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Urban African American Parents' Messages about Violence: A Mixed Methods Study

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Abstract

Family socialization, which includes parental control and support, plays an important role in reducing the likelihood of adolescent involvement in conflict. This study examined the strategies that urban parents living in neighborhoods with high crime rates suggest to help their adolescent children avoid or deescalate conflict. Data come from 48 African American parent/adolescent dyads recruited through the youths' middle school. Dyads responded to three video-taped scenarios depicting youth in potential conflict situations. Qualitative methods were used to identify 11 strategies parents suggested to help youth avoid or deescalate conflict. Although the majority of parents advocated for non-violent solutions, these same parents described situations in which their child may need to use violence. These findings have important implications for family-focused violence prevention programs.

Keywords

Adolescence; Violence; Parenting; Parent/youth communication; African Americans

Violence is of particular concern during adolescence, as this developmental stage is widely acknowledged as representing a peak in perpetration and victimization (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2001). Homicide is the second leading cause of death for youth between the ages of 10 and 24 and juveniles account for 16% of all violent crime arrests (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2010; Puzzanchera, 2009). Additionally, data from the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System indicate that 31.5% of

youth were involved in a conflict that resulted in a fight during the past year (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2009). Violence disproportionately affects some adolescents, with African American youth more likely to be both the perpetrators and victims of violence (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, 2010; Centers for Disease Control, 2008; Puzanchara, 2009). Additionally, poverty and living in an urban environment are associated with an increase in the likelihood of perpetration and victimization (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2010). Thus, for parents of poor urban, African American youth, violence is an important and salient concern.

Youth violence is complex problem, influenced by a wide array of factors operating at differing levels. Research has identified many different risk factors for youth involvement in violence including individual (e.g., drug and alcohol use, aggression), peer (e.g., association with deviant peers), family (e.g., poor parent/youth relationship, spousal abuse), school (e.g. negative school climate) and neighborhood factors (e.g., poverty, access to firearms) (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2001). Due to this complexity, a wide variety of interventions have been developed including modifications to the social and physical environment, social development programs, mentoring programs, and parent and family based programs (Thornton, Craft, Dahlberg, Lynch, & Baer, 2002).

Available research suggests that parents play an important role in preventing their adolescent children's involvement in violence (Huesmann et al., 1996). Therefore the aim of this study was to inform the content of family-focused violence prevention programs for urban adolescents by gaining knowledge about parenting practices related to conflict resolution. Family-focused programs that encourage parent/youth discussions related to violence are commonly recommended in the violence prevention literature. However, little is known about the content of those conversations and what types of strategies parents are using to prevent their adolescent children's involvement in violence (Eron et al., 2002). This paper used a qualitative approach to study the content of parent/youth conversations about violence and to identify the types of strategies parents of urban, African American youth recommend to help their adolescent children avoid or deescalate conflict.

The Role of Parents in Violence Prevention

Parents are the primary socializing agents for their children and are needed to reinforce appropriate attitudes and behaviors in the home and at school. Parental socialization, which includes domains of parental control and parental support, has been related to adolescents' reduced involvement in numerous risk behaviors, including violence (Roche, Ahmed, & Blum, 2008; Wright & Fitzpatrick, 2006). Parental control refers to the instrumental actions that parents take to regulate their children's behaviors. Much of the research on parental control efforts has focused on parental monitoring. Parents are often encouraged to monitor their children's activities and friends in order to reduce opportunities for involvement in violence. Parental monitoring has been defined by Dishion and McMahon (1998) as "a set of correlated parenting behaviors involving attention to and tracking of the child's whereabouts, activities, and adaptations" (p. 61). Studies have consistently found that parental monitoring is associated with a decreased likelihood of youth's involvement in violence (Banyard, Cross, & Modecki, 2006; Fulkerson, Pasch, Perry, & Komro, 2008;

Wright & Fitzpatrick, 2006). However, other studies have found that some parental control efforts, such as corporal punishment, have been associated with youths' increased intention to fight (Ohene, Ireland, McNeely, & Borowsky, 2006).

Parental support refers to the quality of the relationship that youth have with their parents. Studies have consistently shown that youth whose parents have a warm but firm parenting style demonstrate more positive academic and social outcomes. Positive relationships with parents, family cohesion, and parental involvement have been related to reduced youth involvement in a wide variety of violence outcomes, including aggression, perpetration, bullying and dating violence (Banyard et al., 2006; Flouri & Buchanan, 2003; Gorman-Smith, Tolan, Zelli, & Huesmann, 1996; Orpinas & Kelder, 1999). Parental support is commonly measured by asking youth questions such as whether a parent is there when they need him/her or talks through their worries with them, capturing the availability and quality of parent/youth communication (Banyard et al., 2006; Flouri & Buchanan, 2003).

Researchers have found that parenting behaviors are amenable to change (Lochman, 2000) and many programs have been shown effective in both changing parental behavior and improving youth outcomes (Colorado State University, n.d.). Family-focused violence prevention programs aim to improve family relations by teaching parenting skills, providing education on normal child development, improving parent/youth communication, and practicing nonviolent conflict resolution (Thornton et al., 2002).

Parental Attitudes about Violence

Implicit in family-focused violence prevention programs is the assumption that parents unconditionally support nonviolent conflict resolution (e.g., Dishion & Dishion, 2000). However, studies examining parental attitudes about violence have found that for some urban, African-American parents this may not be true (Copeland-Linder et al., 2007; Lindstrom Johnson, Finigan, Bradshaw, Haynie, & Cheng, 2011; Orpinas & Kelder, 1999; Solomon, Bradshaw, Wright, & Cheng, 2008). This is an important potential disconnect in parenting programs, as parental attitudes supporting violence have been associated with an increased likelihood of youth involvement in violence (Copeland-Linder et al., 2007; Orpinas & Kelder, 1999; Solomon et al., 2008). For example, a study of urban African American youth found that the perception of parental attitudes supporting violence was the strongest predictor of youth's retaliatory attitudes (Copeland-Linder et al., 2007). Another study found a synergistic effect between parent and youth attitudes. When parents and youth both held attitudes supporting fighting, the youth engaged in significantly higher rates of fighting, suspension, and weapon carrying than discordant pairs and parent-adolescent pairs that did not support fighting (Solomon et al., 2008). Parental attitudes about violence can be transmitted to youth through a variety of ways, including conversations about violence, parental modeling of violence, and parental 'coaching' on how to resolve interpersonal conflict. Research indicates that children whose parents advocate for aggressive conflict solutions are more likely to respond to conflict using aggression (Kliewer et al., 2006).

One factor that may influence parents' attitudes and messages about violence is their neighborhood context. Research has shown that parents who report lower neighborhood

collective efficacy, a measure of neighborhood's ability to regulate the behavior of its residents, are more likely to hold attitudes supporting violence and to give their adolescent children messages that support the use of violence (Kelly et al., 2010; Lindstrom Johnson et al., 2011). Other factors that have been shown to influence a parents' ability to help their child handle violence include parents' level of education, household income, and family cohesion (Kliewer et al., 2006; Overstreet, 2000). Taken together, these findings suggest that additional research is needed to understand ways in which parents, particularly urban parents, are communicating with their children about conflict resolution. This line of research, in turn, might inform the development of violence prevention programs that provide parents with effective strategies for breaking the cycle of violence through parental actions, advice, and coaching (Kliewer et al., 2006; Ohene et al., 2006).

Overview of the Paper

The available research suggests that understanding parent/youth communication about violence may inform important strategies for reducing youth involvement in violence (Thornton et al., 2002). Yet the research on parent/youth communication and violence has mainly focused on the extent of parental knowledge regarding their child's activities. Kliewer et al. (2006) began to explore the content of parent/youth communication about violence by having participants watch a video clip and respond to questions based on the situations that occurred in the video. Their work was interested in identifying and quantitatively associating parent and youth strategies to cope with exposure to neighborhood violence. The current study used a similar methodology of having parents and youth watch short video clips, after which the parent and youth were prompted to engage in a conversation about the conflict witnessed and how it could be resolved. Video clips were created by a nonprofit group to facilitate conversations with youth about violence. All conversations were thematically coded, with particular emphasis on the strategies that parents used to help their adolescent children avoid involvement in violence. This paper extends Kliewer et al.'s work by focusing on a subset of the coping strategies identified, those that deal specifically with conflict resolution (i.e. active coping, proactive coping, and aggressive coping). Additionally, we present an in-depth analysis of the strategies identified as described by both parents and their adolescent children.

Method

Participants

The data for this study were collected between August 2007 and November 2008. Only parent/youth dyads who both agreed to participate were included in the study. Either participant could opt out of the study or any part of data collection at any time.

Eligible participants had a child enrolled in one of three urban public middle schools (grades 6-8) that had previously worked with the research team on a school-based group mentoring randomized trial. The participating middle schools served a significant number of low-income students (i.e., greater than 70% qualified for free/reduced meals), were on probation for persistently dangerous status defined by the *No Child Left Behind* criteria of high suspension rates for behavior problems, and were in neighborhoods characterized by high

levels of unemployment and violent crime. In addition, eligible participants had lived in their neighborhood for at least 6 months, were English speaking, and reachable by telephone (either providing a working home phone or mobile phone number). Of the 307 families contacted to participate, 144 completed interviews.

The sample consisted of primarily African American mothers and their early adolescent youth (mean age = 13). Although approximately 30% of the adult sample was not the biological parent of the youth, the term ‘parents’ will be used throughout this paper to represent all caretakers. Youth were approximately split evenly between males and females. About half of the parents had received some education post high school. A third of youth were born to a parent who was less than 18 at the time of birth, and half of the youth lived in households with at least two adults. For more information on the sample, see Table 1.

Procedure

Participants were recruited to participate in a randomized controlled trial to evaluate a parenting intervention designed to decrease youth violence. This paper uses the baseline data from the trial and summarizes strategies that parents’ of urban adolescents use to reduce their youth’s involvement in conflict. The majority of the data collection occurred in the participants’ homes, with a small number of parents requesting their interview take place in a community location (e.g., private room at the child’s school). All interviews were conducted by two trained research assistants. The Institutional Review Boards of the Johns Hopkins University and the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) approved this study; the city school district research office also approved this study. Participants provided written consent and assent prior to participation.

During baseline data collection, parents and youth completed a quantitative survey and participated in semi-structured dyadic interviews. The parent and youth each separately completed an audio-facilitated questionnaire, which allowed them to privately listen to questions and record their answers. The questionnaire asked parents and youth about demographic characteristics, youth involvement in risk and prosocial activities, and attitudes and beliefs about violence.

After completing the questionnaire, the parent and youth were brought together to discuss three brief video clips depicting teens in conflict situations at school and in the community. The video clips displayed common conflict situations: one student bumping another student in a crowded hallway, a group teasing another student, and a conflict on a basketball court. The clips were taken from a video series created by Strategies Against Violence Everywhere (SAVE), a nonprofit organization focused on preventing youth violence (Strategies Against Violence Everywhere (SAVE), 2010). Consistent with prior literature highlighting the value of capturing the actual content of parent/youth conversations about violence rather than parent/youth report (Kliewer et al., 2006), we employed a method which allowed us to capture and analyze the true content of those conversations. Each dyad watched each clip and through a semi-structured interview 1) discussed what they saw in the video and 2) discussed what they thought might happen after the clip ended. In half of all completed interviews the parent was prompted to start the conversation and in the other half, the child was prompted to start. After this discussion, which lasted approximately 60 minutes, each

parent and youth were independently interviewed about what their child or parent (respectively) said during the conversations about violence, as well as their experiences with neighborhood violence. A listing of the topics covered in the parent/youth dyad and the individual interviews as well as example questions is provided in Table 2. Both the video prompted conversation as well as parent and youth individual interviews were audio taped and transcribed by a professional transcription service.

Coding

Initial qualitative coding—All transcribed and recorded interviews were compared for accuracy and completeness. Transcripts were then entered into HyperRESEARCH 2.7 (Researchware, n.d.). A grounded theory approach to data coding was used so that content analysis was inductive (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Themes that emerged from participants' statements were identified by two primary coders with expertise in qualitative research methodology. A coding manual was developed based on the first six interviews and modified as subsequent interviews were coded. Each new theme generated a code and similar codes were grouped thematically.

A double coding approach was utilized to improve trustworthiness and rigor (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Two coders were responsible for coding each transcript. Bi-monthly meetings were held among coders and senior researchers to insure consistency and resolve coding discrepancies. Midway through the coding process, a systematic review of the text assigned to specific codes was performed and any identified adjustments to the coding scheme were implemented, with previously completed transcripts re-coded as necessary. The major themes which emerged from the coding were in three major areas – general parenting, school engagement, and communication regarding violence and fighting.

Analysis—For this paper, a purposive sampling strategy was used to select 48 transcripts for secondary analysis. The subsample was selected to represent equal numbers of parent/youth dyads with and without parental experience with neighborhood victimization, as indicated by the single item from the parent survey (Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997). Specifically, parent participants responded to a question which read “since living in this neighborhood has anyone used violence against you or any member of your household” (Sampson et al., 1997), to which they indicated yes or no. Victimized parent transcripts ($n=24$) as well as an equal random sample ($n=24$) from non-victimized parents were chosen for further analysis. This purposive subsample was chosen, as some literature has suggested that parental experience of victimization influences parents' ability to help their child handle violence (Dubowitz et al., 2001; Garbarino, Bradshaw, & Kostelny, 2005; Ruscio, 2001). However, preliminary analyses showed no significant differences in the use of any strategy by parental experience with violence. Therefore, these results will not be presented. No significant differences in demographic characteristics were found between the subsample and the entire sample. Additionally, there were no significant differences in youth aggression or experience with violence.

In this analysis, text passages coded as *Strategies to Avoid or Deescalate Violence (SAD)* defined as “strategies parents suggest would prevent a fight, or stop one once the conflict

has begun” were examined. Two experienced coders further refined and identified specific groups of strategies. Both parental and youth report of strategies were coded into the refined subcategories using similar procedures as described above.

Results

The qualitative data analysis revealed 11 different strategies that parents suggested to prevent or deescalate a fight once it had begun. Specifically, parents recommended an average of 5.9 strategies, which were conceptually divided into two different types loosely based on the parental socialization literature: *control* and *support*. The control strategies involved parents taking action to help their child avoid a conflict. Although control strategies did not necessitate conversation with their child, most parents described their strategy in the context of a conversation with their youth. Support strategies captured parents’ “coaching”, or providing messages to their child, on how to avoid interpersonal conflict. These strategies did not require action on the part of the parent, but instead were advice that was given in the context of a conversation between the parent and youth about violence. The parents described both strategies to prevent their child from becoming involved in violent conflicts as well as strategies to help their child prevent a conflict from escalating into violence. Brief descriptions and the number of parents using each strategy (as reported by both parents and youth) are provided in Table 3.

Control Strategies

In order to prevent their child’s involvement in conflict, parents encouraged their youth to participate in other activities. As one parent described her efforts, “I try to keep her at it, try to keep her in the afterschool programs. Right now it’s summertime so, after school is over, I try to find activities, things to keep them in a positive mind, not a negative mind.” Participating parents felt that after school programs not only kept their child busy, but affected their mood and taught valuable skills. One parent talked about enrolling her child in a basketball class at a recreational center after the child had been involved in a fight on the football field to teach him sportsmanship. Involving youth in other activities was the least commonly suggested parenting strategy by our sample of parents. Youth did not mention their parents’ involving them in other activities as a conflict avoidance strategy.

Parental monitoring was another way that parents reported preventing their child’s involvement in violence. Parents in our sample who suggested this strategy described having rules about where their child could go and who they could be with. As one parent stated:

When it starts getting dark, [child’s name] has to be in the house. And I don’t let her hang around in other people’s houses, playing with other people’s children, because I tell her, I said, “I can’t see around the corner.” And I said, “Anything can happen.” And I said, “Knowing you, I know a lot of things that you might say about somebody and that’s going to get back to someone else.” And I said, “I’d rather for you to stay around the front.” And just like now it gets dark at quarter to nine. I said, “I want you in the house at 9:00. In the house. Not sitting on the front steps or anything. In the house.”

Parents also described a strong desire to know their child's friends. One parent even specified that she did not let "him interact with children I don't know". Youth were less likely to mention their parents' monitoring efforts, with only a few youth acknowledging their parents' having limitations on where and when they could go out.

Almost all parents felt that they were an important advocate for their child, and that their involvement in a conflict was a way to ensure that a conflict did not become violent. Parents mentioned conflict mediation with three different types of people: school personnel, parents, and youth. The most frequently mentioned parental mediation involved the school. As youth spend most of their day in school, it makes sense that many of their conflicts would originate from this location. One parent described her role as, "If he has something that he can't resolve, I do encourage him to tell me because I will go down to the school and confront the principal and let them know that [child's name] is having problems, and they need to do something about it. So I will do that." Similarly, youth characterized their parents' involvement in mediating conflict at school, most frequently in terms of a parent conference. As one youth said, "My mom would say if somebody started a fight, she probably would take me up to school the next day. Probably work it out. Like ask for a parent conference."

Parents also mentioned the importance of involving other parents in their efforts to mediate conflict situations. As one parent described this process, "And then we would of went to the person, the child's house where he live and sit down with his family members and discuss it, what went on." Parents mentioned difficulties if the other parents did not want to work out the situation but did not elaborate on their response to difficulties. Some youth reported actively asking their parent to intervene. For example, "And then if I knew the girl and I knew her parents, I would tell my mother to go up to her house and tell her mother." Parents also described directly intervening in their children's fights. Most often this occurred when the fight happened with the parent present (i.e. in front of the house).

In some conflict situations, parents felt that it was necessary to involve the police or indicated that they would sue the parents of the other child involved in the conflict. Parents specified that this would only be their resort if the fight was "bad" or they "didn't like the parents' attitudes". One parent described her rationale by saying, "I would want the child to get in trouble, you know, school or whatever. If it was like real bad, I probably would have pressed charges if it was like real bad. But if it was like minor, I would have let the school handle it." Youth also mentioned that their parents' likely actions would include suing the parents of the other child or involving the police.

When their children were engaged in a violent conflict parents described punishing their child for their involvement in the conflict. Parents saw this as a strategy to prevent future involvement in conflict, with one parent stating, "you got to punish them so they can think. Then after they think, then they know not to do it again." Parents utilized both violent and nonviolent punishment methods. Violent punishment included instances where parents said "tearing her behind up", "get a beating", "a legal whipping", "I will pinch him", "I would have slapped her upside the head", and "disciplining in a loud and aggressive manner". Other punishment methods that parents used included taking away possessions and

privileges and having their child apologize and reflect on their wrongdoing. These punishment methods were mentioned by both parents and their adolescent children.

Support Strategies

Throughout their conversations with their children, parents offered “coaching” or advice about how to avoid or deescalate conflicts. Some of that advice centered around the importance of having ‘the right friends’. One parent said, “I just try to talk to her and try to tell her to make the wisest decision and watch out for company that you keeping. Watch the kids that you hanging with. If you’re going with a whole lot of kids that thinking they bad, and you’re going to be in the reputation with them.” Youth heard this message from their parents and often said things like “She said stay away from them and try to avoid other people who do bad things.” Other parents were distrustful that ‘good’ associates could be found in their neighborhood and advised their children to only have a few friends. As one parent “I try to tell her...try not to make friends or get close to too many.” Youth did not mention the use of this strategy by their parents.

All parents in our sample gave advice to their adolescent child about avoiding conflict situations. Parents’ messages fell into two broad categories of advice about staying out of a situation in which they were not involved, and advice about how to ignore an insult and walk away from a potential conflict. As one parent said:

Well, I tell her, I say, “Don’t stand around and look.” I said, “I know you want to know what’s going on.” I said, “[child’s name], you never know when somebody has a gun. A bullet got one eye and no sense of direction.” And I said, “Innocent people will get killed or hurt. Don’t stand around.” I said, “Leave, [child’s name].” I said, “You don’t have to come in the house or wherever it is” I said. “But you can stand in the doorway and look down where it’s happening.”

Other parents were more specific in their instructions of how to walk away. One youth reported her mother told her, “When you see them walking up the street about to get on the bus...get off the bus and walk down the street, because I’m not that far from my school.” When youth reported to their parents that they had been insulted parents’ advice was to “ignore it”, “walk away” and to “let it go”.

A common component of parent/youth conversations about violence was the importance of an ethic of respect. As one parent said, “You treat people as you would want them to treat you. Keep your hands to yourself. If you were going to laugh, you didn’t have to do it in her face.” Other behaviors advocated by parents were the importance of apologizing, valuing others feelings, and sportsmanship. Of these, youth were most likely to mention that their parent would want them to apologize. In addition to respect, parents wanted their children to be able to have the skills to mediate a conflict with words. As one parent put it, “Talk it out or talk it over.” Another parent described the value of talking it out as, “sometimes you can talk it out before you decide that you feel that you want to fight, because sometime you might be wrong. You might be right, but you can be wrong too. So it’s good to talk it out first before you decide to put up your fists.” Or as described by a youth, “They say just talk to the other person you fought. Talk out your problems and stuff, become friends.”

The final strategy that the majority of parents advised was to tell an adult. As one parent said, “[My son] come in to me and tell me that he be fighting... I’d tell him, ‘Son, it’s not nice to fight. Always go see adult or teacher, somebody that’s older, and let them know because it get out of hand, then it could be more than what it is.’” This strategy was primarily mentioned in the context of a conflict that occurred on school grounds, with both parents and youth reporting the instruction to “tell a teacher”.

Situations when Violence May Be Necessary

Over two-thirds of parents detailed situations where violence was necessary, providing their child mixed messages about the use of violence to resolve conflict. For some parents violence was necessary if the child was being aggressed. A common message from these parents was that it was okay to respond with violence as long as their child was “hit first”. One parent said, “Somebody walk up and hit you, you hit them back. If they keep trying to hit you, keep trying to hit”. Some parents felt that responding with violence would prevent additional violence. One parent explained that, “you know how you got bullies that just want to keep banging on kids because they know they’re not going to hit them back?” These parents believed that fighting was inevitable. In the words of one parent, “If there are times when if you have to fight--because I believe there are times when you do have to--...please let me know.”

For other parents violence was necessary as a method of defense. Implicit in some parents’ responses was an awareness of the dangerous neighborhoods in which they lived. Many of these parents were concerned about their children getting into situations where they were “outnumbered” and spoke of the need to “fight to get away”. As described by this parent,

If she’s outnumbered and there’s no other way out. If someone is really absolutely going to harm her. Like if they have a knife or something and she has to fight that knife away so she can run, you’ve got to fight that knife away and get away. If someone is going to grab her and harm her, you’d better fight yourself away and run.

Youth understood that violence was necessary in certain situations. One youth described their understanding as, “fight when it’s necessary, don’t fight when it’s not necessary. Fight when [you] have to, but try avoid it if [you] don’t have to fight.” Situations when violence may be necessary were often described in terms of whether they would get punished. Youth felt they had to have a “real reason” to fight if they were to avoid punishment by parents. Violence in self-defense was seen as a non-punishable offense.

The existence of parents’ mixed-messages was evident in the youth interview data. Youth were aware that their parents supported the use of violence in certain situations. As one youth stated, “She’ll usually tell us if somebody hit you, hit them back”. However, they were also aware that their parents advised other non-violent strategies. For example, one youth described how she thought her parents wanted her to respond as, “I think she wants me to go to the office, call her or fight them back.” The use of multiple strategies was sometimes a source of confusion for the youth. As one youth stated, “I don’t know; because my mother--sometimes she’s like, ‘Hit them back’, sometimes she tells me to walk away. So

it's confusing. So I probably would hit them back because my anger gets the best of me sometimes, especially if I'm already mad."

Discussion

This paper examined common strategies that parents from urban, inner-city neighborhoods characterized by high rates of violence recommended to help their youth avoid or deescalate conflict. Using a qualitative approach for analyzing parent/youth discussions regarding violence, the results highlighted the potentially important role that parents play in helping their children to avoid or deescalate conflict. Parents appeared to use multiple strategies, which loosely aligned with two common parental socialization techniques: control and support. However, these data also suggest that many parents gave their child mixed messages about the appropriateness of involvement in conflict, by both modeling violent behaviors as well as by describing situations where violence would be necessary answer to a conflict situation.

Besides taking actions to regulate their child's behavior, parents described general conversations that they would have with their child discussing their expectations regarding conflict situations. These expectations included for their child to have respect for others and choose to resolve a conflict with words rather than weapons. However, for these parents living in a highly violent environment another expectation that they portrayed to their child was the ability to avoid a conflict situation. In highly violent neighborhoods this ability, either to stay away from someone else's conflict or to be able to walk away from an insult, was important for the safety of their child. This finding is similar to other qualitative studies of urban youth who describe the difficulty of walking away from a situation due to the need for respect in their environment (Johnson, Frattaroli, Wright, Pearson-Fields, & Cheng, 2004; Yonas, O'Campo, Burke, Peak, & Gielen, 2005). Identifying particular strategies for youth to "save face", while walking away from a conflict could be an important youth violence intervention point. The parent who advised her child to get off the bus early and walk to school demonstrated one such strategy.

Unfortunately, some of the strategies advocated by parents to help their child avoid conflict may have inadvertently increased their child's involvement in conflict. For example, many parents described preventing future involvement in conflict by punishing their child if they instigated a fight, with some of these parents describing the use of violence in their punishment. The American Academy of Pediatrics (1998) discourages the use of corporal punishment and numerous studies (e.g. Berlin et al., 2009) have associated corporal punishment with increased likelihood of aggression for young children. However, there is some evidence that the relationship between corporal punishment and aggression may be moderated by race, with more adverse effects seen for white children (Deater-Deckard, Bates, Dodge, & Pettit, 1996). This may reflect the success of "no-nonsense" parenting, or firm parenting in a supportive relationship, among low-income African American parents (Brody & Flor, 1998). More research conducted across multiple racial groups to confirm and better understand these findings. For example, Ohene and colleagues (2006) found that the use of corporal punishment in adolescence is related to an increased likelihood of aggression in adolescents.

For most parents in the sample, embedded in parental messages and actions supporting their desire for their child to avoid violence was an understanding that certain situations necessitated violence. As a result, parents gave their children mixed messages about how to respond to violence. On one hand, they supported and advised their youth not to engage in conflict, but on the other hand identified certain situations in which they indicated that violence was unavoidable and necessary (also see Eron et al., 2002). The youth in this study appeared to internalize these mixed messages, understanding that sometimes, particularly when they were aggressed, violence was acceptable. However, especially for youth in violent neighborhoods, the definition of what acts constitute self-defense may be less clear, particularly with the need to keep up a reputation of toughness. The need for parents to send clear messages to their youth has been noted in the literature around parent and youth conversations about sex. For example, parents send their child mixed messages by telling their child not to have sex, but if they do to use protection (Afifi, Joseph, & Aldeis, 2008). The current study suggests that a possible intervention point for parents could be in creating guidelines or scenarios detailing situations that may necessitate a certain type of solution and elucidating the strategies youth should try before resorting to violence.

Only a third of our sample mentioned traditional parental monitoring activities (e.g., knowledge of the child's activities and friends) as a method for reducing their child's risk for involvement in violence. This finding is somewhat surprising given emphasis parental monitoring in parent- and family-based programs (Thornton et al., 2002). As suggested in other studies (Furstenberg, Cook, Eccles, Elder, & Sameroff, 1999; Garbarino et al., 2005) parental monitoring may be more difficult in urban, high-violent neighborhoods. Parents in these neighborhoods may spend less time at home as they may be working more than one job or the pervasiveness of violence may make monitoring difficult or less effective. While the current findings support the importance of this construct in the prevention of youth violence, they highlight numerous other parental intervention points, such as training parents in nonviolent conflict mediation, reducing parental modeling of violence, and detailing situations where violence is necessary for self-defense.

This study included both parent and youth reports of strategies that parents suggested to help their adolescent children avoid or deescalate conflict. For the most part, youth reported similar strategies as their parents. The exceptions to this were involving the youth in other activities and parental monitoring, which were two of the most commonly recommended parenting strategies to reduce youth involvement in violence (Thornton et al., 2002). The rationale behind parents' use of these tactics may not be discussed with youth, or youth may not see parental use of these strategies as a violence prevention effort.

Limitations

As in all qualitative research, this study is limited in its generalizability due to the small sample, the unique sampling frame, and the specificity of the sample (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). While these findings are specific to our sample population they are suggestive of a connection to the broader population of urban African American parents living in highly violent neighborhoods. Parents in suburban, rural, or in neighborhoods with less pervasive violence may recommend using different strategies. Furthermore, most of the parents were

mothers; additional research is needed to examine variation in the types of messages expressed by fathers, which may reflect higher levels of physical aggressive responses, as compared to mothers (Oransky & Maracek, 2009). Parental influence on youth behavior may also differ depending on the gender concordance of parent and youth (Flouri & Buchanan, 2003). Finally, while an effort was made to foster authentic conversations between parents and youth about violence, the conversations created were contrived and based upon hypothetical situations depicted in the videos. Although this approach has been previously used (e.g., Kliever et al., 2006), additional research is needed to determine the extent to which similar conversations occur outside of research settings, and the extent to which youth follow through on those recommended strategies.

Conclusions and Implications

Prior research suggests that parent and family based interventions hold great promise in reducing the frequency of adolescent involvement in violence (Thonton, Craft, Dahlber, Lynch, & Baer, 2002). The current study extends previous research by highlighting 11 different parenting strategies that parents in urban highly violent neighborhoods use to help their youth avoid or deescalate conflict. These strategies included parental control efforts, which extended past parental monitoring, as well as parental support in the form of advice to their child about how to avoid or deescalate conflict. Additional research is needed to better understand how effective these different strategies or combinations of strategies are in reducing youth involvement in violent conflicts. These findings also suggest that some parents may inadvertently increase their child's involvement in violence by modeling violence through the use of corporal punishment or by suggesting to their child that there were times that violence was a necessary means to end a conflict. Nevertheless, the current findings suggest that parent/youth conversations about violence may be an important target for preventive interventions and parent education programs. Parent and family based interventions may need to broaden the scope of discussions about parents' role in violence prevention to more realistically address the complex role of parents in an urban violent environment.

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Table 1

Caregiver/Youth Demographics

Sample Characteristics	Frequencies <i>N</i> =48 (%)
Mean Age of Youth	12.96 (<i>SD</i> =0.99)
Race of Youth	
African American	48 (100)
Gender of Youth	
Female	29 (60)
Male	19 (40)
Race of Caregiver	
African American	48 (100)
Caregiver Relationship to Youth	
Mother	34 (71)
Other Grandmother	14 (29)
Education Level of Caregiver	
Less than high school	14 (29)
Completed high school	11 (23)
Greater than high school	23 (48)
Number of Adults in Household	
One adult	21 (44)
Two or more adults	27 (56)

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Table 2

Parent/Youth Interview Topics and Questions

Topic	Questions
Description of Fight (reference to videos)	Describe what you saw happen in this video. If we kept the video running, what would happen next? Who started the fight?
Prevention of Fight (reference to videos)	How if at all could the fight have been avoided?
Parental Response to Fight (reference to videos)	If you/your child had been the one to start the fight in the video, what, if anything, would your parent/you do or say about it?
Experience with Similar Circumstances	How often, if ever, have you talked about similar situations before? What do you usually talk about if situations like this come up?
Discrepancies (in individual interview)	Tell me what you heard your child/parent say about fighting/violence when we talked about the videos. Did anything he/she said surprise you?
Openness with Parents	If any of these kinds of situations really happened would you/your child tell you about it?
Situations Fighting is Necessary	In what situation, if any, would you/your parent want you to fight?
Representativeness of Videos	What do you think of the videos themselves? Were they realistic?
School and Community Violence	What sorts of things do you see or hear about in your community that you think are violent?

Table 3

Frequency of Parents' Suggested Strategies

Parenting Strategies	Description of Strategy	Parental Mention <i>n</i> =48 (%) Mean Strategies = 5.9	Adolescent Mention <i>n</i> =48 (%) Mean Strategies = 4.8
CONTROL			
Involving Youth In Other Activities	Planning activities for youth to keep them out of certain situations or teach social skills	8 (17)	0 (0)
Parental Monitoring	Parents' knowledge of child's whereabouts and friends; Rules	14 (29)	3 (6)
Parent Mediation of Conflict	Parent involvement with school; Parent involvement with other parents; Direct parent involvement in conflict	41 (85)	27 (56)
Involving the Police/Law	Parents calling police; Parents suing	16 (33)	7 (15)
Punishment with Violence	Physical Punishment; Yelling	14 (29)	10 (21)
Punishment without Violence	Taking away possessions or privileges; Having youth apologize and reflect on wrong doing	17 (42)	20 (35)
SUPPORT			
Choosing Friends	Leave problem friends; Stick with good friends	25 (52)	16 (33)
Conflict Avoidance Strategies	Stay out of it; Ignore or let it go	46 (96)	47 (98)
Demonstrate Respect for Others	Respect others; Show concern when others are hurt; Sportsmanship	43 (90)	43 (90)
Resolve Conflicts with Words	Talk conflict out	20 (42)	23 (48)
Involve an Adult	Get an adult to mediate the situation	35 (73)	39 (81)