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## Examining the Link between Neighborhood Context and Parental Messages to their Adolescent Children About Violence

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### Abstract

**Purpose**—Living in violent neighborhoods has been shown to alter adolescent's social-cognitions and increase aggressive behavior. A similar process may also occur for parents and result in parental support of aggressive behavior. This research examines the influence of perceived neighborhood violence and neighborhood collective efficacy on parents' attitudes toward violence and the messages they give their adolescent children about how to resolve interpersonal conflict.

**Method**—These data come from 143 African-American parents and their adolescent children recruited from 3 inner-city middle schools to participate in a parenting intervention. Models were fit using structural equation modeling in *Mplus*.

**Results**—Contrary to expectations, exposure to neighborhood violence was not predictive of either aggressive attitudes or conflict solutions for parents or adolescents. Rather, a mixed effect was found for neighborhood collective efficacy, with higher perceived neighborhood collective efficacy related to less violent attitudes for adolescents but not parents. Collective efficacy also predicted the messages that parents gave their adolescents about interpersonal conflict, with higher collective efficacy related to messages that were less supportive of violence.

**Conclusion**—Parent and adolescent perception of neighborhood collective efficacy influences the messages that adolescents receive about interpersonal conflict resolution. This suggests that for parents living in violent neighborhoods their appraisal of the neighborhood is more important in shaping conflict resolution messages than parents' own experiences with violence. Parent and

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family-based programs to prevent youth violence need to address neighborhood factors that influence the messages adolescents receive about how to resolve conflict.

### Keywords

Adolescents; Violence; Parenting; Collective Efficacy; Parent/child communications

For many urban adolescents and their families, repeated exposure to neighborhood violence is a common experience. Studies suggest that over 80% of youth living in urban environments have witnessed violence and that over 70% have been victims of this violence [1]. Not surprisingly, some researchers have called the environments these families live in “urban war zones”, as these violent environments have consequences for both the development of healthy parenting and adolescent outcomes [2]. Exposure to neighborhood violence has been linked to higher rates of depression, anxiety, Posttraumatic Stress Disorder (PTSD), sleep disturbances, academic difficulties, antisocial behavior, aggressive behavior, and substance use in youth [1,3,4]. For parents, exposure to neighborhood violence is related to poorer ratings of overall health, higher rates of smoking, as well as decreased rates of physical activity and quality sleep [5].

Early adolescence may represent a particularly vulnerable time, as youth exposure to violence may heighten as time spent in the company of peers increases while at the same time parental supervision decreases. Parents and other family caregivers can help to buffer the negative effects of violence exposure and protect youth from violence involvement [6–8]. In fact, parents represent a particularly important resource for younger adolescents as they rely more on parents for assistance in negotiating their expanding independence. Yet, little is known about the types of messages parents give to their adolescent children regarding the violence they witness or how to resolve interpersonal conflict [9,10]. The current paper explores the link between neighborhood context among both parents and their adolescent children and the parental messages that the youth perceive about how to resolve interpersonal conflict.

### Neighborhood Context and Violence

Consistent with social cognitive theory [11], a series of studies has shown that youth who are exposed to neighborhood violence tend to develop an aggressively biased social-information processing style. Social information processing refers to the process by which individuals interpret ambiguous social situations, infer others’ motivations, and in turn make decisions about how to respond [12]. Studies have shown that youth exposed to neighborhood violence are more likely to perceive a situation as threatening and respond in ways that protect themselves from this perceived threat [13,14]. Yet there has been little complementary research on the effect of exposure to neighborhood violence on parents’ social cognitions. It is possible that parents’ exposure to neighborhood violence also influences their perception of conflict situations and the suggestions they make to their youth regarding how to respond. We hypothesized that parents who witness high levels of violence would be more likely to support their adolescent child’s involvement in violence and possibly endorse or encourage aggressive responses to provocation.

Support for this hypothesis comes from a series of studies illustrating that the association between aspects of the neighborhood social environment and residents’ attitudes about violence. One commonly measured neighborhood social environment construct is collective efficacy. Collective efficacy captures the ability of a neighborhood “to supervise and monitor the behavior of residents, particularly youths’ activities, and the presence of physical risk to residents” and has been associated with reduced youth involvement in risk

behaviors [15]. Neighborhood violence and collective efficacy are closely related, as neighborhoods with lower levels of collective efficacy tend to have higher levels of violence [16,17]. A recent study by Kelly and colleagues [18] found in neighborhoods with higher levels of collective efficacy residents were less likely to hold attitudes supporting violence.

## Parenting and Violence

Parents' attitudes about violence appear to have a strong influence on both children's attitudes about violence as well as their involvement in violent behavior. Studies have shown that adolescents' perceptions of their parents' attitudes toward fighting are a strong predictor of their own attitudes about violence [19,20]. In a study furthering this research, both parent and adolescent attitudes towards violence were predictive of aggressive behavior, fighting, and school suspension, with parent attitudes predicting behavior even after controlling for child attitudes [9]. Research on adolescent coping with neighborhood violence has shown that parental attitudes are transmitted to youth through parental coaching, or the advice that parents give their children about how to resolve interpersonal conflict [10]. They found that youth whose parents suggested an aggressive response to violence were more likely to handle situations with violence [10].

Ensuring nonviolent parental coaching represents an important youth violence prevention strategy. In line with the Center for Disease Control and Prevention's (CDC's) growing interest in the use of parent and family based programs to prevent youth violence [21], additional research is needed to better understand the specific types of recommendations parents are making to their children regarding the way in which to resolve interpersonal conflict.

This study advances the existing research on this topic by further examining potential predictors of parental messages about violence. Specifically, we examined the joint influence of exposure to neighborhood violence and neighborhood collective efficacy on the messages parents give about youth violence, as mediated by their effects on parent and youth attitudes about violence. We performed structural equation modeling (SEM) on data from parent and youth dyads in order to identify potential targets for public health interventions aiming to alter parent child communication regarding interpersonal violence. Based on both social-cognitive theory and the extant research on collective efficacy, we hypothesized that higher levels of violence exposure and lower levels of collective efficacy would result in both parents and youth holding more aggressive attitudes and youth receiving more messages that support the use of violence.

## METHODS

### Participants

Participants were 143 caregiver/adolescent dyads initially assessed in 2007–2008 as part of a baseline assessment for a randomized trial evaluating the effectiveness of an intervention to improve parental monitoring and school engagement. For the remainder of the paper the term parent will be used to refer to all caregivers. Parent/child dyads were recruited from 3 urban middle schools on probation for persistently dangerous status as mandated by the *No Child Left Behind Act of 2001*, and located in neighborhoods characterized by violence. Persistently dangerous status was awarded to schools in Maryland in which greater than 2.5% of the student population was expelled for serious offenses or suspended for 10 or more days. All three schools served significant numbers of low-income students with between 75.1% and 88.6% of students qualified for free or reduced school lunch during the study time period [22]. During this same period, the student body was 96.7% African American [22]. The communities that surround these schools were characterized by high

levels of unemployment and violent crime [23]. A random number generator was used to select a subset of parents from participants in the schools-based study for participation. The inclusion criteria were speaking English and being able to be contacted by phone. Contact was attempted with 276 parents, with interviews completed for 51.8% of caregiver/youth dyads. Participants provided written consent and assent for participation. Procedures for this study were approved by the Johns Hopkins School of Medicine and the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development IRBs.

### Assessment Design

During the baseline assessment, parents and adolescents separately completed audio-assisted questionnaires and were compensated with \$50 per family for participation. Although the majority of assessments were conducted in parents' homes, a small number of parents requested their interview take place at a community location (i.e., a private room at the child's school). Interviews were conducted by two trained research assistants.

### Measures

*Exposure to Neighborhood Violence* was assessed using 5 items from the Perceived Neighborhood Violence Scale [16], a self-report instrument assessing frequency of exposure to neighborhood violence. Parent and youth participants indicated how often the following events occurred in their neighborhood over the past year: a fight in which a weapon was used, a violent argument between neighbors, a gang fight, a sexual assault, and a robbery or mugging. Items were summed with a higher score indicating greater exposure to neighborhood violence. This measure was created for an urban African-American population and has been proven to be highly reliable [24].

*Neighborhood Collective Efficacy* was assessed using the Collective Efficacy scale by Sampson, Raudenbush, and Earls [15]. The scale assessed both informal social control and social cohesion, through a series of 10 questions (Cronbach's alpha ( $\alpha$ ) of .82 for parents and .62 for youth). The social control items assessed the likelihood that neighbors would intervene in various situations (e.g., children skipping school, a fight breaking out), whereas the social cohesion items assessed peoples' willingness to help and the extent to which people in the neighborhood can be trusted. Participants responded on a 5-point Likert scale and some questions were reverse scored so that a higher score indicated higher levels of collective efficacy.

*Attitudes about Violence* were assessed using the 8-item Attitudes about Retaliation Scale [25]. Sample items included "if someone hits you, you should hit them back" and "it is okay to hurt people", to which participants responded on a 4-point Likert scale with items were reverse coded as appropriate and summed such that a higher score indicated more aggressive attitudes. For adolescents, the scale retaining all 8 items was reliable with an  $\alpha = .90$ . The scale had not previously been used with parents, therefore, we conducted a confirmatory factor analysis. The results indicated it was necessary to remove two items ("if someone hurts you, you should forgive and forget" and "if someone hits you, you should walk away") (6-item parent  $\alpha = .69$ ).

*Parental Messages about Violence* were measured by the Perceptions of Parental Attitudes on Fighting Scale [26]. This scale starts with the prompt "Your parents tell you..." and assesses agreement with 12 statements using a 4-item Likert scale. Example statements include "ignore name calling" and "if someone asks you to fight, hit them first". Two items that were specific to the intervention content (i.e., "if you walk away from a fight, you'd be a chicken/coward" and "anyone who won't fight is going to be picked on even more") were added to the original scale for the youth. Items were reverse coded as needed and summed

such that a higher score indicated more aggressive parental messages about violence ( $\alpha = .80$ ). To our knowledge this scale has not previously been used with parents, but our analyses indicated adequate reliability ( $\alpha = .78$ ).

### Analytic Strategy

Path analysis was conducted in *Mplus* 5.2 [27] to examine the hypothesized relationships between the study variables. Model fit statistics (chi-square, Comparative Fit Index (CFI), the Tucker Lewis Index (TLI), and root-mean-square error of approximation (RSMEA)) were used to evaluate the fit of the model. A good fitting model has CFI and TLI values above .95 and RSMEA values below .05 [28]. A full model was fit which included data from both parents and their adolescent youth. Attitudes about violence and parental messages about violence were regressed on both perceived neighborhood violence and neighborhood collective efficacy (see Figure 1). A path between parent-report of messages and adolescent-report of messages was fit. Parental education (dichotomized as high school or lower/greater than high school) was included as a covariate on all parent variables, as studies have shown that lower parent education has been related to greater exposure to neighborhood violence and poorer quality parenting [5,10]. Adolescent gender was also included as a covariate on all youth variables, as males are more likely to be exposed to neighborhood violence and hold more aggressive attitudes about violence [1,13]. We included the covariates on the neighborhood context, attitudes, and messages about violence variables. Parent and youth reports of neighborhood context variables were allowed to correlate.

Although complete data were available on the study variables for 90% of the sample, we used the missing data option in *Mplus* to handle the remaining missing data. All models were fit using maximum likelihood estimation. We conducted a sensitivity analysis on the final model, in which we adjusted the standard errors using the Huber-White adjustment [27] to account for the clustering of child and parent dyads within a single family.

## RESULTS

The majority of participants were African-American (98% for both parent and youth). “Parents” were primarily female: mothers (75%), grandmothers (8%), or aunts (8%). Of all parents, 39% reported some education past high school. Over 71% of parents reported household incomes less than \$25,000 a year. There were more female adolescent participants than male (41% male; 59% female). Adolescents ranged in age from 11–16 with a mean age of 12.98 ( $SD = .92$ ).

### Descriptive and Correlational Analyses

Means and standard deviations of study variables are presented in Table 1 and the correlations among all variables are presented in Table 2. All variables displayed a normal distribution. Correlational analyses indicated a significant association between adolescent and parent report of exposure to neighborhood violence ( $r = .23, p < .01$ ); however, parent and adolescent reports of collective efficacy were not associated ( $r = .08, p > .05$ ), nor were parent and adolescent attitudes about violence ( $r = .03, p > .05$ ). Parents’ messages about violence were significantly positively correlated with the adolescents’ perceived parental messages ( $r = .17, p < .05$ ). For parents, no significant correlations were found between exposure to neighborhood violence and their attitudes about violence or the messages they gave their adolescent about violence. Parent collective efficacy was correlated at the  $p < .10$  level with their messages about violence ( $r = -.15$ ), but not with parental attitudes about violence. Parent attitudes about violence were significantly positively associated with the messages they reported telling their adolescent ( $r = .35, p < .001$ ). For adolescents, no significant

correlations were found between their report of exposure to neighborhood violence and their attitudes about violence or perceived parental messages. Adolescent reports of collective efficacy were significantly negatively associated with youth attitudes about violence and perceived parental messages ( $r = -.18, p < .05$  and  $r = -.19, p < .05$ ). Youth's own attitudes toward violence were strongly positively associated with perceived parental messages about violence ( $r = .59, p < .001$ ).

### Path Analysis

We fit full model presented in Figure 1 in *Mplus* and the results yielded an acceptable fit ( $\chi^2 = 13.30, p > .05$ ; CFI and TLI  $> .98$ ; RSMEA  $< .001$ ). For parents, exposure to neighborhood violence did not predict their attitudes about violence or the messages that they gave their adolescent about violence. Collective efficacy was not related to parental attitudes about violence, but did significantly predict the messages that they gave their adolescent about violence ( $\beta = -.165, p < .05$ ). Parent attitudes about violence were related to the messages that they gave their adolescent about violence ( $\beta = .365, p < .001$ ).

For youth, exposure to neighborhood violence also did not predict their attitudes or their perceived parental messages about violence. Adolescent report of collective efficacy predicted the attitudes they held about violence ( $\beta = -.167, p < .05$ ), but not their perception of parental messages. Youth attitudes about violence were strongly related to perceived parental messages ( $\beta = .553, p < .001$ ). Parental messages about violence were predictive of adolescents' perceptions of parental messages ( $\beta = -.158, p < .05$ ). The pattern of findings did not change after accounting for the clustering of youth and parents within dyads. Therefore, we only report the unadjusted results.

## DISCUSSION

This paper examined the association between neighborhood violence exposure, collective efficacy, attitudes about violence, and parental messages about violence among a sample of inner-city parent and youth dyads. Our results suggested that the neighborhood context has a significant influence on the messages that parents gave and adolescents perceived about violence. Parental attitudes about violence were the primary influence on the messages that they gave to their adolescent. However, collective efficacy appeared to have an independent direct effect, such that parents who perceived their neighborhood to have more collective efficacy were less likely to advise their adolescent to use aggressive solutions in conflict situations. This finding suggests that parents may take into account the context of their youth's environment before advising them on how to resolve conflict. It is important that parent and family based interventions begin to address the influence of factors beyond parents' own attitudes that determine the advice that youth receive about interpersonal conflict resolution [29].

Another important finding was that neighborhood collective efficacy had greater influence on attitudes and messages about violence than did exposure to neighborhood violence. In fact, exposure to neighborhood violence was not significantly associated with youth or parent attitudes about violence, which is counter to both our hypothesis and prior research [30]. This could reflect the fact that attitudes are influenced by factors beyond their current neighborhood situation (religion, upbringing, living in other neighborhoods, etc.). However, the finding that collective efficacy had an influence on adolescents' attitudes about conflict resolution is consistent with a study by Sharkley [31], which found that in neighborhoods with higher collective efficacy youth had higher street efficacy, defined as confidence in their ability to avoid involvement in violence. These findings suggested that neighborhood collective efficacy exerted its influence by altering adolescents' cognitions, either by encouraging or discouraging belief in collective oversight and common norms of behavior.



A similar mechanism could explain why parents' perceptions of neighborhood collective efficacy were related to messages about violence, while their exposure to neighborhood violence was not.

This study extended research on parental influence on youth involvement in violence from attitudinal influences to the coaching that parents provided their youth about how to resolve conflict [10]. While we did not find a strong association between parent and youth attitudes about violence, a relationship was found between the messages that parents gave their youth and youth's perception of parental messages. Studies of adolescent and parent attitudes about violence as well as involvement in violent behavior have noted large discrepancies between parent and adolescent report [9,19,32,33]. This study suggests that even though youth and parents may have differing attitudes about violence, parental messages are still accurately received by adolescent children and likely impact their involvement in violence.

The goal of this paper was to advance the extant research [e.g., 10] by examining the influence of various aspects of the neighborhood context on parent and youth social cognition. A strength of this study is that we modeled both parent and youth perceptions of and responses to the environment. This both minimized error in the model by allowing for the correlation between parent and youth variables (i.e. perceptions of the neighborhood environment) as well as allowed parent responses to predict youth responses (i.e. parents reported messages about violence predicting the messages that youth heard). Much of the literature on parents' role in violence prevention has relied on youth perceptions of their parents' attitudes [19,26].

Our finding of the importance of collective efficacy in influencing youth's attitudes and parent's messages about violence suggests that collective efficacy may be an effective community response to violence. Neighborhood collective efficacy may protect adolescents living in violent neighborhoods from responding to the violence they encounter with more violence. This finding highlights the potential importance of community-based approaches to violence prevention which could help foster greater collective efficacy among neighbors [34]. The lack of correlations between youth and parent measures of neighborhood collective efficacy observed in this study may suggest that different interventions are needed to improve both youth and parents' perceptions of neighborhood collective efficacy. For youth, community based programs may result in less violent attitudes while for parents interventions that help identify prosocial neighbors and neighborhood associations may engender feelings of collective efficacy.

### Limitations and Future Directions

There are some limitations to keep in mind when reviewing these findings. For example, some researchers suggest that collective efficacy should be assessed at the neighborhood level, rather than assessing individual *perceptions* of collective efficacy [16], as was done in the current study. Therefore, multilevel research is needed to explore the influence of neighborhood-level indicators of collective efficacy, rather than individual perceptions of efficacy, on parental messages about violence. Additional measurement work is needed to assess parental attitudes and messages about violence, as our measures, while acceptable, demonstrated lower internal consistency for parents rather than youth. The authors hypothesize that this may reflect developmental differences between youth and parents, with youth more likely to respond with the "correct" answer. Additionally, because this study consisted of students from 3 middle schools all located in violent neighborhoods, it is not clear if the relationship between collective efficacy and parental messages about violence would be the same in less violent neighborhoods. The relatively small sample size also potentially limits the generalizability of these findings, and may have limited the power to

detect a significant influence of parental exposure to community violence. Another limitation is the cross-sectional design of the current study.

Due to the complex interplay between parents' reactions and youth's behaviors, future longitudinal studies are needed to further explore how parents' messages relate to youth involvement in violence and how this association is modified by neighborhood collective efficacy. Other future areas for research include methodological work on the assessment of parent and youth perceptions and exposure to violence, which explores potential discrepancies between their reports [33]. Additional work is also needed to better understand the context in which discussions about violence occur between parents and their adolescents, as the parent/child relationship may be an important target for preventive interventions aiming to break the cycle of violence [21]. Further research on the influence of neighborhood contextual factors on parent and youth interactions around conflict resolution would provide great insight into factors to consider when developing and implementing parent and family violence preventive interventions.

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**Figure 1.** Path analysis for influence of neighborhood context on parental and youth attitudes and messages about violence.

**Table 1**

Means, standard deviations, and ranges of study variables

Variable	Mean	SD	Actual Range	Maximum Range
Parent Neighborhood Collective Efficacy	32.33	7.35	10–50	10–50
Youth Neighborhood Collective Efficacy	32.10	5.53	19–44	10–50
Parent Exposure to Neighborhood Violence	12.03	4.87	5–25	5–25
Youth Exposure to Neighborhood Violence	12.67	4.62	5–23	5–25
Parent Attitudes about Violence	12.07	2.94	6–20	6–24
Youth Attitudes about Violence	21.20	4.79	8–32	8–32
Parent Messages about Violence	17.15	3.93	10–30	10–40
Youth Perceived Parental Messages about Violence	22.99	5.37	12–37	12–48

*Note.* Higher score for the violence variables indicates more violence, whereas a higher score on the collective efficacy measure indicates a more favorable neighborhood

Table 2

Correlations among study variables

Variable	1.	2.	3.	4.	5.	6.	7.	8.
1. Parent Neighborhood Collective Efficacy	----							
2. Youth Neighborhood Collective Efficacy	.07	----						
3. Parent Exposure to Neighborhood Violence	-.21*	.08	----					
4. Youth Exposure to Neighborhood Violence	-.17*	-.16 <sup>†</sup>	.23***	----				
5. Parent Attitudes about Violence	.07	.08	.08	.02	----			
6. Youth Attitudes about Violence	.01	-.18*	-.04	.14 <sup>†</sup>	.03	----		
7. Parent Messages about Violence	-.15 <sup>†</sup>	.07	.11	.12	.35***	.02	----	
8. Youth Messages about Violence	.03	-.19*	.03	.16 <sup>†</sup>	.06	.59***	.17*	----

\*  $p < .05$ ;\*\*  $p < .01$ ;\*\*\*  $p < .001$ ;<sup>†</sup>  $\leq .10$ 

Note. Higher score for the violence variables indicates more violence, whereas a higher score on the collective efficacy measures indicates a more favorable neighborhood.