

# Involved-Vigilant Parenting and Socio-Emotional Well-being Among Black Youth: The Moderating Influence of Natural Mentoring Relationships

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**Abstract** Positive relationships with parents and nonparental adults have the potential to bolster Black adolescents' socio-emotional well-being. Though each type of intergenerational relationship has been linked to more positive youth outcomes, few studies have examined the interactive influences of parenting and natural mentoring relationships on the socio-emotional development of Black youth. In the current study, we examined associations between involved-vigilant parenting and the psychological well-being and social skills of Black early adolescents ( $n = 259$ ; 58 % female; mean age = 13.56,  $SD = .96$ ) across types of natural mentoring relationships. Using K-means cluster analysis, we identified two types of mentoring relationships (less connected and more connected) based on relationship length, involvement, closeness, and frequency of contact. Youth with more connected mentoring relationships ( $n = 123$ ) had higher psychological well-being and social skills than youth with no mentor ( $n = 64$ ) or less connected mentors ( $n = 72$ ). Youth without a natural mentor and youth with less connected mentors did not differ in their levels of social skills or psychological well-being. Structural equation modeling was conducted to determine if associations between

involved-vigilant parenting and youths' psychological well-being and social skills varied among youth with a more connected mentoring relationship in comparison to youth without a mentor or with a less connected mentor, controlling for participants' gender, age, school, and parental education. The positive associations between involved-vigilant parenting and adolescents' psychological well-being and social skills were weaker among adolescents with a more connected mentoring relationship in comparison to their peers without or with a less connected mentoring relationship. These results suggest that youth may be more strongly influenced by involved-vigilant parenting in the absence of a strongly connected natural mentoring relationship.

**Keywords** Parenting · Natural mentors · Black youth · Socio-emotional development · Early adolescents

## Introduction

The socio-emotional functioning of early adolescents has been of interest to researchers and practitioners due to the significant biological, cognitive, and relational changes they experience during this developmental time period (Roeser et al. 2000). Yet, the processes and practices that facilitate healthy socio-emotional development are understudied, particularly among Black youth. Socio-emotional functioning relates to both one's social skills, or ability to competently meet the demands of one's social environment, and psychological well-being, which includes feelings of self-worth, mastery, and purpose (Barbarin 1993; Roeser et al. 2000). Early adolescents with higher socio-emotional functioning have been found to have higher academic achievement (Elias and Haynes 2008), engage in

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fewer high risk behaviors (Hessler and Katz 2010), and have higher quality peer relationships (Roeser et al. 2000). Because of these links to positive outcomes, it is important to understand the factors that promote Black early adolescents' social skills and psychological functioning.

Many of the studies that have focused on Black youths' socio-emotional development have employed a deficit perspective, focusing on challenges facing Black youth and resulting negative outcomes (Garcia Coll et al. 1996; Nicolas et al. 2008). This perspective often paints all Black youth as "at-risk" and does not recognize the variation in experiences and social contexts that Black youth experience (Nicolas et al. 2008). Alternatively, examining the assets and strengths of Black youth, their families, and their communities may help researchers and practitioners understand the processes that lead to healthy development among Black youth in various contexts and help identify practices that facilitate positive outcomes (Lerner 2003; Nicolas et al. 2008).

Findings from previous research suggest that parenting and supportive relationships with nonparental adults may contribute to Black adolescents' socio-emotional well-being. Previously, researchers have found associations between involved-vigilant parenting and positive outcomes such as higher academic achievement and psychological well-being among Black youth (Berkel et al. 2009; Brody et al. 1999). In addition, researchers have found associations between relationships with natural mentors (i.e., supportive nonparental adults from youths' pre-existing social networks such as extended family, neighbors, or coaches) and more positive psychosocial outcomes among these youth (Hurd et al. 2012; Klaw and Rhodes 1995; Klaw et al. 2003; Zimmerman et al. 2002). Yet, studies examining associations between parenting, mentoring, and youth outcomes are rare and those studies that have been conducted have usually focused on formal mentoring relationships (i.e., mentoring relationships that form in the context of a formal mentoring program; Rhodes et al. 2000, 2005). Even fewer studies have examined the interactive influences of parenting and mentoring on youth outcomes (Soucy and Larose 2000). In the current study, we explored associations among involved-vigilant parenting, natural mentoring relationships, and Black youths' psychological well-being and social skills.

#### Ecological Influences on Socio-Emotional Development

This study is guided by Bronfenbrenner's ecological model of development (Bronfenbrenner 1986; Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006) and the integrative model of minority child development (Garcia Coll et al. 1996). Bronfenbrenner's ecological model of development states that

children are situated in multiple levels of context that can interact with each other to influence child development (Bronfenbrenner and Morris 2006). Many studies focus on the role of parenting as a proximal factor in child development, but the ecological model asserts that factors outside of the home such as kinship supports, childcare, mentoring relationships, and school settings can influence parenting, the home environment, and child development. These factors also may vary in their influence across youths' developmental stages. For instance, early adolescence is a sensitive developmental period due to the many changes that are common between the ages of 10 and 14, such as school transitions, pubertal development, and greater focus on peer relationships (Natsuaki et al. 2007; Roeser et al. 2000). Because adolescents begin to rely less on parents during this period, nonparental adults may have more influence on development than in previous stages of development (Rhodes and Roffman 2003). Thus, the influence of relationships with nonparental adults, such as natural mentors, may be increasingly relevant during this stage of development. Empirical inquiry into how these two types of important relationships (parental and nonparental) may interact to shape early adolescents' development is needed.

The integrative model of minority child development (Garcia Coll et al. 1996) builds from ecological models of development and suggests that there are various aspects of minority children's contexts that contribute to developmental competencies such as academic achievement and socio-emotional well-being. Many studies of ethnic and racial minority youth have relied on a deficit model that highlights risk factors in youths' environments and corresponding negative outcomes such as violence, substance use, and school dropout (Garcia Coll et al. 1996). Though the integrative model of minority child development identifies challenges that minority children experience such as racism, discrimination, and other forms of oppression due to their social location and the historical context of the United States, it also identifies factors that contribute positively to developmental competencies. According to the integrative model, parents of ethnic and racial minority youth may adapt their parenting in response to their children's contexts in efforts to promote the socio-emotional well-being of their children. Additionally, the integrative model suggests that ethnic minority families possess unique cultural assets or strengths that aid minority child development. For instance, African American families are more likely to have strong relationships with extended kin (Stewart 2007) and these kinship supports have been found to be protective against problem behaviors for Black youth (Taylor 2010). The integrative model also highlights the need for more research that focuses on normative development and the promotion of positive outcomes (as

opposed to the absence of negative outcomes) among ethnic minority youth (Garcia Coll et al. 1996). The influence of Black youths' social networks, including their relationships with parents and natural mentors, on the promotion of developmental competencies has been understudied. The current study attempts to address this gap in our knowledge base of the promotion of developmental competencies among Black early adolescents.

### Involved-Vigilant Parenting

In a number of studies of Black youth, involved-vigilant parenting has been found to be related to positive youth outcomes such as child competence, psychological adjustment (Brody et al. 2002), self-control (Brody et al. 2005), and academic achievement (Berkel et al. 2009). Involved-vigilant parenting also has been linked to lower levels of high risk and antisocial behavior among Black youth (Brody et al. 2006). This style of parenting is characterized by a combination of parental responsiveness and vigilance. Parental responsiveness includes joint problem solving among parents and adolescents and parents' use of inductive reasoning with their adolescent children. Positive problem solving involves parental warmth and mutual decision making between parents and adolescents regarding their adolescents' problems (Miller et al. 2010). Parents who listen, express concern over their adolescents' well-being, and engage their adolescents in discussions about personal and family issues have been found to promote a greater sense of autonomy, more socially competent decision-making, and greater assertiveness in their adolescent children (Miller et al. 2005, 2010).

Parental inductive reasoning refers to the practice of providing explanations about the purpose of parents' rules, routines, and punishments and the encouragement of self-reflection among their children (Le et al. 2008). Adolescents who are provided the opportunity to discuss their parents' viewpoints may be more likely to understand and internalize the norms and values of their parents, as well as use reason when faced with novel social situations (Brody et al. 2002; Le et al. 2008). Vigilance is the extent to which parents monitor their children and set and enforce boundaries to protect them from potential risks and dangers (Brody et al. 2002; Berkel et al. 2009). When employed alongside parental support and involvement, vigilance has been found to be predictive of the development of self-regulation skills among Black adolescents (Brody et al. 2002).

Many of the studies that have examined the relationship between involved-vigilant parenting and Black youth outcomes have been conducted with single mother-headed families living in rural contexts (Berkel et al. 2009; Brody et al. 2002, 2005). In the current study, we assessed the

potential effects of involved-vigilant parenting on the psychological well-being and social skills of metropolitan Black youth from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. In addition to investigating the role of parenting in the promotion of youths' developmental competencies, we explored how adolescents' relationships with natural mentors may alter parenting influences on youth outcomes.

### Natural Mentoring Relationships

To date, researchers have documented a fairly high prevalence of natural mentoring relationships among Black youth and adults in their lives (Rhodes et al. 1992; Zimmerman et al. 2002). As previously mentioned, this may be due to a greater emphasis on kinship support and intergenerational relationships in the Black community (Stewart 2007). Black adolescents have reported natural mentoring ties with extended family members such as grandparents, aunts, uncles, cousins, and older siblings, as well as non-familial adults such as godparents, family friends, teachers, coaches, and neighbors (Zimmerman et al. 2005). Researchers have found that the presence of these supportive ties may contribute to fewer negative outcomes in the face of risk (Hurd and Zimmerman 2010a, b; Kogan et al. 2011; Rhodes et al. 1992; Zimmerman et al. 2002) and promote more positive psychosocial outcomes among Black youth (Hurd et al. 2012; Klaw and Rhodes 1995; Klaw et al. 2003).

As the body of research investigating natural mentoring relationships among Black youth continues to expand, there remains a need for research that will advance our understanding of the ways in which characteristics of natural mentoring relationships and interactions between natural mentoring relationships and relationships with other important adults (e.g., parents) shape Black youths' outcomes. Findings of research on formal mentoring relationships and natural mentoring relationships with diverse groups of youth suggest that relationship duration, frequency of contact, and relational closeness may influence the effectiveness of mentoring relationships in promoting more positive youth outcomes (DuBois et al. 2002; DuBois and Silverthorn 2005; Grossman and Rhodes 2002; Klaw et al. 2003). Rhodes (2005) theorized that a strong interpersonal connection is a necessary requirement of effective mentoring relationships. Research has supported this notion, showing greater youth benefits in strongly connected relationships (DuBois and Silverthorn 2005; Kogan et al. 2011). In this study, we assessed relationship characteristics and used them to create mentoring relationship profiles. We then conducted comparisons in youth outcomes across relationship profiles and evaluated possible interactive effects of mentoring and parenting.

## Natural Mentoring Relationships and Involved-Vigilant Parenting

Although parenting and natural mentoring relationships have been found to influence Black youths' outcomes independently, few researchers have examined how parenting and mentoring may interact to influence Black youths' developmental competencies. Natural mentoring relationships may influence the association between parenting and adolescent outcomes. For instance, a relationship with a natural mentor could strengthen or weaken the association between parenting and adolescents' socio-emotional well-being. A relationship with a natural mentor who engages with an adolescent in ways similar to the adolescent's parent(s) could reinforce parental messages, leading to stronger associations between parenting and adolescent outcomes. Moreover, positive relationships with nonparental adults may teach youth how to have more positive interactions with their parents (Rhodes 2005). Consequently, youth with natural mentors may be more receptive to positive parenting, leading them to benefit more from it. Conversely, given that adolescence is often a time of decreased reliance on parents (Rhodes and Roffman 2003), it is possible that in the presence of a strong mentoring connection, the strength of the association between parenting and adolescent outcomes may decrease as the adolescent may rely more heavily on the mentoring relationship than the parental relationship (particularly if the parental relationship is strained). Also, it is possible that natural mentoring relationships are a supplementary influence on youth outcomes and in the absence of these additional relationships, youth are more strongly affected by parenting.

Though research in this area is scarce, there are some research findings that suggest that support from nonparental adults may influence the association between parenting and Black youths' psychosocial outcomes. Rhodes et al. (1992) found that Black, adolescent mothers with limited financial resources who had a relationship with a natural mentor may have been better able to benefit from support provided from their social networks than their counterparts without natural mentors. Specifically, among young mothers with natural mentors, total support and satisfaction with support from one's social network predicted fewer symptoms of depression. Yet, among mothers without natural mentors, there was no association between either support network utilization or network satisfaction and symptoms of depression. This finding suggests that relationships with natural mentors may increase the association between other supportive relationships and psychological outcomes. In another relevant study with a sample of rural, African American, male emerging adults from resource-poor backgrounds, Kogan and Brody (2010)

found that autonomy-promoting parenting (defined as high parental support, low parent-child conflict, and the provision of vocational coaching) predicted emerging adults' self-regulatory processes, such as perceived life chances, hope, and self-regulation. Support from a natural mentor moderated the association between autonomy promoting-parenting and emerging adults' self-regulatory practices such that higher levels of supportive mentoring offset the negative effect of lower levels of autonomy-promoting parenting on self-regulatory processes. Taken together, these studies suggest that natural mentoring relationships have the potential to affect parental influences on Black youths' outcomes. Of note, however, these studies have focused on specific "at-risk" Black samples. Thus, it is not clear the extent to which these interactive influences may be present in a diverse group of younger Black adolescents.

## Hypotheses

The current study investigated associations between positive parenting and youths' developmental competencies (i.e., social skills and psychological well-being) among a sample of socio-economically diverse, Black, early adolescents. This study also explored the potential of natural mentoring relationships to moderate these associations. Based on past research linking involved-vigilant parenting to adolescents' psychological well-being and social competence, we expected that adolescents who received higher levels of involved-vigilant parenting would have higher levels of social skills and psychological well-being. Given inconsistencies in findings in the few studies that have examined the potential of natural mentoring relationships to influence benefits derived from other supportive relationships in youths' lives, our moderation analyses were exploratory. Prior to assessing potential moderation effects, we created mentoring relationship profiles based on relationship characteristics and used these profiles to inform our moderation analyses. In all our analyses, we assessed potential influences of participants' gender, age, school, and caregiver education on participants' social skills and psychological well-being in an effort to isolate the hypothesized influences of parenting and mentoring on these outcomes (Fig. 1).

## Method

### Participants

The sample consisted of 259 early adolescents from three middle schools in a Midwestern metropolitan area. Two hundred and twenty participants self-identified as Black or

African American while 39 participants self-identified as biracial or multiracial with at least 1 Black parent. Participants were fairly evenly distributed across the 7–9th grades with 30.3 % of participants in 7th grade, 32.2 % in 8th grade, and 37.5 % in 9th grade. The adolescents ranged in age from 12 to 16 years old with an average age of 13.56 (SD = .96). Female adolescents comprised 58 % of the sample. On average, the highest level of education of participants' caregivers was a bachelor's degree.

### Procedure

Black adolescents were recruited for the study from three middle schools in a Midwestern metropolitan area during the 2010–2011 school year. The three schools were selected due to their differences in socioeconomic composition to provide the opportunity to examine Black youth from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. One school's racial composition was approximately 63 % White, 21 % Black, 8 % Asian, 7 % Hispanic, and 1 % Other, with 22 % of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. In this school, 46 % of the Black eligible students participated in the survey. The second school was more racially and socioeconomically diverse with approximately 46 % White students, 36 % Black students, 14 % Asian students and 4 % Other, and with 29 % of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. In this school, 26 % of the Black eligible students completed the survey. The third school had a predominately Black (93 %) racial composition, with 71 % of students eligible for free or reduced-price lunch. In this school, 16 % of the eligible Black students participated in the survey. Adolescents were recruited through information packets that were mailed to their families, fliers distributed during lunch periods and parent meetings. Caregivers gave consent by signing and returning a consent form before the survey administration and participating adolescents signed assent forms the day of survey administration. Survey administration was done at participants' schools during lunch or class periods. Students who participated were given a \$20 Visa gift card for taking an approximately 45 min online survey that asked questions about family life, natural mentors, and social and emotional functioning.

### Measures

#### *Involved-Vigilant Parenting*

Adolescents answered 13 items related to how much their caregiver engaged in involved-vigilant parenting including monitoring (5 items;  $\alpha = .66$ ; e.g., "In the course of a day, how often does your caregiver know where you are?"), inductive reasoning (4 items;  $\alpha = .62$ ; e.g., "How often

does your caregiver give reasons to you for his/her decisions?"), and problem solving (4 items;  $\alpha = .79$ ; e.g., "When you and your caregiver have a problem, how often can the two of you figure out how to deal with it?"). This measure was modified from an involved-vigilant parenting scale that has been used in previous research with African American families (Brody et al. 2001, 2003). All of the items were on a 4-point scale from 1 (never) to 4 (always). Cronbach's alpha for all items was .86. Each subscale was parceled into a composite variable by averaging. These composites were used as indicators of an involved-vigilant parenting latent variable in our analyses.

#### *Presence of a Natural Mentor*

In order to assess whether adolescents had a natural mentor, adolescents were asked, "Is there an important adult in your life other than your parents or a person who raised you who has taken a special interest in you and who you can go to for support and guidance?" Adolescents responded "yes" or "no."

#### *Natural Mentor Relationship Characteristics*

Youth who responded affirmatively to the above question were then asked a series of questions about their relationship with the identified adult (natural mentor). One item each was used to assess aspects of youths' relationships with the natural mentors including how the youth knew the adult (open-ended), relationship length ("How long has he/she been an important person in your life?"; 4-point scale ranging from 1 to 4: *less than a year* to *5 or more years*), closeness ("How close do you feel to him/her?"; 5-point scale ranging from 1 to 5: *not close at all* to *very close*), and frequency of contact ("How often do you see or talk to him/her?"; 7-point scale ranging from 1 to 7: *less than once a year* to *almost every day*). Mentor involvement was assessed through a 13-item checklist where adolescents checked the type of instrumentally and emotionally supportive activities that the mentor did for the youth such as help with schoolwork, help with relationship problems, talking about the adolescent's future, and listening. These items were summed to yield a total involvement item.

#### *Social Skills*

Adolescents' social skills were assessed using 39 items from the Social Skills Rating System—Student Form (Gresham and Elliott 1990) that includes the subscales of cooperation (9 items;  $\alpha = .76$ ; e.g., "I ask before using other people's things"), assertion (10 items;  $\alpha = .73$ ; e.g., "I start talks with classroom members"), empathy (10 items;  $\alpha = .79$ ; e.g., "I say nice things to others when they

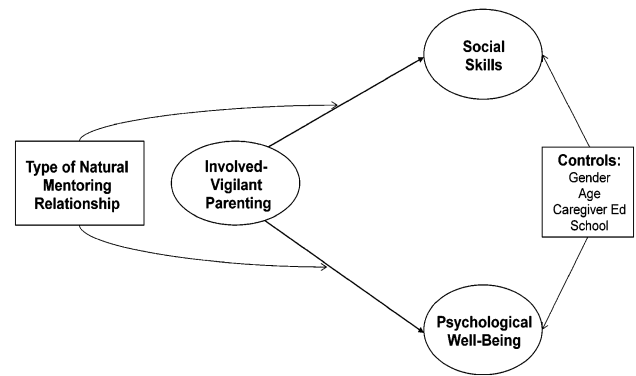
have done something well”), and self-control (10 items;  $\alpha = .69$ ; e.g., “I control my temper when people are angry with me”). Participants were asked to indicate how often they did each of the things listed. Response ratings were on a 3-point frequency scale from 0 (never) to 2 (very often). A composite variable was created for each subscale by summing items. These composites were used as indicators of a social skills latent factor in our structural model.

### Psychological Well-being

Psychological well-being was assessed using a 24-item modified version of the Ryff Scales of Psychological Well-being (Ryff 1989). The measure assesses several dimensions of psychological well-being including purpose in life (4 items;  $\alpha = .53$ ; e.g., “I have a sense of direction and purpose in life.”), positive relationships with others (4 items;  $\alpha = .50$ ; e.g., “I feel like I get a lot out of my friendships.”), personal growth (4 items;  $\alpha = .52$ ; e.g., “I am the kind of person who likes to give new things a try.”), autonomy (4 items;  $\alpha = .47$ ; e.g., “My decisions are not usually influenced by what everyone else is doing.”), environmental mastery (4 items;  $\alpha = .55$ ; e.g., “In general, I feel I am in charge of my life.”), and self-acceptance (4 items;  $\alpha = .68$ ; e.g., “I like most aspects of my personality.”). Adolescents were asked to indicate the extent to which they agreed or disagreed with each statement. Response options ranged from 1 (strongly disagree) to 5 (strongly agree). Some items were reverse coded so that higher scores on all items indicated higher psychological well-being. Cronbach’s alpha for these 24 psychological well-being items was .82. We created composite variables for each of the six subscales by averaging the subscale items. We used the composite variables as indicators of a psychological well-being latent factor in our structural model.

### Participant & Mentor Demographics

Adolescents provided their own age, gender, race/ethnicity, and caregivers’ educational attainment in the survey. For adolescents who reported multiple caregivers, we used the highest educational attainment of any of the caregivers in our analyses. Highest caregiver educational attainment ranged from junior high school or less to doctoral or professional degree (4.7 % high school incompleteness, 11.2 % high school diploma, 19.7 % some college, 31.6 % college diploma, 4.6 % some graduate school, 24.7 % master’s degree, and 3.5 % doctoral or professional degree). The mean highest caregiver educational attainment was a college diploma (5.11) with most participants having at least one caregiver who at the least had completed high school and at the most had completed some graduate school



**Fig. 1** Conceptual model for associations among parenting, participants’ social skills, and psychological well-being as a function of natural mentoring relationship status

(SD = 1.57). Participants also were asked to report demographic characteristics of their natural mentors including mentors’ gender, age (in general ranges such as 20–29 or 30–39 years old), race/ethnicity, and educational attainment.

### Analytic Plan

Missing data were imputed using the estimation maximization algorithm which replaces missing values with iterative maximum likelihood estimations (Schafer 1997). Prior to imputation, less than 8 % of the data were missing across study items. In order to identify natural mentoring relationship profiles among youth who identified a natural mentoring relationship, K-means cluster analyses were used. Mentor relationship characteristics that were used to create the profiles included relationship length, involvement, closeness, and frequency of contact. Latent variable structural equation modeling using Mplus 6 software (Muthén and Muthén 2010) was used to determine if involved-vigilant parenting predicted adolescents’ social skills and psychological well-being. In addition, multi-group analyses were incorporated to determine if associations between involved-vigilant parenting and adolescents’ social skills and psychological well-being differed among youth as a function of the type of natural mentoring relationship they had. Participants’ age, gender, highest caregiver educational attainment, and school were controlled for in structural equation models. The  $\chi^2$  statistic, comparative fit index (CFI), the Tucker Lewis Index (TLI), and the root-mean-square error of approximation (RMSEA) were used to assess the overall model fit. Improvements in the  $\chi^2$  statistic were used to compare the constrained and freed models to test for structural invariance across mentor relationship type in the multi-group analyses. In these analyses, we released the equality constraints one-by-one

to determine if freeing those parameters resulted in a significant reduction in the  $\chi^2$  value (when comparing nested models, a  $\chi^2$  reduction greater than 3.8 for the loss of 1 degree of freedom is significant at  $p < .05$ )

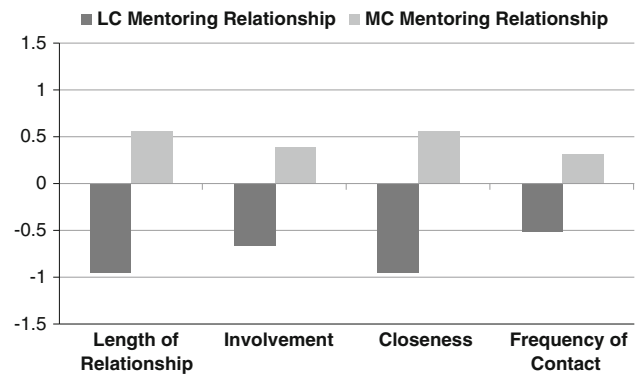
## Results

### Natural Mentors

Approximately three-fourths ( $n = 195$ ) of participants reported the presence of a natural mentor in their lives. Of these mentors, most (65 %;  $n = 126$ ) were related to participants (e.g., aunts, uncles, grandparents, older cousins). Non-familial mentors included family friends, church members, pastors, and coaches. Sixty-three percent of mentors were female and 61 % of participants identified a gender-matched natural mentor. Female participants were more likely to have a gender-matched natural mentor (71 %) than their male counterparts (48 %;  $\chi^2(1) = 10.36$ ,  $p < .01$ ). Eighty percent of mentors were Black or African American and an additional 8 % were bi- or multiracial with Black or African American lineage. Ten percent of mentors were 18–19 years old, 31 % were 20–29 years old, 13 % were 30–39 years old, and 38 % were 40 years old or older (8 % of participants with a mentor reported that they did not know the age of their mentor). According to participants' reports, 2 % of mentors had less than a high school diploma, 13 % had completed high school or a GED, 19 % had received some college or vocational training, 23 % completed college, and 15 % completed graduate or professional school after college (28 % of participants with a mentor reported that they did not know the highest educational attainment of their mentor). On average, participants reported that their mentor had been an important person in their lives for 3–4 years, that they saw their mentor about once a week, and that they felt quite close (4 on a scale of 1–5) to their mentors. Average reported mentor involvement also was high (10.73 out of 13,  $SD = 2.26$ ).

### Natural Mentoring Relationship Cluster Analysis

We standardized and cluster-analyzed the four mentoring relationship variables (i.e., relationship length, involvement, closeness, and frequency of contact) using a  $k$ -means approach to identify distinct mentoring relationship profiles. The  $k$ -means approach maximizes between-cluster differences and minimizes within-cluster variance (Hartigan 1975). We requested two-, three-, and four-cluster solutions. We decided to retain the two-cluster solution because this solution yielded results most consistent with mentoring theory and previous research (i.e., positive associations



**Fig. 2** Summary of natural mentoring profiles (standardized means). *LC* Less connected, *MC* more connected

between relationship duration, frequency of contact, and relational closeness). Further, the two-cluster solution allowed us to maintain sufficiently large cluster sizes for our analyses (the three- and four-cluster solutions each included a cluster with fewer than 15 participants). Figure 2 shows the standardized means for the two clusters. The first cluster ( $n = 72$ ) was characterized by shorter relationship length, lower involvement and closeness, and less frequent contact; consequently, we labeled this cluster *less connected*. The second cluster ( $n = 123$ ) was characterized by longer relationship length, greater involvement and closeness, and more frequent contact; accordingly, we labeled this cluster *more connected*. There was a greater representation of familial natural mentors in the *more connected* mentoring relationship cluster (72 %) in comparison to the *less connected* mentoring relationship cluster (53 %). Table 1 displays descriptive and comparative statistics across study variables for youth without a natural mentor ( $n = 64$ ), youth with a *less connected* mentoring relationship, and youth with a *more connected* mentoring relationship. Gender, age, and caregiver educational attainment were not associated with mentor group status. We also did not find differences in mentoring group status as a function of the school the participant attended ( $\chi^2(4) = 4.64$ , *ns*). Involved-vigilant parenting was higher among youth with a natural mentor in comparison to youth without a natural mentor. Youth with *more connected* mentoring relationships had higher social skills and psychological well-being than youth with no mentor or *less connected* mentors. Youth without a natural mentor and youth with *less connected* mentors did not differ in their levels of social skills or psychological well-being.

### Correlations and Measurement Model

Correlations among study variables are displayed separately as a function of mentor group membership in

**Table 1** Descriptive characteristics of natural mentoring relationships and participants as a function of mentor group status

Variable	No mentoring relationship <i>n</i> = 64	LC mentoring relationship <i>n</i> = 72	MC mentoring relationship <i>n</i> = 123	
Relationship length	n/a	2.56 (.98)	3.94 (.25)	$t(193) = -14.89, p < .01$
Involvement	n/a	9.22 (2.45)	11.62 (1.59)	$t(193) = -8.28, p < .01$
Closeness	n/a	3.71 (.72)	4.86 (.37)	$t(193) = -14.76, p < .01$
Frequency of contact	n/a	4.71 (1.6)	6 (1.30)	$t(193) = -6.10, p < .01$
Participant gender (% female)	64 %	58 %	55 %	$\chi^2(2) = 1.33, ns$
Participant age	13.67 (.82)	13.56 (.96)	13.5 (1.03)	$F(2, 256) = .72, ns$
Caregiver educational attainment	5.31 (1.48)	5.05 (1.58)	5.05 (1.62)	$F(2, 256) = .67, ns$
Involved-vigilant parenting	2.64 <sub>a</sub> (.51)	2.89 <sub>b</sub> (.49)	2.97 <sub>b</sub> (.51)	$F(2, 256) = 9.41, p < .01$
Social skills	51.09 <sub>a</sub> (10.55)	51.10 <sub>a</sub> (10.10)	56.30 <sub>b</sub> (9.56)	$F(2, 256) = 3.34, p < .05$
Psychological well-being	3.72 <sub>a</sub> (.43)	3.72 <sub>a</sub> (.54)	3.98 <sub>b</sub> (.49)	$F(2, 256) = 3.38, p < .05$

Means with differing subscripts differ significantly based on Tukey post hoc comparisons

LC Less connected, MC more connected

**Table 2** Correlations among study variables among youth without natural mentors (*n* = 64; bottom) and youth with less connected mentoring relationships (*n* = 72; top)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5	6
1. Involved-vigilant parenting	–	.58*	.41*	.08	.08	.08
2. Social skills	.56*	–	.56*	.22	.10	.15
3. Psychological well-being	.43*	.55*	–	.08	.09	–.03
4. Female	.13	.17	–.03	–	.14	.05
5. Age	–.07	–.09	.08	.02	–	.14
6. Caregiver educational attainment	–.01	.11	–.10	.11	–.01	–

\*  $p < .05$

**Table 3** Correlations among study variables among youth with more connected mentoring relationships (*n* = 123)

Variable	1	2	3	4	5
1. Involved-vigilant parenting	–				
2. Social skills	.30*	–			
3. Psychological well-being	.28*	.44*	–		
4. Female	.03	.03	–.11	–	
5. Age	–.15	.06	.01	.01	–
6. Caregiver educational attainment	.17	.14	.15	–.10	–.06

\*  $p < .05$

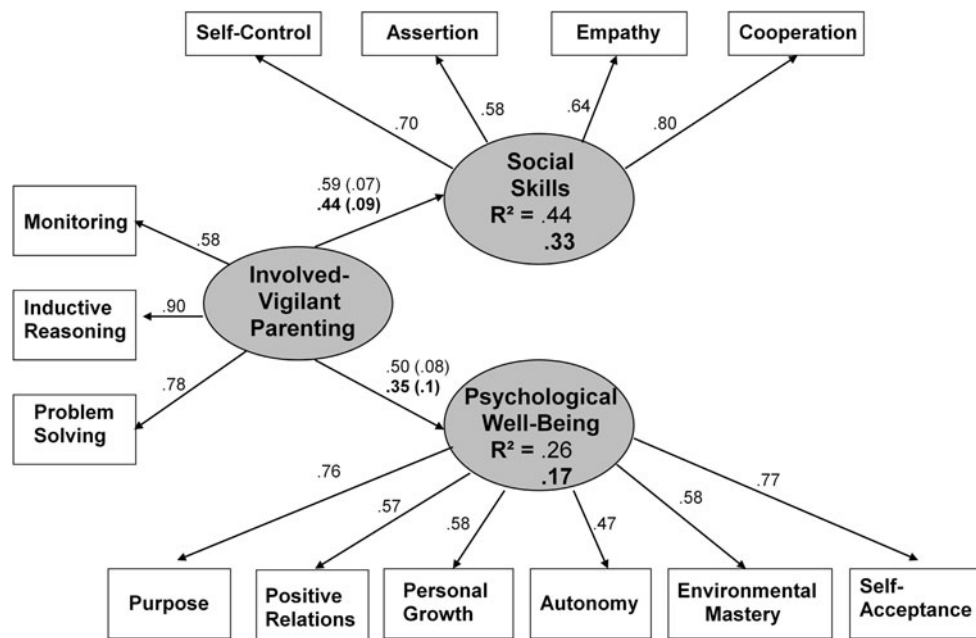
Tables 2 and 3. The measurement model indicated that the latent constructs fit the data well. The  $\chi^2$  value was statistically significant; however, the CFI and TLI were above .92 and the RMSEA was .05. Factor loadings for the indicators of latent factors ranged from .47 to .90.

## Structural Model

Other than a significant  $\chi^2$  statistic,  $\chi^2$  ( $df = 112$ ,  $n = 259$ ) = 203.36,  $p < .01$ , all other fit statistics indicated acceptable model fit to the data (CFI = .95, TLI = .93, RMSEA = .05). We found that involved-vigilant parenting predicted greater social skills ( $\beta = .55$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and psychological well-being ( $\beta = .45$ ,  $p < .01$ ) among participants. Caregiver educational attainment predicted greater social skills ( $\beta = .16$ ,  $p < .01$ ) and being female was associated with greater social skills ( $\beta = .12$ ,  $p < .05$ ). The disturbances of the latent factors for social skills and psychological well-being were related ( $r = .54$ ;  $p < .05$ ). Following the construction of this model, we proceeded to conduct our multi-group analyses to examine the potential moderating effects of mentoring relationships.

Given our smaller sample size, we were unable to examine each mentoring group (i.e., participants without mentors, participants with *less connected* mentoring relationships, and participants with *more connected* mentoring relationships) separately. Only 64 participants in our study did not have a natural mentoring relationship, so we were also unable to run analyses comparing youth without a natural mentor to those with a natural mentor. Yet given that youth without natural mentors and those with *less connected* natural mentoring relationship appeared similar based on their reported social skills and psychological well-being (see Table 1), we considered combining these youth into one group. Using composite variables for involved-vigilant parenting, social skills, and psychological well-being, we found that correlations (see Tables 2, 3) between parenting and youths' social skills and psychological well-being among youth without a natural mentor ( $r = .56$  and  $r = .43$ , respectively) and among youth with a *less connected* natural mentoring relationship ( $r = .58$





**Fig. 3** Standardized coefficients for model of involved-vigilant parenting effects on adolescents’ social skills and psychological well-being adjusted for participants’ gender, age, school, and caregiver education. All path coefficients in the model are significant at  $p < .05$ . Not shown in the model is the correlated disturbance variances between social skills and psychological well-being ( $r = .54$ ;  $p < .05$ ). Comparison between participants with a *more*

*connected* natural mentoring relationship (coefficients in bold) and participants with a *less connected* or no mentoring relationship (participants with a *less connected* or no mentoring relationship were combined to yield one group and the coefficients for participants in this group are in plain text).  $\chi^2(df = 258 \ n = 259) = 406.44$ ,  $p < .01$ ; CFI = .94, TLI = .92, RMSEA = .05 (95 % CI for RMSEA = .03, .06)

and  $r = .41$ , respectively) were comparable ( $z = -.17$ , *ns*, and  $z = .14$ , *ns*, respectively). The correlation between parenting and youths’ social skills among youth with a *more connected* mentoring relationship ( $r = .30$ ) was smaller in comparison to the correlation between these variables among youth without a natural mentor ( $z = 2.06$ ,  $p < .05$ ) and among youth with a *less connected* natural mentoring relationship ( $z = 2.34$ ,  $p < .05$ ). Thus, we proceeded with our multi-group analyses, comparing youth with a *more connected* natural mentoring relationship ( $n = 123$ ) to a combined group ( $n = 136$ ) of youth who either did not have a natural mentor or had a *less connected* natural mentoring relationship. These analyses allowed us to explore whether having a more connected mentoring relationship may influence the extent to which involved-vigilant parenting influenced youth outcomes.

We proceeded by fitting the covariance matrices of both groups simultaneously to the same model. We constrained the factor loadings, paths, and covariances of the two groups to be equal. Our model achieved adequate fit [ $\chi^2(df = 260 \ n = 259) = 415.87$ ,  $p < .05$ , CFI = .94, TLI = .92, RMSEA = .05] indicating that our theoretical model was applicable for both groups. In an effort to achieve improved model fit, we released the equality constraints on the paths from involved-vigilant parenting to youths’ social skills and psychological well-being.

Releasing these constraints allowed us to determine whether there were differences in the associations between these factors by mentoring group. We released the constraints individually and each path we released resulted in a statistically significant reduction in the Chi-square value of the model, indicating that there were differences in path sizes between the two groups. Our final model with the equality constraints released for these two paths reflected improved model fit [ $\chi^2(df = 258 \ n = 259) = 406.44$ ,  $p < .05$ , CFI = .94, TLI = .92, RMSEA = .05]. Although all of the path sizes remained statistically significant, we found that the associations between involved-vigilant parenting and youths’ social skills and psychological well-being were weaker among youth with *more connected* natural mentoring relationships in comparison to their counterparts without a mentor or with *less connected* natural mentoring relationships (see Fig. 3).

**Discussion**

Informed by Bronfenbrenner’s (1986) ecological model and the integrative model of minority child development (Garcia Coll et al. 1996), this study aimed to identify how important relationships with parents and nonparental adults may contribute to developmental competencies among

Black youth. This study was unique in its focus on the promotion of positive outcomes among a socio-economically diverse sample of Black early adolescents. Further, this was one of the first studies to explore the potential of natural mentoring relationships to moderate associations between parenting and youths' socio-emotional well-being.

Consistent with findings from previous research with Black youth, we found that most study participants reported the presence of a natural mentor in their lives. In addition, most of these natural mentors were members of adolescents' extended kin networks (Johnson and Staples 2005; Stewart 2007). Also, most mentors and mentees were matched by race and gender. These findings suggest that youth may gravitate toward adults who share their race and gender when these adults are available and that sharing important demographic characteristics may facilitate mentoring ties. We also found that youth with natural mentoring relationships reported greater levels of involved-vigilant parenting than their counterparts without mentoring relationships. Given that most natural mentoring relationships had existed for at least 1 year, this finding may reflect improved parent-adolescent relationships as a result of adolescents' positive relationships with their mentors (Rhodes 2005). Natural mentoring relationships may help reduce caregiver burden, allowing for more positive parenting. Further, natural mentors may help early adolescents to accurately perceive positive parenting or to elicit more positive parenting from their parents. Alternatively, youth with parents who implement more involved-vigilant parenting may be more likely to develop natural mentoring relationships. This may be due to increased parental efforts to foster and encourage the development of other supportive relationships in their adolescent children's lives or the promotion of improved interpersonal skills needed to develop these relationships with nonparental adults among their adolescent children. Moreover, youth with more securely attached parental relationships may have the needed foundation from which to form new relationships with nonparental adults (Downey et al. 1998; Zimmerman et al. 2005).

Of note, our findings indicated variability in the strength of natural mentoring ties. Specifically, our cluster analyses yielded two distinct mentoring relationship profiles characterized by the level of connectedness of the relationship. *More connected* mentoring relationships demonstrated longer relationship duration, more frequent contact, and greater involvement and closeness. In comparison to their peers with *less connected* or without natural mentoring relationships, youth with *more connected* mentoring relationships had higher social skills and psychological well-being. Youth with less connected mentoring relationships did not differ from youth without natural mentors in

average social skills or psychological well-being. These findings are consistent with previous research underscoring the role of mentoring relationship characteristics in shaping youth outcomes (DuBois et al. 2002; DuBois and Silverthorn 2005; Grossman and Rhodes 2002; Klaw et al. 2003) and support Rhodes' (2005) contention that a strong interpersonal connection is needed in order for mentoring relationships to confer benefits to youth.

We also found that higher levels of involved-vigilant parenting were related to greater social skills and psychological well-being among participants. This finding adds to a growing body of work implicating the role of positive parenting in promoting Black youths' positive development (Berkel et al. 2009; Brody et al. 2002, 2005). Our results suggest that by monitoring their adolescent children's whereabouts, explaining the purpose of rules, routines, and punishments, and engaging in mutual problem solving with their adolescent children, parents may be teaching their children key skills such as self-regulation, healthy self-expression, perspective-taking, and the ability to cooperate with others. These positive parenting factors also appear to influence Black early adolescents' self-perceptions, interpersonal relationships, sense of purpose, autonomy, and self-efficacy.

Though involved-vigilant parenting was associated positively with youths' psychosocial outcomes among all study youth, the strength of these associations were weaker among youth with strongly connected natural mentoring ties. Thus, involved-vigilant parenting was less influential on the social skills and psychological well-being of adolescents with *more connected* natural mentoring relationships. This finding coupled with our finding of elevated levels of social skills and psychological well-being among youth with *more connected* natural mentoring relationships may indicate that parents and natural mentors share the responsibility of positively socializing Black youth. We may see weaker ties between parenting and youth outcomes because youth with strong natural mentoring ties are also able to rely on their natural mentors for socialization related to their social and psychological development. Further, natural mentoring relationships may promote increased autonomy among Black youth which may be reflected in diminished associations between parenting and youth outcomes. In contrast, Black youth without natural mentors or with less strongly connected natural mentoring relationships, may be much more reliant on their parents for socialization and guidance and consequently, more strongly influenced by parenting. Therefore, though beneficial for all youth, positive parenting may be exceedingly important for youth who lack strongly connected, supportive ties to nonparental adults in their extended families or larger communities.

## Study Limitations and Future Directions

There were several limitations to the current study. First, because this study is cross-sectional, we cannot be certain of the directions of causality among parenting, mentoring, and adolescents' socio-emotional well-being. It is possible, for example, that adolescents' developmental competencies could influence parenting and natural mentoring ties. Parents and mentors may be more involved with adolescents they perceive as more interpersonally competent or psychologically healthy (Grossman and Rhodes 2002). Future studies that incorporate a longitudinal design will allow for further analysis of potential transactional effects that may emerge over time as youth and adults mutually influence each other. Second, additional measures of natural mentoring and parenting could help to explain more about the ways in which these factors, individually and in conjunction with each other, influence youth outcomes. In particular, measures of natural mentoring practices that correspond to parenting items may be helpful in comparing the relative influences of these important adults on adolescents' outcomes as well as exploring their combined or interactive effects (Kogan and Brody 2010). Future studies also could assess additional parenting factors that may be related to Black adolescents' socio-emotional well-being such as parental psychological distress (McLoyd 1990), disciplinary efficacy (Mistry et al. 2002), and autonomy granting (Allen et al. 2002). Allowing adolescents to report more than one natural mentor in future studies could also provide more information about adolescents' support networks. It is possible that different natural mentors fulfill varying roles in an adolescents' life or that the associations among parenting, natural mentor relationships, and socio-emotional well-being differ between adolescents with multiple mentors and adolescents with one natural mentor. Third, this study was reliant on data from one source. Future studies that incorporate data from parents and natural mentors will help to address issues of shared method variance. Lastly, findings from the current study may not generalize to Black youth in non-metropolitan contexts. Future research should investigate natural mentoring and parenting influences on Black adolescents' socio-emotional well-being across diverse contexts. Future research is also needed to replicate the natural mentoring relationship clusters found in the present study.

## Conclusion

Our findings underscore the role of involved-vigilant parenting in positively shaping Black youths' development. Results of the current study also suggest that relationships with natural mentors may foster more positive parent-adolescent relationships. These findings suggest that Black

youth may benefit from interventions aimed at supporting involved-vigilant parenting among their parents. One way in which positive parenting may be supported may be through the presence of other supportive adults in youths' lives. Of youth in the current study, youth with strongly connected natural mentoring relationships demonstrated the greatest socio-emotional well-being and were the least strongly influenced by parenting. Collectively, these findings indicate that both parents and youth may benefit from the presence of strongly connected natural mentoring relationships. These relationships may help youth to become more autonomous and less reliant on their parents, while simultaneously promoting positive socio-emotional development. Of note, these benefits were only present among youth with *more connected* natural mentoring relationships suggesting that the degree of connectedness may determine the extent to which natural mentoring relationships contribute to more positive youth outcomes. Thus, in addition to intervention efforts aimed at promoting natural mentoring relationships among Black youth, efforts aimed at strengthening natural mentoring bonds among youth in less strongly connected mentoring relationships may be worthwhile. The formation of strong natural mentoring bonds among Black early adolescents may be facilitated by school and organizational policies and practices that encourage the involvement of other significant adults in youths' lives. The more opportunities youth have to interact with important nonparental adults in their families and communities, the greater their chances of developing strong natural mentoring bonds that have the potential to positively affect their socio-emotional development.

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