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"You Gotta Have a Good Help Mate:" African American Fathers' Co-Parenting Experiences

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Current descriptions of coparenting (i.e., shared decision making between parents and the coordination of parenting activities; Feinberg, 2002; McHale & Kuersten-Hogan, 2004) often are not informed by diverse cultural or family contexts, or by the perspectives of fathers. One group that has been notably absent in the coparenting literature is African American fathers. We conducted semistructured, qualitative interviews with 30 African American fathers (28–60 years of age) of a preadolescent, biological son at-risk for depression, aggression, or both. Informed by grounded theory, we systematically identified emergent themes in the data (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Fathers provided descriptions of both positive and negative coparenting experiences, which were nuanced at times by their residential and marital status. The findings highlight the importance of gender-based parenting differences, fathers' belief in the importance of the father–son relationship, and the significance of discipline and communication as key coparenting domains for this sample of fathers. The framework presented here represents a critical step toward the advancement of coparenting conceptualizations that incorporate diverse cultures, nontraditional family types, and fathers. This framework is a starting point from which theoretical conceptualizations can be further developed. The findings challenge negative perceptions of African American fathers and highlight modifiable factors (e.g., communication) relevant for interventions that support African American fathers, youth, and families.

Keywords: African American, fathers, nonresidential, coparenting, youth, communication

Fathers represent an important aspect of the family system and have both direct and indirect effects on youths' well-being (Lamb & Tamis-Lemonda, 2004). Fathers' positive involvement may be particularly important to youth at-risk for negative outcomes, such as depressive symptoms and aggression. Increasingly, research demonstrates that fathers, whether residential or nonresidential, engage in parenting behaviors (e.g., supervision, discipline, support) that are linked to decreases in depressive symptoms, aggression, and delinquency among youth (e.g., Amato & Gilbreth, 1999; Hoeve et al., 2009; Plunkett, Henry, Robinson, Behnke, & Falcon, 2007). Fathers also may influence child development via the support they provide to their children's mother (Roggman, Fitzgerald, Bradley, & Raikes, 2002). However, the protective effects of fathers may be compromised by a poor coparenting relationship.

Coparenting (i.e., shared decision making between parents and the coordination of parenting activities) is distinct from parents' romantic, financial, sexual, or other relations (Feinberg, 2002; McHale & Kuersten-Hogan, 2004). Positive examples of coparenting include supportive behavior and collaboration between parents (i.e., "acknowledging and respecting each other's contributions"; Feinberg, 2002, p. 176), whereas negative examples include conflict and undermining behavior (e.g., contradicting the other parent's directives; Feinberg, 2002; Stright & Bales, 2003). The quality of the coparenting relationship is associated with

parenting behaviors such as levels of parental involvement, nurturing, and monitoring (Conger et al., 2002; Jones, Forehand, Dorsey, Foster, & Brody, 2005; Jones, Forehand, O'Connell, Armistead, & Brody, 2005). It also has direct effects on youth outcomes such as internalizing and externalizing behaviors (Jones, Forehand, Dorsey, et al., 2005).

Although important gains have been made in understanding coparenting and its relationship to both parenting and youth outcomes, coparenting research is relatively young (McHale, Kuersten-Hogan, & Rao, 2004). Several child and family researchers call for the development of coparenting conceptualizations to further inform research (e.g., measurement development) and interventions (Jones, Zalot, Foster, Sterrett, & Chester, 2007; McHale, Kuersten-Hogan, & Rao, 2004). Developing conceptual frameworks that encompass the influences of diverse cultures, different family systems and structures, and fathers' perspectives may highlight new and important coparenting processes (Jones et al., 2007; McHale, Kuersten-Hogan, & Rao, 2004). For example, fathers may be influenced by or respond to coparental conflict in different ways than mothers.

Very little is known about coparenting among fathers (Insabella, Williams, & Pruett, 2003); similarly, little is known about coparenting among African Americans (Jones, Forehand, Dorsey, et al., 2005). African American fathers, therefore, are notably absent in the coparenting literature. Contrary to prevalent popular views, research evidence indicates that many African American fathers are involved with their children, even after the romantic relationship with the child's mother has ended (Edin, Tach, & Mincy, 2009; King, 1994; King, Harris, & Heard, 2004; Veneziano & Rohner, 1998). African American fathers' presence in families presents a natural opportunity to engage them in prevention efforts for at-risk youth.

With nearly three quarters (73%) of African American youth in the United States born to unmarried parents (Martin et al., 2012), it is likely that many African American fathers coparent within nontraditional family structures. For example, research demonstrates that in single mother-headed African American families, biological fathers (and other extended kin) are engaged in coparenting (Jones et al., 2007). Coparenting among never married, nonresidential fathers likely differs from that of married, coresident, and divorced fathers (Bronte-Tinkew & Horowitz, 2009; Insabella et al., 2003). Compared with divorced fathers, never-married fathers report higher levels of coparental conflict and lower levels of shared decision making (Insabella et al., 2003). Some posit this is attributable in part to the fact that they have fewer legal rights than divorced fathers (Insabella et al., 2003). Furthermore, marital status may differentially impact family dynamics and roles, and subsequently perceptions of parental support (Isacco, Garfield, & Rogers, 2010).

Prior relevant research is primarily quantitative and focuses on predictors of coparenting, and the association between coparenting and both parent (primarily mother) and youth outcomes. Some studies demonstrate the importance of coparenting among extended members of African American families both concurrently and over time. For example, among rural married and single mother-headed African American families, a demonstrated relationship exists between low levels of coparenting conflict (sometimes in combination with high levels of coparenting support) and higher levels of monitoring and maternal self-regulation, as well as

youth outcomes (e.g., internalizing and externalizing disorders; Dorsey, Forehand, & Brody, 2007; Forehand & Jones, 2003; Jones, Forehand, Dorsey, et al., 2005).

More research is needed to determine how fathers resolve coparenting conflicts and establish collaborative coparenting relationships (Sobolewski & King, 2005). Qualitative studies from the perspective of African American fathers can augment extant research by providing insight into the context, processes, and nature of coparental relationships. Insight into the heterogeneous population of African American fathers is relevant to the development of diverse coparenting frameworks and can help inform family-based prevention interventions for at-risk youth. The importance of adapting parent training programs to meet fathers' needs has been noted (Lundahl, Tollefson, Risser, & Lovejoy, 2008). In this context, we explore and identify themes in coparenting among residential and nonresidential African American fathers of an at-risk preadolescent son.

Method

The data presented in this manuscript were collected as a part of a broader pilot study designed to inform the development of father-focused prevention interventions for at-risk African American youth. The study focused on fathers' parenting experiences with their biological, preadolescent son and their thoughts about father-focused prevention interventions. The study was largely informed by prestudy information obtained from conversations with community liaisons and related literature (e.g., Hawkins & Dollahite, 1997; Jarrett, Roy, & Burton, 2002; Roopnarine, 2004). The study also was informed by an ecological framework to explore family, community, and societal influences on fathering (Robbins, Chatterjee, & Canda, 1998). The current investigation is focused on family level factors (i.e., coparenting) related to fathering. As a relatively new area of research, qualitative methods are particularly appropriate to examine how fathers describe and engage in coparenting their son.

Procedure

The participants were recruited from a small Mid-Atlantic city and its surrounding areas. Recruitment strategies were informed by prestudy conversations with community liaisons, and involved face-to-face recruitment by community liaisons and the research team, word of mouth, and the distribution of flyers. Prospective participants were recruited from local businesses (e.g., barbershops), churches, community centers, and organized neighborhood youth activities (i.e., youth baseball games) with African American constituents. Prospective participants were encouraged to contact study staff to obtain more information, ask questions, and schedule a screening interview.

Participants

To participate in the overall study, fathers had to be 18 years of age or older, a biological father of a preadolescent son (8–12 years old) at-risk for developing aggressive or depressive symptoms, and self-identify as African American (i.e., an American-born man of African descent). If fathers had more than one biological preadolescent son we focused on their oldest son in order to maintain

consistency across interviews and reduce respondent burden. Preadolescence is in time in which youth begin to engage in various risky behaviors, and given youths' increasing exposure to peers and the larger environment, often requires transitions in the coparenting relationship (Caldwell et al., 2004; Feinberg, 2002; Sullivan, 2008). For the purposes of the overall study, the designation of "at-risk" for developing aggressive behaviors, depressive symptomatology or both was intentionally defined broadly in the context of community, family, or individual risk. Community risk was defined as residence in inner-city neighborhoods characterized by high poverty levels, crime rates, and a concentration of social problems (Wilson, 1987). This was operationalized as one or more of the following factors being reported by fathers as at least somewhat of a problem in their communities: inadequate public transportation, poor quality schools, crime and violence, drug use or drug dealing, tension between the police and the community, or tension between residents in the community. Youth were considered at family level risk if fathers reported that their monetary resources were "not enough to get by" or "barely enough to get by" in response to the following screening question: "How would you describe your financial situation today?" Youth were also considered to be at family level risk if their biological father was nonresidential (i.e., as a proxy for disruptions in the parental relationship). Youth were considered at individual risk if their father expressed a concern about the potential for future behavioral problems based on the son's current functioning (e.g., already displaying some aggression). Fathers were ineligible for the study if they appeared to be actively psychotic or under the influence of substances, or reported current involvement in an active domestic violence or child abuse case.

Fathers were between 28 and 60 years of age ($M = 40.67$; $SD = 8.66$). Fathers' income ranged from \$7,800-\$175,000 per year ($M = 60,361.54$; median = \$57, 500; $SD = 42, 785.91$), with 11 fathers (26.7%) reporting they did not or barely "had enough to get by." Many fathers indicated that the following were at least somewhat of a problem in their neighborhood: (a) poor quality schools ($n = 15$; 50%); (b) crime and violence ($n = 12$; 40%); (c) drug use or drug dealing ($n = 12$; 40%); (d) tension between the police and the community ($n = 9$; 30%); (e) inadequate public transportation ($n = 9$; 30%); and (f) tension between residents in the community ($n = 8$; 26.7%). Thirteen (43.3%) fathers expressed concerns that their son may develop behavioral problems in the future because of individual (e.g., currently displaying aggressive behaviors) or community (e.g., exposure to crime and drugs) level risk factors.

At the time of the interviews, 20 fathers were residential (i.e., currently living full time with their oldest preadolescent, biological son) and 10 were nonresidential. Of the 20 residential fathers, five were no longer in a romantic relationship with their son's mother yet had primary caregiving responsibility for their son (i.e., single residential dads; SRDs). Of the 10 nonresidential fathers, seven were never married, two either informally or formally had a "shared custody arrangement," and two had daily contact with their son. Regardless of residential status, the majority (90%) lived with their son in the past, and at the time of the interview most (90%) maintained at least weekly contact with their son. With regard to their son's mother, half of the fathers ($n = 15$) were either married to or cohabiting with their son's mother, one-third ($n = 10$) were never married, and 16.7% ($n = 5$) were separated or divorced. Half of the fathers ($n = 15$) reported having children with more than one woman.

Eligible fathers were invited to participate in an individual interview, scheduled at a location (e.g., community center, law office, research facility) and time convenient for them. On the day of the interview, participants completed the informed consent process, a demographic questionnaire (adapted from Caldwell, Rafferty, Reischl, De Loney, & Brooks, 2010), and participated in a semistructured interview (Appendix 1). Interviews were conducted either by a doctorate-level social worker (also a licensed clinical social worker), or by a psychiatry resident physician; both are African American women. Interviews lasted approximately 1 to 1.5 hours, and fathers were compensated \$25 for their time.

Data Analysis

Basic descriptive analyses such as frequency counts, means, SD, range, and median were calculated for demographic variables using SPSS, Version 15 (SPSS, 2006). Data analysis was informed by grounded theory (Padgett, 1998; Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Specifically, emergent themes grounded in the data were systematically identified by the research team that consisted of a doctorate-level social worker (also a licensed clinical social worker), a psychiatry resident physician, and two bachelor-level volunteers. All coders were Black women (i.e., African American or Cape Verdean) who had a myriad of lifelong experiences with a diverse range of Black men and fathers. None were mothers. The QSR NVIVO software package (Version 9; QSR, 2008) was used to organize data and compare coding among analysts.

Codes and codebook development. Via an iterative process, we developed a codebook to guide the data analysis. In an effort to develop codes that were broadly inclusive of themes across interviews, we randomly selected nine transcripts and carefully read and proposed codes for each transcript. The first three transcripts were coded independently by all team members. Subsequently, we met to discuss common, and recurrent themes and develop an iteration of the codebook. The next six randomly selected interviews were divided and independently coded by each analyst (i.e., two per person). Subsequently, the team met again to identify new and refine previously identified themes. We finalized the codebook when: (a) no additional codes emerged from the transcripts and (b) interrater reliability (two-thirds agreement; see below) was achieved. Open coding and consensus (see below) were also used in this process.

Coding reliability and trustworthiness. We set interrater reliability (IRR) at two-thirds agreement (the social worker was replaced by a trained volunteer coder after the codebook was finalized; therefore, the IRR analysis always involved three coders). Sections of transcripts that fell below agreement were flagged, discussed during team meetings, and differences were resolved via consensus. Interrater reliability checks were conducted with five (16.7%) of the transcripts, and occurred throughout codebook development and the subsequent coding of the transcripts. To further ensure that we captured relevant themes, six (20%) additional transcripts were independently coded by two analysts.

To ensure methodological transparency, we kept detailed notes regarding data analysis, audiotaped team meetings (Bloomberg, 2008), and searched for cases within the sample that were not

consistent (or disconfirmed) with developing themes. Peer debriefing, open discussions about researcher biases and assumptions, consultation with an expert qualitative researcher, and member checks (i.e., participant feedback regarding findings) were used to examine the assumptions and interpretations of the research team and explore alternate explanations of the data (Bloomberg, 2008; Padgett, 1998).

Open, axial, and selective coding.   We used both open and axial coding (described below) in the development of the codebook and throughout the duration of coding. Though often described as distinct processes for the sake of clarity, open and axial coding are iterative and often overlapping processes (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). Open coding is "the process through which concepts are identified and their properties and dimensions are discovered in the data" (Strauss & Corbin, 1998, p. 101). Axial coding involves relating categories to subcategories based on their properties and dimensions (Strauss & Corbin, 1998). We used the final codebook to identify the themes derived from all 30 transcripts, including those used in the development of the codebook. Finally, we used selective coding to integrate major themes and develop a coparenting framework (Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Results

Recognizing the pilot nature of this study, we present a preliminary conceptual framework describing coparenting among this sample of African American fathers (Figure 1). Nine themes and six subthemes emerged from the data. These themes were organized into three broad categories: value of family, gender differences in parenting, and key coparenting domains. Some but not all themes and subthemes differed in context, focus, or both based on fathers' residential and at times marital status. Using pseudonyms, exemplar text is included in the vernacular in which it was spoken.
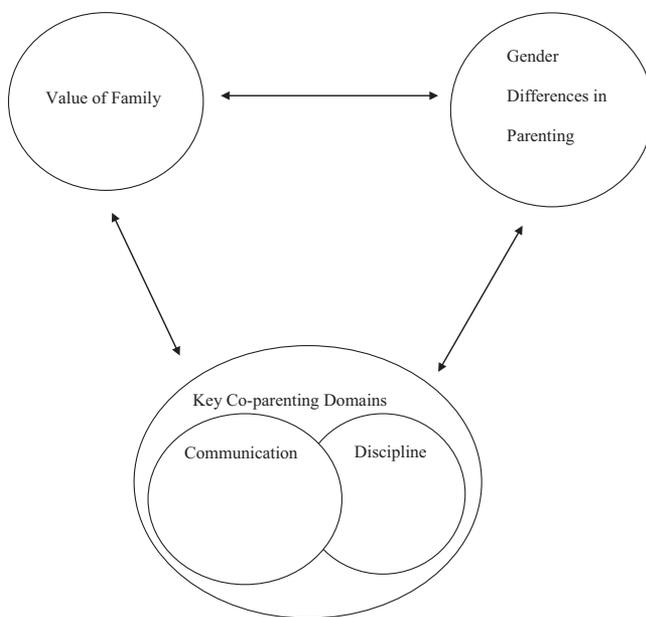

Figure 1.   Conceptual model of coparenting among African American fathers of at-risk sons.

Value of Family

This category consists of three subthemes: value of partnership, "do it for the kid," and "one big family" (the latter two are named directly from participant quotes). These subthemes were described by participants as particularly salient to their parenting. Putting children first and having an expansive view of family reflects a deeper commitment to the need for working parental relationships among the adults in their son's life.

Value of partnership.   Many fathers reported that they value family and a supportive coparenting partnership, whether or not they experienced such a relationship with the mother of their son. Residential fathers tended to discuss the value they place on the coparenting partnership. Barry noted, "You gotta have a good help mate . . . Now you can't be aggravated too much with them if you got a help mate . . .. It's hard to raise a child . . .. But now if you pull together . . . you can get there with double the force." Larry discussed the partnership as his motivation, "So that makes me want to put extra effort out here to do what I got to do "cause it's a partnership." Fred, a single residential father, discussed the importance of boys witnessing healthy male-female interactions. He stated, "I think it's important for boys in particular to understand . . . how important it is to coparent and . . . have a loving relationship with the female partner, particularly if you guys are parenting and raising children and agreeing and disagreeing."

Nonresidential fathers, typically those who were experiencing conflict in the coparental relationship, expressed their desires for more collaboration between themselves and their son's mother. Derrick discussed his frustrations about not being able work with his son's mother to address their son's behavior at school. Brandon stated, "Even though we ain't together, I'm still here. I still want to be involved. . . . even though I live across town . . . I mean just let me be a part of everything."

Do it for the kid.   Both nonresidential and single residential fathers noted the importance of acting in their son's best interest with regard to resolving conflicts and making child rearing decisions. Patrick, a single residential father noted, "regardless of whatever's going on between you and her . . . the child shouldn't have to suffer." Derrick, a nonresidential father similarly stated, ". . . it doesn't matter who's right or wrong . . .. it's about what's best for our child."

One big family.   A small group of residential and nonresidential fathers who had children with more than one woman worked to facilitate positive sibling relationships across their subfamilies. These interactions sometimes included the children's mothers. Cecil, a residential father stated,

> . . . even though I'm married now and had two other wives, there's a certain interaction that we all do . . . everybody gets along. I mean I get [the kids] for the summer and . . . we visit each other . . . it's like we're separate, they have different mothers but it's like one family in one sense.

Jack, a single residential father, provided a rationale for ensuring that all of his children grow up together,

> I always had all my children together . . . it was very important to me that they knew each other, that they grew together so that it's not like this is my step-brother, this is my step-, this is my brother, this is my sister or whatever; so there's no step-, there's no anything in the middle of that . . . So throughout their entire lives they will be able to

look back and reflect that they grew up together and that they know each other . . . They know each other's mothers, the mothers know each other so that there's no animosity about whether or not I care more for anybody, any of my children more than the other. It's an equal opportunity and I think that, like I said, it was something that you had to kind of establish early on so that you can kind of set a precedence that this is what's gonna happen throughout their lives.

Jack also provided his strategy for getting everyone on the same page, which involved clearly articulating, to each child's mother, that the romantic relationship had ended, and agreeing not to be involved in each other's "personal business." Subsequently, the three parents talked out their concerns. He stated:

> So once those lines are being drawn and you kind of put it out like that just plain and simple, then it's easier for everybody to move on. . . . But it has to be articulated; everybody has to know in plain English what's happening, what's going on . . .

Gender-Based Differences in Parenting

This concept consists of three subthemes: mothers as permissive, mothers as nurturers and protectors, and fathers' unique contributions to their son's development. Participants explicitly attributed parenting differences to gender; that is, they viewed fathering as inherently different than mothering. Taken together, these views appreciate as well as assess mothering, and also make the case for fathering as both complementary and corrective.

Mothers as permissive. Both residential and nonresidential fathers often reported that their son's mother was too permissive. Fathers discussed concerns about mother's approaches to discipline, inappropriately giving in to their son's wishes or requests, and not holding their son accountable for his actions. Derrick, a nonresidential father, indicated that his son's mother has ". . . a lot to do with the way he act out because she give him his way . . .. So it's more like she's an enabler to him; he's never wrong." Several fathers described mothers as "coddling," and "spoiling" their son, or expressed concerns that she gives him "too much stuff." Henry, a single residential father, stated, ". . . what they don't understand is I'm raising a man, I'm not raising a cute kid. So they're still caught in the cute kid phase." Some fathers also noted that mothers viewed the fathers as "too hard" with regard to discipline practices. One father described these gender differences in parenting as "opposing forces."

Michael, a residential father whose work required him to stay away from home sometimes for a few weeks at a time described his son's awareness and response when he was home versus when he was not home to discipline and monitor his son. He stated, ". . . he can kind of run circles around mom . . . and he will take advantage of certain opportunities." Henry discussed the rationale for mothers "spoiling" their sons based on his general experience and observations of other parents,

> And with the dynamic of the households with it mostly being moms, moms will raise their daughters; they spoil their boys. You know moms is trying to get a man to do something or fulfill some role, so they put the boy in that position because they don't have a man to do it; but he's not being prepared or trained. So you go from being a child to being subjected to manhood responsibilities or expectations without any training or any type of consistent support or whatever.

Mothers as nurturers and protectors. Although both nonresidential and residential fathers perceived mothers as permissive, a few residential fathers also described their son's mother as protectors, nurturers, or both. Warren stated, ". . . the mother–son relationship I think for centuries . . . has just been a close bond." Thomas stated, "[Mothers are] emotional, relational, they see side of things that fathers would not." These positive perspectives of their coparent seemed to balance some residential fathers' concerns about mothers' permissive nature.

Fathers' unique contributions. Fathers underscored their unique contributions to their son's development with regard to discipline, structure, and male role modeling. Contributions included engaging in play with their sons, managing the aggression that they view as a normal part of being a male, and teaching their sons "how to be a man," in a societal context in which Black males are often not viewed positively. In large part, these contributions were viewed as unreplicable by mothers. Lewis, a residential father, noted "a boy needs a man in his life." He explained further,

> . . . my wife couldn't teach my son or couldn't relate to it if my son came home and say, "They treat me different than they treat [Tasha] because they expect me to react a certain way because I'm a Black male . . .." There's fear factors, there's just, sometimes people still think that our minds don't work like theirs. . . . [that] we're inferior; or they still want to think that. So they don't give us those opportunities that they give our females or other White males or ethnic groups. I've seen it in the military; I've seen it out here in the private sector. And I don't think my wife could relate to that with him the way it would need to be done.

With regard to aggression, Nathan shared his philosophy,

> And to be honest . . . when it comes to a child and a father, a woman really can't raise a child unless he lets her . . .. Because a child as far [as] to a woman can get aggressive, but a strong father can bring that aggression right on down . . .

Key Coparenting Domains

This category includes two levels of subthemes. The first level includes two key coparenting domains: discipline and communication. Discipline consists of three subthemes: supportive behaviors, selective support, and compromise. Communication also consists of three subthemes: positive communication, selective communication, and avoidance of communication.

Discipline. Residential and some nonresidential fathers reported supportive coparenting behaviors by one or both parents. Many residential fathers noted differences between their son's mother and themselves regarding their approach to discipline; however, these differences did not necessarily cause conflict. Several, but not all, described themselves as more of a disciplinarian (i.e., they employed stricter punishment techniques, sometimes including physical discipline) than their son's mother. In contrast, mothers were more often described as using less severe approaches (e.g., talking, yelling, or using time out) to correct their son's behaviors, or as inconsistent or lacking in this area of parenting all together. Larry, a residential father stated, "I'm a[n] old school type dude. I don't do a whole bunch of talking. I only talk once . . . And that's where we get in disagreements right there; 'cause she's more of the talk, time-out type." Henry, a single residential father complained that his efforts to discipline his son

are undone when his children are visiting their mother because of differences in parenting styles. He stated, "And it was driving me crazy cause when they come back to me, it always had to be discipline, discipline, discipline, cause they would get off."

Supportive behaviors.   Fathers also described supportive co-parenting behaviors such as efforts at consistency between parents, shared rules, and common standards of parenting, despite the fathers' residence, marital status, or both. Overall, supportive coparenting experiences were primarily discussed in relation to discipline; however, at times, fathers also discussed such experiences with regard to other areas of child rearing such as decision making. A few residential (married and single) fathers indicated that they shared the responsibility of discipline with their son's mother and experienced supportive coparenting (e.g., "backing each other up") even if there were past conflicts or a romantic break-up. Martin stated, "If momma says you can't do this, it's the same over here, and vice versa. So they can't play us against each other." Patrick echoed the same sentiment, "we always had our spats and stuff, but, 'Hey man, that's still your mom; you still need to listen to her." Fred, who has "shared custody" with his son's mother stated, "I think it's important that he understand that even though she and I may not be together, but we are gonna try to be together on things that involve him."

Compromise.   Some residential fathers described conscious efforts to compromise in response to acknowledged parenting differences regarding values (e.g., responding to violence), discipline, or child rearing in general. As a part of their decision to compromise, fathers sometimes offered an assessment of the strengths and weakness of each parent. Michael, a residential father stated,

> So my wife is very good in her area, and that's why I back off. There's some things I'm not good as far as when it comes to [my son] and when it comes to the physical thing or the confrontations . . . I leave that to the wife.

Selective support.   Some fathers who experienced a romantic break-up with their son's mother (i.e., nonresidential and single residential) described a pattern of coparental exchanges that periodically involved supportive behaviors, often involved inconsistent, and sometimes involved undermining behaviors. These exchanges seemed to be related to conflict between the parents. Derrick, a nonresidential father, described repeated situations in which his son's mother calls on him to address their son's inappropriate behaviors (e.g., getting into trouble at school) and her pattern of inconsistency regarding follow through with the agreed upon consequences,

> That's what she do. She call me to lay down the law. Then when he get to doing it 2–3 days later, she breaks it. It don't be him, it be her; she breaks it. But she call me 'cause she know I'm a come. And once I fix the problem and she see the problem is fixed . . . Like he'll go to school and he'll do good for about 3 weeks, don't hear nothing, she'll go back doing the same thing until it's again.

Inconsistent and undermining behaviors extend into other areas of the coparenting relationship such as communication (discussed in detail later) and may, at times, impact the amount of time fathers spend with their son. Nathan, a nonresidential father with "shared custody" of his son recounted his early years of fathering when he didn't fully understand the child custody process or his rights as a father. He stated, "So a lot of times I was at her mercy, you know, 'Well you not gonna see your son.' I didn't see my son for weeks at a time." Derrick indicated that he is not able to spend as much time as he would like to with his son because of persistent conflict and undermining behaviors, which he attributes to his son's mother. He noted, ". . .I'm fussing with him and I'm trying to talk to him; but then he get on the phone and call his momma. He might cry then she talking about, 'I'm coming to get him.'"

Communication.   Both residential and nonresidential fathers reported positive communication experiences with their son's mother. Residential fathers only described positive communication experiences. On the other hand, some nonresidential fathers only reported positive communication experiences whereas others reported both positive and negative communication (i.e., selective communication).

Positive communication.   RJ emphasized the importance of communication and noted, "So it's a give and take. You have to be willing to listen and at the same time express your opinions . . .." Henry, a single residential father, noted the improved communication between himself and his son's mother as a result of their participation in their son's mental health treatment, "But it ended up being a good thing 'cause now me and his mom . . . we communicate better, we're on the same plane." Marvin noted, "She always calls me and lets me know what's going on . . ., or she put them on the phone . . .. She's good with that." Fred, a nonresidential father with "shared custody," encouraged his son to tell his mother and himself about his interests (e.g., sports). Reflecting on the communication between himself and his son's mother, Fred noted, "We don't always agree, but generally we can talk about and decide that we're gonna give it a shot."

Selective communication.   Some nonresidential fathers indicated that mothers shared information about their son, but only under particular circumstances such as special occasions (e.g., the child's birthday), when she wants the father to do or buy something, or when the son gets into serious trouble or "on the mother's nerves." This communication pattern appears to be closely related to "selective supportive behavior" with regard to discipline, as discussed previously. Derrick stated,

> So in other words the women, when it get to the point that they can't handle it, or the child fittin' go to jail, or . . . to get in trouble, then they want to call the fathers and tell the father. . . .

Derrick also noted, "And then when she get mad with him, she tell me stuff that she should have told me a month ago." Derrick also expressed a desire for his son's mother to call him with positive reports about their son as well as encourage the son to contact him under several other circumstances such as when the father is facing health issues or during holidays. Similarly, Roy who has "shared custody" remembered telling his son's mother, "I'm like, 'Yo, you calling me for this? But yet and still you couldn't call me for Father's Day and tell my kids to call me for Father's Day.' That hurt too." Selective communication sometimes heightened fathers' sense of loss of control and influence over their son's child rearing (e.g., discipline), the amount of time they spend with their son, and overall their contribution to their son's development. Fathers made statements such as, ". . . she like to have control of him, like she own him," "I have no control over her house," and "I was at her mercy." To counter their sense of lack of

control, some fathers reported doing things themselves (e.g., visiting school; learning about child custody laws) to obtain important information about their son's progress and their rights as a father.

Avoidance of communication. As a response to conflict, some nonresidential and single residential fathers reported that they tend to avoid communication with their son's mother, but not their son. Nathan, a nonresidential dad with a formal custody arrangement stated,

> I found it difficult to talk to her when it's something concerning, about him. It's always like she thinks I'm pointing the finger when I'm just trying to find out what's going on. So I found it best not to even, if it's gonna turn to that from me just asking a question, not to even bother with it.

Later in the interview, Nathan explained further

> Cause me, myself, I don't curse; but she would leave all kind of cursing messages everywhere. I mean it got to a point where after a while I had to cease all kind of communication with her because it wasn't going anywhere.

Residential Status

As noted in the descriptions of the themes earlier, many similarities existed between residential and nonresidential fathers, yet responses were sometimes nuanced by fathers' residential status. For example, residential fathers spoke of gender differences; however, those differences did not necessarily cause conflict. Residential fathers more so than nonresidential fathers also acknowledged the need for compromise and noted positive views of their son's mother (e.g., nurturer, protector).

Nonresidential fathers described more heterogeneous coparenting relationships. Some nonresidential fathers reported only collaborative experiences; however, others reported selective communication and selective support in the coparenting relationship. A few also reported notably high levels of coparental conflict (despite selective positive experiences), which was occasionally described as long-standing. Only single residential and nonresidential fathers reported avoiding communication when coparental conflict was high. A few recently separated or divorced fathers noted increasingly collaborative experiences during the period between their initial interview and their follow-up member check (i.e., participants' feedback regarding the findings).

Discussion

We explored coparenting practices and aspirations among biological, African American fathers of an at-risk preadolescent son. Our findings illustrate the ways in which some African American fathers describe and respond to gender differences in parenting and high levels of coparental conflicts (e.g., compromise; avoidance of communication, respectively), as well as fathers' perspectives of their unique contributions to their son's development. Given the importance of developing coparenting frameworks that incorporate diverse cultures, family systems, and fathers' perspectives, we suggest several areas for further analysis and inquiry.

Conceptual Framework of African American Fathers' Coparenting

Our preliminary conceptual framework depicting coparenting as described by fathers in the current sample draws upon coparenting, fathering, and gender literature, and represents a starting point from which theoretical conceptualizations can be further developed. Given the emphasis fathers placed on gender differences in parenting (e.g., mothers' permissiveness; fathers' ability to manage aggression), and the value of family, it is not surprising that when asked about coparenting experiences, fathers focused on discipline. The focus may also reflect the developmental stage or risk status of their son, and may be different than those identified by African American fathers of younger sons, or those not at-risk.

Fathers' claims regarding the permissiveness of mothers are supported by self-report and observational studies which document mothers' differential treatment of her children based on gender (Gryczkowski, Jordan, & Mercer, 2010; Mandara, Murray, Telesford, Varner, & Richman, 2012; Mandara, Varner, & Richman, 2010). It is also consistent with some African Americans' belief that mothers "raise" their daughters and "love" their sons (Mandara et al., 2010). This belief is further supported by research on African American families that demonstrates that mothers are less demanding of their sons and have lower expectations for their sons' participation in chores and academic achievement, compared with daughters (Mandara et al., 2012; Mandara et al., 2010). African American mothers' decreased levels of demands from and expectations of their sons was related to increased arguments between sons and mothers, and increased externalizing behaviors among later-born sons, compared with first-born sons and daughters (Mandara et al., 2010).

Fathers in the current sample expand Mandara and colleagues' (2012, 2010) findings by highlighting fathers' unique ability to counter this dynamic even when they do not reside with their son. Fathers' beliefs that boys are more likely to obey fathers than mothers, and that sons need fathers in their lives are consistent with findings from a qualitative study of Black single fathers (Coles, 2009). The current findings suggest this belief may be more widespread among fathers, as nonresidential and never-married fathers in the current sample also discussed this belief.

The current findings also provide insight into joint family management processes, which has been defined as parents' responsibility for the management of family interactions (Feinberg, 2003). This includes parents' communication and behavior, setting behavioral and emotional boundaries on the coparental relationship that exclude or include extended family members, and balancing broader family interactions (Feinberg, 2003). In the current study, family management is evidenced by residential fathers' description of their decisions to compromise with their son's mother based on their assessments of the strengths and weaknesses of each partner's parenting practices. Their management style may be influenced by their positive views of their son's mother (e.g., nurturer, protector). Family management is also evidenced by the "one big family" theme endorsed by some fathers. That is, some fathers noted that it was important to facilitate sibling interactions within extended family networks that include multiple children with more than one woman, and across multiple households. Such examples of fathers' efforts to facilitate the involvement of the other parent's interaction with the child and between siblings (Feinberg, 2003) are

important and can be included in measurements of fathers' efforts to manage family. Fathers' responses to conflict with their son's mother also provides some insight into (or sometimes evidence of) challenges related to) family management. Some fathers, consistent with previous literature, manage high levels of conflict by avoiding communication with their son's mother (Camara & Resnick, 1989). Occasionally these fathers appeared engage in parallel parenting (i.e., "at least moderate nonresident parent–child contact and little or no communication between former partners"; Amato, Kane, & James, 2011, p. 515), rather than coparenting per se.

Finally, fathers' responses to conflict also provide some insight into the constructs of supportive and undermining behavior, as described by Feinberg (2002). Conceptual questions have been raised regarding whether these constructs represent two separate yet related constructs, or rather two opposite poles of the same construct (Feinberg, 2003). Fathers in the current sample who reported high levels of coparental conflict often characterized it by the experience of both supportive and undermining behaviors, thereby supporting the notion that the two are separate yet related constructs.

Implications for Research and Prevention Interventions

Future research should be conducted with larger samples of nonresidential African American fathers to explore the nature and context of conflict, methods of coping, motivations for resolving conflict, and "turning points" in the coparenting relationship. It is also important to explore the effectiveness of conflict resolution strategies used by nonresidential fathers (e.g., clear communication and establishment of boundaries) and residential fathers in the current sample, (e.g., compromise, assessment of strengths and weaknesses), as well as identify additional management and coping strategies that may exist across diverse family systems.

The importance of extended family coparenting relationships, or nontraditional coparents, in African American families has been noted, particularly those between single mothers and both maternal grandmothers and fathers (Brody, Flor, Neubaum, Lewis, & Feiring, 1998; Dorsey et al., 2007; Forehand & Jones, 2003; Jones, Forehand, Dorsey, et al., 2005; Jones, Forehand, O'Connell, et al., 2005; Jones et al., 2007). Though beyond the focus of the current article, some fathers identified complex extended coparental networks that included at the least the following: (a) the father's current partner; (b) the father's coparental relationship(s) with the mother(s) of any additional children; (c) the son's mother's new partner(s) (i.e., boyfriends or husband); and (d) the father's residential, extended male family members (e.g., father or uncle). Fathers' identification of additional parental relationships expands our understanding of the complex network of extended family coparental relationships in African American families. It also raises important questions for future research such as, "How do additional coparenting relationships with significant others (e.g., new partners, other children's parents and so forth) influence each other?" Furthermore, it highlights the importance of distinguishing between adults in extended networks who do and do not have coparental decision making capabilities (McHale, Kuersten-Hogan, & Rao, 2004).

The current framework provides a basis for adapting family based prevention interventions that target at-risk, African American youth such that they appropriately incorporate fathers. Based on the wide spread endorsement of gender differences in parenting, we support Mandara and colleagues (2010) notion that intervention content should promote a balance between the nurturance and discipline sons receive from the coparental unit, regardless of the residential status of the father (or the mother). It may be important to normalize gender differences in parenting, and encourage fathers to evaluate the effectiveness of their own and their coparent's discipline, management, and coping styles. Fathers who function in more collaborative relationships might be able to offer examples and suggestions to those who experience more coparental conflict. Recently separated and divorced fathers may benefit from intervention content focused on normalizing the separation process and clarifying relationship boundaries (Sullivan, 2008). When appropriate and desired, fathers may explore ways to encourage positive interactions across blended families, or may be invited to participate, with their coparental system(s) in booster treatment sessions that supplement the prevention intervention.

Strengths and Limitations

The current study is limited by our use of a convenience sample of volunteer participants. As a result, the findings may not generalize to other fathers because of factors such as region, youths' risk status, income, and self-selection. Furthermore, the use of a convenience sample limits the application of grounded theory. Specifically, though the analysis was informed by grounded theory, there was limited ability to employ theoretical sampling techniques in which each participant would be selected based on the analysis of previous interviews. Despite this limitation, the current study provides evocative descriptions of fathers' values around family, their contributions to their son's healthy development, and their perspectives of their coparenting experiences. These descriptions are nuanced by fathers' residential and marital status, and rather than mother or child report, the findings are based on first-hand reports from African American fathers. These findings help to challenge negative perceptions of African American fathers and highlight modifiable factors (e.g., communication) relevant for prevention interventions targeting at-risk African American preadolescent males. The framework presented here represents a starting point from which theoretical conceptualizations can be further developed. This is a critical step toward the advancement of coparenting conceptualizations that incorporate diverse cultures, nontraditional family types, and fathers.

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Appendix

Sample Topic Guide Questions Related to Coparenting Experiences

1. What things (e.g., society, family, community, peers, self, other) affect your:
   a. Involvement in child rearing practices?
   b. Influence on your son's behavior?

2. How does your relationship with your son's mother influence:
   a. How you father your son?
   b. Your relationship with your son?
   c. His behavior?

3. In what ways do mothers encourage, discourage, or both fathers' involvement in parenting?

4. Are there areas of child rearing which you might handle different than his mother? If so, can you give me examples?
   a. Does your son respond the same way to you and his mother, or does he respond differently?

5. In what ways do other fathers or father figures (e.g., stepfathers, mother's significant other, grandfathers, uncles) discourage, encourage or both, your involvement with your son?