

Closeness, Conflict, and Control
In Parent-Adolescent Relationships:
Gender Differences in African American Families*

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This paper focuses on three constructs that are central to adolescent-parent relationships and parenting relationships more generally. The paper describes the gender-differentiated ways that closeness, conflict, and control are negotiated over time in African American adolescent-parent relationships. In a recent chapter, and based on their sample of lower middle class African American girls, Ana Mari Cauce and her colleagues (Cauce, Hiraga, Graves, Gonzales, Ryan-Finn, & Grove, 1996) proposed that, “the way in which these separate threads are interwoven is as distinctly African American as is jazz, rap, and the blues. The notes are universal, but the style and verve echo the African American historical and cultural experience and have a signature integrity of their own” (Cauce et al., 1996, p. 112). Although their analyses were insightful, they did not consider how these relationships might differ in African American boys and girls. Therefore, the present analyses compare closeness, conflict, and control in adolescent-parent relationships in a sample of middle class African American families with boys and girls.

A common saying among African Americans is “love your son but raise your daughter.” As others have noted (Cauce et al., 1996), this aptly characterizes the way that African American

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parents teach their children to survive in a hostile world. The task for African American parents is to help their children negotiate safely through adolescence, while maintaining relationships with family, kin, and the broader community. Parents of different ethnicities face similar challenges in fostering their adolescents' autonomy and competence while protecting them from the increased psychosocial risks of adolescence. The challenge for African American parents is substantially greater, however, due to the effects of prejudice and discrimination, and these risks are gender-differentiated (Spencer & Dupree, 1996). In a recent Sunday New York Times Magazine article, Sara Mosle (2000) vividly describes the risks for boys as she described her experience as a volunteer mentor to a group of poor African American boys:

When I first started seeing my kids, people would smile at us on the subway, as in "Look at the nice white lady with the cute little black children." Now I found, when I was standing at the center of a group of teenage boys, people sometimes shot me expressions of alarm, as in, "Are you O.K.?"

In the public's eyes, my kids had morphed, in the matter of one or two years, from being 'cute' to being potential superpredators. I often noticed as we walked around the Upper West Side how people gave us a wide berth, how store managers stiffened when we walked in, how people moved, when we sat down in a theater, how, if I hailed a cab and my kids stepped off the curb, it would screech away... I wanted to hit people when these things happened. My kids just shrugged. It wasn't news to them, and it shouldn't have been to me. But all I can say is that its' not the same until it happens to you." (p. 54).

These concerns were stated repeatedly in our semi-structured interviews with parents. Although being upper middle class certainly shields families from many of the ills associated

with poverty, it does not protect them from racism, and parents of boys clearly articulated their concerns about how their tall, mature-looking, post-pubertal sons would look to others. In their recent book, Boyd-Franklin and Franklin (2000) provide advice to African American parents about what to do – and how to prepare their African American sons -- if they are stopped by the police while driving DWB – Driving While Black. As this illustrates, the risks are very real for African American males of all socioeconomic strata. Research has clearly demonstrated that boys are at greater risk than girls for externalizing problems like conduct disorders, aggression, and juvenile delinquency (Patterson, DeBaryshe, & Ramsey, 1989), and African American boys are at disproportionate risk, compared to their European-American counterparts. Furthermore, they are involved in far greater numbers in the juvenile justice system or in school misconduct than are boys of other ethnicities (Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, 1992).

African American girls, on the other hand, face another set of risks. African American boys and girls sit below White boys and girls in the social hierarchy. Some authors have asserted that African American male-female relationships are egalitarian due to the history of slavery, where family relations were frequently disrupted and female-headed households became the norm (Billingsley, 1992). However, in contrast to this claim, many feminists have described African American women as sitting below European American men and women and below African American men as well, due to the ‘double whammy’ of racism and sexism. African American adolescent girls must construct a positive self-image in a climate where their looks do not fit desired physical stereotypes (specifically, blond, blue-eyed, small-featured, and thin; Cauce et al., 1996), and their relatively powerless position yields them sexually and physically vulnerable to attack.

So how are these sex differences in risk and social position instantiated in adolescent-parent relationships? The data presented here come from the University of Rochester Youth and Family Project, a multi-method, multi-informant, longitudinal study of adolescent-parent relationships in middle income African American families. The sample consisted of 95 families (93 mothers and 57 fathers), with nearly even numbers of boys and girls between 11 and 14 years of age at intake. Families were followed, with little attrition, for two years. The families ranged from lower middle class to upper middle class, with about a third earning more than \$70,000 a year at Time 1. Adolescents, mothers, and, in two-parent families, fathers, were administered questionnaires, individually interviewed using semi-structured clinical interviews, and observed engaging in a series of family interaction tasks.

How African American parents love their sons and raise their daughters is summarized in Figure 1, which show data aggregated over time and across informants. Sex differences emerged in adolescents' reported trust with mothers, ratings of conflict intensity, and reports of monitoring (but not rules) in the family. Boys reported more trust in their relationships with mothers than did girls, whereas girls are monitored more and experience more conflict with parents than do boys. The remainder of this paper unpacks these findings further.

Closeness

Adolescents' reports of closeness with mothers were obtained on Armsden and Greenberg's (1987) Inventory of Parent and Peer Attachment, which includes two 18-item scales assessing trust and communication. As Figure 1 indicates, both boys and girls rated their relationships with mothers as very high in trust (and also in communication, although those data are not depicted here). Besides the main effect for gender in adolescents' ratings of trust depicted in Figure 1, gender also interacted with time of assessment. Boys reported more trust in

their relationships with mothers than did girls, but only at Time 1, in early adolescence (see Figure 2). Gender differences were not significant at Time 2.

Insert Figures 1, 2, and 3 about here

These findings are based on adolescents' ratings. But other findings suggest that this effect is not simply in the eyes of the adolescent beholder. As reported elsewhere (Smetana, Abernethy, & Harris, in press), similar sex differences were obtained in objective African American observers' coding of videotaped family interactions. Scores on a composite measure (Mother Supports/Validates Teen) indicated that mothers supported and validated their sons more than their daughters (see Figure 3). That is, they listened to and were more receptive to adolescents' opinions, they were more supportive and understanding, and tolerated differences and disagreements more. So the sex differences in adolescents' reports of trust may be related to these differences in mothers' support and validation.

Conflict

As reported elsewhere (Smetana & Gaines, 1999), adolescents and mothers rated conflicts in their relationship using the Issues Checklist (Prinz, Foster, Kent, & O'Leary, 1979; Robin & Foster, 1989), a frequently used measure of adolescent-parent conflict. Individuals were asked to indicate whether each of 37 different areas of day-to-day decision-making (for instance, curfew, clothing, and homework) was discussed during the past two weeks, and, if so, to rate the intensity of discussion on a 5-point scale, with higher scores indicating more angry discussion. As Figure 1 demonstrated, conflicts were generally mild in intensity, and adolescent- and mother-rated conflict was more intense in families with girls than boys. Again, however, gender also interacted with time of assessment. Conflicts with parents become more intense over time in

families with girls so that significant sex differences were found only in middle adolescence (see Figure 3).

Moreover, adolescents' conflicts with parents were gender-differentiated in other ways as well. Families with girls also reported a greater number of conflicts than did families with boys, and there were differences in the types of conflicts families with boys and girls experience (see Figure 4). For instance, aggregating across both time and informant, there were proportionally more conflicts over chores in families with boys than girls, whereas there were more conflicts over choice of activities and over the adolescent's room, in families with girls than boys. For instance, there were proportionally more conflicts over chores in families with boys than girls, whereas there were more conflicts over choice of activities and over the adolescent's room in families with girls than boys. Although African American parents demand responsibility from both boys and girls, boys appeared to contest these expectations more than did girls. The lower frequency of girls' conflicts over these issues, as well as the greater frequency of girls' than boys' conflicts over the state of their room reflect African American mothers' strict expectations for their daughters. In the interviews, mothers talked about how learning to keep their rooms neat provides training for the responsibilities that girls will have to assume as grown-ups. In a world where many African American women raise families by themselves, mothers explicitly described trying to prepare their daughters to learn to care for themselves and others.

Insert Figure 4 about here

Control

Several researchers have stressed the importance of distinguishing between parental psychological and behavioral control (Barber, 1996). The focus here was on behavioral

control, which refers to the rules, regulations, and restrictions that parents have for their adolescents and their awareness of their adolescent's activities. Adequate behavioral control is seen as a positive force in adolescent development because it provides adolescents with necessary supervision and guidance. Indeed, numerous studies have linked inadequate behavioral control with a variety of externalizing behaviors (Barber, Olsen, & Shagle, 1994; Patterson et al., 1989). The data presented earlier indicated that adolescents in our sample were very highly monitored, as reported by both mothers and adolescents on a 10-item Parental Monitoring Questionnaire (Steinberg, Mounts, Lamborn, & Dornbusch, 1991). The monitoring questionnaire asks how well parents monitor their adolescents' activities, how much time parents and children spend together, and where the adolescent goes after school. Thus, like many measures of parenting, the questions are general and meant to sample across a range of issues.

But many of the assessments in this research were domain-differentiated, based on a domain specificity theory of social development (Turiel, 1983). Distinctions were made among moral, social-conventional, personal, and prudential issues. We also asked about friendship issues, like who and when to date, which involve a mixture of conventional and personal concerns. When we look more closely at what is being regulated, the meaning of the findings for monitoring becomes clearer. We asked parents and adolescents to rate the extent of rules in six domains, and few sex differences emerged (Smetana, in press). Sex differences pertained specifically to parents' concerns about friendship and dating for girls. When examined in terms of ratings of rules in the family, mothers reported regulating friendships more for girls than boys (although girls' and boys' ratings of rules did not differ significantly; see Figure 5). The assessment of rules was only one of several domain-differentiated

measures of parental authority and parenting, and notably, this same finding emerged repeatedly across different measures. For example, parents and adolescents judged whether adolescents had the legitimate authority to make rules about issues in different domains. Again, sex differences emerged only in ratings of adolescents' authority to regulate friendships. As Figure 6 demonstrates, adolescent girls viewed themselves as having more legitimate authority to regulate their friendships than did boys, but mothers did not. Instead, they viewed their sons as having more legitimate authority to regulate friendship issues than their daughters.

Insert Figures 5 and 6 about here

We also obtained behavioral timetable data at Time 2 using an adaptation of Feldman & Rosenthal's (1990) measures. Adolescents and parents rated on 5-point scales the ages that they began or expected to be able to do what they want with respect to a variety of behaviors, including dating and sex. Response choices were scored on a 5-point scale (with 2 = ages 14-15, 3 = ages 16-17, 4 = 18 or older, and 5 = never). As Figure 7 indicates, on average, middle adolescent boys and girls in our sample wanted to be dating at their current ages, but mothers wanted them to start dating at somewhat older ages (around 16-17 years of age). A main effect for gender indicated that girls were expected to date at later ages than boys. As shown in Figure 8, mothers also wanted their adolescents to initiate sexual activity at older ages – somewhere between age 18 and never, whereas adolescents indicated that they expected to become sexually active later in their teenage years. Although we asked about a variety of other behaviors, there were very few significant sex differences in adolescents' and parents' behavioral timetables, including when adolescents could drink beer or wine or start smoking.

Insert Figures 7 and 8 and Table 1 about here

So the findings indicate that sex differences are focused particularly on control over African American girls' sexuality and concern with protecting girls from the risks of early sexual involvement. However, despite the many risks that boys face, there were no parallel findings for boys. Mothers were not more concerned with controlling boys around the various behaviors that put boys at greater risk than girls.

Finally, we examined the correlations among monitoring, trust, and conflict intensity separately for boys and girls. The findings for boys (see Table 1) indicate that trust is significantly and positively correlated with parental monitoring and significantly and negatively correlated with conflict. For girls, however, trust is only marginally negatively correlated with conflict. To return to the quote at the beginning of the paper, our findings suggest that the way closeness, conflict, and control are interwoven is as distinctly African American as is jazz, rap, and the blues, but it also distinct in African American adolescent boys and girls.

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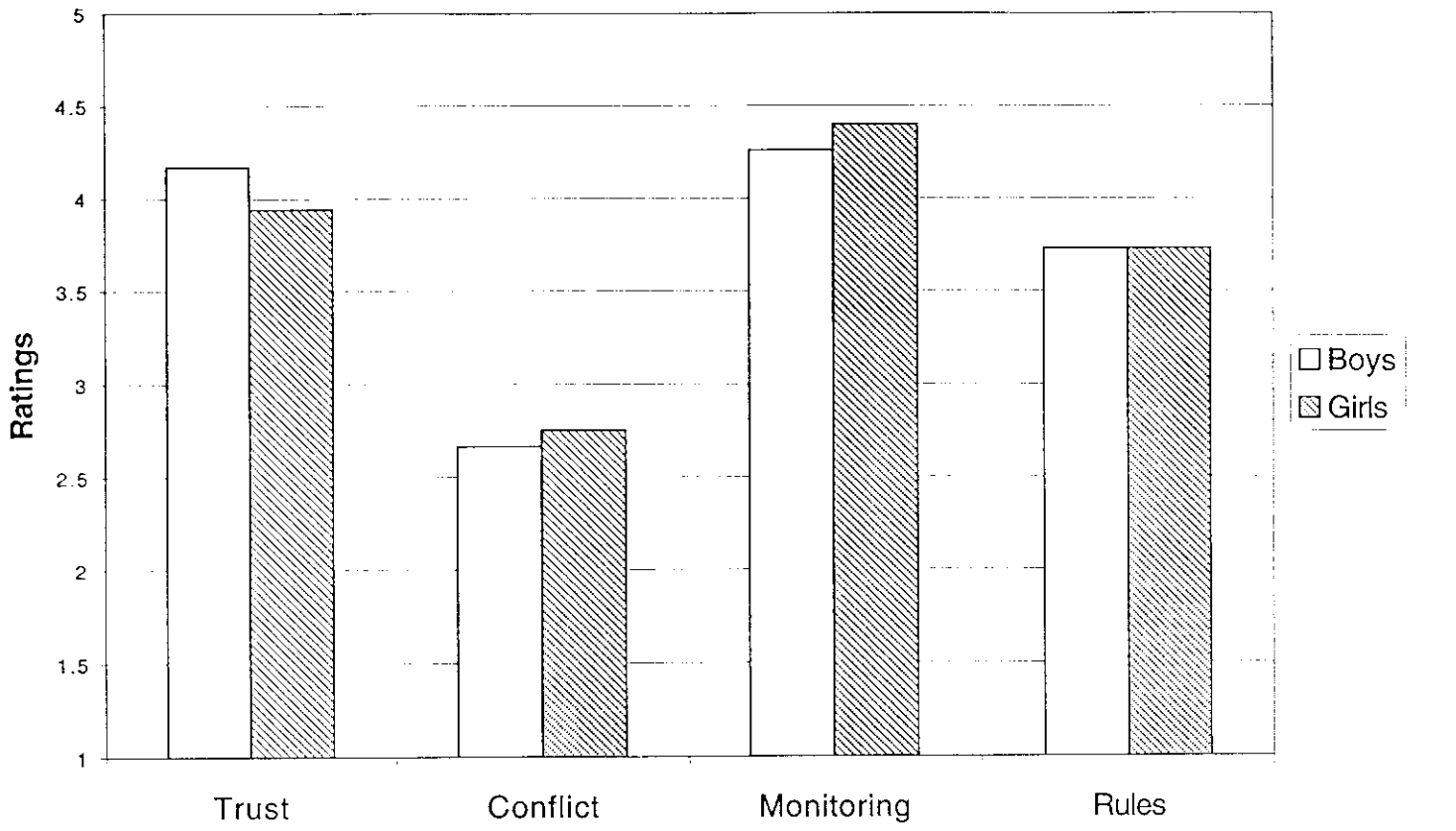
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Correlations Among Trust, Monitoring, and Conflict

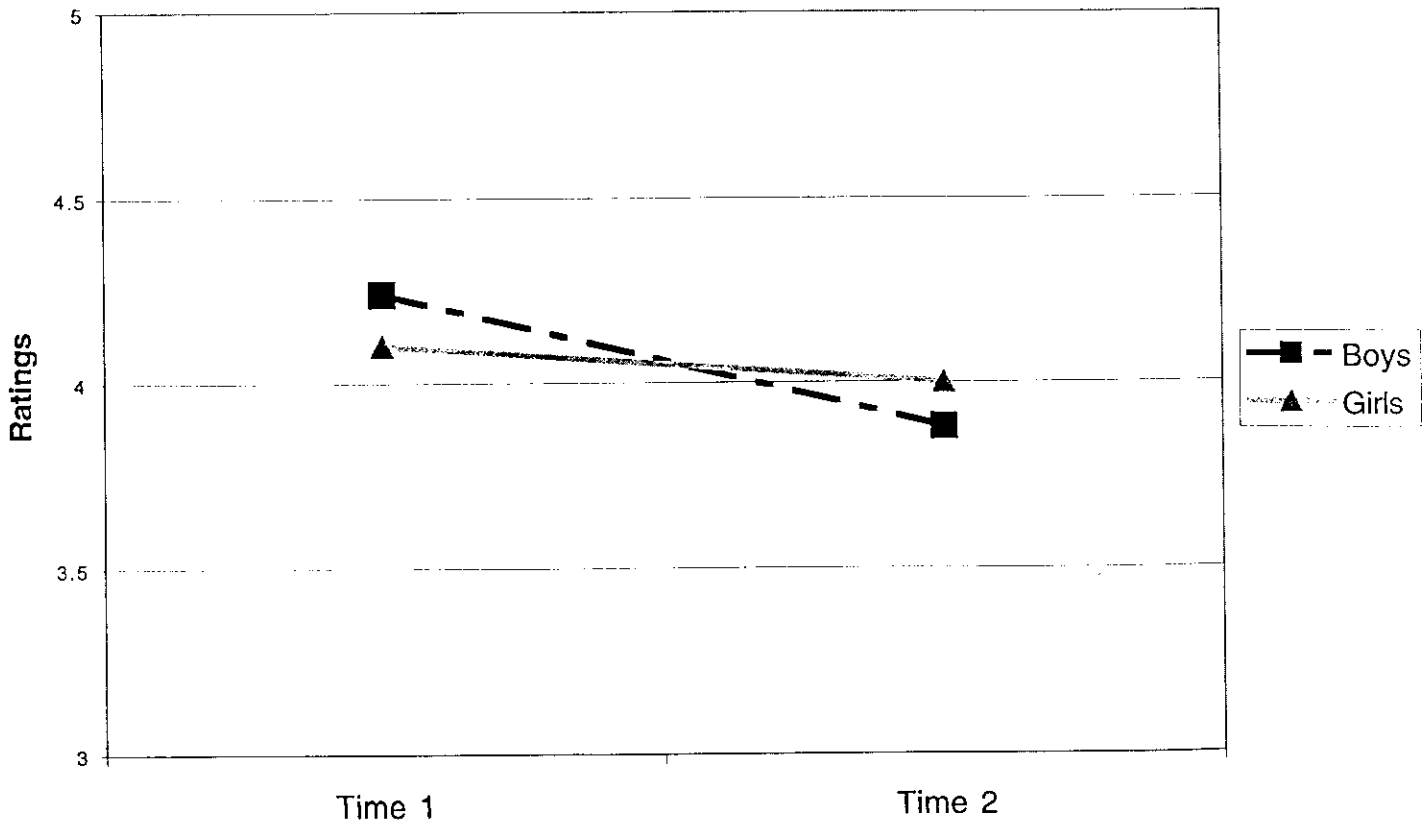
	Monitoring	Trust	Conflict
Monitoring	1.00	.35**	.06
Trust	.16	1.00	-.35*
Conflict	.03	-.26+	1.00

Note: Correlations above the diagonal are for boys; correlations below the diagonal are for girls.

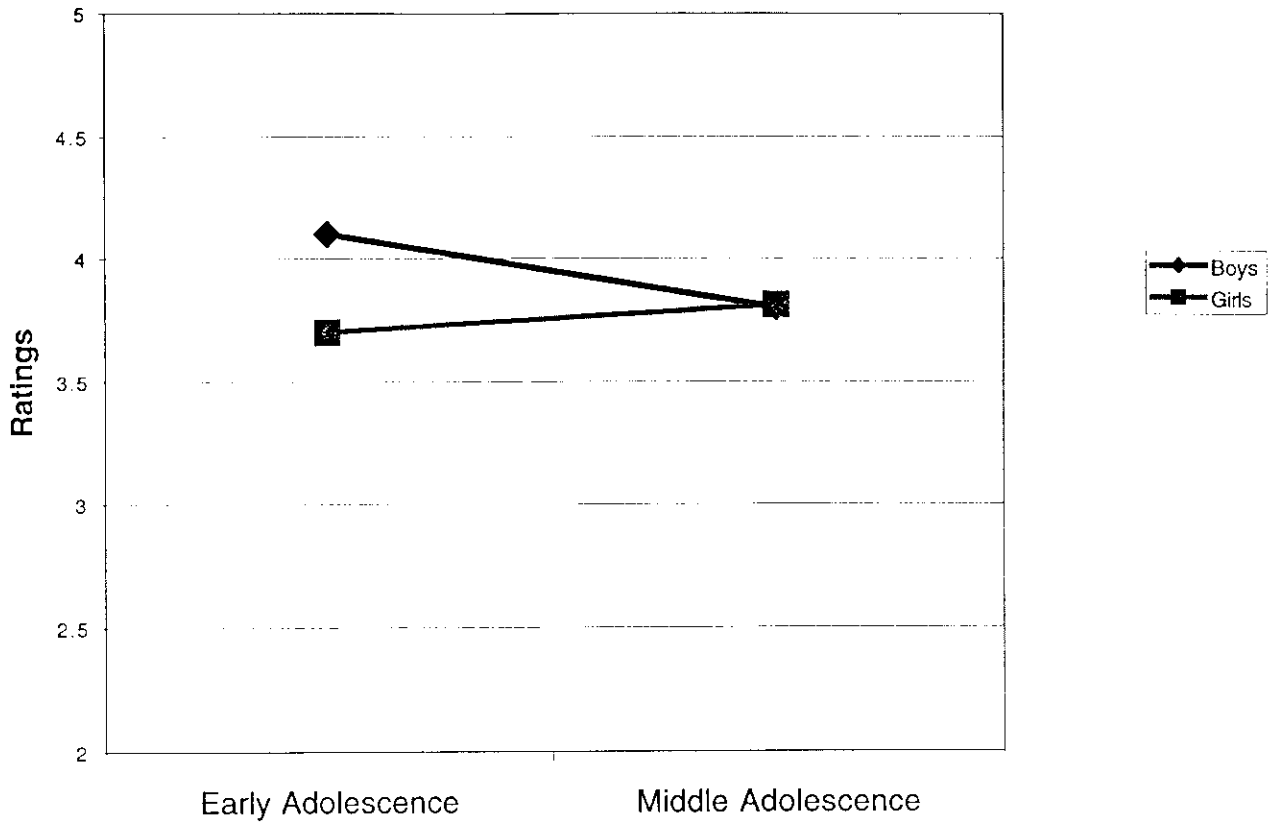
Gender Differences In Closeness, Conflict, and Control



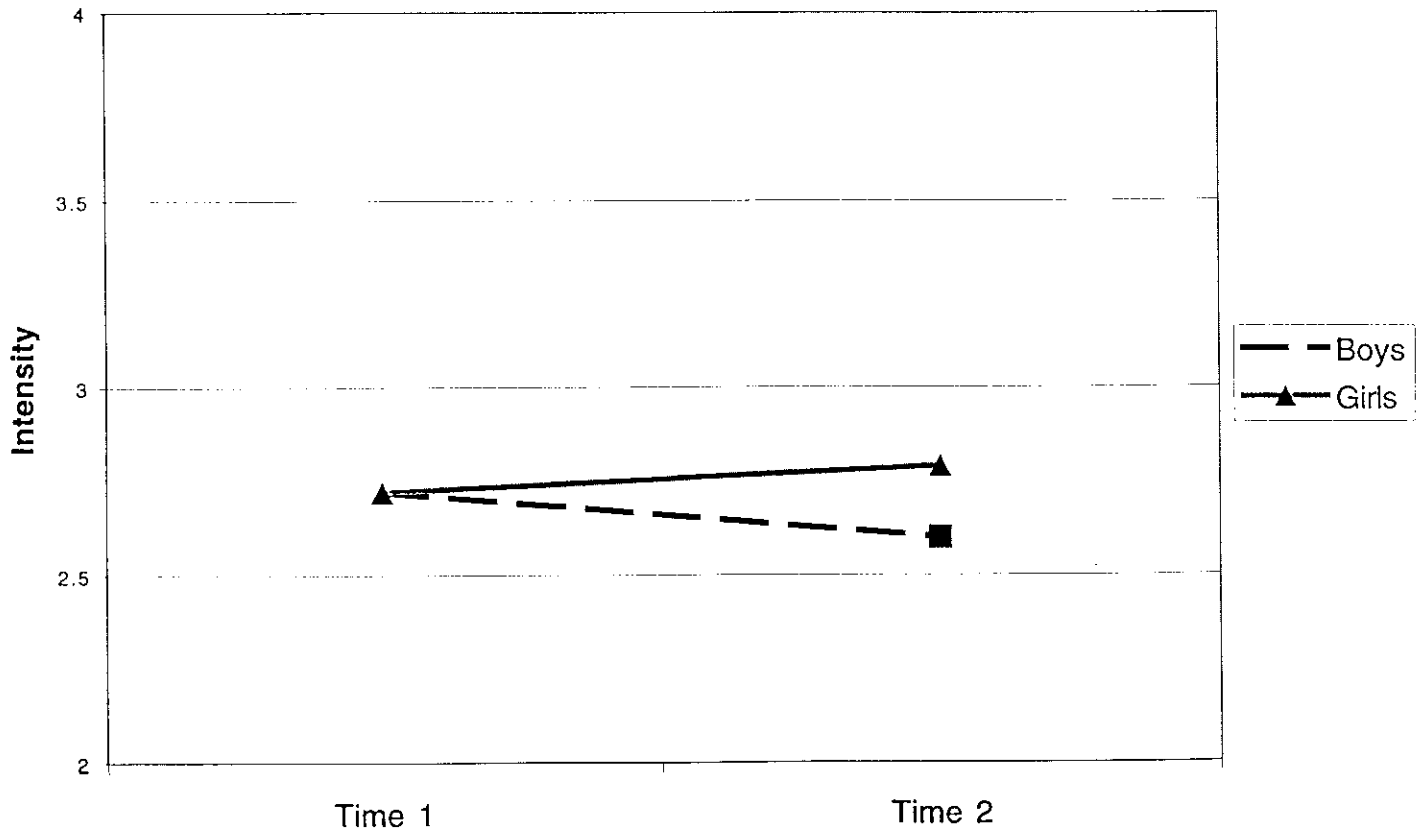
Trust



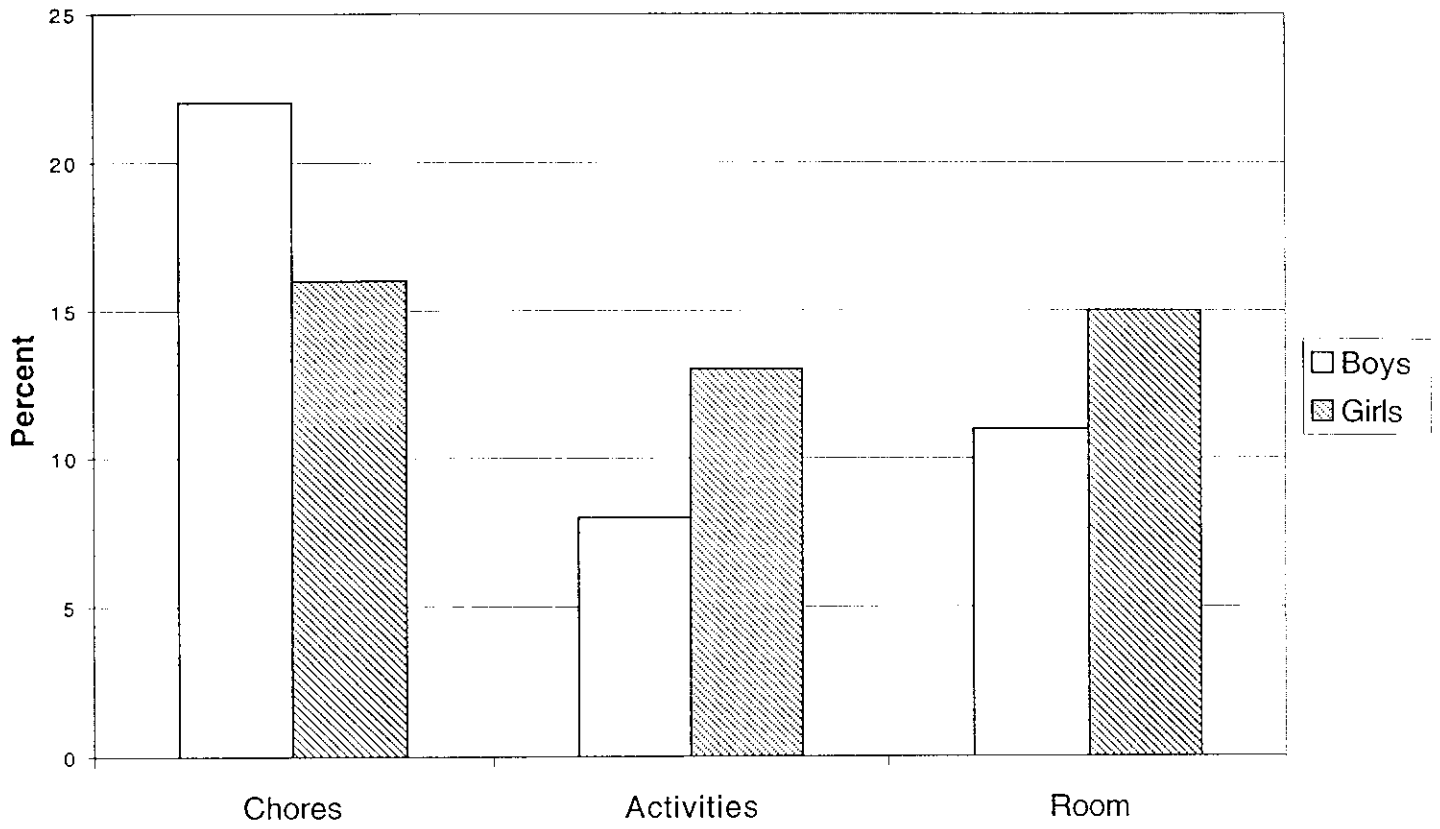
Mother Supports/Validates Teen



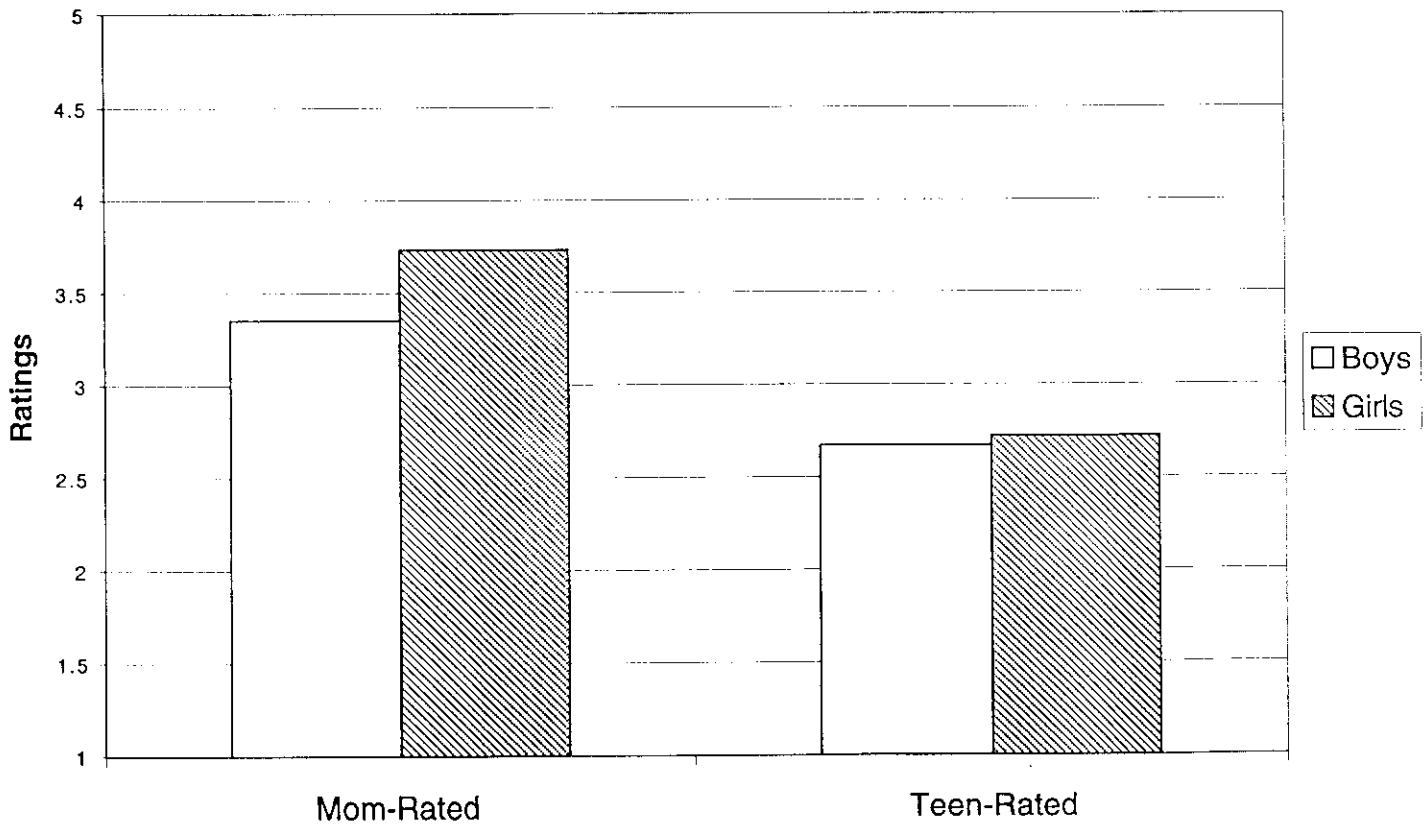
Adolescent-Parent Conflict



Conflicts



Friendship Rules



Behavioral Timelines - Sex

