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Beyond parenting practices: Extended kinship support and the academic adjustment of African-American and European-American teens

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Abstract

This study examined adolescents' perceptions of parenting practices and extended kinship support in relation to academic adjustment for 104 African American and 60 European American 9th and 10th graders (14 and 15 year olds). For African-American teens, parental acceptance was associated with school values, teacher bonding, and work orientation. Higher levels of behavioral control and lower levels of psychological control were associated with a stronger work orientation. After accounting for the demographic variables and the three parenting practices, higher levels of extended kinship support related to stronger school values, higher teacher bonding, and a stronger work orientation. For European-American teens, parental acceptance related to academic adjustment, including stronger school values, higher teacher bonding, and a stronger work orientation. European-American adolescents with stronger extended kinship networks reported higher teacher bonding and a stronger work orientation. Results indicate the importance of extended kinship support for both African-American and European-American adolescents.

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African-American and European-American teens

Parenting practices are associated with various aspects of adolescents' academic adjustment. Examining the broader context of the family beyond parents, however, is also important for understanding youth adjustment, especially for African-American adolescents. Extended kinship support has been characterized as a key adaptive strategy and family resource for African Americans (Demo & Cox, 2000; Johnson, 2000; Taylor, 2000). Yet, there is a limited amount of research that examines the associations between extended kinship relationships and youth adjustment. The present study investigated kinship support and the three parenting practices of acceptance, behavioral control, and psychological control in relation to academic adjustment for a group of African-American and European-American adolescents.

Parenting practices

Three essential dimensions of parenting that relate to healthy adolescent development are acceptance (warm, loving and supportive relationship between adolescents and their parents), behavioral control (regulation of adolescents' behavior via monitoring and supervision on a consistent basis), and low levels of psychological control (shaping behaviors through guilt, anxiety induction and love withdrawal) (Barber, 1997; Barber & Olsen, 1997). According to Barber (1997), these three forms of parenting provide essential experiences for the basic developmental needs of children and teens. Examining the independent associations of discrete parenting practices with adolescent adjustment is especially relevant within ethnic families because parenting styles may not have the same effects for adolescents of differing ethnic backgrounds (Steinberg, Mounts, Lamborn, & Dornbusch, 1991).

Only a few studies have simultaneously examined all three parenting practices for both African-American and European-American adolescents. In a study with a large, multiethnic sample of high school students from Wisconsin and California, 8700 teens reported on perceptions of parental acceptance, behavioral control, and psychological control (Gray & Steinberg, 1999). A composite academic competence score combined self-reported grades and academic self-concept. Parental acceptance and behavioral control were positively associated, and psychological control negatively associated, with academic competence, with small to medium effect sizes. This study did not test for differences between ethnic groups.

Herman, Dornbusch, Herron, and Herting (1997) examined a large multiethnic sample of almost 3000 teens from six California high schools. The sample included 136 African-American teens and 1668 European-American teens. Students who reported high levels of parental acceptance and behavioral control, and low levels of psychological control, reported higher grades and higher educational expectations. When examined over a 1-year period, behavioral control emerged as the strongest predictor of adolescent grades. All race by parenting practices interactions were nonsignificant, suggesting that these associations were similar for the African-, Asian-, Latino-, and European-American teens included in the study.

Using a smaller sample of both African American (75) and European-American (80) adolescents from the Midwest, Bean, Bush, McKenry, and Wilson (2003) examined the relations of parental acceptance, behavioral control and psychological control with adolescent grades.

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