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# A mixed-methods exploration of autonomy-supportive parenting, confidence, and natural mentoring relationships among Black adolescents

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## Funding information

William T. Grant Foundation

## Abstract

The current study examined whether autonomy-supportive parenting practices may be associated with Black adolescents' quantity of natural mentors (i.e., adults from youths' everyday lives who youth go to for support and guidance) via adolescents' confidence. This study employed survey data from 216 Black youth and qualitative interviews from a subsample of youth ( $n = 25$ ), their primary caregivers ( $n = 25$ ), and one nonparental adult relative with whom the youth reported feeling close ( $n = 25$ ). Comparative analyses were then completed among a subset of 10 family triads corresponding to youth from the qualitative subsample who had the highest ( $n = 5$ ) and the lowest ( $n = 5$ ) scores on a survey measure of adolescents' confidence. Study findings suggest that Black adolescents' confidence may be an explanatory link in the association between autonomy-supportive parenting practices among primary caregivers and Black adolescents' quantity of natural mentoring relationships. Moreover, we found that a range of autonomy-supportive parenting practices may be associated with youth confidence, which may, in turn, inform how Black adolescents engage with adults in their social networks.

## KEYWORDS

adolescence, Black families, mixed methods, natural mentoring relationships, parenting

## INTRODUCTION

Parents' efforts to bolster adolescents' sense of autonomy may be a pivotal component of successful parenting in adolescence (Brenning et al., 2015; Soenens et al., 2007). Research suggests that becoming autonomous while valuing a strong relationship with one's parents is a key pillar of adolescent attachment (Allen et al., 2003; Main & Goldwyn, 1984). Autonomy-supportive parents may accommodate adolescents' strivings to independently explore the world around them while being sensitive to their developmental needs for security in that process (McElhaney et al., 2009). Parents who consistently provide support while permitting their child to explore the world help adolescents develop self-confidence while also experiencing a sense of safety as they pursue new relationships with nonparental figures (Haugaard & Hazan, 2002; Williamson et al., 2020).

Accordingly, autonomy-supportive parenting practices may be a key predictor of adolescents' pursuit of supportive relationships with adults in their everyday lives (i.e., natural mentoring relationships).

## Background

Natural mentors are nonparental adults from youths' pre-existing social networks (e.g., relatives, neighbors, and teachers) who provide advice, guidance, and support to youth (Rhodes et al., 1992; Zimmerman et al., 2005). Natural mentoring relationships are considered a normative relational element of adolescence with studies finding anywhere from two-thirds to three-fourths of adolescent samples reporting the presence of at least one of these relationships (DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005; Hurd &

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Sellers, 2013; Zimmerman et al., 2002). Among Black adolescents, the most common source of natural mentoring is extended family members (e.g., aunts, uncles, grandparents, adult siblings or cousins; Billingsley et al., 2022; Hurd & Zimmerman, 2010; Klaw et al., 2003; Kogan et al., 2011). This may be due to cultural values regarding interdependence and the importance of the extended family network in Black families (Billingsley, 1968; McAdoo, 2007; Rovens et al., 2022; Stack, 1974). Moreover, given that Black youth must contend with societal racism and corresponding threats outside of their home, adult family members who share their racial identity and have also faced racism-related stressors may be best-positioned to provide mentorship to their youth relatives. Black youth also tend to identify family friends, neighbors, and fictive kin (i.e., individuals with family-like bonds in the absence of blood or legal ties) who share their ethnoracial identities as natural mentors given that these adults may also be seen as safe, trustworthy, and in possession of shared lived experiences and corresponding wisdom that can be leveraged to offer useful advice and support to Black adolescents (Billingsley et al., 2021; Griffith et al., 2019; Hurd et al., 2012).

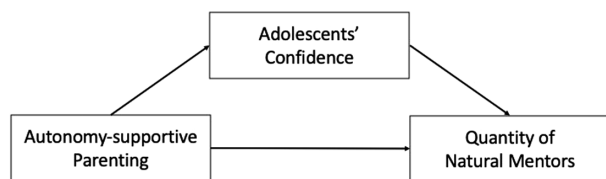
Black youth who possess natural mentors tend to have better psychosocial outcomes over time relative to their peers who lack these relationships (Cooper et al., 2013; Hurd et al., 2012; Kogan et al., 2011). Moreover, consistent with the webs of support framework (Varga & Zaff, 2018), having multiple natural mentors may confer greater benefits as more mentors may mean more options for support and diverse types of support as a function of the unique strengths and offerings of each natural mentor in a youth's network. Though a growing body of research points to the cumulative benefits of multiple natural mentoring relationships (Hurd et al., 2016, 2018), fewer studies have been conducted to understand factors that may facilitate the development of natural mentoring relationships. Parenting practices may be one such factor. Keller's (2005) advanced systemic model of mentoring contends that the parental relationship may serve as a key determinant of the formation of mentoring relationships. This may transpire through a myriad of different parenting practices such as autonomy-supportive parenting.

Given that autonomy support is a key aspect of parenting in adolescence, there is reason to believe that adolescents who experience opportunities to feel autonomous from their parents may be more likely to experience the "internal sense of overall positive self-worth, self-efficacy, and self-regard," or *confidence* that may be needed for the pursuit of a natural mentor (Lerner et al., 2005). Furthermore, parents who convey that they perceive their adolescents as competent may bolster adolescents' sense of confidence through their delivery of opportunities and guidance which are related to the development of natural mentoring relationships (Zimmerman et al., 2005). Specifically, parents may be able to curb relational conflict and promote confidence in their adolescents by how they choose to renegotiate their parenting practices to accommodate their adolescents' age-appropriate desire for autonomy and exploration of their

surrounding ecologies. Cooley (1902) proposed that the significant people in youths' lives can serve as "social mirrors" for the formation of positive or negative opinions of themselves. Thus, parents who view their children as capable and competent to engage the world around them may positively influence how adolescents perceive their own capacities, including their confidence to establish caring and supportive bonds with nonparental adults in their lives.

Additional benefits of healthy levels of confidence for adolescents include greater happiness and life satisfaction and the ability to adapt to challenging situations and circumstances, including those that involve others (Moksnes & Espnes, 2012). On the contrary, consequences of low confidence include a failure to develop and maintain supportive social networks (Marshall et al., 2014). Less attention has been paid to how confidence in adolescence is developed and how it unfolds within the context of relationship formation with natural mentors. Considering the vital role of autonomy support in parenting adolescents, there is reason to believe that this set of parenting behaviors might be linked to adolescents' participation in natural mentoring relationships through the development of an internalized self that is competent and lovable (Arbona & Power, 2003; Gorrese & Ruggieri, 2013).

In seeking to illuminate how Black parents may inform adolescents' pursuit of natural mentoring relationships, understanding the role of autonomy-supportive parenting may offer a fuller depiction of factors that explain this association. Specifically, in the current study, we postulated that parents who provide their youth with developmentally appropriate levels of autonomy and choice may positively influence their sense of confidence, which may be meaningful for their pursuit of supportive relationships with nonparental adults in their everyday lives. Notably, the form and function of autonomy-supportive parenting toward adolescents may be culturally distinct across ethnoracial groups. In a recent literature review, Benito-Gomez et al. (2020) note how cultural values (e.g., interdependence) and a desire to protect against contextual risks stemming from racism likely drive the nature of autonomy-supportive parenting practices among Black parents. This may lead Black parents to be more likely to emphasize protective obedience messages in their expressions of autonomy support and to use both unilateral and joint decision making with their adolescent. Protective messages related to obedience may be driven by parents' perceptions of contextual risk. Further, Black youths' age and gender may be important factors in Black parents' expectations around autonomy support (Benito-Gomez, 2020; Daddis & Smetana, 2005). Yet, previous research on autonomy-supportive parenting has largely excluded Black youth, which may be skewing what is known about parenting of adolescent children among Black families. More research is needed to better understand how Black parents promote autonomy among their adolescent children. Accordingly, the current mixed method study sought to contribute to the field's understanding of autonomy-supportive parenting and its associated outcomes in Black families.



**FIGURE 1** Hypothesized paths from autonomy-supportive parenting to quantity of natural mentors via adolescents' confidence.

## Current study

In the current study, we used an explanatory sequential mixed-methods design (Creswell & Clark, 2007; Ivankova et al., 2006) to explore associations between autonomy-supportive parenting practices, adolescents' confidence, and their quantity of natural mentoring relationships among a sample of Black adolescents. One primary goal of the current study was to elucidate the ways in which autonomy-supportive parenting practices might influence Black adolescents' confidence. A second goal of this study was to understand whether autonomy-supportive parenting practices may also influence Black adolescents' quantity of natural mentoring relationships and, if so, whether their confidence may be an explanatory link in this association.

First, survey data from 216 Black adolescents were utilized to explore associations between autonomy-supportive parenting practices and adolescents' quantity of natural mentoring relationships via adolescents' sense of confidence (see Figure 1). We hypothesized that greater autonomy-supportive parenting practices would predict a greater sense of confidence among adolescents which, in turn, would predict a higher quantity of natural mentoring relationships. To best isolate associations between our variables of interest and study outcomes in the quantitative analyses, we controlled for extraversion, age, and gender (all variables which may be associated with autonomy-supportive parenting practices, adolescents' confidence, and their engagement in natural mentoring relationships; Bleidorn et al., 2016; Bumpus et al., 2001; Daddis & Smetana, 2005; Orth et al., 2018; Rhodes et al., 2006; Soenens et al., 2007).

Open-ended interview data from a subset of adolescents ( $n = 10$ ), their parents ( $n = 10$ ), and adult relatives ( $n = 10$ ) were then analyzed using thematic analysis techniques (Braun & Clarke, 2006) to advance a more comprehensive understanding of how autonomy-supportive parenting practices may be linked to Black adolescents' confidence and to better explicate how adolescents with higher and lower confidence levels may engage with adults in their lives. Additionally, we explored how Black adolescents who reported higher and lower confidence levels engaged with nonparental adults. Altogether, the current study aimed to test whether autonomy-supportive parenting may influence adolescents' quantity of natural mentoring relationships and whether

greater confidence could be an explanatory link in this association; to illuminate which autonomy-supportive parenting practices appear to be associated with youth confidence; and to understand how adolescents' confidence might influence whether and how adolescents are engaging with adults.

## METHODS

The current study was conducted with data from the Learning about Important Nonparental Kin (LINK) mixed-methods study. The overall goal of the LINK study was to understand familial and contextual factors influencing the formation of natural mentoring relationships among Black adolescents and nonparental adults from their families and everyday lives (Billingsley et al., 2021).

### Quantitative participants and procedures

Participants included 216 Black adolescents (59% girls; 41% boys) aged 11–17 ( $M$  age = 13.87 years,  $SD = 1.42$ ), who were recruited via mailed letters and flyers among six local area middle schools, four high schools, and one community center in the Southeastern region of the United States during the 2015–2016 academic school year. All adolescent participants identified as Black/African American. The Black population demographic for the region was largely African American with very few African or Afro-Caribbean families. The schools and community center enrolled youth from urban, suburban, and rural communities. Sixty percent of adolescent participants lived in two-parent households. Mothers were most frequently identified as primary caregivers (78% of the sample) followed by fathers (10% of the sample). Seventy-seven percent of participants reported two or more children living in the household. Fifty-eight percent of participants reported receiving free or reduced-price lunch.

The Institutional Review Board at the authors' institution approved all study procedures (Protocol #2015036700). Youth provided assent and primary caregivers provided informed consent prior to youths' participation in the study. In the first phase of the study, surveys were administered to all 216 adolescents on iPads by trained research assistants who read each survey item aloud to participants to facilitate comprehension of all survey items. Adolescents completed their responses independently on iPads to enhance confidentiality. Survey completion took an hour, on average. Each adolescent participant received a \$40 Visa gift card for participating in the survey portion of the study.

### Quantitative study measures

Descriptive statistics and intercorrelations for key study variables are reported in Table 1.

TABLE 1 Descriptive statistics and intercorrelates for key study variables.

	Response scale	Range	Mean	SD	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Autonomy-supportive parenting	1–5	1.43–5	3.72	0.59	–					
2. Confidence	1–5	1.82–5	3.95	0.66	.37*	–				
3. Quantity of Natural Mentors	0–6	0–6	2.35	2.91	.09	.29*	–			
4. Age	–	11–17	13.87	1.42	–.07	–.28*	–.14*	–		
5. Extraversion	1–5	1.50–5	3.58	0.70	.22*	.44*	.22*	–.18*	–	
6. Male Gender (%)	–	–	41%	–	.07	.12	–.05	.08	.14*	–

\* $p < .05$ .

## Autonomy-supportive parenting practices

Information regarding adolescents' perceptions of their parents' autonomy-supportive parenting practices were measured with the Volitional Functioning subscale of the Parental Autonomy Support Scale (Soenens et al., 2007). Participants responded to 17 items on a five-point Likert scale about how much the person most responsible for raising them was supportive of their autonomy (e.g., empathic to their perspective, limits use of control and power, and helps them explore their values and interests). Response options ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*), and sample items include "Is usually willing to consider things from my point of view" and "Isn't very sensitive to my needs." After reverse scoring two negatively worded items, a composite was created by averaging the 17 items where higher scores indicated greater parental autonomy support. Internal consistency was acceptable for this measure ( $\alpha = .70$ ).

## Adolescents' confidence

The Confidence subscale of the 5 C's of Positive Youth Development (PYD) measure (Lerner et al., 2005) was used to capture adolescents' sense of self-confidence. The measure included five items assessing participants' sense of self-worth, self-efficacy, and global self-regard. Response options ranged from 1 (*strongly disagree*) to 5 (*strongly agree*) on a Likert scale. A sample item includes "On the whole, I like myself." This measure demonstrated good internal consistency ( $\alpha = .85$ ). Items from this measure were averaged to create a composite variable.

## Quantity of natural mentoring relationships

Adolescents were asked, "Is there an adult other than your parents or people who are raising you who you can go to for support, guidance, and help making important decisions." If participants responded yes, they were then asked, "How many adults like this do you have?" Responses to this question ranged from "1" to "6 or more." A score of 0 was given if participants responded negatively to the first question,

which represented each adolescent's total number of natural mentors. Out of all the identified natural mentors, 71% were adult extended family members.

## Gender and age

Adolescent participants answered questions regarding their basic demographic characteristics (e.g., gender and age). Participants were assigned a value of "1" if they identified as boy and "0" if they identified as girl. No participants in this sample self-identified outside of the gender binary. Participants reported their age in years.

## Extraversion

The extraversion subscale (eight-items) of the Big Five Inventory (BFI; John & Srivastava, 1999) was utilized to assess adolescents' levels of extraversion. Participants indicated how much they agreed with statements about being extraverted on a five-point Likert scale. Response choices ranged from 1 (*disagree strongly*) to 5 (*agree strongly*) and three items were reverse coded such that higher values corresponded to higher levels of extraversion. Scores from the eight items ( $\alpha = .77$ ) were then averaged to create a composite variable for extraversion.

## Quantitative analyses

After assessing correlations among study variables, we employed a path model to examine whether autonomy-supportive parenting was associated with adolescents' number of natural mentors directly and indirectly via adolescents' self-confidence (see Figure 1). To better isolate our associations of interest, we accounted for the potential effects of extraversion, age, and gender. We utilized the mediation R package for causal mediation analysis (Tingley et al., 2014). Bootstrapped confidence intervals of the indirect effects were also generated to identify significant indirect effects (i.e., indirect effects were deemed significant if the 95% confidence interval of the standardized specific indirect effect did not include 0).



## Quantitative results

Table 1 shows the results of the bivariate correlations we conducted to assess for associations among our set of primary study variables and covariates. Autonomy-supportive parenting was positively associated with adolescents' confidence and extraversion. Adolescents' confidence was negatively associated with age and positively associated with autonomy-supportive parenting, quantity of natural mentors, and extraversion. Adolescents' quantity of natural mentors was negatively associated with age and positively associated with confidence and extraversion. Identifying as extraverted was negatively associated with age and positively associated with autonomy-supportive parenting, confidence, quantity of natural mentors, and male gender. Adolescents' age was negatively associated with confidence, quantity of natural mentors, and extraversion.

Findings of the path model are displayed in Table 2. Consistent with our hypothesis, we found that autonomy-supportive parenting was indirectly associated with a greater quantity of natural mentors through adolescents' higher levels of confidence. We tested the significance of this indirect effect using bootstrapping procedures. Standardized indirect effects were computed for each of the 500 bootstrapped samples. The standardized indirect effect was 0.07 and the 95% confidence interval ranged from 0.02 to 0.13.

## Qualitative participants and procedure

In the second phase of the study, a stratified random sample of 25 adolescents (13 girls and 12 boys) from the larger sample participated in standardized, open-ended interviews. Adolescent participants were stratified based on gender, age, socioeconomic status, and whether the adolescent possessed a natural mentor. Interviews were also conducted with each adolescent's primary caregiver (one per youth) and one adult relative with whom the adolescent reported feeling close. The sample of primary caregivers included 22 mothers and 3 fathers. Primary caregivers were between the ages of 35 and 54 and identified as African American. The adult relative had to be over the age of 18 and not serving in

a caregiver role. The adult relatives interviewed included 17 women and 8 men and ranged in age from 18 to 78. They included grandparents, aunts, uncles, adult siblings, and adult cousins. Almost all identified as African American. The primary goal of the interview protocol was to understand each participant's relationship with other members of the triad (i.e., adolescent and parent, adolescent and nonparental adult, and parent and nonparental adult), broader family dynamics, and adolescents' experiences with familial and nonfamilial nonparental adults in their lives. Particularly relevant to the current study, primary caregivers were asked to describe how decisions are made regarding where the adolescent goes, who they hang out with, and how they spend their time. Specifically, primary caregivers were asked to describe the degree to which the primary caregiver makes these decisions on their own versus the adolescent makes these decisions independently versus more shared decision making. Primary caregivers and adolescents were also asked about parental monitoring practices (i.e., the extent to which primary caregivers know where the adolescent is when they are not with the primary caregiver) and to describe the degree of openness in communication between the adolescent and the primary caregiver. All members of the family triad were asked to describe the adolescent's attitude toward nonparental adults and whether they would seek out these adults for help or advice. Interviews were conducted one-on-one by a multiracial research team (four women of color and two white women) who all completed intensive training in qualitative research methods prior to launching the study. Weekly team meetings were held to ensure consistency in procedures across interviews. Each semi-structured interview lasted approximately 60–90 min, and each participant (adolescent, primary caregiver, and adult relative) was compensated with an \$80 Visa gift card. All interviews were completed in the spring and summer months of 2017 in the researchers' offices or in confidential locations of the participants' choosing. Interviews were audio-recorded on an iPad and transcribed verbatim by a third-party service. After transcription was completed and checked by a member of the research team, audio recordings were destroyed. All participants' names were replaced with pseudonyms. Notably, in the current study, a subset of 10 of the 25 families

TABLE 2 Results of path analyses predicting adolescents' confidence and quantity of natural mentors.

Outcome variable	Predictors	<i>B</i>	<i>SE B</i>	$\beta$	<i>t</i>	<i>p</i>
Adolescents' confidence	Autonomy-supportive parenting	0.33	0.07	.30	4.90	.00
	Extraversion	0.31	0.06	.33	5.40	.00
	Age	−0.10	0.03	−.21	−3.61	.00
	Male	0.11	0.07	.08	1.40	.17
# of Natural mentors	Autonomy-supportive parenting	0.16	0.09	.07	1.74	.08
	Adolescents' confidence	0.81	0.27	.24	2.99	.00
	Extraversion	0.38	0.24	.12	1.59	.11
	Age	−0.07	0.09	−.05	−0.76	.45
	Male	−0.42	0.34	−.10	−1.24	.21

were utilized for the sake of comparing the experiences of youth with the highest versus the lowest confidence scores. These 10 youth were identified for the current study based on their confidence scores in relation to the full subsample of 25 youth who participated in the qualitative phase of the LINK study. Additional details pertaining to the selection of the subset of 10 families are described below.

## Qualitative analyses

Following our explanatory sequential mixed methods study design, the main purpose of the qualitative analyses was to better understand the nature of the associations found in our quantitative analyses. Specifically, we aimed to better understand the link between (1) autonomy-supportive parenting practices and adolescents' confidence and (2) adolescents' sense of confidence and their quantity of natural mentoring relationships. Our guiding research questions for the qualitative inquiry were: What autonomy-supportive parenting practices appear to be associated with Black adolescents' confidence? How are Black adolescents who are reporting higher versus lower confidence differentially engaging with adults?

We utilized Braun and Clarke's (2021) thematic analysis (TA) approach to extrapolate initial insights regarding the aforementioned questions and complete more refined and focused analysis of the data in subsequent analyses. TA is a flexible qualitative analytic process of identifying themes and codes within qualitative data to address research questions. First, the research team (comprised of three women of color) became well-acquainted with the data within the context of the guiding theoretical frameworks and research questions. Next, the team generated initial codes using a randomized subset of 12 interviews with Black family members (youth, parents, and adult relatives) from the larger data set. Acquiring these codes involved an iterative process of (1) recognizing and labeling data as central to the inquiries of interest, and (2) deepening our understanding of said inquiries in the data through flagging summative and essence-capturing content (Braun & Clarke, 2021; Strauss, 1987). Our process toward developing an initial codebook was also hybrid in nature (DeCuir-Gunby et al., 2011; Fereday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). Thus, in addition to gleaning insights from interview data (inductive; data-driven), tenets of positive youth development and positive parenting literature (deductive; theory-driven) were referenced as analytic frames for understanding how the data might map onto our specific qualitative inquiries. We also referred to our research questions and our quantitative measures throughout the coding process to substantiate the appropriateness of our codes and subsequent themes for further analysis.

Once the 12 participants were randomly identified, interview transcripts for each participant were collated into one document. Then, all three research team members individually read each transcript and thematically generated descriptive and interpretative codes that were potentially relevant to

our qualitative inquiries. The coding team met weekly over several months to review, reconcile, and achieve agreement around each code. An important part of the coding process was determining whether previously developed codes could be applied across transcripts or whether a new code was needed to capture insights provided in the data (Braun & Clarke, 2021). As such, the final codebook underwent many iterations to generate a final set of themes and definitions that were grounded in the representative subsample of families and situated to address our qualitative inquiries for the current study. Results of our coding process (see Table 3) specific to our first research question indicated that parents may differentially (1) support youths' thinking, independent problem solving, and decision making and (2) foster youth's ability to be independent by encouraging them to advocate for themselves and utilize other supportive adults in their networks when needed. In regard to our second research question, which focused on how Black adolescents might differentially engage with adults, we learned that youth may differentially (1) initiate casual and informal interactions with adults, (2) seek adults out for support, and (3) provide support to adults.

Given that both of our qualitative research questions centered around comparisons of lower versus higher confidence adolescents, we next identified a subset of adolescents from the larger qualitative sample ( $n=25$ ) who reported the lowest ( $n=5$ ) and highest ( $n=5$ ) confidence levels on the Positive Identification Confidence measure they completed in the survey in phase one of the LINK study. We then sought to identify potential patterns of difference regarding the proportion of youth in each subgroup reporting experiences with autonomy-supportive parenting (Inquiry 1) and specific types of interactions with nonparental adults (Inquiry 2). Notably, we utilized qualitative data from the adolescents, their parents, and their adult relatives to address these inquiries. To illuminate the mediating role of adolescent confidence more objectively across the two guiding questions, the next steps in our analyses focused on this subset of 10 family triads (i.e., adolescents, parents, and adult relatives). We removed all identifiable labels from each excerpt that was pulled from adolescent, parent, and adult relative interviews ( $n=30$ ). This allowed all coders in the initial stage of the process to avoid imposing bias onto the results and further ensure a trustworthy set of findings. Descriptive data on the subset of 10 youth are reported in Table 4.

Our analytic process also necessitated reviewing and expanding current codes and their definitions to guarantee meaningfulness, breadth, and accuracy. The coding team continued to meet weekly for 3 months to reconcile individual reads of all 30 transcripts ( $n=10$  family triads) for evidence of (1) autonomy-supportive parenting practices and (2) the ways in which adolescents engage with adults. Along the way, we discussed how specific excerpts across families applied to our comprehensive list of themes for each inquiry. Once our initial set of analyses for inquiries one and two were complete, participant identification numbers were rematched to the adolescents' quantitative confidence scores.

**TABLE 3** Thematic codes, descriptive definitions, and exemplar quotes.

Qualitative thematic code	Descriptive definition	Example quote
Research question 1: What parental autonomy supporting behaviors and practices from parents appear to be associated with youth confidence (as reported by families)?		
Parents support youths' thinking, independent problem solving, and decision making	Responses that mention how parents support their youth to think and make decisions more independently. This could include parents scaffolding youths' decisions or independent behaviors; preparing the youth to navigate the world around them more independently with specific knowledge, resources, and skills; and parents being respectful of youths' boundaries for time and space	<p>"I let him choose his ... I think he's a good judge of character. I think he's very aware of the dangers of the world, like I said, I've shared everything. The good, the bad, the ugly. And for the purpose of letting them know that it's out there and letting them know that they're going to have to make their own decisions and their decisions will lead to consequences, good or bad. So I have never said to them 'you can't be that person's friend' or 'you don't want to hang out with that person.' You know that kind of thing. I let them make their own decisions about where they go and what they do." (Parent)</p> <p>"My thing is if children don't want to spend time with [someone], like don't push it, don't force it because it's not going to be good. And so, I respect that. I respect their boundaries or whatever they put into place. I totally respect that." (Parent)</p> <p>"Because she's such an independent thinker. She's one that says 'mom, I've gotta figure it out myself.' She will get your input; she will come and say 'this is what I'm thinking, this is what I'd like to do.' That kind of thing. In her timing if that makes sense." (Parent)</p>
Parents encourage youth to advocate for themselves	Responses that mention parents who encourage their youth to communicate their wants, needs, and/or challenges to adults	<p>"I'm seeing that I have to kind of push her and say 'tell them what you'd like' or 'ask the question.'" (Parent)</p> <p>"... I feel like, 'well, maybe you should have said this or did this or did that.' I don't want people to get over on her." (Parent)</p>
Research question 2: How are youth reporting higher and lower confidence differentially engaging with adults (as reported by families)?		
Youth initiate casual and informal interaction with adults	Responses that mention instances of the youth initiating or starting conversations or interactions with adults	<p>"Like usually, I can go up to people and say, 'hey, how is it going?' And stuff, but then, usually, I have a tiny bit of fear." (Youth)</p> <p>"Like we have a family event and if he sees someone sitting by their self and he'll go over there and sit with them [and say], 'What are you doing? You chilling? I'm going to sit here and chill with you.'" (Parent)</p>
Youth seek adults out for support	Responses that mention youth pursuing adults about issues in their lives	"If something were to happen at home, I would tell [my grandmother]." (Youth)
Youth provide support to adults	Responses that mention youth being supportive of or caring toward adults. This could include helping adults or expressing concern for adults	<p>"Yeah, he'll catch on to [me being upset]. And if I don't say anything about it, he'll come there and be like, 'Are you okay?' Just the smallest thing." (Nonparental Adult)</p> <p>"And then he'll strike up a conversation on his own. Because I guess he thinks they're lonely and sad or whatever. He wants to be the 'pick me up guy.' I don't have to encourage him. That's a natural thing for him." (Parent)</p>

Finally, we grouped all applicable excerpts from each triad's transcripts into higher and lower confidence-level groups and explored potential differences between the two groups of adolescents.

## Qualitative results

### Inquiry one: Autonomy-supportive parenting practices

The first inquiry focused on how autonomy-supportive parenting practices may be related to Black adolescents'

confidence, as reported by each member of the triad (adolescents, parents, and adult relatives). Specifically, we sought to examine how youths' confidence was potentially influenced by how parents were differentially (1) supporting youths' thinking, independent problem solving, and decision making and (2) fostering youth's ability to be independent by encouraging them to utilize other supportive adults in their networks when needed and advocate for themselves. Based upon our quantitative results which showed an association between autonomy-supportive parenting practices and adolescent confidence, we were originally interested in better understanding how parents of higher confidence and lower confidence youth were engaging in autonomy-supportive



TABLE 4 Participant pseudonyms and characteristics for the subsample of lower and higher confidence youth.

Youth	Youths' age	Youths' gender	Youths' confidence	Youths' extraversion	Primary caregivers' position to youth	Nonparental adult relatives' position to youth
Brandon	15	Boy	2.53	4	Mother	Grandfather
Moriah	14	Girl	3.41	2.25	Mother	Adult sister
Ayesha	13	Girl	3.47	4.5	Mother	Aunt
Amari	13	Boy	3.53	3	Mother	Aunt
Charity	13	Girl	3.59	3.75	Mother	Grandmother
Thomas	14	Boy	4.59	4.75	Mother	Grandmother
Nia	13	Girl	4.65	5	Mother	Grandmother
Keisha	15	Girl	4.71	4.75	Mother	Aunt
Jordan	16	Boy	4.76	4	Father	Adult sister
DeAndre	11	Boy	4.94	4.5	Mother	Grandmother

parenting practices and behaviors. More precisely, we sought to uncover how parents of higher confidence and lower confidence adolescents were potentially differentially (1) supporting youths' thinking, independent problem-solving, and decision making, and (2) fostering youths' sense of self-advocacy through leveraging supportive networks of nonparental adults in their lives.

#### *Supporting adolescents' thinking, independent problem-solving, and decision making*

Across all families in the subsample ( $n = 10$ ), interview data from adolescents, parents, and adult relatives suggested that parents worked to support adolescents' thinking, independent problem-solving, and decision making through two notable efforts: (1) scaffolding their decision-making processes, and (2) negotiating youths' independence while still engaging in appropriate levels of parental monitoring. Notably, the general frequency with which instances of autonomy-supportive parenting were described did not appear to differ across lower confidence relative to higher confidence adolescents. In addition, youth, their parents, and their adult relatives all discussed aspects of this kind of support, although to different extents across different domains.

#### *Parents scaffolding adolescents' decision making*

Parents of adolescents in each of the 10 families reported that parents engaged in a range of autonomy-supportive parenting practices and behaviors for the purpose of nurturing their adolescent's ability to responsibly think through challenges, make decisions, and solve problems with a developmentally appropriate level of independence. Grace expressed that she worked to encourage her daughter, Moriah's decision making by gauging her interests and addressing her concerns (i.e., hesitations and barriers) and providing "encouragement so that she can push through whatever the issues are." A number of parents reported bolstering their adolescents' self-assurance and promoting a "can-do" attitude regarding their skills and capacity to achieve particular goals or pursue interests with specific words of encouragement. Among some parents like Janee, this also entailed being generally open to hearing their adolescent, DeAndre,

express why they had the interests they did (i.e., pursuing a rap career) in a nonjudgmental manner.

Across 9 out of 10 of the families (four from the lower confidence group and five from the higher confidence group), participants reported the ways in which parents also engaged in informational support by providing the adolescent with advice, suggestions, and direct guidance on their decision-making process. A notable example of this was a tendency of parents to present their youth with a limited number of choices and options for making a particular decision or communicating to the youth that options are available to them when striving to make a particular decision in their lives. For instance, when Charity shared with her mother a particular career trajectory that she was interested in (i.e., hairstylist), her mother provided her information on local training options for her to explore. For several other dyads, this process involved parents supporting youth in weighing their options by presenting "pros and cons" of different choices they have available to them. Thomas, for instance, explained how his mother also shared what choice she might select when discussing pros and cons, before asking Thomas for his opinion based upon his wishes.

Along these lines, it was common for parents in our subsample to endorse the need for offering their youth increased opportunities to make some decisions in their life while providing guidance and direction along the way. Tanisha, for instance, expressed how important it was to support Charity in making more independent decisions by pointing her in the right direction first to minimize the risk of Charity making bad decisions in the end. Grace shared the various ways in which she scaffolded Moriah's ability to make increasingly more independent decisions as she approached high school by stating the following:

Well, I kind of help her now. I mean she's about to go to high school so trying to help her to make her own decisions, and weigh the pros and cons. I guess situation with classes, like what are her goals, what things she's interested in, trying to get her to step outside of her comfort zone and just explore other areas of interest.

Parents' efforts to scaffold their youths' decision-making process sometimes included helping them understand the importance of perspective taking; this was especially true when parents were supporting their adolescents' ability to manage interpersonal challenges with others and reach a resolution that was aligned with their values and goals. Notably, one youth, Ayesha, went to her mother, Pam, when she felt she was being treated unfairly by her teacher. Pam (who also was a teacher) worked to help Ayesha handle the situation responsibly by offering insight into some of the challenges that teachers face in the classroom before suggesting alternative ways of managing challenges of a similar nature in the future. In another example, Grace tried to help Moriah understand the perspective of Moriah's younger cousin to help Moriah be more patient with her.

Finally, parents' efforts to support their adolescents' autonomy in this domain included coming to and making decisions collaboratively alongside their adolescent. Nia, for example, endorsed the ways in which she and her mother, Bonita, made the decision together about how to navigate challenges she was facing specific to participation in sports, wherein they ultimately decided that it was in Nia's best interest to play for another team. Several parents expressed how working together with their child was an opportunity for them to both privilege their adolescents' desires over their own and maintain a level of active involvement that felt necessary for ensuring their adolescents' ability to be successful. For Anita, working together with her son, Amari, felt vital for joint decision making regarding a situation at hand (e.g., participating in a summer math program), and a reflection of her desires or personal preferences as a parent. Anita wanted to make sure Amari was engaged in something productive during the summer, but she ultimately wanted the decision of what activity to participate in to be Amari's. Anita, went on to express, "It's just like... It's just trying to straddle that. Giving him a little bit more responsibility, but still... I know he still needs me and needs direction..."

#### *Negotiating adolescent independence while still engaging in parental monitoring*

Parents also reported how they uniformly strived to support their adolescents' autonomy in terms of their ability to move about their worlds in a manner that was both autonomous from their caregivers, yet safe and secure. Seven out of 10 parents (three from the lower confidence group and four from the higher confidence group) reported that they made efforts to negotiate their adolescents' independence while balancing a range of relevant safety concerns. What is additionally notable is that parents reported that their approaches to monitoring their adolescents were primarily motivated by external risk factors versus worries that were specific to their child's decision-making abilities or trustworthiness. Notably, several parents' concerns for their adolescents were related to the ways in which their youth may be targeted because of anti-Black racism. Amanda, for instance, expressed to her son, Thomas: "It's not you. It's society," to justify her monitoring efforts and the expectations

she had of her son. Some parents discussed fears specific to men preying on their daughters. Pam reported that the concerns that she had for her daughter, Ayesha, were based in the fact that her daughter looks older than her age and that she feared someone sexually preying on her for that reason.

Parents spoke explicitly about how they communicated their concerns to their children and laid out the expectations they had for their adolescents, as well as why they were necessary for their child's safety and protection. For instance, Pam, provided a detailed account of the ways in which she strived to accommodate Ayesha's request to spend time with friends (e.g., going to the movies) by asking specific questions about her intended plans, including the adults who were going to be present to ensure Ayesha's safety. Pam also worked to make it clear to her daughter during their discussions that her vigilance as a parent is vital for her protection from potential dangers in the world. Along similar lines, Thomas' mother, Amanda, noted how the expectations she had of him when he was making autonomous plans were due to him being a young Black man and how he may be discriminated against or subjected to racial violence. Such expectations of Thomas included answering his cell phone, keeping her updated on potential changes in his whereabouts, and knowing who he will be with while he is away from home.

In all these instances, parents worked to place their child in the "driver seat" of their decision making and support their adolescents' desires for independence while setting up systems and structure to monitor their whereabouts as well as to bolster their adolescents' understanding of why safety is a priority for them. Bonita, for instance, shared that her daughter, Nia is "at that stage where she's able to make decisions, and she knows right from wrong, and I trust her, so I let her do a lot of decision making.... But I do make sure I talk to their parents, and I do my research."

#### *Fostering adolescents' independence through leveraging supportive networks*

Across 6 out of 10 families (three from the lower confidence group and three from the higher confidence group), parents described the ways in which they encouraged their adolescents to utilize the support of other adults in their networks more generally, and specifically when they faced challenges. Many parents from the subsample described how they worked to orient their adolescents toward trusted nonparental adults to help them understand that they can utilize other adults in their lives to receive help and support. For instance, although Bonita and her daughter, Nia, reportedly shared a close bond where Nia could talk to her about "anything," she constantly reminded Nia that she had a broader network of supports available to her whenever needed by stating the following:

If you don't feel comfortable coming to me, you have you know two aunts. You have three uncles. You have grandparents, or even within your friend's circle. If you don't want to come to me, you can always go to somebody else.

In addition to generally encouraging their adolescents' utilization of supportive networks, parents also reported that they strived to support youths' ability to advocate for themselves by leveraging the support of other adults in their lives (e.g., extended family members, teachers, counselors, coaches, parents of peers), who were potentially better positioned to help them in particular contexts in which they were experiencing challenges. In these instances, parents provided advice to their adolescents about how they might utilize a particular adult (e.g., approach a teacher before or after school) to solve a problem they were facing (e.g., an incorrect grade). Although most examples came from parents in our subsample, one youth, DeAndre, explained in his interview that when he got into an argument with a peer at his afterschool program, his mother supported his ability to regulate his emotions and "cool down" by encouraging him to talk to one of his favorite staff members about the incident. Amanda reported that she encouraged her son, Thomas, to make an appointment with his guidance counselor to discuss a problem he was experiencing at school. Although Amanda also reassured Thomas that she would be there to support him if he needed her, she prioritized bolstering his skills for socializing with adults over solving the problem on his behalf.

In sum, we learned from this first qualitative inquiry that parents were engaging in a number of approaches to foster autonomy in their adolescent children. Specifically, they intentionally scaffolded adolescents' ability to make decisions independently. Through modeling and instruction, parents attempted to help their adolescent children acquire decision-making skills that would be helpful to them. Parents also wanted their children to begin to make decisions on their own and were increasingly reluctant to intervene on their behalf (as they were more inclined to have done when their children were younger). Given that parents still had safety concerns based on external societal threats, they still monitored their adolescents' whereabouts and enforced limits on where their adolescents could go and how independent they could be. Importantly, the parents reported explaining their rationale for parental monitoring to their adolescent children so the adolescents could better understand their reasoning. Parents wanted their children to know that they trusted them and through their explanations, they also could enhance their adolescents' trust of them. Finally, parents also discussed helping their adolescents identify other trustworthy adults who they could turn to for help or advice as a way of fostering their adolescents' increasing independence.

## Inquiry two: Adolescents' orientation toward nonparental adults

The second inquiry in this study focused on understanding how Black adolescents engaged with nonparental adults in their lives. Given that adolescents' confidence was positively associated with adolescents' number of natural mentoring relationships in our quantitative analysis, we analyzed

the qualitative data to better understand the ways in which youths' confidence may have influenced the ways they engaged with nonparental adults. Specifically, we utilized the relevant thematic codes we identified in the codebook development phase of the study to compare how higher confidence and lower confidence youth were reportedly able to (1) initiate casual and informal interaction with nonparental adults, (2) seek nonparental adults out for help, support, and advice, and (3) provide support to nonparental adults in their lives as discussed by different members of the triad. We did not find differences in the proportion of higher confidence youth initiating contact, seeking support, or providing support to adults relative to the proportion of lower confidence youth. As such, we then examined the data to see if there were substantive differences in aspects of what youth-adult interactions reportedly looked like across the two groups.

### *Initiate casual and informal interactions with adults*

Parents, adolescents, and adult relatives across all families in the subset ( $n = 10$ ) noted instances of youth initiating casual and informal interactions with nonparental adults in their lives. Broadly, we found that youth initiated contact with adults by engaging in behaviors such as calling family members to "say what's up?" walking into a room of adults and saying "Hi" or "Hey, how is it going?" Although we found that youth in both confidence groups initiated casual and informal interactions with nonparental adults, more youth from the higher confidence group reported initiating casual and informal interactions with a broader array of adults in their lives relative to youth from the lower confidence group. A higher confidence youth, DeAndre, for instance, reportedly had a particularly close relationship with his maternal grandmother, Carmine, who he often initiated spending time with (e.g., asking to spend the night) and being in close physical proximity to (e.g., laying close to her when they're together on the couch). Yet, in addition to this very close relationship with his grandmother, his mother endorsed the ways in which DeAndre also initiated spending time with his uncle and grandfather to do things like watch movies. This was akin to other higher confidence youth who described themselves or were described by others as initiating informal contact with several different nonparental adults in their networks. In contrast, lower confidence youth were more often reporting or being described as primarily initiating informal contact with one adult family member who they were particularly close to (as opposed to a broader network of adults). Grace, for instance, discussed how her daughter, Moriah, often initiated engaging with her grandmother by calling her on the phone or walking over to her house after school, but Grace said she continually worked to support Moriah's ability to initiate contact with other adults beyond Moriah's grandmother.

### *Seeking out adults for support*

Among all 10 families, parents, adolescents, and adult relatives explained instances of youth seeking emotional (i.e., discussion of feelings, expression of concerns, sympathy,

approval, caring, and acceptance), instrumental (i.e., providing tangible resources like household goods, tools, and services like transportation and assistance), and informational (i.e., providing information about resources, suggestions, and advice) support from nonparental adults in their lives. Parents, youth, and adult relatives all mentioned youths' support seeking from nonparental adults. In terms of emotional support, youth primarily sought out nonparental adults for this when they were dealing with interpersonal challenges with peers or adults and were seeking comfort. In terms of instrumental support, youth primarily sought out nonparental adults to receive instrumental support with tasks such as transporting the youth to activities (e.g., sports games and friend's house), cooking and providing meals for the youth, and physically providing resources (e.g., medication and food) to the youth.

In the informational support realm, we noticed a distinction across the higher confidence and lower confidence groups in that youth in the higher confidence group were described going to nonparental adults for advice about a wider range of topics relative to youth in the lower confidence group. Specifically, lower confidence youths' pursuit of nonparental adults in this domain was limited to advice-giving regarding sports and clothing. In contrast, higher confidence youth sought out nonparental adults for advice on which sport to play; educational and career options; and how to make difficult decisions and solve important problems with their teachers and parents.

Additionally, it seemed that youth in the higher confidence group may have sought out a broader array of nonparental adults for support relative to youth in the lower confidence group. The supportive adults in higher confidence youths' lives ranged from their identified adult relatives (who also participated in the study with them) to teachers, school counselors, and other extended family members. Nia, for instance, shared that when a peer on her softball team teased her, she confided in and sought advice from, "My mom (Bonita), my dad, my whole family basically (grandmother, Ida), and the guidance counselor's office, too." Along similar lines, another higher confidence youth in our sample, DeAndre, discussed instances where he readily sought out his grandmother, as well as his mother, father, and after-school program counselor for help and support with different issues. Although lower confidence youth similarly sought out nonparental adults for emotional, instrumental, and informational support, these youth broached a smaller network of adults. Specifically, lower confidence youths' support-seeking interactions with nonparental adults were mostly limited to their identified adult relatives who participated in the study.

#### *Providing support to adults*

Finally, across six families in the subset of 10 (three from the lower confidence group and three from the higher confidence group), there were a few meaningful instances of adolescents providing emotional and instrumental support to nonparental adults in their lives. Instrumental support

included yard work, cooking dinner, as well as helping the adult navigate their smart phone and requesting a rideshare through an app for them. Emotional support in our subsample was specific to providing encouragement to nonparental adults through efforts such as saying "I love you" to their grandmother before surgery and hugging a teacher when the teacher's best friend (also a teacher in the school) passed away during the school year. This emergent finding touches upon the mutuality and reciprocity that may be implicated in healthy intergenerational bonds between youth and nonparental adults.

In sum, findings from our second qualitative inquiry suggested many similarities across the youth from the lower confidence and higher confidence youths in their willingness to initiate contact, seek support, and provide support to adults. Yet, our qualitative analyses revealed differences in aspects of what youth-adult interactions reportedly looked like across the two groups. Specifically, we found that relative to their lower confidence counterparts, higher confidence adolescents appeared to be initiating informal contact more broadly, seeking out support from a broader cadre of nonparental adults, and seeking out informational support on a wider range of topics.

## DISCUSSION

The results of our quantitative analyses indicated that autonomy-supportive parenting practices may influence Black adolescents' number of natural mentoring relationships by fostering adolescents' sense of confidence. This finding suggests that specific aspects of parenting in adolescence remain formative in shaping youths' sense of self (Steinberg et al., 1995; Zimmerman et al., 2005), which, in turn, might play a substantial role in adolescents' ability and capacity to establish supportive relationships with nonparental adults. We then utilized the qualitative data to better understand how our parenting construct of interest manifested in the data and to further interrogate the associations we found in our quantitative analyses.

Thus, a focus of the qualitative portion of this study was to highlight Black parents' autonomy-supportive parenting practices and how they potentially influenced adolescents' confidence, as well as to investigate how adolescents' confidence may have been driving their interactions with nonparental adults. We employed an approach that allowed us to make comparisons across adolescents in the qualitative sample with the lowest ( $n=5$ ) versus the highest ( $n=5$ ) confidence levels. Regarding the first inquiry (autonomy-supportive parenting practices  $\rightarrow$  adolescent confidence), we documented that autonomy-supportive parenting practices manifested in the qualitative data as (1) parents supporting youths' thinking, independent problem solving, and decision making through scaffolding their decision-making processes; (2) parents negotiating their adolescents' independence while engaging in parental monitoring behaviors; and (3) parents fostering adolescents' ability to leverage



supportive networks of nonparental adults for help. We did not find meaningful differences regarding the frequency (proportion) of parents who were engaging in any of these three types of autonomy-supportive parenting practices across the higher and lower confidence subsamples, which was contrary to what we expected to find.

Across both confidence groups of youth, almost all parents described themselves or were described by other members of their family as engaging their adolescents in a range of scaffolding behaviors, such as providing verbal encouragement (particularly in the context of barriers and challenges); offering a range of informational supports (i.e., presenting pros and cons; communicating options available to the youth, guiding the youth in the right direction for what decision might be best; helping the youth to perspective take); and making decisions collaboratively alongside their adolescent. We also found that monitoring efforts from parents occurred alongside these aforementioned supportive efforts to ensure youths' safety and security from potential environmental and societal threats. In particular, some parents described concerns about how their adolescent children may be targeted because of their race, gender, and/or age and how their awareness of these vulnerabilities to external threats required an ongoing vigilance that had to be balanced with their desires to help their child become more autonomous. Parental monitoring efforts involved parents communicating with their adolescents about their specific concerns as well as articulating their expectations and negotiating plans with their adolescents to ensure they could become more independent but still take the necessary safety precautions that parents desired. As mentioned above, the proportion of families where these practices were described did not vary across the lower confidence versus higher confidence subsamples.

In addition, most parents in our subset (across both the lower confidence and higher confidence subsamples) reported striving to support their adolescents' sense of autonomy by directly encouraging their adolescents to leverage other supportive adults in their lives, especially in instances when parents were not present. In particular, parents described helping their adolescents understand when and how nonparental adults in their lives might be most helpful and how adolescents could seek them out intentionally. This finding speaks to a potential direct path from autonomy-supportive parenting to the number of natural mentors in adolescents' lives. Although we did not discover this in our quantitative analysis, this finding suggests that at least for some families, parents' more direct encouragement about engaging with other adults may be resulting in more natural mentoring relationships in their adolescents' lives. Alternatively, it is plausible that parents' consistent efforts to orient their youth toward adults may be an active facilitator of youths' confidence with specific adults in their proximal networks. Moreover, the promotion of volitional functioning scale (Soenens et al., 2007) was utilized to capture parental autonomy support and it did not have items that focused on this specific aspect of autonomy-supportive parenting (i.e., youths' level of engagement with others). If this had

been measured more explicitly in the survey, significant associations may have emerged. It also is worth noting that some parents in the subset explicitly discussed this parenting practice as a way to help their adolescents become more autonomous.

While we approached our comparative analyses expecting to see differences in autonomy-supportive parenting practices across the two subsets of higher and lower confidence adolescents, it is worth noting that there was not tremendous variability in the quantitative confidence scores for the qualitative subsample (see Table 4). Thus, although we selected the 10 adolescents with the highest scores ( $n = 5$ ) and lowest scores ( $n = 5$ ), the actual differences in these youths' average scores may not have been meaningful enough to observe the strong differences we expected. Moreover, the lower-confidence adolescents' scores hovered around the mid-point of the scale reflecting that our subsample did not include youth with exceptionally low confidence scores. Had our subsample included more variability in adolescents' confidence scores (especially with more adolescents at the lower extreme), substantial differences may have emerged. Nevertheless, it also is conceivable that all the adolescents in our subsample were experiencing autonomy-supportive parenting to similar degrees, and all may have been benefiting from this type of parenting in terms of bolstering their confidence. Even still, the youth in the subsample may have started at different levels of baseline confidence which may explain why there was some degree of variability in adolescents' reported confidence despite experiencing similar degrees of autonomy-supportive parenting.

Our approach to the comparative analysis was consistent with best practices for comparisons in qualitative research; however, it is worth noting that the lack of differences found across the two groups in the qualitative analysis does not negate the magnitude of the quantitative finding that more autonomy-supportive parenting may be associated with greater adolescent confidence. This point underscores that the Black adolescents were entering this study with varying levels of confidence which had already been shaped by their general dispositions and cumulative life experiences up to that point. It seems autonomy-supportive parenting may be one important contributing factor toward adolescent confidence, but there are certainly other potential relevant influencing factors that were not included in the study. It may also be that having an interview sample of participants with more variation in their levels of confidence could have produced more consistent findings with that of the quantitative analyses.

Our second qualitative inquiry focused on uncovering how Black adolescents' confidence might matter for how they interact with nonparental adults in their lives in terms of how they (1) initiate casual and informal interaction with nonparental adults; (2) seek nonparental adults out for help, support, and advice; and (3) provide support to nonparental adults in their lives. Overall, our comparative analyses only yielded one major difference across the higher and lower confidence groups of youth. While we found that all youth



in our subsample appeared to possess similar skills for engaging with adults, what appeared to be distinctive across the two groups was the extent to which higher confidence adolescents were more likely to seek advice across a broader range of topics from a broader range of familial and non-familial adults relative to lower confidence adolescents who reported seeking advice for fewer topics and primarily seeking out their one identified adult relative for advice. This finding is consistent with our quantitative finding linking adolescents' higher confidence to a greater number of natural mentors and fits with theoretical frameworks on the role of youth assets in shaping intergenerational relationships (Lerner et al., 2015; Varga & Zaff, 2018). Previous research findings also indicate that natural mentoring relationships may bolster youths' confidence suggesting a potential reciprocal association between these variables (Yu et al., 2019).

This study was generally limited in that the approach we utilized did not allow us to fully assess for bidirectional influences, although there was some evidence in our sample to suggest that more confident youth may also influence parents' autonomy-supportive parenting decisions. Nevertheless, our findings demonstrated that adolescents with higher confidence appeared to be initiating contact with more adults across a wider range of topics, which indicates that adolescent confidence may play an important role in the number of natural mentoring relationships they develop. More research is needed, however, to better understand distinctions in the benefits associated with the quantity versus the quality of relationships with nonparental adults among youth with shyer and more introverted temperaments.

A large portion of the dynamic cognitive, socioemotional, and relational changes projected to occur in adolescence are related to youth developing new levels of understanding and skills for engaging in new interpersonal roles and relationships (Mirković et al., 2021; Williamson et al., 2020). Although somewhat of an emergent finding, it was foreseeable that a meaningful portion of the adolescents in our subset of families displayed efforts to support nonparental adults in their lives through emotional and instrumental support behaviors. Notably, however, the analogous proportion with which this theme emerged across higher confidence and lower confidence adolescents' is rather inconsistent for what might otherwise be expected for youth with varying levels of self-confidence. It is plausible in this regard that adolescents' capacity to be active, empathic, and mutual participants in the relationships they possess is also an important aspect of youth-adult relationship formation. Notably, research suggests that reciprocity and mutuality between mentors and mentees might matter substantially for developing and maintaining natural mentoring relationships (DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005; Melton et al., 2021; Yu et al., 2019).

There is reason to believe that aspects of the parent-child relationship might help promote an understanding of how to successfully garner relationships with other adults through modeling certain prosocial behaviors toward their youth (Davis & McQuillin, 2021; DuBois & Karcher, 2005;

Zimmerman et al., 2005). Youths' understanding of specific interpersonal skills, like empathy (the capacity to understand others' emotional experiences and display kindness and concern for others) and relational expectations have been found to arise out of earlier cognitive representations (i.e., internal working models and scripts) of relationships with primary caregivers (DuBois & Karcher, 2005; Stern & Cassidy, 2018). Specifically, parents' nurturing and supportive stance toward their children may lead to increases in adolescents' own capacity to display the types of interpersonal skills which may be integral for establishing strong bonds with others (Soenens et al., 2007; Stern & Cassidy, 2018). Furthermore, given that this subtheme proportionately emerged across higher and lower confidence youth, there is reason to suggest that other factors specific to youths' lives might contribute to ways in which they provide support to adults in their lives. This is consistent with ecological models of human development which state that environmental and individual factors matter for developmental processes (DuBois & Karcher, 2005; Melton et al., 2021; Williamson et al., 2020), particularly among Black youth and families (Murry et al., 2018; Spencer et al., 1997).

Collectively, this emergent finding aligns well with how the goals of adolescence regarding broadening their social networks (e.g., webs of support; Varga & Zaff, 2018) are discussed in the literature (Laursen & Collins, 2009; Mirković et al., 2021; Yu et al., 2019) as well as the qualities that likely constitute successful natural mentoring bonds between youth and nonparental adults (Deutsch et al., 2020; DuBois & Silverthorn, 2005). Zeldin et al. (2005) once stated that youths' relationships with supportive nonparental adults are a "foundation from which youth can be active agents in their own development, the development of others, and the development of the community" (Zeldin et al., 2005, p. 2). In turn, along the lines of thinking of youth as active agents in their own development (Varga & Zaff, 2018), it may be especially meaningful to consider what youth bring to relationships with nonparental adults that may influence their attainment of these formative bonds, along with how these qualities and skills are shaped (e.g., through aspects of the parent-adolescent relationship as suggested by Keller's systemic model of mentoring).

## Limitations and directions for future research

Several limitations of the current study are worth noting. Given that most of the primary caregivers in our study were biological mothers, our sample was less representative of the diversity that exists among caregivers in Black families. Moreover, while our findings may extend to other Black American families with adolescent children, more research is needed to determine if our findings extend to more ethnically diverse Black families (given that our sample was largely African American) across diverse geographic regions (given that participants in our study all resided in the Southeast). Although it was theoretically and empirically

permissible to consider how parenting practices shape adolescents' confidence, an alternative possibility is that youths' level of confidence shapes how parents engage in particular parenting practices to best meet their child's needs and capabilities (Kobak et al., 2017). Most likely, there is a reciprocal association between parenting practices and adolescents' confidence. We were limited in our ability to assess that in this cross-sectional study. It also is worth noting our quantitative findings were based solely on adolescents' reports and thus while accurately capturing adolescents' perceptions of experiences, these findings may be affected by shared method variance. Future research can employ parent report and observational data on constructs like autonomy-supportive parenting to reduce shared method variance and facilitate data triangulation.

Similarly, while we focused on the role of confidence in potentially contributing to more natural mentoring relationships for Black adolescents, research also speaks to the potential role natural mentoring relationships play in bolstering youths' confidence (Arbeit et al., 2021; Davis & McQuillin, 2021; Yu et al., 2019). It is worth noting, however, that our mixed methods approach allowed for further probing of the associations which emerged in the quantitative analyses, which better positioned us to speak to potential directionality of influence. Given the likelihood of reciprocal associations among study variables that likely unfold in complex ways over time, future research could implement a prospective longitudinal design to more fully understand how these factors influence each other.

## Conclusion

Beyond emphasizing the importance of natural mentoring relationships for youth, especially those from marginalized backgrounds, extant studies in the natural mentoring literature have largely focused on qualities of youth and adults that may influence the formation of natural mentoring relationships (Deutsch et al., 2020; Williamson et al., 2020). Otherwise, there remains very limited conceptual or empirical research directed at understanding how natural mentoring relationships develop and what factors may be associated with the formation of such relationships (Deutsch et al., 2020). Findings from this study emphasize that parents' efforts to promote their children's autonomy may be a strong predictor and active facilitator of natural mentoring relationships between their Black adolescents and the adults in their everyday lives. Given that both parental and nonparental supportive adults in adolescents' lives have the potential to offer a range of unique supports that are collectively critical in supporting healthy developmental outcomes (Futch Ehrlich et al., 2016; Melton et al., 2021; Varga & Zaff, 2018), future research should consider how collaborative efforts between parents and natural mentors may further enable Black adolescents to thrive in the face of contextual adversity (Hurd & Sellers, 2013; Keller, 2005; Varner et al., 2018). In turn, this work has the potential to inform how practitioners

might use strengths-based approaches to effectively support Black youth and families for years to come. Specifically, efforts to more meaningfully engage parents and natural mentors as collaborative and mutually reinforcing supports in youths' lives can strengthen the effectiveness of school-based and therapeutic interventions targeting Black youth.

Given how Black adolescents' perceptions of themselves were directly associated with their number of natural mentoring relationships, one major implication from this study may be that adolescent-focused interventions that seek to build the network of supportive adults in youths' lives could look to more intentionally center adolescents' parents in these processes. Schools, afterschool programs, and faith-based settings, for instance, have historically created enriching opportunities for Black youth to establish supportive and caring relationships with adults outside of their immediate families (Deutsch et al., 2020; Scott & Deutsch, 2021). Although these settings also may attend to the parent-child relationship, this emphasis may diminish as youth progress into adolescence (Hurd & Billingsley, 2023). Insights from our research indicate that important adolescent-serving settings can do more to nurture the parent-adolescent bond and support the parenting practices of adolescents' parents as these approaches will likely hold both direct benefits to the adolescent, as well as secondary benefits of helping Black adolescents to expand their network of supportive adults (Hurd et al., 2013; Melton et al., 2021; Varga & Zaff, 2018).

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We thank the families who participated in this study and the research assistants who assisted with data collection and analyses.

## FUNDING INFORMATION

This study was funded by a William T. Grant Foundation Scholar Award to the fourth author.

## CONFLICT OF INTEREST STATEMENT

The authors report no conflict of interests.

## DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Study data are available from the corresponding author upon reasonable request.

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**How to cite this article:** Charity-Parker, B. M., Billingsley, J. T., Deutsch, N. L., & Hurd, N. M. (2024). A mixed-methods exploration of autonomy-supportive parenting, confidence, and natural mentoring relationships among Black adolescents. *Journal of Research on Adolescence*, 00, 1–16. <https://doi.org/10.1111/jora.12970>