

Maternal Parenting Behaviors and Coping in African American Children: The Influence of Gender and Stress

Noni K. Gaylord-Harden · Cynthia L. Campbell ·
Christine M. Kesselring

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Abstract We examined the effects of maternal parenting behavior on coping strategies in 200 low-income, African American children (mean age = 10.41) and the role of child gender and economic stress on these effects. Participants completed measures of perceived economic stressors, coping strategies and perceptions of mothers' parenting behaviors. Regression analyses demonstrated a main effect for maternal support on active coping and support-seeking coping. For boys, hierarchical regression analyses revealed that maternal support and economic stressors interacted to predict active and support-seeking coping. For girls, there was a significant interaction between maternal psychological control and economic stressors in the prediction of avoidant coping. Our results add to the literature on the effects of parent–child relationships on children's responses to stress.

Keywords Coping strategies · Maternal support · Maternal control · African American children · Economic stress

Introduction

Most efforts to understand children's coping behavior have focused on identifying links between coping and adjustment (Fields and Prinz 1997), with coping shown to be predictive of numerous indices of psychosocial functioning (Compas et al. 2001). These findings have increased our understanding of which coping strategies to target in

interventions designed to promote more adaptive functioning. However, the identification of *determinants* of coping also has implications for applied work by aiding our understanding of the contextual processes that influence and maintain the use of coping strategies. According to the ecological systems theory (Bronfenbrenner 1979), the contextual influences in the lives of children include numerous factors at various levels of proximity. The family is regarded as the most important contextual factor for understanding coping in childhood (Compas et al. 1992). Nevertheless, the dearth of research on the association between family processes and coping, specifically in African American youth, suggests that this issue warrants increased attention.

In numerous definitions, coping has been conceptualized as adapting to one's environment. The influence of parental behavior on children's adaptation to stress has its roots in attachment theory (Bowlby 1969), which established that young children who perceived more supportive behavior from their mothers used active strategies in adapting to their environment (Ainsworth et al. 1978). According to the attachment theory, children with warm, supportive parents develop internal working models of relationships that encourage them to seek support, assistance, or guidance, and consequently, they are more likely to utilize active, problem-solving strategies (Kliewer et al. 1994; Skinner and Wellborn 1994). Parental support, conceptualized as the warmth or acceptance that parents express towards their children (Bean et al. 2006), is also associated with coping behaviors in older children. Parental support and responsiveness is positively related to behavioral and cognitive problem solving coping, and inversely related to avoidance coping (Markstrom et al. 2000; McKernon et al. 2001; Wills et al. 1996; Wills and Cleary 1996). Additionally, youth who perceive a warm and accepting

N. K. Gaylord-Harden (✉) · C. L. Campbell · C. M. Kesselring
Department of Psychology, Loyola University Chicago, 1032 W.
Sheridan Rd., Chicago, IL 60660, USA
e-mail: ngaylor@luc.edu

relationship with their parents use more active and less avoidant coping strategies (Herman and McHale 1993; Kliewer et al. 1996; Smith et al. 2006). These positive parenting behaviors may provide a context that supports effective coping strategies, facilitates access to and encourages the use of helpful resources, or fosters a sense of competence to deal with stressors (Sandler et al. 1997).

In addition to parental support, parental control may also influence how children cope with stress. Parental control is often separated into two distinct types. Behavioral control involves the provision of regulation or structure through the use of rules and limit-setting; whereas, psychological control involves intrusion and manipulation through the use of guilt, love withdrawal, invalidation of feelings, and constrained verbal interactions (Bean et al. 2006). Parental efforts to use behavioral control are positively related to children's use of behavioral and cognitive problem-focused coping and fewer aggressive coping strategies (Hardy et al. 1993; Wills et al. 1996). However, characteristics of psychological control, such as problem communication in the parent–child relationship, parental withdrawal or rejection, and parental intrusiveness are related to more avoidant coping strategies and fewer support-seeking and problem-focused strategies (Jackson et al. 1998; Langrock et al. 2002; Steele et al. 1997).

In sum, when children perceive their parents to be warm and supportive, as well as firm and structured, they are more likely to make active attempts to solve their problems or seek assistance from others. Conversely, when children perceive their parents to be critical and intrusive or unlikely to communicate openly, they are more likely to avoid attempts to manage their problems or distract themselves from the problem. Studies establishing an association between parental characteristics and children's coping represent an important opportunity for continued research (Compas 1998). However, the samples in the coping literature, including those above, have been limited with regard to ethnicity and socioeconomic status (Compas et al. 2001).

Due to social inequalities, African American youth are more likely than other ethnic groups to experience poverty (McLoyd 1998) and are disproportionately exposed to poverty-related stressors (Wadsworth and Compas 2002). An examination of pathways between parenting and coping provides limited information for children at elevated risk if risk factors are not taken into account. Indeed, the effects of parenting behaviors can vary as the level of contextual risk varies (Gorman-Smith et al. 1999). Further, the stress-buffering view of social support (Cohen and Wills 1985) suggests that the protective effects of parental support on child coping may be strengthened at higher levels of stress. For example, in a sample of African American youth, parental support was protective at high levels of community violence

(Hammack et al. 2004). Examining the association between parenting and coping within the context of economic stress (i.e., examining poverty-related stress as a moderator) can provide evidence of “when” a relationship exists between parenting and coping or at which levels of stress the effects of parenting are strongest, which may have important implications for intervention efforts.

Most studies examining the effects of parenting in African American youth do not assess the influence of child gender (Mandara and Pike 2008). However, African American mothers may interact differently with their daughters versus their sons. African American mothers have been described as being overly protective of boys, but more firm with girls in an attempt to encourage more self-reliance (Hill 2001). In a study of African American families of children with sickle cell disease, mothers of male patients were more involved in the care of their child and more likely to view their child as fragile and vulnerable; whereas, mothers of female patients minimized the impact of the disease on their daughters and expected them to engage in routine activities (Hill and Zimmerman 1995). Similarly, other findings reveal that African American mothers use more psychological control and behavioral control with girls and more validation and support with boys (Smetana 2000; Smetana and Daddis 2002).

Whether or not these gender differences influence the association between maternal parenting behavior and children's coping remains to be determined. Only one study to date has assessed the impact of maternal parenting behaviors on youth coping separately for youth gender in a predominantly ethnic minority sample. Specifically, the association between maternal attachment and active coping was significant for adolescent males, but not for adolescent females (Gaylord-Harden et al. 2009). The findings suggest that warm, supportive relationships with mothers were important for males coping, but girls' use of coping was unaffected by their attachment to their mothers. African American girls use significantly higher levels of active, support-seeking coping than boys use (Chandra and Batada 2006; Gaylord-Harden et al. 2008; Tolan et al. 2002), and thus, maternal support may not be necessary to encourage coping strategies that girls are already more likely to use. In contrast, boys may benefit from maternal behaviors that encourage active and support-seeking coping strategies. Further, Gaylord-Harden et al. (2009) did not assess the effects of other types of parenting behavior, such as maternal control, on youth coping behaviors. Females are socialized to place a greater emphasis on interpersonal relationships (Eagly et al. 2000) and, therefore, maternal behaviors that disrupt the mother–child relationship, such as controlling through guilt and constrained verbal interactions, may be more salient for girls' ability to cope with stress than maternal support would be.

We sought to examine the effects of maternal support and control on the coping behaviors of low-income, African American children, extending the existing body of research on this topic to an underrepresented population. A second goal was to examine poverty-related stressors as a moderator of the relationship between parenting and coping. Finally, mothers occupy a key caregiving role in African American families (Nobles 1988), but the effects of mother–child relationships on child functioning may differ for boys and girls. To address this issue, we examined the associations between parenting, stress, and coping separately for boys and girls. First, we predicted that higher levels of maternal support and behavioral control would be related to more active and support-seeking coping, and less avoidant and distraction coping; whereas higher levels of maternal psychological control would be related to less active and support-seeking coping, and more avoidant and distraction coping. Second, we predicted that there would be a significant interaction effect between perceived stress and parenting, but that these effects would vary by gender. Specifically, maternal support would be protective for boys, with a positive association of support to active and support-seeking coping being strongest at high levels of poverty-related stress. Maternal psychological control and behavioral control were expected to show a vulnerability function for girls, with a positive association of psychological control and behavioral control to avoidant and distraction coping being strongest at high levels of poverty-related stress.

Method

Participants

Participants were 200 African American children in the fourth- and fifth-grade (mean age = 10.41, SD = .84) from two public schools in a southern city. Participants were part of a larger study examining the impact of individual and family protective factors on academic resilience in low-income African American children. The sample consisted of 47% males ($n = 93$) and 53% females ($n = 107$), with 97 fourth graders and 103 fifth graders. Thirty-five percent ($n = 70$) reported living with both parents, and 65% ($n = 130$) reported living with mother only. All children in the sample were from low-income families, as evidenced by 100% of families receiving federally-mandated free or reduced priced school lunches. A total of 272 children participated in the larger study; however, only children with complete data who also reported living with their mother were retained for our study. The subset of children included in the analyses did not differ from the excluded children with regard to age or sex.

Procedures

We were granted ethical approval by a university-based institutional review board (IRB) for passive consenting procedures and school administrators endorsed passive consent. Thus, a consent letter for parents was sent home with every child at the school describing the study, and parents were advised that their children would be invited to participate in the project if they did not return the consent form. Data collection was conducted by classroom. In the data collection session, children in the class were given a packet of questionnaires and at least three research assistants were present to assist and monitor the progress of each child.

Measures

Parenting Behavior

The *Children's Report of Parental Behavior Inventory–30* (CRPBI; Schludermann and Schludermann 1988) was used to assess children's perceptions of mothers' parenting behavior. Children were asked to report on the behaviors of their mother by responding to 30 items using a 3-point scale (*not like, somewhat like, a lot like*). The items are categorized into three factors by summing items on each factor: Acceptance, Psychological Control, and Firm Control. A confirmatory factor analysis with our sample demonstrated that the three-factor model could not be fit, as the 10 items representing firm control did not load significantly on the factor. Further, the internal consistency coefficient for firm control was .35. Therefore, this scale was dropped from the model. A CFA with the remaining two dimensions yielded a marginally acceptable fit to the data, $\chi^2(170) = 229.67$, $p < .01$, CFI = .87, SRMR = .08, and RMSEA = .04. Thus, the acceptance (“e.g., gives me a lot of care and attention”) and psychological control (e.g., “will avoid looking at me when I have disappointed her”) factors were used for analyses. The alpha reliability coefficient for acceptance was .80 and .70 for psychological control. Acceptance will be used to assess maternal support as the items on this scale are consistent with definitions of maternal support (e.g., Bean et al. 2006). Higher scores represent higher levels of each parenting dimension.

Family Economic Stressors

Participants were prompted with family economic stressors, such as not having enough money for a nice house, not having enough money to pay the bills, or not having enough money to go places. These procedures were consistent with other research on stress and coping in children (Wadsworth and Compas 2002). Children were asked to

indicate how stressful these problems were on a Likert scale (1 = never to 3 = almost always). Participants completed the CCSC-R1 (below) to indicate their coping responses to economic stressors.

Children's Coping

The *Children's Coping Strategies Checklist-Revision 1* (CCSC-R1; Program for Prevention Research 1999) is a 54-item self-report measure of children's self-reported coping strategies. The items are rated on a 4-point frequency scale (1 = never to 4 = most of the time) and categorized into four factors: active, support-seeking, distraction, and avoidance. Ayers et al. (1996) have provided strong evidence of construct validity for the CCSC (Compas et al. 2001), as well as acceptable test-retest reliability (Program for Prevention Research 1999). A confirmatory factor analysis was conducted to replicate the four factor structure model in our sample (Ayers et al. 1996). The results indicated adequate fit to the data ($\chi^2 = 80.16$, $df = 60$, CFI = .96). Thus, the four coping factors were used, with higher scores indicating greater use of the strategy. For our sample, alpha reliability coefficients were as follows: .83 for active coping, .72 for distraction coping, .64 for avoidance coping, and .79 for support-seeking coping.

Results

Descriptives

Due to a negatively skewed value for the support variable, we performed a logarithmic transformation of the data for this variable to normalize the distribution. The correlations, means and standard deviations for all variables are presented in Table 1. Boys used more distraction coping ($M = 2.80$, $SD = .51$) than girls used ($M = 2.56$, $SD =$

.65), $t(200) = 2.81$, $p = .005$. Girls used more support seeking coping ($M = 2.47$, $SD = .69$) than boys used ($M = 2.28$, $SD = .61$), $t(200) = -2.20$, $p = .03$. Boys reported more maternal acceptance ($M = .56$, $SD = .35$) than girls reported ($M = .40$, $SD = .32$), $t(200) = 3.29$, $p = .001$.

Hypothesis 1

A series of hierarchical multiple regression analyses were used to test the first hypothesis. With each of the four coping variables as dependent variables, child sex was entered in the first step, followed by maternal support and psychological control in the second step. As predicted, maternal support was significantly, positively related to active coping ($\beta = .17$, $p = .02$), and support seeking coping, ($\beta = .19$, $p = .009$). Unexpectedly, maternal support was unrelated to avoidant coping and distraction coping. Additionally, a trend, in the expected direction, was noted for the association between maternal psychological control and distraction coping ($\beta = .13$, $p = .06$). Psychological control was unrelated to the remaining coping variables, inconsistent with predictions.

Hypotheses 2

A series of hierarchical multiple regression analyses was used to test the moderational hypotheses that the level of stress would moderate the association between parenting behavior and coping (Holmbeck 1997, 2002). Two interaction terms were created with centered variables: acceptance X economic stress and psychological control X economic stress. A series of regression analyses was performed for each of the four dependent variables (coping variables) separately for females and males. For each dependent variable, the parenting variable and stress were entered in step one, and the respective interaction term was entered in step two.

Table 1 Means, standard deviations, and correlations among study variables

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7
1. Active coping	–						
2. Distraction coping	.35**	–					
3. Avoidant coping	.51**	.22**	–				
4. Support seeking coping	.63**	.32**	.35**	–			
5. Acceptance	.18*	.03	.09	.21**	–		
6. Psychological control	.05	.11	–.00	.02	.08	–	
7. Economic stress	–.06	–.02	–.02	–.05	–.17*	–.21	–
Mean	2.68	2.67	2.69	2.38	.48	21.51	1.76
SD	.45	.60	.45	.66	.35	3.94	.59

* $p < .05$; ** $p < .01$

Analyses for Males

Results indicated that the interaction between maternal acceptance and economic stress was a significant predictor of active coping ($\beta = .21, p = .04$). Post-hoc analysis revealed that at high levels of economic stress, as perceptions of maternal acceptance increased, active coping increased ($t[93] = 2.09, p = .03$) (Fig. 1). The interaction between psychological control and economic stress was not a significant predictor of active coping. Results also demonstrated a significant interaction effect between maternal acceptance and economic stress in the prediction of support-seeking coping ($\beta = .21, p = .03$). Post-hoc analysis revealed that at high levels of economic stress, as perceptions of maternal acceptance increased, support-seeking coping increased ($t[93] = 3.00, p = .003$) (Fig. 2). The interaction between psychological control and economic stress was not a significant predictor of support-seeking

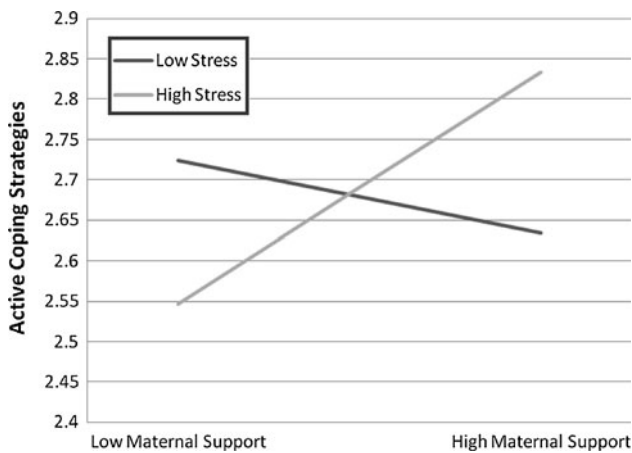


Fig. 1 Economic stress moderating the impact of maternal support on boys' use of active coping

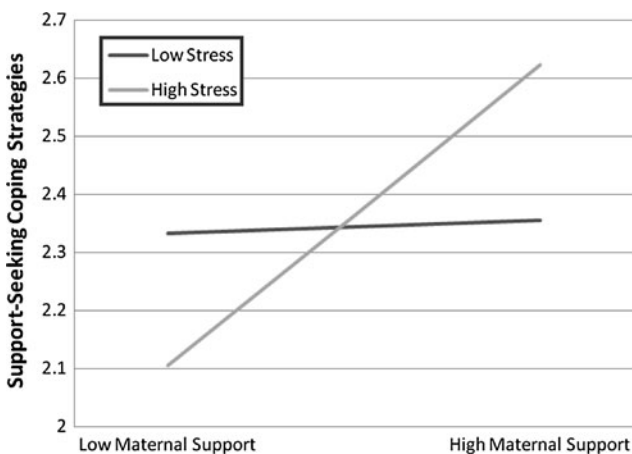


Fig. 2 Economic stress moderating the impact of maternal support on boys' use of support-seeking coping

coping. Neither acceptance nor psychological control interacted significantly with economic stress to predict distraction coping or avoidant coping (Table 2).

Analyses for Females

Results demonstrated a significant interaction effect between psychological control and economic stress in the prediction of avoidant coping ($\beta = .20, p = .04$). Post-hoc analysis revealed that at low levels of economic stress, as perceptions of psychological control increased, avoidant coping decreased ($t[107] = -2.36, p = .01$) (Fig. 3). Post-hoc analysis also revealed that the slope for high stress was significant at the trend level, with increased psychological control associated with increased avoidant coping ($t[107] = 1.92, p = .05$). This overall pattern of findings suggests that perceived stress affects the direction of the association between psychological control and avoidant coping strategies. Neither acceptance nor psychological control interacted significantly with economic stress to predict active, support-seeking, or distraction coping (Table 2).

Discussion

We examined the effects of maternal support and psychological control on coping strategies of African American children from economically-disadvantaged communities. Our findings suggest differential effects for mothers' use of supportive and controlling behaviors. Specifically, maternal support was more influential than psychological control for children's coping behavior, predicting children's use of more active and support-seeking strategies. Parenting behaviors characterized by warmth and acceptance may encourage children to use active attempts to solve their problems or manage their emotions by making children feel comfortable to seek social support when they feel distressed by a problem or by fostering a sense of competence to change problems (Kliewer et al. 1996; Sandler et al. 1997). In contrast, the lack of findings for psychological control is inconsistent with prior research, which has demonstrated that psychological control predicts more avoidant coping strategies (Jackson et al. 1998; Langrock et al. 2002). Perhaps the context in which parenting is occurring in our sample—economically-disadvantaged, urban communities—provides some explanation for the differential effects of maternal support and control. According to the family stress theory, parents who live in poverty and experience poverty-related stressors are more likely to experience depression and anxiety, which in turn lead to more punitive, inconsistent parenting behaviors and less responsiveness to children's emotional needs (e.g., McLoyd 1990). Indeed, in

Table 2 Summary of regression analysis for the interaction between parenting and stress predicting coping strategies for boys and girls

Predictor variables	Active coping			Support seeking coping			Distraction coping			Avoidant coping		
	B	SE	β	B	SE	β	B	SE	β	B	SE	β
Step 2 (Boys)												
Maternal support	-.14	.14	-.10	-.38	.18	-.22*	-.19	.15	-.13	-.11	.14	-.09
Economic stress	-.03	.08	-.04	-.03	.09	-.03	-.02	.08	-.03	.06	.08	.08
Interaction	-.42	.20	-.21*	-.55	.26	-.21*	-.28	.22	-.13	-.18	.21	-.09
Maternal psyc. control	.01	.01	.10	-.00	.02	-.02	.00	.01	.00	.00	.01	.00
Economic stress	-.07	.08	-.09	-.10	.10	-.10	-.06	.08	-.07	.03	.08	.05
Interaction	.03	.02	.14	.05	.03	.18	.02	.02	.11	.02	.02	.09
Step 2 (girls)												
Maternal support	-.31	.13	-.23*	-.37	.21	-.17	-.10	.21	-.05	-.05	.14	-.04
Economic stress	.03	.09	.03	-.04	.14	-.03	.05	.14	.04	-.06	.09	-.08
Interaction	.09	.28	.03	-.45	.45	-.11	.07	.44	.02	.03	.29	.01
Maternal psyc. control	.00	.01	.01	.01	.02	.03	.03	.01	.21*	-.00	.01	-.01
Economic stress	-.02	.08	-.03	-.03	.12	-.02	.03	.12	.02	-.05	.08	-.07
Interaction	.02	.02	.12	.01	.03	.03	-.00	.03	-.01	.04	.02	.20*

Note Boys, n = 93; girls, n = 107

* p < .05

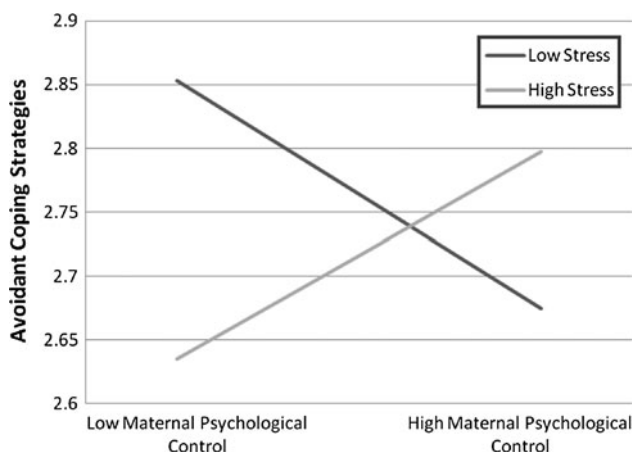


Fig. 3 Economic stress moderating the impact of maternal psychological control on girls' use of avoidant coping

our sample, there was an inverse association between maternal acceptance and poverty-related stress. Perhaps for children in our sample, perceived maternal support was especially salient for their coping behaviors given that punitive and unresponsive parenting may be more likely to occur in this context.

Also, maternal support was not associated with avoidant and distraction coping strategies, inconsistent with existing research with Anglo-American youth showing that low levels of support predict increases in avoidant coping behaviors (Herman and McHale 1993). However, African American mothers and parents in low-income communities may show lower levels of nurturing behaviors (Brooks-Gunn and Markman 2005) because these behaviors are adaptive in high-stress environments (Deater-Deckard et al. 1996). Further, African American children do not view certain parenting behaviors as negatively as these same parenting behaviors are viewed by Anglo-American children (Lamborn et al. 1996) and some parenting behaviors have less negative consequences for African American youth than for Anglo-American youth (Brooks-Gunn and Markman 2005). Thus, lower levels of maternal support may not have the same consequences for African American children's coping behavior as it has for other groups.

Our findings offer additional insights into the association between parenting and child coping by examining the roles of perceived stress and child gender. Boys perceived higher levels of maternal support than girls perceived, and support was more salient for boys. Specifically, for boys, maternal support interacted with economic stressors to predict both active and support-seeking coping. Consistent with predictions, when boys experienced high levels of poverty-related stressors, they were more likely to use active and support-seeking coping strategies when they perceived their mothers as more supportive and accepting. In contrast, maternal support did not interact with stress to predict girls'

coping behaviors. For girls, maternal psychological control interacted with stressors in the prediction of avoidant coping. In particular, when girls experienced low levels of poverty-related stressors, they were less likely to use avoidant coping strategies when they perceived their mothers to be more psychologically controlling. In contrast, when girls experienced high levels of poverty-related stressors, there was a trend for their increased use of avoidant coping when they perceived their mothers to show more psychological control. Therefore, maternal psychological control may reduce avoidant coping at low levels of stress, but increase avoidant coping at high levels of stress.

This pattern of findings builds on prior research showing that supportive maternal behaviors are more influential for the coping behaviors of African American males than they are for African American females (Gaylord-Harden et al. 2009). However, we extend this finding by showing that maternal support was most effective for boys at high levels of stress and that psychological control was more salient for girls. For African American boys, perceptions that their mother is supportive and accepting is important for promoting active attempts to manage stress or seek help at high levels of stress. This finding is encouraging because maternal support seems to be important for promoting coping strategies that boys are less likely to use, but that are shown to be adaptive. In addition, although African American mothers' may use control to encourage girls to be more self-reliant and competent (Hill 2001), our results suggest that the use of *psychological control* may only be adaptive at low levels of stress and have an unintended effect of promoting disengagement when stress is high. High levels of maternal psychological control predict lower levels of perceived self-control in African American girls (Mandara and Pikes 2008). Therefore, mothers' attempts to control through guilt or constrained verbal interactions, may lead girls to believe that they have less control over their behavior and future, but only when they are experiencing high levels of stress. Lower perceptions of self-control may, in turn, lead to use more avoidance strategies.

Limitations of our study should be noted. First, the generalizability of the findings is limited to African American children who reside in urban, low income neighborhoods. African American children who reside in middle- to upper-income neighborhoods may perceive different levels of parenting behaviors or use different patterns of coping strategies. Second, all measures were collected via child report. Due to the variability obtained, shared method variance did not appear to affect the results. Nonetheless, future research would benefit from inclusion of additional informants of parenting and coping (e.g., parents). Our study was also limited by its cross-sectional design and thus, reciprocal associations between

parenting and child coping must also be considered. For example, children's use of support-seeking coping strategies, such as seeking help or advice from family members, may encourage mothers to be more supportive (Kliewer et al. 1996). Further, maternal support or control may impact a third variable, such as maternal socialization of child coping (Kliewer et al. 1996), which may, in turn, impact child coping. There is a need for prospective research to further examine the ways in which stressors, parenting, and coping are related to one another.

In light of the limitations, our study is one of a few studies that have assessed the impact of parenting on child coping with African American children. The influence of parenting and parent-child relationships may be especially important for African-American youth because they may place a higher value on family interaction than Anglo-American youth (Giordano et al. 1993), and are more likely to spend time with both immediate and extended family members than other ethnic groups (Larson et al. 2001). Future research on parenting and coping may benefit from including fathers and other extended family members (e.g., grandparents). In addition, we assessed situationally-based coping strategies, by asking children to indicate how they cope in response to economic stressors. Although poverty is extremely detrimental to children's well-being, only a handful of studies have assessed how youth cope with poverty and poverty-related stressors (Wadsworth et al. 2005). Thus, our findings contribute to research on how coping behaviors manifest within the context of economic stress. In conclusion, mothers' parenting behaviors may play an important role in how African American children from low-income, urban communities cope with stressful situations. In sum, the results provide support for the development of community-based prevention programs that build on the strengths of the child (coping strategies) and the influence of the family (parent-child relationships).

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