



Beliefs about Expressing Love to Adolescents among Ethnically and Economically Diverse Mothers

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Abstract

Parental love promotes positive developmental outcomes among adolescents, yet knowledge about how context might influence the behaviors parents deem as loving is limited. This study examined mothers' beliefs about expressing love to adolescent children in diverse ethnic and socioeconomic groups. Participants were 60 European American, 63 African American, and 60 Latina mothers. Household income (the indicator of socioeconomic status) varied within each ethnic group. Beliefs about the most important ways to express love differed by ethnicity more so than income. Latina mothers were more likely than other mothers to emphasize behaviors that involve family togetherness and practical help and guidance, and less likely to emphasize verbal affection or promoting independence. Mothers from all groups believed that "correction and discipline" was an important expression of love. The findings contribute to an ecologically sensitive understanding of parenting during adolescence, highlighting similarities as well as differences across ethnic and income groups.

Keywords Parenting · Beliefs · Ethnicity · Socioeconomic status · Adolescents

Introduction

Scholars have long emphasized the developmental importance of having a close, loving parent–child relationship for youth's positive development. Yet, surprisingly little work has focused explicitly on the beliefs that parents have about how best to express love to their adolescent children, or on how ecological context might influence these beliefs. Parenting beliefs are essential to understand given theory and evidence suggesting that beliefs are important predictors of parenting practices, and that contextual differences in parenting are often rooted in different beliefs, or ethnotheories, about effective parenting (Miller 2020). Moreover, the growing physical and psychological independence that characterizes adolescence makes this developmental period an important one to target. Behaviors deemed loving during

childhood (e.g., monitoring, physical affection) might come to be thought of as less loving or appropriate during adolescence, whereas other behaviors (e.g., allowing independence) might be seen as increasingly loving. The current research advances knowledge in these understudied areas by examining what types of behaviors mothers believe are the most important in expressing love to their adolescent children and whether this varies by ethnicity or socioeconomic status (SES). In doing so, this study contributes to a more nuanced understanding of how parents think about and prioritize ways to create loving, caring relationships with their adolescents across ecological contexts that can advance theory and practice regarding how parents promote adolescent well-being.

Conceptual Frameworks Emphasizing the Importance of Parental Love

Several conceptual frameworks support the claim that a loving parent–child relationship is intricately tied to adolescents' positive social and psychological outcomes. One of these frameworks is Interpersonal Acceptance-Rejection Theory (IPARTheory, Rohner and Khaleque 2019; formerly known as Parental Acceptance-Rejection Theory, or PAR-Theory, e.g., Rohner et al. 2005). This theory, rooted in theoretical paradigms such as psychoanalytic theory and

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symbolic interaction theory, holds that perceived parental acceptance or rejection is a fundamental and universal predictor of adjustment. It stipulates that acceptance—rejection refers to a continuum on which all parenting can be described, with the acceptance end of the continuum marked by “warmth, affection, care, comfort, concern, nurturance, support, or simply love that children can experience from their parents” and the other end marked by “parental rejection, which refers to the absence or significant withdrawal of these feelings and behaviors” (Rohner et al. 2005, p. 305). Parental acceptance or rejection as defined in these ways is argued to be central to children’s personality (e.g., dependence, independence) and psychological adjustment, and this conjecture has a great deal of empirical support across cultures (Rohner and Khaleque 2010).

Attachment theory, a related conceptual framework, argues that sensitive, warm parenting behaviors are central to children’s short- and long-term socioemotional outcomes (Bowlby 1988). Indeed, extensive research points to a secure attachment—which results from parenting behaviors operationally defined as consistently sensitive, responsive, warm, affectionate, and loving—as beneficial to a wide range of children’s developmental outcomes (e.g., Thompson 2008). Although much attachment research has been conducted with infants and young children, theory and data on working models of attachment during adolescence speak to the continued importance of security in the parent–child relationship to adolescent well-being (e.g., Allen 2008).

A third highly influential conceptual model promoting the importance of a warm or affectionate parent–child relationship is the parenting style typology (Baumrind 1991). In this model, a critical dimension of parenting is “responsiveness”, which includes physical and verbal warmth and affection. A substantial body of literature suggests that authoritative parenting, a style characterized by high responsiveness along with high levels of control and demandingness, leads to the best outcomes in children, at least among European American families (Pinquart 2017; Pinquart and Kauser 2018). In contrast, authoritarian parenting, characterized by low responsiveness with high control or demandingness, has been associated with less positive outcomes. Although some group variations have been found in the impact of authoritarian parenting (Pinquart and Kauser 2018), which will be discussed more fully later, Baumrind’s conceptual framework and most research points to the importance of warm, caring behaviors in differentiating parenting strategies and in children’s development.

How Do Parents Express Love to Adolescents?

Each of these conceptual models speaks to the fundamental importance of cultivating a positive parent–child relationship,

and this conjecture has extensive empirical support. Regardless of the specific labels used (e.g., warmth, acceptance, cohesion, closeness, responsiveness), research consistently points to positive outcomes associated with parental love for children and for adolescents (e.g., Barber et al. 2005; Yap et al. 2014). Less clear are the precise and diverse ways in which parents’ love, warmth, or acceptance might be communicated to their adolescent children.

Attachment and parenting style theories suggest that parenting behaviors instigating proximity to children or verbally expressing warmth and care intuitively translate to expressions of love. IPARTheory similarly articulates specific physical (e.g., hugs, kisses) and verbal (e.g., praise, compliments) behaviors that can communicate affection, while also acknowledging that these are just a few possible examples of “behavioral expressions of parental acceptance” (Rohner et al. 2005, p. 307). Thus, love and acceptance can potentially be communicated in a number of concrete or abstract ways. Furthermore, perceptions and interpretations of parental behaviors can become more nuanced as children become more physically and psychologically independent, and more capable of abstract thought and understanding during adolescence. These ways could range from providing basic needs and care, to giving gifts, to showing interest in a child’s daily activities, to monitoring out of a desire to keep the adolescent safe (for delineations of different ways parents might express warmth, see Cheah et al. 2015; McNeely and Barber 2010). Even the ways in which parents exert control or discipline can be seen as more or less loving. A parenting style framework assumes that reasoned, gentle, and emotionally neutral approaches to parental control and discipline are intended by parents and perceived by children as more loving than harsher or more emotionally charged approaches (Baumrind 1991). Yet, the same type of behavior might be intended or experienced as differentially loving depending on the circumstances or individuals involved or the context in which the behaviors occur (Jackson-Newsom et al. 2008). A goal of the present study was to examine whether parents’ endorsements of how best to express love to adolescents vary by ethnicity or SES.

Considerations of Ecological Context

Anthropological perspectives describe parents’ belief systems, or parental ethnotheories, as a mechanism by which parents operate (Harkness and Super 2006). Ethnotheories are cultural models that include thoughts about the “right” way to parent and serve to motivate specific parenting practices and behaviors. Given variations by culture and other ecological contexts in parenting belief systems, the broad use of concepts such as love, care, or warmth can obfuscate the complexity behind these behaviors, and can lead to wrongful assumptions that particular behaviors

convey love equally across and within ecological contexts. In reality, the behaviors that communicate love might vary in different contexts, and the same behavior could take on a different meaning depending on parental ethnotheories (see Williams et al. 2004, for a similar argument regarding social support).

The danger in overlooking contextual factors in defining constructs such as parental love can be seen in research examining the effects of parenting style in different groups. As noted earlier, drawing on Baumrind's typologies, authoritarian parenting is characterized by practices that emphasize high demands, "harsh" punishment, parental control, and low responsiveness and warmth. These practices have sometimes been described as "parent-centered", implying that they elevate parental needs and perspectives above those of the child. Research spanning several decades suggests that such practices produce less than optimal developmental outcomes (e.g., Baumrind 1991; Dornbusch et al. 1987; Pinquart and Kauser 2018). Because such practices tend to be more common among low income (Friedson 2016), African American (Gershoff et al. 2012), Asian immigrant (Chao 2001) and Latinx immigrant (Fischer et al. 2009) families than among high income or European American families, it can appear that low-income, African American, and immigrant families parent less effectively, in part because they are less "responsive", or less successful at expressing parental love.

Yet, ecologically-sensitive research has emerged demonstrating that authoritarian parenting practices are less likely to be associated with poor developmental outcomes among African American (e.g., Lansford et al. 2004; Pinquart and Kauser 2018) or Asian American (e.g., Chao 2001) adolescents than they are among European American adolescents. Arguably, this is because assumptions about specific parenting practices as symbols of love for adolescents do not hold across ethnic groups (Jackson-Newsom et al. 2008). For example, practices typically defined as "responsive" (e.g., joint decision-making) or "parent-centered" (e.g., harsh parenting) were predictors of higher perceived parental warmth among European American but not African American adolescents (Jackson-Newsom et al. 2008). Similarly, practices that might be interpreted as controlling, harsh, or parent-centered among European American families are viewed by African American mothers of adolescents as expressions of "tough love", and as among the duties of a loving parent (i.e., "unapologetic" or "no-nonsense" parenting; Brody et al. 2002; Buchanan et al. 2013). Strict, authoritarian control practices might also, under some circumstances, be perceived as loving among Asian American families (Chao 2001; Supple and Cavanaugh 2013).

Different norms or micro-contexts of parenting practices thus appear to influence whether a particular parenting practice is interpreted as "harsh" or "parent-centered"

versus "loving" or "child-centered". Furthermore, culturally-specific practices might serve to communicate love powerfully. For example, among Bengali mothers, peeling and feeding oranges to one's child is a deeply meaningful symbol of love (Rohner et al. 2005). Similarly, Chinese immigrant parents have been shown to prioritize physical nurturance, support and sacrifice for educational opportunity, and promotion of self-control as loving practices (Wu and Chao 2017). In the U.S., ethnic and economic differences in emphasis on values such as individualism, familism, or interpersonal respect might influence what behaviors are seen to be most loving. For example, African American and Latinx parents (e.g., Calzada et al. 2010), as well as lower SES parents (e.g., Dixon et al. 2008), might be expected to emphasize strict discipline, supervision, and respect as loving behaviors due to relatively high valuing of parental authority and interpersonal respect. Given cultural values of *simpatía* and familism in the Latinx community, Latinx parents might also emphasize behaviors that promote relatedness, such as family togetherness (Stein et al. 2014). In contrast, European American (e.g., Zimmer-Gembeck and Collins 2003) and higher SES (e.g., Magnusson and Duncan 2002) parents might emphasize behaviors such as talking or complimenting that reflect and promote individualism and personal autonomy, and give children more latitude to question authority and play a collaborative role in in the parent-child relationship. In sum, the concrete and explicit ways that parents believe important to expressing love to adolescents might vary in different ecological contexts.

Only one study was found that systematically examined expressions of love between parents and adolescent children across diverse cultures. In this research, perspectives from adolescents residing in different countries were gathered (McNeely and Barber 2010). Although it was found that some parenting behaviors (e.g., physical affection) were near-universally considered loving, differences by country existed in adolescents' interpretations of other behaviors. Essentially, what adolescents considered most loving were parenting behaviors that delivered rare and valued commodities within a country. For example, in countries where quality education could not be taken for granted, parents' support for education was a sign of love; in countries where time was a rare commodity, "quality time" was articulated as loving. The current study extends the literature by focusing on how context might influence *parents'* beliefs regarding the expression of love to adolescent children.

Current Study

Parental love promotes positive developmental outcomes among adolescents, yet research has not looked at how

context might influence the behaviors parents deem as loving. The question of context is important because parents' beliefs about how best to express their love to adolescents might vary as a result of life circumstances, norms, or cultural values that promote different processes for achieving a healthy balance of autonomy and family connectedness during this developmental period. The goal of this research, then, was to illuminate how ethnicity and SES might be related to the specific behaviors that parents deem important in expressing love to adolescent children. Given limited resources and the anticipation of variation by parent gender, this study focused on mothers. So as not to confound ethnicity and socioeconomic status, mothers of low, middle, and high income were intentionally recruited within the three most common ethnic groups residing locally (European American [EA], African American [AA], and Latina).

A first hypothesis was that that verbal and physical affection would be seen as important expressions of love in all ethnic and SES groups in this study. Although some research shows differences in verbal and physical expressions of love between Chinese immigrant and European American mothers of preschoolers, other theory and data regarding the groups studied here suggest that mothers in this study were unlikely to differ in beliefs about these practices for expressing love.

Other hypotheses concerned ethnic differences that would exist in other behaviors mothers report as most important in expressing love. These included that: (a) AA and Latina mothers would put more emphasis on control practices (correction and discipline; monitoring) than would EA mothers, given a higher emphasis on respect for elders and parental authority; (b) AA and Latina mothers would put more emphasis on showing respect to children than would EA mothers; (c) EA mothers would put more emphasis on "child-centered" practices (e.g., talking, spending one-on-one time) and on personal choice and independence than would other groups given a lower emphasis on parental authority and a higher emphasis on individualism and personal autonomy; (d) Latina mothers would put more emphasis on family togetherness (e.g., spending time together as a family).

Finally, it was predicted that socioeconomic differences would exist in some behaviors mothers report as most important in expressing love, such that: (a) lower income mothers would view protective and controlling practices (e.g., strict discipline, monitoring), as well as provision of gifts or money (as rarer commodities; McNeely and Barber 2010) as loving more so than would higher income mothers; (b) higher income mothers would view collaborative practices (e.g., talking, quality time) as more loving than would lower income mothers.

Method

Participants and Procedure

Participants were mothers of adolescents living in a mid-sized metropolitan city in the southeastern United States (60 EA, 63 AA, and 60 Latina mothers; total $N = 183$). Mothers were recruited via fliers posted in the community (e.g., recreation centers, parks), online advertisements, referrals, and mailings and phone calls to parents of adolescents who attended local middle and high schools. Mothers needed to have at least one child between the ages of 11–18 years to participate. Participating mothers chose a time and location (e.g., local university, adolescent's school, coffee shop) that was convenient for them to meet with a research staff member to complete the survey. The staff member was available to help read and to answer questions about survey items as needed. A native Spanish speaker who had experience working in the neighborhoods from which most Latina mothers were recruited administered the survey to all Latina mothers, who were given the option of completing the survey in Spanish or in English. All but six Latina mothers chose to complete the interview, which had been translated and back-translated by native Spanish speakers, in Spanish. The survey took approximately 45 min to complete. Mothers received a \$20 gift card to a local department store.

Twenty-two percent of EA mothers, 29.6% of AA mothers, and 0% of Latina mothers reported being unmarried. Mean age was 46 years ($SD = 7.19$) for EA mothers, 43 years ($SD = 7.27$) for AA mothers, and 38 years ($SD = 5.79$) for Latina mothers. The majority of mothers had either one (56%, 61%, and 54%, for EA, AA, and Latina, respectively) or two (24%, 31%, and 23%, respectively) children. The remaining percentage of mothers had three or more children. Educational levels were as follows: less than high school (0% for EA and AA; 41.7% for Latina), high school graduate only (8.3%, 4.8%, and 31.7%, for EA, AA, and Latina, respectively), some college or vocational school (30%, 20.6%, and 11.7%, respectively), college degree (45%, 42.9%, and 8.3%, respectively), and graduate or professional degree (16.7%, 31.7%, and 6.6%, respectively). Concerning employment, 71.7% of EA, 77.8% of AA, and 58.3% of Latina mothers were employed. The majority of Latina mothers ($n = 44$) were born outside the US. The most common country of origin was Mexico (64%); the average number of years since immigration to the U.S. was 15 ($SD = 5.42$). Only two EA mothers and one AA mother were born outside the U.S. (in Canada, Yugoslavia, and Costa Rica, respectively); data on years since immigration were not collected for these three mothers.

To unconfound ethnicity and SES, mothers were explicitly recruited across three household income groups within

each ethnic group: low income (below \$40,000 per year in 2011), middle income (\$40,000–\$80,000 per year), and high income (above \$80,000 per year). Despite substantial effort, it was difficult to recruit high-income Latina mothers. Thus, low income mothers are overrepresented ($n = 28$, 46.7%) and high-income mothers underrepresented ($n = 10$, 16.7%) in the Latina group, compared to both EA ($n = 17$, 28.3% and $n = 20$, 33.3%, in the low- and high-income groups, respectively) and AA ($n = 24$, 38.1% and $n = 19$, 30.2%, in the low- and high-income groups, respectively) mothers. The percent of mothers in the middle-income group was similar for all ethnic groups ($n = 23$ or 38.3%, $n = 20$ or 31.7%, and $n = 22$ or 36.7%, for EA, AA, and Latina mothers, respectively). Although there were somewhat different distributions of income in the ethnic groups, a χ^2 test examining the association between income (low, middle, and high) and ethnicity (EA, AA, and Latina) was not statistically significant ($\chi^2(4) = 6.61$, $p = 0.158$). In total, the low-income group included 69 mothers, the middle-income group included 65 mothers, and the high-income group included 49 mothers.

Measures

Demographic data

In a screening interview, conducted by telephone, mothers who volunteered for the study or had been referred to us self-reported race/ethnicity, total annual family income, and age and gender of all children. Mothers who fit screening criteria for recruitment (i.e., at least one child 11–18 years, and in a race and income category that had not yet been filled) answered further demographic questions (i.e., age, education, employment status, country of birth, years since immigration) in their survey.

Parenting behaviors that express love

Mothers rated the importance of 13 parental behaviors in demonstrating love to adolescent children. Specifically, they were asked to rate how important “each of the following things is for parents of adolescent children to do in order to show love to their adolescent children”, using a scale ranging from 1 (*not at all important*) to 5 (*extremely important*). The behaviors were derived from a commonly-used measure of parental warmth (Barber and Thomas 1986), categories of parenting behaviors proposed to make adolescents feel loved from McNeely and Barber (2010), and pilot qualitative interviews with 36 mothers from these ethnic groups (12 in each group). In the pilot study, mothers were asked what they did to make their adolescents feel loved. Answers were coded and compared to major themes from Barber and colleagues. Items used in the current study

reflected nine themes that were cited in both the pilot and published data: “Verbally express affection or appreciation for the adolescent”; “Show respect for the adolescent”, “Talk and listen to the adolescent’s thoughts, feelings, and perspectives”; “Give the adolescent compliments or praise”; “Give the adolescent guidance or advice”; “Buy gifts for or give money to the adolescent”; “Show love physically (through hugs, kisses, smiles)”; “Help the adolescent when needed”; and “Give the adolescent independence”. The pilot work led us to ask four questions that represent modifications or additions to the published data; as in previous work, the mothers emphasized spending time together, but sometimes distinguished between “one-on-one” and “family” time. Thus, two additional items were “Spend time together one-on-one with the adolescent” and “Spend time together as a family, including the adolescent”. Finally, based on their mentions by mothers in the pilot study as well as work theoretical and empirical work suggesting ethnic differences in parents’ view of and approach to discipline and monitoring, the following two items were included: “Correct or discipline the adolescent”; “Keep track of the adolescent’s activities and behavior”.

Following the ratings, mothers ranked, from 1 to 5, the five behaviors that they believed *most* important in expressing love to adolescents. This approach was taken because of the possibility that all mothers might rate many (or even all) behaviors as important in an absolute sense, and yet prioritize them differently. In other words, it was anticipated that group differences might be apparent primarily when mothers were asked about the “most” important ways to express love. A dichotomized variable was computed for each item to indicate whether it had been chosen as one of the five most important ways of expressing love (coded “1”) or not (coded “0”).

Analyses

To examine whether rated importance differed by ethnicity or income, two MANCOVAs were performed. Ratings of the 13 behaviors were the dependent variables and either ethnicity (controlling for income) or income (controlling for ethnicity) was the independent variable. For significant omnibus tests, follow-up post-hoc tests were used to examine the mean level differences between the groups.

To examine whether ranked importance differed by ethnicity or income, χ^2 tests of associations between ethnicity and the dichotomized score of top-five ranking (yes, no) for each behavior were run. The χ^2 result indicates whether ethnic group or income group is associated with the likelihood of a behavior being ranked in the top five. Again, a Bonferroni correction was used to account for familywise error (significant effects if $p \leq 0.004$ [$0.05/13 = 0.004$]).

For significant χ^2 s, two additional sets of analyses were performed. First, follow-up χ^2 tests were run using only two groups at a time (i.e., EA vs. AA mothers; EA vs. Latina mothers; and AA vs. Latina mothers). This set of analyses was done to examine which group differences the significant overall associations reflected. Second, Exacon analyses using Sleipner version 2.1 (Bergman et al. 2003) were run to examine in which cells there were significantly more or fewer mothers than would be expected by chance. Sleipner is a statistical package comprising 16 distinct modules for analyses with a person-oriented approach. Exacon is one module of Sleipner and is used to examine the association between two categorical variables with a focus on cell-wise analysis, rather than simply offering an overall test score (χ^2). The Exacon module tests and computes a probability score for each cell in a contingency table in order to examine the significant association in more depth. If the observed value in one of the cells is significantly higher or lower than the expected value, the result shows that more or fewer mothers than expected in a specific ethnic or income group ranked the behavior as a top-five most important way to express love. Hence, in comparison to the follow-up χ^2 tests, the Exacon analysis shows if the number of mothers in each group who report each behavior to be important to express love is greater than what

would be expected by chance (rather than between-group differences).

Overall, only two percent of data were missing. Only three of the 13 items had any missing data; in total four participants did not offer complete data. For the MANCOVA, listwise deletion was used, and, thus, participants with missing data (i.e., four participants) were excluded from these analyses.

Results

Rated Importance of Behaviors for Expressing Love

Ethnicity

Table 1 shows means by ethnic group for ratings of the importance of each behavior as a way to express love. Notably, and in line with the first hypothesis, all behaviors were considered important, with almost all means above 4 on the 1 to 5 scale. The exception was “buy gifts or give money”, with a mean of less than 4 in all ethnic groups.

The MANCOVA indicated an overall ethnic difference (controlling for income) in importance ratings, $F(26, 326) = 9.20$; $p < 0.001$; Wilk's = 0.33. ANCOVAs for each

Table 1 Results from MANCOVA examining mean level differences in mothers' ratings of importance of behaviors to express love to their adolescents by ethnicity

Behavior to express love	European American ($n = 58$)	African American ($n = 61$)	Latina ($n = 60$)	$F(2, 178)$ p	
	M (SD)	M (SD)	M (SD)		
Verbally express affection or appreciation	4.88 (0.33)	4.79 (0.52)	4.72 (0.52)	1.60	0.205
Show respect	4.81 (0.40)	4.67 (0.60)	4.78 (0.61)	1.08	0.343
Talk and listen to thoughts, feelings, and perspectives	4.93 (0.26)	4.87 (0.39)	4.82 (0.39)	1.28	0.281
Give compliments or praise	4.69 ^a (0.57)	4.87 ^a (0.34)	3.78 ^b (0.74)	60.16	<0.001
Spend time together one-on-one	4.72 (0.52)	4.75 (0.57)	4.77 (0.47)	0.09	0.915
Spend time as a family	4.79 (0.49)	4.85 (0.36)	4.93 (0.25)	2.13	0.122
Give guidance or advice	4.76 ^b (0.47)	4.92 ^a (0.33)	4.95 ^a (0.22)	4.69	0.010
Buy gifts or give money	2.88 (1.04)	3.23 (1.16)	3.23 (0.67)	2.48	0.087
Show love physically (hugs, kisses, smiles)	4.60 (0.70)	4.67 (0.60)	4.50 (0.57)	1.53	0.220
Help when needed	4.84 (0.41)	4.79 (0.51)	4.88 (0.32)	0.99	0.374
Correct or discipline	4.81 (0.48)	4.85 (0.40)	4.82 (0.39)	0.20	0.820
Give independence	4.43 ^a (0.73)	4.33 ^a (0.85)	2.73 ^b (1.10)	62.02	<0.001
Keep track of activities or behavior	4.71 ^a (0.56)	4.70 ^a (0.50)	4.20 ^b (1.04)	8.32	<0.001 ^c

^{a, b}Values with different subscripts differ significantly from each other in post hoc test. Results control for household income. Bonferroni correction is used for the comparisons to control for familywise error. Higher values indicate more endorsement of the importance of the specific behavior

^cSubsequent analyses showed this difference to be limited to low-income mothers (see “Sensitivity analyses”)

Table 2 Results from MANCOVA examining mean level differences in mothers' ratings of importance of behaviors to express love to their adolescents by household income

	Low Income (<i>n</i> = 68)	Middle Income (<i>n</i> = 64)	High Income (<i>n</i> = 47)	<i>F</i> (2, 178)	<i>p</i>
Behavior to express love	<i>M</i> (SD)	<i>M</i> (SD)	<i>M</i> (SD)		
Verbally express affection or appreciation	4.79 (0.44)	4.73 (0.57)	4.87 (0.34)	1.81	0.309
Show respect	4.72 (0.64)	4.80 (0.44)	4.74 (0.53)	0.27	0.763
Talk and listen to thoughts, feelings, and perspectives	4.84 (0.37)	4.87 (0.33)	4.91 (0.35)	0.60	0.548
Give compliments or praise	4.38 (0.85)	4.41 (0.66)	3.60 (0.68)	1.40	0.250
Spend time together one-on-one	4.81 (0.53)	4.64 (0.52)	4.81 (0.50)	2.16	0.118 ^a
Spend time as a family	4.91 ^b (0.33)	4.75 ^c (0.47)	4.94 ^b (0.25)	4.36	0.014
Give guidance or advice	4.94 ^b (0.29)	4.78 ^c (0.45)	4.91 (0.28)	3.45	0.034
Buy gifts or give money	3.16 (0.99)	3.06 (1.04)	3.13 (0.95)	0.11	0.892
Show love physically (hugs, kisses, smiles)	4.69 (0.53)	4.53 (0.69)	4.53 (0.65)	1.32	0.270
Help when needed	4.84 (0.41)	4.80 (0.44)	4.89 (0.31)	0.80	0.451
Correct or discipline	4.84 (0.41)	4.70 ^b (0.53)	4.98 ^c (0.15)	6.13	0.003
Give independence	3.74 (1.10)	3.60 ^b (1.29)	4.26 ^c (1.09)	4.42	0.013
Keep track of activities or behavior	4.46 (0.98)	4.48 (0.69)	4.72 (0.45)	1.90	0.153

^aA significant difference between middle-income and both low- and high-income mothers emerged when predicting transformed variables (see "Sensitivity analyses")

^b, ^cValues with different subscripts differ significantly from each other in post hoc test. Results control for ethnicity. Bonferroni correction is used for the comparisons to control for familywise error. Higher values indicate more endorsement of the importance of the specific behavior

behavior were examined (see Table 1). Rated importance differed by ethnicity for four of 13 behaviors. Latina mothers rated "give compliments and praise" (Cohen's *d* = 1.38 and 1.89), "give independence" (Cohen's *d* = 1.82 and 1.63), and "keep track of the adolescents' activities and behavior" (Cohen's *d* = 0.61 for both) as less important than did EA and AA mothers. In contrast, EA mothers rated "give guidance and advice" (Cohen's *d* = 0.39 and 0.52) as less important than did Latina and AA mothers. Cohen's *d* values indicate moderate to strong effects.

Income

As with ethnicity, most ratings for ways to express love were above 4 across income (see Table 2). Exceptions were "buy gifts for or giving money to the adolescent" (less than 4 in all income groups) and "give independence" (below 4 in the low- and middle-income groups).

The MANCOVA indicated an overall income difference (controlling for ethnicity) in ratings of importance, $F(26, 326) = 1.54$; $p = 0.047$; Wilk's $\lambda = 0.79$. ANCOVAs for each behavior were examined; results are in Table 2. Rated importance differed by mothers' income for four of the 13 behaviors. Middle-income mothers rated "spend time as a family" as less important than did both low-income (Cohen's *d* = 0.39) and high-income (Cohen's *d* = 0.50)

mothers. Further, middle-income mothers rated "correct and discipline" (Cohen's *d* = 0.72), and "give independence" (Cohen's *d* = 0.55) as less important than did high-income mothers. Finally, middle-income mothers rated "give guidance and advice" (Cohen's *d* = 0.42) as less important than did low-income mothers. These Cohen's *d* values indicate mostly moderate effects.

Sensitivity analyses

All MANCOVAs were repeated controlling in turn for other demographic characteristics (i.e., maternal education, maternal employment, maternal age). Results reported above remained significant with two exceptions: the income difference in "give independence" was only marginally significant when age was controlled ($p = 0.059$), and when employment was controlled ($p = 0.062$).

Because eight of the 13 items were highly skewed (i.e., $> \pm 1.96$; George, and Mallery 2010), exponential transformations were done on all variables. After transformation, nine of the variables fell within acceptable ranges of normal distribution, and only four of the items remained highly skewed. MANCOVAs were run with the transformed variables. The results for ethnicity were the same. For the income groups, one additional variable now differed significantly between the groups: spending time one-on-one,

$F(2, 178) = 3.45; p = 0.034$. Middle-income mothers ($M = 26.38; SD = 7.90$) rated spending one-on-one time as less important than did both low-income ($M = 29.35; SD = 6.61$) and high-income mothers ($M = 29.28; SD = 6.73$).

We also used a MANOVA to explore the possibility of ethnicity X income interactions. The MANOVA showed a significant overall effect of ethnicity X income $F(52, 614) = 1.42; p = 0.032$; Wilk's $\lambda = 0.65$ (the main effect for ethnicity remained significant; the main effect for income was not). However, in the ANOVAs for the separate behaviors, only one significant interaction emerged, for “keep track of the adolescents’ activities and behavior”. A follow-up one-way ANOVA testing ethnic differences in each income group indicated that the ethnicity effect reported above was significant only in the low-income group ($F(2, 66) = 12.08; p < 0.001$).

Behaviors Ranked as Most Important to Expressing Love

Ethnicity

See Table 3 for the χ^2 and Exacon tests between ethnicity and ranking within the top five for each behavior. Using the Bonferroni correction ($p \leq 0.004$), there was a significant χ^2

between ethnicity and the dichotomized score of top-five ranking for six of 13 behaviors: “verbally express affection or appreciation”, “give compliments and praise”, “spend time as a family”, “give guidance and advice”, “help the child”, and “give independence”. Follow-up χ^2 s (examining two groups at a time) indicated that the associations between ethnicity and ranked behaviors were significant when comparing EAs and Latinas and when comparing AAs and Latinas. None of the EA and AA comparisons were significant.

Ranking of verbal expressions as among the five most important behaviors to express love to adolescents was more common among both EA and AA than among Latina mothers. Consistent with this result, Exacon analyses indicated that more EA mothers than expected by chance, and far fewer Latina mothers than expected by chance, ranked verbal expressions in the top five. Ranking of “give compliments and praise” and of “give independence” as among the most important behaviors to express love to adolescents was more common among both AA and EA than among Latina mothers. In the Exacon analysis, more AA mothers than expected by chance, and fewer Latina mothers than expected by chance, ranked these behaviors in the top five.

Ranking of “spend time as a family” as among the most important behaviors to express love to adolescents was

Table 3 Results from χ^2 and Exacon tests examining the association between mothers’ ranking of behaviors as one of top five ways to express love and ethnicity

Behavior to express love	χ^2 test	Exacon analysis		
		European American ($n = 60$)	African American ($n = 63$)	Latina ($n = 60$)
Verbally express affection or appreciation	14.19*	53 (>)*	48	22 (<)*
Show respect	1.35	38	32	42
Talk and listen to thoughts, feelings, and perspectives	1.70 ^a	62	62	52
Give compliments or praise	14.13*	20	25 (>)**	2 (<)*
Spend time together one-on-one	5.84	42	37	22
Spend time together as a family	56.54*	40 (<)*	30 (<)**	93 (>)*
Give guidance or advice	13.37*	35	32	62 (>)*
Buy gifts for or give money	7.79	0	6	0
Show love physically (hugs, kisses, smiles)	3.89	23	40	30
Help when needed	21.27*	22	14 (<)**	50 (>)*
Correct or discipline	4.48	47	51	65
Give independence	12.81*	22	22(>)*	2 (<)*
Keep track of activities or behavior	0.34	25	21	23

The p values for the χ^2 test were based on a Bonferroni correction (*indicates $p \leq 0.004$ ($0.05/13 = 0.004$)). Numbers in the Exacon test results are the percentage of mothers in each ethnic group who chose the specific behavior as one of the top five ways to express love. Symbols > and < indicate that significantly more or fewer mothers, respectively, than expected by chance chose this behavior in the top five

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

^aA significant difference between Latina and both EA and AA mothers emerged in the “top two” ranking of this behavior (see “Sensitivity analyses”)

more common among Latina than among both EA and AA mothers. In the Exacon analysis, more Latinas than expected by chance, and fewer EA or AA mothers than expected by chance, ranked “spend time as a family” as among the top five most important ways to express love. Ranking of “give guidance or advice” and “help the child when needed” was significantly more common among Latina than among both AA and EA mothers. The Exacon analysis showed that more Latinas than expected by chance ranked these behaviors as among the most important ways to express love. Fewer AA mothers than expected by chance ranked “help the child when needed” in the top five.

Income

Using the Bonferroni correction ($p \leq 0.004$), none of the χ^2 associations between income and ranking in the top five most important ways for parents to express love were significant. Hence, income was not significantly related to the ranking of any behavior as top five most important.

Sensitivity analyses

Given the high means for all behaviors, it seemed important to use all data available and to avoid overemphasizing distinctions among the top-five rankings. Yet, in recognition that there was no precedent for choosing a particular number of “most important”, we explored whether similar ethnic differences emerged when using the top two most highly ranked behaviors. Using a dichotomous variable specifying whether each behavior was ranked in the top two most important behaviors to express love, there was a significant χ^2 between ethnicity and the dichotomized score of top-five ranking for only three of 13 behaviors: “verbally express affection or appreciation”, “spend family time”, and “talk and listen to thoughts, feelings, and perspectives”. The first two were significant in the top-five analysis, and the results supported those reported for the top-five analysis: EA (26.7%) and AA (31.7%) mothers were more likely to rank “verbally express affection or appreciation” first or second than were Latinx mothers (6.6%), and a full 85% of Latinx mothers ranked “spend family time” first or second, compared to 10% of EA and 12.7% of AA mothers. “Talk and listen to thoughts, feelings, and perspectives”, however, was not significant when considering the top five ($p = 0.018$). Three follow-up χ^2 tests comparing the ethnic groups showed that fewer Latina mothers (22%) than EA mothers (38%) and AA mothers (46%) reported this behavior to be within the top two most important behavior to express love ($p = 0.046$ and $p = 0.004$, for the EA and Latina comparison and the AA and Latina comparison, respectively).

Discussion

Several classic theories emphasize the central importance of parents’ expressions of love to children’s healthy development (e.g., Baumrind 1991; Bowlby 1988; Rohner and Khaleque 2010). Empirical data support this conjecture for adolescents as well as younger children (e.g., Allen 2008; Yap et al. 2014). Yet, relatively little research addresses the different ways parents aim to express love to adolescent children, driven in part by different beliefs, or ethnotheories (Miller 2020). To learn more, in the current study, ethnically and economically diverse mothers of adolescents were asked about their beliefs concerning the importance of different behaviors in expressing love to adolescents. The ethnic groups of focus were Latinx, African American, and European American; family income ranged from low to high in each group.

Consistent with expectations, most behaviors were seen by all mothers as important expressions of love for adolescents. All behaviors except for the giving of material things (e.g., gifts, money) were rated as very important ways to express love to adolescents in all ethnic and income groups. Furthermore, there were no ethnic or income differences in the importance attributed to the following behaviors as expressions of love: physical expressions of love; showing respect; and buying gifts or giving money. Mothers in all groups rated these behaviors as equally important.

Nonetheless, ethnic or income differences in the perceived importance of ten of the 13 behaviors emerged. As anticipated, given the tendency to endorse all behaviors as important in expressing love, group differences were most apparent when mothers indicated what they believed to be the five *most important* ways to express love. When mothers chose the top five most important ways to show love, only ethnic (not income) differences in these “top five” emerged. Thus, overall, ethnicity seemed somewhat more important than income with respect to group differences in ethnotheories of love. For clarity, ethnic differences and income differences are discussed sequentially.

Ethnic Differences

With respect to emphasis on *control practices* (strict discipline; monitoring) or *respect* as expressions of love, expectations for ethnic differences based on existing research (e.g., Dixon et al. 2008; Jackson-Newsom et al. 2008) were not confirmed. EA mothers were no less likely than AA and Latina mothers to endorse the importance of correcting and disciplining, monitoring, or showing respect. In fact, the only difference was contrary to expectations: among the low-income group, Latina mothers rated

monitoring as *less* important for expressing love than did mothers from other backgrounds (but as discussed below, Latina mothers—regardless of income—also put less emphasis on giving independence).

These findings indicate that, in the 21st century United States, mothers from a variety of ethnic and income groups similarly endorse the importance of some degree of discipline, control, and monitoring as behaviors in which loving parents engage. Why did results not reflect the ethnic variation in the emphasis on parental authority documented in other research? Perhaps ethnic variation is more in *methods* of discipline (e.g., more or less “harsh”) than in a basic recognition of discipline and correction as an important expression of parental love. Another possibility is that ethnic differences in the emphasis on parental authority are reflected less by absolute levels of endorsement as in *relative* importance (i.e., ordering) of authority-related behaviors compared to other ways of expressing love, or the pervasiveness of that relative importance (i.e., how normative it is) within the ethnic group. Among EA mothers, compared to AA and Latina mothers, “correction and discipline” was endorsed less overall, and in the context of higher-ranked “talking or listening” and “verbal expressions”. For both AA—and especially Latina—mothers, “correction and discipline” was endorsed as a top-five behavior by a majority of mothers, and was the second-most endorsed behavior. Perhaps differences—although admittedly small—in normativeness and in the behavioral context of “correction and discipline” shift the balance of authority-related parenting behaviors meaningfully. This is a question for future research.

With respect to parenting practices that are typically interpreted as more democratic or child-centered (talking or listening, spending one-on-one time) or that grant the child independence, the expectation that EA mothers would view such practices as more important for expressing love than would other mothers received mixed support. As already noted, among EA mothers, the only two practices endorsed as top-five behaviors by a majority of mothers were child-centered: “talk and listen” and “verbally express affection”. Other differences contrasted EA and AA mothers with Latina mothers, pointing to a lower endorsement by Latina mothers of practices consistent with an individualistic emphasis on personal autonomy and identity that is prominent in the U.S., perhaps in the interests of promoting a child’s self-esteem. For instance, unexpectedly, Latina mothers emphasized verbal expressions of affection less than did EA and AA mothers; these results are similar to those found contrasting Chinese immigrant mothers with EA mothers (Cheah et al. 2015). Latina mothers rated “giving compliments and praise”, and “giving independence”, as less important for expressing love than did other mothers, and they were less likely than chance to rank these

two behaviors in the top five most important, in contrast to AA mothers who were more likely than chance to rank them there. Only 2% of Latina mothers ranked “giving independence” in the top five most important ways to show love. Most of these differences were significant only when the top five (vs. top two) rankings were considered, yet a comparison of top-two rankings supported the difference between Latina and other mothers in “verbal expressions”—and additionally suggested that “talking and listening to thoughts, feelings, and perspectives” was less commonly noted—as one of the two most important behaviors to show love among Latina mothers. Simply put, parenting behaviors that promote children’s independence or individualistic self-esteem were not salient as salient as expressions of love among Latina mothers as they were among other mothers.

In contrast, and consistent with expectations based on notions of *simpatia* and *familism* (e.g., Stein et al. 2014), Latina mothers placed a higher emphasis on practices promoting family connection as expressions of love. Nearly all (93%) Latina mothers ranked “spend time as a family” in the top five most important ways to express love to adolescents (85% ranked it in the top two), a proportion significantly higher than chance, whereas EA and AA mothers ranked this manner of expressing love in the top five at rates significantly lower than chance. This difference speaks to the potential importance of distinguishing between spending “one-on-one” time and “family” time in assessment of loving behaviors. Latina mothers also rated giving “guidance and advice” and “helping the child when needed” as more important ways of expressing love than did other mothers and were more likely than chance to rank these behaviors in the top five most important expressions of love. Altogether these results suggest that Latina mothers emphasize parenting behaviors that require connectedness—with one another and with the family as a whole—of a very physical and practical sort, whereas verbal connections through expressing verbal love and giving compliments were relatively less important. This set of preferences is consistent with setting apart the family as referent group in the socialization of children (Lugo Steidel and Contreras 2003), so that children will consider parental input and wisdom as they solve problems and make decisions, in contrast to an individualistic stance that ascribes as loving the chance for children to act on their own and make their own mistakes. In line with the possibility that the degree of Latina mothers’ exposure to U.S. values might affect their beliefs, Latina mothers were more likely to rank “family time” in the top five most important ways to express love the less time they had lived in the U.S. ($r = -0.31$, $p = 0.02$). Further research could examine within-group differences in beliefs, perhaps due to generational status or levels of acculturation.

Socioeconomic (Income) Differences

In this study, household income was used as the indicator of SES. As already noted, income differences were less frequent than ethnic differences; in fact, there was no significant association between income and ranking of behaviors in the top five most important ways to express love to adolescents. Contrary to expectations, lower income mothers did not emphasize protective and controlling practices (e.g., strict discipline, monitoring) or provision of special gifts (as rarer commodities) as loving more so than did higher income mothers. If anything, the reverse was true in that middle-income mothers rated correction and discipline as a less important expression of love than did high-income mothers. At the same time, middle-income mothers also rated giving independence as less important than did high-income mothers. This difference in independence-giving was the only finding in line with the hypothesis that high-income mothers would view practices emphasizing collaboration or personal choice as more loving than would other mothers.

What was most striking about the findings with respect to SES—other than the similarity across income groups—was that all of the few income differences contrasted middle-income mothers in particular with low- and/or high-income mothers. In addition to the differences in “correct and discipline” and “give independence” already noted, middle-income mothers rated “spend time with family” as a less important expression of love in comparison to *both* low- and high-income mothers; they rated “give guidance and advice” as lower in importance than did low-income mothers. Using transformed variables, the lower rated importance of “spend one-on-one time” among middle-income mothers compared to other mothers was also statistically significant. This pattern of results was not anticipated but raises questions about the ways middle-income mothers might differ from others. On average, the middle-income mothers in this study worked more weekly hours than did the low-income mothers and, despite working similar hours to high-income mothers, they could probably afford fewer time-saving luxuries (e.g., hiring house-cleaning help). The small tendency for middle-income mothers to rate some parenting practices as less important than other groups (and to rate nothing as more important than other income groups) might reflect a higher degree of time pressure that precludes a higher emphasis on all behaviors assessed. Future research can address whether these unanticipated differences are replicable and, if so, explained by different demands on mothers’ time.

Strengths, Limitations, and Implications

A strength of the study is the explicit sensitivity to both similarity and differences in beliefs about loving behavior

across groups that differ in norms, values, goals, and experiences (e.g., Le et al. 2008). Mothers were from the three dominant ethnic groups within the geographical region and were deliberately recruited to represent diversity in SES, which is often confounded with ethnicity (Le et al. 2008). Given that Latinx families in this region are over-represented in lower SES contexts, this effort was not entirely successful in unconfounding ethnicity and income; nonetheless, ethnicity and income were examined separately to the degree possible. Furthermore, analyses controlling for maternal age, education, and employment one at a time ruled out these other factors as possible explanations for the ethnic or income differences.

Another strength of the study was the inclusion of items, developed based on theory and pilot data, to assess mothers’ beliefs about behaviors less commonly conceptualized as expressions of love (e.g., “correction and discipline”, “keep track of the adolescents’ activities and behavior”, “give the adolescent independence”, “spending family time”). These items were ultimately endorsed by most mothers as important for expressing love, indicating that they hold a place in mothers’ ethnotheories of loving behavior for adolescents. Furthermore, in some cases (i.e., giving independence, family time) these items helped to reveal a pattern of ethnic differences contrasting Latina and other mothers. The results provide a foundation on which future and larger studies can build, to consider the variety of ways in which parents might express love and how adolescents might ultimately perceive love. Such awareness has implications for research and for clinical and other settings that seek to promote family functioning. Results suggest that assessments of “love” or “warmth” focused on explicit verbal or physical expressions of love, or on child-centric practices such as talking to and listening to children, tap into important but incomplete aspects of this concept, and that ecologically-sensitive measures should include practices that have less traditionally been equated with expressions of love. For example, if a majority of AA and Latina mothers believe “correction and discipline” is among the most important ways to express love, or if Latinas put less emphasis on verbal expressions of love, measures of love that neglect the former or emphasize the latter might be less valid. Similarly, a focus on behaviors aimed to promote self-esteem and autonomy in an individualistic way (e.g., complimenting, praising, or giving independence) as loving might lead to conclusions that Latina mothers are less loving than they are. Thus, it is important in both research and clinical settings to carefully consider the range of different behaviors that might be used to express love in different contexts.

A limitation of this study is that, in this initial attempt to look closely at group differences in mothers’ beliefs about the importance of specific practices and to avoid

assumptions of where differences might lie, measurement occurred at the item level; items were not combined into one single scale or sub-scales. Rather, the items were treated as distinctive ways of expressing love. Future research can build on the current assessment of these diverse behaviors (and beliefs about them), perhaps formulating multi-item measures for which reliability can be assessed. In doing so, however, researchers must remain aware that glossing over seemingly subtle differences in behaviors (e.g., one-on-one time vs. family time) might also lead to a glossing over of contextual differences in parenting beliefs and behavior.

Another limitation of this study is that it did not address maternal behavior, or adolescents' perceptions of maternal love, despite that it is adolescents' perceptions of love and acceptance that, arguably, ultimately influence their development. Adolescents from different ethnic and SES groups are likely to perceive behaviors as differentially loving depending on the cultural and contextual norms for their family (e.g., Jackson-Newsom et al. 2008), but because their perceptions are influenced by mainstream as well as heritage norms (Wu and Chao 2017), future research can build on the current findings by connecting maternal beliefs to maternal behavior, and to adolescents' perceptions of maternal intentions and behavior. Clinicians and educators who work with adolescents—who often engage in social comparisons about what parents do or allow and might question their own parents' practices based on such comparisons—are positioned to help them understand and appreciate the likely positive beliefs and intent motivating those practices.

Conclusion

Maternal beliefs about expressing love to adolescents were examined among mothers from different ethnic and income groups. This research addresses an important gap in knowledge about the parenting practices mothers deem important for expressing love during a developmental period in which autonomy and independence increase, yet parental love remains critical to positive developmental outcomes. The results document many similarities in beliefs across ethnic and socioeconomic contexts; in fact, all of the practices assessed were seen, overall, as important by mothers in all contexts. There were very few differences based on household income, and the ones that emerged were not predicted. In this respect, the findings affirm that mothers across ethnic and income groups recognize the importance of a wide variety of behaviors—even including correction, discipline, and monitoring—as expressions of love. Nonetheless, results supported some ethnic differences, particularly in what mothers ranked as *most* important to express love. Among the implications of these

differences are that research on and theories of parenting, as well as clinical, educational, or programmatic efforts to promote parenting effectiveness, must acknowledge the role of ethnotheories that might lead parents from different cultural backgrounds and life experiences to emphasize somewhat different specific behaviors, or different constellations of behaviors, in their attempts to express love and warmth to their children. Theories, assessments, or clinical judgments of parental “love” or “warmth” focused only or mainly on explicit verbal expressions of love, or on child-centric practices such as praising children, might be incomplete; they risk underestimating expressions of love in some contexts. Insensitivity to these differences might contribute to assumptions mistakenly elevating some parenting practices (typically, practices emphasized by majority groups) over others as important expressions of love. In contrast, sensitivity to potential differences in parenting can promote greater understanding and acceptance of such differences, allowing clinicians and educators to build more effective relationships with the parents they serve. A recognition of the many similarities, as well as the reasons for some differences, in how parents aim to express love, can be conducive to building bridges that result in greater receptiveness by parents to support, guidance, or education offered.

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Data Sharing and Declaration The datasets generated and/or analyzed during the current study are not publicly available but are available from the corresponding author on reasonable request.

Compliance with Ethical Standards

Conflict of Interest The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

Ethical Approval All procedures performed in the current study were in accordance with the ethical standards of the Wake Forest University Institutional Review Board.

Informed Consent Informed consent was obtained from all individual participants included in the study.

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