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Friend Support and the Parenting Behavior of Latina Adolescent Mothers:

The Moderating Role of Maternal Age

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**Abstract**

The current study examined social support from friends and its relations to parenting adjustment in a sample of young Latina mothers and their 18 month-old children (*N*=168). Hierarchical multiple regression analyses tested friend social support types (emotional, socializing, child care) as differential predictors of maternal behavior (sensitivity, cognitive growth fostering, detachment) displayed during mother-child play interactions. To consider the role of maternal development, the moderating role of maternal age on these associations was tested. The relations between friend emotional and child care support and parenting were moderated by maternal age. Emotional support was related to the use of more growth-fostering parenting behaviors for older (≥ 19.5 yrs.), but not for younger Latina mothers. Child care assistance from friends was related to the display of more detachment and less cognitive growth fostering behaviors among the younger (≤ 18.7 yrs.) mothers only. In contrast, regardless of age, mothers indicating greater friend socializing support displayed less cognitive growth fostering behaviors. These findings emphasize the importance of assessing the types of friend support as separate measures in an ecological context that takes into account mothers’ developmental characteristics.

Social support and parenting research with adolescent mothers has principally focused on African American (AA) and European American (EA) mothers and on support provided by the adolescents’ mothers (Grau, Wilson, Weller, Castellanos, & Duran, 2012). Consequently, there are gaps in the literature regarding parenting by Latina adolescent mothers and the protective role of support provided by other members of the mothers’ social networks. Identifying protective factors for young mothers of Latina origin is especially important given that they have the highest teen birthrate in the U.S. (Hamilton, Martin, Osterman, Curtin, & Matthews, 2015).

Risk factors related to adolescent parenting include living in impoverished neighborhoods and low educational attainment (Hoffman & Maynard, 2008). Young mothers also report higher depressive symptoms than non-parenting peers and older mothers, and these elevated rates continue into emerging and middle adulthood (Mollborn & Morningstar, 2009). They are also exhibit less desirable parenting behaviors (e.g., less sensitive and more hostile behavior than adult mothers (Ensor & Hughes, 2010; Mollborn & Dennis, 2012). Moreover, findings link these parenting difficulties to compromised child development starting in the second year of life (Grau, Duran, Castellanos, Smith, Silberman, & Wood, 2015; Jahromi, Guimond, Umaña-Taylor, Updegraff, & Toomey, 2014). Despite these negative repercussions, the unique set of factors that can facilitate Latina adolescent mothers’ adjustment despite their disadvantaged conditions remain largely unknown. Using a developmental lens, the current study sought to further the understanding of protective factors for adolescent parenting by examining the contributions of friend support to the quality of young mothers’ parenting behaviors.

Social support is an important predictor of parenting adjustment (i.e., exchange of emotional, social, and tangible resources; Contreras, 2004; Nath, Borkowski, Whitman, & Schellenbach, 1991). To understand how support may more specifically influence the parenting of adolescent mothers, we drew from Contreras and collaborators’ (Contreras, Narang, Ikhlas, & Teichman, 2002) model of Latina adolescent parenting, which integrates the developmental, cultural, and socio-demographic factors that contribute to the ecological context of these young mothers. Within this model, the mother’s developmental age is thought to influence the role of social support on parenting in at least two important ways. First, age shapes the relative importance of the different sources of support that are available to or are sought out by mothers. Adolescence is a period of identity exploration, when individuals venture out of the family sphere to socialize with friends (Arnett, 2015; Steinberg & Morris, 2001). The increasingly important valuation of friendship over family support as adolescents mature, as well as the meaningful social and emotional developmental opportunities presented within those friendships (e.g., prosocial development), have been well-documented in the literature (Arnett, 2015).

Second, given their age, young mothers are faced with the divergent developmental goals of adolescence and parenthood (Contreras et al., 2002), and the extent to which they engage in meeting adult and/or adolescent goals likely impacts their parenting competence. For young mothers, focus on identity exploration may be detrimental to their developing parenting skills, while focus on parenting may limit identity exploration and may even foster social isolation (Contreras et al., 2002).

Thus, the young mothers’ developmental level likely influences both the sources and types of support that they seek and how support influences their adjustment. Friends constitute a developmentally salient source of support, with the potential to influence the adjustment of young mothers. Importantly, their contributions need to be studied considering the types of support that are received, the developmental level of the mother, and the specific outcomes that are assessed (Contreras et al., 2002). Although some research supports the role of friend support, the small available literature lacks a developmental approach and yielded mixed results.

Although adolescent mothers identify their own mothers and partners as the most common providers of support in their networks, evidence suggests that their friends are also a considerable source of support (Crase, Hockaday, & Cooper McCarville, 2007; Devereux, Weigel, Ballard-Reisch, Leigh, & Cahoon, 2009; Voight, Hans, & Bernstein, 1996). In Voight and colleagues’ (1996) study of AA adolescent mothers with one-year-old toddlers, friends were the chief providers of social participation (76%) and intimate interactions (52%). Similarly, Mexican American and EA adolescent mothers reported that they frequently used maintaining friendships and making new friends as coping behaviors when facing problem experiences (Codega, Pasley, & Kreutzer, 1990).Other research with AA and EA adolescent mothers suggests the importance of specific types of friend support. Friends seem to provide more emotional support and positive feedback than tangible or childcare assistance and are perceived by mothers to be an important source of emotional and socializing support (Crase et. al, 2007; Richardson, Barbour, & Bubenzer, 1991; 1995; Voight et al., 1996). Nonetheless, little is known about the characteristics of friends in the social network of young mothers, and even less about the friend network for young mothers of Latina origin.

 In regard to the impact of friend support, **t**he literature suggests that the support of friends has a varied impact on the psychological adjustment of adolescent mothers. Although a few studies with AA and EA adolescents found that higher friend support were related to greater psychological distress (Thompson & Peebles-Wilkins, 1992), other studies found a relation to less emotional and life stress (Leadbeater & Linares, 1992) and higher life satisfaction (Crnic & Greenberg, 1987; Unger & Wandersman, 1985). Previous research also indicates a relation between friend support and lower stress related to the parenting role (Richardson et al., 1995; Unger & Wandersman, 1985).

The three studies with adolescent mothers that used behavioral indices of parenting to explore the effect of friend support also yielded mixed results. While one study found that measures of friend support were unrelated to maternal behaviors in a mixed-age sample of EA mothers (Crnic, Greenberg, Ragozin, Robinson, & Basham’s, 1983), another study of British, White mothers found that a friend support composite was positively related to maternal sensitivity and negatively related to less competent parenting (Ensor & Hughes, 2010).

Finally, in a sample of AA adolescent mothers, Voight and colleagues (1996) found that the number of friend support types was unrelated to maternal behavior. However, the number of friends in the network related positively to desirable parenting behavior. The authors suggested that friends may provide emotional, positive support without the conflict that is inherent to familial or romantic relationships.

Given that the above studies used different support measures, it is difficult to discern a pattern in how friend support relates to maternal behaviors. The studies that measured parenting through observed maternal behaviors examined friend support using a composite or a sum of support types. However, the effect of friend support may differ for adolescent mothers based on the type of support provided (Contreras et al., 2002). In their literature review, Nath and colleagues (1991) suggested that the type of support that is most useful to adolescent mothers may depend on the needs created by the stressors they face, along with the characteristics of the population. For instance, the distinctive closeness and intimacy inherent in emotional friend support may help young mothers cope with the demands of parenting and thus translate into more optimal parenting. Socializing and child care support from friends may meet tangible needs but may not provide mothers the opportunities to learn and develop parenting skills.

The main goal of the current study was to examine the protective role of friend support for the parenting of Latina adolescent mothers. Given the need to identify protective factors operating early in development, we focused on the second postpartum year. In order to delineate the potentially differing effects of friend support, we focused on friend emotional support, socializing support, and child care assistance. We examined support utilized in the last month, given research indicating that enacted support, (i.e., amount of support received from others in the recent past) may be most relevant for individuals parenting in adverse, stressful conditions (Collins, Dunkel-Schetter, Lobel, & Scrimshaw, 1993) and for ease of translation to support interventions (Rini, Dunkel Schetter, Hobel, Glynn, & Sandman, 2006). Following the parenting literature (NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2001), we focused on behaviors with demonstrated relations to child development (i.e., sensitivity, positive affect, cognitive stimulation, repertoire of behaviors, and detachment) and coded them from observations of mother-child play. We tested whether specific types of friend support (i.e., emotional, socializing, and child care) had differential relations to the behaviors displayed by mothers, and if these relations were moderated by maternal age. To understand the relative contribution of friend, versus other sources of support, we tested these associations controlling for the support received from all other providers in the mothers’ network. We expected that higher levels of friend emotional support would be associated with more optimal parenting regardless of maternal age. However, we expected the effects of friend socializing and child care assistance to differ based on maternal age, with these types of support being associated with more competent behaviors for older mothers, and to less competent parenting for younger mothers.

In light of the scarcity of studies that explore the support networks of young Latina mothers, a complementary goal was to provide descriptive information on the extent of mothers’ friend networks within their cultural context. Thus, we tested differences in support between US-born and immigrant mothers. Given that Latina adolescent mothers report more family support and less outside support than EA and AA adolescent mothers (Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orosco, 1995), we expected that US-born mothers would report having more friends in their network and receiving more support from them than immigrant mothers.

**Method**

**Participants**

The participants of this study were 168 Latina adolescent mothers and their toddlers who participated when the children were 18 months old.[[1]](#footnote-1) The mean age of the mothers was 17.94 years (SD = 1.32; range: 14.25-19.92) at the time of the child’s birth; the mean age at the time of the study was 19.5 years (SD = 1.33; range: 15.76 - 21.55). Mothers were predominantly of Puerto Rican origin (81.2%; 7.1% Mexican; 10.8% Central and South American origins). The majority of mothers (88.1%) reported receiving some form 45.24% were born outside the mainland of government assistance. At the time of interview, 32.1% of mothers reported completing high school or some type of higher level education, while 58.4% of mothers had completed 9th to 12th grade, and 9.5% had not completed ninth grade. However, during the interview, 26.2% of mothers reported continuing to attend school full-time or part-time, and 41.7% reported being employed full-time or part time. The mean age of toddlers (54.8male**)** was 18.21 months(SD = .96; range: 15.94 **–** 20.79) at the time of the home visit. The majority of children were the only or first child (84.5%). Over 92% of them were born in the mainland US.

**Procedure**

 The study was conducted following procedures approved by two Institutional Review Boards. Participants were primarily (78.2%) recruited in-person from pediatric clinics serving low-income Latino neighborhoods in a large Midwestern city. The participation rate was 70.5%. Two female, at least one of whom was bilingual, conducted home visits in the participants’ preferred language (70.6% English; 29.4% Spanish). The researchers obtained informed consent from the participant (and a parent or guardian if she was under 18 years of age), videotaped the mother interacting with the child and conducted computer-assisted interviews

**Measures**

**Social Support.**The Social Support Network Questionnaire (SSNQ), a modified version of the Arizona Social Support Interview Schedule (ASSIS) (Barrera, 1981; Gee & Rhodes, 2007) was used to assess overall social support and the three types of friend support of interest in this study. Participants nominated persons they perceived as available to provide emotional (talking about something personal or private), socializing (getting together to have fun or relax), and child care (helping take care of child) support. For each person nominated, the mother was asked to categorize the type of relationship (e.g., friend, mother, partner) and report the amount of support received from that person in the last month, on a scale of 0-‘Never,’ 1-‘Once or twice this month,’ 2-‘About once a week,’ and 3-‘More than once a week.’ The SSNQ has been used to assess overall network support and support from different network members in samples of AA and Latina adolescent mothers (Gee & Rhodes, 2007), and adequate reliability has been found with samples of English- and Spanish-speaking Latina adolescent mothers (Contreras, 2004).

 ***Friend support****.* Four friend support variables were derived: Overall friend support (total amount of support received from friends), and the total amount of emotional, socializing, and child care support received from friends during the last month. Given that socializing interactions with friends likely include a component of emotional support, to better index the amount of purely socializing interactions, the final socializing support variable was derived by subtracting the frequency of emotional support from that of socializing support received from friends. The majority of mothers (82%) did not report help with child care from friends in the past month, and the amount of child care assistance variable was mildly skewed and kurtoted. Thus, this variable was dichotomized to reflect whether or not mothers received any child care assistance.

***Total network support****.* Four parallel support variables were created to reflect support received from all network members, excluding friends. The overall network support variable was calculated by summing the total amount of support received by the mother. The network emotional, socializing, and child care support variables were calculated by summing the amount of each type of support received from network members.

**Maternal Behavior***.* Maternal behaviors were assessed during a five-minute videotaped task of mother-child play without toys. The episode was coded for maternal sensitivity, positive affect, detachment, cognitive stimulation, and repertoire using five 9-point scales. The sensitivity, positive affect, and repertoire scales were derived from scales used by Isabella (1993) and adapted for the assessment of behavior among young Latina mothers (Contreras, Mangelsdorf, Rhodes, Diener, & Brunson, 1999). The detachment and cognitive stimulation scales were based on scales used by The NICHD Study of Early Child Care (see NICHD Early Child Care Research Network, 2001). These scales were adapted from 5-point to 9-point scales, and calibrated for the current sample and task. Coders overlapped in approximately 25% of the observations (n=46) to assess agreement and achieved sufficient inter-rater reliability for the five scales. Sensitivity assessed the timing and appropriateness of the mothers’ responses to their children’s cues (*ICC*=.70). Positive affect was the frequency and intensity of maternal warm regard (e.g. smiling, kissing, positive vocal tone; ICC=.69). Detachment was measured by the extent of emotional disengagement, under-involvement, and lack of monitoring of the child (ICC=.67). Cognitive Stimulation was the frequency and quality of teaching activities with the child (ICC=.80). Finally, repertoire assessed the number and types of different approaches or activities used to engage the child (ICC=.81).

***Derivation of composites****.* Given conceptual considerations and the pattern of intercorrelations, sensitivity and positive affect were averaged to create a maternal sensitivity composite (*r* = .66), such that higher values indicated more sensitive and affectively positive behavior. Similarly, cognitive stimulation and repertoire (*r* = .82) were averaged to create the cognitive growth-fostering behavior composite, with higher values indicating a higher frequency and variety of growth-promoting activities. The detachment scale was less strongly correlated with the other scales (*r* range= - .34 to -.59) and was left uncombined, with higher values indicated more detachment. Thus, three maternal behavior variables were used in the analyses: Maternal sensitivity, cognitive growth-fostering behavior, and detachment.

**Results**

**Overview of Analysis**

 To address the descriptive goal of the study, we first provide information about mother-reported friend characteristics and support, and their relations to nativity. Analyses to address the main goal of the study are reported next, starting with preliminary bivariate correlations testing whether control variables should be included in subsequent analyses. Finally, separate hierarchical multiple regression analyses assessed the associations of friend support types and their interactions with maternal age on maternal sensitivity, cognitive growth-fostering behavior, and detachment, respectively. All regressions controlled for the corresponding type of support received from all other members in the mothers’ networks. We proved significant interactions using simple slopes analyses using centered variables (Aiken & West, 1991). We also conducted region of significance analyses using procedures by Fraley (Roisman, Newman, Fraley, Haltigan, Groh, & Haydon, 2012), to identify the specific age ranges for which friend support predicted maternal behavior.

**Describing Friend characteristics and Support**

One hundred and four mothers nominated at least one friend (61.9%). Of these mothers, 58 (55.8%) nominated only one friend, 25 (24%) nominated two friends, 16 (15.4) nominated three friends, and five mothers (4.8%) nominated four or five friends. In all, mothers nominated 178 friends. The mean age of mothers’ friends was 22.3 years (*SD*=5.11) and it was significantly positively correlated with the mothers’ own age (*r* = .21, *p <* .05). Friends were mostly females who resided relatively close to the mothers and talked with them daily. Socializing was the most frequent type of support received from friends at 55%; 39% of mothers reported receiving emotional support, while only 18% of mothers reported receiving child care assistance.

 **Nativity status.** The difference in number of friends by nativity only approached significance (*t*(166)=-1.88, *p* = .062), with mothers who were born outside the mainland (immigrants; N = 76) reporting slightly fewer friends (*M*=.88, *SD*=1.13) than US-born mothers (*M*=1.21, *SD*=1.11). Nonetheless, immigrant mothers reported significantly less overall friend support, *t*(166)=-2.33, *p* = .02 than US-Born mothers (*M*=4.76, *SD*=7.86 vs. *M*=7.89, *SD*=9.28). Cohen’s effect size(1988; *d*=.36) suggested that practical significance was small to moderate. Parallel *analyses* for each type of support indicated that immigrant mothers (*M=*.74, *SD*=1.54) reported significantly less emotional support, *t*(163.21)= -2.99, *p* = .003, than women born in the U.S. (*M*=1.59*, SD*=2.14*)*. Cohen’s effect size (*d*=.46) indicated that practical significance was medium. There were no significant differences by nativity status in socializing support, *t*(166)= -.66, *p* = .51*, or child care assistance,* χ2(1) = 2.09, *p* = .15.

**Selection of control variables**

Bivariate correlations examined the relations between maternal (e.g., age, education, employment, and school enrollment status, economic strain, welfare receipt, nativity) and child characteristics (i.e., age, gender), and maternal parenting behaviors. Results indicated that none of these factors were significantly related to parenting behavior.

**Bivariate associations between Friend Support and Maternal Behavior**

Bivariate correlations examined the relations among friend support, network support, maternal age, and parenting behaviors (Table 1). Results indicated that overall friend and overall network support were unrelated to parenting behavior. Friend socializing support was negatively related to cognitive growth fostering behavior, suggesting mothers reporting more friend socializing displayed less cognitive growth fostering behavior. Friend emotional and child care were not associated with any of the parenting behaviors.

**Multivariate associations between Friend Support and Maternal Behaviors**

To test direct and moderated associations between types of friend support and the parenting behavior variables, we computed hierarchal linear regressions. For all regressions, network support, friend support and maternal age were entered in the first step, and moderator effects were tested by entering the maternal-age-by-friend-support interaction term in the second and last step. Parallel regression models tested whether overall friend support predicted maternal behaviors (controlling for overall network support). Neither the main effect nor the interaction term between total friend support and age approached significance (results available from the authors).

**Emotional Support***.* The first hierarchical linear regressions assessed the influence of emotional friend support and maternal age on parenting behaviors after accounting for the effect of network emotional support (Table 2). There were no main effects of maternal age or friend emotional support on maternal behavior. However, the interaction of friend emotional support and age significantly predicted cognitive growth fostering behavior, above and beyond total network emotional support. The predicted values of growth-fostering were plotted at one standard deviation below and one standard deviation above the mean for maternal age (See Figure 1). Simple slope analysis revealed that the slope was significant for older mothers (*t* = 2.84, *p* =.005),but not for younger mothers (*t* = -.113, *p* = .91). Region of significance analysis indicated that friend emotional support significantly predicted the display of more cognitive growth-fostering behaviors for mothers who were 19.5 years and older (range = 19.5 to 21.6; all *t’s >* 2.00; all *p’s* < .05; depicted by the shaded area surrounding the + 1 SD slope).

**Socializing support***.* Regression results for friend socializing support indicated mothers reporting higher levels of socializing support from friends displayed less cognitive growth-fostering behavior (Table 3). The negative effect of friend socializing on maternal behavior was consistent regardless of maternal age.

**Child care assistance***.* Results indicated that the interaction of friend child care and maternal age significantly predicted both cognitive growth fostering behavior and detachment, above and beyond total network child care assistance (Table 4). Results from simple slope analyses for cognitive growth fostering (Figure 2, Top) indicated that the slope of friend child care and cognitive growth fostering behavior was significantly different from zero for younger mothers (*t* =-2.23, *p* = .02),but not for older mothers (*t* = .97, *p* = .33). Results from region of significance analyses indicated that friend child care support significantly predicted the display of less cognitive growth-fostering behaviors for mothers who were younger than 18.7 (range = 15.8 to 18.7; all *t’*s< -1. 97; all *p’s* < .05).

 The lower part of Figure 2 depicts age as moderating the child care-detachment association. Simple slope analysis indicated that both slopes were significantly different from zero, but in the opposite directions (for younger mothers, *t* = 2.55, *p* = .01; for older mothers, *t* = -2.2, *p* = .03). Region of significance analyses indicated that for mothers younger than 18.8 (range = 15.8 to 18.8; all *t’*s> 1. 97; all *p’s* < .05) use of friends for child care was associated with the display of greater detachment. However, for mothers who were at least 20.7 years old (range = 20.7 to 21.6; all *t’*s< - 1. 98; all *p’s* < .05), child care was associated with less detachment.

**Discussion**

We examined social support from friends, a developmentally salient source of support, as a potential protective factors for the parenting adjustment of young Latina mothers. We found that the associations between friend social support and parenting depended on the specific type of support (emotional, socializing, and child care support) and the mother’s age. These differential relations may account for the mixed findings in the previous literature, and highlight the utility of using a developmental lens to provide a more nuanced picture of the role of social support for Latina adolescent mothers’ parenting.

Consistent with our conceptualization, no relation emerged between an overall composite of friend support and any parenting behavior. Instead, the different support types we assessed showed varied associations with parenting. This finding is consistent with researchers who implicate support type as a key dimension in the measurement of social support with adolescent mothers (Nath et al., 1991). Furthermore, although mothers of different ages were similar in parenting behaviors and reported similar levels of friend support, friend provision of emotional and childcare support showed differential effects on maternal parenting depending on the mothers’ age. Regarding emotional support, we found that, for mothers aged 19.5 years or older, utilization of more frequent emotional support from friends related to the display of more desirable parenting during social interaction with their toddlers; for younger mothers, emotional support appeared to have no effect on their parenting. The finding of a positive association for emotional support is consistent with parenting and social support models (Collins, et al., 1993; Contreras et al., 2002), and previous literature suggesting the importance of friend emotional support to the psychosocial adjustment of parenting and non-parenting adolescents (Richardson, et al., 1991; Richardson, et al., 1995; Way & Chen, 2000). When mothers feel supported emotionally, their parenting may benefit through increased self-esteem and/or parenting confidence. For example, among Mexican-origin adolescent mothers, those who felt more emotionally supported reported higher levels of parenting self-efficacy (Umaña-Taylor, Guimond, Updegraff, & Jahromi, 2013).

The lack of association between emotional support and parenting among mothers younger than 19.5 years, while unexpected, is consistent with Bamaca-Colbert and colleagues’ findings (Bámaca-Colbert, Tilgham-Osborne, Calderon-López, & Moore, 2017) that, among non-parenting Latina adolescents, perceptions of greater friend support were negatively related to self-esteem in early adolescence, but related to higher self-esteem for older adolescents. Although the reason for this lack of effect is not clear, perhaps, younger mothers are more embedded in their families, thus making familial support more relevant for their parenting adjustment. This differential effect by age may be especially relevant for Latina adolescent mothers given research documenting a stronger reliance on family versus external sources of support among Latina adolescents, compared to those of other ethnic groups (Becerra & de Anda, 1984). Nonetheless, because previous studies failed to examine potential differences by age, it remains unclear whether the lack of effect for younger mothers is unique to our sample.

The effects of friend childcare support on the young mother’s parenting also depended on her age. Among mothers aged 18.8 years or younger, friend child care support related to the display of less growth-fostering behaviors and more detachment. Although young mothers may feel supported when friends provide childcare, they may end up with fewer opportunities to engage in and develop their parenting skills. It may also be that young mothers who are less involved in parenting may solicit more child care support from friends. While this support may allow them to engage in other activities, such as attending school or work, it does not appear to help facilitate their parenting engagement and development of skills. The young mothers’ reliance on friends for child care assistance may also reflect a relative lack of child care support from family members, who are the more normative sources of this type of support for young adolescents (Grau et al., 2012). To the extent that this is the case, factors related to lack of childcare support from family members (e.g., family conflict, isolation) may help account for the negative associations we found for friend support among the younger mothers. Longitudinal studies that assess friend and family support across time could clarify the mechanisms that may account for this negative effect.

In contrast to this negative association among younger mothers, among mothers 20 years or older, those reporting childcare support from friends interacted in a less detached manner with their children. These mothers may be within the developmental period of emerging adulthood, a period in which, a time at which relying on friends for child care support may be more normative. As is the case for adult mothers, these mothers appear to be able to benefit from this support (Ceballo & McLoyd, 2002). Our findings suggest that for older mothers, the availability of childcare from friends may facilitate their engagement in parenting. However, the negative relations we found for younger mothers raise concern and point to further investigation of the sources of child care available to Latina adolescent mothers and the repercussions of these for their adjustment as adolescents and as parents.

In contrast to the differential effect of emotional and childcare support by age, mothers who utilized higher levels of friend socializing support displayed less desirable parenting regardless of their age. Whereas socializing interactions with friends may provide useful opportunities for exploration and identity development, they do not appear to facilitate the adolescents’ development of growth-promoting parenting behaviors. Although we cannot determine what accounts for this negative relation, it is possible that mothers who spend relatively more time socializing with friends spend less time developing parenting skills. Information regarding the extent to which parenting versus adolescent goals are central to the mothers’ identity may help clarify these findings (Contreras et al., 2002).

Our results regarding the specific age ranges at which friend support related to maternal behavior indicate important differences between mothers who are less than 19 years of age and those who are above 20 years of age. These different effects may be reflective of cognitive and social-emotional shifts corresponding to the transition to the developmental period of emerging adulthood. (Arnett, 2015). Specifically, the results suggest that friend emotional and child care support serve protective roles for parenting during emerging adulthood, but are unrelated or negatively related to parenting for mothers in late adolescence. Although research on adolescent mothers has not examined the moderating effects of age, some recent research on non-parenting Latina adolescents demonstrates differential effects of age (Bámaca-Colbert et al., 2017). Taken together, these findings argue for the consideration of maternal age in shaping the ways in which friend support influences adjustment. They also highlight the need to assess the types of friend support as separate measures in an ecological context, taking into account the mother’s individual, developmental, and cultural characteristics.

In a complementary goal, the study explored characteristics of maternal friend networks within the cultural context of these young mothers. Friends were a considerable source of support for Latina adolescent mothers in this sample, as 60% of mothers received at least one type of support from friends during the previous month. Mothers utilized friends most frequently for emotional and socializing support. Friend support provision reported by the Latina adolescent mothers in the present study is similar to that of AA adolescent mothers (Voight et al., 1996), aligning well with literature regarding friends as important providers of emotional support for adolescent mothers (Richardson, 1991; Richardson, et al., 1995, Voight et al., 1996).

To consider another layer in the ecological framework of parenting (Contreras et al., 2002), we explored differences between immigrant and nonimmigrant Latina mothers in number of friends and amount of friend support they reported. Although immigrant mothers reported similar number of friends than US-born mothers, immigrant mothers reported receiving less friend emotional support than immigrant mothers. These findings are in line with the traditional cultural value of *familismo*, which emphasizes the importance of support within the family, and the literature documenting Latino adolescents’ preference for family versus outside support (Becerra & de Anda, 1984; Suarez-Orozco & Suarez-Orosco, 1995). Nonetheless, given that for older adolescent mothers, friend emotional support appears to beneficial for parenting, it would be important for service providers to pay attention to the availability of emotional support from families, especially with immigrant mothers who may not have access to their extended family due to migration. Similarly, future research should consider the generational status of Latina adolescent mothers especially regarding the sources of support that are available to them.

 Despite its contributions, our study has limitations that need to be considered. Given the cross-sectional design of the study, the direction and causality of these effects cannot be determined. For instance, both competent parenting and higher levels of friend support may be caused by another factor, such as greater maternal socio-emotional competence. To reach conclusions about the direction of these effects, longitudinal studies with samples of Latina adolescent mothers and their children are needed. Similarly, findings cannot be generalized beyond Latina mothers of primarily Puerto Rican origin, and thus more research is needed with other groups of Latina adolescent mothers and adolescent mothers of other ethnicities. Maternal age was used as a proxy for maternal developmental level. Future studies may wish to include measures to assess other variables that distinguish these levels, such as facets of identity exploration and autonomy. In measuring social support, the current study relied solely on the adolescent mothers’ report. Future studies could be strengthened by including the report of friends, as well as gathering more detailed information regarding the supportive interactions reported by mothers. Due to lack of normality, we dichotomized our child care variable (i.e., provided child care or did not provide child care), therefore we cannot draw conclusions about differences between mothers utilizing different levels of friend child care assistance. Support provided by the adolescents’ networks was not related to parenting in our sample. This lack of associations precluded a better understanding of the relative contribution of friend support. Future studies should examine further the ways in which the social support networks of adolescent mothers can promote their adjustment. This research could also be improved by gathering more information regarding individual and demographic characteristics of the friends in the adolescent mothers’ social network, especially parenting and pregnancy status. Pregnant and parenting friends may be particularly valuable sources of support for adolescent parents, as they can assist with childcare support and exchange advice and emotional support through shared experiences (Herrman, 2008).

 Taken together, our findings suggest implications for prevention and interventions with Latina adolescent mothers and their children. Most of the interventions available for adolescent mothers provide professional support rather than enhancing the pre-existing resources, such as the young mothers’ friend support networks (Letourneau, Steward, & Barnfather,2004). This study’s findings encourage the development of programs that help mothers to infuse warm, emotional support into pre-existing friendships. Programs incorporating social skills training, such as building reciprocal communication skills, may help mothers form and maintain friendships characterized by confidence-building support. Such programs should be sensitive to age and generational differences among young Latina mothers. The understanding of which types of supports relate to more optimal parenting for mothers of different ages is critical for prevention and intervention programs to capitalize on the most useful supports for different sub-groups of mothers. Given the strong links between parenting and child development, knowledge of factors that can facilitate the parenting adjustment of young mothers can have a clear, long term implications for the emotional and behavioral adjustment of the children of these at-risk population.

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| Table 1. *Bivariate Correlations, Means, and Standard Deviations for Main Study Variables* |
|  | Friend Support | Network Support | Parenting | Age |
|   | 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 |
| 1. Total Friend Support | - |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 2. Friend Emotional Support | **.87** | - |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 3. Friend Socializing | .10 | **-.26** | - |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 4. Friend Child Care Support | **.59** | **.41** | .09 | - |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 5. Total Network Supporta | -.14 | **-.20** | -.02 | .04 | - |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 6. Network Emotional Supporta | -.09 | -.10 | .09 | .03 | **.69** | - |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| 7. Network Socializing Supporta | **-.18** | **-.23** | .10 | -.07 | **.17** | **-.43** | - |  |  |  |  |  |
| 8. Network Child Care Supporta | **-.51** | **-.36** | -.05 | **-.86** | .04 | -.01 | -.09 | - |  |  |  |  |
| 9. Sensitivity | .06 | .11 | -.04 | .04 | -.04 | .03 | -.08 | -.10 | - |  |  |  |
| 10. Cognitive Growth Fostering | .02 | .09 | **-.16** | -.07 | .01 | .06 | -.05 | .02 | **.61** | - |  |  |
| 11. Detachment | .12 | .08 | .03 | .01 | -.02 | -.02 | -.06 | .05 | **-.63** | **-.44** | - |  |
| 12. Maternal Age | -.10 | -.12 | .03 | .03 | -.05 | -.02 | .09 | .03 | -.02 | .05 | -.05 | - |
| *M* | 6.5 | 1.2 | .74 | .18  | 31.9 | 4.6  | 1.1  | .77  | 5.1  | 5.14 | 3.36 | 1.32 |
| *SD* | 8.8  |  1.9 | 1.9 | .38  | 16.1 | 3.4  | 4.6  | .42  | 1.0 | .99 | .99 | .58 |

Note: **Bolded** indicate *p* < .05. aTotal network support includes all support except that from friends.

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| Table 2. *Hierarchical Regression Predicting Cognitive Growth Fostering from Friend Emotional Support (N = 168)* |
|   | Cognitive Growth Fostering |
| Predictors | *B* | *SE B* | β | *B* | *SE B* | β |
| Step 1: |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Total Network Emotional Support | .02 | .02 | .07 | .07 | .02 | .05 |
| Maternal Age | .05 | .06 | .07 | .06 | .06 |  .08 |
| Friend Emotional Support | .05 | .04 | .10 | .08 | .04 | .17 |
| Step 2: |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Friend Emotional x Maternal Age |   |   |   | .07 | .03 | **.18** |
| Note: **Bolded** values indicate*p* < .05. |  |  |

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| Table 3. *Hierarchical Regression Predicting Cognitive Growth Fostering from Friend Socializing Support (N = 168)* |

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|   | Cognitive Growth Fostering |
| Predictors | *B* | *SE B* | β | *B* | *SE B* | β |
| Step 1: |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Total Network Socializing Support | -.00 | .02 | -.01 | -.00 | .02 | -.01 |
| Maternal Age | .05 | .06 | .06 | .05 | .06 |  .06 |
| Friend Socializing Support | -.08 | .04 | **-.16** | -.08 | .04 | **-.16** |
| Step 2: |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Friend Socializing x Maternal Age |   |   |   | -.00 | .03 | -.01 |
| Note: **Bolded** values indicate*p* < .05. |  |  |

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| Table 4. *Hierarchical Regression Predicting Parenting Behavior from Friend Child Care Assistance (N = 168)* |
|  | Cognitive Growth Fostering | Detachment |
| Predictors | *B* | *SE B* | β | *B* | *SE B* | β | *B* | *SE B* | β | *B* | *SE B* | β |
| Step 1: |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Network Child Care Support | -.18 | .20 | -.07 | -.21 | .20 | -.08 | .03 | .12 | .02 | .05 | .12 | .04 |
| Friend Child Care Support | -.01 | .02 | -.04 | -.00 | .02 | -.01 | -.01 | .01 | -.04 | -.02 | .01 | -.09 |
| Maternal Age | .05 | .06 | .07 | -.00 | .06 | -.00 | -.02 | .03 | -.05 | .02 | .04 | .05 |
| Step 2: |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |
| Friend Child Care x Age |  |   |   | .37 | .17 | **.18** |   |   |   | -.31 | .10 | **-.26** |
| Note: **Bolded** values indicate *p* < .05 |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |  |



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*Figure 1.* Maternal age moderates the relation between friend emotional support and maternal growth-fostering behaviors. *\*\*p* = .005



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*Figure 2.* Top: Maternal age moderates the relation between friend child care support and maternal growth-fostering behaviors. *\*p* = .02. Below: Maternal age moderates the relation between friend child care support and maternal detachment. *\* p =* .03; *\*\*p* = .005.

1. Data from two additional participants were excluded from the current analyses due to technical difficulties during recording that prevented the coding of maternal behavior. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)