

Prediction of maternal use of friendship facilitation strategies in middle childhood

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Abstract:

We examined child characteristics as predictors of maternal friendship facilitation strategies from third to fifth grades. Results indicated variation in initial levels of friendship facilitation and linear change over time, but no variation in trajectories of change over time. In third grade, African American mothers were less likely to enable proximity to friends and more likely to talk to their children about friendships than were European American mothers. Mothers of children with greater self-efficacy used more of both types of friendship facilitation behaviors. Mothers who perceived children as higher in externalizing were less likely to talk with children in an effort to facilitate friendships. Mothers who perceived children as having more social problems reported talking to their children more.

Keywords: Children | development | facilitation | friendship | management | mothers | parenting

Article:

The conceptualization of how parents manage children's friendships has evolved over time and across researchers. Three perspectives, and accompanying measurement instruments, have dominated work in this area. First, the work of Ladd and Parke (working with preschool-aged children; Ladd, LaSieur, & Profilet, 1993; Parke & Buriel, 2006; Parke et al., 2003) suggested parents manage children's friendships by acting as designers (who place children within contexts that will provide contacts with potential friendship partners), mediators (who direct children toward desirable or away from undesirable friendship partners), supervisors (who monitor children's peer interactions), and consultants (who talk with children about peer relationships). Second, Mounts (2007, 2011) developed an instrument to assess parental management of children's friendships during adolescence. Her measure included subscales such as consulting (providing advice about peer relationships) and guiding (providing constraints regarding peer relationships), which emphasized an increased focus on discussion as opposed to direct control as a management strategy during the adolescent years. Third, Vernberg, Beery, Ewell, and

Abwender (1993) conceptualized what they termed “friendship facilitation” as encompassing four sets of promotive behaviors in which parents of early adolescents might engage to support their children’s friendships by meeting other parents, enabling proximity to peers, talking to children, and encouraging activity involvement. Vernberg et al. (1993) developed the Friendship Facilitation Scale with subscales to assess parental behaviors within each of these areas.

Parental management of children’s friendships as considered from all three of these perspectives has been found to correlate with a variety of indicators of well-being during early childhood (Ladd et al., 1993) and adolescence (Mounts, 2004, 2007, 2011; Vernberg, Beery, Ewell, & Abwender, 1993). Ladd and Golter (1988) reported that when parents of preschool-aged children made more efforts to initiate peer contact, children played more often and with more children. In early adolescence, more parental use of friendship facilitation strategies is associated with a greater likelihood that children will make new friends (Vernberg et al., 1993). Also higher levels of parental management of adolescents’ friendships have been associated with lower levels of delinquent behavior (Mounts, 2007) and more positive friendship quality (Mounts, 2004).

Although parental management of children’s friendships has been linked with a number of indicators of child social competence and well-being, the impact of parental management practices is not uniformly positive. A number of studies have indicated that parental management practices that emphasize restriction or disapproval of peer relationships are often linked with a greater likelihood that adolescents will either associate with antisocial peers or themselves engage in problem behavior. For example, Keijsers et al. (2012) found that parental prohibition of adolescent friendships was longitudinally predictive of increased associations with deviant peers, which in turn predicted adolescents’ own involvement in delinquent activity. Mounts reported that while moderate levels of parental prohibition of adolescent friendships was linked with lower levels of adolescent problem behavior (Mounts, 2011), higher levels of parental prohibition were linked with greater adolescent involvement in drug use, at least when occurring within the context of some parenting style profiles (Mounts, 2002). Tilton-Weaver and colleagues (Tilton-Weaver, Burk, Kerr, & Stattin, 2013) found that in middle adolescence (although not necessarily late adolescence), parental expression of disapproval of friendships predicted a greater likelihood that adolescents would affiliate with deviant peers. In sum, the construct of parental management of peer relationships is multifaceted, and it is critical that researchers carefully consider whether the specific dimension under consideration is likely to support or discourage friendships. Within the current study, we chose to focus on friendship facilitation strategies, dimensions of parental management of peer relationships that have consistently been associated with positive child outcomes related to friendship establishment and maintenance.

Interestingly, there has been no work focusing on how parental management of children’s friendships might be expressed during middle childhood. This is despite theoretical and empirical work suggesting the unique importance of friendships during this developmental period, which suggests that management of such friendships may represent a highly salient

parenting task during these years. Furman, Simon, Schaffer, and Bouchey (2002) have suggested that as children enter middle childhood, their primary attachments shift from parents to friends. The characteristics of friendships during middle childhood differ from those both in early childhood and in adolescence (Hartup & Stevens, 1997) and friendships during middle childhood increasingly operate outside of the direct supervision of parents (Larson & Richards, 1991). As a result, the management of children's friendships is likely to be a particularly important parenting focus during middle childhood, when friendships are taking on increasing importance to children but moving outside of the direct observation of parents.

Characteristics of children and families as predictors of parental management strategies

An accumulating body of evidence has indicated that parental efforts to manage children's friendships are associated with benefits to children. Yet less work has considered what factors might predict these parenting behaviors. Much of the research that does exist in this area has focused on demographic differences (gender and ethnicity) in use of parental management strategies. Within the current study, we consider two potential categories of variables that may be predictive of patterns of parental management of children's friendships, namely demographic characteristics of children and families (which have been considered in previous research on parental management of children's friendships) and child behavioral characteristics (which have not been considered in previous research).

Demographic characteristics of children and families

A variety of parenting practices are shaped by demographic characteristics of children and families (Ladd & Pettit, 2002). For example, parents utilize harsher discipline strategies with boys than with girls (Leve & Fagot, 1997; McKee et al., 2007), and fathers are less likely to report the use of positive and instructional discipline strategies with boys than with girls (Leve & Fagot, 1997). There is reason to suspect that gender differences in parental management of peer relationships may exist as well, in part because the quality of peer relationships differs between boys and girls. Specifically, boys are less likely to maintain close peer relationships than do girls (Way & Chen, 2000). If parents perceive that boys are struggling to build and maintain quality friendships, they may be more likely to engage in friendship facilitation strategies to support such efforts. However, there has been minimal work that has considered possible gender differences in the extent to which parents engage in friendship facilitation. That which does exist suggests that parents of boys are more facilitating in their efforts with regard to children's friendships than are parents of girls. Mounts (2004) found that parents of boys engaged in more mediating, or guiding, behaviors than did parents of girls. Updegraff, Kim, Killoren, and Thayer (2010) reported that parents of girls adopted more restrictive strategies in terms of management of adolescent friendships than did parents of boys—at least under circumstances involving concerns regarding the characteristics of friends.

Whether friendship facilitation efforts differ based on ethnicity and/or social class (which are highly intertwined in contemporary American society; Oliver & Shapiro, 2006; Krieger, Williams, & Moss, 1997) has not been extensively considered either. Mounts and Kim (2009) reported that White mothers (but not adolescents) reported greater expectations of limit setting as it related to adolescent dating (a specific type of peer relationship) than did Latino or Black mothers. In a Mexican American sample, Updegraff, Perez-Brena, Baril, McHale, and Umaña-Taylor (2012) found that parents from higher social class backgrounds were more likely to adopt strategies for management of peer relationships that were supportive in orientation and consistent across mothers and fathers. African American and Latino mothers were less likely than European American mothers to engage in consulting behaviors with their adolescent children (Mounts, 2004).

There are also cultural differences in the extent to which parents engage in strategies that are related to parental management of children's friendships. European American and more affluent mothers are also more likely than African American and less affluent mothers to maintain relationships with their children's friends' parents, with such relationships yielding knowledge concerning children's friendships (Fletcher, Bridges, & Hunter, 2007). Presumably this knowledge allows parents to more effectively manage their children's relationships. It may be that ethnic minority parents and less affluent parents are less likely to engage in friendship facilitation activities at least in part because they lack resources (such as knowledge about children's friendships) that would support the success of such efforts.

Based on the research we have reviewed here and the conceptual rationales outlined, it seems likely that mothers of boys will be more likely to engage in friendship facilitation than will mothers of girls. Mothers who are more affluent should be more actively involved in friendship facilitation strategies than less affluent mothers. European American mothers should be more likely to engage in friendship facilitation strategies than African American mothers.

Behavioral characteristics of children

Mounts (2008) proposed a theoretical model explicating the manner in which parental management of peer relationships emerges as a parenting practice and impacts adolescent development. Within that model, characteristics of adolescents themselves (academic achievement, problem behavior, and social skills) are identified not only as being consequences of effective management practices but also as impacting the expression of these practices by way of their impact on parental beliefs, goals, and perceptions. Yet despite their theoretical importance, very little empirical work has been conducted focusing on identification of non-demographic predictors of parental management of children's friendships. Mounts (2011) reported that parents were more likely to engage in consulting and guiding when they expressed goals related to the improvement of children's peer relationships and beliefs that parents had the right to exert control over such relationships. Tilton-Weaver and Galambos (2003) reported that parents were more likely to communicate with children about their

relationships with peers, communicate disapproval concerning friendships to peers, and attempt to gain information about children's friendships when they perceived children or children's friends to be high in deviant behavior. In the only empirical investigation of whether characteristics of adolescents themselves might predict parental management of friendships, Keijsers et al. (2012) examined adolescents' levels of delinquent behavior as a potential predictor of parental prohibition of friendships. However, he did not observe that the direction of effects flowed in this manner. Rather, parental prohibition predicted increases in adolescent delinquent behavior.

To understand conceptually why specific characteristics of children might impact friendship facilitation, it is important to first understand the function of friendship facilitation. Friendship facilitation is reflected in intentional actions of parents to support their children in friendship formation and maintenance. However, not all children require the same level of intervention or support from their parents. There is evidence indicating that children's friendships are negatively impacted when children experience psychosocial or behavioral difficulties in the areas of externalizing, internalizing, or social problems. Children who are anxious and/or depressed often experience isolation and exclusion from peers (Gazelle & Ladd, 2003; Gazelle, Workman, & Wesley, 2010), and aggressive children may experience peer rejection (Chen, McComas, Hartman, & Symons, 2012). On the other hand, children who report themselves to be more confident and/or more efficacious may experience more positive friendships because they are more likely to reach out to potential friendship partners. Since friendship facilitation behaviors represent parents' conscious efforts to shape the nature of their children's relationships with peers, it is likely that parents who observe their children to be experiencing difficulties in areas that are linked with problematic peer relationships (externalizing and internalizing) will respond to such perceptions through the nature and extent of their friendship facilitation efforts. Parents of children who are more efficacious in terms of friendships may feel that their own efforts to engage in friendship facilitation are not needed. With this evidence in mind, the current project considered four child behavioral characteristics as potential predictors of maternal use of friendship facilitation strategies: externalizing, internalizing, social problems, and self-efficacy.

Keeping in mind the function of friendship facilitation and the variability in children with different characteristics, we hypothesized distinct conceptual pathways linking each of these four child characteristics with friendship facilitation. Specifically, externalizing behaviors should be linked with more friendship facilitation efforts because children who exhibit externalizing behaviors often experience peer rejection. Similarly, social problems should be linked with more friendship facilitation efforts because mothers might perceive that friendship formation and maintenance will be difficult based on previous problems in social settings. Internalizing behaviors should also be linked to more friendship facilitation efforts because parents may perceive their children as more withdrawn and, therefore, less likely to initiate and engage in peer formation. Self-efficacy should be linked to fewer friendship facilitation efforts because

children who are self-efficacious should be more likely to form and maintain friendships without parental intervention.

Over time changes in parental management of children's friendships

Much of the research on parental management of children's friendships has been cross-sectional in nature. Clearly, this restricts the ability of researchers to determine the direction of effects involving these categories of variables. In addition, we do not know whether parents' behaviors in this regard change as their children get older. As children grow older, their conceptualizations of friendship change, becoming more focused on intimacy and support as opposed to shared activities (Hartup & Stevens, 1997). At the same time, children's interactions with peers increasingly occur outside of the direct supervision of parents (Larson & Richards, 1991). Together these changes may impact the extent to which parents engage in different strategies to manage and support their children's relationships with peers. For example, parents may rely more on discussions with children regarding how to handle friendships as opposed to direct supervision of children's interactions with friends. The current study fills these gaps by focusing on how mothers' efforts to facilitate children's friendships change over a 3-year period in middle childhood.

Research hypotheses

The current project was designed with the intent of extending current knowledge concerning the manner in which parents' efforts to engage in efforts to manage (specifically, facilitate) their children's friendships unfold across middle childhood as well as explain the manner in which characteristics of children and families might explain observed differences and patterns of change.

Our first goal was to consider whether levels of maternal friendship facilitation might change over a 3-year period of time. Based on previous work indicating that as children grow older they spend more time with peers outside direct parental supervision (Larson & Richards, 1991), we hypothesized that levels of maternal friendship facilitation would increase over this period.

Our second goal was to examine differences in initial levels of maternal friendship facilitation—when children were in third grade. We predicted there would be variability in the initial levels of maternal friendship facilitation and that this variability would be predicted by both demographic variables and behavioral characteristics of children. Based on previous work in this area (Mounts, 2004), we hypothesized that mothers of boys would engage in more friendship facilitation strategies than would mothers of girls. We hypothesized that more affluent mothers would engage in more friendship facilitation strategies than less affluent mothers. We hypothesized that European American mothers would utilize more friendship facilitation strategies than would African American mothers. We hypothesized that mothers of children with higher levels of externalizing behaviors, internalizing behaviors, and social problems would

engage in more friendship facilitation strategies. We hypothesized that mothers of more efficacious children would be less likely to engage in friendship facilitation.

Our third goal was to identify predictors of over time change in maternal friendship facilitation. For reasons similar to those described for prediction of initial levels of friendship facilitation, we hypothesized that rates of over time increases in levels of friendship facilitation would be greater for mothers of boys, more affluent mothers, European American mothers, and mothers of children with higher levels of externalizing, internalizing, and social problems. We hypothesized that over time increases in levels of friendship facilitation would be smaller for mothers of more efficacious children who were perceived as higher in levels of self-efficacy.

By definition, all possible indicators of friendship facilitation are designed to promote or support children's friendships (as opposed to prevent or discourage friendships with specific children). Accordingly, we hypothesized that these effects would operate similarly for all indicators of friendship facilitation.

Method

Participants

Participants in this study were children and their mothers who were recruited into a short-term, longitudinal study when children were in third grade. Mother-child dyads were interviewed annually for three consecutive years. Four hundred and four mother-child dyads participated in Year 1 (37% African American and 63% European American; 51% female and 49% male). Three hundred seventy-one mother-child dyads were retained for Year 2 (36% African American and 63% European American; 52% female and 48% male). Three hundred forty-seven mother-child dyads were retained for Year 3 (38% African American and 62% European American; 53% female and 47% male). Social class of participating dyads was determined using The Hollingshead Four Factor Index of Social Status (Hollingshead, 1975). Year 1 Hollingshead scores for the sample ranged from 16 (semiskilled laborers) to 66 (major business persons and professionals), with a mean of 42.96 (medium business personnel and minor professionals) and an *SD* of 11.70.

Measures

Demographic variables

Demographic data were collected through a family roster interview with mothers during Year 1. Mothers reported on ethnicity (always the same within dyads; 0 = *Black* and 1 = *White*) and child gender (0 = *female* and 1 = *male*). The Hollingshead Four Factor Index of Social Status (Hollingshead, 1975) used parental education levels and occupations as reported by mothers to calculate a summary measure of social class.

Child adjustment

During Year 1, participating children reported on their beliefs in their own ability to successfully deal with challenges in various areas of their life using the 13-item Self-Efficacy Scale (Furstenberg, Cook, Eccles, Elder, & Sameroff, 1999). Children indicated the extent to which they felt efficacious in their ability to handle situations (e.g., “stand up for yourself when you are being treated unfairly”) on a 7-point Likert scale with options ranging from 1 (*not at all well*) to 7 (*very well*). Scores were averaged across the 13 items. Resulting scale scores ranged from 1 to 7, with higher scores indicating higher levels of self-efficacy. The Time 1 α for this measure was .72.

During Year 1, each child’s mother completed the 118 problem items questions of the *Child Behavior Checklist* (CBCL; Achenbach & Edelbrock, 1981). The CBCL is a standardized clinical measure used in a variety of settings to assess a broad spectrum of child behaviors. For all items, parents indicate whether children exhibit specific behaviors on a 3-point scale with 0 = *not true (as far as you know)*, 1 = *somewhat or sometimes true*, and 2 = *very true or often true*. The problem items questions yield several scales including the 31-item Internalizing Behavior Grouping, the 32-item Externalizing Behavior Grouping, and the 11-item Social Problems Syndrome Subscale. Item scores for each scale are summed, and higher scores on all scales indicate higher levels of problem behavior.

Friendship facilitation

Each year, children completed the 20-item Friendship Facilitation Scale (Vernberg et al., 1993), developed to determine the extent to which parents engaged in strategies intended to support children in establishing and maintaining relationships with peers. The scale initially consisted of four subscales: Meeting other Parents, Enabling Proximity to Peers, Talking to Offspring, and Encouraging Activity Involvement. Children responded on a 5-point scale ranging from 1 (*never*) to 5 (*very often*) indicating how often they perceived their parents to engage in each behavior. Alphas for individual subscales were low, and several items did not have strong face validity in relation to specific subscales. Accordingly, we conducted exploratory factor analyses separately for all 3 years of data using a varimax rotation. These initial factor analyses indicated that a three-factor solution was warranted for all 3 years. We then repeated factor analyses using maximum likelihood extraction and a promax rotation and restricting to three factors for each year. One factor (corresponding to the initial Meeting Other Parents subscale) was not consistent across years in terms of factor loadings and was discarded. For the remaining two factors, we eliminated items that did not load similarly across all 3 years and were left with two subscales. The Enabling Proximity to Peers subscale consisted of all items for the original measure except for two that focused on parents’ use of driving. Since a number of the families in our sample did not own cars, it made sense that these items would need to be removed from the subscale. The resulting subscale consisted of 5 items with Cronbach’s α across the 3 years of .66, .71, and .75. A sample item is “Let you invite friends to sleep over.” The final subscale was termed Encouragement and Communication, and it consisted of all but 1 item on both the Talking to Offspring and Encouraging Activity Involvement subscales. The combined subscale had 8 items

and α s of .75, .79, and .81. A sample item is “Talked to you about life and friends.” We calculated all alphas separately for Black children versus White children and for boys versus girls and found that reliability coefficients were highly consistent across these different groups.

Means and standard deviations for all variables are presented in Table 1.

Table 1. Descriptive variables.

	N	Mean	SD
Family socioeconomic status ^a	404	42.887	11.61
Child self-efficacy ^a	404	5.24	.84
Externalizing behavior ^a	404	5.58	5.45
Internalizing behavior ^a	404	5.62	5.28
Social problems ^a	404	2.25	2.48
Friendship facilitation			
Enable proximity to peers			
Year 1	404	2.95	.87
Year 2	370	2.88	.90
Year 3	347	3.27	.90
Talk to offspring and encouraging activity involvement			
Year 1	403	3.43	.84
Year 2	370	3.36	.86
Year 3	347	3.64	.82

^aYear 1.

Procedure

Parents were contacted initially through letters distributed to all third-grade children in nine participating schools. Eighty-five percent of those contacted agreed to participate in the school-based portion of the study (which yielded data not analyzed in the current article). Eligibility to participate in the home-based portion of the study (which yielded data analyzed here) was determined using demographic information provided by children during school-based data collection. To be eligible, mothers had to reside with participating children, children had to be born in the U.S., and participants had to self-identify as either Black or White. Eligible mothers were contacted by telephone and asked to participate in home interviews. Seventy-nine percent of mothers who were contacted agreed to participate in home interviews.

Mother-child dyads participated in 90-min interviews conducted by two research assistants (RAs) in participants' homes or at a location of their choosing. RA pairs conducting each interview consisted of one graduate and one undergraduate student with one RA always matched to the family in terms of ethnicity and one RA always female. Mothers and children completed questionnaires and answered interview questions separately. All questionnaires were read aloud to children in locations in which parents could not overhear interviews. Questionnaires were read

aloud to mothers if they appeared to be having difficulty completing measures or if they requested assistance.

Data analytic strategy

Hierarchical linear modeling (HLM) was used because of its ability to analyze over time change in parental friendship facilitation and predict individual differences in initial status and change over time as a function of characteristics of children (Bryk & Raudenbush, 1987). Full information maximum likelihood was used to estimate missing data. Using a multilevel modeling approach made it possible to address multiple research questions having to do with the nature and prediction of parental friendship facilitation during middle childhood (Pan, Rowe, Singer, & Snow, 2005). Specifically, we could consider whether there was change over time in friendship facilitation as well as identify predictors of initial levels of friendship facilitation and trajectories of change.

Individual change over time, or growth trajectories, was established in the within-subject model (Level 1). The between-subject model (Level 2) measured differences attributable to characteristics of children or fixed effects (Bryk & Raudenbush, 1987). Specifically, Level 2 variables included social class, race, sex, self-efficacy, internalizing behavior, externalizing behavior, and social problems as potential predictors of variance.

We chose to adopt an analytic approach that involved first testing an unconditional growth model to determine whether there was individual variation in the intercept and slope of each Friendship Facilitation Scale (enabling proximity to peers, encouragement and communication). We then tested a mixed model to identify predictors of such variation if it was present (Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). We ran two sets of each of these models, one with each friendship facilitation subscale as an outcome.

Results

Unconditional and conditional growth models (Tables 2 and 3) were used to create reduced mixed models for each outcome variable. Model 1 represents the unconditional model, or baseline model, for each parental friendship facilitation subscale and is used for model comparison. Model 2 represents the unconditional growth model for each parental friendship facilitation subscale, adding change over time. Models 3 through 6 add predictors of friendship facilitation and then remove those that are not statistically significant.

Table 2. Enabling proximity to peers.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5	Model 6
Fixed effects						
Level 1						
Intercept (β_{00})	3.02* (.04)	2.89* (.04)	2.73* (.07)	2.70* (.06)	2.70* (.06)	2.70* (.06)

Year (β_{01})		0.14* (.02)	.14* (.02)	.15* (.02)	.15* (.02)	.15* (.02)
Level 2						
SES			0.00 (.00)			
Ethnicity			.34* (.08)	.29* (.07)	.29* (.07)	.29* (.07)
Sex			.12 (.07)			
Child self-efficacy				.26* (.04)	.26* (.04)	.24* (.04)
Externalizing				-.01 (.01)		
Internalizing				-.01 (.01)		
Social problems				.05* (.02)	.02 (.01)	
Random effects						
Intercept (τ_{00})	.36*	.35*	.34*	.29*	.30*	.30*
Slope (τ_{10})		.1				
Level 1 residual (σ^2)	.45	.42	.43	.43	.43	.43

Note. SES = socioeconomic status. * .01.

Table 3. Encouragement and communication.

	Model 1	Model 2	Model 3	Model 4	Model 5
Fixed effects					
Level 1					
Intercept (β_{00})	3.46*(.03)	3.38*(.04)	3.49*(.07)	3.53*(.67)	3.54*(.06)
Year (β_{01})		.09*(.02)	.09*(.02)	.09*(.02)	.09*(.02)
Level 2					
SES			-.004(.00)		
Ethnicity			-.15*(.08)	.24*(.07)	.24*(.07)
Sex			-.03(.07)		
Child self-efficacy				.26*(.04)	.26*(.04)
Externalizing				-.02*(.01)	-.02*(.01)
Internalizing				-.01(.01)	
Social problems				.07*(.02)	.07*(.02)
Random effects					
Intercept (τ_{00})	.30*	.33*	.29*	.24*	.24*
Slope (τ_{10})		.02			
Level 1 residual (σ)	.42	.4	.42	.42	1.42

Note. SES = socioeconomic status. * .01.

Fully unconditional growth model equations

For the unconditional model without time (Model 1), the Level 1 equation was: $(\gamma) = \pi_{0i} + \varepsilon_{ii}$

and the Level 2 equation was: $\pi_{0i} = \beta_{00j} + r_{0ij}$

For the unconditional growth model with time (Model 2), the Level 1 equation was:

$$(\gamma) = \pi_{0i} + \pi_{1i}(\text{time}_{ti}) + \varepsilon_{ii}$$

$$\pi_{0i} = \beta_{00j} + r_{0ij}$$

and the Level 2 equations were: $\pi_{1i} = \beta_{10j} + r_{1ij}$

Within these models, friendship facilitation represents the outcome variable and there are no predictors of either the intercept or the slope. π_{0i} represents the i th mother's friendship facilitation, π_{1i} represents the change in friendship facilitation over time, ε represents the error in the Level 1 model and r represents the error in the Level 2 model.

Variability in initial levels of friendship facilitation

A multilevel model analytic approach allows us to determine whether there is variability in levels of the outcome of interest at the first point of data collection. Having such variability is a prerequisite for examining whether we can use proposed predictor variables to explain such variability. For both subscales, Model 2 β_{00} coefficients were significant, indicating that initial levels of mothers' friendship facilitation were significantly different from 0. Significant τ_{00} coefficients indicated that there was within-sample variability in initial levels of both friendship facilitation subscales. In other words, when children were in third grade, parents' levels of enabling proximity to peers and their levels of encouragement and communication varied across individuals meaning that we could then proceed to attempt to explain this variability.

Over time change in mothers' efforts to facilitate friendships

A multilevel model analytic approach also allows us to determine whether there is variability in the rate at which the outcome of interest changes across points of data collection. Having variability in rates of change is a prerequisite for examining whether we can use proposed predictor variables to explain such variability. Significant β_{01} coefficients indicated that mean levels of both friendship facilitation subscales rose over time. However, the τ_{01} coefficients (in models in which slopes were allowed to vary) were not significant, indicating there was not across-participant variability in trajectories of friendship facilitation subscales over time. In other words, although initial levels of friendship facilitation were different across individuals, the rate of change over time was the same across individuals. Specifically, mothers' friendship facilitation strategies increased as children moved from third grade into fourth grade and continued to increase as they entered fifth grade. We then reran these models constraining the variability of the slopes. Model comparison tests (enabling proximity $\chi^2(2) = .131, p > .05$; encouragement and advice $\chi^2(2) = .69, p > .05$) indicated no differences when parameters around

the slope were allowed to vary versus constrained. The most parsimonious model, the one with constrained slopes, was retained for further analyses.

Predicting variability in initial levels of friendship facilitation

Based on previously described findings indicating differences in initial levels of friendship facilitation strategies, we included predictor variables in a random intercept model. Therefore, random intercept models were run to identify predictors of variability in initial levels of friendship facilitation.

For the random intercepts model, the Level 1 model examined individual change over time in friendship facilitation. The Level 1 equation was: $(\gamma) = \pi_{0i} + \pi_{1i}(\text{time}_{ii}) + \varepsilon_{ii}$

The Level 2 model included fixed effect demographic and child adjustment variables as potential predictors. These predictors were entered in two blocks, and the theoretical model with all

$$\begin{aligned} \pi_{0i} = & \beta_{00j} + \beta_{01j} (\text{Socioeconomic status}) + \beta_{02j} (\text{Ethnicity}) \\ & + \beta_{03j} (\text{Sex}) + \beta_{04j} (\text{Child self - efficacy}_{ii}) + \beta_{05j} (\text{Externalizing}) \\ & + \beta_{06j} (\text{Internalizing}) + \beta_{06j} (\text{Social problems}) + r_{0i} \end{aligned}$$

predictors was: $\pi_{1i} = \beta_{10j}$

Within the random intercept model, friendship facilitation represents the outcome variable. π_0 represents i th mother's friendship facilitation, π_i represents the change in parental friendship facilitation over time, and ε ; represents the error term. The error term was not included for π_{1i} , in the Level 2 model, because there was no variation on the slope in the unconditional growth model.

Model 3 included all demographic variables (socioeconomic status, ethnicity, and gender) as potential predictors of initial variation in friendship facilitation levels. Only significant demographic variables were retained in subsequent models. Model 4 added the child adjustment variables of child self-efficacy, externalizing behaviors, internalizing behaviors, and social problems. Again, nonsignificant predictors were eliminated, and the model was further reduced until all included predictor variables accounted for a significant portion of the variance in friendship facilitation subscales. For each subscale, we present significant predictors from the final model.

Enabling proximity to peers

For the friendship facilitation outcome of enabling proximity to peers, ethnicity was the only significant demographic predictor ($\beta_{01} = .29$). European American mothers were more likely than African American mothers to engage in behaviors that put their children in proximity to other children. The only child adjustment variable that significantly predicted friendship facilitation was self-efficacy ($\beta_{02} = .26$), indicating mothers of children who reported higher levels of child

self-efficacy were more likely to engage in behaviors that enabled their children to be around peers.

Talking to children

For the friendship facilitation outcome of talking to children about friendships, ethnicity ($\beta_{01} = -.24$) was again the only significant demographic variable retained in the final model as a Level 2 predictor of initial levels of friendship facilitation. African American mothers were more likely than European American mothers to talk to their children about their friendships. Self-efficacy ($\beta_{02} = .26$), externalizing behaviors ($\beta_{04} = -.02$) and social problems ($\beta_{03} = .06$) were retained in the final model as significant Level 2 predictors of initial levels of friendship facilitation.

Mothers of children who reported higher levels of self-efficacy were more likely to talk to their children about making friends. Mothers were more likely to talk to their children about making friends if they perceived their child to have social problems. Mothers were less likely to talk to their children about making friends if they perceived their child as exhibiting externalizing behaviors.

Predicting variability in over time change in trajectories of maternal friendship facilitation (slope)

Since the unconditional model (Model 2) indicated no variability in over time trajectories of friendship facilitation for either of the subscales, demographic and child adjustment predictors of friendship facilitation trajectories (slope) were not examined.

Discussion

This study was designed to consider variability in initial levels of, and over time changes in, maternal friendship facilitation and to identify demographic and child behavioral variables that might predict such variability. We found significant variability in initial levels of friendship facilitation and significant increases in the use of friendship facilitation strategies from third through fifth grade but not variability in the maternal use of strategies over time. Accordingly, we were only able to test predictors of initial levels of friendship facilitation. European American mothers were more likely than African American mothers to engage in behaviors designed to enable children to be around friends. African American mothers were more likely than European American mothers to talk to their children about friendships. Mothers of children who reported themselves as higher in self-efficacy were more likely to engage in both types of friendship facilitation (enabling proximity, communication and encouragement). Mothers who perceived their children as exhibiting more externalizing behaviors were less likely to talk to children and encourage them with respect to friendships, while mothers who saw their children as having more social problems were more likely to engage in these behaviors.

Over time changes in friendship facilitation

Existing work examining parental management of children's friendships has tended to examine this construct at single points in time—either by linking management with contemporaneous levels of other variables (Mounts, 2004; Vernberg et al., 1993) or by considering management at one point in time as a predictor of child adjustment measured at a later point in time (Mounts, 2001, 2002, 2011). In contrast, the current study examined levels of two types of friendship facilitation across a 3-year period—from third to fifth grades. We found that both types of friendship facilitation (enabling proximity to peers, communication and encouragement) engaged in by mothers (as reported by children) increased over time. This finding is likely explained by the changing nature of children's focus on and experiences with peers as they move across middle childhood. By the end of this period, children are reporting more concerns regarding peer acceptance (Parker & Gottman, 1989), are spending time interacting with more cohesive and stable groups of peers ("cliques"; Crockett, Losoff, & Peterson, 1984), and are increasingly interacting with these peers outside of the direct supervision of their parents (Rubin, Bukowski, & Parker, 1998).

As a result of such changes, parents may adjust their behaviors to become more vigilant concerning and promotive of children's friendships. It may be disconcerting for mothers to realize their children's increased time spent in the company of peers is occurring within contexts that cannot be directly monitored by parents. Mothers' increased efforts to talk with children about friendships may represent an effort to remain informed about and shape friendships under a set of circumstances that requires more indirect parenting strategies. In contrast, increased efforts by parents to provide children with opportunities to interact with peers may represent a response on the part of mothers to children's increased interest in spending time with friends (Brown and Larson, 2009). It is important to remember that our measure of friendship facilitation was reported by children themselves, reflecting on their perceptions of mothers' behaviors. It is possible that in addition to being indicative of over time changes in mothers' actual efforts at friendship facilitation, children's reports also reflect an increasing awareness of their mothers' efforts in this regard as a result of their own enhanced interest in such behaviors.

Demographic differences in friendship facilitation

Interestingly, mother-child dyads from different racial/ethnic backgrounds varied in their use of specific friendship facilitation strategies. European American mothers were more likely to assist children in spending time with peers. It has been suggested that African American families' social networks are often kin based (Burton & Jarrett, 2000; Johnson, 2000) or involve long-standing relations with others who function as kin ("kith" relationships; Stack, 1974). Within contemporary American society, ethnicity and social class are intertwined, making it more likely that African American families will experience economic disadvantages and reside in neighborhoods that are characterized by disadvantage and social disorganization (Anderson, 1999; Mendenhall, DeLuca, & Duncan, 2006). Furstenberg et al. (1999) found that parents who were raising children in dangerous or chaotic neighborhoods were highly selective in the types of relationships they were willing to pursue for themselves and for their children, often avoiding

social connections with more readily available families within their neighborhoods of residence in favor of relationships maintained within contexts such as church and employment that were perceived as more positive for children. Taken together, these findings may explain the lower likelihood that African American mothers will assist children in spending time with peers. For at least some of these mothers, such strategies may be perceived as either unnecessary (as children's friendships are maintained within kith and kin contexts that are readily present in children's lives) or inconsistent with parental goals involving their children's social partners and activities.

In contrast, African American mothers spent more time talking with children about peer-related issues and supporting their children's efforts to maintain positive friendships. This finding is consistent with a literature that emphasizes closeness and communication within parent-child relationships in African American families, particularly relationships with mothers (Stinnett, Talley, & Walters, 1973). As early as infancy, African American mothers have been observed to engage in more positive and negative emotion talk with their children than is present among European American mothers (Garrett-Peters, Mills-Koonce, Adkins, Vernon-Feagans, & Cox, 2008).

Child behavioral characteristics as predictors of differences in friendship facilitation

As predicted, mothers' efforts at friendship facilitation varied based on behavioral characteristics of children themselves. Mothers whose children reported themselves to be more self-efficacious were more likely to engage in both types of friendship facilitation. This finding was unexpected. We had hypothesized that mothers of children who were highly effective in managing their environments would be confident in such children's abilities to form and maintain friendships and thus would not feel it necessary to engage in parenting practices that would further support an already strongly engrained social strength in children. Instead, mothers of more efficacious children were more likely to support their children's efforts to connect with peers, in terms of both providing opportunities for interaction and discussing friendships with children. Such associations may be due to both characteristics of children and those of mothers. Efficacious children may be particularly likely to value friendships and such value may make friendship interactions a particularly salient aspect of the home environment. Also having mothers who have engaged in more of these friendship facilitation strategies over time may contribute to higher levels of efficacy among children (Mounts, 2001, 2002, 2011).

Mothers who perceived their children to have more externalizing problems were less likely to talk with children themselves to support or guide children's efforts to connect with peers. Within middle childhood, externalizing behaviors are frequently either directed toward peers (arguing, fighting, and destroying others' belongings) or make children unattractive social partners in the eyes of peers (rule-breaking, lying and cheating, and irritability; Coie & Dodge, 1998). Items comprising our measure of externalizing included indicators of all such behaviors. Given the considerable over time stability in externalizing behavior during childhood (Sturaro, van Lier,

Cuijpers, & Koot, 2011), it is likely that children who experience externalizing problems have long histories of negative interactions with peers. Mothers may perceive that conversations with children about peer relationships will be difficult to have or perceive that they will not be productive, given children's histories of behavioral difficulties. Such an explanation assumes that mothers' parenting behaviors are shaped by children's characteristics and this is likely true. However, we cannot ignore the possibility that the opposite direction of effects is at work as well. The failure of mothers to discuss with their children appropriate strategies for interacting with peers may result in not providing children with the tools needed to engage with peers appropriately.

Limitations and directions for future research

Use of HLM within this study provided us the ability to examine maternal friendship facilitation behaviors over time and, potentially, identify predictors of both initial levels of friendship facilitation and change in facilitation behaviors over time. Yet given that there was not significant variability in trajectories of friendship facilitation from third to fifth grade, we were only able to examine predictors at the intercept in third grade. Even so, our use of longitudinal data provided information about changes over time in maternal friendship facilitation—changes that have not previously been demonstrated. Middle childhood appears to be a developmental period during which levels of maternal friendship facilitation rise, and such rises appear to be a developmental phenomenon experienced by most families rather than one that varies across families that are diverse with respect to demographic characteristics and behavioral characteristics of children. In other words, although these variables statistically predict differences in levels of friendship facilitation at a given point in time, rates of change in friendship facilitation are uniform across these characteristics.

We had only one reporter for the key constructs of friendship facilitation and children's behavior characteristics. From a methodological perspective, multiple reporters of friendship facilitation would minimize reporter bias. Conceptually, maternal reports of friendship facilitation would provide additional insight into maternal beliefs and perceptions of their own friendship facilitation practices that children are unlikely to recognize. However, reporters were chosen carefully. Previous research has indicated children are able to accurately report on their parents' parenting behaviors (Scott, Briskman, & Dadds, 2010); therefore, children were asked to report on their mothers' use of friendship facilitation strategies. Children also reported on their beliefs in how well they were able to manage problems that may come up in their lives, a construct that is more clearly accessible to children themselves than to those around them. Previous research has also shown that mothers' and fathers' responses on the CBCL are highly correlated (Grigorenko, Geiser, Slobodskaya, & Francis, 2010), indicating that only one parent reporter is needed. The absence of fathers in the current study was clearly a limitation, but previous research has indicated that mothers are more often the primary caregivers within families and are more active in their children's day-to-day lives (Helms, Walls, & Demo, 2010). Finally, it is of concern that participants in this study only represent two ethnic groups living within a single

county in the southeastern portion of the U.S. Given the ethnic differences observed in mothers' use of specific friendship facilitation strategies, future research should include participants from different areas of the country and should include multiple ethnic groups.

Conclusions

Yet despite such limitations, the findings reported here offer an important window on a parenting practice about which we know relatively little—the behaviors parents engage in with the goal of supporting children's relationships with peers. Across the course of middle childhood, it appears that maternal friendship facilitation is noteworthy in terms of both its trajectory and its correlates. While, in general, mothers increase their efforts to support children's friendships over this period in time, their efforts reflect mothers' understandings of the unique characteristics that make maintaining friendships easy for some children and difficult for others. Under optimal circumstances, such customization offers some children the opportunity to spread their social wings with independence and others to benefit from the support offered by a guiding parental hand. In terms of children whose social relationships may be at risk due to their own externalizing difficulties, the implications of this study are more concerning. It may be that those working with families of children who have such difficulties should consider helping parents to develop strategies for facilitating their children's social relationships as well as support in implementing such efforts. Through such an approach, perhaps all children will be able to experience the potential benefits of positive friendships during this critical developmental period.

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