Youth Disclosure About Friendships Across the Transition to Middle School

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Abstract
This longitudinal qualitative investigation considered youth disclosure to parents about friends as well as parents’ responses to such disclosure across the transition to middle school. African American and European American youth participated in qualitative interviews regarding their disclosure to parents about friendships in three consecutive years spanning the transition to middle school. Coding was completed in a two-step process that started with identifying themes regarding disclosure about friends as they reflected the experiences of all youth. Second, global categorizations of disclosure patterns during each year were used to categorize participants into four groups: stable complete disclosers, stable partial disclosures, increasing disclosers, and decreasing disclosers. We then identified themes regarding disclosure about friends as they distinguished these disclosure groups. Findings indicated that adolescent disclosure to parents about friends is embedded within the nature of adolescents’ relationships with parents and the manner in which parents respond to adolescent disclosure episodes across time.

Keywords
disclosure, adolescence, parents, friends, qualitative

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Over a decade and a half have passed since Stattin and Kerr transformed the field of parenting research with their ideas concerning the manner in which parents become informed about their children’s whereabouts and activities. Prior to that time, researchers had assumed that parents gained such information through explicit efforts to monitor and control their children. Stattin and Kerr (Kerr & Stattin, 2000; Stattin & Kerr, 2000) provided evidence that (a) the construct that researchers had been referring to as “monitoring” was more accurately described as parental “knowledge” and (b) that parental knowledge was to a large extent attained through adolescents’ spontaneous disclosure of their activities—with adolescents who engaged in lower levels of problem behavior being more willing to disclose to their parents.

The years that followed yielded extensive research focused on identifying factors that predict adolescent disclosure to parents, as well as linking disclosure to a variety of indicators of adolescent adjustment (Darling, Cumsille, Caldwell, & Dowdy, 2006; Nucci, Smetana, Araki, Nakaue, & Comer, 2014). The majority of such work has been quantitative in nature, generally testing the fit of models focused on identifying antecedents, correlates, and consequences of disclosure. What has been missing from this literature has been a concentrated effort to understand the disclosure process from the perspective of adolescents themselves. In the current article, we attempt to fill this gap by utilizing a qualitative approach to understanding the manner in which adolescents disclose information to parents about their friendships and activities with friends across the transition to adolescence, as well as the manner in which such disclosure unfolds within the context of parent-adolescent relationships. A qualitative approach was particularly appropriate for the current study as it allowed us to expand our understanding of not only the extent to which adolescents engage (or do not engage) in disclosure to parents, but also why they do so and how they feel about their disclosure experiences. Also, adolescent responses provide a level of depth and detail not present in quantitative studies of this topic.

Adolescent Disclosure, Parental Knowledge, and Youth Adjustment

Adolescent disclosure is a critical construct for explicating the manner in which parenting and parent-adolescent relationships come to be associated with adolescent problem behavior. However, the role played by disclosure is complex and must be understood in terms of (a) ways in which levels of disclosure are linked to parental knowledge about their children’s activities and affiliations, (b) bidirectional associations between adolescents’ involvement in problem behavior and their willingness to disclose to parents, and (c) ways
Disclosure as a Predictor of Parental Knowledge

Prior to Stattin and Kerr’s (2000) initial writings in this area, researchers (Crouter & McHale, 1993; Steinberg, Fletcher, & Darling, 1994) tended to operationalize monitoring by asking adolescents a series of questions assessing the extent to which parents were knowledgeable about what their children did, where they spent time, and with whom they spent time. Stattin and Kerr pointed out what, in retrospect, perhaps should have been viewed as obvious. Such measures were not assessing parental efforts to become informed by soliciting information from their children, but rather the extent to which they actually were informed about their children’s activities, whereabouts, and associates. As such, it was better conceptualized as a measure of parental knowledge than a measure of parental monitoring. Indeed, when Stattin and Kerr asked questions that disentangled what parents attempted to know from what they actually did know, it became clear that previously reported associations between parental monitoring and adolescent involvement in problem behavior were better thought of as associations between parental knowledge and problem behavior. Parents who knew what their children were doing had children who were less likely to be involved in activities such as delinquency and drug and alcohol use. Furthermore, one of the strongest predictors of parental knowledge was the extent to which adolescents spontaneously disclosed their activities to their parents. Stattin and Kerr were the first to demonstrate that parental knowledge was more strongly associated with adolescent disclosure than with parental solicitation or parental control, both contemporaneously and longitudinally (Kerr, Stattin, & Burk, 2010; Stattin & Kerr, 2000). Other researchers have reported similar findings (e.g., Criss et al., 2015), and several reviews of research in this area (Racz & McMahon, 2011; Smetana, 2008; Stattin, Kerr, & Tilton-Weaver, 2010) have concluded that child disclosure is a strong correlate and predictor of parental knowledge and an important construct contributing to our understanding of how knowledgeable parents come to have children who are less likely to engage in problem behavior.

Bidirectional Associations Between Adolescent Disclosure and Involvement in Problem Behavior

Higher levels of adolescent disclosure are both contemporaneously associated with (Stattin & Kerr, 2000) and longitudinally predictive of (Kerr et al., 2010) lower levels of adolescent involvement in problem behavior. However,
there is also reason to believe that adolescents who are less involved in problem behavior are more likely to disclose to their parents. Evidence in support of this direction of effects (e.g., Darling et al., 2006) provides support for the idea that adolescents who have little to hide about their behavior have little reason to nondisclose.

**Parenting, Parent-Adolescent Relationships, and the Willingness to Disclose**

Given the importance of adolescent disclosure in relation to both parental knowledge and adolescent involvement in problem behavior, it is of considerable interest to determine what factors make it more likely that adolescents will disclose information to their parents. Adolescents make conscious decisions about what they will and will not disclose to parents (Keijsers, & Laird, 2010; Smetana, 2008). Such decisions are in part shaped by the extent to which adolescents believe their behavior to be under the jurisdiction of their parents (Nucci et al., 2014) as well as developmental changes (specifically, an increasing need for autonomy during this developmental period; Darling et al., 2006). But of greater interest for the current investigation was the manner in which both parenting behaviors and parent-adolescent relationships shape the likelihood that adolescents will spontaneously disclose information to their parents. Not surprisingly, adolescents are more likely to disclose when they have warm and trusting relationships with their parents and when their parents engage in parenting that is considered optimal in terms of a wide range of adolescent behaviors and indicators of adjustment. Below, we review several of the themes that have emerged through primarily quantitative work linking disclosure to aspects of parenting and parent-adolescent relationships.

Adolescents are more likely to disclose to their parents when they feel safe and supported within the context of their relationships. Levels of disclosure are positively correlated with levels of adolescent-perceived warmth in the parent-adolescent relationship (Cumsille, Darling, & Martinez, 2010) and more close and positive overall relationships with parents (Yau, Tasopoulos-Chan, & Smetana, 2009). Adolescents are more likely to disclose when they report their parents to be high in authoritativeness (demonstrating high levels of both responsiveness and demandingness; Almas, Grusec, & Tackett, 2011; Darling et al., 2006; Smetana, Metzger, Gettman, & Campione-Barr, 2006). Higher levels of trust of parents have been consistently identified as predictive of higher levels of disclosure (Daddis & Randolph, 2010; Kerr, Stattin, & Trost, 1999; Smetana et al., 2006; Tasopoulos-Chan, Smetana, & Yau, 2009). Such trust likely has its roots in histories of positive interactions with parents. When adolescents have shared information with parents in the past
and received positive responses, this encourages the development of trusting relationships that allow adolescents to feel safe sharing again. In support of this premise, adolescents disclose more when their parents encourage them to share and are good listeners (Crouter, Bumpas, Davis, & McHale, 2005). In contrast, adolescents are less likely to disclose to parents when they anticipate that their parents will disapprove of their behavior (Nucci et al., 2014). Likely related to such anticipations of disapproval, levels of disclosure are lower when adolescents perceive their parents to be high in psychological control (Tilton-Weaver et al., 2010; Urry, Nelson, & Padilla-Walker, 2011). The transactional nature of the linkages between adolescent disclosure and parent-adolescent relationships is illustrated by work indicating that adolescents make disclosure decisions in part based on the desire to maintain positive parent-adolescent relationships (Marshall, Tilton-Weaver, & Bosdet, 2005). When probed as to why they might choose to disclose to their parents, adolescents often indicate it is because they depend on their parents for both comfort and advice related to the disclosure topic (Chaparro & Grusec, 2015).

Disclosure in Early Adolescence: The Transition to Middle School

The overwhelming majority of research on child disclosure has focused on adolescents, and for good reason. Adolescents, as compared with younger children, spend more time with peers and place more emphasis on peer relationships, friendships, and relational intimacy (Rubin, Bukowski, & Bowker, 2015). Time spent with peers is also more likely to occur outside of the direct supervision of parents during adolescence (Larson & Richards, 1991), meaning that parents must increasingly rely on adolescents’ decisions to disclose information in order to remain informed about their activities and associates. Adolescence is a developmental period characterized by increases in the desire for autonomy (Oudekerk, Allen, Hessel, & Molloy, 2015), which has implications for decisions as to whether to share information with parents. Finally, adolescents think differently than children about what decisions should be under their own versus their parents’ control, increasing the number of areas they consider to be personal in nature during adolescence (Smetana, Crean, & Campione-Barr, 2005). Not surprisingly, disclosure is lower during adolescence (and particularly middle adolescence) than it is during earlier developmental periods (Smetana, 2008). For all of these reasons, the choice to focus the study of disclosure on adolescence is appropriate. Yet to be explored is how disclosure experiences change over the transition from late childhood to early adolescence, as well as how relationships with parents shape such changes. It is this focus that characterizes the current article.
The Current Study

Within the current study, we analyze longitudinal qualitative data, following a sample of children across fifth, sixth, and seventh grades and the transition into middle school. Our focus was on youth disclosure to their parents about their friends—both characteristics of friends and activities engaged in with friends. We asked youth to reflect on both what they disclosed to parents and why they disclosed it, with the intent of addressing the following research questions.

**Research Question 1:** How does disclosure to parents about friends change or remain stable across the transition to adolescence? Given that adolescence is a time of increased desire for independence from parents, we hypothesize that the most typical pattern of disclosure over time will involve adolescents disclosing less to parents as they transition into adolescence.

**Research Question 2:** What are the emotional components of adolescent disclosure to parents? Based on research indicating that levels of disclosure vary based on adolescent involvement in problem behaviors and perceptions regarding how parents will react to disclosure, we hypothesize that youth will perceive both positive and negative components of disclosure, depending in part on the nature of the information being disclosed and in part on the manner in which parents react to disclosure.

**Research Question 3:** How do youth perceptions regarding their parents and their parents’ reactions to disclosure shape stability and change in disclosure? Consistent with quantitative research findings, we hypothesize that good parenting, encouragement by parents to share information, feelings of trust and security in relationships with parents, and perceptions that parents respect adolescent desires for autonomy will all shape adolescent decisions regarding disclosure.

Method

*Participants*

Data for this study came from a longitudinal mixed-methods study of youth friendships and well-being. Initial participants in the quantitative portion of this study (data not analyzed for this article) were 404 third graders. These students were recruited from nine elementary schools in a single county in the southeastern United States. This county encompassed two cities and their surrounding suburbs, as well as a number of smaller towns in outlying rural
areas. Schools were specifically selected based on enrollment of students from a wide range of social classes. However, schools were also selected based on their enrollment of predominantly African American or European American students, the two most prevalent ethnic groups within the county and the focus of the larger project. As a result of this sampling strategy, enrolled participants did not mirror the broader county or region from which they were drawn, although they were diverse in terms of community type, social class, and to some extent family structure (all participants were required to live with their biological or adoptive mother). Eighty-five percent of eligible children across the nine schools received parental consent for participation in the larger project. Twenty participants were selected from the larger sample to participate in a series of qualitative interviews. These participants (who provided the data analyzed here) were chosen to equally represent boys and girls as well as African American and European American participants. Thus, there were 10 boys and 10 girls and 10 youth identified themselves as African American and 10 as European American. The Hollingshead (1975) procedure for calculating social class uses both educational and occupational information from both parents (when both parents are involved in the child’s life) to calculate a summary social class score. According to the Hollingshead procedure, social class for the qualitative subsample ranged from 15 (unskilled laborers) to 66 (major business persons and professionals). The mean score was 40.65. Thirteen youth lived with mothers who were married to the target child’s biological father, three lived with single mothers, and four had mothers who reported living with the target’s child’s stepfather or a partner. Youth were interviewed once a year for three consecutive years (Grades 5, 6, and 7) with these grades selected because the transition from elementary school to middle school occurred in sixth grade in the county in which children resided. Three participants dropped out after Grade 5 and were replaced with three additional youth from the quantitative study who were similar in terms of gender, ethnicity, family structure and social class. No youth dropped out between Grade 6 and Grade 7 interviews.

Procedure

Home visits were conducted by two graduate research assistants and were completed in approximately 1 hour 15 minutes. Research assistants met with mothers and children separately and reviewed consent (mothers) and assent (youth) forms with each. Mothers and youth were given the opportunity to ask questions about the project and consent/assent forms, and when they felt comfortable mothers provided signed consent for youth participation and youth signed assent for their own participation for each individual year of
participation. At least one research assistant was of the same ethnicity as the families and at least one was always female. These research assistants were typically different individuals in each year. During home visits, youth participated in qualitative interviews administered by one research assistant outside of earshot of other family members. Each family received $40 per completed interview as compensation for participation, and children received a gift bag of small toys and school supplies during each year of participation. Interviews were transcribed verbatim and pseudonyms assigned to all participants.

**Interview Protocol**

Research assistants conducted interviews using a standard interview protocol developed for the project, but probed responses using their own follow-up questions based on initial youth responses. Interview questions of interest for the current project focused on youth disclosure to their parents of information regarding their friends (referred to simply as disclosure from this point forward) and parental solicitation of and reaction to such disclosure. Specifically, during each year youth were asked questions focused on (a) characteristics of friends and activities with friends (used to transition into questions regarding disclosure), (b) reflection on themselves and their preferences and actions related to disclosure, (c) types of information youth chose to disclose or not disclose to parents, (d) consequences of disclosure (positive and negative), and (e) parental reactions to disclosure episodes. In Grades 6 and 7 only, youth also were asked to reflect on how their disclosure about friends had or had not changed across the transition to middle school. During Grade 7 only, youth answered a set of additional questions unrelated to disclosure (not analyzed for the current article).

**Analysis**

Initial themes emerged through multiple readings of the transcripts and discussions between the authors. First-cycle coding (descriptive and process codes; Miles, Huberman, & Saldana, 2014) was then used to summarize the content of all data “chunks.” Specifically, we developed and refined codes related to youth reports regarding disclosure to parents and parents’ reactions to such disclosure. Codes were modified through an iterative process wherein coders engaged in multiple independent readings of these transcripts, meeting in pairs between each round of readings to add codes, delete codes, or clarify code definitions so as to accurately reflect youth descriptions. Reliability of the final set of codes was verified by having two coders code all transcripts using the final coding protocol and then comparing coding. Reliability was assessed using kappa statistics calculated for each interview year and indicated acceptable
agreement across raters (G5 kappa = .79; G6 kappa = .83; G7 kappa = .90). Final codes focused on topics of disclosure, reasons for disclosure/lack of disclosure, and parental responses to disclosure. Second-cycle coding (pattern coding) and charting were then used to identify and relate themes regarding youth discussion of disclosure. Specifically, we identified ways in which first-cycle codes co-occurred in meaningful ways such that they could be grouped into a smaller set of descriptive and explanatory themes. We then utilized a cross-case, variable-oriented strategy to gain a better understanding of the factors that contributed to the patterns of disclosure and changes in disclosure over time. In other words, we considered points of consistency that emerged across adolescents (cases) with respect to the manner in which key concepts (variables) related to disclosure emerged and were connected. In addition to coding of transcript segments, we also coded transcripts as a whole, classifying each participant at each time point as either a complete discloser or a partial disclouser based on the interview in its entirety. This global coding was conducted by each author separately (agreement = .80 across all interviews) and disagreements were resolved through discussion. Differences in global coding categories were then compared over time to detect patterns of change in overall disclosure. We grouped data by code both within and across global coding categories and examined intersections of codes to look for patterns indicative of how disclosure experiences differed across global coding groups.

**Results**

We present the results of our analyses as follows. First, we consider global patterns of change or stability across time (Hypothesis 1). Next, we focus on the ways in which youth discussed the emotional experiences related to disclosure to their parents (Hypothesis 2), considering both components that were universally expressed by youth and those that were specific to youth demonstrating over-time consistency in disclosure patterns. Finally, we examine the emotional experiences related to disclosure (Hypothesis 2) for the subset of youth who changed disclosure patterns over time. Embedded within results related to youth discussion of emotional experiences are findings related to how these experiences are intertwined with their perceptions of their parents and their parents’ reactions to past disclosures (Hypothesis 3).

**Global Disclosure Classifications Over Time**

Youth were explicitly asked to reflect on their own levels of disclosure to parents about friendships—whether they told their parents everything or held some information back. We read each transcript, taking into account both
youth self-categorizations as well as examples of disclosure and nondisclosure provided by youth in other parts of interviews to make global categorizations at each time period as to whether each youth was a complete discloser or a partial discloser. We then examined over-time patterns of stability or change from Grade 5 to Grade 7 (or, in the cases of the three late entrants into the study, Grade 6 to Grade 7).

The most frequent categorization was stable partial disclosure (n = 10). Four youth (including one with only Grade 6 and 7 data) were stable complete disclosers. Among the six youth who experienced over-time change in discloser status, four reported decreases in disclosure, moving from being complete disclosers in Grade 5 to partial disclosers in Grade 7. Two participants reported increases in disclosure, moving from partial disclosure in Grades 5 or 6 (for one late entrant) to complete disclosure in Grade 7. We then examined youth reflections on disclosure (or nondisclosure) experiences to extract themes that were common to all youth, regardless of disclosure status, as well as themes that distinguished groups. Youth reflections on disclosure experiences did not differ in systematic ways based on either gender or ethnicity. Accordingly, we discuss themes and patterns as they were observed across all participants.

**Universal Disclosure Experiences**

Regardless of youth disclosure status, several distinct themes emerged related to adolescent perceptions regarding discussion of friendship experiences with parents.

*Enjoyment of positive disclosure experiences.* In general, youth tended to report that disclosure episodes were a point of connection for themselves and parents. The most frequent comments regarding such positivity referenced disclosure as an opportunity for youth and parents to enjoy humorous aspects of youth interactions with friends: “Sometimes they laugh if I, like, I tell them they did something funny or something, and laugh at what they did” (Bryan, European American Stable Partial Disclosing Boy, G7).

*Parents as a source of advice/support/assistance.* Most youth viewed their parents as an important source of support as they handled difficult situations with their friends. Youth from all disclosure groups reported disclosing to parents in an effort to obtain their parents’ perspectives about how to best proceed in difficult situations. Although the form of assistance provided varied from child to child (including advice as to what to do and emotional support as children handled or reacted to difficult situations), a common theme
involved willingness of youth to disclose to parents when they were having problems with friends, as well as appreciation of the support they received. Michael commented on his tendency to “just tell ’em about my problems and maybe they can give me advice about it. Like if it comes up the same way again, I can tell ’em” (Michael, European American Increased Disclosing Boy; G7).

**Feelings of discomfort involving sharing of negative information.** What distinguished partial disclosers from complete disclosers was their reports of what they actually did (or did not) disclose to their parents—not how comfortable they felt during the disclosure. Virtually all youth reported discomfort in sharing negative information about friends with their parents. Specifically, they did not feel comfortable telling their parents when friends got in trouble or did things they believed their parents would not approve of. Chris talked about why he did not enjoy sharing with his parents the information about how his friends talked. “Some people are just really weird and they like to talk about nasty things at school and I don’t want to, my parents to, like, know that I am going to a nasty school and they’re talking about nasty things” (Chris; European American Stable Partial Disclosing Boy; G6). Other times, youth talked about hiding friendships that they knew would disappoint their parents. Bryan knew that his parents had high standards in terms of the types of friends they wanted him to have. He chose not to tell his parents about one particular friend because he knew his choice would disappoint them: “I’m afraid they won’t approve” (Bryan, European American Stable Partial Disclosing Boy, G7).

**Links between disclosure and parental permission.** Youth from all disclosure groupings indicated that their decisions regarding whether to disclose information about friends to their parents were made based on beliefs regarding how parents used knowledge to make decisions about whether to allow their children to spend time with friends. When youth reported nondisclosure, they often explained their decisions to withhold information from their parents as due to concerns that if they shared, their parents would no longer allow them to spend time with friends. However, youth sometimes explained their decisions to disclose by a desire to be allowed to spend time with friends.

I think like if they know them better then they’ll let me hang out with them and stuff and if they don’t then they probably won’t let me go a lot of places with them, so I just like tell them so then I can hang out with them more. (Sheryl; European American Stable Complete Disclosing Girl, G7)
Youth clearly recognized that parents used what they knew about their children’s friends and activities with friends to make decisions regarding whether children should be allowed to spend time with specific individuals. This recognition resulted in youth with more prosocial friendships being more willing (and even eager) to share information about such friendships with their parents. At the same time, youth who perceived their friendships as potentially troubling to parents were less likely to talk with parents about these friendships.

**Stable Complete Disclosers**

Unique to the reflections of stable complete disclosers were two additional themes regarding disclosure experiences.

**Trust of parents.** Youth who were consistent over time in reports that they disclosed everything about their friends and friendships to their parents reported a high level of trust in their parents. They knew that, regardless of what they shared, their parents would keep the information within the family and not share it with others or insist on intervening in the situation. “You can tell them stuff and you know that they are not going to kind of like go behind your back and tell people” (William, Stable Complete Disclosing Boy, G6).

**History of positive parental response to negative disclosure information.** Youth who were consistent in their decisions to disclose all information about their friends to their parents tended to report that they had disclosed negative information to their parents in the past and that their parents had reacted to such revelations in a positive manner. For example, Jon recounted a time he and his friends got lost in the woods, and he told his parents about the episode.

We went way, way, back in the woods and we lost direction. When we were going back, we thought we were going back towards the house, but we ended, it ended up we were about an eighth of a mile over there. And we had to find a shallow crossing . . . but it was, the water was kind of fast but we could just make it across. But Christina was scared so she started breaking down, but finally we got through the river and we popped out in a, in the next cul-de-sac over. And from there we just walked home and I told my parents all about that. And you know, my mom, she didn’t like it but, you know, my dad thought it was cool. My dad, my dad’s a funny guy. (Jon, European American Stable Disclosing Boy, G6)
Youth who had histories of positive or supportive parental responses to disclosure of information were confident that they could tell their parents anything without fear of negative repercussions.

**Stable Partial Disclosers**

Stable partial disclosures chose to disclose some, but not all, information about friends to their parents. Not surprisingly, much of the information they chose to withhold focused on negative characteristics of or activities with friends. Adrianna reported on the sorts of activities with friends that she chose not to disclose to her parents.

> When I go over to my friend’s house, we be at the park by ourselves, and it’s really the ghetto out there, and her parents, like, my parents don’t want me going, like two teenage girls alone and there’s like gangs out there. And then we talk to ’em, make conversation, but I don’t tell ’em all that. (Adrianna, African American Stable Partial Disclosing Girl, G7)

But youth also chose to withhold positive or neutral information from their parents. For example, Chris chose not to disclose to his parents the details of his on-again-off-again relationship with a girlfriend,

> I asked out this girl in 6th, in umm, this year . . . we were going out together in 5th grade, which was short of like, like a big step . . . and so we, and then we just didn’t, like everything stopped during 5th grade. I don’t know if it was me or her but we just stopped. And so we tried to get back together but things weren’t working out. (Chris, European American Stable Partial Disclosing Boy; G6)

Youth reasons for withholding positive/neutral versus negative information about friends and friendships differed considerably.

**Reasons for withholding positive/neutral information from parents.** When youth reported withholding positive or neutral information from parents, they tended to justify their decisions based on personal belief systems that emphasized privacy. “Sometimes I don’t tell my mom ’cause, ummm, it’s more between me and my friends, what goes on and so I will keep that between us and not tell my mom” (Jazmyn, African American Stable Partial Disclosing Girl, G6). In such cases, youth believed that they had a basic right to have areas of their lives that they did not share with their parents. This belief was sometimes expressed in terms of a right or a need that increased as children
grew older, “as you get older, you just don’t want to tell them everything” (Pam, European American Stable Partial Disclosing Girl, G6). Youth also expressed the belief that this emphasis on areas of privacy was something that parents would support, “’cause they were teenagers once and you don’t want their parents like milking them for answers” (Adrianna, African American Stable Partial Disclosing Girl, G7). “I don’t want them to know, like, every little detail, like they were their own child . . . ’cause then they, they needed their privacy” (Chris, European American Stable Partial Disclosing Boy, G7).

**Reasons for withholding negative information from parents.** In contrast, youth justifications for withholding negative information about friends or friendships from parents focused exclusively on concerns (often grounded in previous negative experiences) related to disclosure to parents. Youth reported a large number of such concerns which were distinct but all fell under the umbrella of negative parental response. Youth indicated concerns that parents would inappropriately share confidences with others—with others defined as parents’ own friends, parents of children’s friends, teachers, and even friends themselves. “I don’t tell her everything because she might go and talk to the teacher about my friends” (Tylyn, African American Stable Partial Disclosing Girl, G5). Other youth reported avoiding discussions with their parents because of perceptions that their parents were intrusive and badgering within the context of such interactions. “I: What’s the worst part about talking to your parents about your friends? Y: When they start asking question after question” (Pam, European American Stable Partial Disclosing Girl, G6). Youth also reported concerns that parents might overreact to information that was disclosed—with such concerns typically grounded in a history of such behaviors.

She’s hostile . . . what I say to her depends on how she is going to react . . . she would have probably got hyped then she probably would have went over there. ’Cause then she would have went to my aunt’s house and then went over there to talk to him. (Summer, African American Stable Partial Disclosing Girl, G6)

In contrast to overreacting, some youth reported that their parents didn’t care to listen to disclosures about friends. Such lack of interest was disappointing to youth and resulted in a lack of interest in sharing information in the future. “When my friend Eric came over here I said, ‘Ma, let me tell you about my friend.’ She said, ‘Oh, God!’ and she was not interested at all so I didn’t even tell her about Eric” (Caleb, African American Stable Partial Disclosing Boy, G5). Finally, some youth identified disclosure as a past source of conflict
with their parents. Jazmyn described a typical disclosure experience with her mother as follows.

It’s usually a fight that, usually like an argument that me and my friend has been through and I told my mom about it and either she’ll like get upset and tell me that, either tell me that that friend should apologize or something like that. I think that’s the only time that I will, she will actually argue or get mad about. (Jazmyn, African American Stable Partial Disclosing Girl, G7)

**Changes in Disclosure Over Time**

Although most youth demonstrated over-time stability in their disclosure categorizations, a smaller number did demonstrate over-time categorization changes. Youth reflections on their disclosure practices, which were probed regarding whether such practices had changed over time and why change might have occurred, indicated two themes related to changes.

*Changes in friends.* For both youth who increased disclosure over time and youth who decreased disclosure over time, youth explained changes in terms of differences in the individuals with whom they were spending time and their beliefs regarding how parents would view these new friends. Youth clearly preferred to share information about their friends when the nature of that information would be positive and disclosed less when the content of such disclosure would be negative. Theresa moved over time from being a complete discloser to a partial disclosure and attributed this change entirely to changes in friends.

Some of my friends changed . . . everybody kind changed, so I tell ’em different things . . . I don’t tell her like they’re badder than they were last year. She’ll be like, she’s bad, she be doing crazy stuff like that. (Theresa, African American Decreased Disclosing Girl, G7)

Youth who moved from being partial disclosers to being complete disclosers talked about changes in their friendships as well. Michael changed schools over the course of our study and said of his new school,

I have better friends there, and like I can tell them more about it, ’cause I don’t like to tell ’em the bad things as much as the good things. So I just have better friends going to a Christian school now. (Michael, European American Increased Disclosing Boy, G7)

Another boy who transitioned from elementary school to middle school spoke about changes in his friendship group.
I: Do you talk to your parents about your friendships more, less, or about the same since moving to middle school? Y: Probably more . . . Because I have a lot more friends and they’re, like, nicer and stuff. And better to talk about. (Mark, European American Increased Disclosing Boy, G6)

Changes in friendship groups were virtually always related to school transitions. Moving to a new school offered youth opportunities to affiliate with new peer groups, for better or for worse. It was the anticipated parental responses to the new friends that shaped changes in disclosure patterns. Changes to a more positive peer group led to more disclosure to parents, while changes to a more negative peer group led to less disclosure.

**Intrusive parenting.** Changes in friendship groups accounted for transitions in disclosure patterns that moved in both directions. However, a second theme emerged to explain some of the over-time transitions from more disclosure to less disclosure. This theme was youth reaction to intrusive parenting. A small number of youth within our sample reported having parents who were overly interested in or protective of their children. Although parents may have had the best of intentions in trying to get their children to talk with them, youth perceived these parents’ questions as intrusive and upsetting. “She’s sorta nosy,” said Isaiah, “She’ll get concerned and ask who they is and get all, like a mother protecting and stuff like that” (Isaiah, African American Decreased Disclosing Boy; G7). Laura talked about avoiding discussions with her mother about her friends because co-ruminating about difficulties in her friendships was upsetting for her. “Sometimes I don’t really like to talk, like to talk about fights we had, ’cause then it just makes me more depressed . . . then she’ll keep, wanna keep on talking about it and I won’t, so” (Laura, European American Decreased Disclosing Girl, G7). In cases such as these, changes in youth disclosure patterns were clearly a reaction to negative experiences surrounding discussions with parents about youth friendships.

**Discussion**

As children transition into adolescence, they must simultaneously navigate relationships with two groups of individuals who hold important yet distinct places in their lives: parents and friends. The point of connection between these two sets of individuals is in large part defined in terms of the decisions adolescents make about whether and what to disclose to parents about their relationships with friends. Our findings indicate that adolescent disclosure to parents about friends is embedded within the nature of adolescents’ relationships with parents and the manner in which parents respond to adolescent disclosure episodes across time.
Consistent with Hypothesis 2, disclosure experiences represented both positive and negative points of connection for adolescents and their parents. When disclosure goes well, adolescents enjoy sharing with their parents and rely on their parents as a source of advice and support as they negotiate complicated relational and behavioral issues with friends. Our findings in this area are consistent with quantitative work indicating that one of the reasons adolescents disclose to their parents is because parents are seen as a potential source of guidance (Chaparro & Grusec, 2015). However, the quantitative literature has heretofore failed to capture the enjoyment that adolescents experience from sharing positive information about friends to their parents. Such enjoyment is highly reinforcing of inclinations to disclose and also serves to strengthen connections between parents and adolescents. The ability to identify and describe this enjoyment and its role in the disclosure process represents a unique contribution and strength of the current project.

Yet disclosure is not all fun and games. Adolescents clearly recognize the role of parents as gatekeepers of peer relationships. They report discomfort associated with disclosure of negative information to parents, an emotional experience that has also escaped notice in the quantitative literature on disclosure. In part, this discomfort can be explained by adolescents’ understanding that if parents disapprove of friends, they have the means to shut down adolescents’ opportunities to spend time with these individuals. And as they worry about the potential negative consequences of disclosing to parents, adolescents simultaneously also wish to avoid disappointing their parents or making their parents uncomfortable. Understanding why adolescents fail to disclose is larger than just the fact that adolescents do not want to tell their parents about their own involvement in problem behavior, a finding well documented in the quantitative literature on disclosure. Our findings are unique in that they indicate that disclosing to parents that a friend is making poor choices opens adolescents up to the risk of feeling that they themselves have disappointed parents, as well as potentially causing worries and stress for concerned parents. It is not surprising that decisions to disclose are strongly rooted in the extent to which adolescents feel secure in their relationships with parents (Daddis & Randolph, 2010). Our findings suggest that such security develops over multiple iterations of child disclosure and parental reactions to such disclosure.

Consistent with Hypothesis 3, youth in our study discussed disclosure as being shaped by some of the same factors that have been identified in the quantitative literature as predictive of levels of disclosure. As has the work of Kerr et al. (1999) and Tilton-Weaver et al. (2010), our findings indicate that disclosure experiences are grounded in adolescents’ feelings that they can trust their parents and that their parents are respectful of their needs to keep
some aspects of friendships private (an element of psychological autonomy granting). When adolescents perceive that their parents do not want to hear about their friends, or when parents respond to disclosure poorly (e.g., breaking adolescents’ confidences or badgering adolescents for additional details they do not wish to share), adolescents become less likely to disclose on future occasions. However, when adolescents perceive that their parents have handled past disclosure experiences well (remaining calm when being told about problems, being respectful of increased desire for privacy as children grow older), they feel comfortable continuing to disclose. Either way, adolescents base their disclosure decisions on beliefs that parents will behave consistently over time, for better or for worse.

Unique to the current project was our decision to follow adolescents over time and to examine consistency and change in disclosure patterns across the transition to middle school. This focus on the transition to middle school/early adolescence is noteworthy because it captures a developmental period during which youth are becoming more heavily invested in peer relationships and also spending more time with friends outside of the direct supervision of parents (Larson & Richards, 1991; Rubin et al., 2015). Also important is that involvement in many types of problem behavior (such as experimentation with drugs and alcohol and involvement in delinquency) begins to appear during the middle school years (Johnston, O’Malley, Bachman, & Schulenberg, 2011). Accordingly, parents may be particularly interested in encouraging adolescent disclosure about friends and activities with friends during this developmental period.

Contrary to Hypothesis 1, our findings indicated that there was considerable stability in the patterns of disclosure exhibited by youth as they transitioned from middle childhood to early adolescence. This stability appears to be because parent-child relationships, as they relate to disclosure experiences, are in large part determined well before this transition occurs. For better or for worse, by the time adolescents reach middle school they have already made key decisions regarding the extent to which they are comfortable disclosing information about their friends to their parents.

We did identify a small number of cases in which youth changed disclosure patterns over time. Interestingly, these changes reflected patterns of both increasing and decreasing disclosure. It does not appear to be the case that children disclose less as they enter adolescence. It is certainly the case (based on our own data and the work of others; Solis, Smetana, & Comer, 2015) that adolescence brings with it increased concerns regarding the need privacy related to relationships with friends. However, many adolescents still share considerable information with their parents during the middle school years, and a few become even more communicative about their friends. In cases in
which youth report decreases in disclosure, it may be that overly intrusive parenting becomes particularly difficult for adolescents to tolerate as they experience developmentally appropriate increases in the desire for privacy. This observation is consistent with other work suggesting that intrusive parenting may be more particularly detrimental during adolescence (Weymouth & Buehler, 2015). However, in the context of positive parent-adolescent relationships, it appears that some adolescents become more forthcoming with their parents during the middle school years, particularly when the friends about whom they are disclosing are perceived by youth to be ones they would be proud to discuss with their parents. This is consistent with our finding that youth prefer to disclose positive information about friends to parents.

Our data have yielded a rich perspective on the ways in which children’s experiences and relationships with parents shape their disclosure behaviors across the transition to adolescence—complete with a level of depth and illustration that is only available through qualitative research inquiries. Yet despite the appeal of our findings, some limitations are present in the methodology we applied to this topic. Our focus was specifically on disclosure about friends and accordingly cannot be generalized to disclosure of other types of information. Friendship is a central developmental concern during early adolescence, and much of adolescents’ time is spent with, and activities occur in the context of, friends (Larson & Richards, 1991). Accordingly, our focus on disclosure about friends is developmentally appropriate and informative. However, it may be that adolescents think about and engage in disclosure differently when the topic of disclosure differs. For example, adolescents may be less likely at all ages to disclose about their own involvement in problem behavior than to disclose about their relationships with friends.

Our sample was relatively small and represented only two ethnic groups within a single geographic area in the United States. However, we attempted to bring some diversity into our sample by including both girls and boys and by including youth from a variety of socioeconomic backgrounds and family structures. Also, our ability to follow these adolescents for a 3-year period of time provided us a window on developmental change not often possible with qualitative samples. Further research in this area might focus on developmental change in disclosure about friends among youth from other ethnic backgrounds and geographic locations. For example, it may be that patterns of disclosure and reasons that adolescents chose to disclose or not to disclose differ in cultures which vary based on characteristics such as familism which values greater levels of support and closeness among family members (Knight et al., 2010).
Finally, we relied on interview data collected from adolescents to obtain information about disclosure to parents. This was appropriate in that our intent was to consider adolescents’ own perceptions regarding how they made decisions to disclose to their parents. A different perspective on disclosure to parents would be provided from interview data from parents regarding their perspectives on how and why adolescents disclose information to them. Future research should also incorporate parental perspectives on disclosure so as to gain a broader perspective regarding this phenomenon.

Given the critical role that youth disclosure plays in relation to parental knowledge about adolescents’ relationships and activities, as well as adolescent involvement in problem behavior (Stattin & Kerr, 2000), it is of considerable interest for developmental researchers and parents alike to understand the relational context within which such disclosure episodes become more or less likely to occur. Our findings suggest that youth decisions regarding disclosure in adolescence have their roots in disclosure experiences well before this developmental period. Under the best of circumstances, children approach the transition to adolescence against a backdrop of long histories of positive reinforcement of sharing information with parents. Disclosing to parents in adolescence may not always be fun, but the likelihood that disclosure will occur is solidly grounded in the extent to which it has been fun in the past—as well as safe and respectful.

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