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Aligning social support to youth's developmental needs: The role of nonparental youth–adult relationships in early and late adolescence

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ABSTRACT

Through the provision of different types of social support, significant nonparental youth–adult relationships can facilitate youth's positive development across adolescence. However, despite the potential benefits of these relationships, there has been little consideration of how the relational process may vary across different adolescent stages. Utilizing qualitative methods, this study compared five types of social support processes (emotional, instrumental, companionship, validation, and informational) as reported by youth during early ($n = 23$) and late adolescence ($n = 14$). Differences emerged with regard to the general characteristics and nature of relationships between the early and late adolescent groups and additional differences emerged across the five types of social support. This study demonstrates how a developmental perspective may elucidate the processes that characterize and underlie youth's relationships with supportive nonparental adults. Findings provide implications to understand, promote and sustain these important relationships in the lives of youth.

Supportive relationships can facilitate youth's positive development across adolescence. Aside from supportive parent and peer relationships, many young people indicate the presence of significant nonparental adults (e.g., teachers, coaches, extended family members) in their lives (also known as "VIPs" or natural mentors; Beam, Chen, & Greenberger, 2002; Dubois and Silverthorn, 2005). Through the provision of different types of social support, these relationships facilitate positive gains in the health and wellbeing of youth (Chu, Saucier, & Hafner, 2010; Dubois & Silverthorn, 2005; Sterrett, Jones, McKee, & Kincaid, 2011). However, despite the potential benefits of these relationships, there has been little consideration of how the relational process may vary across different adolescent stages. These differences are important to consider, as early and late adolescents have distinct developmental needs. Just as with settings (Eccles & Midgley, 1989) and peer and parent relationships (Allen, 2008), nonparental youth–adult relationships that align with youth's developmental stage may be optimal for providing appropriate social support and promoting positive outcomes.

Functional roles of supportive nonparental youth–adult relationships

Supportive nonparental youth–adult relationships may develop out of the roles that adults play in the lives of youth (e.g., teacher, coach, extended family member). Some relationships are more focused on the achievement of specific goals, such as completing tasks or getting into college, while other relationships are much more organic in nature, evolving from youth's ever-changing socioemotional needs and the dynamics of youth's relationships as they grow and develop (Spencer, 2007). In this view, supportive nonparental adults can play multiple *functional* roles in the lives of youth including serving as supporters (e.g., believer, advocate), connectors (linking youth to people and institutions), and as role models and a compass for youth's sense of direction in life (Hamilton, Hamilton, DuBois, & Sellers, 2016). The shift in focus from the "social" roles of these relationships (place of the adult in youth's social system; e.g., teacher, coach, uncle/aunt) to their *functional* roles or what they "do" for adolescents is needed to better understand the nature and characteristics of these significant relationships in

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youth's lives (Darling, Hamilton, & Shaver, 2003; Hamilton et al., 2016).

Types of support from significant nonparental adults

As a way to better understand what nonparental youth–adult relationships "do" for youth, this current study focuses on specific supports these relationships provide youth. Significant nonparental adults, also known as Very Important Persons (VIPs), provide youth with multiple types of social support including informational, instrumental, emotional, validation, and companionship support (Wills & Shinar, 2000). These supports can serve different functional roles in youth's lives and have been broadly discussed in the literature on VIP support (see Spencer, 2007 for a review). Furthermore, these supports are associated with increases in youth's academic functioning and self-esteem as well as decreases in youth's behavioral and emotional difficulties (see Sterrett et al., 2011 for a review). However, some support processes may be better predictors of positive development than others, which can depend on various developmental factors such as age (Cohen & Wills, 1985; Schaefer, Coyne, & Lazarus, 1981).

The existence of multiple types of social support has posed challenges to establishing clear links between social support and adolescent wellbeing (Chu et al., 2010). While much of the literature has focused on establishing links between different types of social support from parents and peers, less attention has been given to nonparental adults. Indeed, much of the research on social support and nonparental adults is segmented, often focusing on single types of support, or operationalizing support as a single construct continuum from low to high levels of support (Varga & Zaff, 2018). The research in this area is limited given evidence that suggests VIPs provide youth with varying types of support, which can differentially influence relational processes and youth outcomes (Hamilton et al., 2016; Malecki & Demaray, 2003; Sterrett et al., 2011). For example, informational support or advice from nonparental adults can facilitate decision-making and goal-directed behaviors that lead to feelings of accomplishment and self-worth (Colarossi & Eccles, 2003). Emotional support could increase youth's sense of wellbeing by instilling in youth the availability of support in times of personal struggle (Farruggia, Greenberger, Chen, & Heckhausen, 2006). Forms of instrumental support or directive assistance can help youth's mobilizing efforts by keeping them focused (Larson & Angus, 2011). Validation support or positive feedback can help youth better identify their strengths and abilities (Yu et al., 2018), which in turn can influence youth's learning and achievement in schools (Hattie & Timperley, 2007). Lastly, companionship support or engaging in leisure activities with VIPs can contribute to a nurturing and sustaining state of emotional wellbeing, enhancing the pleasure experienced in everyday life (Spencer, 2006). More empirical work is needed to understand the characteristics and nature of supportive nonparental youth–adult relationships during adolescence, as well as what types and aspects of support in these relationships may be most salient for youth at different developmental stages.

Developmental stages and changes in adolescence

Adolescence is generally divided into three sub-stages—early (ages 10–14), middle (ages 15–17), and late adolescence (ages 18–21; Steinberg, 2016), which coincide with the educational transitions of middle school and high school to a period of emerging adulthood (Arnett, 2004). With each of these transitions, youth's social worlds expand as they move into a new social context (e.g., educational, out-of-school and workplace settings). Notably, as they grow older, youth's relationships with VIPs may take on new roles, functions and meanings (Beam et al., 2002; Hurd, Tan, & Loeb, 2014; Spencer, 2007). Unfortunately, much of the literature on these relationships focuses on adolescence as a whole rather than as separate developmental stages. This lack of differentiation is problematic given literature suggesting great variability in the characteristics, needs, and perceptions of youth during different adolescent stages (Eccles & Midgley, 1989; Steinberg, 2016). Toward a better understanding of these differences and its implications for youth's relationships with VIPs, this study focuses on two distinct developmental stages: early and late adolescence. These stages are characterized by profound changes in youth's developmental needs and social contexts. By comparing the beginning and end of adolescence, this study seeks to identify and understand distinct characteristics and relational processes underlying these important relationships in youth's lives.

Changes in Early Adolescence. Early adolescence is a period characterized by rapid and significant changes in physical, cognitive and psychosocial development (Steinberg, 2016). Physically, early adolescents undergo more change than at any other developmental period

except from birth to two years old (Scales, 2010). There are also significant changes that occur within the brain related to the development of executive function (e.g., control and coordination of thoughts and behavior) and social cognition (e.g., self-awareness, perspective-taking; Blakemore & Choudhury, 2006). As early adolescents develop, they continue to refine their capacity for abstract thought processes, increasing their ability to understand, reason, and make independent decisions (Scales, 2010). These changes facilitate youth's engagement in deeper and more complex relationships with others (Carlo, Hausmann, Christiansen, & Randall, 2003).

As early adolescents exercise their independence and individuality, interpersonal relationships shift from parents to peers, which may place demands on youth as they explore more intimate relationships outside of the family (La Greca & Harrison, 2005). Multiple studies have found that the most salient sources of social support shift across adolescence, with early adolescents reporting higher levels of support from parents and older youth reporting greater support from peers (e.g., Bokhorst, Sumter, & Westenberg, 2010). Unfortunately, despite the salience of parental support there is evidence to suggest that early adolescents have high rates of conflicts with their parents (Laursen, Coy, & Collins, 1998). Supportive nonparental adults—somewhere between parents and peers—may be in an even better position to influence younger adolescents by complementing the structure and support provided by parents and providing companionship support typical of peer relationships (Hirsch, 2005). Thus, these relationships may have profound and unique developmental consequences for early adolescents.

Early adolescence is accompanied by larger structural changes in the educational environment. Specifically, the goals for learning emphasized through policies and practices become more tightly controlled and scheduled, limiting student access to and time with caring adults, opportunities for competence-building, and healthy individuation (Pianta, Hamre, & Allen, 2012). Researchers have documented a number of challenges that youth report facing during this period, including perceiving less adult caring and support, and limitations in school organization, classroom autonomy, and instructional quality (Chhuon & Wallace, 2014; Klem & Connell, 2004). Consequently, indicators of student engagement (e.g., motivation, grades, and attendance) and socioemotional wellbeing (e.g., self-esteem, mental health) have been found to decline as students transition to upper grade levels (e.g., Benner, 2011; Marks, 2000). These changes are highly relevant to thinking about how youth's relationships with VIPs during early adolescence may best fit the needs of youth.

Changes in Late Adolescence. Compared to early adolescents, older adolescents explore the possibilities of intimate relationships, work and education and thus move gradually toward making enduring choices (Arnett, 2004). Consequently, this developmental period facilitates great personal growth. As students transition from high school, they are likely to move away from home and have access to a broader network of relationships including new nonparental youth-adult relationships through the various contexts to which they become exposed (e.g., work, college). Thus, nonparental adults may not only be more accessible than parents but youth's relationships with these adults may also take on different functions and meanings. For example, Hurd, Stoddard, Bauermeister, and Zimmerman (2010) found that natural mentors may serve as a vital resource for youth, helping them cope more effectively with stress and risks (e.g., depression and sexual risk behavior) associated with this developmental period. Chang, Greenberger, Chen, Heckhausen, and Farruggia (2010) found that VIPs provide an important bridging role, linking emerging adults to particular forms of social capital that they may not have access to through their parental and peer relationships. Indeed, VIPs can serve as important sources of support especially in the areas of work (McDonald, Erickson, Johnson, & Elder, 2007) and the transition and adjustment to college (Chang et al., 2010; Hurd & Zimmerman, 2016; Zalaquett & Lopez, 2006).

Older adolescents have greater ability to consider different points of view, which can result in less reliance on others, and at the same time, increased empathy and concern for others (Blakemore & Choudhury, 2006). These changes have implications for the types and the nature of social support that youth may need and access from nonparental adults. For example, although older adolescents may be more apt than young adolescents to turn to nonparental adults for role modeling and help with important life decisions, they may be more sensitive to mutuality and nondirective forms of support (Liang & Ketchum, 2008). Moreover, older adolescents may benefit from specific support that can help them develop and feel more confident in their life purpose, abilities and passions (Hurd et al., 2014; Liang, Spencer, Brogan, & Corral, 2017).

During late adolescence, youth balance connection with their increasing need for autonomy (Allen,

2008). Relationships with nonparental adults, as compared to parent relationships, may be particularly salient because they provide youth with connection without hindering youth's sense of autonomy (Allen, 2008). Notably, compared to younger adolescents, the amount of time spent with nonparental adults may be less important among older adolescents (Hurd et al., 2014). More research is needed to better understand the nature these relationships and the particular processes through which they influence youth's development. Such research would be further enriched by consideration of how youth's developmental stage may differentially shape these relational processes (Hurd et al., 2014; Spencer, 2007).

Purpose of the study

The current literature offers insight into the ways that youth may differentially experience, and draw support from, relationships with significant nonparental adults (VIPs) in early and late adolescence. In order to further understand these processes, this study utilized a qualitative approach to examine how the *characteristics* and *nature* of youth's relationships with VIPs differ between early and late adolescence and in particular, how differences vary across types of social support including companionship, emotional, validation, informational, and instrumental support.

Through in-depth interviews and drawing on aspects of phenomenological qualitative methods (Creswell & Poth, 2018), this study seeks to understand how youth perceive and experience supportive nonparental youth–adult relationships in adolescence. The overall study is grounded in an interpretivist or constructivist epistemology (Lincoln, Lynham, & Guba, 2011). We believe that it is the meanings that people make of their experiences that drive human action and are therefore important for social scientists to understand. We interpret these meanings within a frame that privileges the contextual nature of lived experiences but that also seeks to discover when and where commonalities in meanings exist that may help inform youth-related practice and research.

Method

Data and sample

The data for this study come from a study of youth–adult relationships. Adolescents (ages 12–17; $N = 289$) were recruited from a mid-sized Atlantic city through local youth programs, schools, and community settings. A sub-sample of 40 youth was then purposively recruited to participate in five in-depth interviews over 3.5 years. For the first four interview time points, the same set of questions was used to understand youth's relationships and interactions with their VIPs (described in the following sections), creating consistency in the information gathered about the VIP relationships across those time points. During Time 1 interviews, youth ages ranged from 13–17 and by Time 4 youth ages ranged from 15–19. For the present study, two interview time points with the largest proportion of early and late adolescent interview data were selected. Time 1 had the largest proportion of early adolescent interview data ($n = 23$) and Time 4 had the largest proportion of late adolescent interview data ($n = 17$).

Thus, for this paper, the subsample of 40 youth was split into two independent early and late adolescent groups. The early adolescent group included 23 youth who were between the ages of 13–14 at their Time 1 interviews. The late adolescent group included 14 youth who were between the ages of 18–19 at their Time 4 interviews (these youth were between the ages of 15–17 at Time 1). There was no overlap between the two groups. Three youth, who would have been in the late adolescent group because they were 15–17 years old at Time 1, did not have Time 4 interviews and thus were omitted from the sample for this paper, making the overall sample size for the present study 37.

Across both early and late adolescent groups, 57% of youth identified as female. Seventy-eight percent of youth reported their racial/ethnic background as White, 14% African American, 5% Hispanic, and 3% other. Fifteen percent were eligible for free or reduced-lunch at school. All names used in this paper are pseudonyms, which youth selected for themselves during their interviews. Of the VIPs youth nominated, 40.5% were from school settings (mostly teachers and coaches), 26.7% from family settings (extended kin), 6.9% from work settings, 3.9% from community settings (e.g., church, afterschool programs), and 21.7% from other settings (e.g., family friends). Table 1 provides more information about youth and their VIPs including youth's education status (i.e., middle school, high school, or college) or work status and the types and number of VIPs each youth nominated in their interviews.

Youth interviews

Interviewers asked participants to nominate a VIP, a significant nonparental adult, which we defined as "persons you count on and that are there for you, believe in and care deeply about you, inspire you to do your best, and influence what you do and the choices

Table 1. Participant and VIP information.

Participant	Age	Gender	School status	# of VIPs	VIP role
Chief	13	M	Middle	1	Brother
DrewBrees	13	M	Middle	1	Grandfather
John	13	M	Middle	1	Teacher
Lizzy	13	F	Middle	2	Grandmother, Teacher
Michael	13	M	Middle	1	Teacher
Prime	13	M	Middle	1	Teacher
Red	13	M	Middle	1	Grandmother
Robert	13	M	Middle	1	Teacher
Skylar	13	F	Middle	1	Teacher
Swagballer19	13	F	Middle	1	Counselor
Time	13	F	Middle	1	Older Cousin
Abby	14	F	Middle	1	Teacher
Carrie	14	F	Middle	1	Church Leader
Claire	14	F	High	1	Grandmother
Jack	14	M	High	1	Family Friend
Jenna	14	F	High	1	Family Friend
Lucy	14	F	High	1	Family Friend
Missy	14	F	High	1	Coach
Molly Hooper	14	F	High	1	Counselor
Nothing	14	F	High	1	Grandmother
PhilishaQueesha	14	M	High	1	Coach
Scooter	14	M	High	1	Church Leader
Skye	14	F	Middle	1	Family Friend
Bodos	18	M	Post High	2	Teacher, Mentor
Riley	18	F	Post High	1	Mentor
Poncho	18	F	Post-High	2	Coach, Teacher
Johnny Depp	18	M	Work	1	Work
Katherine	18	F	College	1	Family Friend
Bob	18	M	College	2	Coach, Advisor
Bartholomew	18	M	College	2	Teacher, Coach
Cecilia	19	F	College	1	Family friend
Rachel	19	F	College	1	Teacher
Connor	19	M	College	1	Grandmother
Karen	19	F	College	1	Coach
McMolnakerson	19	M	Work	2	Work, Teacher
Rachel2	19	F	College	1	Aunt
Alicia	19	F	College	1	Church Leader

Note. The early adolescent sample included 23 youth and the late adolescent group included 14 youth. "Post High" refers to students who were interviewed after they graduated from high school but have not started college or work. All college students attended four-year universities.

you make". Interviews lasted an hour to an hour and a half. Approximately a third of each interview consisted of questions surrounding the VIP relationship. Participants were asked what they normally did with their VIP(s), what they talked about, why they felt close to their VIP, and specific questions about various types of support their VIP(s) provide (see Appendix A for VIP interview protocol). Two principal investigators, three graduate students, and two full-time research assistants conducted interviews. A majority of the interviews were one-on-one, but occasionally we worked in interviewer pairs to enhance rapport or comfort level (e.g., to ensure a same-gender interviewer was present). Most interviewers were women (84%) and racially identified as White (71%) and Asian/Pacific Islander (29%).

Analyses

As part of the larger study, the research team developed thematic codes (Yin, 2016) encompassing the goals of the study, including social support. Once the themes were developed, researchers coded the transcripts using Dedoose Version 7.0.23, a cloud based mixed-methods data analysis application. The research team met weekly to address coding questions and to ensure reliability. Two coders were assigned to every transcript and after both coders independently coded a transcript, the two coders compared the codes and reconciled any discrepancies. Discrepancies which the coders could not reconcile or which they had questions about were brought to the larger group meeting and discussed and reconciled by the entire research team.

After all 36 transcripts were reconciled as part of the larger study, at least two research assistants then subcoded excerpts of social support based on five types of social support. They coded for companionship, emotional, instrumental, informational, and validation based on Wills and Shinar (2000) definitions. Similar to the process previously described, both research assistants coded independently and then met to compare codes and reconcile discrepancies. The first author oversaw this process and led weekly meeting to discuss and resolve disagreements between coders. This process helped to ensure reliability of coding application and helped to ensure that all instances of the types of social support were captured. Given the multidimensional nature of social support that VIPs provide youth (Varga & Zaff, 2018) and the ways in which youth in our study described their relationships and the supports they derived from their VIPs, many excerpts were coded as representing multiple types of social support. Examples of overlap between types of supports are discussed in the results.

The first author, with the help of two research assistants unfamiliar with the larger study, conducted a thematic analysis (Braun & Clarke, 2012) of the excerpts coded for each type of social support. Specifically this process involved the following steps. First all of the excerpts coded for each of the five types of social support across both the early and late adolescent groups were downloaded from Dedoose. Second, the three researchers then read through all the excerpts coded for a specific type of support and individually developed initial codes that appeared interesting and meaningful, while also memoing to begin developing overarching themes within the data. Third, all three researchers then met to discuss initial codes and memos across all the excerpts followed by a more targeted discussion of differences between the early and late adolescent excerpts. Fourth, based on these discussions, a codebook of themes was then

applied to the group of excerpts for each type of social support. As one way to audit this analytical process, the first author then consulted with another senior member of the larger study, who was heavily involved in the youth interviews, to get feedback on the themes and key examples.

Findings

Characteristics of relationships in early versus late adolescence

There were differences in how the early and late adolescents described the general characteristics of their relationships with their VIPs. First, relationships differed in terms of power dynamics. Younger youth described having vertical interactions with their VIPs, characterized by VIPs exerting much more control in the relationship. Older youth on the other hand, described much more horizontal (e.g., peer to peer) interactions with their VIPs. Another general characteristic of relationships that differed between early and late adolescence involved the significance of perceived support. Indeed, compared to younger youth, who emphasized the importance of enacted support (e.g., frequency and availability of support in shared settings), older youth emphasized the significance of perceived support in times of need and despite physical distance. Specific examples of how these characteristics of relationships manifested in youth's relationships with their VIPs are presented below. Specifically, the following sections describe themes (italicized) and differences between the early and late adolescent groups across the five types of social support (see Table 2 for Codebook of themes).

Companionship support

Companionship support involves VIPs participating in social and leisure activities with youth. For younger youth, a key aspect of this support was based on their *VIPs treating them like "peers."* This treatment often involved VIPs having "teenage"-like qualities as Swagballer19 described here about her school counselor:

> I kind of feel like she's a teenager when I talk to her. I feel like she thinks like a teenager. It's just easier to talk to her as a peer. It's kind of hard to talk to adults.

VIPs having peer-like qualities made it easier for younger youth to talk to and participate in social activities with their VIPs. For younger youth, pervasive stereotypes about teens as being "up to no good" and "annoying" made their VIP relationships particularly significant because it was a type of relationship they were not used to having. Indeed, younger youth shared that their VIPs were more non-judgmental compared to other adults and were more "tolerant" of them as Michael described here in response to being perceived as an annoying teenager:

> I don't really talk to that many adults. Like he's just like that teacher that was nice and that I liked, and how he was kind of tolerant of me, and that really stood out.

The simple interaction of "tolerating" and going against negative notions about adolescence seem to have the power of facilitating positive relationships between younger youth and VIPs.

Whereas younger adolescents emphasized their VIPs' "peer" and "teenage"-like qualities, older adolescents described their *VIPs as treating them more equally as "adults" and as "friends."* Older youth described the significance of no longer being treated like students and at times "dumb teens." Furthermore, older youth described the progression toward stronger friendships. Cecilia, for example, stated, "I guess [our relationship] just kind of fluctuated, but also as I've gotten older she became more a friend." This statement was echoed by Alicia who said "we've become just really good friends, even though she's older than me."

As a function of being treated more equally as adults and friends, older adolescents also described the importance of *"shared efforts."* This theme involves the idea that friendships are two-sided and thus require effort and action from both youth and VIPs. McMolnakerson, for example, said "We're pretty close, just because he holds up his end of the friendship, too. He'll text me and – he'll text me first and stuff like that." Riley added "I make an effort to show that [I] care about her so she makes an effort to always be there, we're pretty close." Similarly, Alicia said "*We're* friends, so *we* are committed to keeping up, and *we're* not gonna just lose touch with each other" (emphasis added). These shared efforts gave older youth a sense of connection and ownership of the relationship.

Although both younger and older adolescents described bonding over *similar personalities and/or shared interests*, a specific theme that emerged for younger adolescents included *humor-related interactions*, which involved exchanges of jokes, inside jokes, and sharing of fun and/or funny moments (e.g., laughing together). These interactions acted as a catalyst for youth's social relationships with their VIPs. For example, Time stated:

> We both like the same sort of music which is punk in the beginning when we first met, he would suggest all

> these bands for me and then it's just me like being sarcastic and joking around and we just started writing to each other, he's just a funny, strange person.

Indeed, humor-related interactions helped VIPs engage with younger youth. Humor also functioned as a way to make younger youth feel better. Lucy, for example, said, "She is really funny and she always makes me laugh when I'm sad" about her VIP. For PhilishaQueesha, humor-related interactions made him more comfortable around his coach: "He's a good friend that I can just go and do fun stuff with." Having these interactions with VIPs were important to younger youth. It made VIPs less intimidating, youth more comfortable, and helped to promote happiness and fun interactions between VIPs and youth.

Emotional support

Emotional support involves VIPs being available to youth when they are having personal problems, while providing indications of caring, acceptance, empathy, and trust. For younger youth, the provision of this type of support was often based on *VIPs being strongly connected to their social network* in terms of duration of relationships, settings, and the availability of support. Skye illustrated this theme when asked whether she goes to her VIP for personal issues:

> I mean yeah definitely just because of how long we've known each other – she knows what's going on in my life so it's not like every time I see her I have to catch her up on stuff. She's just always like caught up and knows how I act and so she'll know like her opinion on stuff but also how that can relate to what I would do.

Like Skye, other younger youth described their VIPs having "insider knowledge" of their personal issues based on duration and consistency of support. The settings youth occupied also played an important role in regard to VIPs being physically present and available in the same space to provide youth with emotional support for their personal problems.

Older adolescents, on the other hand, described emotional support from their VIPs despite physical distance or time apart. For example, Bob, a college student said, "I don't think that distance or even really time deteriorated our relationship" about a coach he had in high school. Katherine, another college student said, "She's always gonna be someone in my life who I can talk to" about a coach in high school. McMolnakerson added "We don't talk that much anymore, but if I really needed to I definitely could go talk to him about anything" about a previous teacher. These statements highlight an important aspect of emotional support during late adolescence in regard to *perceived dependability*. For these older youth, just feeling like their VIPs would "be there" in times of personal struggle was enough to maintain the positive perceptions they had about their VIP relationships as sources of emotional support. This perceived dependability allowed youth to access their VIPs if they needed to. It is important to note that many older adolescents named and described VIP relationships they had prior to their transition to college and/or work, which may have important implications for promoting enduring relationships in this developmental period.

In regard to the content of emotional support, youth across the early and late adolescent groups described the importance of *being able to talk to their VIPs about personal topics* including general emotional issues (e.g., feeling sad or bad about something) as well as issues related to specific times of hardship (e.g., parents' divorce, death in the family). For younger youth, emotional support was often coupled with follow-up support in the form of other types of support including validation and information support. For example, Molly Hooper, a youth who shared having personal conversations with her VIP about her self-esteem issues said, "When we are talking, she tells me what I need to hear." She went on to say that her VIP was particularly helpful because "she'll help me come up with ways to distract myself or will just tell me that it's not important what other people think." Here, it is important to note that Molly Hooper was describing her interactions with her counselor, whose role is to provide her with emotional support. Other younger youth described similar interactions with their VIPs and the importance of providing "follow-up" support. Prime, for example, said "she always good answers" in regard to advice that his teacher would give him after talking about "personal stuff."

Conversely, older adolescents described having a more mutual relationship with their VIPs in terms of *helping and encouraging each other during personal struggles*. This theme was apparent in Bartholomew's response to having personal conversations with his teacher in high school:

> I just like kept the conversation going and then I left and then I realized that she needs to talk to someone too. So I went back and I gave her a hug and I said, "If you ever need to talk you can text me." So we have those conversations.

This "shared friendship" as previously described helped to facilitate youth's mutual relationship with their VIPs. Having a more mutual relationship made older youth more comfortable to engage in personal

Table 2. Codebook of themes and definitions.

Social Support	Definition	Young Adolescents (ages 13–14)	Older Adolescents (ages 18–19)
Companionship Support	*Process of participating in social and leisure activities with youth.*	**1. Treating youth like peers.** *VIPs treating youth like peers and VIPs having teenage-like qualities. This theme also involves VIPs going against negative stereotypes about teenagers.* **2. Similar personalities and/or interests.** *Youth relating to VIPs based on shared personalities and/or interests.* **3. Humor-related interactions.** *Involves exchanges of jokes, inside jokes, and sharing of fun and/or funny moments (e.g., laughing together).*	**1. Treating youth like adults and friends.** *VIPs treating youth more equally as adults and friends.* **2. Similar personalities and/or interests.** *Youth relating to VIPs based on shared personalities and/or interests.* **3. Shared efforts.** *Involves the idea that friendships are two-sided and require effort and action from both youth and VIPs.*
Emotional Support	*Involves being available and listening to youth when they are having problems, while also providing indications of caring, acceptance, empathy, and trust.*	**1. Youth being able to talk about personal issues with VIPs.** *Involves youth being able to talk to their VIPs about personal topics including general emotional issues (e.g., feeling sad or bad about something) as well as issues related to specific times of hardship (e.g., parents' divorce, family death).* **2. VIPs being strongly connected to youth's social network.** *Involves the idea of VIPs being strongly connected to youth's social network in terms of settings, duration of relationships, and consistency and availability of support.*	**1. Youth being able to talk about personal issues with VIPs.** *Involves youth being able to talk to their VIPs about personal topics including general personal issues (e.g., relationship problems).* **2. Perceived dependability.** *Involves the idea of youth perceiving support from their VIPs despite physical distance or time apart.* **3. VIPs and youth helping each other.** *Involves the idea of VIPs and youth having a mutual relationship in terms of helping and encouraging each other.*
Validation Support	*Process of providing positive confirmation about the appropriateness of youth's behaviors. It also includes feedback or social comparison.*	**1. Highlighting youth's strengths and perspectives in the context of challenges.** *VIPs providing youth with opportunities to showcase their strengths and perspectives, often in the context of challenges.* **2. Helping youth's self-esteem.** *VIPs providing youth with support related to self-esteem issues. Further, it involves VIPs challenging youth's negative thinking.*	**1. Highlighting youth's accomplishments and strong points.** *VIPs providing youth with support that highlights their accomplishments and strong points, particularly in relation to their education and career interests and goals.*
Information Support	*Provision of knowledge, advice or guidance for youth.*	**1. Providing youth with different perspectives.** *VIPs providing youth knowledge, advice or guidance that is unique and/or different from peers, parents and/or other adults.* **2. Helping youth process information.** *VIPs helping youth process information in order to promote youth's problem solving skills and sense of competence.* **3. Providing youth with life lessons.** *VIPs providing youth with general life lessons (e.g., not to take things too far, it's important to help people).*	**1. Providing youth with different perspectives.** *VIPs providing youth knowledge, advice or guidance that is unique and/or different from peers, parents and/or other adults. Youth tend to be more selective of the support they receive.* **2. Youth-initiated support.** *Involves youth initiating support (as opposed to VIP initiated) from VIPs to gain knowledge, advice and/or guidance.*
Instrumental Support	*Provision of tangible, practical assistance.*	**1. Providing youth with practical life skills.** *VIPs providing youth with practical life skills that they can apply in other settings and/or in the future.* **2. Helping youth with present problems, tasks and projects.** *VIPs helping youth with things related to the present including help with specific tasks (e.g., homework, projects) or during specific hardships.*	**1. Helping to keep youth on-track.** *VIPs helping to keep youth on-track in order to facilitate youth's sense of responsibility.* **2. Helping youth get ahead.** *VIPs helping youth get ahead in terms of their education, career and/or sense of purpose/goals.*

conversations with their VIPs and made youth feel good about being able to reciprocate the emotional support they received from the relationship.

Validation support

Validation support or positive feedback involves providing positive confirmation about the appropriateness of youth's behaviors. For both the younger and older adolescent groups, VIPs highlighting their strengths and perspectives was a key factor in helping them feel heard, special, and more competent. For younger youth, it was important that VIPs didn't just dismiss them but provided feedback related to areas of improvement, including help to better communicate and address their problems. For example, Scooter said the following about his church youth group leader:

> She can really relate to what I'm saying, and like she'll understand and she'll be like, "Yeah, I understand." [Other] people are like, "Okay, what? What is he trying to say?

He went on to describe how his VIP not only complimented his efforts to share his ideas but also gave him ways to address similar challenging situations in the future. This sentiment was also shared by Claire who said, "she'll provide you with constructive criticism and then explain how you can do [it] better in the future so you don't forget for next time."

Younger youth talked about *validation of their strengths and perspectives in the context of challenges* whereas older youth talked about *validation based more on their accomplishments and strong points*, as Poncho stated here:

> I mean I told [my teacher] about college. She told me about just life in general and what she thinks my strong points are going to be.

Additionally, for older youth, it was helpful that their VIPs provided them with feedback to support their growing sense of identity as it related to their education and career pursuits. Karen, for example said, "we talk about my accomplishments in college." Additionally, Johnny Depp said "he'll compliment you in front of people, and [will] give you a good reputation" referring to a line of work that Johnny Depp is interested in pursuing in the future.

Bodos, an older youth and one of the few African American youth in the study, noted the significance of his VIP teacher's efforts to "lift" minority youth:

> What's striking about her is that she cares about the minorities. She really cares about the minorities. And she supports them, and lifts them up. And yeah, I think that's amazing.

Bodos went on to describe how his teacher gave him and other minority students like him opportunities within his school's drama department and the community. A specific example included his teacher having minority students interviewed on TV instead of "the white kids," to which he responded:

> I think it's important to allow the minorities to do it because it's not often that they'll be on TV for something positive … so it's good for them to do stuff like that.

Bodos further noted that this particular event gave him ideas for the future. Through validation support, Bodos' VIP not only provided him with opportunities to move him forward in life but also supported his strong desire to help others like him in the future.

As compared to older youth, younger youth, particularly females, spoke more often about the significance of validation support to *help with self-esteem issues*. For example, Lizzy stated:

> [My grandmother] doesn't think that I'm weak for feeling the things that I feel, and she doesn't think that I'm weird for liking the things – Well, that's not true. She thinks I'm weird, but she doesn't judge me too harshly … instead of mostly just thinking bad about myself, she remind[s] me that it's not true.

For Lizzy and other younger youth it was important that their VIPs helped them to address their self-esteem issues by providing a nonjudgmental space to talk about these issues as well as feedback to challenge negative thinking. Youth reported gaining more self-confidence as a result of these interactions, and many youth reported feeling able to trust their VIPs.

Informational support

Informational support refers to the provision of knowledge, advice or guidance. Across the early and late adolescent groups, the idea of *VIPs providing youth with different perspectives*—unique and different from that of peers, parents and/or other adults—was important for youth. Robert, a younger youth demonstrated this theme when asked about why getting advice from his teacher was important:

> I guess its just advice from a person other than my parents. So I get the usual stuff from my parents all the time. So it's just good to have it from a different point of view.

Similarly, older youth reported appreciating different perspectives but tended to be much more discerning of the sources and content of informational support. For example, Bob said the following about his core advisor in college:

> He's a great guy but I wouldn't … I think his job is to be there for students if they need help with anything. And it's not like I feel uncomfortable going to him, but he wouldn't be first on the list I would go to.

Bob added that depending on what he needed, he can go to mother or college peers because they are "already there." Like Bob, other older youth noted having multiple sources of information support and being much more selective about whom they would reach out to for information. Not surprisingly, being selective of support was related to the theme of "*youth-initiated support.*" Older youth demonstrated their ability to consider different points of view and to understand and differentiate sources of informational support in their lives. Youth's selectivity was also based on the role that VIPs played in their lives. Youth identified circumstances they would go to their VIPs over others because of their expertise and knowledge of particular information.

Compared to older youth, younger youth emphasized the "*process*" rather than the content of information support. This theme was represented in Claire's response to whether she learns anything from her grandmother:

> Claire: Like you're doing great or you can do this and she helps me like understand, if I am doing something wrong.
>
> Interviewer: Oh, so how does she do that?
>
> Claire: Like tells me what I can do better … because I don't always know.

Here, Claire's VIP not only provided information about her behavior but also helped her through the process of understanding how she can do better. Similar sentiments were shared by Skylar who described going to her teacher for questions related to information she did not understand:

> If I ask her a question she'll really make sure I understand it before letting me go and trying to do it on my own. And that's just really nice because some teachers will be like, 'Okay do you have it now?' or 'Okay here's the answer go see if you can do it' but she'll be like, 'Okay do you actually know or do you have any more questions?

VIPs also pushed younger youth to consider how various situations could potentially play out as well as helped youth approach problem solving in different ways, as described by Scooter here:

> [My church youth group leader] will give me advice about like what questions should I ask God, and like just different things about my faith. If I have a question about like things about the bible, she'll like kind of give me ideas to approach it in a different way.

Often VIP-initiated, these interactions facilitated younger youth's positive relationships with their VIPs. VIPs helping youth "process" information fostered youth's sense of competence and problem solving skills. These interactions also promoted youth's sense of connection because it meant that their VIPs "cared" for them and were invested in their growth and learning.

Instrumental support

Instrumental support is the provision of tangible and practical assistance. This type of support from VIPs provided younger youth with *practical life skills,* as Lizzy stated here about her grandmother:

> Interviewer: So she teaches you practical things [using tools, solving math problems] that you need to know. Is this important to you, that she teaches you all of these things?
>
> Lizzy: Yeah, because when I move out, I'm going to need to know this type of stuff to be able to live out my life. So I find it very helpful to be able to be independent like that.

Lizzy's VIP taught her practical life skills that she can see using in the future. Other younger youth described similar processes. Specifically, tangible assistance such as help with homework and school projects in combination with support to "process" information (as previously described) enabled youth to apply their learning in different settings. This was apparent in Abby's description of the homework help she received from her teacher, which she said helped her develop academic skills (e.g., study habits and time management) that she was able to apply in different settings (e.g., other classes and at home). It is important to note that the provision of practical life skills was often based on VIP roles. School based VIPs were more likely to help with academic skills, coaches with athletic skills, and familial VIPs with more general like skills including (e.g., cooking, childcare). What seems to connect these skills across VIP roles was that they helped to promote youth's sense of independence. Furthermore, there seems to be underlying lessons in these instances of VIP support, which youth found significant in terms of future application.

Whereas younger youth noted concrete, practical assistance with "*present*" *tasks* (e.g., homework, school projects) or during specific times of hardship (e.g., needing money), older youth noted the importance of support that helped them to "*get ahead.*" At the most basic level, this theme included VIPs writing college recommendation letters for youth and giving youth work and other support and opportunities related to

their career interests. Other older youth described a more nonlinear process in regard to developing skills they need to achieve their goals and sense of purpose. For example, Bartholomew said "He taught me skills that has had a huge impact on my life" referring to the training and lessons he's received from his track coach and how it helped him reflect and address negative character qualities (e.g., cockiness) that could potentially affect his goals of being successful and respected in the future. Similarly, McMolnakerson said, "He's helping me try to better myself," in response to the problem solving skills he's developed for his chosen profession and the support he's received from his VIP when confronted with confusing life situations (e.g., not knowing the right thing to do).

Overall for older youth, it was important that their VIPs provided them with tangible and practical assistance that helped them move forward in life and achieve their goals. In addition, it was important that their VIPs helped them to consider other factors (such as character strengths) that might impede or promote success.

Discussion

Previous research has documented the importance of supportive nonparental youth–adult relationships during adolescence. However, previous work has left open the question of whether the developmental characteristics and nature of these relationships vary across adolescence. As one-way to fill this gap in the literature, this study compared five types of social support processes as reported by youth during two distinct developmental periods in adolescence.

Adolescence is marked by changes that exist across various contexts. These changes are often accompanied by shifts in adolescents' trajectories (Gutman & Eccles, 2007). For some youth, changes during adolescence may facilitate positive growth and adjustment. For other youth, however, these changes can negatively affect wellbeing (e.g., self-esteem), as well as increase problem behaviors (e.g., disengagement in schools; Symond & Hargreaves, 2016). According to stage–environment fit theory (Eccles & Midgley, 1989), some of these negative changes may result from a mismatch between the needs of developing adolescents and the opportunities afforded to them in their social contexts. Adolescents whose contexts change in developmentally regressive ways or provide "bad fit" for meeting youth's changing needs may lead to difficulties and less than optimal development. In contrast, adolescents whose social environments respond to their changing needs are more likely to experience positive outcomes. In line with this theoretical perspective, this study shows that social support from VIPs may help youth navigate developmental changes and contexts associated with two distinct stages in adolescence. For example, our findings link to previous research suggesting younger youth tend to have vertical (e.g., adult to youth) interactions with adults as compared to older youth who tend to emphasize mutuality in relationships (Chu et al., 2010; Hartup, 1989). According to Chu et al. (2010), vertical and horizontal relationships can have different impacts on youth and thus the social support they receive and perceive, and its effects, may be different as well.

Overall, results suggest the importance of considering the quality of "fit" between the supports that VIPs provide youth that align with their changing developmental needs. Specifically, knowing that VIPs "do" different things for youth makes it possible to think about aligning what youth most need with adults who are best able to perform those functions (Hamilton et al., 2016). Indeed, this study shows that VIPs may serve multiple functions in youth's lives, as sources of companionship; as means to gain information, master skills and explore opportunities; and to address personal development, social competence and character development to name a few. To further elucidate these processes, this study identified key developmental differences in the characteristics and nature of social support as described by younger and older adolescents. The developmental implications of these differences are discussed further in the following sections.

Developmental implications of VIP support in early adolescence

In light of the themes found within the early adolescent group, three developmental implications of VIP support seem particularly relevant to discuss: (a) the importance of scaffolding, (b) addressing self-esteem issues, and (c) challenging negative stereotypes about adolescents. The importance of scaffolding was evident in youth's descriptions of support from their VIPs that helped them "process" information and situations in order to develop problem-solving skills. Based on the work of Vygotsky (1978), scaffolding is related to the Zone of Proximal Development (ZPD), which refers to the distance between youth's "actual development levels as determined by independent problem solving" and the higher level of "potential

development as determined through problem solving under adult guidance" (p. 86). Adults help youth operate in the ZPD through scaffolding—providing just enough support to help youth solve problems without doing it for them. According to this theory, learning is inherently social. Thus, youth's interactions with supportive adults help to shape their thinking and actions. Furthermore, this theory involves the importance of goal-directed activities that emphasizes process over product. These "developmentally instigative activities" have the potential to become progressively more complex and therefore can facilitate optimal youth development in early adolescence (Darling, 2005). Youth described VIPs engaging in these types of process-oriented activities, encouraging the development of youth's skills and sense of competence. Rather than focus on giving youth the "right" answer to their problems, VIPs helped youth adapt their understanding to new situations, structuring their problem-solving attempts, and assisted youth in assuming responsibility for managing problem solving. Younger youth appeared to be attracted to these developmentally instigative activities because it provided them with sensitive and appropriate scaffolding. Per Eccles's stage-environment theory (Eccles & Midgley, 1989), which posits the importance of structuring settings to meet youth's developmental needs, relationships with VIPs may provide an important context to meet youth's needs and promote positive outcomes.

The prevalence of receiving support for self-esteem issues was particularly pronounced in the early adolescent narratives. Several longitudinal studies have followed samples from preadolescence through adolescence, and these studies generally find that self-esteem declines in early adolescence then rises through late adolescence (Huang, 2010). However, the decline in self-esteem in early adolescence is much more pronounced for female youth (Huang, 2010). This pattern was evident in this study and may be the reason why many younger youth, particularly females, reported support from their VIPs related to self-esteem issues. As compared to older adolescents, younger adolescents reported being more conscious of how they look, what they say, and how they act. They also suspected and feared that others would judge them harshly. VIPs helped to ameliorate these concerns by providing a nonjudgmental space and validation support to challenge negative thinking.

Early adolescents were also acutely aware of negative stereotypes against adolescents and were sensitive about how their VIPs interacted with them. Most noted the significance of having a VIP, an adult, who didn't align with this deficit-based thinking. This finding was not surprising given the amount of emphasis on adolescence as a period of conflict and of adolescents themselves as "problems to be managed" (Roth, Brooks-Gunn, Murray, & Foster, 1998). The findings of this study show the power of seeing youth more positively and the impact that it can have on youth's development of supportive relationships with adults.

Developmental implications of VIP support in late adolescence

Across the late adolescent group, three major developmental implications emerged: (a) the importance of mutuality, (b) the power of perceived social support, and (c) support related to youth's growing sense of identity and cognitive development. Older adolescents were much more sensitive to mutuality across the different types of support. They noted a need for give and take in the mentoring relationship in ways that early adolescents did not. They described the relationship as being more reciprocal and noted a sense of "shared efforts" with their VIPs. The significance of mutuality may reflect the developmental needs of youth in this age group. Specifically, it is well established in the literature that there is an increased need to feel autonomous and connected in adolescence, which in combination, may be especially salient in late adolescence (Inguglia, Ingoglia, Liga, Coco, & Cricchio, 2015). In line with previous studies of mentoring (e.g., Liang & Ketchum, 2008) and parent-adolescent relationships (Allen, 2008) in late adolescence, the findings of this study suggest that VIP support for mutuality that is sensitive to simultaneous needs for autonomy and connection may be especially well received by older adolescents.

Older youth perceived support, including emotional support, from their VIPs despite physical distance or time apart. This finding aligns with previous studies of social support and wellbeing including a meta-analysis of 246 studies, where Chu et al. (2010) found that measures of perceived social support (as opposed to actual support received) had the strongest association with overall adolescent wellbeing, and that the effect increased with age. Additionally, this finding supports previous research on natural mentoring relationships that suggest face-to-face interactions and the amount of time spent with VIPs may be less critical among older youth (Hurd et al., 2014; Packard, 2003).

According to Arnett (2004), youth begin to develop a firmer sense of identity in late adolescence in the

areas of personal relationships, education and work. Results of this study suggest that relationships with VIPs may function to facilitate youth's growth in these areas of development. Specifically, older youth noted the importance of receiving instrumental support from their VIPs in order to achieve their education and career goals and to move them forward in life. They also noted appreciation for support related to their increasing sense of responsibility and purpose in life. According to Baxter Magolda (2008) older youth think more critically about what brings meaning to their lives. Mentoring offers a coaching mechanism that guides the discovery process by not only providing tangible assistance but also providing youth with opportunities for self-reflection. Overall, findings suggest that supporting youth's growth in these areas of development (e.g., education, work, sense of purpose) may have strong implications for the effectiveness of youth's relationships with VIPs in late adolescence (also see Crisp & Cruz, 2009; Hurd et al., 2014; Liang et al., 2017).

Lastly, older adolescents demonstrated their capacity to make finer distinctions between different aspects of their relationship with VIPs, especially when it involved the provision of informational support. They reported having more sources of support compared to younger adolescents and were much more selective about information they solicited from their VIPs. This finding aligns with older youth's increased capacity for abstract cognitive processes and may also reflect changes associated with late adolescence—a time when youth's social worlds broaden and they shift from family embeddedness to greater independence (Arnett, 2004).

Implications for practice

In addition to the implications highlighted in the previous sections, this study has several implications for practice and research. For younger youth, one specific implication for practice involves creating spaces for shared and recreational activities. Youth noted the importance of their VIPs being physically present and available in the same space to provide them with support. At the same time, they also described the importance of having fun and humor-related interactions with their VIPs. Structuring settings and communities that are conducive to these types of natural mentoring relationships may result in more secure and enduring relationships and greater numbers of youth connected with mentors (Schwartz, Chan, Rhodes, & Scales, 2013). Furthermore, promoting these relationships may be particularly important in early adolescence, a period that is relatively dominated by peers, less populated by caring adults, and more tightly controlled and scheduled around academics (Pianta et al., 2012).

For older youth, an implication for practice is the promotion of enduring relationships. In this study, many of the older youth named VIPs they had prior to graduating from high school. It may be worthwhile to create a platform to continue to connect youth with their VIPs. This may occur organically in some relationships, but for VIPs such as high school teachers, a program to follow-up on students who have graduated can have great benefits. It may complement the significance of "shared efforts" and may continue to promote of the power of perceived social support for this population. These efforts may be especially important given that many college settings, for example, can be less conducive to the forming of new VIP relationships (Crisp & Cruz, 2009).

The findings of this study may have additional implications for parents who support VIPs in the lives of their children. Specifically, it provides evidence to support the importance and benefits of these relationships during adolescence, a developmental period often characterized as a period of parent–child conflict (Branje, 2018). Previous research has shown that youth who have a caring adult outside the home are more likely to talk with their parents about "things that really matter" (Murphey, Brandy, Schmitz & Moore, 2013), which is an example of how VIPs can complement parents as sources of support (Bowers et al., 2014). On the other hand, VIPs may play a compensatory source of support for youth who report less optimal parent support (e.g., Albright & Hurd, 2018; Bowers et al., 2014). By laying out key developmental and practical implications, this study provides key ways to encourage and sustain VIP relationships in the lives of youth across adolescence, which in turn can benefit both youth and youth's relationships with their parents.

Strengths, limitations, and future directions

One strength of this study is that it examined how social support processes differed between two distinct developmental periods in adolescence. Another strength of this study is that it builds on previous literature on social support by considering different types of support that adults provide youth during adolescence. However, although this study highlighted processes specific to different types of support, it is important to note that

there was often overlap in the types of support that youth described in their relationships with their VIPs. For example, emotional support was often coupled with validation support, and informational support was often coupled with instrumental support. Future research should further explore these overlaps and, in particular, how combinations of supports may function differently in response to different types of situations and problems (Wills & Shinar, 2000). Future research should also consider how various actors (e.g., parents, peers, and other adults in addition to VIPs) in an adolescent's social network impact one another (Albright & Hurd, 2018; Bowers et al., 2014; Varga & Zaff, 2018). Indeed, emerging research shows that multiple individuals from different contexts can each be comprehensive sources of social support for youth (Varga & Zaff, 2018).

Another limitation of this study is the possibility that the differences decribed by early and late adolescents could be a result of the cognitive and communicative abilities of younger versus older youth. Furthermore, given the timing of the interviews, this study grouped together youth in the same age group to coincide with key educational transitions (e.g., middle to high school, high school to college or work) in adolescence. This method limits our findings, as there may be great variability between youth's pre and post transition experiences. Future research should explore how youth's relationships with VIPs may vary across these transition periods.

Research on natural mentoring relationships has highlighted the significance of youth's social identities (e.g., based on youth's racial and ethnic backgrounds) and its influences on the processes of supportive nonparental youth–adult relationships. For example, previous studies have found that Hispanic and African American youth are less likely to report the presence of caring and supportive nonparental adults in their lives than White or Asian students (Erikson, McDonald, & Elder, 2009). When these minoritized youth do report natural mentors, they are often extended family members, whereas White youth are more likely to nominate nonrelated adults (e.g., teachers) (e.g., Cavell, Meehan, Heffer, & Holladay, 2002; Munson & McMillen, 2008). This pattern was evident in this study as over 70% of the youth (78% White students) in our sample named unrelated VIPs (mostly teachers and coaches) compared to 26% that named extended family members. Our study's lack of diversity, with regard to race, ethnicity as well as SES (only 15% qualified for free/reduced lunch), limits the generalizability of our findings to more diverse and less privileged youth populations. These youth, based on their social positions and interpersonal experiences in society, may not only have less access to unrelated VIPs such as teachers, but they may also utilize and benefit from these relationships differently in adolescence (Sanchez, Colón, Feuer, Roundfield, & Berardi, 2013). Future research is needed to explore the role and influences of youth's social identities in the processes underlying youth's relationships with supportive nonparental adults.

Conclusion

In summary, the present study expands the body of literature on natural mentoring relationships by providing further insight into the characteristics and nature of supportive youth–adult relationships and how they vary between youth in early and late adolescence. Mentoring, at its essence, is a developmental phenomenon (Darling, 2005). This study demonstrates how a developmental perspective may elucidate the processes that characterize and underlie youth's relationships with supportive nonparental adults. Findings show a need to understand, promote, and sustain these important relationships in the lives of youth.

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Appendix A

Interview Protocol

1. We are interested in learning about adults that are important in your life. Significant adults are persons you count on and that are there for you, believe in and care deeply about you, inspire you to do your best, and influence what you do and the choices you make. Based on this description, do you have any significant adults in your life right now (other than your parents or guardians?
   a. Name of adult:_____
   b. Tell me about [VIP] *and/or* Tell me a story about [VIP]. If not very responsive, ask participant to tell you about the last time he/she saw VIP.
   c. Describe what your relationship is like with them.
   d. How did you meet?
   e. How long have you known them?
   f. How often do you see them?
   g. What kinds of things have they done that make you feel close to him/her?
2. What do you usually do together or talk about?
   a. Do you learn stuff from what they say or do? What kinds of stuff?
   b. Is this important? Why?
3. Does [VIP] help you with your homework? Or does he/she help you with other things?
4. Does being with [VIP] make you feel better about yourself? In what ways?
5. Do you ever talk about personal stuff with [VIP]? What types of things?
   a. How does [VIP] respond?
   b. How does it make you feel to talk about personal things with [VIP]?
6. Does [VIP] ever give you advice? How often? What kinds of advice?
7. Does [VIP] do things so that you know he/she respects you? What kinds of things?
8. Was there ever a time (or times) when you were not close to [VIP]? How did you get closer?
9. Were there ever times when you and [VIP] were not getting along? How did you get over that?
10. Has your parent met/talked with [VIP]? How did that go? How do they feel about [VIP]?
11. Is your relationship with [VIP] different from relationships with other adults? If so, how?
    a. Why do you think that is?
12. Is there anything you'd really like me to know about [VIP, or anything that you think is important for me to know about [VIP]?