

## Managing Children's Friendships Through Interparental Relationships: Roles of Ethnicity and Friendship Context

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### **Abstract:**

Twenty African American and European American mothers of fourth-grade students reflected on strategies for managing children's friendships maintained across a variety of contexts. Ethnicity differentially located families within specific social contexts that yielded children's friendships, then informed social processes as they unfolded within these contexts. Maternal knowledge concerning children's friendships developed as a function of the types of relationships formed among parents encountered within different settings. Findings suggest that inter-parental relationships represent a key source of information about children's friendships. Yet, maternal opportunities to establish such relationships differ on the basis of both ethnicity and the nature of contexts in which children's friendships are maintained.

### **Article:**

The current study integrates theoretical and empirical work focusing on two distinct ways in which parents may impact their children's social well-being. The work of Parke (Parke & Buriel, 1998) and Ladd (Ladd, Le Sieur, & Profilet, 1996) focuses on understanding the manner in which parents may influence or manage children's relationships with peers. Coleman (1988) considered the role of social relationships among parents whose children are friends as a potential influence on children's well-being. We suggest that these interparental relationships serve as a mechanism through which parents become informed concerning their children's friendships, alerting them as to the appropriateness and necessity of intervening in these relationships. We focus on interparental relationships as a source of information about children's friendships and characteristics of friends' families during the middle childhood years. We consider the nature of interparental relationships and their role in relation to parents' knowledge concerning and strategies for managing children's relationships with friends by analyzing qualitative interview data from African American and European American mothers of fourth-grade children.

### ***Theoretical and Empirical Perspectives***

Direct (as opposed to indirect; see Parke & Buriel, 1998) parental influences on children's peer relationships are suggested when parents behave in ways specifically intended to influence children's relationships with peers. Theoretical and empirical work in this area has focused on (a) identifying the strategies used by parents to support or discourage children's friendship formation and maintenance and (b) linking parental use of such strategies with characteristics and qualities of children's friendships.

Ladd et al. (1996) proposed that parents may function as *designers, mediators, supervisors, and consultants* with respect to their children's friendships. Parents as designers influence the settings in which children spend time *and* come into contact with potential friends. Parents as mediators influence children's relationships with specific peers by introducing children to potential friends, arranging opportunities to interact with friends, or steering children away from undesirable social partners. Parents as supervisors watch over and direct children's

interactions with specific peers. Supervisory activities may be directive (parents observe children's interactions and intervene if there are problems), interactive (parents interact with children and playmates in an effort to facilitate positive interactions and prevent negative interactions), or monitoring activities (parents seek to obtain information about children's interactions with peers through a variety of substrategies such as observing children together, talking with children about friendships, or seeking information from other individuals such as teachers, other parents, and friends themselves). Parents as consultants use conversations with children as a way to communicate with children about friendships. The current study uses Ladd et al.'s conceptualization of parental involvement strategies as an organizational framework for describing how parents think about and behave with respect to their children's friendships.

Variations in use of strategies described by Ladd have been linked with both the quantity and the quality of preschool-aged children's peer relationships (Ladd et al., 1996). Other researchers who have focused on parental involvement in peer relationships during the adolescent years have reported that parents of adolescents have considerable knowledge about their children's day-to-day peer interactions and activities and that greater parental involvement in and knowledge of adolescents' friendships is linked with a number of indicators of social competence and friendship quality (Knoester, Haynie, & Stephens, 2006; Mounts, 2001, 2002; Updegraff, Madden-Derdich, Estrada, Sales, & Leonard, 2002).

### *Interparental Relationships as a Parental Involvement Resource*

Coleman's (1988) work also is relevant to the study of parental involvement in children's friendships. Coleman's interests focused on the nature of parents' relationships with their children's friends' parents and, to a lesser extent, these friends themselves, as fulfilling a variety of functions that *benefit* children. Coleman's conceptualization of *intergenerational* or *social network closure* emphasized the strength of social ties between network parents. In short, Coleman expressed interest in the potential benefits to children when "parents' friends are the parents of their children's friends" (Coleman, p. S106). Coleman viewed such relationships as social structures that facilitated the development of social capital, relationships among persons that "facilitate productive activity" (Coleman, p. S101). We use the term *closure relationships* in a manner that is consistent with Coleman's writings to refer to social connections between parents whose children are friends.

Interparental relationships are a potential tool that parents may utilize when seeking to influence their children's friendships. For example, parents may be more likely to encourage children's friendships with peers whose parents are known to them. Parents may also increase or decrease supervisory/monitoring efforts on the basis of the extent to which they have knowledge of and trust in network parents.

The role of closure relationships with respect to parental involvement in children's friendships may also vary according to the developmental stage in which friendships develop. During the preschool years, children's friendship formation is highly constrained by the extent to which parents know each other and are willing to let children spend time together. As children grow older and spend less time in the company of their parents, the nature and importance of closure relationships likely changes.

We propose that closure relationships may play a particularly important role during the middle childhood years. Middle childhood is distinct with respect to two factors that are highly relevant to the study of parental management of children's friendships. First, it is during the middle childhood years that spending time with peers outside of the company of parents becomes a near universal experience. Dramatic increases in the percentage of social interactions with same-age peers occur during the middle childhood years (Higgins & Parsons, 1983). Second, the role of parents with respect to children's friendships during middle childhood is reduced compared to that in the early childhood years when children's social interactions are typically supervised by parents and other adults, but not so little as in adolescence (Brown, 1990). With entry into formal schooling and increased access to extracurricular activities during the middle childhood years come opportunities for children to maintain friendships of which their parents may not even be aware.

As a result of these changes, parental involvement in children's friendships simultaneously becomes more difficult for parents to demonstrate and more likely to impact the well-being of children during the middle childhood years. As children's friendships first move outside of the direct supervision of their parents, intergenerational closure relationships may come to play an increasingly important role in providing parents information about their children's peer relationships as well as influence with respect to such relationships. The strategies utilized by parents may also change, likely becoming less overt and more focused on maintaining awareness through observation and consultation. Yet surprisingly, there has been no explicit effort to understand the role of intergenerational closure relationships with respect to parental strategies for managing children's peer relationships.

### *Ethnicity and Social Class*

Ethnicity may play a role in shaping both the nature of children's friendships and the roles that parents may play with respect to such relationships. Mounts (2004) found ethnic differences in the extent to which parents used specific management strategies (i.e., European American parents consulting with their children more than African American or Latino American parents) and that ethnicity moderated associations between parental management and substance use (i.e., parental management strategies were stronger predictors of delinquency among European American than among African American or Latino American adolescents).

Research considering the role of ethnicity with respect to parental involvement in peer relationships and social network closure has been almost exclusively quantitative in nature. This work has typically controlled for social class statistically while focusing on understanding the role of ethnicity. Lareau (2000a, 2002), however, has explicitly examined the role of social class in shaping (a) parental socialization strategies that structure children's leisure and everyday activities and (b) the types of social connections formed by parents.

We were particularly interested in the intersection of ethnicity and social class as they together created distinctive social locations for parents as well as systems of cultural meanings, values, and beliefs. This approach acknowledges the ways in which race, ethnicity, and social class are intertwined within contemporary American society. Ethnic minority individuals or families have, on average, lower educational attainment, lower income, and lower occupational prestige than European American individuals or families (Krieger, Williams, & Moss, 1997; Oliver & Shapiro, 2006). In addition, generations of systematic discrimination and institutionalized racism have resulted in a social and economic system within which minority and majority individuals equivalent in educational credentials may differ vastly in the supposed sequelae of such credentials (e.g., income, occupational prestige, wealth) (Oliver & Shapiro). In short, indicators of "social class" are not necessarily equivalent across ethnic groups. Given concerns such as these, some researchers (Cole & Omari, 2003; Collins, 1998; O'tiller, 1998) have suggested that rather than impose an artificial equivalence of groups, a richer understanding of the meaning of ethnicity and social class as it is expressed within the lives of individuals is gained through approaches that explicitly acknowledge the intertwined nature of these two factors and seek to understand how they work together to shape experiences. We take this approach in the current study.

### *The Contexts of Children's Friendships*

One manner in which the intertwined constructs of ethnicity and social class may come to be linked with closure relationships is through variation in children's access to the various contexts within which children's friendships are established and maintained. Children from different ethnic groups and socioeconomic backgrounds vary in the extent to which they maintain friendships within various contexts. African American children are more likely than European American children to maintain friendships with same-age relatives, whereas European American children are more likely to maintain friendships within the contexts of school, neighborhood, child care, and extracurricular activities. Economic advantage is linked with more friendships within school, neighborhood, and extracurricular activities and fewer within the context of relatives as friends (Fletcher, Troutman, Gruber, Long, & Hunter, 2006). Middle-class parents are more likely to structure children's leisure activities and to cultivate social connections outside the extended family (Lareau, 2002). Levels of extracurricular involvement are higher among European American and more affluent children and

adolescents (Lareau, 2002; McNeal, 1998), making it more likely that children from these backgrounds will form friendships within this context.

Differential access to the contexts in which children's friendships are maintained in turn contributes to the likelihood that parents of children who are friends will come to form relationships with one another. Some friendship contexts (e.g., friendships with same-age relatives) are defined by the presence of strong closure relationships. Ethnic minority families may be particularly reliant on friendships with kin and, as a result, may create kin-based social networks that have implications for children's well-being (Burton & Janett, 2000; Stack & Burton, 1993). Other contexts (e.g., schools) provide few opportunities for parents of children who are friends to get to know one another. Working within a single context (school), Lareau (2000a) reported that economically advantaged parents were more likely to maintain relationships with their children's friends' parents, with such relationships constituting a key source of social capital supporting academic success.

## **METHOD**

### ***Participants***

The current investigation was a part of a larger, mixed method longitudinal project that followed 404 elementary-aged children and their mothers through the third, fourth, and fifth grades. The focus on mothers was based on research indicating that mothers are more likely to be responsible for the day-to-day care and supervision of children (Helms & Demo, 2005; Lareau, 2000b). Accordingly, mothers are more likely than fathers to be knowledgeable about and involved in their children's friendships. A subset of 20 mothers (10 African American and 10 European American) involved in the quantitative study participated in qualitative interviews. These mothers were selected so as to represent a range of child and family characteristics but with an understanding that such characteristics would not be balanced across groups. We first identified mothers who fit into categories defined by family ethnicity, child gender, family structure, and social class, with an eye toward interviewing mothers from each group. Mothers were selected to be as similar as possible to the sought after demographic profiles for each group but with an understanding that not all profiles would be represented in the final sample.

The final qualitative sample consisted of mothers of three African American boys, seven African American girls, six European American boys, and four European American girls. Social class groupings placed participants in the following categories as defined by Hollingshead (1975): upper class ( $n = 2$ ), upper middle class ( $n = 10$ ), middle class ( $n = 6$ ), and lower middle class ( $n = 2$ ). The participants represented a predominantly middle-class sample with 80% ( $n = 16$ ) of mothers from middle-class and upper middle—class backgrounds. Seventy percent of mothers ( $n = 14$ ) were married to participating children's biological or adoptive fathers, 20% ( $n = 4$ ) were single mothers, and 10% ( $n = 2$ ) were single mothers residing with nonrelated adults (one grandmother, one unrelated man). Mothers' educational levels ranged from one mother who had not completed high school to one who had obtained a graduate degree with a modal level of some college. Resident fathers' educational levels ranged from one father who had not completed high school to four who had obtained graduate degrees with a modal level of having received a high school diploma.

Given our interest in understanding the potential roles of ethnicity and social class as working together to create contexts that might shape the manner in which mothers thought about and demonstrated involvement in their children's friendships, we were less interested in balancing the distribution of social class across ethnicity than in ensuring that this distribution was reflective of that observed in the quantitative sample, which had been intended to mirror the community from which it was drawn. Mean Hollingshead scores did not differ between the qualitative participants and the quantitative participants who did not participate in qualitative interviews,  $t(369) = -4.19, p = .68$ . Within both the qualitative sample and the quantitative samples, European American families had higher mean social class scores than African American families, qualitative,  $t(18) = 2.25, p = .04$ ; quantitative,  $t(369) = 8.3Z, p < .01$ . Comparatively few participants from either ethnic group were represented at the extremes of lower or upper class. Although the overwhelming majority of participants fell within the middle-class categories, it was across these categories that the intertwined nature of ethnicity and social class was most evident. Whereas African American families were represented at all three levels of middle-class

categories (within the qualitative sample two lower middle class, four middle class, three upper middle class), European American families were disproportionately likely to be represented at the high end of these groupings (no lower middle class, one middle class, seven upper middle class). Such distributions speak to the intertwined nature of ethnicity and social class within the community from which this sample was drawn and to the futility of attempting to disentangle these variables.

Families resided in a variety of neighborhoods and homes that reflected the socioeconomic characteristics of the sample. Most families owned or rented single family homes that were modest in size and located in well maintained, safe neighborhoods. Several families resided in larger homes located in more affluent neighborhoods, three occupied mobile homes, and one resided in an apartment complex. Target children all attended public elementary schools.

### *Procedure*

For the purpose of the current effort, we focused on qualitative interviews conducted during fall of the 2002 — 2003 school year when children were in the fourth grade. Interviews were conducted in families' home by a matched ethnicity graduate student interviewer and an undergraduate research assistant. One research assistant in each interviewing pair was always a woman. During one portion of the audiotaped, semistructured interviews, mothers were asked to respond to a series of questions focused on (a) approaches to managing children's friendships, (b) whether approaches to managing children's friendships varied on the basis of the context(s) in which friendships were maintained, (c) mothers' roles in helping their children to develop friendships with specific children, (d) mothers' roles in helping children to maintain specific friendships, and (e) mothers' roles in discouraging specific friendships in their children's lives. As an example of how we elicited details concerning each of these topics, we provide the initial questions and suggested probes for mothers' roles in discouraging specific friendships. Mothers were first asked "Parents may want to discourage or end some of their child's friendships. Are there times when you have either discouraged or ended one of (target child's) friendships?" If mothers responded in the affirmative, they were then asked a series of questions about such experiences including "What are some of the reasons and/or circumstances under which you discouraged or ended X's friendships?," "What kinds of things have you done to discourage or end X's friendships?," and "Give an example of when you have discouraged or ended one of X's friendships. Describe what happened." Additional probes focused on eliciting examples, details, or elaborations of mothers' underlying motivations for their actions. Mothers were given \$50 for participating in interviews.

### *Data Analytic Strategy*

We describe our analytic strategy by discussing in turn our three (interrelated) levels of analysis; coding, data organization and interpretation, and model development. These analyses included multiple strategies to generate meaning, with such strategies being iterative and reciprocal (see Huberman & Miles, 1994). The interpretative process was also supported by memoing and documenting analytic procedures and evolving interpretations (i.e., an audit trail). The focus of our investigation included both a broader interest in how mothers managed children's friendships during middle childhood and an emphasis on the influence of ethnicity and social class on how mothers viewed and developed their relationships with children's friends' parents while managing children's friendships.

*Coding.* We developed codes focusing on (a) types of involvement strategies described by mothers, (b) mothers' expressed concerns or goals as they related to the use of these involvement strategies, and (c) contexts in which friendships were maintained.

We coded maternal involvement according to the categories proposed by Ladd (designer, mediator, supervisor, consultant; Ladd et al., 1996) with the supervisor category further subdivided to identify directive strategies, interactive strategies, and monitoring strategies. Involvement subcodes were added focusing on the roles of context, maternal intent, and the specific forms of strategies as they fell within some of Ladd's superordinate categories. Subcodes added to the designer category focused on identifying the social ecologies that might be entered into by mothers with the intent of locating potential friends for their children. In this case, ecologies

were identified with reference to empirical work (Fletcher et al., 2006) that has identified seven distinct contexts of children's friendships: school, neighborhood, child care, place of worship, extracurricular activities, relatives as friends, and children of family friends. Codes for the remaining maternal management strategies were developed in an emergent fashion from mothers' descriptions of their involvement experiences. Specifically, subcodes were added to the mediator, consultant, and directive and interactive supervision categories to clarify maternal intent in the utilization of these involvement strategies. This approach resulted in five mediator subcodes that focused on (a) helping the child to locate potential friends or initiating interactions with specific friends, (b) arranging or encouraging opportunities for children to interact with friends, (c) regulating or discouraging children's friendship choices or interactions, (d) working outside the mother-child relationship to change the quality or nature of an existing friendship, and (e) allowing or permitting interactions although not explicitly encouraging or discouraging them. The monitoring/supervision category was elaborated through addition of subcodes focusing on the specific source of information (e.g., observation, child, school personnel, inter-generational closure relationships).

We developed codes for why mothers reported engaging in specific involvement strategies (e.g., safety concerns, desires to build children's social skills, or to promote academic achievement). The development of these codes was emergent, again drawn from mothers' descriptions of their involvement experiences. These codes were not intended to be the primary focus of the analyses but rather to inform our understanding of the motivations underlying maternal involvement strategies.

Finally, because of our own interest in the contexts of children's friendships, we developed codes for the contexts in which specific friendships were maintained. Friendship context codes were developed a priori (Fletcher et al., 2006) but were consistent with mothers' descriptions of the social locations in which children's friendships were formed and maintained.

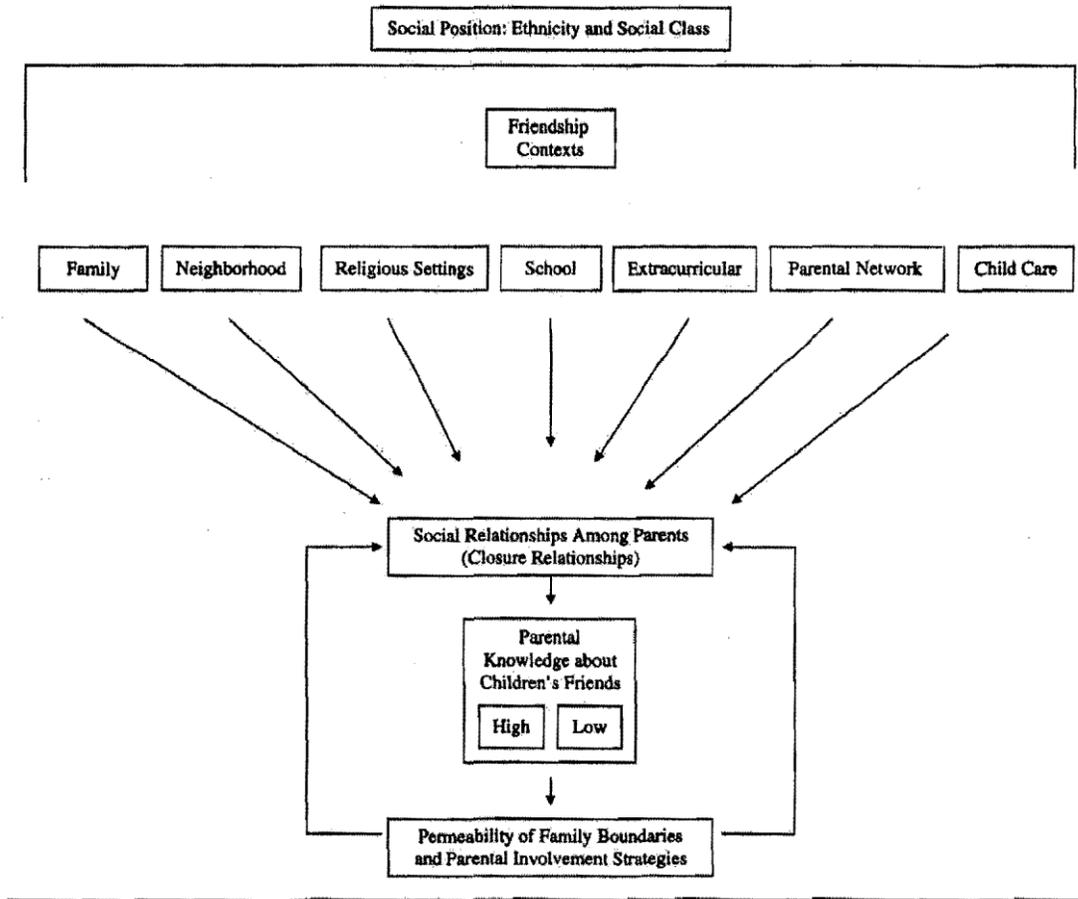
For both theory-based and emergent constructs, the coding template was refined using a subset of 10 transcripts. Codes were modified through an iterative process wherein the first two authors engaged in multiple independent readings of transcripts, meeting between each round of readings to add codes, delete codes, or clarify code definitions so as to accurately reflect the experiences of mothers. Reliability of the final set of codes was verified by having each of the first two authors code all 20 transcripts using the final coding protocol and then comparing coding. Assignment of codes to transcript segments was highly reliable across these two coders. Validity of codes was suggested by the high degree of similarity between final codes and the theoretical and empirical (Ladd et al., 1996) work upon which they were based.

*Data organization and interpretation.* The second level of analysis utilized a qualitative software program (Qualrus; Brent, Slusarz, & Thompson, 2002) to group coded sections (i.e., maternal involvement strategies, maternal concerns and contexts of friendship, and the interaction of these two sets of codes) and how such groupings varied by ethnicity. Using a cross-case analysis approach (case-oriented and variable-oriented), grouped sections of code were analyzed to capture emerging themes as they related to variations in involvement strategies (Huberman & Miles, 1994). Themes focusing on ethnic variation were then verified by manual counts focusing on the number of times mothers from different backgrounds mentioned a specific involvement strategy, concern or goal, or friendship context. Given the intertwined nature of ethnicity and social class, we did not attempt to disentangle purported "effects" of these two variables but rather considered social class as an integral component of occupying the social position defined by ethnicity.

*Model development.* The final level of analysis focused on developing a model to describe how friendship context and maternal involvement strategies worked together in a manner that explained both similarities and differences grounded in the intertwined characteristics of race or ethnicity and social class. We attempted to clarify these similarities and differences through a series of steps involving multiple readings of transcript sections separated by ethnicity, group meetings among all authors to clarify the emerging picture of maternal involvement efforts, and a series of exercises wherein we individually wrote "stories" to capture the patterns of experiences as they both unified and separated mothers. As the pattern of connections among themes began to

emerge, we then developed and refined the final model (Figure 1) described below. This stage of analysis had two aims: (a) to build on and expand current theoretical understanding and empirical research concerning maternal involvement in children's friendships during the middle childhood years (an approach consistent with grounded theory; Strauss & Corbin, 1994) and (b) to help guide us in the development of a narrative to describe such involvement. We present our findings using this model as an organizational framework.

FIGURE 1. INFLUENCES ON THE FORMATION OF INTERPARENTAL (CLOSURE) RELATIONSHIPS.



## RESULTS

### *Overview of the Model*

The focus of our investigation evolved over the course of analysis from a broader interest in how mothers managed children's friendships during middle childhood to an emphasis on how the intertwined demographic characteristics of ethnicity and socioeconomic background had implications for the ways in which these mothers *viewed* and developed their relationships with children's friends' parents in the course of such involvement. When asked to reflect upon their own involvement in children's friendships, mothers' responses articulated the interplay between their own beliefs, goals, and concerns with respect to their children's friendships and their knowledge of and comfort with the parents of these friends. In addition, Mothers' reflections highlighted the manner in which their own individual experiences unfolded against a backdrop of social contexts that reflected both similarities and differences across families whose racial and socioeconomic backgrounds were intertwined. Ethnicity and social class worked together to create social positions that channeled families into specific social contexts that yielded children's friendships, then informed social processes as they unfolded within these, contexts. Maternal knowledge concerning children's friendships developed as a function of the types of relationships formed among the parents encountered within contexts, with the nature of such relationships varying both within and across contexts and reflecting social position differences in the strategies used to support and restrict children's social relationships. Ultimately, Mothers' knowledge concerning children's friends' and friends' families, or the lack of such knowledge, was maintained through a reciprocal system involving knowledge, the permeability of boundaries between families, and the types of strategies mothers used to both support and discourage children's social relationships. This model is

depicted in Figure 1 and is explored in further detail in the sections that follow. In describing the findings that emerged, we call attention to patterns of responses that differentiated the more affluent but still predominantly middle-class European American mothers from the African American mothers whose middle-class backgrounds were somewhat more varied.

### *Friendship Contexts*

Mothers spoke of children's friendships as they were maintained within the contexts of neighborhood, school, relatives as friends, and children of mothers' own friends. The intertwined constructs of ethnicity and social class positioned children differently within three additional contexts: religious settings, child-care settings, and extracurricular activities. Mothers who discussed children's friendships as they were maintained within all three of these Settings were, without exception, affluent and European American. Religious and child-care settings, however, were mentioned so infrequently that we cannot reasonably conclude that there were systematic differences in the extent to which African American versus European American children maintained friendships within these settings.

As children established and maintained friendships, the contexts in which these friendships were formed were inextricably linked with the types of relationships mothers formed, or did not form, with one another. We observed considerable within- and across-context variation in the nature of such relationships. Friendship contexts could be grouped into those that supported the development and maintenance of interparental relationships, a single context in which children's friendships flourished without the necessity of interparental relationships, and those in which how interparental relationships were perceived and managed differed for mothers who occupied different ethnic and socioeconomic positions.

*Contexts supportive of the development of closure relationships.* Within the contexts of family as friends, church, children of parents' own friends, and extracurricular activities, mothers emphasized the close and constant nature of their own relationships with children's friends and these friends' parents. Relationships were defined in terms of both quantity of time spent together, "as cousins we're always together a lot" (*Carol, upper middle—class European American mother*), and the closeness of these relationships. One mother compared her son's relative as friend to his other friends and concluded, "I guess he's more like my son I would discipline him more ... you see a more mother type to the family" (*Karen, upper middle—class African American mother*).

In the contexts of family as friends, church, and children of parents' own friends, parents' relationships with one another typically preceded children's friendships. Mothers knew the parents of their children's friends who were their own relatives and who shared a familial history. There were few unknowns in these relationships and mothers exhibited considerable comfort within them. This comfort was also *evident* in communities in which families resided across generations, "I just know all these parents ... A lot of them I went to school with and my husband went to school with" (*Elizabeth, upper middle—class European American mother*). Within religious settings, mothers spoke of the importance of children's friendships in terms of maintaining connections to their religious institutions, "I don't think Steve would go to youth group if Robert didn't go" (*Elizabeth, upper middle—class European American mother*).

In contrast, intergenerational closure relationships within extracurricular settings (discussed only by more affluent European American mothers) developed subsequent to or concurrent with friendships among children. These social relationships developed when entire networks of children and parents met during a specific activity and subsequently forged social relationships,

We have took a more active role in that relationship by meeting Luke's parents, spending social time with Luke's parents, and ... in doing so, we gained two more friends ourselves Luke has an older sister who plays ball with Rachel, Dave's older sister. So it's a very comfortable friendship for all of us ... In fact, Luke's dad is Rachel's baseball, softball coach. So, it's a very comfortable relationship (*Sandra, middle-class European American mother*).

Extracurricular involvement served as an important source of social relationships for both parents and children. These relationships yielded information concerning what went on in children's friends' homes and whether families shared important values and belief systems. This information was also available for friendships with the children of family friends, relatives as friends, and friendships maintained within religious settings. Within these settings, the "comfortable relationships" were what kept mothers informed about what went on within friendships and whether a given friendship was to be nurtured or discouraged.

*Neighborhood friendships:; Barriers to closure relationships.* Within the neighborhood context, mothers' reflections concerning their involvement in children's friendships contained few references to their own relationships with the parents of children's friends. It appeared that within the neighborhood much of children's play was spontaneous and occurred outside of homes. Although geographic proximity made it easy for neighborhood children to spend time together, this ease of access made it unnecessary for parents to establish relationships with one another.

We just say hi and talk in the yard. We don't have ... I mean, we're friendly and everything ... We don't travel in the same ... I mean, they're not involved in sports or any outside things like that (*Courtney, upper-class European American mother*).

In the absence of information from and about other adults, mothers who wished to learn about children's neighborhood friendships relied on information obtained from direct observations of children at play, observations frequently made from the front porch or a window, "I am sitting on the porch right there watching about 20 kids" (*Renee, lower middle—class African American mother*). Under such circumstances, mothers felt informed concerning the nature of children's interactions with friends and were accepting of neighborhood peers. Because mothers often knew little about what went on in the homes of their neighbors, they were forced to rely on rumor and hearsay as sources of this information: "I don't particularly like her spending any time in their house 'cause ..., they keep a lot of stuff going on ... rumors ... I just prefer for them to stay outside the house and play 'cause I definitely don't want them in nobody's house" (*Gloria, middle-class African American mother*). The resulting mistrust of neighborhood parents resulted in neighborhood children sometimes being seen as less desirable playmates than their peers from other contexts, "the girls from school, you know, have a little more training they have a lot more self-discipline than the ones that are right here at home" (*Gloria, middle-class African American mother*).

Suspicious concerning the appropriateness of neighborhood friends were handled differently by mothers who occupied different social positions. Proactive versus reactive involvement strategies distinguished African American versus European American mothers, respectively. African American mothers emphasized the importance of screening and supervising children's interactions so as to make sure that problems did not occur. In contrast, European American mothers spoke of reacting to neighborhood friendships that did not work out. "We did end a relationship that Dave had with a neighborhood child, because the relationship had become dangerous, very unhealthy" (*Sandra, middle-class European American mother*).

*School friendships: Variations in approaches to closure relationships.* In some cases, children's friendships flourished within an initial setting but then faltered when efforts were made to extend contact outside of that context. In the case of children's friendships that began in school or within child-care settings, children spent considerable time outside of the company of their mothers. Under such circumstances, friendships emerged with children who were relatively unknown to mothers. It was only when children (or mothers) wished to extend these friendships outside of the school context that parents had to become involved.

Mothers from different social positions discussed their children's school friendships and the nature of their own contact with the parents of these friends differently. These differences reflected variations in mothers' perspectives concerning the functions of interparental relationships in their lives and those of their children. African American mothers viewed parent-to-parent contact as a necessary tool for bridging geographic distances between children. Their approach to orchestrating out-of-school contacts between children was

cautious and highly ritualized. Contact outside of school was not permitted unless parents from both families approved it: "some of them, I haven't met the parents ... I don't know where they live, I don't know if the parents want her over or not ... I haven't met her, I don't think you should go over there" (*Gennette, upper-class African American mother*).

One mother discussed the procedure *she* followed to make contact with the parents of her daughter's school friends:

Momma, can I share ray phone number? Uh-uh, don't give my home phone number out ... their nest *approach* will be to ask me can I go over such and such? Nnnn, you can't go over there, I don't know their momma and daddy. They usually end up getting the person's phone number and their mom's name and they get them to call me ...then their mom usually end up coming over here to meet me and she'll bring her, uh, bring her daughter over *and* usually she, they usually have kids, they with 'em too so I get to meet all the kids so they come over and we sit and talk, talk about 30 minutes to an hour while the kids go play, but then I'm okay ... then I go visit with her and then you, then you can go over spend a couple hours at a time (*Gloria, lower middle—class African American mother*).

Such descriptions reflected the proactive and cautious nature of African American mothers with respect to their children's friendships. Mothers felt that such caution was necessary to protect children from potentially dangerous influences within the peer group, "I kinds like pay attention to the friendships ... I just don't want them getting involved with the bad crowd" (*Renee, lower middle—class African American mother*). Yet, these highly ritualized procedures were not without their pitfalls. Primary among these was that some parents did not conform to the series of steps African American mothers felt were necessary prior to letting their children play in other children's homes. African American mothers made reference to overtures they made to other parents that were ignored.

He liked the little boy at school and they friends and he *was* an honor student too and so was Isaiah and I met the mother at a PTO meeting and introduced myself and told her I'd Like to get the two boys together and she said that would be nice. And she even asked for the number and I just sort of left it at that. I guess they just play at school (*Sylvia, middle-class African American mother*).

For African American mothers, the challenge inherent in school friendships involved the balance between protecting children from potentially dangerous peer influences while still promoting opportunities for social interactions.

In contrast, European American mothers expressed far less caution about extending children's school-based friendships outside of that context. In part, this difference may be accounted for by differences in the schools that African American children versus European American children attended. One European American mother reflected "I always tried to tell my children that they are lucky to have to be in such a small school where everybody knows each other, trust everybody. And there is not the drugs, the knives, the fights, I know that they had 2 or 3 fights each year" (*Elizabeth, upper middle—class European American mother*).

European American mothers viewed the parents of their children's friends not only just as bridges to potential social relationships for their children but also as potential sources of friendships for themselves. Mothers were comfortable allowing their children to spend time at friends' houses and inviting their children's friends into their own homes, perhaps because European American mothers were more likely to know children (and parents) from other community contexts as well (e.g., extracurricular activities). Yet European American mothers did not articulate many concerns regarding potential out-of-school interactions with school friends. Sometimes, the payoff of such openness was new (or renewed) social relationships for children and mothers alike:

They hit it off great ... their first week in second grade ... Christi came home and said her new best friend was Pam ... so they were really building their friendship before her mom and I got to be friends. I

wouldn't have been friends with Cathy if Christi hadn't been friends with Pam (*Gina, upper middle—class European American mother*).

Another mother recounted a pleasant surprise that resulted from one of her son's school friendships: "Now Chris met him in school ... and come to find out his dad and my husband had graduated school together" (*Elizabeth, upper middle—class European American mother*). Yet there were risks that accompanied mothers inviting new children into their homes.

The child actually came into our house and stole a few things, His brand new Nintendo, Game Boy Nintendo, and his games. Then showed up on the bus, a week later, bragging and told Dave how much money he got out of it when he sold it (*Sandra, middle-class European American mother*).

European American mothers' openness to the possibility of inviting school friends to visit their homes resulted in their looking somewhat more reactive than did African American mothers, one of whom commented "I don't want anybody to bring any problems to the house" (*Gennette, upper-class African American mother*).

### *Closure Relationships, Boundaries Permeability, and Maternal Involvement Strategies*

As we first considered the role of intergenerational closure in maternal management of children's friendships, we envisioned closure as a starting point from which mothers made decisions and engaged in activities designed to influence their children's peer relationships. Yet as we reflected on the words of these mothers, it became clear to us that such relationships were better conceptualized as one part of a reciprocal system involving the closeness of interparental relationships, maternal knowledge about what went on in the homes of children's friends, and the permeability of boundaries and types of involvement strategies that connected families. The intertwined constructs of ethnicity and social class and the contexts of children's friendships set in place a reciprocal system of varying amounts and types of contact with other parents.

African American mothers were less likely than European American mothers to know the parents of their children's friends in part because of differences in the likelihood that children would forge friendships within contexts that facilitated closure relationships. Extracurricular activities were an important source of friendships for affluent European American but not African American children during the middle childhood years. Yet, even within contexts that served a source of friendships for most children, such as school, we observed ethnic variation in how mothers viewed and approached relationships with their children's friends' parents. European American mothers were more likely than African American mothers to utilize children's friendships as a source of potential social partners for themselves. As a result of these social connections, European American mothers became more knowledgeable concerning children's friends and the families of these friends. This increased knowledge made mothers feel more comfortable with other families and the experiences their children would have in their company:

If there are people whose parents I feel like share the same values that we have as a family, then I do manage it a bit differently, I probably take a more, in some ways, take a more hands-off because I feel like when they go places, or do things, they are sharing the same values that we have. They are not going to take her to go see a movie that we probably would not go let her see (*Donna, upper middle—class European American mother*).

The more mothers knew about their children's friends and friends' families, the more comfortable they were having their children spend time with these individuals. In turn, more time spent together resulted in mothers accumulating even more knowledge about children and families, and so on. Greater contact among parents led to greater maternal knowledge, which in turn led to maternal involvement strategies that encouraged even more contact and stronger social connections. As a result, these mothers were able to obtain information about their children's friendships with relatively little effort.

In contrast, the more cautious and proactive nature of involvement strategies among African American mothers, in conjunction with a lack of consideration of network parents as potential social partners, resulted in these mothers having lower levels of knowledge about what went on in the homes of their children's friends. These lower levels of maternal knowledge led African American mothers to establish clear boundaries that separated families. African American mothers engaged in these strategies against a backdrop of concerns about safety and the influences of other families and peers that could undermine childrearing goals and place children at risk. These strategies also required that, in the absence of firsthand knowledge, African American mothers use indirect strategies to gain information about children's friendships and their acceptability.

## DISCUSSION

We explored how African American and European American mothers thought about and negotiated issues of involvement in their children's friendships as well as the role of their own relationships with the parents of their children's friends. Mothers occupying these two social positions differed in reports of children's friendships across different contexts and in how they managed children's and their own social relationships within these contexts. We discuss findings with respect to (a) how mothers from different backgrounds differed in the extent to which they reported children maintaining friendships based in extracurricular activities, (b) the extent to which mothers viewed the parents of children's friends as potential friendship partners for themselves, and (c) how ethnicity and social class converged within the day-to-day lives of participants to shape closure experiences.

Our findings are consistent with work indicating that children differ in systematic ways in the extent to which they have access to contexts that may yield friendship partners. Within our sample, only affluent European American mothers discussed children's friendships as being maintained within the context of extracurricular activities. This finding is consistent with a wide body of research indicating that levels of extracurricular involvement are higher among European American and more affluent children and adolescents (McNeal, 1998). Existing research has focused primarily on understanding variation in extracurricular participation as a function of resources available to families (i.e., social class), and, as Lareau (2002) argues, the childrearing goals of parents. Economically advantaged parents or European American parents may be more likely to use extracurricular activities to cultivate their children's development, and our work suggests that mothers may also view the extracurricular context in terms of the social opportunities it provides children.

The high likelihood that European American mothers would report extracurricular activities as a context for children's friendships had implications for the formation of closure relationships as well. European American mothers viewed the parents they met at extracurricular events as potential friends for themselves and spoke of strong closure relationships emerging within this context. Extracurricular contexts may be structured in ways that encourage the development of social relationships among parents who find themselves thrown together as they wait for ballet class to dismiss or cheer for their children's soccer team. Economic resources likely make possible extracurricular involvement among more affluent European American children and closure relationships emerge within the extracurricular setting.

Other differences between African American versus European American mothers may be better understood in terms of African American mothers' social networks being kin-based and drawing on long-standing intergenerational relationships (Burton & Jarrett, 2000; Johnson, 2000). Although African American families may show a great deal of flexibility in household boundaries and fictive transformations (Hunter & Taylor, 1998; Johnson), they may be more bounded against "external" relationships outside of these networks. Indeed, the highly ritualized and structured nature of interparental interactions reported by African American mothers with respect to the parents of their children's school friends may serve as precursors to the formation of closure relationships among African American parents and to the possible formation of relationship statuses that exceed friendship, that is, fictive kin relationships (Stack, 1974).

Although our sample was predominantly middle class, it was characterized by ethnic differences in the distribution of social class within the middle-class continuum, European American families were clustered at

the highest level of this continuum whereas African American families were distributed across the full range of lower middle—class, middle-class, and upper middle—class strata. Given the impossibility of untangling the constructs of ethnicity and social class in this investigation, we instead considered ways in which these intertwined factors shaped the daily life experiences of families. One way was through differential patterns of extracurricular involvement as discussed above. Another possibility lies in residential patterns experienced by mothers within our study.

The socioeconomic variation evident among African American families in our sample was reflected in the composition of the neighborhoods in which they lived. On the basis of historical patterns of racial residential segregation (Chafe, 1980), African American families are more likely to live in neighborhoods that reflect variability with respect to social class or in working-to middle-class neighborhoods adjacent to low-income neighborhoods (Aldeman, 2004; Dawkins, 2004; Doucett, 2000). Our observations confirmed such residential patterns within our own sample. African American families resided almost exclusively in older neighborhoods characterized by variation in home size and condition. In contrast, European American families lived either in large homes located in well maintained, new neighborhoods or in mobile homes located well outside of such neighborhoods. To the extent that exposure to more economically diverse neighborhoods and families represents an ecological risk, African American mothers may have been more vigilant about potential exposure to problematic peers with this vigilance reflecting either awareness of or anxieties about potential neighborhood-based risks.

African American mothers' more cautious stance with respect to their children's friendships and the formation of closure relationships may also reflect culturally informed relational processes rather than being driven by social class and residential patterns. African American mothers did not appear to lack confidence in the larger social networks in which they and their children were embedded. Rather, mothers appeared to be most concerned about outside influences that could derail what they were trying to accomplish at home. Still, the pattern of findings reported here is consistent with other work indicating that European American parents are more likely to form the social connections represented by closure relationships (Bould, 2003; Sampson, Morenoff, & Earls, 1999).

The current study represents the first ever conducted considering how mothers from two distinct ethnic backgrounds utilize relationships with their children's friends' parents to manage children's friendships and potentially develop their own social networks. Yet this effort was not without limitations. Our decision to interview only mothers provided a limited window on the processes at work here. A different picture might have emerged had we included fathers or other caregivers. We focused on just two ethnic groups, and it is likely that the patterns described here might not be representative of the experiences of families from other ethnic and socioeconomic backgrounds. We made an explicit decision to consider how ethnicity and social class worked together to shape mothers' management of their children's friendships. Yet our small sample size and its homogeneity in social class are also limitations of this effort. Researchers should involve larger samples that represent a wider range of social class backgrounds to consider how ethnicity and social class may exert independent influences. We also recognize that maternal involvement patterns and the likelihood that mothers will form closure relationships may be impacted by factors such as child gender, family religiosity, immigration history, and residential mobility, to name a few. Although consideration of such issues was well beyond the scope of the current project, these remain important factors to be studied.

Parents in contemporary America are increasingly urged to keep track of their children's activities and associates by engaging in active monitoring behaviors. Yet rarely do we hear mention of the role of interparental relationships in keeping parents informed and in helping them to generate new and more effective parenting strategies. This study represents a valuable extension of existing research focusing on parental management of children's friendships. These mothers tell us that their management strategies do not occur in a social vacuum. To fully understand how mothers think about and manage their own and their children's relationships, we must take into account the diverse physical, and demographic contexts forming the backdrop against which these relationships are negotiated.

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