

QUALITATIVE INSIGHTS INTO BLACK HIGH SCHOOL GIRLS' INSTRUMENTAL USE OF AGGRESSION

by

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ABSTRACT

Aggression among Black high school girls is often pathologized in school settings; however, the Social-Ecological Diathesis-Stress model suggests it may function as an adaptive response to unsafe, unsupportive environments shaped by systemic inequities. This qualitative study explored how caregivers of Black adolescent girls interpret the antecedents, meanings, and consequences of aggression, with the goal of contextualizing behavior that is frequently misunderstood and harshly disciplined. Guided by a constructivist epistemology and analyzed using reflexive thematic analysis, interviews were conducted with 15 caregivers of Black high school girls who had received at least one school referral for physical aggression. Three themes were developed through an iterative process of coding, reflection, and interpretation: (1) Navigating Systems without Protection, which described caregivers' concerns about unsafe school climates and institutional neglect; (2) Standing Up but Not Alone, which captured the escalation of protective behaviors in the absence of support and the role of caregiver advocacy; and (3) Protecting the Next Generation, which reflected intentional parenting strategies to foster

resilience and buffer the effects of discrimination, while also calling for institutional change.

Caregivers emphasized that their daughters' aggression was often reactive and strategic, shaped by the social and cultural realities they navigate daily and intensified by schools' failure to intervene or provide meaningful protection. Findings highlight the need for schools to move beyond punitive responses and toward culturally responsive practices that consider the social context of behavior. This study offers actionable insights for educators, school-based mental health professionals, and policymakers seeking to reduce discipline disparities and create safer, more supportive environments for Black girls.

INDEX WORDS: Black girls, aggression, school discipline, racial bias, caregiver perspectives, culturally responsive practices, reflexive thematic analysis

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION

Black communities have historically faced systemic discrimination, inequality, and violence, which has led to the adoption of coping mechanisms that are often in contrast to the dominant culture's expectations and norms (Bonilla-Silva, 2018). For instance, some level of aggression may often be deemed acceptable in Black communities as a means for protection and survival against systemic discrimination and violence (Ness, 2004). Within these marginalized communities where there is a lack of trust in law enforcement, individuals may feel compelled to rely on themselves for protection and safety (E. Anderson, 2000). Thus, there is a unique emphasis placed on the importance of defending oneself in Black culture. Black youth are often expected to adhere to these standards as a means of preparing themselves to navigate and cope with various forms of oppression, prejudice, as well as overt and covert racism and discrimination (Crothers et al., 2005). These cultural expectations persist across various environments, including schools.

Although schools are meant to provide a safe environment for youth development, research suggests that this is not always the case. In fact, students are at a 15% higher risk of experiencing criminal victimization (i.e., theft, robbery, assault, sexual assault, aggravated assault) at school than outside of school (Irwin et al., 2021). Furthermore, the intersection of discrimination and sexism experienced by Black girls place them at particularly alarming risk. Compared to other female students from minoritized populations, Black girls have a higher risk of experiencing peer victimization (Koo et al., 2012). Peer victimization refers to physical,

verbal, or psychological harm caused with the intent to harm (Olweus, 1993). Bullying is a recurring power-imbalanced form of peer victimization, while victimization between individuals with similar power or status is considered peer victimization (Gladden et al., 2014; Olweus, 1994). Although research has mainly focused on bullying, the negative outcomes associated with bullying and peer victimization are similar (Hunter et al., 2007) and will be discussed together in this literature review.

School policies have not consistently ensured the safety of Black girls and, instead might have contributed to discipline disparities and injustices within the educational system. The responses of administration to the harassment faced by Black girls in school are insufficient and influenced by detrimental racial and gender biases (Smith-Evans et al., 2014). Black students' inclination to regard retaliatory aggression as a viable strategy for problem-solving (Bradshaw et al., 2009) may be attributed to the insufficient protection they receive while in school. While aggression is often viewed as a negative trait, research suggests that it might also have advantageous effects, particularly for Black girls who have historically been at a higher risk for victimization (Brendgen et al., 2013). Therefore, while the use of aggression as a coping mechanism can lead to negative consequences, it may have initially developed as a means of promoting safety and self-protection in the face of systemic discrimination and violence.

Theoretical Perspective

The present study is guided by Swearer and Hymel's (2015) Social-Ecological Diathesis-Stress model. The model helps explicate bullying behaviors by using a combination of the Social-Ecological model and the Diathesis-Stress model. The Social-Ecological Model, conceptualized by Bronfenbrenner (1979), proposes that development is shaped by the individual and the multiple systems they develop within. This theory is especially relevant to the present

study as peer victimization does not exist in a vacuum; the environment of the school impacts the behavior of its students. The Diathesis-Stress model suggests that abnormal behavior occurs as a result of environmental triggers to biological, cognitive, or social vulnerabilities (Cicchetti & Toth, 1998). Together, the Social-Ecological Diathesis-Stress model posits that experiences of peer victimization can activate biological, cognitive, or social vulnerabilities—when interacting with adverse contextual and personal factors—leading to internalizing and externalizing behaviors. Thus, in relation to the current investigation, this theory posits that individuals' perceptions of and propensity toward victimization will be affected by the safety or lack thereof of their environment. This perception of potential victimization may trigger an individual's diathesis, causing them to either internalize or externalize their experience.

Literature Review

Victimization

Although peer victimization is an issue that affects individuals of all backgrounds, individuals from minoritized communities are placed at significantly high risk (Hanish & Guerra, 2000; Musu-Gillette et al., 2018; Seaton et al., 2013). Any level of victimization can be harmful, yet the rate at which Black youth experience victimization in schools is alarming. In a comparison of students aged 12–18 across races, Black students experience more victimization than their Hispanic counterparts and higher rates of violent victimization than their White counterparts (Musu-Gillette et al., 2018). These statistics are especially concerning when considering the tendency of Black students to under report instances of victimization (Sawyer et al., 2008). Black girls have a particularly uphill battle in achieving and successfully navigating their academic careers. Compared to other female students from minoritized populations, not only are Black girls more likely to be victimized by their peers in the form of verbal and

relational aggression (e.g., spreading rumors, excluding others from social activities), but also Black girls have a higher risk of physical victimization (Koo et al., 2012). The severity of victimization is notable, as Black girls report the highest instances of being threatened or injured with a weapon on school property (Ross et al., 2012).

Consequences of Peer Victimization

The prevalence of victimization Black girls are subjected to in schools is especially concerning as peer victimization places individuals at a heightened likelihood of derailing their academic progress (Waschbusch et al., 2019). Research consistently shows that experiences of victimization at school can negatively impact students' engagement (Dorio et al., 2019; Ladd et al., 2017). These negative experiences may lead to decreased motivation and a lack of interest in school, ultimately hindering students' ability to reach their full potential. Specifically, peer victimization is a risk factor for poor academic achievement (Macmillan & Hagan, 2004; Mundy et al., 2017; Musu-Gillette et al., 2018; Schwartz et al., 2005; Wei & Williams, 2004), lower school engagement (Dorio et al., 2019), truancy (Ringwalt et al., 2003), and school dropout (Beauvais et al., 1996; Cornell et al., 2013; Macmillan & Hagan, 2004). A lack of educational attainment can leave students at a disadvantage and greatly increase the odds of facing difficulties achieving their goals and aspirations in their future endeavors as adults.

Peer victimization also inhibits one's social capabilities (Waschbusch et al., 2019). For instance, experiences of peer victimization are associated with poor peer relations, inhibited abilities to make friends, and rejection (Nansel et al., 2001). Early experiences of victimization predict later social alienation (Rudolph et al., 2014). One of the most frequent reasons for bullying endorsed by victimized youth is that they "didn't fit in" (Hoover et al., 1992, 1993; Nansel et al., 2001). Bullied individuals tend to demonstrate emotional maladjustment, poor

social skills, and greater loneliness (Hoover et al., 1993). Not only does peer victimization identify socially isolated individuals as “easy targets,” but peer victimization also impairs one’s capacity for obtaining social capital. Social capital refers to the benefits gained from the network of relationships (Putnam, 1995) and has been shown to be influential in buffering the effects (Prinstein et al., 2001) and protecting students from victimization (Carney et al., 2018; Evans & Smokowski, 2015). Individuals with a strong network of friends are less likely to fall victim to bullying (Nansel et al., 2001), highlighting the crucial role that social support plays in protecting individuals from victimization.

Peer victimization is consistently associated with adjustment difficulties such as a diminished sense of belonging, poor self-esteem, depression, anxiety, social anxiety, delinquency, aggression, and violent behaviors (Bond et al., 2001; Card & Hodges, 2008; Fitzpatrick et al., 2010; Hanish & Guerra, 2000; Hawker & Boulton, 2000; Hodges & Perry, 1999; Schwartz et al., 2005). Peer victimization may be a catalyst for mental health problems as it is associated with both internalizing (e.g., anxiety, depression) and externalizing (e.g., aggression, delinquency) problems (Hanish & Guerra, 2000; Reijntjes et al., 2010, 2011). Equifinality suggests that the manifestation of internalizing or externalizing problems following experiences of victimization can be the result of a complex interplay between individual vulnerabilities and environmental activations. The diathesis-stress model of psychopathology posits that these individual factors (i.e., biological, cognitive, or social vulnerabilities) interact with environmental stressors, leading to the development of pathological symptoms (Hinshaw & Beauchaine, 2017). Moreover, the transactional model highlights the bidirectional relationship between aggression and victimization, suggesting that difficulties in adjustment may stem from the reciprocal influence of these experiences on one another (Prinstein et al., 2001). Adolescents

who have experienced victimization may suffer from current and future mental health problems (Crick, 1996), and those with existing mental health issues may be more susceptible to becoming victims in the future (Crick & Bigbee, 1998).

Cognitive processes, such as how individuals interpret and make sense of their experiences, can greatly influence their developmental trajectory. These cognitive appraisals, particularly regarding how an individual responds to environmental stimuli, can play a crucial role in the development of either internalizing or externalizing forms of psychopathology. For instance, diminished self-concept mediates aversive outcomes of peer victimization (Shemesh & Heiman, 2021). Increases in negative self-schemas following victimization (e.g., “Everyone hates me; I am a loser”) may lead to a negative outlook on the world and subsequent internalizing problems (Card & Hodges, 2008) or may lead to externalizing problems as negative self-concept is a significant predictor in the perpetration of victimization—in attempts to increase positive self-perceptions (Marsh et al., 2001).

Gender can also play a role in the effects of victimization. Victimization has notable impacts on girls, particularly during adolescence when they tend to form closer relationships with their peers and have a stronger need for social affiliation. As a result, girls are more likely than boys to report feeling self-conscious, embarrassed, afraid, and less confident following instances of peer victimization in schools (Lipson, 2001). Not only do girls experience bullying based on social status and physical appearance (Hoover et al., 1993), but they also experience sexual taunting from their male peers (Nansel et al., 2001). Further, bullied girls reported more significant emotional effects than boys experiencing similar levels of victimization (Hoover et al., 1993).

The Impact of Victimization on Aggression

Aggression can be a natural response to feeling vulnerable or in danger, and it is often driven by the desire to protect oneself or others. This is called reactive aggression. However, aggression is not always an appropriate or effective way to handle threatening situations, as it may have negative consequences for both the perpetrator and the target of aggression. Repeated experiences of victimization may prime adolescents to react aggressively. Instances of victimization put individuals at risk for further victimization (Finkelhor, 2008) and increase the likelihood of perpetrating aggression, becoming the victimizer themselves (Reijntjes et al., 2011). Victims are more likely to display higher levels of aggression (Ostrov, 2010), even after the termination of victimization (Schwartz et al., 1998). Longitudinal findings point to the presence of a causal relationship, demonstrating that peer victimization serves as an antecedent increasing the risk of physical aggression in adolescents (Aceves & Cookston, 2007). Additionally, evidence from monozygotic twin outcomes supports this pathway of victimization as an antecedent of aggression. Specifically, childhood victimization was associated with blunted cortisol reactivity, which in turn predicted social and behavioral problems such as aggression (Ouellet-Morin et al., 2011).

Rather than being a vulnerable target, individual characteristics such as physical strength and aggressive tendencies might help ward off potential victimization (Jackson et al., 2017). Greater physical strength predicts significantly less peer victimization (Hodges & Perry, 1999), while perceptions of weakness predict significantly more peer victimization (Hoover et al., 1993). Longitudinal findings demonstrate aggressive children experienced significantly lower levels of peer victimization over a year later (Persson, 2005). It is essential to recognize that relying on reactive aggression as a means of addressing conflicts can lead to additional negative

consequences, including social exclusion and disciplinary action from authority figures, which may perpetuate the cycle of aggression and victimization. Thus, continued reliance on aggression as a coping mechanism to address conflicts can become maladaptive, hindering their ability to develop more effective problem-solving skills.

Provocative Victims

While reactive aggression is a victims response to a threat, "provocative" victims may unknowingly trigger aggressive responses from their peers (Salmivalli, 2010). These individuals are seen as hostile, aggressive, argumentative, and impulsive (Olweus, 1978). Compared to their passive or non-aggressive victimized peers, provocative victims are generally more disliked, tend to have fewer social connections, and exhibit significantly more behavioral issues (Crick et al., 2001). Provocative victims' lack of favorability may irritate their peers and contribute to their risk of victimization (Hodges & Perry, 1999). For instance, displays of aggression in the early school years (i.e., preschool and kindergarten) are associated with higher rates of peer victimization in the later years (Barker et al., 2008; Jansen et al., 2012; Snyder et al., 2003). Similarly, the genetic predisposition of aggressive behavior is associated with a higher risk of victimization by peers (Brendgen et al., 2013b), suggesting the association of aggression and peer victimization may result from evocative gene-environment correlation (rGE).

Evidence demonstrating aggression to be both an antecedent and consequence of peer victimization may be explained by the distinct subtype of a bully/victim—an individual who is both a victim and a perpetrator of bullying (Nansel et al., 2001). A significant amount of research supports the overlap of victims and offenders (for review, see Jennings et al., 2012). Pellegrini and colleagues (1999) describe this subtype as “aggressive victims.” Rather than using aggression in an instrumental and calculated manner, or simply responding to perceived threats

or provocation, these individuals tend to display hostile social interaction styles eliciting aggression from peers (Pellegrini et al., 1999). The temperament of the aggressive victim subtype is especially important as high levels of emotionality may result in deficits in emotional regulation, leading to the display of explosive and disproportionately intense reactive aggression (Pellegrini et al., 1999). Elevated levels of emotionality and poor emotional control may also contribute to the high rates of peer rejection (Perry et al., 1988), leading to instances of victimization.

Research has consistently demonstrated involvement in peer victimization as both a victim and a perpetrator may place individuals at an especially high risk of the adverse effects of victimization (Eslea et al., 2004; Glew et al., 2008; Juvonen et al., 2003; Nansel et al., 2001). Compared to their aggressive and victimized peers, bully/victims exhibit poorer social/emotional adjustment and more severe behavior problems (Nansel et al., 2001). Additionally, bully/victims experience higher levels of anxiety and depressive disorders than their bully or victimized peers and were at the highest risk of suicidality in their young adult years (Copeland et al., 2013). Individuals who fall into this category of bully/victim are more likely to be criminal offenders through acts of theft, assault, relationship violence, and substance misuse (Jennings et al., 2012). Bully/victim status also has severe implications on perceptions of school as bully/victims reported lower levels of teacher support and feelings of safety in school and were significantly more likely to skip school because of fear (Berkowitz & Benbenishty, 2012). Feelings of insufficient safety in school may contribute to the extreme actions that bully/victims take to protect themselves as they are more likely to endorse that it is “not wrong” to carry a gun to school (Glew et al., 2008). Considering the combination of social isolation, lack of success in

school, and involvement in delinquent behaviors, youth who both perpetuate victimization and are victimized by others may represent an especially high risk group.

Forms of Aggression

While there are various reasons for employing aggression, there are two different forms of aggression that people may use—relational or physical acts of aggression. Relational aggression refers to covert and manipulative behaviors intended to hurt others by damaging their self-esteem, reputation, and social relationships (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). Relational aggression is most often associated with females and includes gossiping, social exclusion, starting rumors, and negative body language. Physical aggression refers to overt or direct acts of physical behavior intended to cause harm (Olweus, 1978). Physical aggression is typically characterized by hitting, punching, hair-pulling, etc.

Relational and physical aggression are associated with a myriad of negative outcomes. Specifically, relational aggression is associated social maladjustment (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995), poor academic performance (Macmillan & Hagan, 2004), and psychological concerns (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995; Werner & Crick, 1999) including: depression, anxiety, social isolation, and poor self-esteem (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). Among girls, relational aggression is also associated with externalizing behaviors (Prinstein et al., 2001) and found to predict delinquency (Ellis et al., 2009). Physical aggression is a risk factor for current and future adjustment problems (Dodge et al., 2006), including: depression, loneliness, anxiety, and peer rejection (Crick & Grotpeter, 1995). Additionally, early displays of aggression are related to low pro-social behavior and delinquency, placing individuals at risk of following a developmental trajectory toward anti-social tendencies in adulthood (Moffitt, 1993).

Distinctions in socialization practices within same-sex peer groups may contribute to the reliance of relational aggression among females, which can, in some cases, escalate into physical aggression (Moretti et al., 2001; Rivera-Maestre, 2015). Girls tend to focus on interpersonal matters through adolescence, such as popularity and security within their social standing (Moretti et al., 2001). Thus, rather than direct confrontation disturbing order within the group, girls learn to use and prefer indirect means of expressing anger (Putallaz et al., 2007). Due to the importance of social functioning among girls, the consequences of relational disputes have the potential to escalate aggressive behavior, culminating in physical conflict (Rivera-Maestre, 2015). For instance, disrespect plays a prominent role as an antecedent to physical aggression among Black girls. Minor slights, teasing, spreading rumors, and other forms of relational aggression frequently precede violent acts at school (Lockwood, 1997). This temporal relationship is further supported as relational aggression precedes physical aggression among African American girls in school (Talbott et al., 2002). Although relational aggression is related to increases in relational victimization, physical aggression shows the opposite effect as it is associated with decreases in relational victimization (Kawabata et al., 2010). Thus, girls may see the benefit of increasing their aggressive behaviors as a form of protection. These intentions are supported by research that demonstrates aggression can serve as an effective form of self-defense by providing youth with the means to protect themselves from harm (Pugh-Lilly et al., 2001; Waldron, 2011; Zenz Adamshick, 2010).

Despite the noted escalation of relational aggression to physical aggression, previous research regarding physical aggression in girls has fallen short. Assumptions that physical aggression was limited to males have left the construct drastically understudied among females (Hong & Espelage, 2012; Hoover et al., 1993; Moretti et al., 2001). It was not until the 1990s

that physical aggression among females became a subject of investigation, likely due to the increase in violent incidents among female youth that had risen to levels that no longer could be ignored (Moretti et al., 2001). At the time, research suggested that girls have always been just as likely to be aggressive as boys, but girls employ social intelligence rather than physical dominance when in conflict (Crothers et al., 2005). Present aggression research continues to be notable for investigations of physical aggression among males and relational aggression among females.

The lack of investigation into female physical aggression may be due to perceptions of stigma surrounding physical aggression among girls. Societal norms place the assumption that girls solve disagreements through indirect means rather than through the use of physical aggression (Jones, 2010). When girls contradict this pattern of behavior, they are identified as delinquents, breaking standards of femininity (Ness, 2004). However, recent research suggests the opposite; physical aggression between girls may be a more normative experience than once believed. Interviews with urban female youth suggested that physical altercations with other girls were often portrayed as a seemingly inevitable part of navigating their environments (Jäggi & Kliewer, 2016; Ness, 2004).

Ecological Contributors of Victimization and Aggression

The Social-Ecological Model, also known as the Ecological Systems Theory, was conceptualized by Bronfenbrenner (1979) and explores the intricate interactions between individuals and their environments, shaping human development. This framework emphasizes that human behavior is influenced by multiple levels of factors, ranging from individual characteristics to broader societal and environmental factors. Bronfenbrenner's model consists of five interconnected systems which are nested within each other and operate in a bidirectional

manner. For the purpose of this review, the focus will be on three specific levels of an individual's ecological system contributing to aggressive behavior: the macrosystem, microsystem, and the individual themselves.

The macrosystem encompasses the broader cultural, economic, and social contexts. This includes the level of industrialization, legislative policies, social and cultural ideologies, media influence, poverty, socioeconomic status, and ethnicity. The macrosystem provides the overarching framework that shapes the other levels of Bronfenbrenner's social-ecological model. The microsystem refers to the immediate environments in which an individual directly interacts. At this level, individuals such as a child's family members or peers have the potential to shape the child's developmental trajectory, such as by reinforcing or punishing aggressive behaviors. Further, a child's actions and personal traits can influence the manner in which they are perceived and treated, thus eliciting responses that may increase or decrease the likelihood of aggression. Lastly, Bronfenbrenner emphasizes the important characteristics of the individual impacting development. Factors such as genetic predispositions, temperamental traits, motivation, or cognitive abilities play a crucial role in shaping how individuals interact with and respond to their surrounding environments. These inherent dispositions, combined with their unique experiences, contribute to the dynamic interaction between the individual and their ecological systems, thereby influencing their developmental outcomes, including their propensity for aggression.

Although aggression is often viewed as a negative characteristic in contemporary society, it is essential to explore the function of aggression within the context of Bronfenbrenner's theory and consider how it may develop as a protective mechanism in certain situations. Within uncertain and dangerous circumstances, aggression may be the determinant factor of one's safety.

Through evolution, aggression enabled humans to adapt to competitive and unpredictable environments. For instance, aggression was useful to intimidate and ward off a potential assailant, establishing the security of resources, shelter, or mating partners (Buss & Shackelford, 1997). In modern civilization, however, the necessity of aggression as a means of survival has diminished, leading to a shift in the perception and consequences of aggressive behavior. Given its detrimental impact on the overall functioning of cooperative societies, aggression is widely considered maladaptive by societal standards. Not all individuals have the same level of access to resources or support that can help them navigate unsafe environments, and some individuals may be more vulnerable to violence or aggression due to factors such as their age, gender, race, environment, or socioeconomic status.

Despite the evidence of the negative outcomes associated with displays of physical aggression, aggression may serve a distinctive role in communities of marginalized individuals living without a sense of security. For Black individuals who face systemic discrimination and violence, aggression may serve as a coping mechanism for self-protection and survival in the face of such adversity, both within and outside their communities. By examining aggression through the lens of Bronfenbrenner's ecological systems theory, we can gain a deeper understanding of its complex dynamics and significance for individuals living in marginalized communities. This perspective proves valuable by considering the interplay between aggression, environmental factors, and safety-seeking behaviors. Through this lens, we gain a comprehensive understanding of how aggression operates in diverse contexts and how individuals adapt their behavior to ensure their safety, well-being, and overall survival.

Macrosystem

History of Oppression

By employing an ecological approach and investigating the experiences that shape the development of Black girls, we can enhance our understanding of the intersectionality of the Black female experience. This encompasses both the unique challenges and discrimination faced by Black women in society as well as the ways in which those experiences intersect with and are shaped by other aspects of their identity, such as their class and sexuality. The multiple identities an individual holds cannot be disentangled from one another, as they collectively shape their distinct experiences and interactions within society (Atewologun, 2018). Black high school girls are subject to a unique and diverse set of pressures and experiences compared to other student demographics. Despite the evidence that Black girls growing up in inner-city neighborhoods inherit similar risk factors passed down to Black boys, most research emphasizes relational outcomes (Lloyd, 2005). Black girls are not immune to the consequences of poverty, racism, and violence. The distinct stress of living in a low-income urban setting, where some level of violence may be seen as acceptable, could contribute to the persistent use of physical aggression by African American adolescent girls (Lockwood, 1997).

The infamous enslavement of Africans in American history has positioned Black individuals in a distinctive societal position in which racial, educational, and financial inequalities are notable (Collins, 1998). Black individuals—forcibly brought to this country—continue to face discrimination and consequences for not adhering to the ethnocentric values imposed upon them (Kazembe, 2021), leading to a range of negative outcomes for Black individuals, both individually and at the community level. As stated by James Baldwin, "To be a Negro in this country and to be relatively conscious is to be in a state of rage almost, almost all

of the time." Unlike the pre-civil rights era, where racism and discrimination were openly practiced and easily identified, discrimination today is less recognizable. Even so, the disparities in the lack of safety Black American individuals experience are unparalleled. For instance, Black individuals cannot rely on the protection of law enforcement as they disproportionately face over-policing in their communities, leading to a heightened risk of police brutality and fatal encounters for Black men (Edwards et al., 2019).

These systemic discriminatory experiences are examples of how racism operates through institutional and cultural structures. Institutional racism perpetuates and reinforces racial disparities and inequalities, while cultural racism contributes to negative attitudes and beliefs about certain racial groups (Bonilla-Silva, 2018). The stress and trauma of experiencing discrimination is associated with poorer mental and physical health outcomes, such as higher rates of depression and anxiety, as well as chronic illnesses like hypertension and diabetes (Williams et al., 2019). Discrimination may also restrict access to educational and economic opportunities, resulting in a cycle of poverty that can be difficult to break out of (Pager & Shepherd, 2008). These institutional and cultural domains of racism are interconnected, and their effects extend across a range of social and economic outcomes for Black individuals.

Microsystem

Neighborhoods

Research indicates that African Americans are more likely than other races to report both victimization and perpetration of aggression (Carlyle & Steinman, 2007), which may be due to feelings of safety within their immediate environments. For example, almost one-third of African American adolescents live in poverty, resulting in regular exposure to high rates of violence (Paxton et al., 2004). Concerning research shows Black youth experience high rates of violent

victimization in the community (Hammond & Yung, 1993) and at school (Musu-Gillette et al., 2018). Specifically, the data reveals that as many as 75% of urban African American adolescents have witnessed one or more violent events in the past six months (Howard et al., 2002).

Experiences of violence not only endanger one's current physical safety but also place them at high risk for future safety threats.

Given the disproportionate rates of poverty, unemployment, violence, over-policing, discrimination, and mistrust of police within disadvantaged communities (E. Anderson, 2000), the tenets of Black culture may differ from mainstream values. Specifically, a unique emphasis is often placed on the importance of defending oneself in the Black community. E. Anderson (2000) posits there is a set of unspoken rules that govern behavior amongst Black communities, referred to as the "code of the street." The "code of the street" encourages individuals to display aggression as an appropriate adaptation for particularly high-violence environments (E. Anderson, 2000). Within this view, aggressiveness results in protection for one's physical safety as well as respect from other community members. Jacobs (2004) found that individuals following the code of the street used the threat of retaliation to reduce their risk of victimization and to earn, maintain, or increase respect. The code's basis is to take personal accountability for one's safety as structural forms of protection (e.g., police, schools, teachers) have failed. Adherence to the street code supports acts of retribution as appropriate for instances of disrespect. Retaliation helps to maintain social harmony within a group by providing a way for individuals who have been offended to deal with feelings of disempowerment or unfair treatment (Elster, 1990). Qualitative interviews with urban adolescents indicate that youth believe that maintaining a tough reputation might help prevent future fights (Jäggi & Kliwer, 2016). Individuals who fail to adopt the "code of the street" are particularly vulnerable to being treated

with a lack of respect, and consequently, experiencing a higher level of victimization. For instance, minor insults such as being referred to as a “punk” are viewed by urban adolescents as a direct attack on one’s image. The insult indicates the perception of weakness or an inability to fight back (Rivera-Maestre, 2015). Thus, the expectation among urban adolescent girls may be to present a tough image demonstrating a willingness to fight in order to prevent disrespect (Jones, 2010; Ness, 2004; Rivera-Maestre, 2015). These attitudes may explain why African American students are perceived as more overtly aggressive than their peers (David et al., 2000) and are more likely than White students to endorse retaliatory attitudes of aggression (Bradshaw et al., 2009).

Another aspect of the “code of the streets” is that it may also promote disrespectful behavior and foster a culture of social rivalry. Those following the code are encouraged to be confrontational and disrespectful toward others to gain or maintain respect. Therefore, the code compels individuals to engage in the exact type of behaviors that they are expected not to tolerate from others (Stewart et al., 2006). Some level of assertiveness and willingness to defend oneself may be beneficial to deter threats; however, those who abide by the code of the street may be evoking more disrespect and victimization than they are warding off. Among adolescent African Americans, those who reported the highest adherence to the code of the street engaged in violence more often, and instead of deterring potential harm, they were also at the highest risk of victimization (Stewart et al., 2006). Consistent with the idea of provocative victims (Olweus, 1978), individuals who display the highest levels of aggression may incite hostility from their peers by aggravating them, even in situations where there was none before (Hodges & Perry, 1999). Recent findings also support the idea that there may be an endorsement level for the code of the streets that exceeds its protective benefits and becomes harmful. Higher levels of

aggression among high school Black girls (in comparison to average levels of aggression among White females) may be protective in reducing experiences of victimization within schools perceived to be unsafe; however, this protective relationship was not significant for Black girls displaying the highest levels of aggression compared to their same-race peers (Day et al., 2023). Thus, the authors theorized there may be an optimal level of aggression that can help to prevent victimization in unsafe environments.

Families

Girls of color must engage in behaviors that foster connection, promote self-expression, and protect them from harm as a means of counterbalancing the daily discrimination they experience and the power and privilege they lack within the dominant culture. Familial cultural messages about aggression can profoundly impact how Black girls perceive and justify the use of aggression, influencing their understanding of when and why it is appropriate. For example, some Black girls may view aggression as a means of protection in a society that is often hostile towards them, while others may use it as a means of asserting themselves and gaining respect within their communities (Jäggi & Kliever, 2016; Waldron, 2011). In contrast to the general disapproval of aggressive behavior in other cultures and racial groups, some Black families have been found to endorse the use of aggression as a problem-solving strategies (Collins, 1998; Lloyd, 2005). An ethnographic study of street-fighting among girls from poor neighborhoods in Philadelphia found that mothers played a crucial role in their daughters' use of violence. According to the study, mothers socialized their daughters to be assertive and to defend themselves against disrespect, and they encouraged aggression as a means of fostering independence and self-protection (Ness, 2004). Such messages not only shape their perspective but also can provide Black girls with a sense of agency and empowerment, which can be

beneficial in navigating challenging social contexts, particularly when they are facing discrimination or marginalization. Further, experiences of discrimination and microaggressions are linked to feelings of anger and frustration, which may manifest in aggressive behavior as a form of coping mechanism (Sittner Hartshorn et al., 2012).

The socialization of Black youth is unique as parents must prepare their children to deal with oppression, prejudice, and overt and covert forms of racism and discrimination (Crothers et al., 2005). One illustration of the distinctive effects of racial socialization is in communication styles. Considering the historical and current marginalization of Black women, Black girls are encouraged to communicate in an assertive, strong, and independent manner (S. Hill & Sprague, 1999). However, paradoxically, conforming to the normative communication style of their race may increase the likelihood of experiencing discrimination as they may inadvertently reinforce the stereotype of the "angry Black woman" (Letendre & Rozas, 2015; Stevens, 2002). In this complex landscape, code-switching, (the ability to switch between different identities), is modeled and passed down through Black parents' socialization, promoting the self-preservation of their children (Levinson, 2012). For instance, it is not uncommon for Black parents to have explicit conversations with their Black sons, instructing them on appropriate behavior when interacting with law enforcement, as they are often subject to toxic stereotypes that depict them as violent and criminal. These code-switching behaviors (e.g., addressing police as "sir" or "ma'am," avoiding sudden movements, and making declarations before moving) are necessary for survival.

The "angry Black woman" stereotype is a pervasive and deeply ingrained notion in the White dominant narrative that continues to shape how Black women are perceived and treated in society (Ashley, 2014). This stereotype, which is often perpetuated through various forms of

media and reinforced by societal norms and institutions, not only solidifies harmful perceptions of Black women but may also contribute to a biased and discriminatory treatment of them in various societal contexts. Black girls are placed in a difficult position where they are expected to behave according to competing and often contradictory expectations. Black girls are taught to present an assertive and tough identity as a means of survival in a society that may be experienced as hostile. Simultaneously, they are also expected to placate White individuals by suppressing their behavior to avoid being perceived as a threat, mitigating the risk of discrimination and violence. Thus, the socialization of Black children, particularly Black girls, necessitates a constant adaptation of behavior in order to navigate the contexts they reside in and ensure their safety and well-being.

Schools

All students have the right to feel safe and supported in school. Maslow's (1943) Hierarchy of Needs underscores the necessity of safety in facilitating well-being. School safety refers to the physical and psychological security schools provide students. Not only are students' feelings of safety in schools an essential precursor to academic achievement, but school safety is also a powerful promotor of positive development (Cornell & Mayer, 2010). Unfortunately, not all students report feeling safe while at school (Elsaesser et al., 2013; Felix & You, 2011; Glew et al., 2008). Students ages 12-18 report feeling more concern regarding an attack or being harmed while at school than they do away from school (Irwin et al., 2021). Further, Black children who disproportionately attend high-poverty schools (Orfield et al., 2012), report more significant risks of victimization (Dhami et al., 2005). Several factors can contribute to feeling unsafe in school, including bullying, discrimination, and a lack of supportive relationships with peers and adults. Experiences of victimization are related to negative perceptions of the school

climate (Bowen & Bowen, 1999; Nansel et al., 2001), and poor perceptions of school safety may cause emotional distress and behavioral problems among students (Astor et al., 2001).

The norms of school environments shape students' behavior, and school norms are fundamental in understanding the risk of peer victimization (Salmivalli & Voeten, 2004). Individual schools construct their own culture in which the collective body determines approval of aggression (Felson et al., 1994). Sociological perspectives indicate that school norms have the propensity to perpetuate inequality, alienation, oppression, and aggression among students regarding their race/ethnicity, gender, and socioeconomic background (Leach, 2003). Victimization is more likely to occur within classrooms characterized by social norms that support aggression (Brendgen et al., 2013a; Salmivalli & Voeten, 2004). School norms that favor non-violent responses to aggression may encourage students to utilize alternative strategies (Henry et al., 2011). These results were notably stronger among females than males, suggesting the importance of creating a culture condemning aggression in disrupting the cycle of aggression and peer victimization for girls.

With regard to Black students, schools may amplify their vulnerability. Black girls, in particular, often encounter additional barriers in school due to the intersections of their race and gender, which may contribute to unique experiences of discrimination and marginalization. Not only do Black girls have to be prepared to endure racism and sexism, but they also often develop skills to protect themselves from violence, harassment, and assault. The 2015-16 Civil Rights Data Collection Report on School Climate and Safety report shows Black students experience the highest levels of harassment on the basis of race (U.S. Department of Education). Specifically in Georgia, during the 2017-18 school year, African American students were most likely to experience race-based harassment (45.1%) compared to White (30%), Hispanic

(15.7%), Asian (4.9%) or multi-race (3.4%) students (Office for Civil Rights). Black girls' safety is especially threatened as they have a significantly higher risk of violent victimization in school than their White peers (Koo et al., 2012).

At school, the responsibility of protecting students falls on the administration. When schools do not adequately fulfill this responsibility, students—particularly those vulnerable to victimization—may feel compelled to take action into their own hands. Through qualitative interviews, Black girls detail instances in which they reported bullying to the school administration to no avail (Pugh-Lilly et al., 2001). As the instances of victimization continued and with no support from the school, they resorted to solving the problem for themselves (Pugh-Lilly et al., 2001). Data from the Youth Risk Behavior Surveillance System (YRBSS) suggest that African American female high school students (11.7%) are the most likely to engage in a physical fight on school property, followed by Hispanic (5.6%), multi-race (4.5%), Asian (3.0%), and White (2.2%) girls (Kann et al., 2018). The disproportionately high rates of physical altercations on school property reported by Black female high school students may be attributed to the significant threats to their safety and well-being experienced while in school (C. Hill & Kearl, 2011; Ross et al., 2012). Specifically, data from the YRBSS highlights that—in comparison to their White, Hispanic, and Asian peers—Black high school girls were disproportionately more likely to report being threatened with a weapon on school property (Kann et al., 2018). Interestingly, however, Black high school girls (5.3%) were less likely to carry a weapon at school than their Hispanic (6.6%), White (7.1%), and multi-race (10.7%) peers, which lends credence to their reliance on physical aggression as a means of protection. Further, When Black girls were unable to identify a teacher with whom they felt comfortable going to for assistance in problem-solving, they were driven to seek their own strategies in

response to situations in which they felt victimized (Letendre & Rozas, 2015). Hence, schools' current prevention and intervention practices provide youth little protection from peer victimization, leaving them to fend for themselves in establishing a sense of safety at school. Students' perception of school safety is directly related to the school's environment and policies impacting the likelihood of student victimization and aggression (Felix & You, 2011; Gottfredson & Gottfredson, 1985; Hanish & Guerra, 2000). Schools that emphasize awareness of school violence and set clear expectations with consistent consequences report lower individual levels of physical aggression (Astor et al., 2005; Henry et al., 2011). A large-scale study conducted with over 7,300 students and 2,900 teachers found that consistent enforcement of school discipline was associated with higher levels of school safety (Gregory et al., 2010). Policy research supports these findings as interventions intended to raise awareness of the importance of school safety and establish clear rules and policies are found to reduce violence and aggression in schools (Astor et al., 2005).

Despite research identifying ways to reduce violence and aggression in schools, the 2019-2020 School Crime and Safety shows 8% of high school students reported being in a physical fight on school property within the last 12 months (Irwin et al., 2021). The percentage of students involved in physical disputes at school was higher for Black students (15.5%) than for White (6.4%), Hispanic (7.8%), Asian (4.9%), and multi-race (11.0%) students (Irwin et al., 2021). In the 2017-18 school year, 78% of high schools and 58% of middle schools took at least one serious disciplinary action (out-of-school suspension for 5 or more days) for student offenses ranging from physical fighting to use or possession of a weapon (Irwin et al., 2021). In addition to higher rates of peer victimization, public schools with over 25% of students eligible for free

and reduced lunch have higher rates of serious disciplinary actions compared to schools with fewer students eligible for free and reduced lunch (Irwin et al., 2021).

Sadly, school policies related to violence and aggression may cause more harm than protection for Black girls. Administrators' and teachers' responses to the harassment of Black girls in school are inadequate and shaped by harmful racial and gender stereotypes (Smith-Evans et al., 2014). Many Black girls receive citations in schools for behaviors that defy traditional standards of femininity and parallel the behaviors of stereotypical images of Black women as hypersexualized, angry, and hostile (Blake et al., 2011).

As students matriculate through their educational careers, implicit biases in the perception of Black students' behavior are often ingrained. A lack of representation in the curriculum and leadership may be influential in the disparate discipline rates of Black high school girls. The demographic makeup of school personnel is significant to the enforcement of discipline practices; experiences of same-race teachers are associated with lower rates of exclusionary discipline for Black students (Lindsay & Hart, 2017). When the majority of teachers are White women, behavior norms are modeled around ethnocentric culture. The norms of the dominant culture leave little leeway for the expression of affect that is normative in Black communities (Letendre & Rozas, 2015); this not only suppresses ethnic identity development, which has been shown to be a protective factor in buffering the effects of victimization (Yip, 2018), but also leaves Black girls without adult support.

Implicit biases and the persistent criminalization of Black youth make schools risky for Black girls (Morris & Perry, 2017). School personnel often misidentify Black girls defending themselves against their harassers as the aggressors (Miller, 2008). Rather than focusing on the social dilemmas that arise preceding fights on campus, schools typically respond with

disciplinary action, suspending all students involved, regardless of their role in involvement (Talbot et al., 2002). The rationales behind discipline referrals are especially flagrant among diverse school systems. Within an urban district in the U.S. Midwest, Black girls most often received citations for defiant behaviors followed by inappropriate dress, profane language, and lastly, physical aggression (Blake et al., 2011). Further research demonstrates that students receive exclusionary discipline referrals as a result of unmet needs. Themes emerged through interviews with students suggesting discipline referrals stem in part due to students' innocuous requests, such as requesting assistance or asking for permission to go to the bathroom (Kennedy-Lewis, 2013). Rather than handling the behavior within the context it occurred, teachers utilized office referrals as a means to a solution for undesired behavior.

School Disciplinary Consequences

A significant body of research has documented disparities in how disciplinary consequences are applied in schools, with students from racially minoritized backgrounds often facing more frequent and harsher punishments than their non-minoritized peers (Huang, 2020). Disproportionate discipline practices of racially minoritized populations begin in early childhood and particularly impact Black youth (Musu-Gillette et al., 2018). In 2014, the United States Department of Education released a report reviewing the literature on racial disparities in discipline as a decree to educators on the necessity of fair discipline practices. Contained in this report, data from the Office for Civil Rights showed that African American students are more than three times as likely as their White peers to be expelled or suspended (U.S. Department of Education, 2014).

Discipline disproportionalities are not typically due to differences in disruptive or aggressive behavior but rather may reflect the differential application of consequences

influenced by biases and stereotypes held by school faculty, contributing to more frequent and severe punishments for students from racially minoritized backgrounds (Skiba, 2015). Black youth receiving harsher punishment for the same behaviors as White youth (Shi & Zhu, 2022; Skiba et al., 2011) may be explained by implicit biases and the attention devoted to policing the behavior of minoritized youth. Eye-tracking research reveals teachers pay more attention to the behavior of Black youth and, thus, witness more incidences of misbehavior as a result (Gilliam et al., 2016). This heightened attention to the behavior of Black students may lead to an increased likelihood of identifying and punishing misbehavior, even when it is less disruptive than the misbehavior of non-Black students.

Current data reports demonstrate disproportionate discipline practices have persisted. During the 2017-2018 school year, boys were most frequently disciplined, with Black boys being suspended and expelled at a rate three times their enrollment (Office for Civil Rights, 2022). Among girls, Black girls were the only group across all races/ethnicities who disproportionately received suspensions and expulsions (Office for Civil Rights, 2022). Roughly half (49.5%) of the students enrolled in Clarke County Public Schools, a school system in North-East Georgia, were Black. However, Black students were significantly more likely to receive in-school suspension (72.4%), out-of-school suspension (79.9%), and to be expelled (75.2%) compared to their peers (Office for Civil Rights).

Although boys of all races account for higher rates of discipline consequences than girls, Wallace et al. (2008) found the disparities between Black and White students are more significant among females. Black girls' risk of receiving exclusionary discipline consequences is high as Black girls are twice as likely to receive in-school and out-of-school suspensions than their female peers (Blake et al., 2011) and three times as likely to receive office referrals than

their White female peers (Morris & Perry, 2017). Recent data from the state of Georgia replicates these findings. In the 2017-18 school year, Black boys were 11.2% more likely to receive at least one out-of-school suspension, while Black girls were 15% more likely to receive at least one out-of-school suspension than their White peers (Office for Civil Rights).

Exclusionary discipline practices intensify disproportionalities. Exclusionary discipline refers to removing a student from an educational setting (i.e., in-school/out-of-school suspensions, suspensions from riding the bus, expulsions, disciplinary transfers to alternative schools, and referrals to law enforcement) for violations of school rules. Exclusionary discipline practices are not always reserved for serious offenses and may be used in response to a continuum of non-violent transgressions (e.g., dress code violations, disrespect, tardiness, and loitering). One study found that 95 percent of out-of-school suspensions were for non-violent, minor disruptions such as tardiness or disrespect (Skiba, 2000).

Exclusionary discipline begets further problems as it disrupts students' academic progress and increases the likelihood of disengagement, thereby elevating their risk of academic failure (Morris & Perry, 2017). Disciplined students are placed at a disadvantage as they must make up for missed material to catch up with their peers. Even when students are given the opportunity to complete schoolwork while serving punishment, students may not have the skills or sufficient support to successfully complete missed assignments (Kennedy-Lewis, 2013). Rather than teaching students behavioral expectations and regulation strategies, exclusionary discipline practices produce and perpetuate pre-existing academic challenges.

Zero-tolerance policies confine the flexibility of school administration in responding to situations of violence and aggression. Numerous school systems adopted zero-tolerance discipline policies during the early 1990s in an effort to reduce school violence (McAndrews,

2001). Zero-tolerance policies refer to a “philosophy or policy that mandates the application of predetermined consequences, most often severe and punitive in nature, that are intended to be applied regardless of the gravity of behavior, mitigating circumstances, or situational context” (American Psychological Association [APA] Zero-tolerance Task Force, 2008, p. 852). The predetermined consequences—typically suspensions—remove students from educational environments for behaviors that threaten the safety or academic advancement of members of the school body (Skiba, 2000). Supporters of zero-tolerance policies believed severe punishments would deter student misbehavior and keep schools safer. However, after several decades, evidence for this claim is lacking. The research demonstrates that not only have rates of exclusionary discipline risen (Skiba, 2014), but also students and teachers in schools with greater support for zero-tolerance reported lower feelings of safety at school, even after controlling for school characteristics associated with safety (Huang & Cornell, 2021).

Zero-tolerance policies have been criticized for disproportionately impacting students from minoritized backgrounds, specifically Black students. The American Psychological Association Zero-tolerance Taskforce concluded that implementing zero-tolerance policies did not improve school safety and may have widened the discipline gap between White students and students of color (APA, 2008). Findings indicate a significant increase in disciplinary consequences among students of all races but most significantly among Black students (Curran, 2016; Hoffman, 2014). Within two years following the implementation of zero-tolerance policies, recommendations for expulsions more than doubled for Black students, resulting in approximately an additional 700 days of lost instruction per year (Hoffman, 2014).

In addition to the negative impact on individual students, zero-tolerance policies may also contribute to the overrepresentation of Black youth in the criminal justice system, referred to as

the “school-to-prison pipeline.” The U.S. Department of Education’s 2014 report on school discipline demonstrated the positive association between suspensions (both in-school and out-of-school) and the increased risk for future arrest. Students who are out of school due to suspension or expulsion are more than two times as likely to come into contact with law enforcement (Cuellar & Markowitz, 2015), which might have long-term consequences for their education and well-being. For instance, during an out-of-school suspension, students have reduced supervision and increased opportunities to commit crimes. The effect of the relationship between school suspension and criminal offense is substantial for African American youth (Cuellar & Markowitz, 2015). Given these concerns, many educators and researchers have called for the abandonment of zero-tolerance policies in favor of more nuanced and evidence-based approaches to school discipline that focus on prevention, intervention, and restorative justice.

Restorative justice is an approach that focuses on repairing the harm that has been caused by criminal or delinquent behavior rather than solely on punishment. Restorative practices involve bringing together the offender, the victim, and other relevant stakeholders—such as community members and family members—to discuss the harm that has been caused, identify ways to repair that harm, and prevent future incidents from occurring. Implementing restorative justice practices effectively reduces student behavior referrals and suspensions by employing methods alternative to disciplinary actions (Stinchcomb et al., 2006). By investigating causal factors of an incident, restorative justice encourages school personnel to acknowledge differences in culture and life experiences leading to conflict, thereby reducing racial disproportionalities in discipline practices (C. Anderson et al., 2014). The emphasis of restorative justice is on the reparation of relationships following conflict by (a) collaborative decision-making, (b) accountability for harm, (c) engagement of family and community stakeholders, and

(d) reducing, preventing, and improving harmful actions by changing behavior and the conditions that caused the incident (Skiba, 2015).

Implementing and evaluating restorative justice practices is variable as it is a relatively new and philosophical approach to school discipline (Morrison, 2003). A systematic review identified ten studies that fit with the restorative justice framework, each reporting positive outcomes. Together, the findings demonstrated restorative justice implementation in schools improved social relationships and reduced discipline referrals (Katic et al., 2020). With regard to restorative justice's impact on discipline disparities, Gregory et al. (2018) found students who participated in restorative practices were less likely to receive out-of-school suspensions overall; however, Black students were still more likely to receive out-of-school suspensions when compared to their White peers. Thus, restorative justice is not a "fix-all" and may be a supplemental tool in ameliorating the evident disparities in educational contexts.

Peers

As youth enter adolescence, their interactions with peers become increasingly more impactful on their behavior, such as the phenomenon of peer-contagion, where individuals adopt behaviors and attitudes of those around them. This developmental period is notable for the upsurge in concern regarding one's reputation and status amongst peers. Further, students' relations with peers also become more hostile during this period (Kennedy-Lewis, 2013). The added pressure on social relationships and increased hostility creates tension, and students become increasingly concerned over "drama" (Kennedy-Lewis, 2013). To maintain desired perceptions by others, adolescents are pressured to conform to the normative behavior of the social group, a process referred to as socialization (Steinberg & Silverberg, 1986). Deviating from the norms of their peer group increases the risk of rejection, social isolation, and the

negative impact on self-esteem and overall well-being that often accompanies such rejection (Leary & Baumeister, 2000). According to the framework of researchers Cohen and Prinstein (2006), engagement in aggressive and risk-taking behaviors may stem partly from an inclination to imitate the actions that an individual perceives as being indicative of high status among their peers. This theory is supported by research findings from Hoover (1993), who demonstrated that individuals were more likely to be bullied by their peers who they perceived to have higher status. Thus, it can be inferred that engagement in aggressive behavior directed toward one's peers may be influenced by an individual's desire to imitate the behavior of those they perceive as popular.

The influence of peers is also more significant for girls than for boys. Research consistently demonstrates the critical role that peer influences have in shaping girls' aggressive behavior. For instance, environmental effects are significant for girls but not for boys in the development of physical aggression (Baker et al., 2008). Moreover, girls who display high rates of physical aggression typically do so in the presence of friends (Grotzinger & Crick, 1996). The amplifying influence of the peer group may be due to homophily, or selection effects, as youth seek affiliations with like-minded peers (Rudolph et al., 2014). Research findings reveal that bullies typically associate with others who engage in victimization, encouraging further engagement in bullying behavior (Espelage et al., 2003). Further, urban adolescent girls with strong peer connections demonstrate higher levels of violence perpetration than their less-connected peers (Shlafer et al., 2013). The authors posited that those who have a strong sense of connection to their peers might place more importance on the opinions and actions of their peers, making them more susceptible to negative peer influences, such as involvement in violent behavior. Another explanation behind these findings may be the importance of defending

friendships in the face of disrespect. There is a significant emphasis on the importance of loyalty in Black culture (Lloyd, 2005). Among a diverse school district, adolescent girls discussed the expectation of peer loyalty in conflicts (Letendre & Smith, 2011). Specifically, one expressed, “And if somebody talking about my friends behind their back and they my friends, and if my friends was to get in a fight, I’m not going to sit there and watch my friends fight. I will definitely hop in that” (Letendre & Smith, 2011, p. 53). In order to stick up for a friend, Black girls may perceive friends to be worth fighting for (Lloyd, 2005).

Conformity toward anti-social behavior peaks around the transition to high school (Berndt, 1979) which may be why displays of violence and aggression are highest amongst high school students (Grotperter & Crick, 1996; Irwin et al., 2021). Additionally, children's attitudes and beliefs regarding aggression shift to be more approving over time (Rigby & Slee, 1991). Among older children, in particular, aggressive behavior may be valued and used to maintain dominance within the peer group (Cillessen & Mayeux, 2004). Group norms show a similar developmental change, as high school students endorse pro-bullying behaviors as permissible (Salmivalli & Voeten, 2004). Students even suggest that pro-bullying behaviors are expected at times; it is more harmful to get in the way of conflict resolution by informing a teacher of the bullying or protecting the victim (Salmivalli & Voeten, 2004).

Individual

Individual-level predictors of aggression can be categorized by the perpetrator's motivation for employment. Proactive aggression is the display of aggression in anticipation of self-serving benefits, whereas reactive aggression is in response to a provocation or a blocked goal (Werner & Crick, 1999). Girls who experience social vulnerability may use reactive physical aggression in response to direct incitement (Lockwood, 1997). Employing reactive

aggression is associated with impulsivity, hostility, social anxiety, low peer status, and difficulties interpreting social cues in adolescence (Lahey & Waldman, 2017). The outcomes of proactive aggression are more severe. In childhood, proactive aggression is associated with delinquency, lower academic motivation, poor peer relationships, and hyperactivity; in adolescence, it is associated with a psychopathic personality, delinquency, and severe violent offending (Lahey & Waldman, 2017).

The emergence of aggressive behavior is complex. The diathesis-stress model posits that aggression develops as a result of environmental risk factors interacting with individual vulnerabilities. Specifically, individual vulnerabilities refer to various biological predispositions, including genetic, physiological, and temperamental factors (Pascual-Sagastizabal et al., 2021). For instance, an individual's biological predisposition of cortisol reactivity may affect their ability to regulate their emotional reactions to stressors in the environment (Barrios et al., 2017). Later renditions of Bronfenbrenner's theory reflected this dynamic interaction of individual factors and the environment. One of the significant evolutions in his theory was the acknowledgment that he had initially underestimated the significance of the individual's role in their own development and placed an excessive emphasis on contextual factors (Bronfenbrenner, 1989). Specifically, he recognized the individual as an active participant in shaping their development; this active role is demonstrated through proximal processes, the way in which genotypes are transformed into phenotypes. Proximal processes are the everyday interactions that shape human development within the broader ecological context (Bronfenbrenner, 1995). Bronfenbrenner incorporated the importance of proximal process into his theory, referring to it as Process-Person-Context-Time (PPCT) (1995).

Temperament is a core aspect of the person component in the PPCT model (Bronfenbrenner, 1995). Temperament refers to an individual's innate and relatively stable predispositions in areas such as emotional reactivity, sociability, activity level, and adaptability (Sanson et al., 2004). These traits are thought to be present from birth or early infancy and play a fundamental role in shaping an individual's personality and behavior over time. A review of temperament and social development characterizes temperament by three broad features: negative emotionality or reactivity (e.g., irritability, anger, or emotional intensity); self-regulation (of attention, behavior, emotions), and one's approach-withdrawal tendencies to novel situations (Sanson et al., 2004).

These temperament characteristics, especially high negative emotionality, contribute to externalizing behavior problems (Sanson et al., 2004). Negative emotionality is often regarded as a predisposition to exhibit anger and aggressive behavior. The work of Pascual-Sagastizabal and colleagues demonstrated the significance of negative emotionality in the development of aggression within the diathesis-stress framework. Specifically, the authors found that girls with high levels of negative emotionality (i.e., biological vulnerability) are more sensitive to harsh parenting practices (i.e., environmental stressors), contributing to explanations of their high levels of aggression (Pascual-Sagastizabal et al., 2021). Bronfenbrenner's emphasis on proximal processes highlights the transactional nature of the relationship between a child's temperament and their immediate environment, such that challenging behavior may evoke harsher responses. Further, the concept of evocative gene-environment correlation (rGE) underscores how children's heritable traits shape the environments in which they are raised. Longitudinal findings demonstrate that negative emotionality in early childhood evokes hostile parenting, creating a cycle of negative interactions, leading to later behavioral problems (Shewark et al., 2021).

Lastly, another individual contributor to victimization and/or aggression is youth identity development. Specifically, Black girls may turn to fighting as a means of self-expression and to assert their developing identity. Being a skilled fighter may be a means of gaining recognition and respect from their peers, thereby increasing their perceived status and capability within their community. Research has shown that mastering the skill of fighting and maintaining a reputation as a capable fighter is a highly valued aspect of the identity of urban adolescent girls (Jäggi & Kliwer, 2016). The importance of one's identity as a good fighter aligns with the "ghetto" identity, as described by Nikki Jones (2010) in her book "Between Good and Ghetto: African American Girls and Inner-City Violence." Jones argues that African American girls growing up in inner-city communities often adopt either a "good" or "ghetto" identity to navigate the danger of their environments. The "good" identity is associated with being well-behaved, studious, and respectful, while the "ghetto" identity is associated with being loud, aggressive, and tough. Girls who adopt the "ghetto" identity are more likely to learn how to fight and protect themselves. In contrast, those who adopt the "good" identity tend to form close relationships and turn to religion for support (Jones, 2010).

Current Study

The present study seeks to make sense of the perceptions and utilization of aggression among Black high school girls. The troubling statistics surrounding the victimization of Black girls reveal the unfortunate reality that schools may not always be a secure space for them. Nevertheless, the aforementioned literature indicates that aggression may serve as a crucial means of protection that Black girls employ to navigate the educational environment, ensuring their physical safety. Despite the negative connotations typically associated with aggression, for Black girls, it may be a necessary tool for survival in a hostile environment where they are more

likely to face violence and discrimination. Therefore, understanding the unique factors that shape Black girls' perceptions and use of aggression can provide valuable insights into how schools can better support and protect them.

While previous research has overlooked aggression among females, recent literature has attempted to bridge this gap in knowledge. Nonetheless, research on female aggression has not adequately examined the unique factors that influence the socialization of aggression, specifically among Black girls (Rivera-Maestre, 2015). Prior research has mainly been comparative and quantitative, which has failed to provide a comprehensive understanding of Black female aggression—the "why" behind it (Waldron, 2011). To address this gap, the current study focuses on the perspectives of caregivers to gain a deeper understanding of the underlying factors that influence aggressive behavior among Black girls. Semi-structured interviews were conducted with Black parents and caregivers, offering insight into the cultural, familial, and social contexts that shape how aggression is perceived, reinforced, or discouraged. Given the poor psycho-social outcomes for students who engage in or are targets of aggressive behavior, this study's findings can provide valuable context for educators and school-based mental health practitioners with insights into how to intervene and break the connection between victimization and maladjustment (Mihalas, 2008). The current study seeks to answer the following questions:

1. What do caregivers believe are the antecedents and consequences of Black high school girls' displays of aggression?
2. How do caregivers interpret Black high school girls' displays of aggression, and how do they think schools interpret and respond to the same behavior?

CHAPTER 2

METHOD

Epistemological Approach

This study was guided by a constructivist epistemology, which assumes that as reality is subjective, knowledge is constructed through individuals' experiences, beliefs, and social interactions (Pretorius, 2024). Constructivism aims to explore the diverse range of perspectives about a topic, rather than uncover a singular, objective truth. From this perspective, participants' accounts are understood as shaped not only by their social and cultural contexts but also by the dynamics of the interview process itself. Rather than striving to eliminate subjectivity, researchers actively contribute to the construction of meaning by recognizing their positionality and interpretations as integral to the research process, thereby enabling richer, more nuanced understandings of complex social phenomena (Braun & Clarke, 2021a; Pillow, 2003). This epistemological stance informed the use of reflexive thematic analysis (RTA), which aligns with constructivism by emphasizing meaning as co-constructed through interaction, interpretation, and reflexivity, rather than discovered in fixed or objective categories (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2013, 2021a).

Participants

Participants included caregivers of 9-12th grade female students who self-identified as Black (e.g., African American or Caribbean-American). The final sample size of 15 participants was determined in alignment with RTA principles, prioritizing richness and depth of meaning over the pursuit of saturation as a marker of adequacy (Braun & Clarke, 2021b). Saturation, often

defined as the point when no new codes, themes, or insights emerge, or “information redundancy” (Guest et al., 2006), is conceptually misaligned with RTA, which views meaning as constructed through ongoing interpretation rather than discovery. Instead, the goal was to develop an analytically robust dataset capable of supporting thoughtful, in-depth analysis. Thus, the sample size ($n = 15$) was based on an assessment of the data to provide sufficient complexity, variation, and nuance to meaningfully address the research questions (Davis & Morahan, 2024).

To be eligible for participation, individuals were required to meet the following criteria: (a) be 18 years of age or older; (b) be the custodial parent or guardian of a Black adolescent female currently enrolled in 9th through 12th grade who lived majority-time in the caregiver’s home; (c) the adolescent daughter reported having received at least one office referral for a physical altercation at school; (d) the adolescent daughter had not been diagnosed with a severe mental health disorder (e.g., schizophrenia, bipolar disorder, post-traumatic stress disorder); (e) be willing to participate in the study; and (f) be able to speak, read, and understand English. Participants included ($n = 15$) caregivers of Black high school girls. In line with a constructivist approach (Lincoln & Guba, 2016; Pretorius, 2024), demographic data were not formally collected, as the emphasis was on how participants constructed meaning through their experiences rather than on predefined identity categories. However, based on interview content, the sample included mothers, fathers, and sibling caregivers.

Recruitment

Following approval by the University of Georgia’s Institutional Review Board (IRB), I began recruiting participants through a combination of strategies including social media advertisements, word-of-mouth referrals, snowball sampling approach, and community-based efforts such as posting and passing out fliers in local businesses, libraries, and other public

spaces frequented by families and adolescents. Lastly, I also recruited through Prolific, an online research platform connecting researchers with eligible study respondents. Individuals interested in participating were directed to the screening survey to confirm eligibility and obtain consent for participation. Following completion of the individual interview, participants were compensated \$75 for their time.

Measures

Inclusion Criterion Questionnaire

Individuals interested in participating in the present study were directed to complete a questionnaire to determine if they met the inclusion criteria. The questionnaire was administered online using Qualtrics, a secure web-based platform for survey distribution and data collection. Participants provided consent to participate in the study and shared their emails for the purpose of scheduling individual interviews (see Appendix A).

Interview Protocol

The interview protocol (see Appendix B) was guided by the Social-Ecological Diathesis-Stress model to capture the multiple ecological dimensions influencing aggression among Black high school girls. Individual semi-structured interviews with caregivers were designed to explore how they interpret and respond to their daughters' experiences with aggression in school settings. The interview protocol sought to elicit caregivers' perspectives across multiple ecological dimensions of their daughters' lives, including individual factors, family dynamics, peer relationships, school environment, and broader sociocultural influences. Lastly, the protocol sought to understand caregivers' interpretations of the antecedents and consequences of aggression, including factors they viewed as contributing to the conflict and the outcomes that followed at home and school.

At the start of each interview, I welcomed participants, reminded them of the study's purpose and goals, and informed them that they could opt out at any time without affecting their compensation. I acknowledged my positionality as a White woman and addressed the racial and cultural differences between myself and the participants. I briefly shared my investment in understanding caregivers' perspectives on how Black girls are perceived and treated in school. I expressed recognition that our differences could impact what participants felt comfortable with and encouraged participants to share only what felt appropriate to them. With their consent, interviews were digitally recorded. I discussed confidentiality, anonymity, and the limitations of qualitative interviewing, and informed participants that all identifying information would be removed or altered during transcription and that pseudonyms would be used in all written materials.

Interviews began with open-ended questions about how raising a Black daughter has shaped their caregiving practices, prompting reflection on identity, socialization, and the unique challenges their daughters may face. Caregivers were also asked to describe their daughter's temperament and personality to provide insight into individual factors that may influence behavior. Additional questions explored perceptions of peer interactions, conflict, and social dynamics that may shape behavioral responses.

To understand the environmental context within the microsystem, caregivers were asked to reflect on their daughter's school climate, perceptions of safety, disciplinary policies, and how incidents of aggression were handled by educators and administrators. Specific attention was paid to caregivers' interactions with the school and their perceptions of how school staff responded to incidents of physical aggression. Caregivers also described how they addressed

their daughter's altercation at home and the guidance they provided with regard to conflict resolution.

Caregivers were asked to share their views on how race and gender may shape their daughters' experiences with conflict and aggression, as well as their treatment within school settings. These questions were designed to examine macrosystemic influences, such as racism and gendered stereotypes, and how caregivers interpret these dynamics in the context of their daughter's day-to-day experiences. Lastly, participants were asked to offer recommendations for how schools can better support Black girls in constructively navigating conflict.

Reflexivity Statement

As a cisgender, straight White woman, I approach this research with an awareness of the privilege I hold as someone from a non-minoritized background. My academic and professional work has centered on improving mental health and academic outcomes for Black youth, and I view this focus as one way to leverage my positionality in service of equity and justice. I became aware of these dynamics early on as an elementary student in Atlanta Public Schools, where I was struck by the stark contrast between what was expected of me and what was expected of my Black peers. This early realization sparked a long-standing commitment to addressing racial inequities. After hearing the assertion that "Racism is not a Black person's problem, it is a White person's problem. Thus, it is a White person's responsibility to solve," I felt more certain of my responsibility to engage in this work and to contribute meaningfully.

Reflexivity is a critical component of qualitative research, involving the ongoing practice of critically examining how a researcher's positionality, values, and assumptions influence the research process (Berger, 2015; Braun & Clarke, 2006). Reflexivity promotes transparency by requiring acknowledgment of how the researcher shapes and is shaped by the study's design,

data collection, and interpretation (Pillow, 2003). Throughout this study, I have actively reflected on how my identity, assumptions, and values might influence data collection, analysis, and interpretation. During the coding process, I kept analytic memos to reflect on emerging patterns, question my assumptions, and document interpretive decisions throughout the analysis. I also engaged in ongoing dialogue and consultation with Black female colleagues, my co-coder—an international graduate student of African descent—and my dissertation chair, whose insights supported reflexivity and helped ensure that my interpretations remained grounded in participants' voices rather than shaped by my projections.

This research intentionally resists the deficit framing often applied to Black youth in the literature. Instead, I focus on the strength and resilience of Black girls by amplifying the voices of those who know them deeply and advocate for them daily. While I cannot personally relate to many of the experiences shared, I aim to use my position to ensure their voices are conveyed with the context and complexity that research too often overlooks. This study offers an opportunity to rethink how Black girls' aggression is framed, moving away from pathology and toward a more accurate understanding that accounts for the broader contexts shaping their experiences.

Data Analysis

I analyzed the qualitative data from the semi-structured interviews using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA), an interpretive and generative method for identifying, analyzing, and making meaning of patterns within textual data (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2012, 2021a). I followed the six phases outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006): (1) familiarization with the data, (2) generating initial codes, (3) searching for themes, (4) reviewing themes, (5) defining and naming themes, and (6) producing the report. Although presented as sequential, I approached the process

iteratively, often revisiting earlier phases as new insights emerged. For example, refining themes often prompted adjustments to initial codes, and familiarization with the data continued throughout the analysis. This recursive process reflects the interpretive nature of RTA and supports deeper engagement with the data.

Pre-Coding

I transcribed all interviews verbatim using Otter.ai, an online transcription service that provides automated transcripts of audio recordings. To ensure accuracy and minimize transcription errors, I cross-referenced all transcripts generated by Otter.ai with the original audio recordings and edited them prior to analysis. During this process, I also replaced names with pseudonyms and removed identifying details to protect confidentiality. I closely read each transcript multiple times to develop familiarity with the content and begin analytic immersion. I documented initial impressions, recurring ideas, and salient participant reflections using analytic memos. Once finalized, I uploaded the transcripts into NVivo 15 to support organization and coding.

Coding

I analyzed interview transcripts using Reflexive Thematic Analysis (RTA) (Braun & Clarke, 2021a), which emphasizes the researcher's active role in identifying patterns of meaning within the data. Both inductive and deductive approaches were used in code development. This combined approach allows for a more nuanced understanding of the data, as it integrates the theoretical underpinnings of the research questions while remaining open to unexpected patterns and particularly salient experiences (Braun & Clarke, 2012). Consistent with a constructivist perspective, this approach highlights participants' interpretations and the experiences they find most meaningful, reflecting how they understand their world (Burns et al., 2022).

Following the familiarization period, I generated initial codes at the semantic level, reflecting both what was said and the context in which it was shared. Consistent with RTA, coding was treated as an active, interpretive process rather than a descriptive task (Braun & Clarke, 2021a). Thus, as the analysis progressed, codes evolved from descriptive labels to more latent, conceptual categories that captured shared meaning. The codebook was continuously refined, with new codes added, merged, or adjusted to capture emerging patterns and ensure alignment with the research questions.

To enhance reflexivity and deepen meaning gathered from participant insights, I engaged in collaborative discussions with a co-coder, who independently reviewed and coded a subset of transcripts (20%) at multiple points throughout the coding process. Analytic memos were used to document changes, areas of overlap or confusion, and general evolving insights gathered through engagement with data. These meetings were not aimed at achieving consensus, but instead focused on exploring assumptions and alternative interpretations, clarifying code definitions and boundaries, and supporting ongoing refinement throughout the coding process.

Consistent with RTA, the goal of this collaboration was not to achieve inter-coder reliability, but to deepen interpretation through ongoing dialogue about the data (Byrne, 2022). Some qualitative traditions prioritize consistency and agreement between coders as a sign of objectivity; however, training an individual to code a text in the same way does not reduce the inherent subjectivity in qualitative data interpretation (Yardley, 2008). As researchers O'Connor and Joffe stipulate, the role of the qualitative researcher is not to uncover universal truths, but instead to utilize theoretical knowledge to interpret and communicate the different meanings people attach to their experiences (2020). In RTA, researcher bias is seen as unavoidable and inherent to the research process (Braun & Clarke, 2021a). Instead of trying to reduce bias to

uncover a single "accurate" way of viewing the data, RTA acknowledges that all data interpretation is subjective, embracing the researcher's active role in meaning-making within data analysis. Thus, practices like inter-coder reliability, which prioritizes consistency over interpretation, are conceptually misaligned with RTA (Braun & Clarke, 2019, 2021a).

After multiple cycles of coding and numerous codebook revisions with the co-coder, a final codebook was established (see Appendix C), and a final round of coding was then completed. Final codes were reviewed and organized into broader patterns of meaning. Themes were developed by grouping related codes, capturing shared experiences across participants (see Figure 1). Of note, these themes were not "discovered" within the data but were actively constructed through iterative cycles of coding, reflection, and interpretation. This approach aligns with the assumptions of RTA, which views thematic development as a process shaped by the researcher's ongoing engagement with the data, rather than the identification of pre-existing patterns waiting to be found (Braun & Clarke, 2006, 2013).

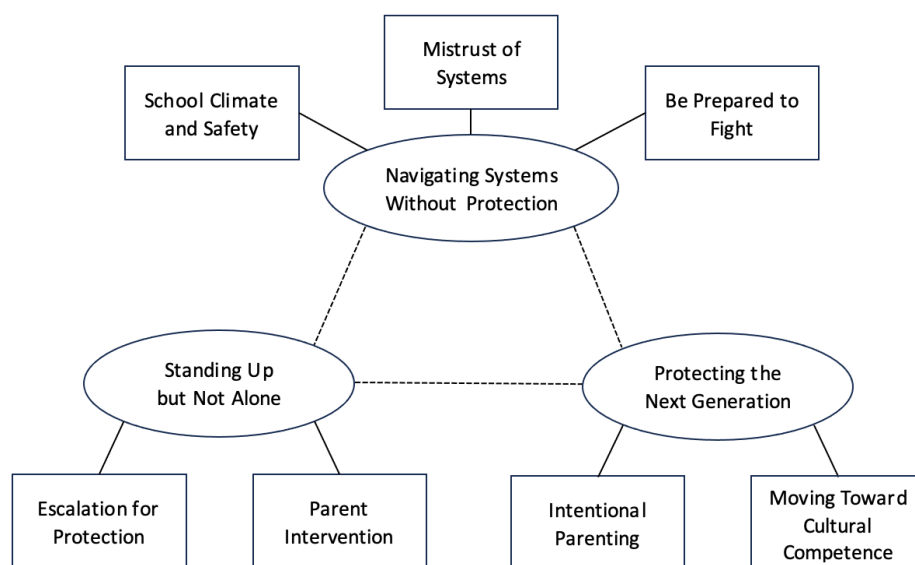


Figure 1

Identified Themes

CHAPTER 3

RESULTS

Parents and caregivers of Black high school girls highlighted several aspects influencing their daughters' experiences at school and with conflict. Three overarching themes were identified—Navigating Systems without Protection, Standing Up but Not Alone, and Protecting the Next Generation—reflecting how caregivers make sense of their daughters' behavior, the role of school systems, the influence of social dynamics, and the broader cultural and racialized contexts in which these conflicts occur.

Navigating Systems without Protection

Caregivers described a pervasive sense that schools, and broader societal systems, are not structured to support the needs of Black girls; thus, Black girls are left to navigate school environments that fail to provide safety, meaningful support, or fair treatment. Institutional responses to harm are often insufficient, ineffective, or biased, deepening the vulnerability of Black high school girls rather than alleviating it. In the absence of meaningful protection, caregivers reflected on how their daughters are often left to navigate conflict on their own, reinforcing concerns about school climate and deepening mistrust in institutional systems.

School Climate and Safety

Caregivers described schools as increasingly dangerous spaces for all youth, particularly in light of rising threats like school shootings and peer violence, both within school and beyond. For example, Taylor described warning her daughter to be cautious, sharing:

“I talked to her about being careful, because honestly, these days, a lot of school shootings, school stabbings... but the honest truth is, is that even if someone doesn't get

weapons into the school, after school, when there's, you know, there's no one to assist. You know, children have weapons off campus. They follow you home. They fight you on the way home, so they don't get in trouble at the school."

Other caregivers emphasized how this lack of safety forced them to seek alternative forms of protection. Olivia, for instance, expressed frustration that her daughter felt the need to take a self-defense class just to feel safe returning to school:

"I mean, having to talk to my daughter about, you know, self-defense. And then she got into over the summer, she went and got into a self-defense class... for a teenager to have to, had to go to self-defense to feel safe going to school the next year is ridiculous."

Caregivers also shared that schools often fail to act preventively. London reflected that school staff tend to downplay interpersonal conflict, which leads to missed opportunities for prevention. As she explained, *"There's this stigma around girls' conflict... they kind of minimize the actual conflict. And the stigma around girls being really emotional, they're not, you know, recognizing the actual problem at hand, and just being very dismissive."* Jordan offered a concrete example of this dynamic, describing a situation in which her daughter made her teacher aware of rising tension with a female classmate:

"My daughter let the teacher know, but the teacher... She didn't respond in a way that would have stopped, you know, the fight. You know, I know teachers are busy with teaching and other things like that, but I don't think she handled that right, because it could have been avoided."

Taylor echoed this concern, voicing frustration with how staff failed to respond until a situation escalated:

"We also alerted the teachers and the principal of the situation. But you know, the principal and the teachers can't be with my child 24/7... until they are caught, until they are, until something big happens, you know, there's no action, yeah, there's no warning. There's no call to parents and notify the parents, 'Hey, your child may be picking, you know, or bullying this other child there.' There's nothing until, you know, there is physical engagement between the two."

Despite having raised concerns with the school, Taylor shared that staff did not step in to prevent the situation from escalating. As she explained, *"When she was pushed, she fought back. And*

even though it was a defensive situation for her, she was also disciplined for her participation, you know, so it was, it was the self-defense, you know, she was disciplined.” Other caregivers described similar situations in which schools failed to intervene early and later disciplined their daughters for defending themselves. As Taylor referred to it, her daughter was “*caught up in the sweep,*” as school staff apply zero-tolerance policies without considering the context or recognizing actions as forms of self-defense. Olivia expressed frustration with what she saw as an unfair consequence for her daughter’s attempt to protect herself:

“She was downstairs by herself, walking around on her free period, or whatever. And she said, some boy even walked up on her, cornered her, and tried to touch her. And we brought [it] to the school’s attention, but she got in trouble because, you know, he cornered her, and she lashed out. He got hit, and so she got in school detention, and he got sent home for a day. But why are you punishing someone protecting themselves?”

In addition to concerns about physical safety and disciplinary responses, caregivers also spoke to the emotional toll of unsupportive school climates. Talia, an older sister who had taken on a caregiver role after her parents’ divorce, shared how school staff failed to recognize the broader context of her sister’s behavior and needs:

“I feel like the teachers could be a little bit more supportive, like knowing what the situation is, and they don’t really give that, and they’re not really, like, lenient with what’s going on, like, say she’s not doing her work, or she’s missing class, like they’re not trying to help her, they’re not pushing her. You’re just like bashing her for it.”

Talia also reflected on how quickly students can become labeled, emphasizing that “*once you get that stigma of being the bad kid... it just follows you,*” shaping how they’re treated moving forward.

Mistrust of Systems

Caregivers described a deep mistrust of school systems, rooted in patterns of differential treatment and biased interpretations of their daughters’ behavior. As Black girls were often seen as aggressors, caregivers raised concerns regarding how schools’ biases shape their perceptions

and responses to conflict. Sydney described a pattern of biased surveillance, reflecting on a conflict her daughter experienced in which she was pushed by a White peer. When her daughter pushed back, she faced disciplinary consequences. In response to a follow-up question about whether the White girl received any consequences, Sydney shared:

“No, it was definitely just my daughter... The excuse is always, ‘well, I didn't see them, I just saw you.’ And it's like, how was that always the case? How are you always just seeing her do something... Nobody's just out the blue, just always just doing something. I'm not saying that people don't pick on people and things of that nature, but... how is she always the one seen to do something?... ‘Oh, well, we just seen you turn around and push her. We didn't see her.’ And it's like, I don't believe that. I feel that that's why you're in the hallway, because you're observing everybody. And so, if you can pinpoint her doing that, you seen what the other girl did. And that's why she retaliates... That's not something you just, ‘oh, I'm going turn around and push somebody.’ You know? It doesn't even make sense.”

Sydney's comments reflect a broader concern voiced by other caregivers: that schools are not neutral spaces, but ones in which Black girls are closely monitored, unfairly judged, and subject to harsher consequences. Sydney further underscored the role of racial bias in school discipline, noting: *“Sometimes it's just always, ‘oh, I know it's you just because you're Black. I know you were the one.’ And that's not always the case.”* This sentiment was echoed by other caregivers, who described how Black girls are often presumed to be at fault rather than being given the benefit of the doubt. As London explained, *“If you get in a fight with a person of another race and you're Black, everyone already believes that it's the Black person that started that... They come off as the instigators most of the time.”*

Caregivers reflected on how systemic racial bias influences the way Black girls' behavior is perceived in schools; rather than being understood in context, these behaviors are frequently misinterpreted through a racialized lens and mischaracterized as disrespectful, combative, defiant, or aggressive. Taylor shared, *“[Being Black] comes with sometimes a quick anger to fight back, but that's because they take so much where they can't fight back, and then... the*

explosion comes, and then it's deemed angry... Even if it's only self-defense, it's deemed aggressive." Imani echoed this idea, noting how even assertiveness can be misunderstood, and described how she prepares her daughter to navigate these perceptions: *"Different people have different interpretations of things, right? You may feel like you are defending yourself, speaking up for yourself... but that can come across as you being aggressive to someone else."* Other caregivers emphasized that it's not just anger or self-defense that gets misread; confidence, intelligence, and independence can also be perceived as threatening. Adriana explained, *"If you're smart and you're confident and you show a certain level of independence, I feel like sometimes, for a young Black girl, [that] comes off as aggression, and it's not. That's not at all what the case is."*

Schools' tendency to respond rather than prevent was a major contributor to caregivers' mistrust in the system. Rather than offering meaningful support, caregivers described schools as neglecting girls' needs and defaulting to punitive responses. Many expressed frustration that school staff rarely considered the context behind a student's behavior, focusing instead on reactive discipline. As Adriana explained:

"The school district is not necessarily, or the administration is not really asking, like, you know, why are you late to school every day? Or why did you want to fight this little girl in the bathroom? ... It's more like, 'okay, you always picking on people, you always got attitude, so we going to suspend you,' or 'we going to give you, you know, alternative school,' and not really getting to the questions of why things are happening and why these children are responding in a way that they are and that that is disproportion."

Be Prepared to Fight

In the absence of meaningful support from schools, caregivers described a reality in which Black girls were expected to protect themselves—physically, emotionally, and socially. Caregivers often described their daughters' displays of aggression as strategic responses to threats and unsafe conditions. Caregivers spoke about preparing their daughters to defend

themselves as essential, noting the limitations of school intervention when deeper issues go unaddressed. As Brielle explained, *“Teachers can only do so much... I feel like they are doing their best to keep the violence down, but again, it starts from home.”* Adriana also emphasized the importance of preparing her daughter to defend herself, recognizing that not all children are raised with the same values or expectations.

“I’ve always told her, I was like, don’t start a fight. But I was like, ‘don’t let people hit you either.’ And like, ‘fight like by you have to defend yourself.’ And so, we’ve always taught her to defend herself. Like her daddy goes over, you know, he’s like, teaching her how to punch and stuff like that, just in case, because we don’t know. I wish everybody had the same upbringing and the same, you know, faith-based households and, you know, things like that. But that’s not the case. And I can’t tell you what other people do in their houses or how other parents raise their children. So, for us, like, just be on the safe side.”

For many, aggression was not framed as unwarranted or as a disproportionate reaction but as a form of self-preservation. Nia explained, *“If you don’t stand up for yourself, then they’re going to constantly be on you all the time... and then you have to walk around in fear or whatever, so you have to stand up.”* Taylor echoed this sentiment, sharing that her daughter was being bullied by other girls and avoiding conflict was not working: *“She finally had to engage. But after that situation, she didn’t have trouble anymore.”*

Caregivers acknowledged the cultural and social pressure to maintain a strong reputation. Imani reflected on how aggression among Black girls is often performative as it is used to avoid being seen as weak or vulnerable: *“No one wants to look like a pushover... they’re trying to take on these different personalities... just being afraid of coming across a way that makes them look weak.”* She described how this also played out in her daughter’s experience: *“She wanted to prove, like, ‘I’m quiet, I’m to myself, I’m chill or whatever, but don’t push me, because I’m not the one.’ So, she had to kind of prove herself, um, to be, you know, that’s not the case.”* Alexis described this pressure as part of a broader cultural narrative, deeply ingrained in the Black

community. She spoke to the expectation that strength must be demonstrated and defended, especially in response to perceived disrespect:

“Yeah, it can get crazy in the Black neighborhood, everyone wants to prove that they're bad. You can't talk to my kid like that. You can't teach my kid that. You can't tell my kid what to do. I'm gonna get my mother on you. That's the stigma that within the Black culture... I gotta prove that I'm badder than you. Yeah, I need to take the win. I want the trophy, the imaginary trophy that doesn't exist.”

Standing Up but Not Alone

Caregivers of Black high school girls described efforts to strike a balance between encouraging their daughters to navigate challenges independently and recognizing the limits of individual power within school systems shaped by bias. Caregivers described a process of escalating tactics that Black girls may use to navigate conflict or harmful situations. While many emphasized the importance of assertiveness, they also acknowledged the risks Black girls face when advocating for themselves. As they reflected on the power differentials their daughters encounter—not only with peers but also with teachers and school staff—caregivers underscored the importance of staying actively involved and ready to step in when needed.

Escalation for Protection

Caregivers emphasized the importance of teaching their daughters to begin with the most measured response when managing conflict and escalate only when necessary. First and foremost, caregivers encouraged the avoidance of conflict. As Talia shared, *“I'll tell her to walk away, to not engage in it, to pretty much just like, breathe and calm yourself down before it gets there.”* Caregivers also emphasized the importance of emotional regulation, not only as a means of de-escalation, but as a protective strategy in environments where Black girls' behavior is often scrutinized or misinterpreted. Sydney explained:

“But I have told her sometimes in life, and that's even as an adult for myself, sometimes you don't always have to respond... because even as an adult, there are times we'll be looked at a certain kind of way. And sometimes, yes, it is a cause to defend yourself. And

sometimes it's not. Sometimes it's just to walk away, you know, because if that's the case we'll be defending ourselves for everything you know... So that's what I'm trying to teach her now... just walk away from the situation."

Caregivers recognized that avoiding conflict is not always feasible and encouraged their daughters to seek support from adults when needed. Imani emphasized the importance of turning to someone in a position to help, rather than escalating tension among peers:

"Just walk away... find a teacher or an administrator or, you know, some adult... Someone that's like, not a student... because your classmate, your peers? No, they just as slow as you. So, you don't want to go to them... Go to an adult, someone with a developed frontal lobe."

Caregivers also taught their daughters to speak up when necessary and advocate for themselves when confronted with unfair treatment. Self-advocacy was framed as essential, especially when faced with bullying or exclusion. As Kira explained, *"We're not aggressive people in my household, but like I said, we're also not going to let anyone just bully us."* Olivia encouraged her daughter not to stay silent: *"Don't let people push you around because you're quiet... If it comes down to it, say something."* Similarly, Adriana underscored the need for assertiveness as a way to protect one's sense of safety and autonomy: *"Stand up for yourself, say something. Don't let these girls bully you and put you into a space where you're not comfortable and you feel like it's unsafe to go to school."*

Even with efforts to de-escalate, caregivers acknowledged that situations could reach a point where self-defense became necessary. Rashad stressed this to his daughter, clarifying, *"Self-defense should be the last mechanism of defense if all other defensive barriers have been broken."* Jordan shared a similar message, telling her daughters that self-defense must be justified: *"They have to have a valid reason... It has to be a threat... You have to have no other choice."* Caregivers identified physical contact as the threshold that justified a physical response in self-defense. As Camille explained, her daughter *"knows that if somebody puts their hands on*

her, she has the right to defend herself.” Across these reflections, caregivers underscored that while fighting was not encouraged, neither was victimization. Malik expressed, *“She can’t just stand there and take a beating from somebody that’s bullying her... We definitely tell her to defend herself if she has to.”* Alexis echoed this belief, delivering a powerful message to her daughter about survival as a last resort:

“If you just have no other choice but to defend yourself, be the one to tell the story... You fight for your life... be the one to tell me the story... Don't ever give up without a fight if it comes to that... Fight for your life... get home to me.”

Parent Intervention

Even as caregivers encouraged their daughters to advocate for themselves, many emphasized the importance of stepping in when necessary. This involvement was seen as a critical aspect of parental protection and advocacy, particularly within systems where Black girls’ concerns are often dismissed or misjudged. Sydney captured this balance, saying: *“Yes, I want you to be able to stand up for yourself. But sometimes I may need to go further that you can’t do.”* She reflected on the difference it can make when an adult intervenes on a child’s behalf, noting *“If I’m the one handling it, you’re not always the one looked at as being aggressive... So, I do try to tell her to let me handle it.”* Similarly, Adriana pointed to the limits children face in resolving conflicts independently, especially within systems where power is unequally distributed. She underscored the structural disadvantage her daughter holds as a Black girl in school stating, *“Get home and come tell me, because then I can fight it and you can’t.”*

Many caregivers described the necessity of intervening on their daughters’ behalf, especially when self-advocacy was difficult or ineffective. Olivia illustrated this need for parental involvement, recalling, *“freshman year, she didn't really, she didn't really stand up for herself at all. We had to come step in a lot... had to be at the school bus. ‘Hey, you know, leave her alone.’”* Olivia explained how these experiences shaped the message she continues to

reinforce with her daughter, stating, *“I always tell her, especially now, I tell her, you know, come to me and I will handle it.”* She also recalled reaching out to the school with questions and concerns, pressing for clarity and support: *“I went to the school, and I talked to them like, you know, ‘what can I do? What do I need to do? What are y’all gonna do to make sure it doesn’t happen again?’”* Kira described a similar approach, emphasizing the importance of a stepwise process for resolving conflict: *“I tell her first to try and contact an adult... But if that doesn’t work, her next approach is to contact me. Then, as a parent, I’m going to go and handle it myself.”* She noted the school’s limited response when concerns were raised about a boy constantly picking at her daughter on the school bus: *“I would contact the school, and let the principal know what my daughter has told me. They’ll just be like, ‘Well, I understand, but we can’t pinpoint who’s the main aggressor’... There was never anything done about it.”* Eventually, she intervened directly: *“I decided to go up to the school myself... I was picking her up from school, and she pointed out the guy. So, I had a talk with him, a one-on-one talk.”* While Kira suspected the boy’s behavior may have stemmed from a crush, she noted that following their conversation, the harassment stopped.

After the school failed to intervene to protect her daughter from harassment, Kira spoke about the importance of daily check-ins to ensure the harassment did not continue: *“Each day, when she would come home, I would ask her, like, Has he said anything? Has he done anything?... she knows I’m gonna get to the bottom of it.”* In addition to direct advocacy, other caregivers described emotional support as a central form of intervention. Several recalled that changes in affect often alerted them to potential challenges their daughters were facing in the school setting. Adriana described returning from a work trip and immediately sensing something was off: *“I was like, What’s wrong with you? ... I literally had to stand or sit in her room for 30*

minutes. I said, I'm not leaving until you tell me what's going on with you." Adriana's persistence created space for her daughter to open up about the bullying she was experiencing from older peers. For Sydney, a decline in academic performance raised concern:

"She was doing honor roll, and then... 'okay, your grades are dropping a little. Is everything okay? Or do you need a tutor?' ... I started to realize that, okay, no, it's because you are feeling a little way at school and you're no longer confident just within yourself. You don't even want to do anything or be there."

Emotional monitoring emerged as an active and deliberate parenting strategy. In response to schools' failure to protect their daughters, caregivers shared their effort to remain connected, responsive, and protective even when they could not physically intervene. Sydney noted that the strongest form of protection for her daughter is her attention:

"I know I can't always be there and I'm not going to know everything, but I just, my job, because I am a single parent, is that I want to protect you as much as I can, and so the best way to do that is to pay attention to you. Even with my busy life, I still, you know, and I'm not going to say I'm perfect all the time with that, but that's something that I always strive to do, is pay attention to different mood changes and things like that, because that is very important."

Protecting the Next Generation

Caregivers described conscious efforts to prepare their daughters to navigate a complex social world and to mitigate the harmful effects of racism and bias. Caregivers drew from their own experiences to both equip their daughters with confidence, resilience, and cultural pride, and to advocate for change within the systems their daughters must navigate. Recognizing their daughters as the next generation of Black individuals, caregivers utilized strategies of racial socialization, intentional emotional support, and recommendations to foster greater cultural competence within schools.

Intentional Parenting

Caregivers frequently discussed intentional efforts to instill confidence and resilience to prepare their daughters to face societal challenges rooted in racism and prejudice. These practices reflected elements of racial socialization, as caregivers aimed to equip their daughters with tools to navigate a racially biased world while affirming their identity and worth. Alexis illustrated this approach through deliberate emotional reinforcement: *“I pour into her on the daily. ‘You’re beautiful, you’re smart, you’re intelligent.’ I overly pour into her... Overly love... overly encourage her, not because of her just being a Black girl, just because it’s me as a parent.”* Alexis also highlighted the underlying fear driving this effort:

“I fear she will run into situations where she won’t be invited or approved of because of the color of her skin. She might be overlooked because she is a chocolate girl... I tell her she has to work twice as hard.”

Caregivers also described efforts to psychologically build their daughters up by fostering confidence, resilience, and inner strength. London acknowledged the necessity of preparing her daughter to withstand external pressures, articulating, *“I always tell her things like, ‘You have to be strong enough to not feel intimidated by what your peers are saying.’”* Further, caregivers’ efforts to combat negative stereotypes, reflected the broader process of racial socialization, as seen in Talia’s message to her sister: *“I try to teach her, ‘You’re strong, you can’t really let those stereotypes get to you.’ If you raise your voice or get angry because something happened, you’re labeled aggressive. I teach her that’s not who you are.”* Adriana extended this idea by stressing collective cultural pride as a protective factor, sharing, *“As a culture, we have to have pride in ourselves because if we don’t, the world will tear us down. We must maintain a certain level of confidence and appreciation for ourselves just to make it through.”*

Many caregivers drew directly from personal experiences to inform their parenting.

Rashad described himself as a “personal guide” for his daughter, noting, *“I use my own experience to help her navigate, so she can avoid the pitfalls I didn't. I am her headlights at night. I didn't have those, and I ran into plenty of tunnels.”* Sydney reflected on her upbringing and the expectations placed on her as a Black woman:

“With my own mom... I would say she was a little harder [on me], you know, [she] wanted [me] to be more independent, and just not really take anything... I think that that's also where, because I hear that a lot, where, you know, the Black woman being aggressive... It's not so much that I'm that way, but it's just because of the situation that we're put in, we feel like we'd have no choice but to defend ourselves... and then it's looked at like we're being so aggressive. And that's not really the case... I don't necessarily want to be I just, you know, have to be that way, otherwise I feel like I'm being taken advantage of... or just not treated right.”

She noted that these experiences shaped her motivations to instill her daughter with resilience:

“Being a Black woman and having a Black daughter, sometimes I feel like I have to teach her to have thicker skin... Because, just the stereotype or even my own experiences... I want her to be able to handle situations and cope with whatever she may go through.”

Caregivers also shared their efforts to approach discipline with connection and coaching rather than control. Rashad described a strategy he developed with his daughter, which he calls “anger deflation.” He explained, *“Anytime she gets upset... document it down. Write down the reason why she got upset, and then a solution... a good solution and a bad solution to make her choose between the two... [see the] potential outcome between the two.”* He emphasized the importance of understanding his daughter's language and emotional signals, adding, *“These kids like to call it crashing out... If you hear a child say, ‘I'm about to crash out,’ then that's a good time to intervene... I call it anti-crashing out.”* For Rashad, recognizing and responding to those cues allows him to stay connected to his daughter while helping her regulate her emotions. Similarly, Alexis described taking a more connected and emotionally attuned approach to

discipline, rooted in her desire to break generational cycles. She spoke about the ways her own experiences have informed a shift toward a more open and supportive parenting style:

“I come from a household where discipline was whoopings and a lot of yelling... From healing my inner kid and becoming a parent, I have taken [a different approach] on the discipline thing... So, instead of the whoopings, because I felt like it made me an angrier person. I felt like it did not help the situation. It just only made me more aggressive, we speak about things, we talk. I allow her to be open with me. I allow her to voice her opinion... But just because of the way I was raised in my household, I necessarily don't do whoopings. Um, we do more of a coaching lesson.”

Caregivers' reflections clearly conveyed the intentionality behind their efforts to serve as protective buffers against societal harm. Alexis further emphasized the importance of maintaining a supportive relationship, articulating, *“I want my child to know that I'm her protector... I don't want her to say, 'I can't tell my mom.' I want her to say, 'I need to call my mom.'”* Across reflections, caregivers conveyed a strong sense of purpose in their parenting, aiming to empower their daughters by instilling the foundational strength to navigate societal challenges and resist internalizing external judgments.

Moving Toward Cultural Competence

In addition to equipping their daughters with tools to navigate a biased world, caregivers emphasized the importance of shifting the systems their daughters navigate within. They called for educators to move toward genuine cultural competence rooted in students' lived experiences, communication styles, and the social and cultural contexts that shape behavior. Adriana spoke directly to the risk of misinterpretation when such understanding is absent, explaining, *“You have to understand that just because somebody carries themselves a certain way doesn't mean that they're going to fight or they're an aggressor.”* Others reiterated the need for schools to recognize the unique needs of Black girls and avoid making assumptions based on appearance or behavior. To achieve this, Imani stressed the importance of fostering supportive environments,

expressing, *“They should be able to say what they feel without feeling like they’re going to be sent to the office for insubordination.”*

The goal of cultural competence was framed as an ongoing process rooted in reflection, humility, and a willingness to engage. Adriana clarified, *“What you should be saying is, ‘I acknowledge color and I respect it, and I choose to listen and try to understand.’”* Caregivers reflected that while some progress has been made in schools, much of it remains surface-level and avoids deeper engagement with the realities Black students face. Camille noted that race-related conversations are often avoided altogether, especially by White educators: *“It may seem like they don’t want to talk about it because it’s an uncomfortable conversation... but I think being able to have those conversations confidently would help.”*

Caregivers also envisioned programs that would increase visibility and representation for Black girls, such as Adriana’s call for mentorship programs that connect girls with Black professionals who can model success and resilience: *“We need more of that that actually transcends from the community into the schools, into professional careers... so they can have somebody to look up to.”* Caregivers emphasized the importance of targeted support programs to equip girls with tools to regulate emotions, navigate peer dynamics, and advocate for themselves effectively. Brielle suggested, *“Having some type of classes that they can go to... [to deal with] peer pressure, anger management... getting the problem down and getting to the overall issue, to fix it, where it won’t happen again.”* Taylor expanded on this idea by envisioning schools that actively teach the skills to manage relational and emotional conflicts: *“They need to be taught the skills... and the teachers as well should be using the skills they need to teach to the children.”* Ultimately, caregivers envisioned schools as spaces of meaningful support, cultural understanding, and belonging for Black girls.

CHAPTER 4

DISCUSSION

The current study explored caregivers' perceptions of their daughters' school experiences, with a focus on how conflict and aggression are understood in the context of Black high school girls' lives. By centering caregivers' voices, the study aimed to deepen understanding of the social, familial, and cultural factors that shape how aggression is expressed, interpreted, and responded to in school settings. The research sought out parents and caregivers of Black high school girls to provide nuanced perspectives on the perceptions, antecedents, and consequences of aggression within these intersecting contexts.

This study addresses a gap in the literature by offering novel insights into how aggression among Black girls is shaped by social and cultural context. The specific experiences of Black high school girls remain understudied, particularly in relation to the socialization processes that influence how aggression is expressed, perceived, and managed (Rivera-Maestre, 2015). Further, existing studies have predominantly relied on comparative and quantitative methods, which provide limited understanding of the meaning behind these behaviors. A qualitative approach offers a more contextualized understanding by centering caregivers' perspectives (Waldron, 2011).

This investigation draws on the Social-Ecological Diathesis-Stress model (Swearer & Hymel, 2015) to frame aggression as an adaptive response triggered by contextual stressors and systemic inequalities. In contrast to research that pathologizes Black youth by examining their behaviors through a deficit lens, this study challenges dominant cultural narratives that

misinterpret culturally grounded behaviors as deviant and fail to provide adequate attention in considering systemic inequities (Ogbu, 1981). Thus, rather than framing Black girls' aggression as inherently problematic, the findings highlight the complexity, context, and resilience reflected in their experiences, as described by those who advocate for and know them best.

Conclusions

Antecedents of Aggression

Caregivers identified significant environmental, institutional, social, and cultural factors contributing to aggression among Black high school girls. Caregivers' perspectives align with the literature in that school environments frequently fail to adequately protect Black girls, exacerbating their vulnerability and continuing their exposure to victimization (Ross et al., 2012; Smith-Evans et al., 2014). These findings are consistent with Swearer and Hymel's (2015) Social-Ecological Diathesis-Stress model, highlighting how school environments may activate social, cognitive, and psychological vulnerabilities, contributing to externalizing behaviors such as aggression. Caregivers highlighted institutional bias and a lack of authentic cultural competence as a driving force behind unsupportive school climates. Their daughters faced harassment and relational conflict in environments where school staff did not intervene until the conflict escalated to the point of a physical altercation. Caregivers noted origins of conflict stemming from "petty" disputes or concerns over peer "drama" (Kennedy-Lewis, 2013), highlighting how educators frequently minimized or overlooked these situations, thereby missing opportunities for prevention. These reflections are particularly salient in light of prior research indicating that relational aggression often precedes physical aggression among African American girls in school settings (Talbott et al., 2002). Even when caregivers coached their daughters on conflict avoidance, their guidance often relied on the assumption of adult intervention, such as

alerting a teacher for help; when that assistance failed to materialize, aggression became a last-resort tactic for ensuring safety. These findings mirror prior qualitative research in which Black girls reported similar frustrations, noting that repeated inaction from school personnel often forced them to manage conflicts on their own (Pugh-Lilly et al., 2001). Most of the scenarios recalled by caregivers reflected reactive aggression, triggered by provocation or perceived threat rather than unprovoked hostility, consistent with prior research (Bradshaw et al., 2009). In alignment with the Social-Ecological Diathesis-Stress model, caregivers' accounts illustrate how aggression can emerge out of necessity, as a purposeful response to unsafe conditions and insufficient school-based intervention (2015).

In response to the systemic lack of protection and support from schools, caregivers emphasized the necessity of preparing their daughters to protect themselves. These proactive strategies were shaped not only by institutional neglect but also by broader cultural expectations of their communities, encouraging Black girls to project a willingness to fight. In environments where perceived vulnerability incites further targeting, some level of aggressiveness was described as both a protective measure and a performative response to social expectations. While caregivers generally encouraged their daughters to avoid conflict, they also emphasized the importance of standing up for themselves when faced with mistreatment. This messaging echoes E. Anderson's (2000) concept of the "code of the street," which positions aggression as a socially conditioned strategy for navigating neighborhoods marked by poverty, violence, and institutional failure, where safety and respect must be self-enforced. In this context, caregivers' encouragement to "not sit down and take it" was not about promoting aggression, but about helping their daughters assert themselves in environments where institutional support was unreliable.

Building on this orientation toward preparedness and self-advocacy, caregivers shared strategies they have used to prepare their daughters for the unpredictability of real-world encounters where protection could not be assumed. In addition to fostering assertiveness to navigate biased systems, they also reported explicitly teaching self-defense skills to ensure their daughters could respond if necessary. This approach aligns with previous research that found mothers encouraged assertiveness and aggression to equip their daughters with the independence and ability to protect themselves in the context of social adversity (Ness, 2004). At the same time, caregivers acknowledged that these strategies could unintentionally reinforce negative stereotypes and result in biased treatment by peers or school staff, furthering their vulnerability to victimization. Caregivers reflected on the difficult position their daughters were in, as behaviors encouraged for safety and self-advocacy could simultaneously increase the risk of differential treatment and result in being unfairly labeled an “angry Black girl.” Rather than stemming from problem behavior or poor self-control, aggression was often described as an adaptive response to systemic neglect, reflecting how unreliable protection, structural inequities, and cultural expectations shape when and why Black girls fight.

Consequences of Aggression

Caregivers described significant social, psychological, and academic consequences of aggression for Black high school girls. Socially, aggression was recognized as a protective mechanism, enabling girls to assert boundaries and deter further victimization, aligning with findings from previous studies on the importance of assertiveness and status perceptions (Jones, 2010; Ness, 2004; Rivera-Maestre, 2015). Consistent with prior research, caregivers reported that experiences of peer victimization and conflict significantly impacted their daughters’

psychological well-being, leading to feelings of frustration, anxiety, and reduced motivation for school engagement (Mundy et al., 2017; Reijntjes et al., 2010).

While some caregivers acknowledged implementing consequences at home in response to their daughters' aggressive behavior at school, most emphasized the context and justification of such behavior rather than viewing it as purely disciplinary. Their responses reflected a protective stance, in which aggression was understood as a reaction to unmet needs or institutional failure rather than a behavioral problem to be punished. Caregivers described taking active roles in supporting their daughters, including coaching them on how to navigate future conflicts, directly intervening with the school, and providing consistent emotional monitoring to mitigate the psychological impact of ongoing peer conflict and school-based stressors.

Despite these efforts, the negative consequences of aggression often extended into the academic realm. Not only did the consequences of aggression impact academic engagement in schools, but schools' responses also reinforced systemic mistrust, exacerbating the divide between Black families and institutions. Caregivers described their daughters being singled out for disciplinary consequences, even when others were involved in the conflict. They questioned how staff repeatedly overlooked the actions of White peers while focusing on their daughters, raising concerns about biased surveillance. Eye-tracking research supports this perception, showing that teachers are more likely to monitor Black students, making them more likely to be identified and punished for misbehavior (Gilliam et al., 2016). This heightened scrutiny contributed to caregivers' broader frustration with school disciplinary practices, which often applied blanket consequences rather than investigating context or recognizing roles in conflict, such as acts of self-defense. This concern echoes earlier research documenting the failure of zero-tolerance policies to differentiate between initiators and responders in school conflicts

(Talbot et al., 2002). Overall, caregivers' reflections underscore how the consequences of aggression are not limited to interpersonal fallout but are entangled with broader systemic inequities that reinforce patterns of exclusion and mistrust.

Caregiver Perceptions of Black Girls' Aggression

Caregivers highlighted how societal norms and institutional biases shape the ways Black girls' behavior is interpreted in school settings. Across interviews, they described a disconnect between their daughters' intentions and how their actions were perceived by school personnel and peers. Behaviors such as setting boundaries or expressing frustration were often misread as defiance, while expressions of strength, such as confidence, assertiveness, or self-advocacy, were similarly interpreted as combative or hostile. Caregivers' accounts align with research showing that assertive communication can prompt institutional backlash in predominantly White or ethnocentric settings, where Black girls are expected to suppress emotion to avoid being perceived as threatening (S. Hill & Sprague, 1999; Stevens, 2002).

These narratives revealed broader concerns about the rigidity of school systems and their inability, or unwillingness, to recognize the complex realities Black girls face. Consistent with prior research findings, caregivers shared that when Black girls stood up for themselves, responding to mistreatment, they were often assumed to be the aggressors and disciplined more harshly than their peers (Shi & Zhu, 2022; Smith-Evans et al., 2014). Yet, even in situations where their daughters acted in self-defense, schools still defaulted to punitive measures. Caregivers emphasized that their daughters were not inherently combative or aggressive; rather, their behavior was often shaped by external factors such as peer provocation, adult dismissal, or institutional neglect. When these conditions were overlooked, their daughters' behaviors were often pathologized, rather than understood as reactions to ongoing stressors and unmet needs.

This lack of inquiry, combined with limited efforts to prevent harm, reinforced reductive and punitive interpretations of Black girls' actions (Talbot et al., 2002). Caregivers shared sentiments that such patterns perpetuated stereotypes and contributed to the continued stigmatization of Black girls through disproportionate and routine disciplinary practices.

In anticipation of biased interpretations of their daughters' behavior, caregivers engaged in racial socialization aimed at fostering resilience, assertiveness, and strength, while also preparing their daughters to navigate school environments shaped by racial and gendered stereotypes. These efforts often emphasized the importance of self-restraint as a protective measure. Caregivers encouraged their daughters to limit emotional or behavioral responses to provocation to avoid conflict, misjudgment, and the reinforcement of harmful labels. Conflicting pressures required Black girls to carefully manage their self-presentation in settings where expressing emotion, asserting boundaries, or showing confidence could result in being perceived as aggressive or defiant. While caregivers encouraged advocacy and assertiveness at home, they also prepared their daughters for the reality that such behavior might be penalized in school. This form of racial socialization reflected a difficult balancing act in caregivers' attempts to foster strength while helping their daughters anticipate and prepare for biased perceptions. Studies have documented the challenge Black parents face in promoting racial pride while preparing their children to navigate discrimination in everyday contexts (Smith-Bynum et al., 2016).

Caregivers recognized the emotional toll their daughters experienced while navigating school environments shaped by bias and discrimination. They noted that repeated exposure to marginalization may contribute to a heightened sensitivity to perceived injustice and, at times, more immediate emotional responses. This is consistent with research indicating that perceived racial discrimination can contribute to emotional distress and increased expressions of anger or

aggression among African American adolescents (Simons et al., 2006). Participants described these emotional reactions as reasonable responses to being misunderstood, dismissed, or targeted, yet noted that such responses were often seen as inappropriate or excessive by school staff or peers. Ultimately, caregivers portrayed their daughters as navigating a double standard in which they were expected to manage conflict with restraint, while receiving little understanding or protection. Therefore, the perception of aggression is not simply a matter of behavior but a reflection of the broader social and institutional dynamics that shape how Black girls are seen, judged, and treated within school contexts.

Implications

The findings from this study have important implications for how educators, school-based mental health professionals, and policymakers understand and respond to aggression among Black high school girls. Through this study's emphasis on caregiver perspectives in providing a more contextualized understanding of aggression, the findings highlight the influence of environmental stressors, systemic inequities, and cultural expectations. The impact of environmental and systemic influences does not occur in isolation; rather, it is amplified by the intersection of race and gender, making it difficult to disentangle the effects of each in shaping students' behavior. These insights stress the need for schools to move beyond punitive responses and toward culturally responsive interventions attuned to the social contexts that shape students' behavior. Patterns of misinterpretation and punitive disciplinary responses can have lasting effects, as students who engage in or are targeted by aggression often experience poor psychosocial outcomes (Mihalas, 2008). Therefore, this study offers valuable context for educators and school-based mental health practitioners aiming to disrupt the link between victimization and maladjustment.

This study also reinforces the importance of engaging families as partners in understanding the broader context in which behavior occurs. Caregivers offered critical insight into how racialized and gendered expectations shape the way their daughters' behavior is interpreted and responded to in school settings. Their perspectives underscore the need for culturally responsive interventions that are grounded in the specific experiences of Black girls. Restorative justice practices may serve as one such approach. By investigating the underlying causes of conflict, restorative justice encourages school personnel to consider differences in culture and lived experience, which can help reduce racial disparities in discipline practices (C. Anderson et al., 2014).

In line with caregiver beliefs expressed throughout this study, schools should prioritize training in cultural competence to help educators appropriately interpret and respond to Black girls' conflicts without reinforcing harmful stereotypes or relying on overly punitive discipline. Black youth often face more frequent and severe punishment than their White peers due to biased disciplinary practices and educators' implicit stereotypes (Shi & Zhu, 2022; Skiba, 2015; Skiba et al., 2011). These disparities are especially pronounced among girls, with Black girls receiving significantly harsher consequences than their White counterparts (Wallace et al., 2008). Failing to address these inequities risks mislabeling adaptive responses as misconduct and perpetuating cycles of systemic exclusion. Recognizing the compounded effects of racism and sexism is essential to developing interventions that acknowledge how the intersection of these forces amplifies bias, contributing to the misinterpretation and disproportionate disciplining of Black girls in school settings. The present findings offer valuable context to help schools better understand and respond to the structural and interpersonal conditions contributing to aggression, ultimately supporting more equitable and effective approaches to student behavior.

Strengths and Limitations

This study offers important insights but is not without limitations. Firstly, participants were recruited throughout the United States; however, specific information regarding geographic location, demographic variables, or family background was not collected. This approach is consistent with RTA, as Braun and Clarke emphasize the importance of understanding how individuals make sense of their lives, rather than quantifying these perspectives based on fixed categories (Braun & Clarke, 2021a). Socioeconomic status (SES), in particular, influences how Black girls experience school-based conflict and support systems. While this study did not collect detailed SES data, it is important to acknowledge that access to resources—such as mental health care, academic support, and safe community spaces—can shape the realities Black girls face. Although the absence of data on these contextual factors may limit generalizability, the study's emphasis on the salience of participants' reflections allowed for a more meaningful, nuanced understanding of their daughters' experiences.

This study exclusively reflects caregivers' interpretations of their daughters' behavior, school experiences, and family dynamics. Without direct input from the youth themselves, the analysis may offer a partial view, limiting insight into how Black girls make meaning of these experiences or the specific proximal factors contributing to aggression. While most participants were mothers, the presence of diverse caregiver roles (e.g., mothers, fathers, non-parent guardians) is a notable strength of the study. Participants were self-selected and may represent caregivers with a particular investment in discussing school discipline or their daughters' behavior, which may not reflect broader experiences.

While it is expected that caregivers generally hold favorable views of their children, most participants characterized their daughters as generally non-confrontational and reported only

isolated incidents of physical altercations at school. As a result, the study may underrepresent the perspectives of caregivers whose daughters more frequently use physical means to navigate conflict. The inclusion criteria focused on caregivers whose daughters had experienced at least one physical altercation at school; however, this criterion did not account for variation in the intensity, frequency, or context of those incidents, which may have narrowed the range of behavioral patterns and disciplinary responses represented. Not all physical altercations are equivalent in intent or severity as some may reflect reactive or dysregulated behavior, while others may represent measured acts self-defense. This variability complicates interpretation, particularly given that the frequency and intensity of conflict were not specifically explored.

Further, it is important to consider the context in which this study was conducted. As a White researcher, my interpretation of participants' narratives is shaped by my positionality and the lens through which I engage with their experiences. I engaged in ongoing reflexive practices to mitigate bias and approached the data with sensitivity to power dynamics; however, my outsider perspective inevitably influenced how I understood, interpreted, and emphasized certain themes. Thus, the findings presented here should be viewed within this context.

In addition to the influence of my Whiteness on the analytic process, the data collected were also shaped by what participants felt comfortable sharing with a White researcher. Their responses may have been influenced by general social desirability, or more specifically, by the power differential embedded in our racial and cultural differences. A strength of this study, however, lies in its explicit attention to reflexivity. Rather than downplaying these dynamics, I acknowledged them directly. Following rapport building, I engaged participants in open conversation about our racial differences and how they may have shaped their daughters' experiences and our interaction. I shared my motivation for the research, including early

observations of racial disparities that led me to this work. This disclosure likely primed participants, potentially encouraging more openness and critical reflection, but also possibly influencing responses in ways aligned with social desirability. Ultimately, these dynamics are important to consider when interpreting the findings, as they reflect not only participants' experiences but also the relational context in which those experiences were shared and analyzed.

Directions for Future Research

Future research should explore Black high school girls' own perspectives to gain direct insights into their experiences with school-based conflict, perceived aggression, and systemic barriers. Comparing youth and caregiver narratives could illuminate how perspectives align or diverge, offering deeper contextual understanding of how aggression is socialized, interpreted, and managed within families and schools. In addition, studies should consider how family context, such as caregiver roles, household structure, and familial support systems, may influence how Black girls are perceived and supported in educational settings. Including the perspectives of school personnel (e.g., teachers, administrators, school psychologists, and school counselors) would also be valuable in identifying how implicit bias, policy enforcement, and disciplinary decisions contribute to the marginalization of Black girls. Including the perspectives of school personnel (e.g., teachers, administrators, school psychologists, and school counselors) would offer valuable insight into how behavioral concerns are identified, interpreted, and addressed through both disciplinary and support-based responses. These perspectives can further illuminate how bias, policy enforcement, and intervention practices contribute to the marginalization of Black girls.

Mixed-methods approaches may further enhance this work by combining in-depth qualitative narratives with broader survey data, enabling researchers to capture both the nuance

of lived experience and patterns across larger samples. Future studies should also attend to intersecting social identities, such as socioeconomic status and geographic context (e.g., rural or urban settings), that may further shape how Black girls are perceived and treated within school environments. Finally, research examining environmental and policy-level factors (e.g., school discipline policies, district demographics, teacher training) would contribute to a more comprehensive understanding of the systemic conditions influencing these experiences.

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Appendix A

University Of Georgia Consent Form

Reclaiming the Narrative: Giving Voice to Black Girls' Perspectives on Aggression and Self-Protection

You are being asked to take part in a research study. The information in this form will help you decide if you want to be in the study. Please take the time to read the following information carefully. Please ask the researcher below if there is anything that is not clear or if you need more information.

Principal Investigator: Sycarah Fisher, Ph.D.
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Study Purpose: We want to better understand the experiences of Black high school girls regarding aggression and safety in their school environments. We aim to explore the factors influencing feelings of safety in school as well as factors that impact the socialization and display of aggression. You will receive a \$75 electronic gift card for your participation in this study.

Eligible Participants: We are looking for participants who speak, understand, and read English and fit into one of the following categories:

- Custodial parent/guardian (over 18 years old) of a Black adolescent female aged 14–18 years who (a) lives majority-time in the caregiver's home and (b) reports having received at least one discipline referral for a physical altercation.
- Self-identified Black female high school student who is 14–18 years old and reports at least one discipline referral for engaging in a physical altercation on campus during their high school experience.

What's Involved: If you agree to be in this study, you will complete an online screening survey (approximately 5 minutes), and you may be asked to participate in a one-time individual interview (approximately 60 minutes). Additionally, if you agree for your daughter to participate, she will also complete a 60-minute individual interview. Interviews will be scheduled and may take place over Zoom, phone, or in person based on your preference and availability.

Some questions on the survey and interview ask about experiences and feelings that may make you or your daughter uncomfortable. You are free to exit the survey at any time. During the interview, you can elect not to answer any question. Your daughter will also be reminded that she may elect not to respond to any questions during the interview.

Interviews will be recorded for the purpose of analysis, but any recordings will be destroyed no later than 12 months after the interview. We will be careful to keep your survey responses and audio recordings of the interview confidential and anonymous. Each participant will be given a participant ID to keep responses anonymous. Your e-mail address and/or your daughter's e-mail address will be used for sending compensation, but this will not be connected to you or your daughter's responses in any way. All data will be stored on a single computer in password-protected files. Results of the study may be published and presented at conferences,

but we will not publicly identify you or your daughter. Researchers will not release identifiable information with anyone who is not connected to this research study unless there is an indication of abuse/threat to self or others in the interview. If there is, researchers will provide resources and take necessary steps to ensure the safety and well-being of the individual involved. This may include contacting relevant authorities or support organizations, as well as offering guidance and assistance to the individual in accessing the help they need. The confidentiality and privacy of participants will be respected to the fullest extent possible while prioritizing the safety and welfare of all individuals involved.

Your involvement in the study is voluntary, and you may choose not to participate or to stop at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. While there are no direct benefits for you, participating in this study can help increase our understanding of the experiences and socialization of Black high school girls. Your voice, as well as your daughter's voice, can challenge stereotypes about "Black girl aggression" and may help reduce disparities in how Black girls are disciplined in schools.

Internet Data Collection: This research involves the transmission of data over the Internet. Every reasonable effort has been taken to ensure the effective use of available technology; however, confidentiality during online communication cannot be guaranteed.

How to Participate: If you agree to participate in this research study, please choose your consent preference by selecting one of the following options.

- ☐ Both myself and my daughter will participate in this study.
- ☐ I will participate individually, without my daughter.
- ☐ My daughter will participate in this study, without a caregiver.
- ☐ I do not consent to participate in this study.

If you have any questions about the study, please email the co-investigator, Elizabeth Day, BlackGirlsVoicesStudy@gmail.com. If you have any complaints, questions, or concerns about your rights or the rights of your daughter as a research participant in this study, contact the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at 706.542.3199 or IRB@uga.edu.

By providing your consent electronically, you acknowledge that you have read and understood the information provided above and voluntarily agree to participate in this study. Additionally, please provide your email address and your daughter's name and email address (if she will be participating).

Your Name: _____

Date: _____

Your Email: _____

Daughter's Name (if participating): _____

Daughter's Email (if participating): _____

Appendix B

Interview Protocol

1. How has your child's race and gender influenced your caregiving practices?
(*Macrosystem*)
 - a. How is your caregiving style influenced by the way you were raised?
2. Can you describe your daughter's personality and temperament? (*Individual*)
 - a. How do you perceive her interactions with peers?
3. What is your perception of your daughter's school climate? (*Microsystem*)
4. Do you know what kind of policies your child's school has to keep students safe?
(*Microsystem*)
 - a. How effective do you feel these policies are?
 - b. What do you know about the school's policies pertaining to aggression?
 - i. How did you learn of these policies?
5. Your daughter was involved in a physical altercation at school. Can you share some details about this incident as well as how you were informed of this incident?
(*Microsystem*)
 - a. What was your response?
 - b. How do you perceive the school's response to conflicts or aggressive behavior involving your daughter?
 - i. Do you believe it has been fair and effective?
6. What role do you believe family dynamics play in your daughter's experiences with aggression? (*Microsystem*)
7. Have you had any discussions with your daughter about appropriate ways to handle conflicts or aggression, particularly in a school setting? (*Microsystem*)
 - a. What strategies or approaches do you support your daughter in using when navigating potentially challenging situations with peers or at school?
8. Do you believe that your daughter's race or gender has influenced her experiences at school, particularly in relation to conflicts or aggression? If so, how? (*Macrosystem*)
9. Do you think your daughter's experiences at school have affected her emotional well-being or self-esteem? If so, in what ways? (*Microsystem*)
10. In your opinion, what can schools and educators do to better support Black high school girls in managing conflicts and aggression in a healthy and constructive manner?
(*Microsystem*)
11. Are there any additional insights or experiences you would like to share about your daughter's interactions at school or her experiences with aggression that you feel are relevant to this study?

Appendix C Codebook

Code	Definition	What to include
Family Environment	Parenting strategies, values, discipline, communication, and family structure that influence behavior and development.	• Communication style and emotional tone within the household • Family values and spirituality • Levels of trust, connection, relational closeness, or distance between family members • Household structure (e.g., single-parent home, birth order) • Beliefs about parenting • Implementation of discipline
	Examples "The way that I am, I try to tell her, you know, use your judgment. I want to encourage her to be a free thinker." "We try to just teach her right from wrong. We go to church. We teach her the bible. Christian beliefs and everything, we stay positive. We don't we've never abused her in any way. So, she comes from a positive home environment when she's always been told the truth and what we expect from her."	What not to include • Preventative restrictions or shaping child's environment to maintain safety (<i>see Protective Parenting</i>) • Specific coaching or direction for how to respond to a situation (<i>see Protective Parenting</i>)
Code	Definition	What to include
➤ Parent's Individual Factors	Characteristics of the parent or caregiver that influence their parenting style, family relationships, or the child's development.	• Caregiver's temperament or personality (e.g., calm, reactive, controlling, permissive) • Caregiver's mental or physical health (e.g., I am an anxious parent) • Caregiver's experiences with trauma, racism, or chronic stress • Reflections on how the caregiver's upbringing or past influences their current parenting approach or family relationships
	Examples	What not to include

	"Her dad is very mellow. So overall, she's grown up in a very mellow environment." "I grew up during desegregation of schools... We were taught not to engage. We were taught how to handle people coming at us, how to avoid certain people. I think that was a huge influence over my teaching now with my children."	• General parenting values or beliefs not clearly tied to the caregiver's identity or life history (<i>see Family Environment</i>) • Descriptions of protective actions or monitoring behaviors, without reference to the caregiver's personal history, traits, or identity (<i>see Protective Parenting</i>)
Code	Definition	What to include
➤ Build Them Up	Caregiver efforts to nurture their child's confidence, resilience, or positive identity. This includes affirming messages about self-worth, racial or cultural pride, and encouragement to feel strong, capable, or proud in the face of adversity or marginalization.	• Affirmations of love, strength, or worthiness • Caregiver encouragement to be proud of their racial, cultural, or gender identity • Intentional strategies to reinforce confidence, motivation, or self-belief (e.g., "You're a leader," "You're beautiful the way you are")
	Examples	What not to include
	"I let my daughter know she's definitely loved, and she can come to me with whatever problems she might have, or anything." <i>*Double coded with Family Environment</i> "I mainly just try to teach her like you're strong, like you can't really let those stereotypes get to you... I feel like if you do anything wrong, like, if you raise your voice, or you get angry because something happened to you, like you're made as aggressive. So, yeah, I just try to teach her, like, that's not who you are." <i>*Double coded with Misunderstood Behavior</i>	• Emotional support or guidance primarily focused on managing behavior or safety (<i>see Protective Parenting</i>)
Code	Definition	What to include
Protective parenting	A caregiving approach grounded in the anticipation of risk, where caregivers actively guide, monitor, or emotionally prepare their daughters to navigate social challenges, injustice, or perceived	• Emphasis on the caregiver's role as protector or advocate in external situations • Actions aimed at shielding the child from anticipated harm or misjudgment

	vulnerability. Within this approach the family is positioned as a buffer against external threats.	• Emotional coaching used specifically to prepare for or process situations involving perceived risk, vulnerability, or injustice • Monitoring and regular check-ins about emotional or social well-being • Preventative strategies to promote safety (e.g., supervision, curfews, limiting certain friendships or activities)
	Examples	What not to include
	“She knows that she's she has support. She has people behind her that will fight for her.” “My job, because I am a single parent, is that I want to protect you as much as I can, and so the best way to do that is to pay attention to you.” “I always tell her ‘Be aware of your surroundings’” “Well, her race and gender influence. I mean, it's hard... I feel like I have to be more hands on, because she is a girl, especially in these days and times where things are kind of over sexualized”	• Encouragement to avoid conflict or disengage without emotional coaching or monitoring (<i>see Self-Restraint as Protection</i>) • Instructions for the child to defer to the parent to handle situations (<i>see Let Me Handle It</i>) • Encouragement to stand up for oneself (<i>see Assertiveness</i>) • Discipline strategies or consequences in response to behavior (<i>see Family Environment</i>) • General parenting values, warmth, or emotional tone without a protective strategy (<i>see Family Environment</i>) • Reflections on caregiver traits or experiences (e.g., I am an anxious parent) without connection to protective behaviors (<i>see Parent's Individual Factors</i>)
Code	Definition	What to include
➤ Self-Restraint as Protection	Caregiver descriptions or encouragement of intentionally limiting one's responses to provocation in order to avoid conflict, judgment, punishment, or harmful stereotypes. Emphasis is often placed on self-control as a way to prevent harm or misunderstanding.	• Caregivers encouraging the practice of self-control or restraint as a means to prevent conflict • Guidance to suppress or control emotional expression (e.g., tone, facial expressions, frustration) to avoid escalation • Actions to disengage, withdraw, or de-escalate in the face of provocation • Avoiding conflict by choosing an alternative action (e.g., walking

		away, telling an adult, or seeking support)
	Examples	What not to include
	“That is my goal, is to teach them how to respond without anger...” “So, you just keep your mouth closed. Get home and come tell me, because then I can fight it and you can't.” <i>*Double coded with Let Me Handle It</i> “Sometimes you don’t always have to respond... because I do know this, even as an adult, we’ll be looked at a certain kind of way.” <i>*Double coded with Misunderstood Behavior</i>	• Use of verbal (<i>see Assertiveness</i>) or physical aggression (<i>see Aggression as Self-Defense</i>) • General emotional coaching not tied to avoidance or restraint (<i>see Protective Parenting</i>)
Code	Definition	What to include
➤ Assertiveness	Caregiver descriptions or encouragement of their daughters verbally asserting their thoughts, needs, or boundaries, particularly in response to perceived unfairness or conflict.	• Encouragement to speak up to express one’s needs or speaking out against unfair treatment (for selves or others) • Standing up to peers, adults, or authority figures • Descriptions of daughters verbally defending themselves • Recognition of “toughness” or confidence as a protective or empowering trait
	Examples	What not to include
	“Her teachers gave her a hard time in middle school, and I think that's when she started advocating for herself, yeah, but I know she got called to the principal's office a couple times because of her defending herself “ “So, you know, speak up. If you feel like someone's bullying you, don't be a victim, stand up for yourself.”	• Physical aggression used in response to threat (<i>see Aggression as Self-Defense</i>) • Caregiver-led efforts to intervene on the child’s behalf (<i>see Protective Parenting</i>)
Code	Definition	What to include
➤ Aggression as Self-Defense	Caregiver descriptions or encouragement of using physical	• Caregiver encouragement to physically defend oneself in

	aggression in response to threat, violation, or risk of harm.	dangerous or high-pressure situations • Beliefs that fighting is necessary or justified in response to physical threats, bullying, or unwanted advances • Teaching children how to fight
	Examples	What not to include
	“I mean, you're supposed to defend yourself. That's what taught my child. If someone's gonna hurt you, please defend yourself. Don't be a victim. If you can, if you can't help it, don't be a victim.” “Now, if somebody runs up on you and hits you, you have the right to defend yourself.”	• Displays of aggression without provocation or perceived threat to safety • Verbal assertiveness or encouragement to speak up without physical action (<i>see Assertiveness</i>) • General emotional reactivity or outbursts not tied to defense (<i>see Individual Factors or Misunderstood Behavior</i>)
Code	Definition	What to include
➤ Let Me Handle It	Caregiver statements encouraging their child to defer to the parent in challenging or unsafe situations. This includes instructions to notify the caregiver so the adult can intervene, rather than the child handling the situation themselves.	• Situations where caregivers step in to “fight battles” daughters are not allowed or able to fight themselves • Parental readiness to intervene in school or social conflicts • Directives to report a problem to the parent rather than address it • Justifications for stepping in based on perceived social or identity-based vulnerability (e.g., due to race or gender)
	Examples	What not to include
	“Freshman year, she didn't really, she didn't really stand up for herself at all. We had to come step in a lot.” “You just keep your mouth closed. Get home and come tell me, because then I can fight it and you can't.” <i>*Double coded with Self-Restraint</i>	• Emotional coaching or advice on how to respond without caregivers stepping in (<i>see Protective Parenting</i>) • Encouragement to suppress or de-escalate one's response (<i>see Self-Restraint as Protection</i>) • Encouragement to advocate for oneself (<i>see Assertiveness</i>)
Code	Definition	What to include
Family-School Connection	Caregivers’ reflections on the overall quality and nature of	• Communication between school and caregivers (e.g., calls, emails, meetings)

	communication and engagement between the family and school.	• Perceived responsiveness, transparency, or collaboration between families and school staff • References to communication regarding school policies or expectations (e.g., student handbook)
	Examples	What not to include
	“That's one of the things that I don't like about high school, because they don't really include parents in anything.” “Then you know certain things that we hear about certain teachers online when we read about these things. So that's another thing that sort of concerns me, which is why I do stay active and involved into school and with the administration and make at least to try to ensure that, you know, hopefully everything is within the correct merit.” *<i>Double coded with Protective Parenting</i>	• Hypothetical or future-oriented statements about what the caregiver would do in response to school issues (<i>see Protective Parenting</i>) • General expressions of mistrust toward schools or systems without reference to communication or engagement (<i>see Mistrust of Systems</i>) • Descriptions of how the child experiences school, without mention of caregiver/school interaction (or lack thereof)
Code	Definition	What to include
	Caregiver beliefs about who holds primary responsibility for shaping a child's behavior, development, or outcomes. This includes statements that position home life, parenting, or upbringing as central to school success or school conflict.	• Beliefs that schools or institutions cannot “fix” what starts at home • Comments positioning caregivers as primarily responsible for discipline or guidance • Limits of school power or authority without family involvement
➤ It Starts in the Home	Examples	What not to include
	“I feel like [schools] are doing their best to keep the violence down, but again, it starts from home.” “[School policies around aggression] could definitely be effective, but it has to be. The kids	• Direct critiques of school inaction or failure (<i>see Mistrust of Systems</i>) • Descriptions of school-led responses or policies (<i>see School Intervention</i>)

	have to do it, and the parents have to coincide with it.”	
Code	Definition	What to include
Sense of Safety	Caregivers’ perceptions of their child’s physical, emotional, or social safety across settings such as school, home, neighborhood, and online.	• Perceptions of safety and awareness of potential threats • School policies or procedures intended to prevent harm (e.g., lockdown drills, school resource officers, metal detectors, secure entry) • Reflections on efficacy of preventative measures • Exposure to threats such as violence, crime, bullying, drug use, or intimidation from peers or adults • Concerns about unsafe school, neighborhood, or community environments • Caregiver reflections on supervision, surveillance, or lack of protective structures
	Examples	What not to include
	“For a teenager to have to, had to go to self-defense to feel safe going to school the next year is ridiculous.” *Double coded with <i>Mistrust of Systems</i> “I would like them to have a policy that would keep them safe from guns, but most of the schools here are starting to putting in metal detectors.”	• Caregiver-led strategies to prevent or respond to harm (<i>see Family Intervention or Protective Parenting</i>) • School-based disciplinary actions or interventions in response to specific behaviors (<i>see School Intervention</i>)
Code	Definition	What to include
School Climate	Perceptions of the overall social and emotional tone of the school environment, including peer relationships, teacher-student interactions, feelings of support, and the broader culture of inclusivity, fairness, and belonging.	• Peer dynamics and teacher-student relationships • Emotional support and sense of belonging among students • Caregiver impressions of the school’s overall atmosphere (e.g., supportive, warm, tense or chaotic)
	Examples	What not to include
	“I don't think teachers care as much, or maybe they're just tired, yeah, because they go through a lot	• Concerns about physical safety or threats of harm (<i>see Sense of Safety</i>) • Systemic mistrust or critiques of

	more curriculum wise... discipline wise. So I think they're tired, and they don't have the energy to involve themselves as much." "I think at [high school], those kids get to do what they want to do. I think...maybe the teachers have gotten to a point where they kind of have no control."	institutional failure beyond school climate (e.g., racism in the education system, disciplinary bias <i>see Mistrust of Systems or Beliefs about School-Based Discipline</i>) • Reflections regarding communication or interactions between caregivers and the school (<i>see Family-School Connection</i>)
Code	Definition	What to include
School Intervention	Supports or responses provided by the school to address students' needs. Includes both disciplinary actions and supportive practices intended to respond to specific incidents or patterns of behavior such as building peer cohesion.	• School-wide or individual interventions in response to conflict • Disciplinary consequences (e.g., detention, in-school suspension, suspension, alternative school) • Counseling, emotional check-ins, restorative practices, peer-based mediation, or parent meetings following incidents
	Examples "They even have little breakout groups, every so often, to discuss like if you're being bullied or if you're feeling down" "She was suspended after that. She had a week suspension after that incident."	What not to include • Caregiver perceptions regarding how the school handled a situation or suggestions for how schools should respond (<i>see Beliefs about Discipline</i>) • General preventative policies or safety measures (e.g., lockdown drills, SROs) not tied to specific student behavior (<i>see Sense of Safety</i>) • Schools informing parents of daughter's altercations (<i>see Family-School Connection</i>) unless there is a mediation component
Code	Definition	What to include
➤ Beliefs about School-Based Discipline	Caregiver perceptions and beliefs about the school's implementation of and adherence to disciplinary practices.	• Concerns about over-punishment or harshness, or commentary on how fairness should be assessed in disciplinary decisions. • Views on the strictness or leniency of school rules • Perceptions regarding the enforcement or effectiveness regarding school disciplinary policies

		• Critiques of how discipline was handled or how school policies were (or weren't) applied
	Examples	What not to include
	"I mean, it's better than them doing nothing... but it's always tricky, because depending on what their approach is, it can make a situation worse. So, I feel like, at least they were responsive to it." "Some boy even walked up on her cornered her and tried to touch her. And we brought to the school's attention, but she got in trouble because even though he cornered her, she lashed out. He got hit, and so she got in school detention, and he got sent home for a day. But Why are you punishing someone protecting themselves?"	• Caregiver mistrust of the school's ability or willingness to protect or advocate for their child outside the context of discipline (<i>see Mistrust in Systems</i>) • Descriptions of the child's behavior being misunderstood without a focus on the disciplinary response itself (<i>see Misunderstood Behavior</i>)
Code	Definition	What to include
Mistrust of Systems	Perceptions that schools or other institutions are ineffective, unresponsive, or inconsistent in supporting or protecting children. This includes the absence, delay, or insufficiency of appropriate support and caregiver doubts that systems will follow through, take concerns seriously, or prioritize student well-being. Emotional tones often include frustration, fatigue, or disillusionment.	• Caregiver beliefs that school responses were insufficient, inappropriate, or harmful • Descriptions of school inaction, inconsistency, or delay in response to bullying, conflict, or safety issues • Perceptions that the school is not doing enough to help. • Emotional tone of fatigue, distrust, or frustration with school or institutional systems
	Examples	What not to include
	"Do you feel like the consequences have been fair and effective?" No, I think it's making it worse, because it's like, once you get that stigma of being the bad kid like you, it just follows you." <i>*Double coded with Beliefs about Discipline because of the focus on systemic issues</i>	• Communication issues between school and caregiver without deeper mistrust or systemic concern (<i>see Family-School Connection</i>) • Hypothetical or suggested improvements to school systems, unless rooted in dissatisfaction or repeated failure • Limitations of school authority (<i>see It Starts in the Home</i>)

	“I don't like her school. I mean, it has a good program, but I really don't like the administration that much. I mean, having to go to school that many times to talk to them about the same issue, they don't really step in”	• Critiques of how school implements discipline practices (<i>see Beliefs about School-Based Discipline</i>) • Identity-based bias or perceptions of double standards based on race, gender, or other characteristics (<i>see Differential Treatment</i>, unless institutional mistrust is also expressed)
Code	Definition	What to include
➤ Differential Treatment	Caregiver descriptions or perceptions that their child was treated differently or unfairly because of their identity. This includes differential treatment by both school staff and peers, such as being disciplined more harshly, excluded socially, held to a different standard, or having their needs dismissed or accomplishments minimized due to bias or stereotypes.	• Caregiver concerns about how their daughter is perceived or treated differently due to her intersecting identities • Being disciplined for behaviors that other students aren't • Teachers or staff ignoring daughters' efforts, not giving credit or not being selected for opportunities despite qualifications • Experiences of exclusion due to perceptions of bias related to race, gender, or behavior presentation.
	Examples	What not to include
	“They're obviously, like, pointing a finger at you, Gabrielle, because you don't look like anybody else. She in all of these things, but she's not in the majority, and so she tends to get the short end of the stick. And I don't say this just because this is my child, she really is one of the hardest working dancers they have out there. Or she might not get the center spot for tumbling, even though the coach that trains her says you're the best tumbler we have, just things like that.” “I just fear that she will run into situations where she won't be invited or approved of because of the color of her skin, she might be looked past because she is a	• Behaviors that are misread or mischaracterized without an identity-based explanation (<i>see Misunderstood Behavior</i>) • Generalized critiques of systems or staff that are not directly tied to the caregiver's perception of their child being treated differently due to identity (<i>see Mistrust in Systems</i>)

	chocolate girl, and not be given opportunities as those of other races may be given.”	
Code	Definition	What to include
➤ Misunderstood Behavior	Perceptions that children’s behavior, emotional expression, or intent is frequently misread or misinterpreted by others. This includes situations where behavior is labeled as disrespectful, aggressive, or problematic when the caregiver believes it stems from communication differences, emotional overwhelm, or unrecognized needs.	• Descriptions of being labeled "angry," "aggressive," or "troublemaker" without understanding the context or function of the behavior • Descriptions of emotions or behaviors being judged without understanding the underlying cause • Beliefs that a child’s tone, facial expressions, or communication style are misinterpreted as negative
	Examples	What not to include
	“I hear that a lot, that stereotype of the Black woman being aggressive. And I don’t think it’s that I’m actually that way, but the situations we’re put in make us feel like we don’t have a choice. We have to defend ourselves, and then it gets interpreted as being aggressive. That’s not really the case. I don’t necessarily want to be that way. I just feel like I have to, otherwise I’d be taken advantage of or not treated right.” "They don’t get the chance to say it was self-defense, because for most of our children, self-defense is strong. It might look like quick anger, but it’s really the result of holding so much in. And when they finally react, it’s labeled as aggression, even if it’s just them defending themselves." <i>*Double coded with Aggression as Self-Defense</i>	• Perceptions of biases in treatment based on identity (<i>see Differential Treatment</i>) • Institutional failure to respond appropriately or follow through on support (<i>see Mistrust of Systems</i>)
Code	Definition	What to include
Conflict	Interpersonal tension, altercations, or ongoing disputes with peers or staff, including both the emotional and relational dynamics that lead	• Emotional or relational buildup (e.g., feeling ignored, talked about, not supported, or judged) that contributes to conflict

	to conflict, as well as the behaviors that arise from it.	• Peer conflict involving bullying, exclusion, jealousy, perceived disrespect, shifting friendships, betrayal, or competition for attention or social status • Behavioral expressions of conflict, including fighting, yelling, verbal aggression, or threats
	Examples	What not to include
	“Her and one of her friends were just kind of horse playing, but it kind of turned serious, because I guess the young lady pushed Sarah, and Sarah pushed her back, and then they were kind of in a entanglement.” “I guess one of the traditions is the older kids kind of find a freshman, and they kind of pick on them a little bit to kind of welcome them to high school.”	• Unfair or biased treatment based on identity (<i>see Differential Treatment</i>) • Misinterpretation of behavior without actual interpersonal tension (<i>see Misunderstood Behavior</i>) • Descriptions focused on the school’s response to conflict (<i>see School Intervention</i>) • Caregiver-led strategies to address or prevent conflict (<i>see Protective Parenting & subcodes</i>)
Code	Definition	What to include
Pressure to Conform	Expectations or pressures to adhere to group norms, behaviors, or expectations in order to gain approval, avoid exclusion, or maintain social status.	• Pressure from peers (e.g., being “egged on”) to fight, engage in risky or negative behavior, or act out • Feeling pushed to conform to social norms or group dynamics (e.g., dress, talk, attitude) • Experiences of needing to prove oneself • Participation in behaviors for entertainment, attention, or fear of exclusion • Perceptions that peer groups are influencing the child’s choices or identity
	Examples	What not to include
	“Her friends are doing certain things with boys, and she doesn't have an interest in. So, she has a lot of pressure from other kids, especially boys.”	• Conflict that emerges naturally from relationships without clear pressure to conform (<i>see Conflict</i>) • Encouragement to assert oneself independently (<i>see Assertiveness</i>)

	“The people that she hangs with can put her in a lot of trouble.”	
Code	Definition	What to include
The Social Impact of Individual Factors	Personal characteristics that shape behavior, identity, and social experiences, including temperament, personality, and physical attributes.	• Personality traits (e.g., shy, outgoing, strong-willed, sensitive, calm, reactive) • Role in social dynamics (e.g., popularity, she is a leader/follower) • Physical characteristics (e.g., skin tone, body type, attractiveness)
	Examples “I think they know that if Gabrielle is with them, they don't have anything to worry about, because Gabrielle's not gonna let anybody pick on them.” <i>*Double coded with Assertiveness</i> “She's a dainty girl. She doesn't want to do the roughness, she doesn't want to get her clothes dirty, she doesn't want to mess up her hair. She doesn't want to be physical with anyone.”	What not to include • Descriptions of conflict, peer tension, or altercations driven by disagreements or misunderstandings rather than individual traits (<i>see Conflict</i>) • Experiences shaped primarily by perceptions of bias related to race, gender, or behavior presentation (<i>see Differential Treatment</i>)
Code	Definition	What to include
Negative Experiences and Emotional Consequences	The psychological or emotional effects of difficult or unjust experiences.	• Decline in internal emotional state, coping ability, self-esteem, confidence, or identity expression • Descriptions of internalizing emotional responses (e.g., feeling defeated, hopeless, emotionally reactive) • Links between emotional state and school performance, motivation, or social behavior
	Examples “I think it's just the feeling of her thinking everyone's giving up on her, so she holds that anger in. Then when someone finally pushes her, that's when she'll act out.” “That whole thing with the dance team and like the girl saying that she was a mean girl and, um, just	What not to include • Personality traits or temperament not linked to an emotional response to experience (<i>see Individual Factors</i>) • Behavioral reactions without caregiver reflection on emotional meaning (<i>see Conflict or Misunderstood Behavior</i>)

	not talking to her, not including her and things. It did take a toll on her.” <i>*Double coded with Conflict</i>	• Caregiver attempts to guide or intervene (<i>see Protective Parenting</i>)
Code	Definition	What to include
Moving Toward Cultural Competence	Suggestions or reflections on the need for systems to become more inclusive and culturally responsive to improve treatment of Black children.	• Suggestions for how schools or educators can be more culturally responsive • Reflections on the importance of understanding race, identity, equity, or social context in working with Black youth • Statements about what educators or systems should do differently to better serve diverse populations • Calls for policy, training, or mindset shifts rooted in cultural understanding and inclusion
	Examples “So, when somebody says, I don't see color, understanding that that's not a true statement. It's never been a true statement, unless you are completely blind, like that's the only way that you can't see color. What you should be saying is I acknowledge color and I respect it, and I choose to listen and try to understand” “Give educators more opportunities to relieve their own stress so they can get to a place where they can educate properly by giving them the tools they need to be competent about different cultures. Not assuming every child is a cookie cutter. Knowing the difference between equity and equality when it comes to different races, societies, and populations, so they can better serve our students and not make assumptions based on appearance or what they perceive to be true.”	What not to include • General critiques of institutional failure without suggestions for change (<i>see Mistrust of Systems</i>) • Reflections focused on how Black children are currently treated without a future-oriented or improvement-focused lens (<i>see Differential Treatment</i>) • Descriptions of parenting strategies/identity-affirming messages directed at the child (<i>see Build Them Up</i>)