

Family Relations During Puberty:  
Parent and Adolescent Perspectives

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## INTRODUCTION

Previous research has implicated pubertal maturation as an important catalyst to the changes in parent-child relationships during early adolescence. Physical development is a salient individual change for both the adolescent experiencing it, and his/her family members. While familial response to pubertal growth is likely to shape the adolescent's experience of it, the family's response may also contribute to the shifts in family relations during this developmental period.

Research over the last two decades has demonstrated links between pubertal growth and parent-child relations, such that pubertal maturation has been associated with increased adolescent autonomy, decreased parental supervision and monitoring of activities, increased parent-child conflict over "minor issues," and less time spent together. Pubertal status appears to be mildly and consistently linked to changes in parent-child relations. However, the impact of developing sooner or later than expected may have on this set of normative changes in the family is less clear.

This study investigates the links between the timing of development, and a number of aspects of the parent-child relationship. It seeks to extend the current literature through (1) investigating these processes for both boys and girls in a large sample of African-American and European-American 8th graders, (2) utilizing both parent and adolescent report of family relations in order to comment on the experience from both perspectives, and (3) assessing whether "off-time" pubertal development co-occurs with unique parent-child relationship patterns as compared with "on-time" developers.

## RESEARCH QUESTIONS

1. Do maternal-adolescent relations differ as a function of pubertal timing (early, on-time or late), when controlling for the age of the adolescent?
2. How do the patterns of relations vary by gender of the adolescent, and by maternal vs. adolescent reports?
3. How does ethnic group membership (European-American or African-American) moderate the relationship between pubertal timing and maternal-child relations?

## METHOD

### Participants

This sample of eighth graders ( $n=868$ ) is drawn from the second wave of the Maryland Adolescent Growth in Context Study (MAGICS). The sample is roughly two-thirds African American ( $n=550$ ) and one-third white ( $n=318$ ), and represents a wide range of socioeconomic backgrounds across racial/ethnic groups. The adolescents were 13.5 years old (range 13-14) at the time of data collection. There were comparable numbers of boys ( $n=437$ ) and girls ( $n=431$ ).

## MEASURES

### Pubertal Growth (adapted from the Petersen Pubertal Scale, 1988)

<u>Item</u>	<u>White</u>		<u>African American</u>		<u>Range</u>
	<u>Girls</u>	<u>Boys</u>	<u>Girls</u>	<u>Boys</u>	
Growth Spurt <sup>a</sup>	2.91	2.54	2.79	2.47	1=not yet begun 4=changes completed
Skin Changes <sup>a</sup>	2.78	2.64	2.62	2.37	1=not yet begun 4=changes completed
Perception of Timing Relative to Peers	3.00	2.88	2.90	2.94	1= a lot sooner 3= about the same 5=a lot later
Breast Development <sup>a</sup>	3.63		3.00		0=not yet begun 1=began in 3rd grade 6=began in 8th grade
Menarche <sup>a</sup>	4.40		4.05		1=3rd grade 6=8th grade
Voice Change <sup>b</sup>		2.78		2.63	1=not yet begun 4=voice changed completely
Sex Organ Development <sup>b</sup>		3.30		3.09	1= began in 4th grade 5= began in 8th grade

**Pubertal Index:** 5 items are standardized and averaged to create overall index of growth.  
Higher scores indicate later maturation.

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- \* Items reversed in Pubertal Index
  - g Items asked of girls only
  - b items asked of boys only

**Note:** Overall, African-American adolescents reported somewhat earlier maturation than did Whites. As expected, girls reported earlier maturation than did boys. In particular, African-American girls reported maturing earlier than did White girls (average about 1/2 a grade earlier on most measures).

#### Stability of Puberty Index Ratings

Estimates of pubertal timing using this index demonstrate moderate stability between 7th and 8th grade. Cross-time correlations were ( $r=.63$ ) for girls, and ( $r=.50$ ) for boys.

## Pubertal Timing

Groups of **Early**, **On-Time** and **Late** maturing adolescent boys and girls were identified by individuals' scores on the overall puberty index using the following criterion.

Puberty Index Ranking	Pubertal Timing
Earliest 1/6	Early
Middle 2/3	On-Time
Latest 1/6	Late

Because there were some significant differences in the maturational timing between African-Americans and whites, membership in pubertal timing groups was established within both ethnicity and gender.

### Family Measures

reporter:scale name

	# Items	Alpha	Mean	Range
<u>Autonomy</u>				
Youth: Decide	6	.63	3.19	1-5
Parent: Decide	4	.69	4.04	1-5

\* How family makes decisions that involve the child; how much personal autonomy child has about hair, clothes, curfew.

#### Monitoring

Youth: Monitor	6	.87	3.77	1-5
Parent: Monitor	7	.65	2.30	1-3

\* Rules regarding supervision, curfew, dates, time and people child allowed out with; personal domains such as clothing, phone, TV

#### Parent-Child Conflict

Youth: Conflict	6	.76	2.30	1-5
Parent: Conflict	5	.82	2.31	1-5

\* Parent-Child conflict around how child spends money, time out of school, grades, who child spends time with, at what age child can date

#### Worries/Concerns about Child's Future

Youth: Worry	7	.93	2.86	1-5
Parent: Worry	12	.83	1.68	1-5

\* Parental Worries about future negative peer involvement, bad grades, trouble at school, mental health problems, early or troublesome sexual behavior (AIDS, pregnant), and delinquency; drugs, police, gangs

#### Authority

Parent: Authority	4	.53	2.59	1-5
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\* Parent wants child to obey even if they disagree, child not allowed to disagree or criticize parent's ideas; "authoritarian control."

#### Affective Relationship

Youth: Attunement	8	.72	3.47	1-5
Youth: Communication	3	.77	3.61	1-6
Parent: Attunement	5	.46	4.35	1-5
Parent: Yell at Child	5	.61	2.38	1-5
Parent: Enjoyment of Activities with Child	5	.78	4.84	1-7

\* Level of trust, criticism, listening, sharing problems, feeling close to each other, having empathy for the other and feeling responded to and attended to within the relationship

**Note:** Parent and Youth indices of these constructs are not identical. Scales have been named to reflect similarity of underlying construct, and in most cases, parent and youth scales do share common items.

## SUMMARY OF RESULTS:

### 1. Do maternal-adolescent relations differ as a function of pubertal timing when controlling for the age of the adolescent?

\* Overall, results demonstrate patterns consistent with previous findings of mild to moderate relationships between pubertal development and parent-child relations. Typically, the data reveals linear trends associated with pubertal maturation, as opposed to "off-time" effects, per se.

### 2. How do the patterns of relations vary by gender of the adolescent, and by the reporter (maternal vs. adolescent) ?

\* There were twice as many significant findings for girls than boys.

\* **Girls.** No consistent pattern of domain-specific results emerge from these analyses. Mothers report enjoying time spent in activities with daughters less among girls with earlier onset of puberty. Increased mother-daughter conflict in early maturing girls was reported by European-American girls, and African-American mothers.

\* **Boys.** Similar to other studies, these results provide support for boys' increased status in the family with pubertal development. Among the constructs assessed in this study, boys get yelled at less by their mother, experience less "authoritarian control," and are enjoyed more by their mothers. Decision-making, monitoring, conflict, and maternal worries about negative outcomes for their sons do not appear to be affected by pubertal development as assessed here.

\* **Maternal and adolescent reports** both demonstrated relations to pubertal timing. Data support the common-sense notion that pubertal changes do indeed impact both the adolescent and his/her family members' response to them. For European-American mothers, all significant findings were in the area of "affective relations" with their boys and girls. Findings for African-American mothers, in contrast, were in the domains of conflict, worry and authority.

### 3. How does ethnic group membership moderate the relationship between pubertal timing and maternal-child relations?

\* Overall, there were twice as many significant findings for European-American adolescents. Also of note is that significant relations were found most often for European-American girls, and least often for African-American boys across reporter. Direction of effects does not appear to be moderated by ethnic group membership. For example, across ethnic categories, maternal reports of enjoyment increase for sons, and decrease for daughters with pubertal maturation.

## DISCUSSION

Overall, the data reveals linear trends associated with maturational timing. This provides support for models suggesting that it is the status of puberty, or the process of development which precipitates accommodations within the family. While pubertal development does appear to co-occur with changes in the adolescent's family, the timing of pubertal onset, per se, does not appear to produce a qualitatively different shift the nature of the parent-child relationship within a normative population.

A couple of findings are worthy of note. First, the data present a trend for maternal enjoyment of activities to differ for daughters and sons. Inclusion of paternal data would help illuminate cross-gender parent-child relations to comment on prominent aspects of social development occurring during this phase. That is, as mother-daughter relationships become more conflictual, paternal-daughter relationships may be less so under circumstances where a father is present and available in the home. Likewise, father-son relationships might demonstrate more tension, given the tasks of de-identification and individuation from parents, and same-sex parents in particular.

Second, the parental authority shifts for African-American youth is interesting given other reports of higher "authoritarianism" among African-American families. This data demonstrates that African-American mothers shift their attitudes away from an authoritarian stance as their children become more mature physically. One possible explanation for the lack of emotional distress reported as a function of pubertal timing by African-American youth (Michael, 1996) could be the acknowledgment of development by mothers, who relax their stance towards their son/daughter's expression of viewpoints which differ from their own. More generally, if physical changes are accompanied by positive experiences from the social environment regarding the meaning of these changes, emotional distress would not be a likely outcome.

Finally, data demonstrate strongest support for effects of pubertal timing on European-American girls, whom have already been most studied in this regard. However, inclusion of other groups can assist in ascertaining the more universal, and more unique aspects of the individual and family accommodation to pubertal development as one element of the rapid changes of early adolescence.

Table 1: Correlations between pubertal development and family variables

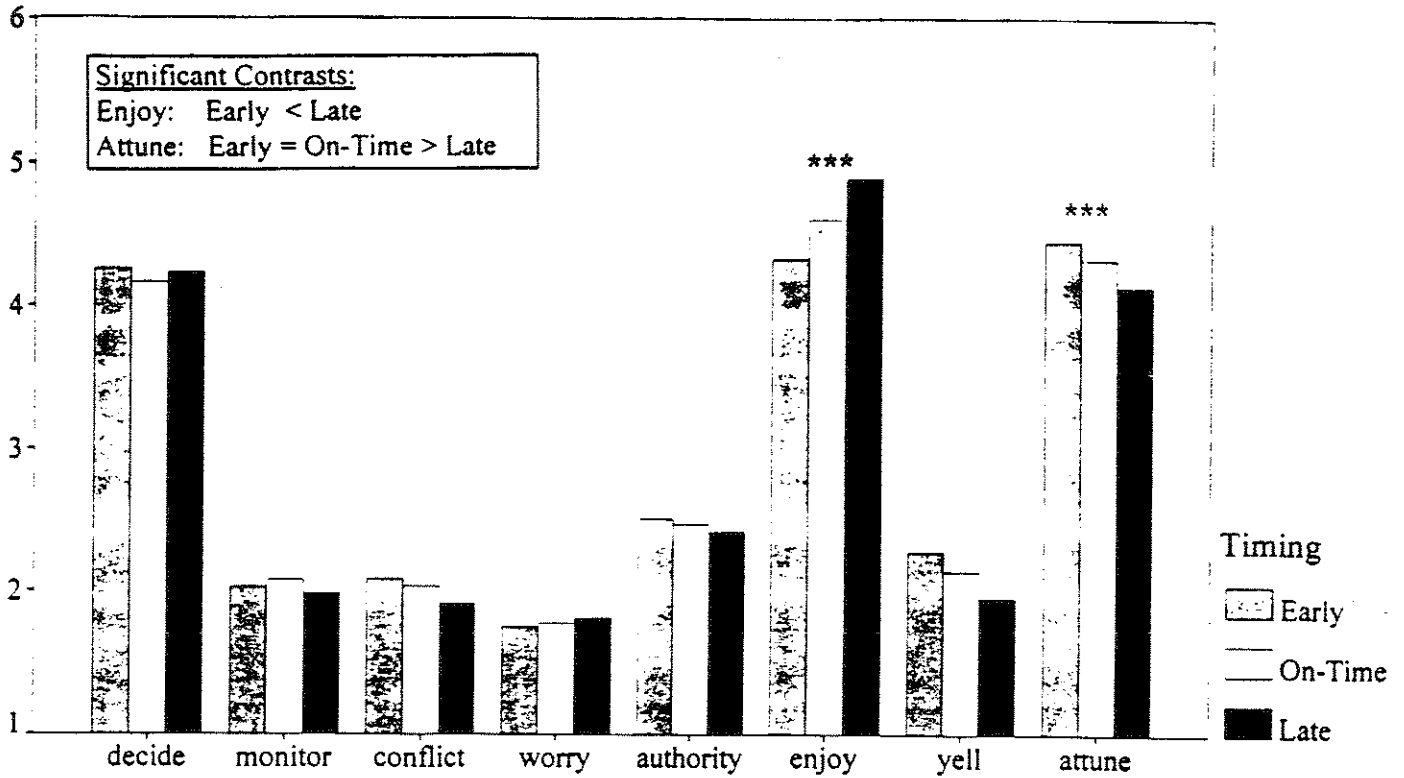
Puberty/ Family Scale	Youth Report		Parent Report	
	Girls EA/(AA)	Boys EA/(AA)	Girls EA/(AA)	Boys EA/(AA)
<b>Decide</b>	.06/(-.04)	-.05/ (.14*)	.01/(-.09)	.12/ (.06)
<b>Monitor</b>	-.08/ (.03)	-.12/ (.02)	.03/ (.01)	-.03/ (.05)
<b>Conflict</b>	.21**/ (.05)	-.06/ (.03)	.09/ (.12+)	-.04/ (.08)
<b>Worry</b>	.08/ (-.06)	-.07/ (-.02)	.00/ (.09)	-.07/ (.09)
<b>Authority</b>			.07/ (-.05)	.00/ (-.15**)
<b>Attune</b>	-.15+ / (-.08)	.01/ (.09)	.17* / (-.03)	-.16+ / (.02)
<b>Communicate</b>	.06/ (-.06)	-.11/ (-.01)		
<b>Enjoy</b>			-.15+ / (-.13*)	.23** / (.05)
<b>Yell</b>			.14+ / (.08)	-.11 / (-.11+)

Note: Pubertal scale is in the direction of increased maturation =higher score.  
 EA= European American  
 AA= African American

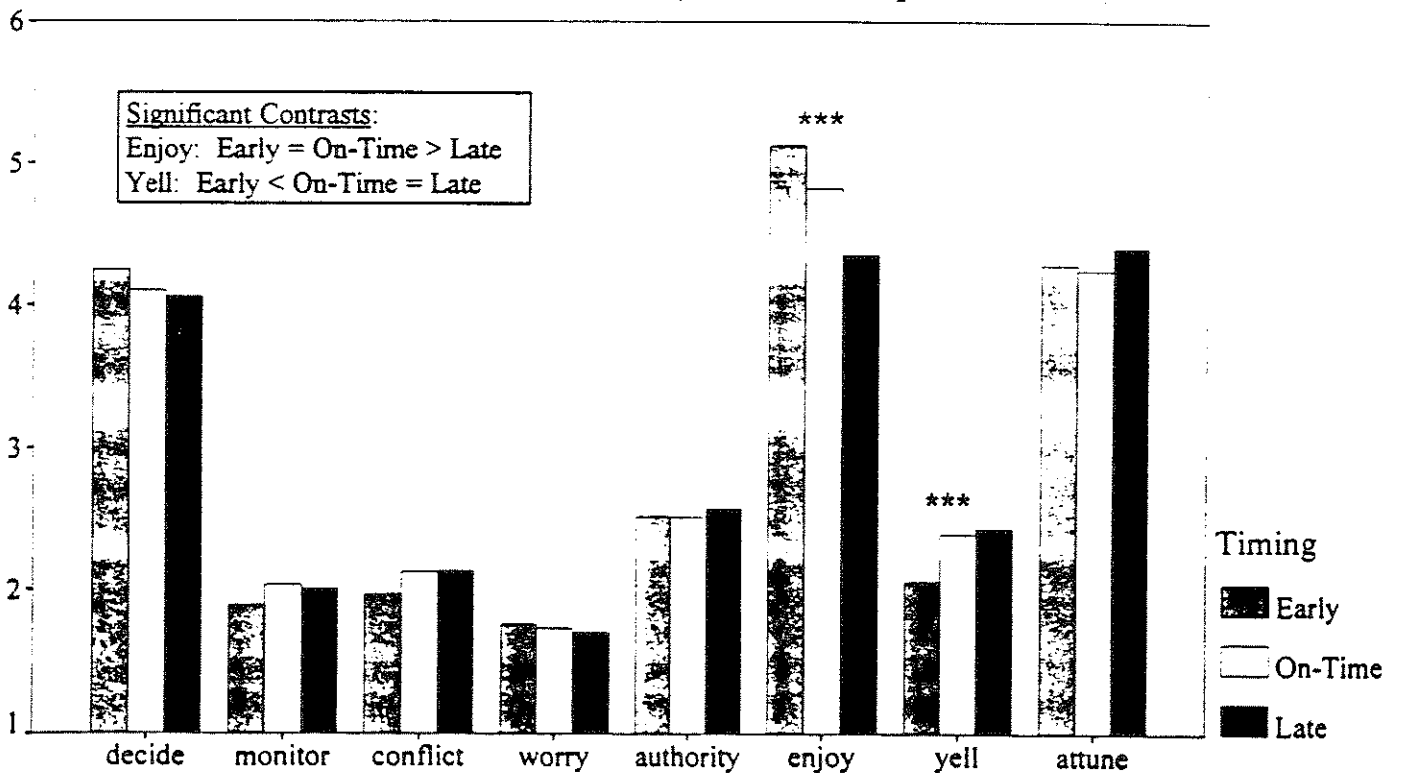




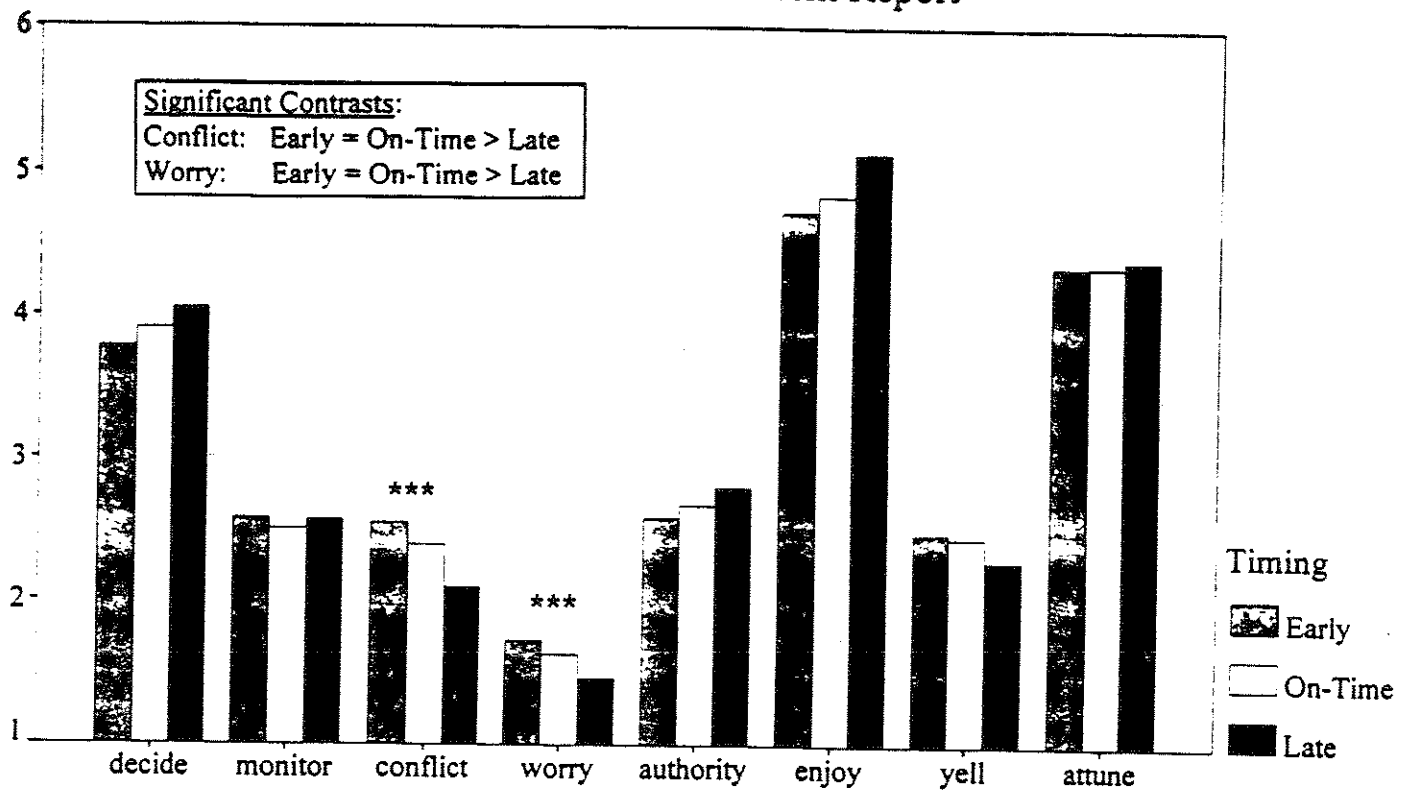
## European-American Girls: Parent Report



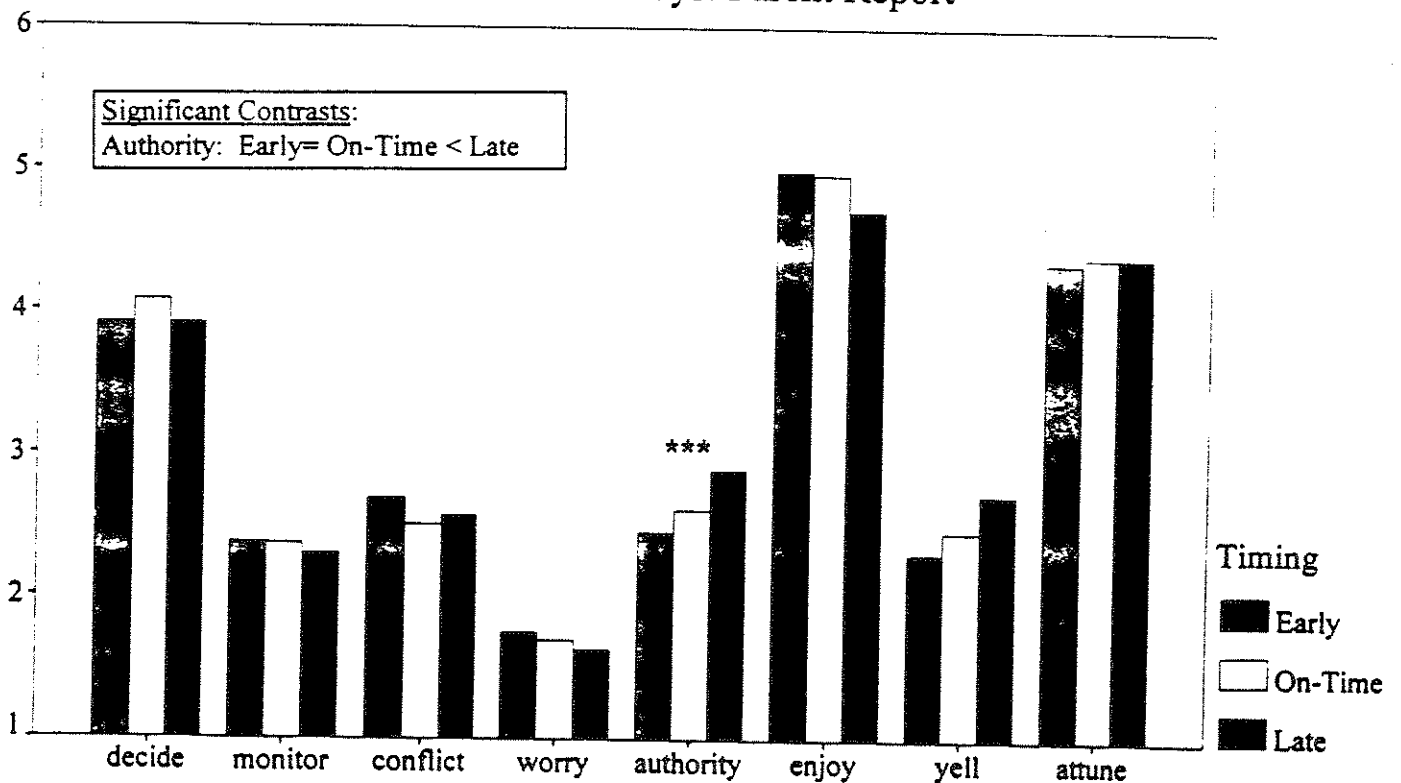
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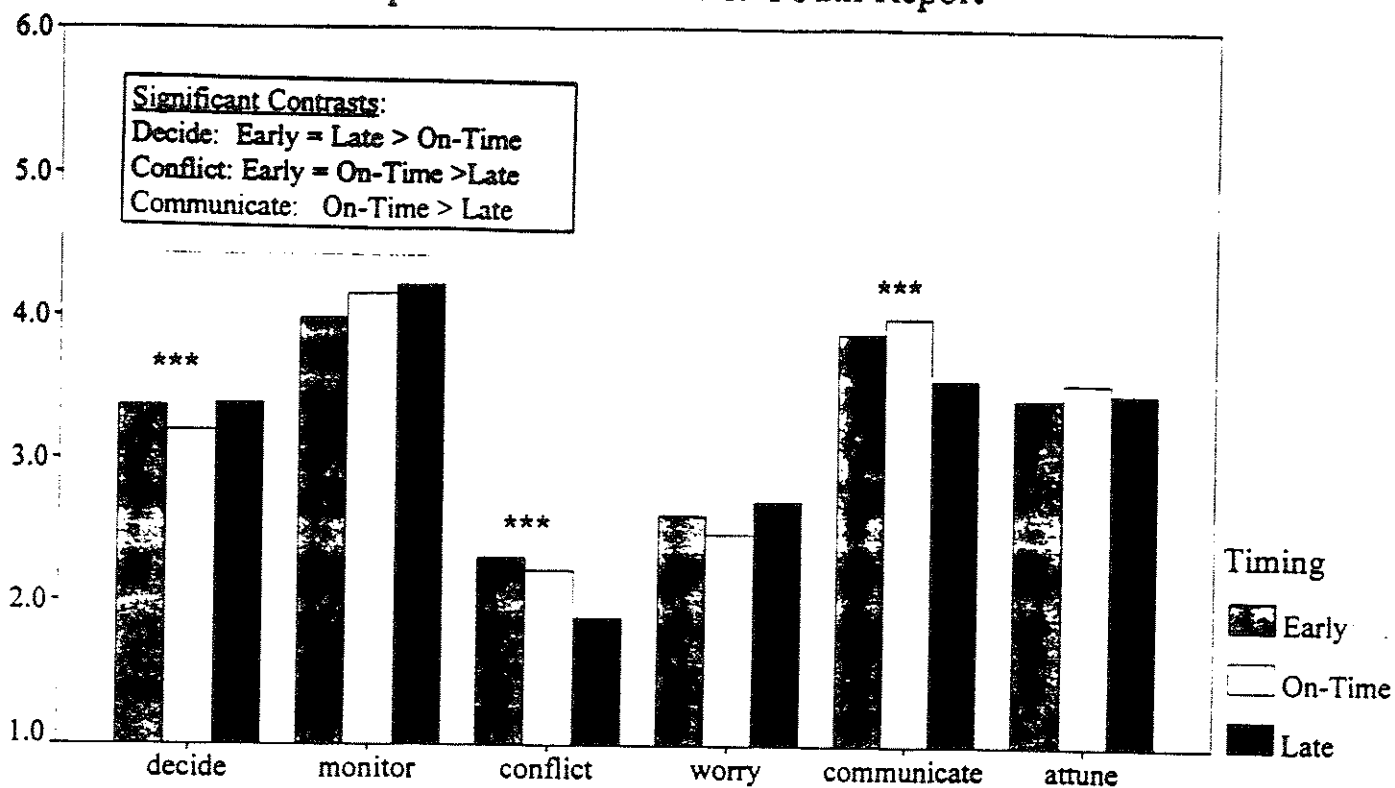
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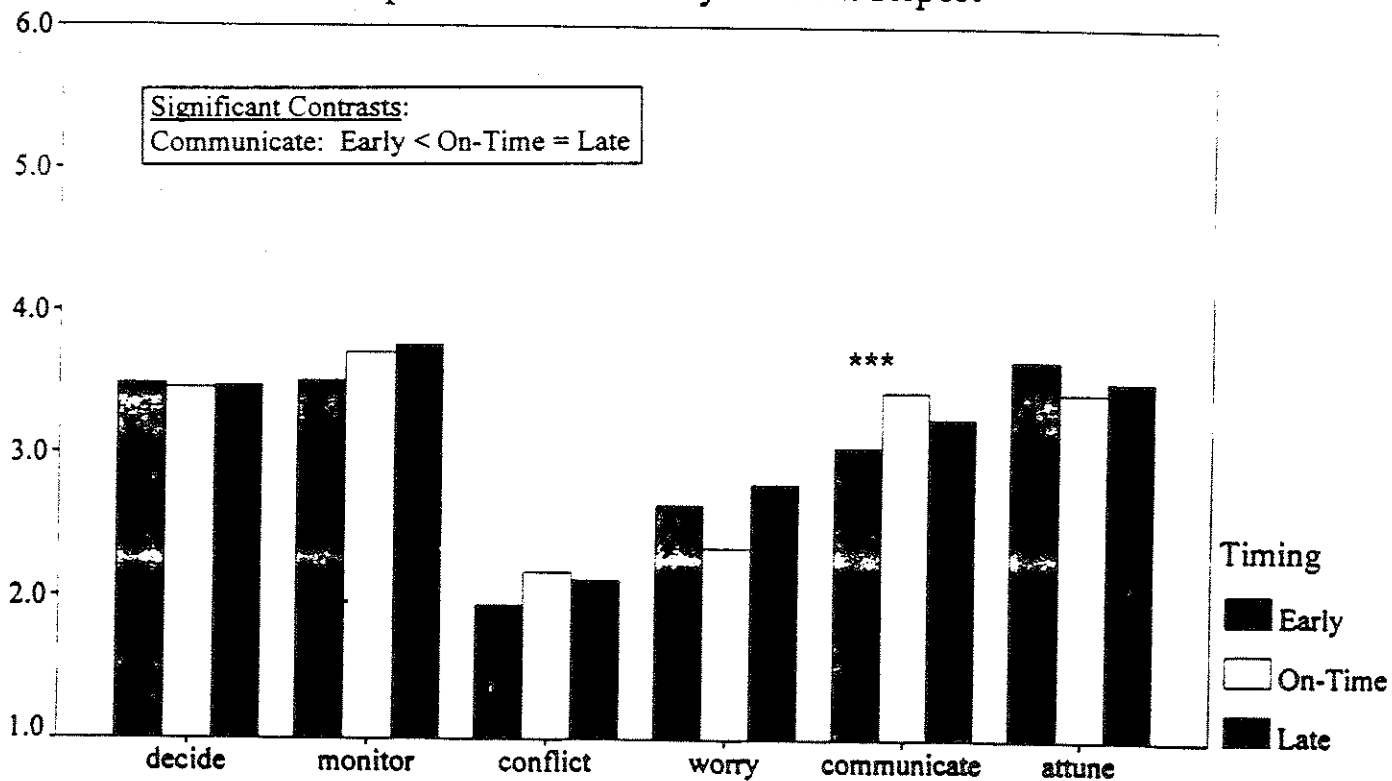
## African-American Boys: Parent Report



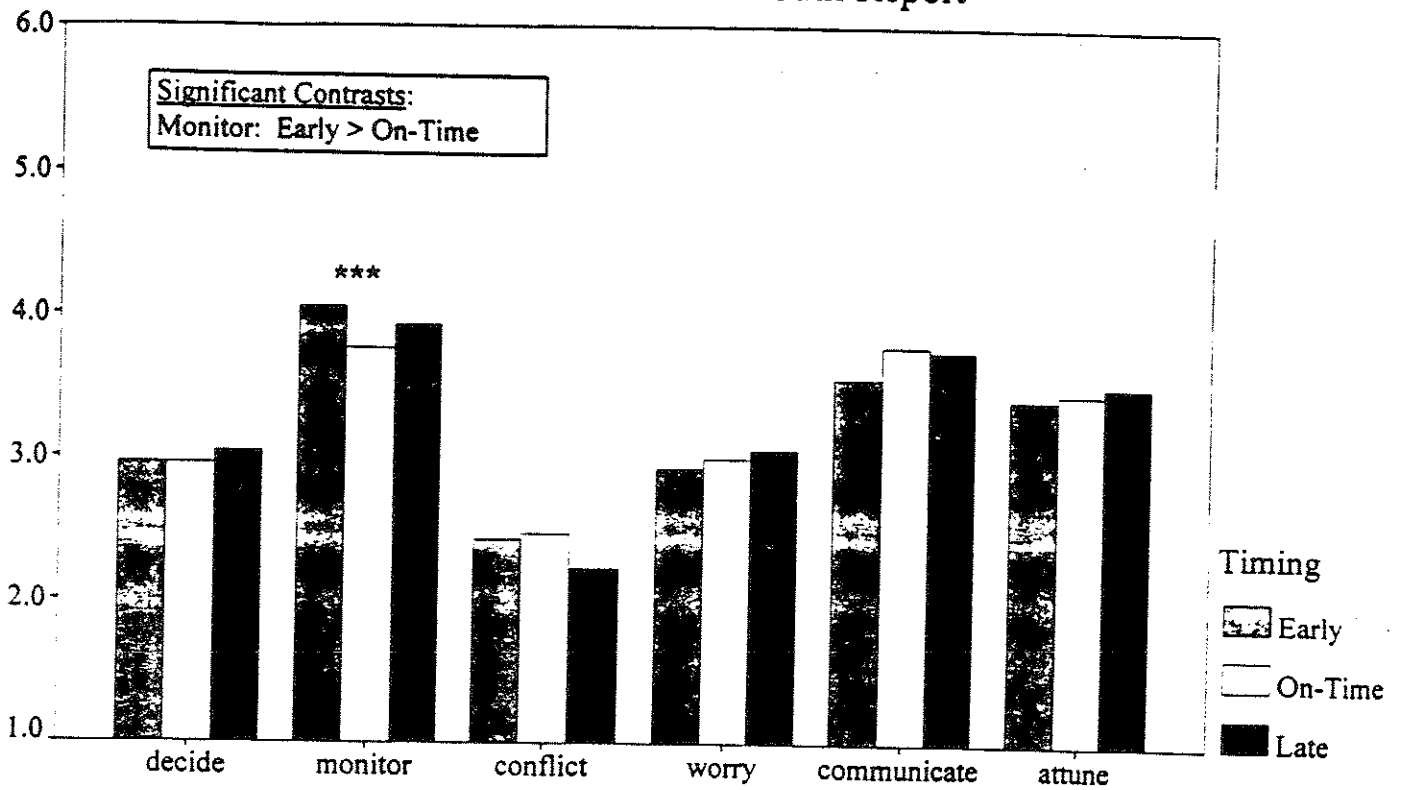
## European-American Girls: Youth Report



## European-American Boys: Youth Report



## African-American Girls: Youth Report



## African-American Boys: Youth Report

