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Child and Parent Perceptions of Relational Aggression Within Urban Predominantly African American Children's Friendships: Examining Patterns of Concordance

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Abstract Increasing research documents the negative short- and long-term effects of relational aggression on children's behavior and social–emotional functioning. Although parents likely play an important role in the way children learn to cope with and attempt to resolve relational aggression, there is little research on this issue. The present study explored children and parents' beliefs concerning relational aggression and the children's use of coping strategies when experiencing relational aggression in close friendships. Fifty-four low-income, urban, predominantly African American children and a parent/guardian participated in the current study. Findings suggest that the children and their parents were largely discordant in their perceptions of relational aggression and the way the children cope with being a victim of relational aggression. Although the vast majority of parents perceived that their children would come to them for support when experiencing relational aggression, the girls were most likely to report going to teachers, whereas boys were most likely to go to another adult. These results enhance our understanding of how parents and children view relationally aggressive behaviors and may inform the development of strategies to help children cope with relational aggression.

Keywords Relational aggression · Coping · Gender differences · African American · Parent/child relationships

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Introduction

Relational aggression is behavior that is intended to harm another individual through non-physical means, such as manipulation, damaging of relationships, and hostile gestures (Card et al. 2008; Crick and Grotpeter 1995). Although research on relational aggression is steadily increasing, the manner in which boys and girls experience relational aggression within their close friendships remains unclear. The extant research has largely focused on relational aggression among White suburban children, yet there is increasing concern about the rates of relational aggression among urban African American children, and how it may quickly escalate to physical acts of retaliation (Farrell et al. 2007; Talbott et al. 2002). While parents can play an important role in preventing or helping children manage relationally aggressive situations (Beane 2008), there has been limited empirical research examining how parents view this problem. To address these gaps in the research, the current study explored how a sample of urban, predominantly African American children and their parents perceived and coped with relational aggression among close friends and whether these associations varied by the child's sex.

Recent studies of predominantly White, middle-class children have found that when the relational aggression occurs between close friends, it can be more stressful for both children than when it occurs within the larger peer group (Benenson et al. 2006; Crick and Nelson 2002; Murray-Close et al. 2007). However, we currently know comparatively less about relational aggression when it occurs between close friends, and among African American children living in poor urban environments. Children in urban neighborhoods are frequently exposed to more stressors, such as poverty and community violence, than

children living in middle-class urban or suburban environments (Douglas-Hall and Chau 2006; Lorion 1998; Selner-O'Hagan et al. 1998). Although children in poor urban environments would benefit from a close supportive friendship (DuBois et al. 2002; Hammack et al. 2004), if relational aggression occurs within the context of a close friendship, then the coping resource itself becomes a source of stress. It is, therefore, imperative that we examine children's close friendships as a potential context for stressful or harmful social interactions, such as relational aggression (Bagwell 2004; Ladd 1999).

In order to understand children's friendships and the relational aggression that may occur within them, the complex interactions between the various systems affecting child development should be explored (Rubin et al. 1998). This systemic view of children's development assumes that children interact with various surrounding systems such as their families, schools, communities, and cultures (Black and Krishnakumar 1998; Sampson 1997). The child is influenced by and has influence on these systems, which together have an impact on the child's development (Bronfenbrenner 1979). More specifically, Vygotsky's (1978) theory of sociocultural development suggests that children learn cultural rules for social behaviors (e.g., how to be a good friend, how to deal with disagreements with friends) through their daily interactions. The ongoing interactions between parents and their children provide the foundation for the socialization of friendship values and social behaviors across the life course (Bandura 1977; Cowan and Cowan 2004; Power 2004; Valiente et al. 2004). Culture is intertwined with parenting and the socialization of children (Hill 2002; Jones et al. 2008), and therefore, likely shapes parent–child interactions regarding relational aggression.

Despite robust correlational findings between parent–child relationships and the child's peer relationships (Cowan et al. 1998; Parke and Buriel 1998), the peer relations literature has typically remained separate from the family relationships literature (see Cowan and Cowan 2004 for a review). A recent study of the discrepancy between parents' and children's attitudes toward physical aggression, however, underscored the importance of examining parents' perceptions of violence. Specifically, Solomon et al. (2008) examined 72 parent–child dyads and found that parents' attitudes toward aggressive behavior predicted their children's aggressive behavior. It is likely that parents either model or communicate—directly or indirectly—norms regarding aggressive retaliation and coping. In the relational aggression literature, researchers have rarely explored parents' perceptions of relationally aggressive behaviors or parents' responses to their child's use of relational aggression (for a brief discussion, see Sheridan et al. 2003; Underwood et al. 2006).

However, parents likely influence the way children learn to cope with the stress associated with experiencing relational aggression.

Scholars argue that the covert nature of relational aggression among children might be an impediment to an adult's capacity to identify children who are relationally aggressive and their victims (McEvoy et al. 2003; Ostrov and Crick 2005). It may be that adults do not lack the capacity to identify relational aggression, instead, it may be that they do not perceive these behaviors as harmful to their children. It is also possible that parents view relational aggression as a normative social experience that all children go through—one which will naturally stop without adult intervention (Bigsby 2002; Bradshaw et al. 2007; Mishna et al. 2006). These views clearly reflect a lack of understanding of the stress that relationally aggressive behaviors may cause some children (Werner et al. 2006; Yoon and Kerber 2003), and the impact of relational aggression on social–emotional problems (Card et al. 2008).

When a child discloses experiences with relational aggression to his/her parent, the way in which the parent sympathizes, reacts, and intervenes will greatly influence the child's perceptions of the aggressive behavior (Werner et al. 2006). In a qualitative study of parents' and children's perceptions of the child's experience of aggressive behavior, Mishna et al. (2006) revealed that when there were discrepancies between the children's and parent's perceptions, the adults tended to minimize or invalidate the child's experience. This was especially true in the instance of teasing, name-calling, and put-downs, where the parents perceived these behaviors as normal or harmless. In order to better understand how children and their parents perceive relational aggression we must gather information from both perspectives (Park et al. 2005). Such research is critical for identifying strategies parents can employ to help their children cope with relational aggression among close friends.

With regard to potential gender differences, there is an ongoing debate in the literature regarding sex differences in the use of relational aggression and its effects on children's social–emotional functioning (Card et al. 2008; Underwood 2004). The prevailing opinion in the literature has been that girls more commonly engage in and are more likely to be victimized by relational aggression than boys, whereas the opposite is true for physical aggression (Crick 1997). However, a recent meta-analysis by Card et al. (2008) found limited evidence of sex differences in the use of relational aggression among children and adolescents (also see Scheithauer et al. 2006; Underwood 2004). Furthermore, some researchers have posited that girls are more sensitive to and distressed by relational aggression than boys (Crick 1997; Crick et al. 1996). Related research on

children's coping strategies suggests that there are sex differences in the way children cope with peer difficulties. For example, when faced with social stressors, girls tend to use assertive strategies (e.g., seek social support), whereas boys may be more likely to use avoidance strategies (Camodeca and Goossens 2005; Eschenbeck et al. 2007; Hampel and Petermann 2005). Taken together, the extant research suggests that the child's sex would be an important factor to consider when examining the way in which children cope with relational aggression.

The current study investigated parent/child perceptions of children's experience with relational aggression within close friendships and the efforts employed to help them cope with these experiences. The data for this study come from a sample of urban primarily African American children and their parents—a population in which the issue of relational aggression has rarely been examined. In light of prior research suggesting potential sex differences in both the experience of relational aggression and coping (e.g., Crick 1997; Eschenbeck et al. 2007; Sandstrom 2004), we also explored for sex differences in these associations.

We first examined the children's friendship characteristics, hypothesizing that there would be significant sex differences in the characteristics of the children's close friendships. We then examined children and parents' beliefs about relational aggression and their perception of the harm associated with being a victim of relationally aggressive behavior within close friendships. We also explored concordance within parent–child dyads in their beliefs about relational aggression and the harm associated with being a victim of verbal, physical, and relational aggression in their children's close friendships. Consistent with prior research indicating discrepancies between children's and adults' perceptions of relational aggression (Mishna et al. 2006; Werner et al. 2006), we hypothesized that parents would underestimate the harm of relational aggression. Based on prior research suggesting that relational aggression is perceived as more common among girls (Crick 1997), we anticipated that the discrepancy would be strongest among the parents of boys and their sons. Another aim was to examine children and parents' perceptions of the coping strategies the children were most likely to use when experiencing relational aggression. Consistent with research by Eschenbeck et al. (2007), we hypothesized that girls would use more active coping strategies, whereas boys would use more avoidant coping strategies. Finally, we examined the children's support seeking behavior when they experienced relational aggression. We investigated concordance in children and parents' perceptions of the types of adults (e.g., parents, teachers) the children would seek support from when relationally victimized.

Method

Participants

Fifty-four children and a parent/guardian (referred to as parents) participated in the current study. Children enrolled in fourth and fifth grade classrooms at five public schools located in urban low-income neighborhoods in a large metropolitan city within a mid-eastern state participated. Approximately half of the participating children were female (53.7%). The parents were predominantly mothers (81.5%), fathers (13.0%), and other relatives/guardians (e.g., aunts, grandmothers) (5.5%). Eighty-two percent of the child and parent participants were African American, 13.0% were White, 3.7% identified themselves as Latino(a)/Hispanic, and the remaining participants identified themselves as Other/mixed (both the parent and the children reported the same race/ethnicity). Fifty-one percent of the children were age ten (Range = 9–11, $M = 9.96$, $SD = .70$).

Measures

Demographic questionnaire. Parents completed a brief demographic questionnaire that inquired about their relationship to the child (e.g., mother, father, aunt) and their race/ethnicity. Similarly, children completed a brief demographic questionnaire that inquired about their sex, birth date, grade, and race/ethnicity.

Friendships and relational victimization. Children responded to a series of questions about the sex and age of their close friends, their satisfaction with their friendships, and whether they experienced relational aggression within their friendships (see Table 1) (Waasdorp et al. 2009). We constructed a series of parallel items for parents, in which they reported their perceptions of their child's friendships and experiences with relational aggression.

Beliefs about relational aggression. Three items assessed the children's beliefs about relational aggression (Waasdorp et al. 2009). The items assessed whether they perceived that many children experience relational aggression within close friendships (0 = no, 1 = yes); their perception of the frequency with which relational aggression occurs within children's friendships (1 = rarely, 2 = sometimes, 3 = often); and the perceived sex of the children who are more likely to experience relational aggression within friendships (1 = mostly girls, 2 = mostly boys, 3 = both boys and girls). Parents responded to three parallel questions regarding their perceptions of relational aggression that occurs within children's friendships.

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Table 1 Participants' friendship characteristics by sex

Friendship characteristics	Boys (n = 25)	Girls (n = 29)	Parents of boys (n = 25)	Parents of girls (n = 29)
*Sex of close friends**				
All or mostly girls	10.3%	89.7%		
All or mostly boys	80.0%	20.0%		
Size of group[NS]				
1–2 Friends	20.0%	17.2%		
3–4 Friends	12.0%	37.9%		
5 Or more friends	68.0%	44.8%		
Age of friends[NS]				
Most or all same age	60.0%	65.5%		
Not the same age	40.0%	34.5%		
Older[b]	72.7%	80.0%		
Younger[b]	27.3%	20.0%		
Experience relational aggression within their friendships[NS]				
Yes	80.0%	79.3%	76.0%	89.7%
No	20.0%	20.7%	24.0%	10.3%
Happy with friendships[a]	.96 (.84)	.69 (.85)	1.40 (.87)	.93 (.70)

Chi-square test indicating significant sex difference

NS Chi-square test results indicate non-significant group differences

* $p < .001$

[a] Values presented are means with standard deviations in parentheses. An ANOVA indicated a significant difference between parents and children, and between boys and girls

[b] Indicates responses among children reporting that their friends were not the same age

aggression that occurred within their close friendships was assessed using the *Indirect, Social, and Relational Aggression scale* (ISRA; Coyne et al. 2006). Children rated the harmfulness of 28 different aggressive behaviors, which for the purpose of this study, were specified to have occurred between close friends. Similarly, the parents rated how they thought their child would perceive each behavior. The ISRA was originally developed using a factor analytic procedure, which indicated a three-factor solution (Coyne et al. 2006). Sixteen of the items pertained to relational aggression (e.g., being gossiped about behind their back, being left out of the group or conversation on purpose, having someone try to get other people in the group to dislike them), six depicted verbal aggression (e.g., being called a mean name, being yelled at), and six were physically aggressive behaviors (e.g., bitten, hit, or punched). For each behavior, the participant responded using a Likert scale from one (*NOT feel sad or hurt at all*) to four (*would feel REALLY sad or hurt*) (Coyne et al. 2006). Utilizing the same scoring procedures as the authors of the measure, subscale scores were created for relationally aggressive behaviors (16-item $\alpha_{child} = .88$; $\alpha_{parent} = .90$), physically aggressive behaviors (6-item $\alpha_{child} = .89$; $\alpha_{parent} = .94$), and verbally aggressive behaviors (6-item $\alpha_{child} = .79$; $\alpha_{parent} = .83$). Consistent with previous research (Coyne

et al. 2006) all three subscales of the ISRA had high internal consistencies.

Coping with relational aggression. Participants completed a modified version of the *Survey for Coping with Rejection Experiences* (SCORE; Sandstrom 2004), which is a self-report measure of strategies used to cope with the experience of relational aggression. The original *SCORE* included brief vignettes depicting situations of direct rejection between peers but did not specify the nature of the peer relationship. The measure was adapted in the current study to assess how children perceived relationally aggressive behaviors specifically within the context of their close friendships. The researcher administering the measure read aloud two brief vignettes depicting a relationally aggressive friend (i.e., "Imagine that you are standing by yourself in the hallway at school. Then, some of your close friends walk by. They look at you, whisper something to each other, laugh, and ignore you" and "Imagine that you just found out that your close friend gossiped or spread rumors about you behind your back"). The children were asked to reflect on both scenarios when answering each question, which were designed to elicit their coping actions in response to a relationally aggressive friend. The parents were asked to rate how they perceived their child would cope with the situations. Responses were obtained using a

Likert scale ranging from 1 (*I don't do this at all/my child doesn't do this at all*) to 4 (*I do this a lot/my child does this a lot*). We calculated scores for each of the four subscales, which were originally identified through factor analysis by Sandstrom ([2004]). Ten items depicted active coping (e.g., "Tell them they are making me feel bad"; α_{child} = .73; α_{parent} = .63), 7 items depicted aggressive coping (e.g., "Tease them back"; α_{child} = .57; α_{parent} = .76), 5 items depicted denial coping (e.g., "Tell myself it doesn't really matter very much"; α_{child} = .51; α_{parent} = .58), and 5 items depicted ruminative/avoidance coping strategies (e.g., "Keep thinking about it"; α_{child} = .53; α_{parent} = .56).

Support seeking. Both parents and children responded to a series of three questions regarding the adults that the children would seek support from when experiencing relational aggression. Specifically, children responded to three questions which asked them if they were to experience relational aggression within their close friendships how often would they go to a parent, a teacher, and another adult (e.g., older cousin, aunt or uncle) for help or support. The children indicated on a four-point Likert scale the frequency with which they would seek support from each of the three sources. Similarly, parents responded to three parallel questions regarding the frequency with which they perceived their child would seek support from a parent, a teacher, and another adult.

Procedure

All participants recruited to participate in the current study were from a larger study of relational aggression among children (see Waasdorp et al. [2009] for details). Of the original sample of 126 children, 54 parents agreed to participate in the parent survey (43.0%). All child and parent participants were informed in writing that the purpose of the study was "to gain an understanding of children's close friendships, their feelings about disagreements with their friends, and how they handle these situations." Participating children were administered the survey materials at school in a group format. The lead researcher read aloud each question while the students read along and privately indicated their answers on the written response sheet. Parents completed the study materials and returned it to the researcher using the provided, stamped, self-addressed envelope. Participating students received a small incentive (i.e., a small toy ball with a value of less than one dollar). A lottery drawing for a single $25 gift card was used as an incentive for participating parents. All parents provided written consent, and youth provided written assent. This study was approved by the University Human Subjects Review Board and the school district.

Overview of Analyses

First, we examined possible gender differences in the children's friendship characteristics using Chi-Square and ANOVA. We then tested for sex differences in the children's beliefs about relational aggression and perception of the harm of relational, physical, and verbal scales of the *ISRA* using *t*-tests. For comparisons between children and parents on these measures of perceived harm, we dichotomized each scale and calculated percent concordance and kappa coefficients.

Next, to assess sex differences in the children and parents' perceptions of coping strategy *t*-tests and a MANOVA were used. To address our final aim, *t*-tests were conducted to explore sex differences on the children's reports of who they would seek support from. For comparisons between children and parents, we dichotomized each scale to calculate percent concordance and kappa coefficients. All analyses were conducted using *SPSS* version 16.

Results

Friendship Characteristics

We first examined the children's friendship characteristics, and as hypothesized, we found some sex differences (see Table 1). The majority of boys (80.0%) reported that their close friends were all or mostly boys, whereas the majority of girls (89.7%) reported that their close friends were all or mostly girls, χ^2 (4, 54) = 26.64, p < .05. The majority of boys (68.0%) reported that they had five or more individuals they considered as close friends, whereas 45.0% of the girls reported that they had five or more individuals they considered as close friends; however, there was no statistically significant difference between the boys and girls on this item. Sixty percent of boys and 65% of girls stated that most or all of their friends were the same age. A 2 (Child or Parent) × 2 (Sex) analysis of variance (ANOVA) on the average perception of happiness within close friendships indicated a significant difference between boys and girls as well as children and parents. Parents perceived their children were happier than the children reported (M_{parent} = 1.14, SD = .81; M_{child} = .814, SD = .85), F (1, 3) = 4.70, p < .05, and boys reported being happier with their close friends than did the girls (M_{boys} = .96, SD = .84; M_{girls} = .68, SD = .85), F (1, 3) = 5.53, p < .05. However, there was not a significant interaction between parent/child and the child's sex. See Table 1 for additional information on the friendship characteristics.

Table 2 Beliefs about relational aggression among children and parents

Question	Boys (n = 25)	Girls (n = 29)	Parents of boys (POB) (n = 25)	Parents of girls (POG) (n = 29)	Concordance (kappa)
Does relational aggression happen between friends your child's age?[NS]					
Yes	68.0%	72.4%	80.0%	86.2%	
No or not sure	32.0%	27.6%	20.0%	13.8%	
				POB & boys	72.2% (.286)
				POG & girls	72.4% (.387*)
How often does relational aggression occur between friends your child's age?[NS]					
Rarely	8.0%	13.8%	4.0%	6.9%	
Sometimes	60.0%	55.2%	28.0%	44.8%	
Often	32.0%	31.0%	68.0%	48.3%	
				POB & Boys	24.0% (−.243)
				POG & Girls	30.0% (−.162)
The sex of the children who experience relational aggression more often?[NS]					
Mostly girls	8.0%	20.7%	20.0%	37.9%	
Mostly boys	16.0%	3.4%	4.0%	0.0%	
Both boys and girls	76.0%	75.9%	76.0%	62.1%	
				POB & boys	76.0% (.400*)
				POG & girls	51.7% (−.058)

NS Chi-square test results indicate non-significant group differences

* $p < .05$

Beliefs About Relational Aggression

Consistent with our second aim, we examined the children's and parents' beliefs about relational aggression (see Table 2). Sixty-eight percent of boys and 72.4% of girls reported that relationally aggressive behaviors happen to children their age, but this effect did not reach statistical significance. Similarly, 80.0% of the parents of boys and 86.2% of the parents of girls reported that relationally aggressive behaviors were a common occurrence between friends ($p > .05$). With regard to the perceived frequency of relationally aggressive behavior in close friendships, 60.0% of the boys and 55.2% of the girls reported that they thought that relational aggression occurred within close friendships "sometimes", whereas only 28.0% of parents of boys and 44.8% of parents of girls reported the behavior occurred "sometimes". Sixty-eight percent of the parents of boys and 48.3% of the parents of girls perceived that relational aggression between friends occurred often.

When asked whether boys, girls, or both boys and girls were most likely to experience relational aggression in their close friendships there were no significant sex differences; the vast majority of children reported that it affected boys and girls equally (76% of boys; 75.9% of girls) (see Table 2). Among those who selected another response, 85.7% of the girls and 33.3% of the boys thought

that relational aggression is experienced more often by girls (result not reported in table). Seventy-six percent of parents of the boys and 62.1% of the parents of girls stated that boys and girls equally experience relational aggression within their friendships (see Table 2). Among parents who selected another response, 83.3% of parents of boys and 100% of parents of girls thought that relational aggression is experienced more often by girls (result not reported in table).

We then examined concordance between the parents' and the children's beliefs about relational aggression (see Table 2). Boys and their parents (72.2%; $k = .286$, $p > .05$) as well as girls and their parents (72.4%; $k = .387$, $p < .05$) were mostly in agreement that relationally aggressive behaviors occur between close friends. However, just 24% of boys and their parents agreed that relational aggression occurs between close friends 'often' ($k = −.243$, $p > .05$), whereas just 30% of girls and their parents agreed that relational aggression occurs between close friends 'sometimes' ($k = −.162$, $p > .05$). When asked which sex was more likely to experience relational aggression within their close friendships, 76.0% of the boys and their parents were in agreement (72.4%; $k = .400$, $p < .05$), but just 51.7% of the girls and their parents ($k = −.058$, $p > .05$) were in agreement reporting that both boys and girls experience relational aggression within their close friendships.

Perceived Harmfulness of Relational Aggression

We then examined children's and parents' perceptions of the harmfulness associated with relationally, physically, and verbally aggressive behaviors occurring between close friends. For descriptive purposes, average ratings for the items on the ISRA (Coyne et al. 2006) were ranked by the value of the mean ratings. See Table 3 for means and standard deviations for the three highest ranked items for girls, boys, parents of girls, and parents of boys. The three most harmful aggressive behaviors by a friend for girls were 'having a friend tell their secrets', 'having their friendship with someone else being broken up on purpose', and 'having rumors spread about them'. Boys reported that 'having their friendship with someone else being broken-up on purpose', 'having a friend tell their secrets', and 'having their property destroyed by a friend behind their back' were the most harmful aggressive behaviors a friend could do. Parents of girls reported that their daughter would perceive 'being made fun of by a friend in front of other people so they look stupid', 'having rumors spread about them', and 'finding mean notes or messages written about them by a friend' as the most harmful aggressive behaviors a friend could do. Parents of boys reported that their sons would perceive 'having their property destroyed by a friend in front of their face', 'having their property destroyed by a friend behind their back', and 'being bitten' as the most harmful aggressive behaviors a friend could do.

Independent samples t-tests were conducted to examine possible sex differences in the children's scores on the relational, physical, and verbal scales of the ISRA (see Table 4). We applied a Bonferroni correction to adjust for the multiple tests (i.e., adjusted p-value = 9 tests/ .05 = .006). Girls ($M = 2.56$, SD = .60) tended to rate relationally aggressive behaviors as more harmful than the boys ($M = 2.06$, SD = .67), t (52) = 2.81, $p < .01$, however, this effect did not reach statistical significance using the Bonferroni corrected p-value. Similarly, girls tended to report that physically aggressive behaviors were more harmful ($M = 2.69$, SD = 1.02) than boys ($M = 2.13$, SD = 1.07), t (52) = 2.00, $p = .05$; however, this effect did not reach statistical significance using the corrected p-value. Furthermore, parents did not differ significantly by the sex of their child in their ratings of relational, physical, or verbal scales. Using matched t-tests, we did observe significant differences between boys and their parents' perceptions of the harm associated with the relational aggression scale t (24) = 3.64, $p < .001$, physical t (24) = 4.31, $p < .001$, and there was a trend for the verbal aggression scales t (24) = 3.27, $p < .01$, such that, consistent with our hypothesis, boys tended to perceive the behaviors to be less harmful than did their parents. However, girls and their parents did not significantly differ on their reports of perceived harm associated with the three forms of aggression. See Table 4 for means of perceived harm of relational, physical, and verbal aggression by sex.

In order to explore concordance between parents' and children's perceptions of harm on the relational, physical, and verbal scales of the ISRA, each scale was dichotomized using a median split of the four Likert items into either low perceived harm or high perceived harm (see Table 5 for details and kappa coefficients). With regard to girls, a little over half of the parents of girls were concordant with their daughter's ratings of perceived harm for relational

Table 3 Rank-order of perceived harm of aggressive behaviors among children and parents

Item	M	SD
Girls		
1. Telling secrets	3.14	.92
2. Friendship broken up on purpose	3.00	1.03
3. Rumors spread about them	2.89	1.08
Boys		
1. Friendship broken up on purpose	2.60	1.25
2. Telling secrets	2.60	1.08
3. Property destroyed behind back	2.52	1.35
Parents of girls		
1. Made fun of	3.38	.77
2. Rumors spread about them	3.31	.66
3. Finding mean notes or messages	3.28	.84
Parents of boys		
1. Property destroyed in front of face	3.36	1.04
2. Property destroyed behind back	3.36	.99
3. Being bitten	3.32	1.02

Averages for the items on the ISRA ranked by the value of the mean ratings

Table 4 Means and standard deviations of the ISRA among children and parents

Subscale	M	SD		M	SD
Relational aggression					
Boys	2.07	.67	POB	2.78	.55*[a]
Girls	2.56	.60	POG	2.84	.55
Physical aggression					
Boys	2.13	1.07	POB	3.28	.95*[a]
Girls	2.70	1.02	POG	3.07	.98
Verbal aggression					
Boys	2.06	.95	POB	2.88	.62*[a]
Girls	2.29	.76	POG	1.63	.90

* Bonferroni adjusted p-value is $p < .006$

[a] Chi-square difference test between parents of boys and boys

Table 5 Perceived harm of aggressive behaviors between friends

Subscale	Boys ($n = 25$)	Girls ($n = 29$)	Parents of boys (POB) ($n = 25$)	Parents of girls (POG) ($n = 29$)	Concordance	Kappa[NS]
Relational aggression						
Low harm	68.1%	48.3%	24.0%	13.8%		
High harm	32.0%	51.7%	76.0%	86.2%		
			POB & boys		32.0%	−.146
			POG & girls		51.7%	.010
Physical aggression						
Low harm	68.0%	41.4%	20.0%	24.1%		
High harm	32.0%	58.6%	80.0%	75.9%		
			POB & boys		52.0%	.211
			POG & girls		62.1%	.167
Verbal aggression						
Low harm	60.0%	69.0%	28.0%	44.8%		
High harm	40.0%	31.0%	72.0%	55.2%		
			POB & boys		43.4%	−.029
			POG & girls		62.1%	.270

A median split was used to create the low harm and high harm groups from the Likert scale ratings of perceived harm when experiencing relational aggression; one (*NOT feel sad or hurt at all*) to four (*would feel REALLY sad or hurt*)

NS indicates all kappas were non-significant

aggression (51.7%, $k = .010$, $p > .05$) (i.e., both parents and girls perceived relational aggression to be above the median in harmfulness), whereas 62.1% ($k = .167$, $p > .05$) of these dyads were concordant for physical (i.e., both above the median in harmfulness) and 62.1% ($k = .270$, $p > .05$) of dyads were concordant for verbal aggression (i.e., both below the median in harmfulness). As reported in Table 5, parents of boys, however, were even less concordant with their sons' ratings of the perceived harm associated with the different forms of aggression (concordance rates of 32.0%, $k = -.146$, $p > .05$; for relational, 43.4%, $k = .211$, $p > .05$; for physical, and 52.0%, $k = -.029$, $p > .05$; for verbal aggression). Taken together, these findings suggest that parents and their children were largely discordant in their perception of the harm associated with the different forms of aggression, and

the discrepancies were greatest among boys and their parents.

Coping with Relational Aggression

Consistent with our third aim of the current study, we assessed via the *SCORE* the children's and parents' perceptions of the most commonly employed coping strategy when experiencing relational aggression (see Table 6). Children tended to score highest on the ruminative/avoidance coping strategies ($M = 2.76$, SD $= .53$), followed by denial ($M = 2.55$, SD $= .67$), active coping ($M = 2.32$, SD $= .52$), and aggressive coping strategies ($M = 2.25$, SD $= .68$). Parents perceived that their children coped with a relationally aggressive close friend by employing denial coping strategies ($M = 2.55$, SD $= .58$), followed by

Table 6 Perceived coping strategy reported by parents and children

Coping scale[a]	Boys ($n = 25$)	Girls ($n = 29$)	Parents of boys ($n = 25$)	Parents of girls ($n = 29$)
Active	2.36 (.54)	2.30 (.51)	2.39 (.43)	2.29 (.39)
Aggressive	2.35 (.73)	2.16 (.65)	2.15 (.59)	1.92 (.48)
Denial	2.50 (.69)	2.60 (.67)	2.55 (.57)	2.55 (.60)
Ruminative	2.71 (.61)	2.81 (.46)	2.42 (.50)	2.54 (.47)

MANOVA indicated an overall significant difference between parents and children, Wilk's $\Lambda = .898$, $F (4, 101) = 2.85$, $\eta^2 = .102$, $p < .05$. The follow-up univariate tests indicated significant differences on the ruminative/avoidance subscale, $F (1, 104) = 7.75$, $\eta^2 = .069$, $p < .01$, and a marginally significant difference on aggressive coping strategies, $F (1, 104) = 3.49$, $\eta^2 = .032$, $p = .06$

[a] Values presented in table are means with standard deviations in parentheses

ruminative/avoidance ($M = 2.49$, SD $= .49$), active coping ($M = 2.34$, SD $= .40$), and aggressive coping strategies ($M = 2.03$, SD $= .54$). A 2 (Child or Parent) × 2 (Sex) multivariate analysis of variance (MANOVA) on the four coping subscale scores (active, aggressive, denial, ruminative/avoidance) indicated a significant difference between children and parents in their perceptions of type of coping strategy used, Wilk's $\Lambda = .898$, $F (4, 101) = 2.85$, $\eta^2 = .102$, $p < .05$. Contrary to our hypothesis, however, there were no significant differences in the overall mean coping strategy subscale scores by the child's sex. The follow-up univariate tests indicated that children scored higher than their parents on the ruminative/avoidance subscale, $F (1, 104) = 7.75$, $\eta^2 = .069$, $p < .01$. There also was a marginally significant effect for aggressive coping strategies, suggesting that children reported using more aggressive coping strategies than the parents perceived, $F (1, 104) = 3.49$, $\eta^2 = .032$, $p = .06$.

Support Seeking

The final aim addressed the children's and parents' perceptions of the children's support seeking behaviors. Specifically, we assessed which types of adults (parents, teachers, and other adults) the children would seek help and support from when relationally victimized by a friend; parents responded to parallel questions regarding parents, teachers, and other adults. On average, boys reported they were more likely to seek support from other adults ($M = 2.40$, SD $= 1.08$), followed by a teacher ($M = 2.32$, SD $= 1.14$) and then a parent ($M = 2.12$, SD $= 1.05$), $t (24) = 11.11$, $p < .001$. The girls, however, reported they

were most likely to seek support from a teacher ($M = 2.21$, SD $= 1.08$), followed by other adults ($M = 2.17$, SD $= 1.08$), and then a parent ($M = 1.93$, SD $= 1.03$), $t (28) = 10.99$, $p < .001$.

In order to explore concordance between parents' and children's perceptions of support, each item was dichotomized using a median split of the four Likert items into either Yes or No (see Table 7 for percentages, concordance and kappa coefficients for support items by sex). Whereas just 35% of the girls and just 44% of the boys reported they would go to their parent for support when victimized, 89.7% of the parents of girls and 76% of the parents of boys reported that their child would come to them for support. Review of the concordance data indicated that boys and their parents were concordant in just 52% ($k = .096$, $p > .05$) of the dyads, with 36% of dyads agreeing they would ask for parent support, and 16% of dyads agreeing they would not ask for parent support. Similarly, girls and their parents were concordant in just 44.8% ($k = .115$, $p > .05$) of dyads, with 34.5% of dyads agreeing they would ask for parent support, 10.3% of dyads agreeing they would not ask for parent support. For boys, the majority of the discordance occurred when the parent reported the son would come to them for support but the child said he would not. For girls and their parents, 100% of the discordance occurred when the parent reported the daughter would come to them for support but the child said she would not.

Children and parents also responded to questions regarding teacher support. Forty-four percent of boys and 56.0% of girls said they would seek support from teachers when experiencing relational aggression. Only 28.0% of

Table 7 Perception of support among children and parents

Question	Boys (n = 25)	Girls (n = 29)	Parents of boys (POB) (n = 25)	Parents of girls (POG) (n = 29)	Concordance	Kappa[NS]
Would you go to a parent for support?[a]						
Yes	44.0%	34.5%	76.0%	89.7%		
				POB & boys	52.0%	.096
				POG & Girls	44.8%	.115
Would you go to a teacher for support?						
Yes	44.0%	56.0%	28.0%	27.6%		
				POB & Boys	44.0%	−.014
				POG & Girls	44.8%	.039
Would you go to another adult for support? (*older cousin, aunt or uncle*)						
Yes	44.0%	38.0%	60.0%	65.5%		
				POB & Boys	52.0%	−.094
				POG & Girls	58.6%	−.027

NS indicates all kappas were non-significant

[a] A median split was used to create the Yes and No groups from the Likert scale ranging from one (*I don't do this at all/my child doesn't do this at all*) to four (*I do this a lot/my child does this a lot*)

parents of boys and 27.6% of parents of girls reported that their child would go to a teacher for support. Forty-four percent ($k = -.094$, $p > .05$) of the boys and their parents and 44.8% ($k = .039$, $p > .05$) of girls and their parents were concordant in their responses to the item regarding teacher support.

Finally, children were asked if they would go to another adult (e.g., older cousin, aunt) for support, and 44.0% of boys and 38.0% of girls said yes. However, the majority of parents of boys (60.0%) and parents of girls (65.5%) thought their child would go to another adult for support if their child was a victim of a relationally aggressive friend. Fifty-two percent ($k = -.094$, $p > .05$) of the boys and their parents were concordant in their responses to the items regarding support from another adult; the highest discordance occurred when the child said he would not go to another adult, yet the parents perceived the child would (36.0%). Similarly, 58.6% ($k = -.027$, $p > .05$) of the girls and their parents were concordant; the highest discordance occurred when the child said she would not go to another adult but the parents perceived the child would (41.0%). Taken together, these data suggest that parents and their children were largely discordant in their perception of the children's support seeking behaviors following relational aggression.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine children and parents' beliefs about relational aggression and the use of coping strategies when experiencing relational aggression between close friends. Whereas previous research on urban youth has primarily focused on physical forms of aggression, our findings suggest that there may be relatively high rates of relational aggression occurring within urban settings. In fact, the majority of children reported that they had experienced relational aggression within their close friendships; likewise, parents reported that the majority of their children experienced relational aggression within their close friendships. Parents' perception that relational aggression occurred more frequently between close friends as compared to the children's reports suggests that the parents recognize that relational aggression is common and perhaps normative (Craig et al. 2000; Mishna et al. 2006; Yoon and Kerber 2003). While it is promising to see that parents recognize the prevalence of relational aggression, it is critical that they not underestimate the potential impact that relational aggression can have on children's social–emotional development and well-being (Bigsby 2002; Bradshaw et al. 2007; Card et al. 2008; Mishna et al. 2006).

Based on prior research suggesting that girls would perceive relational, verbal, and physical aggression to be more harmful than boys (Coyne et al. 2006; Underwood 2003), we anticipated that girls would perceive aggressive behaviors as more harmful than boys; however, we found no significant sex differences in the students' perceived harmfulness of the different forms of aggression. In fact, both boys and girls ranked a relationally aggressive behavior as the most harmful aggressive behavior a friend could do. This finding is consistent with the emerging research suggesting that there are fewer sex differences in children's response to relational aggression than originally thought (Card et al. 2008; Underwood 2004; cf Crick 1997). Furthermore, boys endorsed 'having their friendship broken-up on purpose' while girls endorsed 'a friend telling their secrets' most often. Conversely, parents of girls perceived a verbally aggressive behavior ('made fun of by a friend in front of other people so they look stupid') and parents of boys rated a physically aggressive behavior ('having their property destroyed by a friend in front of their face') as the most harmful aggressive behavior a friend could do.

These findings suggest that some parents may assume relationally aggressive behaviors are not as stressful as children perceive them to be. Accordingly, the parent's reaction to the child's experience of a relationally aggressive friend will likely be shaped by these perceptions (Mishna et al. 2006; Werner et al. 2006). Parents may intervene only in a situation that they assess as detrimental, which may put boys at increased risk for developing subsequent behavioral or social–emotional problems. Due to a stigma associated with victimization among African-American youth (Sawyer et al. 2008) and a cultural emphasis for males in Western society to be tough and less concerned with relationships, if boys have difficulty within friendships they may feel that they should not discuss these issues and parents may be less likely to intervene. Parents' sex-based beliefs about who is involved in relational aggression may influence the way in which they intervene with their children. These findings suggest that prevention and intervention efforts should be sex and culturally sensitive in order to more effectively prevent extreme forms of relationally aggressive behaviors that occur between friends (Leff et al. 2007).

Whereas previous research on children's coping with peer difficulties has evinced sex differences in the way in which children cope with peer conflict (Camodeca and Goossens 2005; Eschenbeck et al. 2007), no sex differences emerged in the present study. Boys and girls both reported using ruminative/avoidance strategies most often when dealing with a relationally aggressive friend. However, parents underestimated their child's use of ruminative/avoidance strategies and tended to underestimate the use of aggressive strategies. Parents and their children were also largely discrepant in their perceptions of the children's

support seeking behaviors. Interestingly, the parents thought that their children would likely come to them for support yet, the mean scores indicated that girls would turn to teachers and the boys would seek support from other adults if they were a victim of a relationally aggressive friend. These findings suggest that teachers, parents, and other adults should receive training in how to talk with children about relational aggression. Preparing adults to respond to relationally victimized children in an empathic way may reduce the subsequent development of social–emotional problems and possibly break the vicious cycle of (retaliatory) relational aggression (Underwood 2003). Given that parents believe their child would come to them, perhaps parents should directly communicate this option and expectation to their children in a supportive and sensitive manner.

The present study examined a relatively understudied issue among a low-income, urban African American purposeful sample from the perspective of both parents and children; therefore, the extent to which these findings generalize to other samples is unknown. Like other researchers (e.g., Card et al. 2008; Crick 1997), we relied on children's self-reports of relational aggression. This is a common approach to examining children's victimization experiences, as parents, peers, or teachers may not be aware of and sensitive to victimization experiences across multiple contexts (Card et al. 2008). As a result, self-reports are typically considered the most valid source of information regarding victimization (Ladd and Kochenderfer-Ladd 2002). Furthermore, when the aggression is relational and by nature more covert, studies have shown that teachers and other observers may have a difficult time noticing when a child is victimized (Kochenderfer-Ladd and Pelletier 2008; Leff et al. 1999).

A strength of this study is the availability of data from both parents and children. While we were particularly interested in the participants' experience with and beliefs about aggression, future studies should consider linking self-report data with other sources of information, such as observational data, peer-report, or teacher-report of involvement in relational aggression and the children's subsequent adjustment. The majority of this sample was 10 years old, thus the extent to which these results generalize to children of other ages is unknown. Studies have shown that children use relational aggression starting as early as preschool (Burr et al. 2005; Crick and Nelson 2002), and the use of relational aggression may increase in frequency with age (Murray-Close et al. 2007). Therefore, longitudinal inquiries could further our understanding of children's friendships and how they cope with relationally aggressive friends in childhood and through adolescence.

Despite its previous use, the internal consistency values (i.e., alphas) on the subscales of the SCORE (Sandstrom

2004) were lower than expected. Although this is a potential limitation of the current study, it may also reflect the complex nature of coping and the need for additional research on children's coping strategies in different stressful situations (Compas et al. 2001; Skinner et al. 2003; Skinner and Zimmer-Gembeck 2007). The way in which a child copes in a particular instance of relational aggression may not be the way in which the child chooses to cope every time; this variation in coping may contribute to the observed heterogeneity in the pattern of responses on the coping measure (Streiner 2003a, b). More specifically, children's responses on the coping measure may have been symptomatic of the moment, and subject to how the children were feeling when they participated in this study. Moreover, children may choose to use several different coping strategies over a period of time or a number of strategies in tandem in order to cope with a particular stressor. Furthermore, it is difficult to compare findings on coping and to gain in-depth insights into this topic due to the multiplicity of definitions, categories, and styles of coping utilized in the research (Eschenbeck et al. 2007; Skinner et al. 2003; Skinner and Zimmer-Gembeck 2007). It is even more difficult to form conclusions about the effectiveness of different coping strategies employed by inner-city African American children due to the paucity of studies examining coping among this population (Greer 2007; Scarpa and Haden 2006; Tolan et al. 2002).

A major focus of the present study was the concordance in perceptions between parents and children. Although at times the concordance rates between parents and children were high, the kappa statistic did not reflect this agreement. Several scholars have noted similar discrepancies between the concordance rates and kappas when there are few response categories, the prevalence across categories is heavily skewed, and there is a small sample size (Hoehler 2000; Morris et al. 2008; Sim and Wright 2005). These challenges are all characteristic of the current study, and therefore, we interpret the kappa statistics with caution (Morris et al. 2008). Nevertheless, the available concordance data suggest several discrepancies between children and their parents, particularly in the way the children report coping with relational aggression and how the children report seeking support following an experience with relational aggression. Additional studies with larger samples of parent–child dyads are needed to determine the extent to which these patterns generalize to other samples and to identify factors that may predict these discrepancies (e.g., level of direct communication about relational aggression, parent's use of relational aggression).
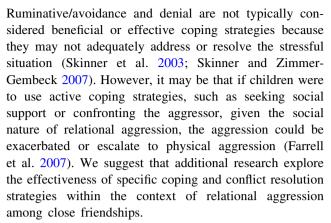
The results from this study suggest that relational aggression is likely a common experience among urban African America fifth graders. As a result, future studies on aggressive behaviors among inner-city youth should also

explore both physical *and* relational forms of aggression. Therefore, parents and other adults should be cognizant to intervene when they see physical and relational aggression (Burr et al. 2005; Mishna et al. 2006). Parents can also play a significant role in shaping how their children respond to relational aggression. Although not explicitly examined in the current study, parents should reflect on their own behavior and beliefs regarding aggressive retaliation and coping, as these behaviors and norms may be—either intentionally or unintentionally—modeled or communicated to their children. For example, parents' use of relational aggression toward their own friends, family members, and spouse may send the message to children that relational aggression is acceptable and appropriate (Bandura, 1977; Nelson et al. 2008; Solomon et al. 2008).

The current findings also highlight the importance of parent–child communication regarding conflict resolution and adaptive coping strategies. Recognizing that their children view relational aggression as harmful, parents should make conscious attempts to help their children cope effectively with this stressful experience. There also should be a greater emphasis on parent/child communication in preventive interventions (Gentzler et al. 2005; Power 2004; Valiente et al. 2004), whereby parents establish open channels of communication with their children to learn more about how their children perceive and cope with relational aggression. Furthermore, the sex of the child and the sex of the parent may influence the intervention strategy. For example, in the current study, parents (most of whom were mothers) and boys were the most likely to be discordant in their perceptions of harm and support. Examining this issue within a larger sample of father/son dyads may help us better understand the extent to which fathers may be more consistent with their son's perception of harm and support. These results also remind us that parents are not alone in this process, for the girls often reported turning to teachers and boys reported seeking support from other adults when they experienced relational aggression. Consequently, it is critical that parents, teachers, and other adults who are in frequent contact with children receive information—and when possible training—about how to talk with children about relational aggression, conflict resolution, and effective coping strategies (Bradshaw et al. 2007).

The current findings also suggest a need for further research to determine the most effective and contextually appropriate coping strategies that should be used when experiencing relational aggression. For example, the children in the present study reported to most frequently use ruminative/avoidance strategies to cope with relational aggression. Similarly, the parents perceived that children were utilizing ruminative/avoidance and denial strategies more than active and aggressive strategies.

Ruminative/avoidance and denial are not typically considered beneficial or effective coping strategies because they may not adequately address or resolve the stressful situation (Skinner et al. 2003; Skinner and Zimmer-Gembeck 2007). However, it may be that if children were to use active coping strategies, such as seeking social support or confronting the aggressor, given the social nature of relational aggression, the aggression could be exacerbated or escalate to physical aggression (Farrell et al. 2007). We suggest that additional research explore the effectiveness of specific coping and conflict resolution strategies within the context of relational aggression among close friendships.

Although to our knowledge, there are no randomized trials of programs which aim to prevent relational aggression by targeting parents, scholars suggest that early parental involvement and communication can have a strong impact on a children's social development and peer relationships (Beane 2008; Prothrow-Stith and Spivak 2005). Consequently, it would be beneficial for prevention and intervention efforts to emphasize parent/child communication starting at an early age (Solomon et al. 2008), whereby parents help children to develop effective social skills, empathy, and conflict resolution skills (Leff et al. 2007), as well as promote the formation of positive and supportive friendships (Garrity et al. 2004). It is critical that parents recognize the importance of positive friendships from an early age and help their children form and sustain prosocial friendships without employing relational aggression. Providing children the skills they need to effectively resolve peer conflicts, be a good friend, and have satisfying, positive friendships will likely reduce relational aggression and result in broad range of positive social–emotional outcomes for children (Garrity et al. 2004).

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