, Cascardi, Avery-Leaf, & O'Leary, 2001) who indicate that dating violence is a national problem among Black youth.

For instance, in their study of dating violence perpetration, victimization, and associated sexual risk behaviors among a sample of inner city adolescent females, Alleyne-Green, Coleman-Cowger, and Henry (2011) found that 35% of Black and Hispanic females reported having experienced at least one instance of physical victimization in a dating relationship. Additionally, 56% of their sample reported psychological victimization. Similarly, Holt and Espelage (2005) found that Black adolescents reported higher rates of dating violence victimization than their White counterparts (43% vs. 32%), with 37% of Black females specifically reporting physical dating violence victimization and 66% reporting emotional abuse in dating relationships. Raiford et al. (2009) found that approximately one in four Black adolescent females reported experiencing dating violence at baseline in a longitudinal study of dating violence, with an additional 12% reporting dating violence at 1-year follow-up.

While much research has begun to focus on understanding dating violence among adolescents and prevention efforts have increased greatly (Wolitzky-Taylor et al., 2008), the majority of research to date has focused on the role of mothers, peers, schools and public officials in helping to reduce and bring attention to this issue (Dancy, Crittenden, & Talashek, 2006; Dilorio, McCarty, & Denzmore, 2006). Very little attention has focused on the role of men, particularly fathers and father figures (male role models) in reducing and bringing attention to dating violence victimization among adolescents, particularly Black adolescents. Therefore, the purpose of this article is to explore the role of fathers and father figures (uncles, step-fathers, grandfathers,

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