

# Violence Exposure and the Association Between Young African American Mothers' Discipline and Child Problem Behavior

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**Objective.**—Children of adolescent mothers are at increased risk of violence exposure and behavior problems, which have been linked to mothers' disciplinary practices. This study examines how the effect of young African American mothers' discipline on their preschool-age children's externalizing and internalizing behavior varies by mother and child violence exposure.

**Methods.**—A sample of 230 African American mothers who gave birth as adolescents and their 3- to 6-year-old children were recruited from community-based day care and primary health care sites in the Washington, DC, metropolitan region. In-person interviews were conducted by trained research assistants who administered standard survey instruments.

**Results.**—Hierarchical regression models revealed an interaction effect such that adolescent mothers' harsh disciplinary practices, specifically physical discipline strategies, were positively

associated with young children's internalizing and externalizing behavior in the context of high or moderate, but not low, maternal violence exposure.

**Conclusions.**—Compared with less violence-exposed mothers, the harsh disciplinary practices of young African American mothers who have been exposed to high levels of violence are more strongly associated with their children's problem behavior. Practitioners should screen mothers for violence exposure in order to address potential issues of discipline and behavior problems.

**KEY WORDS:** adolescent mothers; child behavior; harsh discipline; violence exposure

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Low-income minority children born to adolescent mothers are at risk for developing behavior problems, such as aggression,<sup>1–3</sup> which are associated with adverse outcomes later in life.<sup>4,5</sup> A substantial body of research suggests that physically or verbally harsh discipline is associated with children's aggressive behavior.<sup>6,7</sup> However, this association is not consistently observed among African American children.<sup>8,9</sup> To better understand the underpinnings of behavior problems in children born to young African American mothers, we examined the interplay between both maternal and child violence exposure and mothers' disciplinary practices.

Minority youth living in low-income inner-city neighborhoods are especially vulnerable to community violence exposure.<sup>10,11</sup> Children's own violence exposure as well as maternal victimization has been linked to young children's externalizing (eg, aggression) and internalizing (eg, anxiety)

problems.<sup>12–14</sup> However, the potential buffering role of parenting behavior has not been clarified. Some studies report a protective-reactive moderation effect in which parental monitoring predicts fewer negative child outcomes (eg, depression, early substance use) only when community violence exposure is low.<sup>10</sup> This may be because high violence exposure is so overwhelming that parents cannot buffer its effect on child behavior.<sup>15</sup> On the other hand, Krenichyn and colleagues<sup>16</sup> report that children exposed to the highest levels of community violence and harsh parenting scored lowest on social competence, whereas children exposed to less harsh parenting in the context of high community violence scored highest on social competence.

The current study integrates and builds on these bodies of research by examining the complex relationship between discipline, violence exposure, and young children's behavior. In doing so, it draws on ecological theories of development, which emphasize the reciprocal influences of different systems in a child's environment, in this case the neighborhood and family, on child development.<sup>17</sup> Specifically, we address the following 2 research questions: how do maternal and child violence exposure moderate the association between discipline and children's externalizing and internalizing behavior? And, in the context of violence exposure, how are verbal versus physical discipline associated with children's behavior?

In addressing these questions, we extend existing research on violence exposure and parenting to

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preschool-age children, which is important because early experiences can have long-lasting implications for developmental outcomes.<sup>4,5,7</sup> We explore the moderating effects of mothers' violence exposure in addition to children's exposure because there is evidence that maternal violence exposure indirectly affects children through maternal distress and parenting.<sup>18–20</sup> We also explore the effects of verbal versus physical discipline on child behavior because previous studies have reported distinct effects of these forms of discipline on child behavior<sup>8,9,21</sup> and because disciplinary practices may be modified with appropriate interventions.<sup>22,23</sup>

## METHODS

To address our research questions, we draw on data from an institutional review board–approved cross-sectional study of young mothers living in violence-prone neighborhoods of Washington, DC.<sup>24</sup>

### Procedure

To recruit participants, we used convenience sampling methods: we distributed flyers with information about the study's purpose, age requirements, and contact information at 90 community-based sites selected because they serve a general population of mothers and children, not exclusively adolescent mothers, clinically referred patients, or families receiving services related to violence exposure. We recruited from numerous sites because our narrow eligibility requirements made it necessary to screen a large number of mothers to enroll an adequate sample size. Out of 2349 mothers who contacted the research staff about participating, 262 (11%) were eligible on the basis of the following inclusion criteria: mother 18 to 24 years old, self-identified as African American and nonimmigrant with legal and physical custody of child; and child age 3 to 5 years without serious chronic health problems. If eligible mothers had more than one child between 3 to 5 years old, the oldest was selected as the focal child.

Most eligible mothers (97%) agreed to participate, but 8% failed to attend their scheduled appointment and did not reschedule. Most participants were recruited from community-based health care clinics (21%) or Women, Infant, and Children WIC) agencies (22%). The final analytic sample consisted of 230 mothers who provided written informed consent and completed in-person interviews. Interviews were scheduled at a time and place convenient to the mothers (usually their homes) and were conducted in English by trained research assistants. The interviews consisted of standard survey instruments and lasted 1.5 to 2 hours. For their participation, mothers were given a \$50 gift certificate redeemable at a local store.

### Measures

#### *Child Behavior*

Mothers completed the Child Behavior Checklist,<sup>25</sup> a commonly used and validated 113-item measure of children's emotional and behavioral functioning. For each item, mothers reported how frequently their child exhibited the

behavior during the past 6 months on a 3-point scale from never (0) to frequently (2). After summing responses across items, raw scores for externalizing and internalizing behavior were converted to T-scores, thereby adjusting for age and gender.

#### *Harsh Discipline*

The Parent Practices Interview,<sup>23</sup> adapted from the Oregon Social Learning Center Discipline Questionnaire, was used to measure mothers' disciplinary actions. For the primary analyses, we focused on the 14-item harsh discipline subscale (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .67$ ). Mothers reported how frequently they used 4 different parenting strategies (eg, "raise your voice," "threaten to punish him/her but not really punish him/her") in response to their child's misbehavior and how often 2 particular disciplinary situations arise (eg, how often do arguments with your child build up and you do or say things you don't mean to?) on a 7-point scale from 1 (never) to 7 (always). They also reported the likelihood they would utilize 4 disciplinary strategies in each of 2 hypothetical situations ("if [child] hit another child"; "if [child] refuses to do what you wanted him/her to do") using a 7-point Likert scale from 1 (not at all likely) to 7 (extremely likely). *Harsh discipline* scores were created by summing responses across items.

We also created subscales for verbally and physically harsh discipline. The *verbal discipline* subscale (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .54$ ) consisted of 4 items asking how frequently mothers "threaten to punish," "raise [one's] voice," "show anger," and "say things [you] don't mean" in response to their child's misbehavior and 4 items asking how likely they would be to "threaten to punish" or "raise one's voice" in response to the 2 hypothetical misbehaviors. The *physical discipline* subscale (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .72$ ) was based on a total of 6 comparable items asking about spanking and slapping/hitting.

#### *Violence Exposure*

Mothers completed the Survey of Exposure to Community Violence: Self-Report Version, which was developed in a low-income ethnic minority sample.<sup>26</sup> Participants responded to 27 items asking how frequently they had directly experienced (eg, been hit or slapped, sexually assaulted) or witnessed (eg, heard gunfire while in home, seen others get attacked/stabbed) types of violence on a 5-point scale from 0 (never) to 4 (many times). Subscale composite scores were created by summing responses across items, with higher scores reflecting more numerous exposures to violence. The current analyses highlight mothers' experienced violence (Cronbach's  $\alpha = .74$ ).

Mothers also completed the Violence Exposure Scale for Children, which assesses parents' perceptions of children's exposure to violence and has been found to be reliable among primary caregivers of minority preschoolers living in urban areas.<sup>14</sup> For each violent event, mothers reported how often their child had witnessed (12 items; eg, "seen a person steal from or rob another person") or been the victim (8 items; "a person chased your child where your child was scared") using a 4-point scale from 0 (never) to 3 (lots of times). Responses were summed to create

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