Familial Mentor Support and Black Youths' Connectedness to Parents Across Adolescence

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Familial Mentor Support and Black Youths' Connectedness to Parents Across Adolescence

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Abstract
This mixed method study explored whether and how familial mentor support may have influenced the parent-adolescent relationship, and whether the impact of familial mentor support on the parent-adolescent relationship may have differed across adolescents' developmental stage. Findings from analyses of survey data from 106 Black adolescents indicated that familial mentor support may be equally beneficial for youths' connectedness to parents across developmental stage. Interview data from a subset of 12 adolescents, their primary caregivers, and familial mentors were analyzed to better understand how familial mentors supported the parent-adolescent bond and whether the nature of mentor support differed between early and middle adolescents. Qualitative findings indicated that mentors supported the parent-adolescent relationship by acting as sounding boards; coaching positive communication strategies; and promoting understanding between youth and their parents. Additionally, findings indicated that familial mentors

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may be attuned to developmental changes experienced by their adolescent relatives.

During adolescence, Black youth must learn to navigate developmental changes in their physical, cognitive, and social functioning (Arnett, 1999) while also facing exposure to a disproportionate share of contextual risk factors associated with anti-Black racism and structural inequality (Seider et al., 2019; Wilson, 2009). Despite their exposure to these cumulative stressors, Black youth continue to demonstrate positive adaptation in the face of such adversity (Cooper, 2009; Wittrup et al., 2019). Prior work suggests that having close relationships with parents may promote healthy development and psychological well-being among Black adolescents (Booth et al., 2010; Bynum & Kotchick, 2006; Caldwell et al., 2010; Cooper, 2009; Sagrestano et al., 2003; Travis & Leech, 2014). Although strong bonds with parents have the potential to promote positive outcomes among Black youth facing contextual risks, there are normative changes in the parent-child bond during adolescence that may complicate parents' ability to provide such support to their children. The current study sought to further investigate the potential role of supportive familial adults in nurturing and bolstering the parent-child bond between Black adolescents and their parents.

Adolescent Age and Parent-Child Relationships

As youth move through adolescence, they often experience an increased desire for autonomy (i.e., independent, self-reliant functioning; Holmbeck & Hill, 1986; McElhaney et al., 2009; Steinberg & Silk, 2002). Adolescents' process of becoming autonomous from their parents is nuanced in that youths' own autonomy-seeking behaviors tend to manifest through decreases in youths' self-disclosure to parents and time spent with parents (Branje et al., 2012), often leading youth to report declines in their connectedness to parents (De Goede et al., 2009). Parents and youth also may experience increased conflict as youth increasingly seek independence and resist parental control during adolescence (Montemayor, 1983; Smetana, 1989), which may further compromise the parent-youth bond during adolescence (Conger & Ge, 1999; De Goede et al., 2009). Although youths' autonomy-seeking behaviors may strain the parent-child relationship (Montemayor, 1983; Smetana, 1989), they

are a normative and healthy part of adolescent development as youth ultimately transition from children who are completely reliant on their caregivers to independent adults (Brown, 2004; Steinberg, 2001, 2014). Yet variability likely exists in the extent to which parent-adolescent relationships are strained, and some dyads may experience substantially less strain than others. Moreover, Black adolescents may have a greater need to maintain strong bonds with parents relative to youth from other racial and ethnic groups given that Black adolescents tend to face a unique host of contextual risk factors stemming from anti-Black racism which they face in addition to normative developmental stressors. Thus, it may be important to consider how additional supportive relationships may differentially function to help preserve the parent-child bond in Black families during adolescence.

Familial Natural Mentor Support and Parent-Child Relationships

Natural mentors are non-parental adults in youths' preexisting social networks who youth go to for support and guidance. Rhodes (2005) and Keller's (2005) theoretical models of youth mentoring can be used as frameworks for understanding how natural mentor support may promote parent-youth connection during adolescence. First, Rhodes' (2005) model of youth mentoring suggests that a primary pathway of mentors' influence on positive youth outcomes is through improvements in youths' social relationships with other important adults, such as youths' parents. Rhodes posits that youth may learn how to more effectively communicate with important adults in their lives, such as their parents, through their mentoring relationships. Relatedly, Keller's (2005) systemic model suggests that mentors may alter the parent-adolescent dynamic by providing direct support to either the adolescent or parent. For instance, adolescents may confide in their mentors regarding difficulties with their parents or mentors could serve as a sounding board for parents to discuss difficulties experienced in parenting as their children transition through adolescence. Furthermore, mentors' role as a trusted source positions them well to help youth perspective-take and understand parents' decisions (with which youth may initially be in conflict). Given mentors' relationships with youth, mentors also may find that they are able to provide youths' parents advice on how they can best manage issues they are experiencing with their adolescents (Keller, 2005).

Previous research has yielded empirical support of these models of mentoring (Chan et al., 2013; Grossman & Tierney, 1998; Hamilton & Darling, 1989; Hurd et al., 2013; Morrow & Styles, 1995; Renick Thomson & Zand, 2010; Rhodes, 1994; Rhodes et al., 2000). For example, Hurd et al. (2013) found that Black youth with natural mentoring relationships were likely to

report more positive relationships with their parents relative to their peers who lacked mentoring relationships. Similar findings drawing connections between mentoring and parent-child relationships have also emerged in the formal mentoring literature. For instance, longitudinal studies examining formal mentoring relationships have found that guidance and support from mentors was associated with youth reporting improvements in their relationship with their parents over eight (Renick Thomson & Zand, 2010) and 18-month (Rhodes et al., 2000) time periods. This suggests that mentoring relationships may benefit parent-child relationships over time and potentially buffer against declines in the bond that tend to accompany the progression through adolescence.

While previous research findings suggest that youths' possession of a mentoring relationship may help to strengthen their bond with parents (Hurd et al., 2013; Rhodes et al., 2000), there are also findings suggesting that indicators of mentor relationship quality may be driving this association (Chan et al., 2013; Renick Thomson & Zand, 2010). For example, in a study examining formal mentoring relationships among middle and high school students, Chan et al. (2013) found that youth were likely to report closer relationships with their parents when they reported receiving more guidance and support from their mentors. Other studies characterizing the nature of natural mentoring relationships also indicate relationship quality, rather than mere presence, as being particularly meaningful in promoting positive youth outcomes (Albright & Hurd, 2018; Hurd & Sellers, 2013; Hurd et al., 2018; Wittrup et al., 2019). With regard to mentor support, it may be that more frequent provision of advice, encouragement, or a listening ear from mentors could better help youth navigate daily conflicts arising in the parent-adolescent relationship.

While prior work has considered the impact of youth-directed mentor support on the parent-adolescent relationship, less attention has been given toward understanding how parent-directed mentor support may influence the parent-adolescent relationship. Such consideration may be especially useful for understanding mentoring relationships among Black youth given that, on average, two-thirds of the adults serving as natural mentors to Black adolescents are extended family and fictive kin (i.e., individuals who are unrelated by birth or marriage but take on family-like roles; Billingsley et al., 2020; Hurd & Zimmerman, 2010; Hurd et al., 2013; Klaw et al., 2003; Raposa et al., 2018). The tendency for Black youth to consider extended family as trusted adults they can go to for support and guidance may be rooted, in part, in the emphasis Black families tend to place on familial interdependence (i.e., the centering and relying on extended family for support; Billingsley et al., 2020; Stewart, 2007; Taylor et al., 2015; Wilson, 1989). Given the cultural

valuing of intergenerational support in the Black community and the likelihood of Black youths' mentors being familial adults with a personal relationship with both the adolescent and their parent, Black youths' familial natural mentors may be uniquely positioned to mediate parent-child conflict or provide perspective to both the adolescent and parent. Such support to parents and adolescents from familial natural mentors may be helpful in mitigating developmental strains facing the adolescent-parent bond.

Adolescent Age, Natural Mentor Support, and Parent-Child Relationships

Although familial natural mentor support has the potential to mitigate strains in the parent-youth relationship, there is likely variability in the extent to which such impacts are realized. Though research in this area is scarce, there is reason to believe that familial natural mentor support may be especially consequential for parent-youth connectedness among older adolescents. This may be due to older youth being more inclined than younger youth to experience strains in parent connectedness (Branje et al., 2012; Conger & Ge, 1999; De Goede et al., 2009). Given that the parent-child bond is likely more fraught as youth get older, the parent-child bond may reap greater benefits from the support natural mentors can provide to potentially ameliorate conflict and strengthen parent-child communication and understanding among older youth relative to their younger counterparts. Relatedly, increased maturity and emotional competence among older youth (Keefer et al., 2013; Mayer et al., 1999) may lead these adolescents to seek out and be more receptive to specific supports from their familial natural mentors that would strengthen the parent-child relationship. Given these considerations, research is warranted to explore whether the positive influence of familial natural mentoring relationships on the parent-child bond may be greater among older adolescents relative to younger adolescents.

Current Study

An explanatory sequential mixed-methods design (Creswell & Clark, 2007) was used to explore whether having a more supportive familial natural mentor may have contributed to stronger parent-child bonds while also offsetting potential age-related declines in parent-child connectedness. This sequential design allowed quantitative findings to be probed using qualitative data from interviews, which facilitated a more complete understanding of patterns that emerged. Quantitative analyses focused on examining direct effects from familial natural mentor support on parent-child connectedness, as well as

interactive effects between familial natural mentor support and age on parent-child connectedness to determine whether the impact of familial natural mentor support on parent-child connectedness may have been greater among older relative to younger adolescents. Demographic (i.e., gender) and personality (i.e., extraversion) factors were accounted for as these factors may have been associated with reported mentor support and parent connectedness among adolescents. Specifically, these variables were included as covariates given the possibility that relative to boys and adolescents who are more introverted, girls and adolescents who are more extraverted may be more likely to have closer relationships with their parents and receive more support from mentors (Bozionelos, 2004; Eby et al., 2006; Hurd et al., 2018).

Open-ended interviews were then conducted with a subset of participants and their families to expand on findings from the quantitative analyses (i.e., to better understand study findings). The current study utilized data from interviews with adolescents, their primary caregiver, and one non-parental familial adult who they identified as their mentor in order to explore how familial natural mentors were potentially supporting the parent-adolescent relationship and whether this support may have looked different or had differential magnitudes of influence as a function of adolescents' age.

Method

Quantitative Participants and Procedures

An Institutional Review Board at the authors' institution approved all study procedures. Participants in this study were drawn from the Learning about Important Non-parental Kin (LINK) study. LINK is a mixed-methods study focused on better understanding the influence of Black youths' social contexts (e.g., family, community) on the formation of natural mentoring relationships among Black adolescents and non-parental adults in their pre-existing social networks. During the 2015 to 2016 academic school year, participants were recruited from six local middle schools, four local high schools, and one local community center, all of which were located in central Virginia. Black youth aged 11 to 17 were eligible to participate in the study. Schools mailed recruitment letters to Black students' caregivers inviting their children to participate in a study examining Black adolescents' day-to-day experiences at home and school. School counselors also handed out recruitment letters to students, and the research team posted recruitment flyers in community centers and distributed them via community LISTSERVS. Students' caregivers provided informed consent for their child's participation in the study and youth provided informed assent. Research assistants

Table 1. Descriptive Statistics for Primary Study Variables.

	Response range	*M*	*SD*
1. Percentage of male participants	—	41	—
2. Extraversion	1–5	3.58	0.71
3. Age (in years)	11–17	12.87	1.42
4. Natural mentor support	1–5	3.68	0.70
5. Closeness to parents	1–5	4.42	0.67

administered surveys to 216 adolescents. To enhance participants' comprehension of survey items, research assistants read survey items aloud to participants. To facilitate honesty in reporting and confidentiality in responses, participants recorded their own responses to survey questions on an iPad. Participants were compensated with a $40 Visa gift card for completing the survey.

Quantitative Measures

Table 1 includes descriptive statistics for study variables.

Familial natural mentor support. To assess the amount of support adolescents received from familial natural mentors, adolescents were first asked, "Is there an adult other than your parents or people who are raising you who you can go to for support, guidance, and help making important decisions?" If youth responded in the affirmative, they were asked to indicate how they knew that adult. Participants were then asked to think of the adult who they felt closest to (if thinking of more than one adult). Of all identified mentors, 71% were non-parental family members. Given that familial natural mentors may be uniquely positioned to impact the parent-child relationship, only youth possessing familial natural mentoring relationships were included in this study's analyses ($n = 106$). Youth were then asked to answer a series of questions regarding the frequency of support received from that adult (i.e., their familial natural mentor) in the previous 30 days using a modified version of Barrera's Inventory of Socially Supportive Behaviors (ISSB; Barrera et al., 1981). The emotional, appraisal, and informational support subscales of the ISSB were used for the current study analyses as familial natural mentors' provision of advice and a listening ear to the adolescent could strengthen the parent—adolescent relationship (Keller, 2005). Each subscale comprised four items with response options ranging from 1 (*not at all*) to 5 (*every day or almost every day*). Scores were averaged to create a composite variable of

total support received from natural mentors. Items ($\alpha=.95$) measured how frequently adolescents' natural mentor offered the adolescent comfort (e.g., "Over the past 30 days, how often has this person listened to you talk about your private feelings"), affirming feedback (e.g., "Over the past 30 days, how often has this person let you know you did something well"), or guidance for problem solving (e.g., "Over the past 30 days, how often has this person suggested some action that you should take").

Adolescent closeness to parents. To assess adolescents' perceptions of their relational closeness with their parents, the five-item family-connection subscale of the Five Cs of Positive Youth Development (Lerner et al., 2005) measure was utilized ($\alpha=.86$). Participants were asked to indicate how much they agreed or disagreed with statements about their relationship with their parents/caregivers, including "I get along with them." Response options ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*). Participants' scores were averaged across the five items to create a composite score that was used in this study's analyses.

Extraversion. To assess adolescents' level of extraversion, the eight-item extraversion subscale of the Big Five Inventory (BFI; John & Srivastava, 1999) was utilized ($\alpha=.77$). Adolescents were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed with statements describing themselves as extraverted (e.g., talkative, sociable, assertive). Response options ranged from 1 (*disagree strongly*) to 5 (*agree strongly*). Three items were reverse coded so that higher scores on all items indicated greater levels of extraversion. Adolescents' scores were averaged across the eight items to create a composite variable that was used in this study's analyses.

Demographics. Participants were asked a series of questions regarding their basic demographic characteristics, including their age and gender identity. Age was entered in number of years. For the current study, participants were assigned a value of "1" if they identified as male and "0" if they identified as female (no participants self-identified as being outside of the gender binary).

Quantitative Data Analyses and Results

All analyses were conducted using R software (version 3.6.1). Bivariate correlations were conducted to assess for associations among the primary study variables and covariates (see Table 2). Identifying as male was associated with higher levels of extraversion and greater reported closeness to parents. Extraversion was positively associated with closeness to parents and mentor

Table 2. Correlations of Primary Study Variables.

	2	3	4	5
1. Age	−.02	−.24*	.08	−.18*
2. Natural mentor support	—	.28*	.05	.24*
3. Closeness to parents		—	.18*	.29*
4. Male			—	.14*
5. Extraversion				—

*$p < .05$.

support, and negatively associated with adolescents' age. Adolescents' age and their reported closeness to their parents were negatively associated. Mentor support was positively correlated with closeness to parents. Hierarchical linear regression analyses were then conducted to examine the main effects of familial natural mentor support and age, as well as the effect of an interaction term comprised of these two variables on participants' closeness to parents, controlling for extraversion and gender. As expected, we found that familial natural mentor support was positively associated with adolescent-parent closeness. We also found that adolescents' age was negatively associated with adolescent-parent closeness. The interaction term between familial natural mentor support and age, however, was not associated with adolescent-parent closeness (see Table 3).

Qualitative Participants and Procedures

Standardized, open-ended interviews were conducted in the summer of 2017 with a stratified random sample of 25 youth from the larger study sample. Stratification was implemented based on youths' gender, age, socioeconomic status, and familial mentor status. Open-ended interviews were also conducted with all of these adolescents' primary caregivers (the majority of whom were youths' biological mothers) and one non-parental familial adult with whom the youth reported feeling close. Twelve of the interviewed youth considered their close, non-parental familial adult to be their familial mentor. Interviews typically lasted 60 to 90 minutes and each member of the triad (i.e., youth, parent, non-parental familial adult) was individually interviewed. Interview sessions were conducted in a private location selected by the participants (e.g., their homes, researchers' offices). Interviewers were a multiracial research team (four women of color and two white women).

The interview protocol included questions inquiring about participants' relationships with members of their family and broader family dynamics.

Table 3. Main and Interactive Effects of Familial Mentor Support and Adolescents' Age on Adolescents' Reported Closeness to Parents.

Predictors	B	B (SE)	β	t	p
Male	0.10	0.12	.10	0.79	.43
Extraversion	0.19	0.09	.19	2.11	.04
Age	−0.09	0.04	−.13	−2.34	.02
Natural mentor support	0.15	0.06	.15	2.64	.01
Age × Natural mentor support	−0.05	0.04	−.07	−1.41	.16

Note. $F (5, 105) = 5.38$, $p < .05$, $R^2_{Adjusted} = .16$.

Primary caregivers were asked to describe instances in which the non-parental familial adult provided them support, including "What are some ways that [non-parental familial adult] helps you with parenting?" and "What conversations have you had with [non-parental familial adult] that you found useful in how you've raised your children?" Youth also were asked to describe instances in which the non-parental familial adult provided them support, including "What kinds of problems would you talk to [non-parental familial adult] about if you were having them?" and "Has there ever been advice that [non-parental familial adult] has given you that has affected the choices that you've made?" Non-parental familial adults were asked to describe how they had supported the youth and primary caregivers. Such questions included "Have you ever done anything to help [primary caregiver] with their responsibilities as a parent?" and "What kinds of things does [youth] talk to you about?" All interviews were audio recorded on an iPad and subsequently transcribed by a third-party service. Audio files were then destroyed after having been transcribed. Each participant was compensated with an $80 Visa gift card at the completion of their interview.

Qualitative Data Analyses

To facilitate the most precise comparison of familial natural mentor support across adolescence, this study's narrative analyses focused only on the families of youth with familial natural mentoring relationships. A total of 36 interviews were analyzed utilizing thematic and modified analytic induction techniques (Bogdan & Biklen, 1992; Braun & Clarke, 2006) for the 12 families of mentored youth. To ensure accuracy and breadth of information in our findings, we employed triangulation by capturing data through different sources (parent, youth, and non-parental familial adult perspectives) and by utilizing multiple coders (Creswell, 2013; Patton, 2002). The team of six interviewers engaged in

multiple readings of transcripts and weekly discussions over a 12-month period to reach agreement regarding predominant themes in the data. An initial codebook was developed based on these emerging themes, the interview protocol, and previous research. Each interview was coded separately by two researchers who would meet to reconcile any disagreement in the application of codes until consensus was reached (Harry et al., 2005).

Given that quantitative findings suggested a positive association between familial natural mentor support and adolescents' reported connectedness to their parents, qualitative analyses examined how adolescents' familial natural mentors supported the parent-child relationship through both youth- and parent-directed means. By examining multiple pathways of influence of familial natural mentor support on the parent-child relationship, a more holistic understanding of the mentoring relationships was captured. Excerpts initially coded as "social support" were assessed with focused attention given to mentor support on the parent-child relationship. After becoming familiar with the data, the six research team members reviewed the "support" excerpts of an initial 12 interviews. The research team read each excerpt line-by-line and named the concepts that emerged (open coding; Glaser & Strauss, 1967). The research team then organized the concepts into broader categories (axial coding; Glaser & Strauss, 1967) and compared data between and within categories until thematic saturation was achieved (Green & Thorogood, 2004). Once the final list of categories was generated, two research team members coded an initial four interviews to verify clarity in the application of codes. The team members repeated this process while coding the remaining 32 interviews with disagreement occurring among less than 10% of the codes between the two researchers.

Although quantitative findings suggested that mentor support did not have a differential impact on older and younger adolescents' connectedness to parents, qualitative analyses also were undertaken to determine whether the enactment of mentor support toward the parent-child relationship varied as a function of adolescents' age. This was important to consider given that potential distinctions discovered in familial natural mentors' support of younger versus older youth could provide insight into the evolving function of familial natural mentoring relationships across adolescence. Experiences of familial natural mentor support to families of youth who were early adolescents (ages 11–13; $n=4$) were compared to the experiences of youth who were middle adolescents (ages 14–15; $n=8$).

Qualitative Results

Table 4 provides descriptive information of interview participants. All names reported are pseudonyms. The first qualitative research question sought to

Table 4. Interview Participant Pseudonyms and Characteristics.

Youth	Youths' age	Parents' position to youth	Mentors' position to youth
DeAndre	11	Mother	Maternal grandmother
Shay	12	Mother	Older sister
Charity	13	Mother	Maternal grandmother
Kiera	13	Mother	Maternal grandfather
Thomas	14	Mother	Maternal grandmother
Byron	14	Mother	Older step-brother
Naomi	14	Mother	Maternal grandmother
Trey	14	Mother	Older brother
Zachary	14	Mother	Maternal aunt
Destiny	15	Mother	Paternal second cousin
Keisha	15	Mother	Maternal aunt
Brandon	15	Mother	Maternal grandfather

uncover how familial natural mentors supported the parent-child relationship through both youth- and parent-directed means. Three themes were identified as related to familial natural mentors' support of the parent-child relationship: familial natural mentors (1) acting as a sounding board, (2) coaching positive communication and response strategies, and (3) promoting understanding. The second qualitative research question sought to investigate how familial natural mentors' support of the parent-child relationship may have varied across age by comparing support received in families of early versus middle adolescent youth. Key findings addressing both areas of inquiry are presented in the following sections.

Mentors as sounding boards. Eight (67%) families shared how familial natural mentors would listen to youth and parents discuss the challenges they experienced in the parent-child relationship. The grandmother mentor of Naomi, a 14-year-old girl, described how her granddaughter would turn to her when needing an outlet to voice frustrations she felt with her parents. This grandmother shared, "Naomi bring up stuff 'well momma don't understand or daddy don't understand.' So I said 'well, tell me your version of it.' So, we sit down, and I just listen to her talk." Naomi expressed similar sentiments by sharing, "I will tell my grandma like 'me and my mom had an argument' or something. . . or I might tell her about something maybe my mom did, something my dad did." Similarly, the adult brother mentor of Trey, a 14-year-old boy, also shared that Trey would "want to vent" about the frustrations he had with their mother from time to time. Through venting his frustrations to his

older brother, this familial mentor believed that Trey was "finding a way to express how he feels." Likewise, the grandmother mentor of DeAndre, an 11-year-old boy, shared, "when [DeAndre's] upset about something, he and his mom get into a disagreement or something, he'll call me just to get it out of his system, talk to me about it."

Parents also utilized their children's familial mentors as a sounding board to process their thoughts and emotions when experiencing conflict in the parent-child relationship. Similar to what DeAndre reported, his mother also shared that she relied on DeAndre's familial mentor (her mother) to discuss challenges associated with raising an adolescent. She explained that with DeAndre "getting older," she would call her mother to "just talk to her about, 'Gosh [DeAndre], sometime his attitude. . .'" The familial mentor relayed similar sentiments by sharing that her daughter would reach out to her when she was "frustrated about something" and that the two of them would often talk about "family, the kids." Similarly, the mother of Brandon, a 15-year-old boy, shared that she often had conversations with her father (Brandon's familial mentor) "just to vent" about Brandon's behavior, while the mother of Thomas, a 14-year-old boy, found it meaningful when her mother (Thomas' familial mentor) "just listen[ed]." Speaking about the grandmother's support, Thomas' mother explained, "she listens also without judgment. She's just listening to hear what you have to say and if you want her advice, she'll give it but she doesn't just throw it out there. She's really patient." In all, these illustrations suggest that parents and youth appreciated having a close familial adult who they could turn to when needing to process challenges they experienced in the parent-child dynamic. Moreover, by providing both youth and parents the space to talk through their emotions, familial natural mentors were likely helping them better understand and express their feelings, practices which may promote more effective parent-youth communication (Halberstadt et al., 2001; Kehoe et al., 2014).

Mentors coaching positive communication strategies. Eight (67%) families described how familial natural mentors suggested positive communication and response strategies to navigate conflict in the parent-child dynamic. Excerpts in this theme included reference to familial natural mentors advising youth to not become upset or argue with parents and for youth to follow parents' advice and instruction. Excerpts also included familial natural mentors encouraging parents to refrain from harsh discipline of youth. Naomi, a 14-year-old girl, shared that her familial mentor (her grandmother) would advise her to not "argue back" with her mom. She further shared, "I guess when I'm thinking about it now, I guess I would say I used to argue with my mom a lot more than I do now. After I talked to my grandma, I don't argue

with [my mom] that much." The grandmother mentor of DeAndre, an 11-year-old boy, mentioned that her grandson would often become upset and "stomp off to his room" when his mom "fuss[ed] at him." This grandmother shared that she would tell her grandson "you know, honey, that's your mom, you got to do what your mom tells you." Relatedly, the grandfather mentor of Kiera, an 11-year-old girl, shared that he would "calmly" tell his granddaughter "Your mom is right. You have to pay attention. You're the child. She's the parent" when he would see that she was "not really listening" to her mother. By using calm and supportive tones when speaking with youth, familial natural mentors were able to affirm parents' positions without having the youth shut down or resent their advice. Ultimately, this approach may have worked to help mitigate conflict in the parent-child relationship.

When discussing how he has helped his adult daughter with her responsibilities as a parent, Kiera's grandfather also shared that Kiera's mother would "get really upset with Kiera on this and that" and that he would tell Kiera's mother "you have to be calm and tell Kiera in a different way. . . you got to keep a calm voice. You have to calm down and they might get it rather than you screaming at them." The mother of Zachary, a 14-year-old boy, also mentioned how her sister (Zachary's familial mentor) would "challenge" her decisions around discipline. This mother shared, "if (my sister) feels I'm wrong on something, then she'll call me on it. . . if she give[s] me her input, I'll respect her and I'll listen to her because I could be making a decision out of anger." Similarly, the mother of Charity, a 13-year-old girl, shared how her mother (Charity's familial mentor) would talk her down from responding in anger when Charity abused her phone privileges. Ultimately, this mother felt the advice given to her by her child's familial mentor was the "right direction" in terms of discipline. By helping parents calibrate their reactions, it is likely that familial natural mentors were able to promote more effective parent-child communication strategies (Duncan et al., 2009; Gentzler et al., 2005; Jaccard et al., 2002).

Mentors promoting understanding. Four (33%) families highlighted how familial natural mentors promoted understanding in the parent-youth relationship by advising youth to perspective take and share information with parents, while encouraging parents to give their children appropriate space and autonomy. For instance, the older brother mentor of Trey, a 14-year-old boy, shared that he would often try to help Trey "[put] himself in other people's shoes," when Trey was upset with their mother. This mentor shared that he would explain to Trey that their mother works "at least 8 hours every day and then gotta come home and take care of you" in an effort to help Trey understand how him "throwing fits" over material purchases (in this case, an iPhone) was unfair to their mother.

In other efforts to build understanding, families also mentioned familial natural mentors encouraging youth to keep their parents informed of issues they were experiencing. For example, Keisha, a 15-year-old girl, shared that her familial mentor (her aunt) would encourage her to tell her mother about problems she was experiencing in school. Relatedly, the familial mentor of DeAndre, an 11-year-old boy, mentioned that she would tell her grandson "'you've got to call your mom and let her know that too" when he would share the issues he experienced in his afterschool program. By encouraging youth to consider their parents' perspectives and share their concerns with parents, familial natural mentors may have helped facilitate understanding among youth and parents (Lundell et al., 2008; Van der Graaff et al., 2014).

This theme also included familial natural mentors encouraging parents to give their adolescent children appropriate space and autonomy. Specifically, familial natural mentors helped parents understand the importance of granting their adolescents greater independence. The mother of Shay, a 12-year-old girl, shared how her adult daughter (Shay's familial mentor), would provide advice that she found helpful in raising Shay. This mother shared that her adult daughter would often say "you can't do Shay like this. . . You've got to let her do this. You've got to let her do that." Likewise, the mother of Thomas, a 14-year-old boy, mentioned that her mother (Thomas' familial mentor), is her "chill button." This mother shared, "[my mom] reminds me that I cannot protect Thomas from everything. I can give him advice but she's really the one trying to get me to release a little bit and relax and let him make his own way. . . [she reminds me] that he is a young man and to let him be young man even with all my fears and worries. Not to stifle that." By advising parents to "relax," "stay calm," and give their children space and autonomy, familial mentors may have helped to relieve tension in parent-child interactions (Long & Adams, 2001; Sorkhabi & Middaugh, 2014).

Comparative analyses. Although quantitative findings did not suggest that mentor support differentially impacted older versus younger adolescents' sense of connectedness to parents, the second qualitative research question sought to determine whether the enactment of mentor support toward the parent-child relationship varied as a function of adolescents' age. Comparative analyses (comparing the enactment of familial natural mentor support to families of youth who were early adolescents vs. youth who were middle adolescents) yielded one notable finding: three of the four (75%) families of early adolescent youth reported that familial natural mentors encouraged obedience when youth disagreed with parents, compared to just one of eight (13%) families of middle adolescent youth. Instead of scaffolding obedience and suggesting that youth "just listen" to their parents, familial natural mentors of middle

adolescent youth more often encouraged youth to perspective-take or advo-
cate for themselves. For instance, the grandmother mentor of Naomi, a
14-year-old girl shared that she would encourage her granddaughter to voice
her concerns to her father when she disagreed with him. She mentioned that
she would tell her granddaughter, "Well, you know, you have a right to speak
up, and you should speak up and say 'daddy, you know, I didn't appreciate
what you did.' You just have to know how to say it." Differences in the advice
communicated to younger and older youth suggests that familial natural men-
tors may adjust their messaging to be developmentally appropriate. As youth
get older, familial mentors may encourage more independent thinking, bal-
anced communication, and negotiation with parents, whereas this may not
have been as possible or desirable when youth were younger.

Discussion

Findings from the current study contribute to our understanding of normative
support processes happening in Black families. First, quantitative results of
the present investigation suggest that greater natural mentor support of Black
youth may lead them to feel a greater sense of connectedness to parents dur-
ing adolescence. This finding suggests that natural mentors may be an impor-
tant resource for helping youth maintain close bonds with parents during a
period typically marked by increased relational distance. This finding is in
line with theory (Rhodes, 2005) and prior empirical work (Chan et al., 2013;
Hurd et al., 2013; Renick Thomson & Zand, 2010); however, the current
study also provided the opportunity to build on previous research by investi-
gating how natural mentors may be supporting the parent-adolescent rela-
tionship within Black families.

   A central way familial mentors may be supporting the parent-adolescent
bond is through coaching parents and youth on effective communication and
conflict resolution strategies. Specifically, in the current study, we found that
familial natural mentors often provided adolescents and parents advice on
effective communication skills and emotion management when experiencing
conflict or disagreement with one another. For instance, families indicated
that familial natural mentors often discouraged parents from using harsh pun-
ishment of youth, and advised youth to follow their parents' instruction and
refrain from arguing with their parents. This finding not only builds on work
in the mentoring literature suggesting that mentors may help youth manage
negative emotions and develop emotional competence (Brady et al., 2015),
but also expands our understanding of family communication processes by
highlighting the ways familial mentors directly intervened to intentionally
support and strengthen the parent-child relationship. This is one of the first

studies to date to document the specific ways in which familial mentors leverage their position in the family to meaningfully engage both members of the parent-adolescent dyad to promote healthy communication and conflict resolution.

In addition to familial mentors' coaching of positive communication, families also discussed the ways familial mentors served as a sounding board, or listening ear, for parents and adolescents. Specifically, participants described how familial mentors provided parents and youth a non-judgmental space for processing challenging parent-adolescent exchanges. This finding is in line with previous work demonstrating the prevalence of emotional support provision within the Black family (Lincoln et al., 2013; Taylor et al., 2015), and underscores an important and potentially unique opportunity available to non-parental adult family members who are well-positioned to support the parent-adolescent bond from either side. Our findings also pointed to the specific ways in which parents and adolescents intentionally sought out trusted familial adults to confide in them and seek their advice.

We also found that familial mentors encouraged parents and youth to consider each other's points of view. The suggestion to step outside of one's own experience to consider the thoughts and feelings of others is of particular importance given prior work indicating that perspective-taking may improve adolescents' feelings of closeness to other individuals (Peterson et al., 2015; Schroder-Abe & Shutz, 2011). Research also has shown that when parents engage in more perspective-taking, it may positively influence youths' emotional openness and perceptions of parental warmth (Stern et al., 2015). Moreover, by encouraging adolescents to share their life experiences with their parents, more generally, familial mentors may have been facilitating increased opportunities for parents to be informed about the types of challenges and exciting activities in their adolescents' lives. Such encouragement from familial mentors may have provided opportunities for youth to develop a stronger sense of connection to their parents, as previous research findings indicate that youth feel closer to adults following self-disclosures (Donovan et al., 2016). Furthermore, this may have better positioned parents to give meaningful and appropriate advice to their adolescents (Tokić & Pećnik, 2011).

Findings from the current study also are consistent with previous research that has documented less strong parent-child relational bonds among older adolescents relative to younger adolescents (Branje et al., 2012; De Goede et al., 2009; Montemayor, 1983; Smetana, 1989). Yet we did not find any evidence that mentor support may be more consequential for older adolescents' connectedness to parents relative to younger adolescents' connectedness to parents. Instead, our findings suggest that familial mentor support

may be equally consequential for youths' connectedness to parents across developmental stage, but that familial mentors may be engaging in different types of supportive practices with older adolescents and their parents in order to maintain the equivalent effectiveness demonstrated with younger adolescents and their parents (where tension may be lower, on average). For example, we found that familial mentors of younger adolescents were more likely to encourage youths' obedience of their parents' instructions whereas mentors did this less with older adolescents and instead focused more on helping older adolescents advocate for themselves or try harder to consider their parents' points of view. This difference in familial mentors' approaches shows a responsiveness to developmental changes youth experience during adolescence. In particular, familial mentors seem to be factoring in older adolescents' increased cognitive maturity and emotional capacity (Keefer et al., 2013; Mayer et al., 1999) when giving them advice about how to more effectively communicate with their parents.

Study Limitations and Future Directions

Several limitations of the current study are worth noting. First, the limited age range captured in our qualitative sample (11–15 years old) may have curtailed our ability to identify differences in familial mentors' approaches to supporting parent-adolescent dyads across adolescence (e.g., 10–18 years old). Our comparisons centered on early adolescents relative to middle adolescents but if our study had also included late adolescents, we may have found greater or more substantial differences in familial mentors' influence on the parent-child relationship or in the specific approaches familial mentors implemented to support the dyad. We also noted that, on average, youth in our study reported relatively high familial mentor support and connectedness to parents (i.e., scores were heavily concentrated above the mid-point of the scale). The fact that we detected positive associations in spite of this suggests that our findings may underestimate the true strength of familial mentor influence. Future research that captures more variability in parent-adolescent connectedness and includes a greater proportion of dyads with weaker bonds may provide a better sense of the true magnitude of the associations tested in the current study.

Given that all parent interviews included in the current study (n = 12) were mothers, it is possible that study findings may not generalize to other parents or caregivers. Fathers, for example, may experience different challenges in their relationship with children during adolescence (Hosley & Montemayor, 1997; Phares et al., 2009). Accordingly, familial mentors may implement different strategies to support the father-adolescent relationship. Future studies

should seek to examine familial mentor support to all of adolescents' caregivers. Additionally, half of all familial mentors interviewed in the current study were grandparents. Prior literature examining grandparent-parent-child dynamics has often considered how the grandparent-parent relationship affects the grandparent-child relationship (Attar-Schwartz et al., 2009; Billingsley et al., 2021; Brown, 2003; Monserud, 2008), or has examined intergenerational transmission of relationship qualities (e.g., emotional closeness, conflict) from the grandparent-parent relationship to the parent-child relationship (Birditt et al., 2012; Hank et al., 2017; Savelieva et al., 2017). The current study contributes to the literature on family dynamics by providing insight into the ways that grandparents' relationships with both youth and parents may support the parent-child bond during adolescence. Moreover, this study looks beyond grandparent-parent-child dynamics to consider support received from other important non-parental adult relatives in the family network (e.g., aunts, adult siblings). Notably, though, the scope of this study was limited in that we focused on determining whether mentors' enactment of support varied as a function of adolescents' age. Future work should employ a generational lens to determine whether mentors' familial role may influence their enactment of support toward parents and youth.

Finally, given the cross-sectional nature of this study, we interpreted our quantitative findings with caution. For instance, family cohesion and values of interdependence may have influenced mentor dynamics and shaped how close adolescents were with their parents (Billingsley et al., 2020; Klaw et al., 2003; Taylor et al., 2015). While overarching beliefs and orientations toward family are likely to influence mentor support and parental relationships, we intentionally leveraged our mixed method design to probe our study's correlational findings. As a result, our qualitative findings bolstered our confidence in our directional interpretations suggesting mentor action as a potential pathway for promoting close parent-adolescent bonds. For example, this pathway of influence was further documented through participants' descriptions of instances in which familial mentors helped parents and adolescents better understand and communicate with one another. Nevertheless, given the likely reciprocal nature of the associations investigated in the current study, future research that implements a prospective longitudinal design and that follows youth across the full span of adolescence will be better positioned to speak to the reciprocal influences that may unfold and change over time.

Conclusion

The current mixed method study sought to uncover the role of familial natural mentors in promoting connectedness between Black adolescents and their

parents. Findings of this study support existing theory (Keller, 2005; Rhodes, 2005) and are consistent with empirical findings on mentoring relationships and family processes that point to familial natural mentors as a potentially important resource to the parent-adolescent relationship (Chan et al., 2013; Hurd et al., 2013; Renick Thomson & Zand, 2010). Moreover, our findings build on previous research by further illustrating *how* familial mentors intervene to support and strengthen the parent-adolescent bond among early and middle adolescents in ways that may yield similar effectiveness as youth age. Collectively, our findings shed light on normative developmental processes occurring in Black families and suggest that interventions aimed at improving parent-adolescent relationships should consider opportunities to involve familial mentors as a way to improve intervention effectiveness. Given that our findings may speak to more universal familial processes (at least within a U.S. context), future research could examine similar questions with racially, ethnically, and culturally diverse samples to determine the extent to which the current study findings may replicate.

Declaration of Conflicting Interests

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