RMLE Online
Research in Middle Level Education

Micki M. Caskey, Ph.D., Editor
Portland State University
Portland, Oregon

2008 • Volume 31 • Number 8 ISSN 1940-4476

Factors Associated with Perceived Parental Academic Monitoring in a Population of Low-Income, African American Young Adolescents

Jessica Miller Rath
University of Maryland
College Park, MD

Andrea C. Gielen
Johns Hopkins Bloomberg School of Public Health
Baltimore, MD

Denise L. Haynie
National Institute of Child Health and Human Development
Bethesda, MD

Barry S. Solomon
Johns Hopkins University School of Medicine
Baltimore, MD

Tina L. Cheng
Johns Hopkins University
Baltimore, MD

Bruce G. Simons-Morton
National Institute of Child Health and Human Development
Bethesda, MD

Abstract

Adolescent academic achievement is closely linked to numerous health outcomes. Studies have demonstrated a positive relationship between parental academic monitoring and adolescent academic achievement. Less is known about factors associated with parental academic monitoring, and research is particularly lacking with low-income, African American young adolescents who are at high risk for school disengagement and underachievement.

Data were collected from a sample of incoming urban sixth graders using a computer- assisted questionnaire. Data were analyzed as cross-sectional using the responses of 111 African American adolescents, ages 10–14

years. The median responses of adolescents about perceptions of parental academic monitoring were used to classify adolescents into two groups, lower and higher perceived academic monitoring. Logistic regression and stratified analyses determined factors related to higher parental academic monitoring.

Adolescents' perceived parental general support (OR: 2.08, CI: 1.29–3.36) and friends' pro-social behavior (OR: 1.54, CI: 1.03–2.30), were significant factors in the multivariate model. Also, adolescents living with one biological parent and with other adults were more likely to report higher parental academic monitoring, compared to adolescents living with one biological parent and no other adults (OR: 3.58, CI: 1.00–12.83).

Perceptions of general parental support and peer groups offer insight into why parental academic monitoring allows only some African American urban youth to succeed academically. Parental support provides a context that influences youths' perceptions of their parents' academic monitoring and should be considered in future research. Results identify factors in a high-risk population that may help explain why some urban youth succeed academically while others do not.

Introduction

African American youth experience a disproportionate share of the burden of poverty in the United States (McLoyd, 1990). In 2004, there were 62% of African American children under the age of 18 living in one parent or no parent households, compared to 23% of European American children (Forum on Child & Family Statistics, 2004). In 2000, the high school completion rate for African Americans 18–24 years was 83.7% compared to 91.8% for European Americans (Kaufman, Alt, & Chapman, 2001). Urban, African American families frequently encounter stress associated with young parenthood, negative life events, economic hardship, and mental health problems (McLoyd). Unfortunately, poverty, economic loss, and stress diminish the capacity for supportive and involved parenting (McLoyd; Kaslow et al., 2003). However, there are poor, African American youth who experience success despite all odds (Gutman & McLoyd, 2000). Various parent and youth factors must be operating to help these youth overcome tremendous odds and obtain academic success.

Home and school are the major ecological settings for youth and thus provide a context to understand factors that may relate to positive academic outcomes. In the context of home, parental involvement has been well documented as protective for numerous adolescent health outcomes. In 1980, Petit identified parental monitoring as a dimension of parental involvement. Parental monitoring can include knowing what youth are doing when they are not at home, and knowing youths' friends or how youth spend their money. Like parental involvement, this concept of parental monitoring is essential in research, which postulates that parenting style is a key factor in promoting healthy psychosocial youth development. Research also exists on parental monitoring as it relates to specific domains, such as academics.

One definition of parental academic monitoring includes knowing what classes your child is taking and knowing when your child has misbehaved at school (Simons-Morton & Crump, 2003). Examining parental academic monitoring can be useful for schools to understand factors outside the school related to an adolescent's school performance. The relationship between academic monitoring and positive health outcomes is mediated by academic achievement. For example, Turner (1994) described parental academic monitoring as protective against youth substance use. Therefore, it is important to examine influences of parental academic monitoring in order to improve youth academics and therefore, youth health outcomes. While some literature suggests that parents help struggling students less often than their higher academically achieving youth, other literature indicates that parents of struggling students demonstrate more at-home school monitoring and less at-school participation (Shumow & Miller, 2001). Shumow and Miller examined this issue further in their secondary analysis of data collected for the Longitudinal Study of American Youth (LSAY). Results indicate that parents of struggling students provided more monitoring than parents of successful students did. The opposite was true for at-school involvement. Parents of successful students were involved at school significantly more than parents of struggling students (Shumow & Miller).
Less is known about specific factors that may be related to parental academic monitoring in low-income

urban populations. The current study examines the following research question: Is parental academic monitoring in a low-income, African American population associated with pro-social friends and behavior and perceived parental engagement and support?

Methods

Research Design

This study was a cross-sectional, secondary analysis of data collected as part of the Steppin' Up intervention study with an experimental and control condition (Contract #N01-HD-2-3344). All students beginning their first year of sixth grade in 2003, who were not in self-contained special education classrooms, and their parent/guardians were eligible to participate in the study. Parents/guardians provided written informed consent and adolescents provided assent (N = 111). Consent forms were re-issued three times to non-respondents. Participants randomized to the intervention group received 24 weekly mentor-based educational sessions emphasizing academic achievement and aggression prevention. Participants in the control condition received health education materials surrounding these issues. The Johns Hopkins School of Medicine and the National Institutes of Child Health Institutional Review Boards as well as the Baltimore City School District Review Board approved the study. All participants completed a baseline survey conducted in groups in the school computer lab, using a computer-assisted survey instrument.

Participants

The sample population included incoming sixth grade young adolescents in one inner city middle school located in a low-income urban neighborhood with high rates of unemployment and crime. Students in the school were 99.8% African American with 87.9% of students qualifying for the federal free and reduced-price lunch program. The data analysis was limited to African American students. Youth ranged in age from 10 to 14 with a mean age of 12.03 years. There were 61 girls (55%) and 50 boys (45%). The school (including all grades) was approximately 50/50 female/male ratio. Most (58.6%) students lived with at least one biological parent and other adults in the home, 27 (27.3%) students lived with one biological parent and no other adults in the home, and 14 (14.1%) students did not live with either of their biological parents.

Parents providing consent to participate also agreed to participate in a telephone interview. Of the 199 eligible students, 144 consents were obtained with 111 (55.8%) agreeing to participate. Consent forms for the remaining 55 (27.6%) students that were not returned were considered to be passive no's. The 111 intervention and control participants comprise the youth sample used in this analysis.

Measures

All measures were based on youth self-report. Individual items were summed and scales were created for each measure by calculating an average score. There was very little missing data among the youth data. This may have been in part because youth used computer-assisted surveys. Therefore, mean scale scores were calculated for individuals if greater than half of the scale was completed. Higher scale scores indicated an increase in the trait being measured. A summary of scales including scale citations, example items, ranges, means, standard deviations, and Cronbach's alphas is provided in Table 1.

Table 1
Summary of Data Collection Instruments

Scale	Citation	Example Item	Range	Mean/SD	Cronbach's Alpha
Independent Variables					
Friends Pro-social Behavior	Simons-Morton et al., 1999	How many of your 5 friends do volunteer work?	0–5 (friends)	3.3/1.5	.85
Youth Pro-social Behavior	Simons-Morton et al., 1999	How many of the last 30 days did you do something to help someone in your neighborhood?	0–30 (days)	8.7/6.7	.85
Academic Engagement	Midgley et al., 1998	I pay attention in class.	1–10 (SD to SA)*	7.7/1.8	.78
Perceived Parental Support	Jackson, Henriksen, & Foshee, 1998	I have a parent or guardian who tells me when I do a good job on things	1–10 (SD to SA)*	8.2/1.6	.84
Dependent Variables					
Perceived Parental Academic Monitoring	Simons-Morton et al., 1999	I have a parent who knows what classes I am taking.	1–10 (SD to SA)*	8.5/1.8	.81

*SD = strongly disagree; SA = strongly agree

Measures were thoroughly pilot tested for time and readability. Two forms of the measures were tested on nine students each (n = 18) that were current sixth graders at the school prior to the start of the first year of data collection. Follow-up with students involved a discussion about the experience of completing the questionnaire, question clarity, and sensitivity of questions. A few words were changed based on results of this pilot test in order to increase clarity of the questions. A description of the measures follow.

Friends' pro-social behavior. This 5-item scale was developed by Simons-Morton et al., 1999. Items evaluate how many of the youth's five closest friends do certain pro-social behaviors on a 6-point scale, ranging from 0/5 friends to 5/5 friends. Example items include "how many of your 5 closest friends stay out of trouble," and "how many of your 5 closest friends do volunteer work."

Youth pro-social behavior. This 10-item scale was developed by Simons-Morton et al., 1999. Items evaluate how many days of the last 30 days, youth report certain pro-social activities. Example items include "how many of the last 30 days did you attend religious services," and "how many of the last 30 days did you do something to help someone in your neighborhood."

Academic engagement. This 8-item scale was developed by investigators and adapted from Midgley et al., 1998 and ADD Health Youth Interview. Items evaluate how engaged youth are in middle school on a 10-point Likert scale, ranging from 1, *strongly disagree,* to 10, *strongly agree.* Example questions include "I pay attention in class," and "I talk with my teachers about what we are learning."

Perceived parental support. This 11-item scale was based on the work of Jackson, Henriksen, and Foshee, 1998 and modified by Simons-Morton et al., 1999. Items evaluate youths' perceptions of their parents'

supportive behaviors on a scale from 1, *strongly disagree*, to 10, *strongly agree*. Example questions include "I have a parent or guardian who tells me when I do a good job on things," and "I have a parent or guardian who I turn to for support with my personal problems."

Perceived parental academic monitoring. This 5-item scale was developed by Simons-Morton et al. (1999) for the Going Places Study. Items evaluate youth's perceptions of monitoring their school lives on a 10-point Likert scale, ranging from 1, *strongly disagree,* to 10, *strongly agree.* Example questions include "I have a parent who knows when I have misbehaved at school," and "I have a parent who knows what classes I am taking."

Data Analysis

Data were analyzed using SPSS 11.0 for Windows (2004). A median (9.0) split was used to classify perceptions into higher (n = 54) and lower (n = 43) categories. The median split was chosen based on the distribution of this sample. Mean scores between children with higher and lower perceptions of parental academic monitoring were compared, using two-sample t-tests (unequal variances), with respect to each continuous youth factor: friends' pro-social behavior, youth pro-social behavior, youth academic engagement, and perceived parental support (Rosner, 2000). Multiple logistic regression modeling was used to estimate the relations between higher parental academic monitoring and each continuous youth factor; the model included the child's age and gender (Hosmer & Lemeshow, 1989). Last, stratified analyses were performed on youths' number of pro-social friends and separately on family composition.

Results

The research question was answered. Parental academic monitoring in a low-income, African American population appears to be associated with pro-social friends and behavior and perceived parental engagement and support. Preliminary analysis associated parental support (mean = 8.93 vs. 7.61), youth academic engagement (mean = 8.15 vs. 7.16), friends' pro-social behavior (mean = 3.64 vs. 2.90), and youth pro-social behavior (mean = 10.65 vs. 7.21) with parental academic monitoring. Youth who perceived their parents as having higher parental academic monitoring also reported having significantly more pro-social behavior for themselves (mean = 10.65 vs. 7.21) and for their friends (mean = 3.64 vs. 2.90) than youth in the lower academic monitoring group (Table 2). Similarly, mean group differences were found for academic engagement (mean = 8.15 vs. 7.l6) and perceived parental support (mean = 8.93 vs. 7.61) between youth reporting higher academic monitoring compared to youth reporting lower academic monitoring (Table 2).

Table 2
Means, Standard Deviations, T-values, and Significance of Predictor Variables by Reported Perceived Parental Academic Monitoring

	Higher perceived parental academic monitoring (> 9.0)			Lower perceived parental academic monitoring (< 9.0)			
Youth Factors	*n*	Mean	SD	*n*	Mean	SD	*p*-value
Friends' pro-social behavior (scores range from 0 to 5)	54	3.64	1.47	43	2.90	1.53	2.4/.016*
Youth pro-social behaviors (scores range from 0 to 30)	51	10.65	7.02	42	7.21	6.01	2.5/.014*
Youth academic engagement (scores range from 1 to 10)	54	8.15	1.82	43	7.16	1.56	2.8/.006**
Perceived parental support (scores range from 1 to 10)	54	8.93	0.84	43	7.61	1.76	4.5/.000**

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

Logistic regression analysis was utilized to measure the predictive capability of the independent variables. The results of the logistic regression analysis are presented in Table 3 in the form of odds ratios (OR) and confidence intervals (CI). For every unit increase in youths' parental support, the odds of reporting high parental academic monitoring increased 2.08 times (CI: 1.29–3.36; $p = .003$). For example, youth who reported a mean parental support score of 10 were 2.08 times more likely to report higher parental academic monitoring than those youth that reported a mean support score of nine. Similarly, for every unit increase in youths' report of their friends' pro-social behavior, the odds of reporting higher parental academic monitoring increased 1.54 times (CI: 1.03–2.30; $p = .036$). For example, youth who reported a mean friend pro-social behavior score of 10 were 1.54 times more likely to report higher academic monitoring than those youth who reported a mean friend pro-social behavior score of nine.

Table 3
Multiple Logistic Regression Model: Odds of Reporting Higher Versus Lower Perceived Parental Academic Monitoring[a] (n = *88)*

Youth Factors	Full Model[b]
Family Composition:	
One biological parent, no other adults	Reference Category
At least one biological parent, with other adult(s)	**OR: 3.58 (CI: 1.00 – 12.83)***
No biological parents	OR: 2.70 (CI: .43 – 17.12)
Friends' Pro-social Behavior	**OR: 1.54 (CI: 1.03 – 2.30)***
Youth Pro-Social Behavior	OR: 1.09 (CI: .99 – 1.20)
Youth Academic Engagement	OR: 1.20 (CI: .862– 1.77)
Perceived Parental Support	**OR: 2.08 (CI: 1.29 – 3.36)****

*$p < .05$; **$p < .01$
[a] Adjusted for age and gender, not statistically significant
[b] Includes all variables; age, gender, household composition, friends' pro-social behavior, youth pro-social behaviors, youth academic engagement, perceived parental support

When controlling for other factors in this study, family composition, parental support, and friends' pro-social behavior remained statistically significant in the logistic regression model. Youth living with two adults in the home, including at least one biological parent are 3.5 times more likely to perceive higher monitoring than youth living with only one biological parent in the home with no other adults present (CI: 1.00–12.83; $p = .05$). The stratified analysis further indicates that parental support increased the likelihood of academic monitoring, regardless of family composition. The magnitude of the effect was even more so for multiple adult households. The more adults living in the house, the more likely children were to report more academic monitoring.

A stratified analysis was performed to demonstrate the effect of a risk factor on an outcome while holding another variable constant. Stratified analyses were performed to further understand how parental academic monitoring operated for youth depending on number of pro-social friends (Figure 1) and, separately, on family composition (Figure 2). The stratified analyses revealed that the effect of pro-social behavior, parental support, and academic engagement on the odds of having high versus low parental academic monitoring differed by number of pro-social friends. For youth reporting high pro-social friends, those who were also high on pro-social behavior were 1.3 times more likely to have reported high parental academic monitoring than those who were low on pro-social behavior. However, youth who were low on pro-social friends and low on parental support were 2.9 times less likely to have high academic monitoring. For youth with high pro-social friends, those who were also high on academic engagement were six times more likely to have high

parental academic monitoring than those who were low on academic engagement. For students in the low pro-social friends group, those who were high on academic engagement were not more likely to have higher parental academic monitoring than those who were low on parental academic monitoring. Thus, pro-social behavior and academic engagement increased the likelihood of academic monitoring, regardless of pro-social friends. The magnitude of that effect was higher for youth with more pro-social friends. In multiple adult households, those with high parental support were 2.8 times as likely to have also high academic monitoring, compared to those with low parental support. In single adult households, those with high parental support were 1.4 times as likely to have also high academic monitoring compared to those with low parental support. Thus, parental support increased the likelihood of academic monitoring, regardless of family composition. The magnitude of that effect was higher in households with multiple adults.

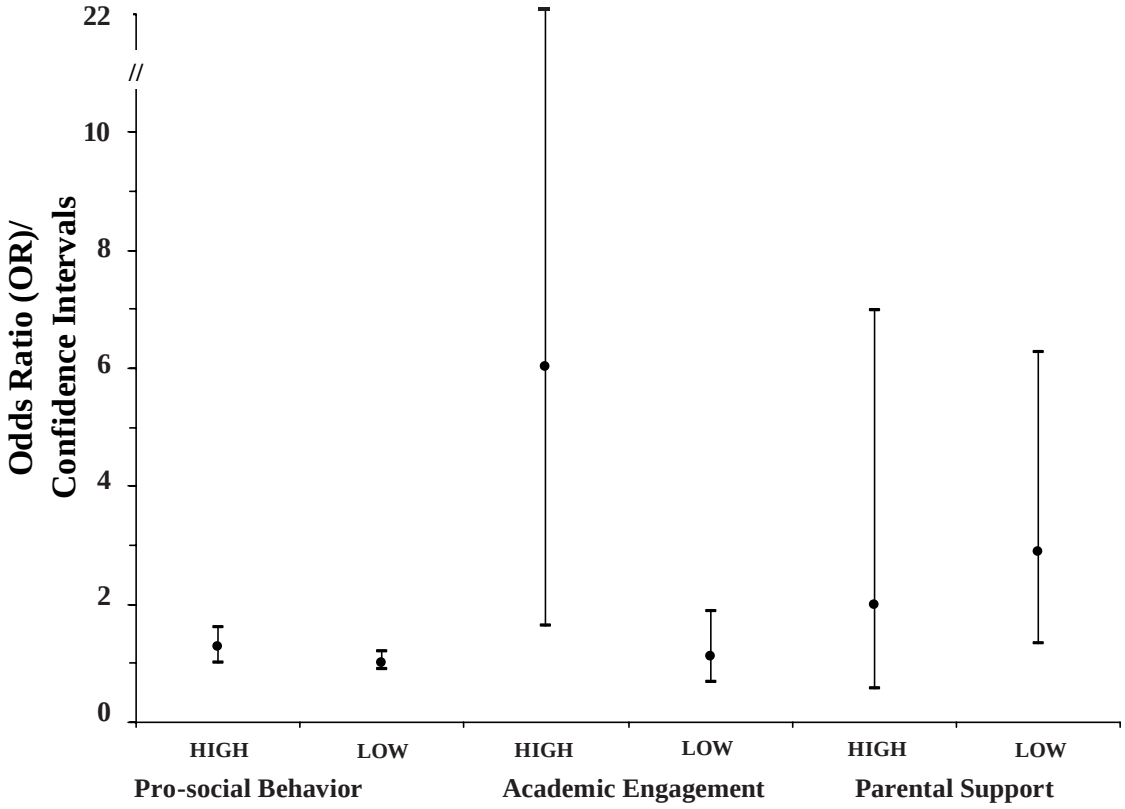

Figure 1. Odds of Having High Parental Academic Monitoring by Levels of Parenting Variables: Stratified by Youths' Pro-Social Friends

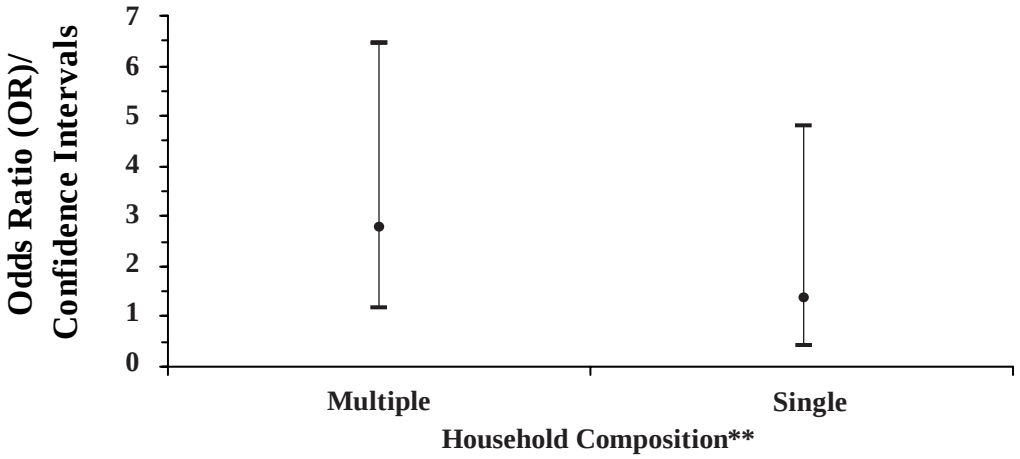

Figure 2. Odds of Having High Parental Academic Monitoring by Levels of Parental Support*: Stratified by Family Composition

Discussion

When interpreting the results, it is important to note both limitations as well as strengths of this study. Methodological limitations of this study included the use of a cross-sectional research design with a small sample. Future studies should utilize longitudinal research designs, with a larger sample, to determine the stability and causality of the observed associations over time. While methodological limitations existed, this study also presents several strengths. For example, the computer-assisted survey design had the potential to enhance participants' perceptions of confidentiality, which may have improved the honesty of responses and decreased bias compared with face-to-face interviews (Perlis, Des Jarlais, Friedman, Arasteh, & Turner, 2004). Additionally, this study fills a gap in the research by examining psychosocial variables related to parental academic monitoring instead of only demographic variables such as gender and age. This type of research is crucial to designing effective interventions with the goal of increasing academic engagement in an urban setting.

There are over two decades of research that link parent-school involvement with youths' positive academic performance (McKay, Atkins, Hawkins, Brown, & Lynn, 2003). The findings from the current study describe youth factors related to parental academic monitoring in a low-income, African American sample of urban youth to understand better why some urban youth succeed academically while others do not.

In this study, the percentage of youth classified as having "lower" parental monitoring (46%) was slightly lower than the 62.5% categorized as having less parental monitoring by DiClemente et al. (2001) in their sample of 609 low-income, black females ages 14–18 years. The difference in classification between this study and DiClemente et al. is justified given the older age range and female only sample in the DiClemente et al. study. Monitoring tends to decrease as youth age increases (Steinberg, Lamborn, Dornbusch, & Darling, 1992). In addition, DiClemente et al. included all female participants. Females tend to report higher authoritative parenting, meaning increased parental monitoring (Miller, DiIorio, & Dudley, 2002). In this secondary analysis, the higher academic monitoring category included 33 (61%) girls and 21 (39%) boys.

Is parental academic monitoring in a low-income, African American population associated with pro-social friends and behavior and perceived parental engagement and support? The answer is yes, as expected, youth who perceived their parents as having higher parental academic monitoring also reported having more pro-social friends and reported more of their own pro-social behaviors. It is well documented that peer influences have a profound effect on adolescents in middle school (Wentzel, Barry, & Caldwell, 2004). Those students that do well in school tend to befriend other students that do well in school (Wentzel, Barry, & Caldwell). This study is consistent with research that indicates that perceptions of being monitored demonstrate consistency over time with regard to health outcomes such as unprotected sex, drug use, and drug trafficking (Li, Feigelman, & Stanton, 2000).

The more adults living in the house, the more likely children were to report more academic monitoring. In order to increase academic monitoring for students, youth serving organizations, such as schools, churches, and after-school programs must provide supervision for adolescents as an additional resource for families with one biological parent and no other adults present. This could include mentoring programs that increase the number of caring adults in a youth's life. These organizations are a resource for parents who want to know where their children are after school. After-school programs that provide academic support for youth may allow parents to monitor their children's academics even when they are not home in the evenings. In addition, African American families commonly rely on extended family kinships and the larger community to provide additional sources for support (Hatchett & Jackson, 1993). School personnel and programs may be able to find ways to facilitate effective use of these kinship networks to enhance school monitoring, such as explicitly inviting extended family to school-related functions.

Academic engagement was no longer significant when controlling for other variables in the model, but this variable has been linked to parental involvement in other studies (Simons-Morton & Crump, 2003). Shumow and Miller (2001) found evidence that parents of successful students were involved more at school than parents of struggling students. The stratified analyses further indicated that pro-social behavior and academic engagement do increase the likelihood of academic monitoring, regardless of pro-social friends. The magnitude of the effect was more so for youth with more pro-social friends. This suggests that both peer, as well as parental support influences adolescent academic engagement.

Perceived parental support remained a significant factor related to parental academic monitoring in the multivariate model. This finding is similar to previous research of Steinberg et al. (1992). They found that students who reported higher perceptions of their parent's academic monitoring also reported higher academic engagement and higher parental support. Higher levels of parental monitoring are associated with an authoritative parenting style (Steinberg et al.). Monitoring combined with support may possibly be part of a positive in-home parenting pattern. An easier, more conventional child may elicit greater support and monitoring from a parent. However, some adolescents are resistant to support and monitoring from parents. These parents may be unable to provide sufficient monitoring and support because of their youth's resistance, thus creating a negative pattern of monitoring and support. Parents who are not home during hours that are conducive to academic monitoring may not have the resources or knowledge to seek help for their children elsewhere. Communities and schools can take on this responsibility by offering academic after-school programs or providing tutoring by teachers that is specific to the subject area they teach that students may be struggling in.

Friends' pro-social behavior also remained a statistically significant factor in the multivariate model. Youth reported how many of their five closest friends stay out of trouble, and how many of their five closest friends do volunteer work. While parents have a protective effect on adolescents in terms of health outcomes, peer influences and the school environment simultaneously have a profound effect on adolescents in middle school (Wentzel, Barry, & Caldwell, 2004). Those students who do well in school tend to befriend other students that do well in school (Wentzel, Barry, & Caldwell). This finding shows the importance of both peers and parents on adolescents. He, Kramer, Houser, Chomitz, and Hacker (2004) established both parents and peers as criteria for defining healthy lifestyles in adolescents. The healthy lifestyles study demonstrated that those students in a home context of higher monitoring also affiliated with more positive peer groups. Parents who more closely monitor their children may get to know their youth's friends and encourage them to associate with more pro-social friends.

The current study indicates that all aspects of a youth's environment must be considered. Monitoring is a complex process between adolescents and parents (Hayes, Hudson, & Matthews, 2003). Parents, peers, and household composition maintain influence over adolescents. Youth who report more academic monitoring also perceived more parental general support and reported having more pro-social friends. While there is an abundance of research that examines parental involvement and parental monitoring, less research exists surrounding these concepts in a low-income African American urban population. It is known that parental academic monitoring increases youth academic achievement, but it remains critical to understand how to increase parental academic monitoring in minority families. Even if these factors are determined to be similar across adolescents of all races, interventions must be designed to be culturally sensitive and provide the parents in the community with relevant training to increase academic monitoring. This study demonstrates that African American, urban youth likely follow the same patterns as other adolescents in terms of the positive effects of academic monitoring. Once factors are better defined, information can be used to ensure culturally sensitive interventions are developed to increase parental academic monitoring for low-income, African American adolescents. The association between parental involvement, parental monitoring, and adolescent academic achievement is clear (Steinberg, Lamborn, Dornsbusch, & Darling, 1992); however, there is little research examining factors associated with parental involvement and parental monitoring. A family-based approach, sensitive to parent and peer influences on adolescents, provides a context for future interventions in urban communities. This type of research can help to better understand why some African American urban youth succeed academically while others do not. Results identified factors in a high-risk

population that may lead to an understanding of the role of parental academic monitoring and other factors in enhancing adolescent academic achievement at school.

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