

## Parenting Style and Adolescent's Reaction to Conflict: Is There a Relationship?

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### **Abstract:**

**Purpose:** To determine if the reactions of adolescents toward hypothetical situations that can lead to conflict and violence varied by parenting style of their mothers.

**Methods:** This study was part of a larger research project involving adolescents and their mothers participating in a longitudinal HIV-prevention program. Mothers and their adolescents were recruited from a community-based organization (CBO) and interviewed separately. Data were analyzed using the responses of 439 African-American adolescents ranging from ages 11 to 14 years. The responses of adolescents to questions about parenting were used to classify mothers into one of three parenting styles: authoritative, authoritarian, or permissive. The "anticipated reactions to hypothetical situations" scale consists of 11 items with 6 response categories. The six responses were reclassified into three categories ranging from "not at all violent" to "extremely violent." Higher scores indicate more violent reactions to the hypothetical situations. The parenting scale consists of two subscales: a 13-item parental involvement scale and a 13-item parental control scale. Items were rated on a 5-point Likert scale from "strongly disagree" to "strongly agree." Analysis of variance was used to determine if the anticipated reactions of adolescents toward hypothetical situations varied by parenting style of their mothers.

**Results:** Adolescent participants who reported a more permissive parenting style expressed more intense negative reactions toward the hypothetical situations that can provoke conflict. Male adolescents also expressed more intense reactions than females to the situations. There was no difference in intensity of reaction by age after controlling for gender and parenting style.

**Conclusions:** Parenting style is associated with adolescents' reactions to hypothetical situations that can provoke conflict. This finding highlights the importance of considering parents and their approach to child-rearing as a factor in the adolescent's ability to react to conflict.

**KEY WORDS:** Adolescence, Conflict, Gender differences, Parenting style, Violence

### **Article:**

Youth violence is considered one of the most pressing public health issues in the United States today. Although violence affects every socioeconomic level of American society, intentional interpersonal violence disproportionately involves adolescents as both perpetrators and victims [1]. Research has demonstrated that there are numerous factors associated with adolescent violence, including low socioeconomic status, lack of positive encouragement, poor school climate, exposure to deviant peers, adverse family relationships, and individual physical or psychological predisposition to violent behavior [2]. Although the role of the parent has also been

considered a factor in youth violence, few investigators have examined the association between parenting behaviors and the propensity of youth to adopt violent approaches to resolving conflicts. Using ideas about parenting derived primarily from developmental literature, in this study we sought to determine if the anticipated reactions of adolescents toward hypothetical situations that can lead to conflict and violence varied by parenting style of their mothers.

### **Methods**

Data for this study were obtained from a larger research project involving adolescents and their mothers who participated in a longitudinal HIV- prevention intervention study. Both adolescents and mothers were recruited in person or by telephone through the cooperation of a community-based organization (CBO) providing services to children and adolescents. This CBO provides after-school programs to primarily low-income families and is located in a large southeastern metropolitan area.

Mothers were given a description of the study and the eligibility criteria. Adolescents were required to be between ages 11 and 14 years, and mothers were required to be at least aged 18 years and the primary female caretaker of the adolescent for at least the past year. Moreover, both adolescents and their mothers were required to participate together in the study. Eligible and interested mothers and adolescents were invited to participate in a baseline interview after hearing a description of the study. Mothers were required to sign informed consent for themselves and their adolescents, and adolescents were required to sign an assent form. Before beginning data collection, the study was reviewed and approved by the CBO and the Institutional Review Board of the researchers' institution. All interviews for the baseline assessment were conducted at the CBO in private rooms and lasted approximately 1 hour. Trained interviewers conducted separate face-to-face assessments with mothers and adolescents using a structured questionnaire. Mothers and adolescents were paid \$20.00 each for completing the interview. Because researchers were interested in adolescent perceptions of their mothers, only data from adolescents were included in the present analysis.

### **Participants**

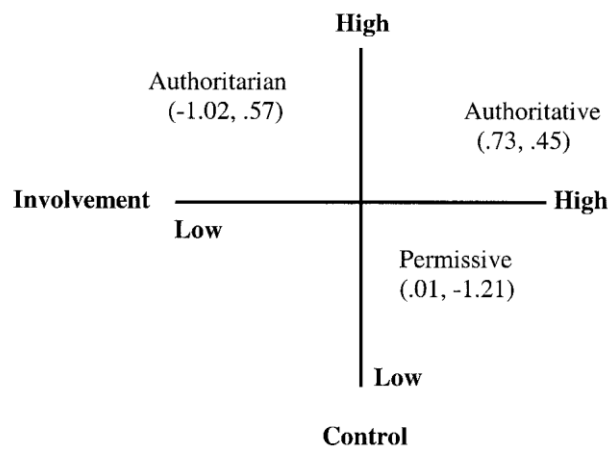
Although several mothers had more than one child in this study meeting the age requirements, only the first adolescent enrolled in the study per family was included in this analysis. This analysis was further limited to African-American adolescents who participated with their biological mothers. A total of 620 adolescents completed the baseline assessment, and 439 met the study criteria. They had a mean age of 12.28 years. Sixty-one percent of participants were male, most of whom (56.2%) had completed the sixth grade.

### **Measures**

*Anticipated reactions to hypothetical situations.* Adolescents' anticipated reactions to hypothetical situations were measured by an 11-item scale adapted from a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) survey on adolescent risk behavior [3,4]. Each item presents a situation that might be handled in different ways. Respondents are asked to select from six possible responses how they would react if they were confronted with the situation. Examples of the situations are: "someone cuts in front of you in line, a person breaks something of yours, someone wants to physically fight you," and "someone points a gun at you." The six possible responses are: 1 = "physically fight the person (punching, kicking, hitting)"; 2 = "yell and/or

curse”; 3 = “walk away and talk to that person about the situation”; 4 = “walk away and talk with an adult about the situation”; 5 = “ignore the situation and keep it to myself”; and 6 = “use a weapon (gun, knife, bat, or other weapon).” In the current study, the six response options were reclassified into one of three categories: “not at all violent, somewhat violent,” and “extremely violent.” The following three response options were classified as nonviolent reactions: “walk away and talk about it with that person, walk away and talk about it with an adult,” and “ignore the situation and keep it to myself.” The response option “yell and/or curse,” was classified as a somewhat violent response. And the response options of “physically fight this person” and “use a weapon” were classified as extremely violent. Thus for each item, a respondent could receive a score ranging from 1 to 3. Total scores were found by summing responses for individual items and then dividing by 11, the total number of items. Total scores then ranged from 1 to 3 with higher scores indicating greater likelihood of violent reactions to the hypothetical situations. The alpha coefficient for the responses on the measure was .85, indicating an adequate level of internal consistency.

*Parenting style measure.* The parenting style measure was developed by the principal investigator to measure adolescents’ perceptions of parental in-



**Figure 1.** Assignment of clusters to parenting style by mean scores.

volvement and control. The items selected for the measure were derived from a review of the literature on parenting style and the work of Lamborn et al. [5]. The measure was composed of 40 items, each rated on a 5-point Likert scale. An example of one item used to assess the involvement dimension is: “When you do something your mother likes, she praises you, or gives you a smile, hug or kiss.” An example of an item used to assess the control dimension is: “Your mother allows you to date.”

To determine if the items selected to measure the involvement dimension were conceptually distinct from those selected to measure the control dimension of parenting, the measure was subjected to a factor analysis using principal components analysis with varimax rotation. Two factors were extracted from the analysis. One factor included most items developed to measure involvement, and the second factor included most items that measured control. To further refine the instrument, items for each factor were retained if they had a loading of .40 or higher on their primary factor and if the difference between loadings on the primary factor and the secondary

factor was greater than .20. Twenty-six items, 13 for each factor, met these criteria and were retained for the primary analysis. The 13-item involvement scale had an alpha coefficient of .87, and the 13-item control scale had an alpha of .83, both demonstrating adequate internal consistency reliability.

### *Results*

Data were analyzed using SPSS 9.0 for Windows (SPSS Inc., Chicago, IL, 1999). The analysis was conducted in two stages. In the first stage, adolescents were classified into parenting style groups based on their response to the 26-item parenting style measure. This was accomplished through the use of principle component analysis followed by cluster analysis. First, the 26 items were reduced to component scores for each respondent, using principal component analysis of the 26-item parenting style measure. Component scores were computed by first fixing the number of components at two (one for control and one for involvement) based on the exploratory factor analysis discussed above. In this process, each adolescent's responses across the 26 items were reduced to two standardized orthogonal component scores: a score for involvement and a score for control.

These two component scores were then submitted to a K-Means Cluster Analysis to identify categories of respondents who were similar in their pattern of scores. In keeping with the four-group parenting style structure proposed by Baumrind [6], in the first analysis, we forced a four-cluster solution. The preliminary results indicated clustering of scores in three of the four categories. There were few participants with both low-involvement and low-control component scores. Thus, a second cluster analysis was conducted, forcing a three-cluster solution. The results of this analysis are that each adolescent was given one of three mutually exclusive cluster assignments. Thus, provided with these assignments, we computed the average component scores within each cluster. This allowed us to display the results of the second cluster analysis in Figure 1. Each cluster is plotted along the two dimensions of Control and Involvement using the ordered pair of their average component scores. Thus, the average component scores for the cases categorized as authoritative were relatively high in both involvement and control (with group means for the standardized component scores of .73 and .45, respectively).

As can be seen in Figure 1, the clusters fell into three separate quadrants. We found that 41% of participants' responses fell into the high involvement/high control quadrant; 30% of responses fell into the low-involvement/high-control quadrant; and 29% of responses fell into the high-involvement/ low-control quadrant. This classification corresponds with three of four parenting styles derived from Baumrind's work: authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive.

The second phase of the analysis was conducted to determine if adolescents in the clusters identified in the first phase differed in their reactions to the hypothetical situations. In this phase, the dependent Table 1. Means of Self-Reported Reactions to Potentially Violent Situations

	Mean	SD	F	p
Parenting style (n = 410)			21.545	<.001
Authoritative	1.51	.47		
Authoritarian	1.56	.45		
Permissive	1.90 <sup>a</sup>	.52		
Gender (n = 435)			28.777	<.001
Male	1.72	.52		
Female	1.47	.41		
Age (years) (n = 435)			5.523	<.001
11	1.52	.52		
12	1.57	.46		
13	1.77 <sup>b</sup>	.48		
14	1.68	.48		

<sup>a</sup> Self-reported reaction scores were significantly higher in the “permissive” group than either the “authoritarian” or the “authoritative.” However, no significant differences in self-reported reactions were found between the “authoritative” and “authoritarian” groups.

<sup>b</sup> 13-year-olds were significantly higher in self reported reactions than 11- and 12-year-olds. No other significant differences were found.

variable was the adolescents’ total score on the anticipated reactions measure. The three independent variables were: parenting style assigned according to the results of the cluster analysis (with three levels), adolescent age, and gender. A three-way factorial ANOVA was conducted to examine both main and interaction effects of parenting style, age, and gender on anticipated reactions.

The results demonstrated that there was a main effect of parenting style [ $F(2, 409) = 21.45, p < .001$ ] (Table 1). This result indicates that participants who perceive their mother to use permissive parenting techniques tended to demonstrate a greater propensity to anticipate a more intense negative reaction than did participants indicating an authoritative and authoritarian parenting style. Post hoc analysis using the Scheffe test indicated no differences in anticipated reactions between participants who described their mothers’ parenting style as either authoritative or authoritarian. In addition to the main effect of parenting style, there was a main effect of gender ( $F[1,4340] = 28.78, p < .001$ ) that indicated that males reported a greater propensity to anticipate that they would respond in a violent manner to the situations. There was also a main effect of age ( $F[3,434] = 5.52, p < .001$ ). Participants who were aged 13 years displayed significantly more negative reactions than did participants who were ages 11 or 12 years. When parenting style and gender were controlled, the main effect of age was diminished and no longer significant. Although assessed, none of the interactions achieved significance.

### Discussion

In the present study, our purpose was to extend the studies on parenting and violence by examining whether or not children raised under different parenting styles also differed in their reactions to hypothetical situations that could escalate to conflict and violence. Although we did not examine actual behavior, we did, in keeping with current techniques in this area of research, use the adolescent’s anticipated reaction to hypothetical situations.

The first objective of the study was to use responses of adolescents to classify parenting styles of their mothers. We found that parenting styles could be classified into three of the four categories identified by developmental theorists: authoritative, authoritarian, and permissive. Forty-one percent of parenting styles were classified as authoritative, 30% as authoritarian, and 29% as permissive. Thus, most adolescent participants perceived that their mothers provided a balance of control over their lives and involvement in their lives. According to many authors, authoritative parenting is the preferred parenting style and has been associated with more positive child-rearing outcomes such as psychological adjustment, school achievement, and fewer reports of problem behaviors [7]. The second largest group of mothers was classified by their adolescents as authoritarian. These participants perceived their mothers to be more controlling and less involved or responsive. A slightly smaller number of adolescent participants described their mothers as permissive, meaning that parental involvement in the adolescent's life outweighed control or supervision of activities.

None of the participants perceived their mothers to be low in both control and involvement, an indication of neglectful parenting. This finding might be attributed to the fact that mothers and their adolescents were recruited from a CBO that provided opportunities for social, personal, and career development. Mothers who enroll their children in the CBO might be more concerned about their child's well-being and more interested in providing a healthy environment. They are also willing to provide the time and support for the additional activities that accompany their child's participation in the CBO. It is unlikely that many mothers who exhibit little involvement in their children's lives would consider enrolling them in this type of program. Thus, it is not surprising that none of the responses could be classified as neglectful. The support of this proposition provides evidence for the validity of the measure used to classify parenting styles.

The primary objective of this study was to determine if adolescents' anticipated reactions to hypothetical situations that can provoke conflict and lead to violence varied by parenting style. Using analysis of variance, we found that adolescents who described their mothers as having a more permissive parenting style expressed more intense negative reactions toward the hypothetical situations than did adolescents who described their mothers as authoritative or authoritarian. This finding supports that of Steinberg et al. [8], who found that problem behaviors that lead to delinquency tended to decline over a 1-year period for adolescents raised in authoritative and authoritarian homes, but remained the same for those from permissive homes. Moreover, this finding can be interpreted in light of reported characteristics of permissive parents and their children. According to Baumrind [6], permissive parents tend to be inconsistent in their approaches to discipline, and their children are more likely to be impulsive, aggressive, and rebellious. Without consistent and adequate discipline, adolescents are more likely to have difficulty controlling their own feelings and setting reasonable limits for their behavior.

We did not find a difference between reports of reactions to the situations by adolescents from authoritative and authoritarian homes. Both parenting styles reflect a high level of control over the adolescent's behavior. Steinberg et al. [8] also demonstrated no difference in problem behaviors between adolescents raised in authoritative and authoritarian homes. But, they did find that adolescents raised in authoritarian homes reported an increase in somatic and internalizing symptoms over time. We did not explore other variables in this particular analysis, but it is possible that other aspects of the child's behavior might be needed to understand the relative

advantages of authoritative parenting over authoritarian parenting. With regard to protection from intense negative reactions, both styles of parenting seem to be equally effective.

We found that males were more likely than females to report that they would use a violent solution. These findings are consistent with other studies that show that males are more likely than females to commit violent acts [9]. Our findings add to these findings by raising the possibility that assessing reactions to hypothetical situations might be a method of identifying children prone to violent solutions. Our findings initially indicated that reactions differed by age. However, these differences were no longer statistically significant when controlling for gender and parenting style. We studied adolescents of a relatively narrow age range. Age differences might be more significant among a broader age range of adolescents.

### **Limitations**

When interpreting the results, it is important to note several limitations of this study. First, the data used in this analysis were not collected with the intent to study the association between parenting styles and violence, and thus may be inadequate to explain the association. The use of reports of parenting behavior from the adolescent's perspective represents another limitation of this study. There are discrepancies between mothers' and adolescents' reports of behavior, so findings may have been different had the mothers' reports been used. Another limitation of the research is that this sample was composed of participants who were all members of a CBO dedicated to serving youth from low-income communities. Mothers and adolescents who participate in activities offered through the CBO are not likely to represent the population of low-income families living in urban areas. The sample was further limited to the analysis of African-American participants and the results may not be representative of other ethnic groups.

### **Conclusions**

This study provides evidence that violence prevention programs for adolescents need to consider the role of the parents in developing intervention strategies. Because the behavior of an adolescent is reflective of years of parenting, program developers might consider intervening with families of younger children so that the benefits of parenting can accrue over time.

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