

“Like Two Musketeers”: Socialization beliefs about toddler’s friendships among Dominican, Mexican, and African American mothers

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Funding information

National Science Foundation, Grant/Award Number: 021859

Abstract

Parental ethnotheories shape socialization beliefs around childrearing more broadly, and children’s friendships more specifically. While prior work has examined aspects of parental socialization of friendships among school-aged children and adolescents, no studies have examined beliefs held around the function of friendships among ethnically diverse mothers of toddlers from low-socioeconomic contexts. Toddlerhood marks a point in development when the concept of “friendship” gains impact and relevance due to leaps in children’s social, cognitive, and motor skills, as well as children’s increasing access to contexts where they organically encounter peers. Toddlerhood is also a time when caregivers may initially consider the influence of peers on their children, beliefs that could eventually guide and shift how they navigate socialization practices around friendship. In the present study, we document U.S. Dominican American, African American, and Mexican American mothers’ socialization beliefs around functions of friendship for their 2-year-old children. We found that mothers emphasized a variety of friendship functions, including learning of social skills and morality, and communicating and experiencing emotions. A majority of mothers viewed their children’s friendships as unidirectional, and framed their children as undiscerning in their engagement with social information from peers.

Findings are discussed in relation to mothers' orientation to children and "childhood" via cultural and developmental beliefs.

KEYWORDS

culture, early childhood, ethnotheories, friendship, parenting

1 | INTRODUCTION

The tiny kitchen is cramped, but bright. Sunlight touches the crayon drawings that crowd on the fridge. Verónica¹ has her back to us, but turns and smiles as we walk in. She is making chicken soup and we can hear the bustle of children playing in the other room. Her son Juan just turned two. We are curious to know more about Verónica's thoughts on Juan's peer relations, and ask her to describe the ideal friend for him during these first 2 years of his life. She immediately refers to his friend Ligia, who is "very calm. She's focused, she listens [...] if she sits down and play, she will play like, you know, not aggressively. She will play calmly. She will show him things that she already knows." In many ways, Verónica's socialization beliefs about friendships reflect the widely known saying, "show me who your friends are and I'll show you who you are."

Verónica and Juan participated in a mixed-method, longitudinal study following approximately 200 U.S. based Dominican, African American, and Mexican mothers and their children. The overall aims of the study were to examine cultural and contextual influences on parenting and child development from birth until the age of 6. In the present paper, we draw upon qualitative data collected when focal children were aged 2, specifically focusing on mothers' beliefs about the nature of their children's peer relationships. The seminal role peers play in children's development has been extensively documented across a variety of domains (e.g., Hartup, 1996; Piaget, 1932; Rubin et al., 2006). Peer interactions directly provide opportunities for children to learn, for example, social and problem-solving skills such as cooperation and negotiation from each other. However, caregivers may indirectly shape peer relationships through the beliefs they hold about the function of friendships for their young children (Super & Harkness, 1986).

Although an impressive body of work exists on the function of friendships across development, most scholarship focuses on the role of peers in children's development in late childhood and adolescence (e.g., Cohen & Woody, 1991; Tilton-Weaver & Galambos, 2003; Updegraff et al., 2004), when children have increasing autonomy in selecting and maintaining friendships. Little is known about caregivers' perspectives on the functions of friendships in early childhood, particularly in toddlerhood, when children are developing foundational socio-cognitive skills through their interactions with others (Rubin et al., 2008). Additionally, parental beliefs about the functions of friendships are culturally situated, and reflect society's beliefs pertaining to the role peers play in shaping the end goals of development within a given community (e.g., Tamis-LeMonda et al., 2007). Thus, an examination of mothers' beliefs about the functions of friendships for their 2-years-olds sheds light on the cultural construction of what it means to be a child in a social world.

In this study, we examine what Mexican, Dominican, and African American mothers believe the functions of peers are for their 2-year-old children. Through structured interviews, mothers discussed qualities that characterize good and bad friends for their children, the importance of friendships, along with the benefits and risks of having friends. Through their responses, we glean insights into what mothers deem is important for their children to learn through close relationships with other children, and how influential mothers deem peers to be from an earlier age than previously documented.

1.1 | The meaning and function of friendships

Ecocultural theories are useful lenses through which to understand socialization beliefs pertaining to children's friendships (Keller, et al., 2006; LeVine et al., 1994; Super & Harkness, 1986; Weisner, 2002). Whether caregivers find friendships to be important for young children, how they organize social interactions for their children, and what they find valuable to socialize to foster their children's development are all examples of what Super and Harkness refer to as parental ethnotheories (1986). Parental ethnotheories are cultural belief systems (e.g., cultural scripts), which are the nexus through which aspects of the larger culture are filtered. They are often implicit, taken-for-granted ideas about the "natural" or "right" way to think or act that orchestrate the child's everyday life. Although cultural communities are heterogenous (e.g., Harwood, et al., 2000), there are cultural trends that characterize cultures' socialization beliefs and practices. Among many Asian and Latine societies, for instance, children are encouraged to learn skill sets that prime them to be cooperative in groups (Chen, 2000; Greenfield & Suzuki, 1997); fostering low competitiveness and higher mutual sensitivity and compliance (Schneider, et al., 2005). In contrast, among many U.S. communities, families socialize children to stand out as individuals by asserting themselves in peer contexts (Chen et al., 2004).

Extant scholarship on peer relations has primarily focused on caregivers' behaviors that relate to children's friendships, such as parent-child-relations, or parental assistance with children's peer relations (e.g., providing opportunities to spend time with peers; assisting with child's peer interactions) (e.g., Finnie & Russell, 1988; Ladd & Golter, 1988; Mize & Pettit, 1997). Parents navigate their children's friendships as designers, mediators, supervisors, or consultants, possibly reflecting the implicit conception that young children need assistance with interacting with others. Parents can, for example, support the development of their children's peer relations by constructing settings that encourage friendship formation (designers), introducing their children to potential peers and providing opportunities for peer interactions (mediators), helping children navigate their friendships (supervisors) or talking to and advising their children about friendships (consultants, Ladd et al., 1996; McCollum & Ostrosky, 2008). While such insights into parental behaviors are valuable, parents' beliefs about children's friendships are less often studied, particularly among parents of toddlers in different cultural communities.

Caregivers' beliefs about the functions of friendships can guide parental regulation of children's peer relations in early childhood, and are thus important foci of inquiry. Indeed, scholars (e.g., Howes & Lee, 2006; Way, et al., 2007) argue that friendships are cultures in and of themselves, with shared beliefs, values, and practices related to specific types of relationships. Friendships are reflections of macro level contexts (e.g., cultural ideologies, histories), and reveal the full extent of cultural variation that exists within any given community. Here, we highlight two culturally-grounded, interrelated lenses through which to understand parental beliefs about children's friendships: 1) beliefs are products and reflections of sociocultural contexts, which are informed by the intersections of social constructions of gender, ethnicity/race, and other social identities; 2) beliefs are lenses through which to understand cultural constructions of childhood. That is, caregivers' implicit beliefs about how and what children learn in peer contexts provide a glimpse into cultural ethnotheories about what it means to be a child in a social world.

1.2 | Functions of friendships as culturally situated

Caregivers' perspectives on the meaning of good and bad friends for children are culturally grounded, and can vary as a function of mothers' ethnicity and race. Culture is closely bound with race and ethnicity. Race refers to a culturally constructed classification of people who share phenotypic characteristics. Racial classifications emerged during European conquest of the Americas, are hierarchical, and result in generalizations and harmful stereotypes about groups of people (Hartigan, 2015; Morning, 2011). Ethnicity refers to individuals' participation in culturally specific practices, as well as a sense of identity and belonging individuals exhibit in relation to their cultural group. Here, we regard culture as a shifting continuum of historically transmitted patterns of meanings embodied in symbols, cultural scripts, or discourses, through which members of a community communicate, perpetuate, and construct knowledge and attitudes

about everyday life (Geertz, 1966). From this standpoint, people may take part in multiple cultural communities, and cultural groups consist of individuals who are members of multiple communities (Harwood, et al., 2000). Thus, cultural communities are dynamic, with no clear boundaries, and people can be members of multiple cultural groups and vary in the degree to which they share the agreed-upon scripts of their communities. Although there are meaningful distinctions between culture, race, and ethnicity, both race and ethnicity are inextricably intertwined with culture and are central to understanding cultural processes (Causadias, 2013; Quintana et al., 2006).

In many cultural communities, “good” friends are viewed by caregivers as those who encourage socially valued norms and goals, whereas “bad” friends are those who reinforce deviant or socially irresponsible behaviors (e.g., Way et al., 2007). For instance, Harding et al. (2017) found that Dominican, African American, and Puerto Rican mothers of adolescents valued their children having friends who are well behaved, who get good grades, and who don’t get in trouble over friends with whom their children want to spend time. Moreover, research on Latine and African American populations found that many parents tended to be wary of their children’s relationships with nonkin peers in fears of them having a bad influence on their children’s behaviors. Among these communities, relations with extended family are often particularly valued and cultivated. This, in turn, may lead to increased concerns among caregivers that nonkin peers will disrupt their children’s commitment and ties to family (Harding et al., 2017). Intersectional experiences of minoritized communities in the United States (Santos & Toomey, 2018) can potentially explain parents’ weariness of children’s friendships. In the United States, structural privileges or oppressions are afforded to people based on where they lie at the intersections of gender, ethnicity/race, skin tone, and class (e.g., López, et al., 2018). African American and Latine mothers’ fears of negative peer influence, thus, can be partially explained by disproportionality in punishment of perceived misbehavior of BIPOC (Black, Indigenous, People of Color) children compared to other groups in the United States (Gregory et al., 2010; Skiba et al., 2011). Such fears may be in response to U.S. colorist ideologies, which pin people based on phenotype on a spectrum from white to black, and subsequently associate positive qualities and privileges with individuals who are closer to the Euro-centric, white pole of the spectrum (Dixon & Telles, 2017). Mothers raising young children who are perceived as dark skinned by others may be attuned to social influence of peers and display a heightened sense of protectiveness in efforts to shield children from institutional racism they may experience in their everyday settings (Greene, 1990). Prior work has not examined how caregivers frame the function of friendship for their toddlers among populations that exist at the intersections of multiple minoritized identities such as race/ethnicity, immigrant background, and socioeconomic status.

Emotional functions of friendships are also valued by caregivers, particularly when they are in the service of cultural goals, such as promotion of relatedness (Chen et al., 2004; Luo, 1996). Studies with US-based Latine parents—a panethnic community with diverse backgrounds, cultures, and migration histories to the United States—have found shared cultural ethnotheories rooted in relatedness (Calzada et al., 2010; Guilamo-Ramos et al., 2007) that may guide caregivers’ beliefs about friendships. These include *familismo* (attachment, loyalty, reciprocity and support in relations connected to the family), *personalismo* (preference for relations built on warmth, trust, cooperation, and reciprocity), *respeto* (showing respect, obedience, and responsibility towards authorities, usually based on age or social rank) and *simpatia* (emphasizing warmth, agreeable and respectful relations void of conflict and friction). These culturally grounded values may influence how mothers think about friendships for their young children, for example, potentially focusing more on certain aspects and functions of friendships over others (e.g., warmth and cooperation over competitiveness and promotion of individual growth). For instance, Dominican parents of adolescents frequently mentioned that an important function of friendship is to offer emotional support to their children (Way et al., 2007). When compared with African American parents, Dominican American parents also expressed more concern that their adolescents would be subject to emotional betrayal in their friendships. As such, parents of certain cultural backgrounds may have increased awareness of particular peer functions, which then equally guide their beliefs around both positive and negative aspects of friendship for their children.

Cultural beliefs about functions of friendships interact with societal constructions of gender, as well as individual factors, such as immigration status and socioeconomic status (e.g., Causadias, 2013). The few studies that do focus on parenting perspectives on young children’s friendships show mixed findings with regards to gender. While Liu and

colleagues (2005) did not find gender differences in Chinese and Canadian mothers' emphasis on connectedness and autonomy for their toddlers (2005), Leaper and colleagues (1998) reported that mothers emphasized interpersonal closeness more with daughters than sons, and autonomy more with sons than daughters. Inconsistencies in parents' gender-related perspectives may be attributed to cultural differences, since prior work has noted that gender and culture often interact (Schroeder & Bámaca-Colbert, 2019).

Parents' immigrant backgrounds may inform their perspectives on the functions of children's friendships (Schroeder & Bámaca-Colbert, 2019). One study with Mexican American mothers of 1- to 6-year-olds found variability in parental socialization of values by immigrant generation status. Early generation mothers put higher value on relatedness and later generation mothers on autonomy (Suizzo et al., 2019). Overall, however, mothers across generations largely shared the same beliefs and long-term goals for their children and integrated values from both their home and host cultures (Aldoney & Cabrera, 2016; McCabe et al., 2016). There are no studies, to our knowledge, that have specifically examined mothers' beliefs about functions of toddler's friendships in a sample of mostly immigrant Latine communities and African American communities in the United States.

1.3 | Functions of friendships as lenses onto social constructions of childhood

Parental socialization beliefs about friendships may point to implicit sociocultural conceptions of childhood. What it means to be a child is not universal; rather, childhoods are socially constructed and shaped by various social, cultural, contextual, and historical factors (e.g., James & Prout, 1990; James & Prout, 2003). Childhoods in any given cultural community consist of actual and desirable qualities adults attribute to children and, we argue, to their peers. Prevailing conceptions of childhood cast children as being in the process of becoming adults, learning the necessary skills and behaviors through interactions with other, often more knowledgeable, members of their communities (Qamar, 2021; Vygotsky, 1978). Although the immaturity of children is a biological fact, how different communities construct meaning of children's development is historically, politically, and socially situated, representing multiple, shifting, contextual, and contingent perspectives (James & Prout, 1990). What functions do caregivers believe friendships serve for 2-year olds, at a pivotal time in development when foundational cognitive and social skills are acquired? And what do functions of friendships suggest about parents' beliefs regarding what and how toddlers learn from peers?

Prior scholarship has shed light on whether relationship effects are stronger in reciprocal or unidirectional friendships. Research on the nature of social networks finds that reciprocal relationships yield stronger influences on individuals than unidirectional ones (e.g., Almaatouq et al., 2016). Most of this work, however, focuses on measuring actual relationship effects in reciprocal and unidirectional friendships. Parents' perceptions of directionality of influence of friendships on their children's development offer a window onto cultural ideas about how children learn from their close relationships with peers, the answer to which can inform what it means to be a child in a social world. Specifically, do parents consider their children as the sole recipients of influence in the context of their friendships (unidirectional), or do they view their children as influencing their friends as much as their friends influence them (bidirectional)? Parents' perceptions of peer relationships among toddlers from the angle of social construction of childhood has not, to our knowledge, been examined among ethnic/racial minority families of toddlers, communities that are largely underrepresented in psychological research (e.g., Roberts et al., 2020).

1.4 | Current study

In this study, we examined ethnically diverse parents' perspectives on their 2-year-old children's friendships. We focused on Dominican, African American, and Mexican communities living in New York City, a large, metropolitan North-Eastern city in the United States. Specifically we asked: (1) What do Mexican, African American, and Dominican mothers perceive to be functions of their toddlers' friendships?; (2) Do mothers perceive their toddlers' friendships to

be unidirectional or bidirectional? We focused on minoritized caregivers, many of whom are immigrants living in the United States, whose experiences with assimilation to a new country, or negotiations with majority culture may shape the types of expectations and values they place on their children's social interactions (Schroeder & Bámaca-Colbert, 2019). Mexican, African American, and Dominican communities vary in their cultural backgrounds, immigration histories in the United States, educational experiences, languages, racial-ethnic identifications, and parenting views. As a result of living in New York City, a densely populated metropolitan context characterized by large inequality and ethnic-racial diversity, these three ethnic groups may embody similar cultural practices. They share the experience of raising children in New York City, coming from low-income communities, and being of minoritized status in the United States due to the intersections of race, socio-economic status, immigrant origin (for Mexican and Dominican mothers only) and ethnic backgrounds. These commonalities may be reflected in parents' views about children's friendships.

Peer researchers have explicitly stated that, in toddlerhood, children's social experiences with peers can be defined as friendships (Rubin et al., 2008). During their second year of life, children take developmental leaps that significantly improve the quality of their social interactions (Rubin et al., 2008). The rapid gains in language, social, cognitive, and motor skills assist toddlers in engaging in more interactive, as opposed to parallel play, and it is common that toddlers pay careful attention to, and imitate one another (Hanna & Meltzoff, 1993; Howes, 1988). Moreover, as toddlers begin to initiate social interactions on their own, conflict with same-aged peers also increases—a sign of increasingly complex social skills and awareness (Rubin et al., 2008). Although it is still unclear whether toddler friendships have similar socioemotional impact as friendships in later childhood and adolescence, scholars still consider peer relations during this time as foundational to children's social life (Hay et al., 2004).

Notably, in toddlerhood, many children also experience changes in their physical settings, as their initially tiny microsystems expand beyond the home. At this point, in contexts such as the United States, many children enroll in center-based care, or preschool programs, and experience interactions with peers apart from primary caregivers (Bennet et al., 2020). The expansion of their microsystems may lead children to engage with peers in a different manner, as they spend more time away from adult supervision and guidance. In a peer group setting, such as center-based care, children's awareness of norms and standards heightens. They may find themselves categorized as part of a specific group (e.g. "the boys") and begin to adapt to group norms (e.g., "boys don't cry"), even when they are not in the original group setting (Harris, 1995). This shift may also lead caregivers to think about potential peers for their children differently. Not only do they find themselves having less control over who their children spend time with, but may also witness concurrent changes in their children's attitudes and behaviors that they attribute to peers. It is possible that toddlerhood is the first time when caregivers begin to seriously consider the influence of peers on their children, beliefs that may subsequently guide and potentially shift their socialization practices around friendship.

2 | METHODS

2.1 | Participants

Data were drawn from a large, longitudinal study focused on how cultural context shapes parenting and children's development from the child's birth until 1st grade. Mothers ($N = 184$) were approached by research assistants in hospitals shortly after giving birth and self-identified as Dominican (36%), African American (33%), and Mexican (31%). Their infants were healthy and full-term. The sample was balanced by child gender (boys, 49%; girls, 51%). See Table 1 for demographic information on the full sample.

2.2 | Procedures

In this study, we draw upon data collected when children were 24 months of age (± 2 weeks). Mothers were interviewed in their homes by research assistants in the language of mothers' choice (Spanish/English). After getting

TABLE 1 Sample demographic variables

Demographic Variable	Dominican	African American	Mexican	Comparison
N	72	59	62	$F = 1.99, p = .14$
Female	48.6%	47.5%	58.1%	$\chi^2 = 1.69, p = .43$
firstborn	45.8%	45.8%	29%	$\chi^2 = 23.66, p = .05$
Mother born outside of the United States	77.8%	-	95.2%	$\chi^2 = 129.47, p < .000$
Baseline (infant's birth)				
Mother's years in the US	9.41 (6.42)	-	8.12 (5.06)	$F = 3.93, p = .25$
Father's years in the US	11.57 (8.30)	-	10.32 (6.16)	$F = 3.26, p = .39$
Mothers' age	26.11 (5.35)	25.31 (6.75)	27.39 (5.48)	$F = 1.96, p = .14$
Father's age	30.29 (7.64)	27.79 (7.13)	29.90 (6.91)	$F = 2.07, p = .13$
Household income	\$24,188.90 (\$15,327.82)	\$19,566.37 (\$15,507.62)	\$18,133.20 (\$11,491.65)	$F = 2.91, p = .06$
Mother's years of education	12.44 (2.02)	11.91 (1.65)	8.68 (3.55)	$F = 37.63, p < .000$
Father's years of education	11.91 (2.03)	11.84 (1.43)	8.35 (2.75)	$F = 45.24, p < .000$
Total number of children	2.10 (1.15)	2.67 (1.81)	2.89 (1.24)	$F = 5.62, p < .01$
At the age of 2 visit				
Mother's Employment status	87% (.58)	70% (.46)	55% (.59)	$\chi^2 = 17.66, p < .01$
Father's Employment Status	84% (.37)	62% (.49)	98% (.13)	$\chi^2 = 25.94, p < .000$
Total # People in Living in the household	4.41 (1.38)	4.69 (2.06)	6.00 (2.22)	$F = 13.03, p < .000$
Total # household adults	2.46 (1.04)	2.08 (1.12)	3.23 (1.49)	$F = 14.15, p < .000$
Total # household children	2.10 (1.15)	2.61 (1.80)	2.89 (1.23)	$F = 5.47, p < .01$
Total Household Income	\$26,613.48 (\$18,513.37)	\$15,251.65 (\$14,929.75)	\$22,203.75 (\$13,024.51)	$F = 8.02, p < .000$
Mother Cohabiting with Father/Male Partner	64% (48%)	33% (48%)	86% (35%)	$\chi^2 = 33.35, p < .000$

settled, mothers were asked the following open-ended questions: 1) In your opinion, what are some of the qualities that would make a good friend for your child during the first 3 years of life?; 2) In your opinion, what are some of the qualities that would make a bad friend for your child during the first 3 years of life?; 3) Do you think friendships are important for your child? If so, why?; 4) In general, what do you think are some of the benefits of having friends?; 5) In general, what do you think are some of the risks of having friends?

2.3 | Coding

Interviews were audio-recorded and transcribed in the language of the interview. An interpretative community of students and faculty used Strauss and Corbin's (1998) open coding methodology to develop coding themes reflecting mothers' peer socialization beliefs. Our interpretive community was mixed in terms of backgrounds and ranks (faculty, doctoral, and undergraduate students who then went on to become Master's students during the course of data analysis and write-up). Although all members of the research team lived in the United States, not all were born in the United

States (Russian faculty born in Russia, Dagestani-Jewish American masters' student born in the United States, Swedish doctoral student born in Sweden, Ecuadorian-American masters' student born in the United States, Indian doctoral student born in India). One of our team members is a parent herself. All of the team members resided in New York City when analyzing and writing up the data. Authors 1 and 3 spent most of their lives in NYC, where they lived alongside or in the same communities as families in the sample. Collectively, our positionalities were essential to the interpretation and analysis of the data, and we frequently reflected on our own upbringing and socialization beliefs when analyzing and writing up the data. Our varied cultural upbringings gave us unique vantage points onto the cultural context of friendships.

An important limitation of our varied perspectives is that none of us are of African American, Mexican, or Dominican origin. We all made attempts to identify, as much as possible, the blindspots that inevitably result in such etic approach during the coding and writing process. Given most of the team were immigrants to the United States, we shared some experiences with our Mexican and Dominican participants of negotiating our home and host cultures. However, our own positionalities at the intersection of race/ethnicity, gender, and class undoubtedly shaped our experiences in ways that depart from those of our participants. The first author has had extensive experience working with Mexican, African American, and Dominican families, as she helped collect data for multiple waves of this longitudinal project and researched alongside scholars from Latine and Black communities. The first and second author continue to work with Mexican, Dominican, and African American communities in research settings: We published (and continue to generate) articles focused on socialization of children among families in this sample and others, and continue to learn about their experiences from multiple vantage points in the context of parenting. In our efforts to represent families' perspectives in this manuscript, we foregrounded mothers' perspectives by retaining, as much as possible, responses in their own voices and languages. In the process of contextualizing mothers' voices, we consulted heavily prior literature and knowledgeable others in our lives when embedding mothers' experiences in their cultural contexts. Nonetheless, we acknowledge that the intersections of our social identities result in experiences that significantly differ from those of the mothers and children we write about. Inevitably, we harbor blind spots resulting from our etic approach that we can neither fully identify nor rectify.

Analyses followed three stages of coding suggested by Grounded Theory Coding: open, axial, and selective coding (LaRossa, 2005). First, we examined data by searching for salient words, phrases, or ideas that mothers used to describe the functions of their toddlers' friendships (open coding). We then organized the codes by establishing relationships between categories (axial coding). At this stage, we collapsed similar categories into larger categories. Finally, we developed an understanding of how the data contributes to ecocultural theories that guided the study, with a focus on how mothers' responses to the questions exhibited ethnotheories of friendships (selective coding). Reliability was conducted on 20% of transcripts by coders (kappas = .85 - .96). Cross language reliability was conducted on 20% of transcripts, whereby coders fluent in both languages coded English and Spanish transcripts to ensure codes were similar across languages. Our codes focused on mothers' responses to all the questions. All of the mothers' responses were in the form of explanations and examples that pointed to functions of friendships, rather than isolated qualities that described characteristics of peers. Table 2 depicts operational definitions of the coding categories. For each code, we noted whether parents implied directionality in their toddler's friendships.

3 | RESULTS

Prior to introducing themes we found across interviews, we first present data on the importance mothers placed on friendships of their toddlers. Most mothers found friendships to be important for their 2-year-olds (92.2%). When asked to elaborate, many referred to friendships as a way of learning "to be around people," "lose their shyness (*perdan la timidez*)" and "know how to live with others" (*sepa convivir con las demás gente*), while others emphasized the importance of "a good friend [who] will always be there for you" and having someone to share "secrets" with. In contrast, 7.8% of mothers claimed that friendships were *not* important for their children. Of those mothers who didn't

TABLE 2 Operational definitions for codes

Code	Definition
Functions of friendships	These codes can be positive (e.g., sharing, schoolwork) or negative (e.g., cursing, bad manners).
Learning social skills	Learning about social behaviors – for example, aggression, sharing, understanding and interacting with different people. This code could also involve children experiencing peer pressure.
Learning cognitive skills	Gaining practical knowledge – for example, learning new games, names of colors, to count (could also include asking questions, being smart). This code also captures responses suggesting that children are not learning cognitive skills from friends (e.g., not teaching the child letters of the alphabet).
Learning morality	Learning moral or immoral attitudes and behaviors – for example, good/bad manners and etiquette, how to be a good/bad friend (being honest and loyal, being able to tell right from wrong), obeying or disobeying rules and respecting/disrespecting others.
Experiencing and communicating feelings	Engaging in the communication of emotion and feelings – for example, expressing one's own emotions while also listening to and identifying with the emotions of others, showing compassion, and patience, and peers serving as emotional confidants. Also includes emotional betrayal, and vulnerability, which can lead to distrust and the showing of "one's colors".
Providing companionship	Having someone to spend everyday situations with – for example, playing and eating together, joking around, and relaxing. This code could also refer to unreliable, irregular friends who rarely show up, call, or visit.
Exhibiting similarity	Being similar in terms of physicality (e.g., height), emotional maturity, and age. Sharing similar interests, and characteristics (e.g., being on the same level, liking the same activities and/or food). Could also refer to being different or dissimilar, e.g., one child being more or less mature than the other.
Providing protection	Being looked out for and offered protection – for example, keeping each other emotionally safe, and having each other's backs. This code could also involve being betrayed or abandoned in the face of friction, conflicts, or as a result of peer pressure.
Directionality of friendships	Explicit or implicit mention of whether friendships are mutual or in one direction.
Bidirectionality	The modeling behavior is mutual between peer and child.
Unidirectionality	A friend is teaching or modeling behavior to the child.

think friendships were important for their children, 33.3% suggested that family should be prioritized, or function as a substitute for friends. For example, Danielle, an African American mother explained that "...as long as [my daughter] has her brothers and her cousins, those are all the friends she needs." Twenty percent of mothers who responded that friendships are not important for their toddlers referred to their young age. Rosa, a Mexican mother, said of her daughter in English: "cause she's a baby, she doesn't like really know [friendships yet]." Another 20% of mothers maintained that their children don't "need" friends. For example, Ella and Lauren, African American mothers with young daughters alleged, "you don't need a friend to do the things that you gotta do for you (Ella)," and "in the end it's just gonna be her, friends are just there for periods of time, but it's not something you need (Lauren)." The remaining 26.7% of mothers discussed everything from how friends can pull you into, and abandon you in trouble (Livia, Mexican mother of a son), to not having the experience themselves of having "friends like this (*Yo nunca he tenido amigos así*, Oona, Mexican mother of a daughter)." Interestingly, the majority of mothers who did not consider friendships to be important to their children identified as African American ($N = 11$), followed by Mexican ($N = 4$). There were no Dominican mothers in this category. Additionally, African American mothers, but not Mexican mothers, raised the themes of "prioritizing family"

and “not needing friends to do well in life”, respectively, while the four Mexican mothers were more heterogeneous in their responses.

3.1 | Mothers emphasized a variety of functions of toddlers’ friendships

Mothers emphasized a variety of friendship functions for their 2-year-olds. Below, we discuss the 7 themes for functions of friendships that emerged in the data in the order of most to least frequently mentioned in the sample. We considered a theme to be mentioned by mothers if they emphasized it at least once in response to any of the questions.

3.1.1 | Learning social skills

Almost every mother emphasized learning *social skills* when talking about toddler’s friendships. Specifically, many mothers discussed the importance for children learning to be *social* with and through others. Being social, in turn, was represented through various beliefs that mothers expressed in their interviews. For example, many mothers emphasized learning the social skill of sharing through early friendships. Samara, an African American mother, suggested that her son will eventually “know how to share and play” through friends, while Maria, a Dominican mother, suggested that friends will teach her son “...how to share [...] how to play with each other.” For these two mothers, sharing seems to be an essential aspect of playing successfully with a peer. As such, Samara and Maria believe peers socialize children into play by teaching them how to share. Sofia, a Mexican mother with a daughter, also discussed sharing, but not only in relation to play: “Las cualidades [de un buen amigo] son que si le cae bien una persona ella les sonríe, y si está comiendo algo ella les brinda y ehh y eso me hace sentir bien porque ella está aprendiendo a compartir o dice bye y una sonrisa les dice bye y a mi me gusta su forma de ser de ella” (*The qualities [of a good friend] are that if she likes a person she smiles at them, and if she is eating something she offers them [her food] and ehh and that makes me feel good because [my daughter] is learning to share or says bye with a smile to others and I like it when she is this way*). Sofia thus suggests a good friend will teach her daughter to share with others in many ways; through food, games, smiles, goodbyes. Sharing, to Sofia, as much as to Maria and Samara, becomes fundamental to their children’s initial social interactions.

Mothers also suggested that via peers children might learn about people who are different from themselves, and the social skill of navigating diverse personalities. Veronica, an African American mother, explained that her daughter learning to socialize with different people is a way of gaining life experience, but also intimacy: “...she learns to be with different people [...] you get to experience life through someone different, you know, like you are sisters.” Nora, another African American mother, said the following about her son; “by interact[ing] with other people he’ll know how to treat people.” For Kaia, a Mexican mother, the experience of having friends might teach her daughter to recognize who is a close friend, and who is just an acquaintance: “Que hay que aprender distinguir cuando es una amigo y cuando es un conocido nada más porque no todos son tus amigos. Muchas personas son dos caras, hablan de ti, hablan de todo el mundo (*You have to learn to distinguish when someone is a friend and when someone is no more than an acquaintance. Many people are two-faced, they talk about you, and they talk about the whole world*).” For Veronica, Nora and Kaia, exposure to friends teaches their children awareness and understanding of others and, because of this, also the ability to know who to keep close, and who to keep at arm’s length.

Some Spanish-speaking mothers emphasized that friends could teach their children the social skill of self-expression, and communication in English. Laura, a Mexican mother with a young son, discussed why friends are important: “Porque así podría tener oportunidades de jugar con otros niños y aprender de ellos juegos y hablar inglés (*because that way [my son] has opportunities to play with other children and learn games from them and speak English*)”. Similarly, Eva, another Mexican mother, said that some of the benefits of having friends is that it makes it easier for her daughter to learn English: “Y sea más fácil para ella aprender el inglés.” Additionally, adding another layer of the immigrant experience, she pointed out that “here in this country, you are almost always alone (*aquí en este país casi uno*”).

casi siempre está solo), “and you need to have many friends so as not to shut yourself off (*y uno necesita tener muchas amistades para no encerrarse*).”

Finally, mothers also discussed learning how to be “good” and “not bad” via social interactions with peers. Rita, a Dominican mother, emphasized she doesn’t want her daughter’s friends “to be bad, because sometimes kids do what other kids do [...] I don’t want her to learn bad stuff [...] Yea some kids do that. They see what their little friends are doing and they want to do the same thing.” Verónica, a Dominican mother, expressed content with her son having a friend who is “very calm. She’s focused, she listens [...] if she sits down and play, she will play like you know not aggressively. She will play calmly. She will show him things that she already knows.” Louisa, and Carla, two Mexican mothers, expressed concern that their young sons would copy “rude” behaviors they see in their peers: “Porque ello copian. Porque él no me tiraba nada y como la niña tira todo, el copio (de la niña) (Louisa)” (*Because they copy. Because he did not throw anything at me [before] but as [his friend] throws everything, he copied [her]*); “Pues fíjate que me gustaría un niño que no hable groserías, porque el niño que juega con [son], cada rato dice groserías y luego el niño lo ve y lo repite (Carla)” (*Well, you see I would like [my son to play with] a child who does not speak rudely, because the boy who plays with [my son] every so often speaks rudely and then [my son] sees it and repeats it*). Overall, mothers appeared to appreciate their children learning via friendships to adapt to different people and social contexts with the caveat that some people and social contexts are inherently unhelpful, or teach them “bad” attitudes and behaviors.

3.1.2 | Experiencing and communicating feelings

Mothers who spoke about *emotionality* in their children’s friendships tended to highlight the communication of emotions and feelings within the relationship. Sonia, an African American mother, said the benefits of friendships for her son are: “Basically just being able to talk to people you know, expression, you know, a lot of friends would identify with each other and then you have something in common and sometimes you don’t [...] being able to interact with people is just really important.” Sonia emphasized the communication in friendships as vital, especially in terms of being able to identify and connect with each other. Similarly, Diana, a Dominican mother, described friendships as helping her son communicate and accept both his own emotions as well as the emotions of others: “Becoming like older, friends are supportive, uhmmm it helps them with communicating and uhmmm showing affection and showing different emotions and feelings.” In discussing the benefits of friendships, Diana stated, “just knowing how to respect people feelings and emotions and things like that. Like having friends, you learn how to respect their feeling and they are going through something you know how to deal with it and them through it you know and be supportive of them.” For Diana, as for Sonia, friendships are thus a way for their sons to gain emotional intelligence and knowledge and to connect with others through the reciprocal exchange of feelings.

Rosa, a Dominican mother, also targeted emotionality in her descriptions of qualities that would define a good friend for her son: “Being there, being supportive, uhm, loving, careness, uh, the warmth, uh, I think loving and care is the most important things for a child for the next three years because that way they’ll know for sure who you are and from where they come from.” For Rosa, it appears the ideal friend for her son holds close to maternal properties (love, care, warmth, support). To Reina, a Mexican mother, the ideal friendship for her son takes on properties evoking marriage or an intimate, romantic relationship: “de tener una buena amistad pues seria de compartir las tristezas, las penas, las alegrías (*having a good friend means to share sadness, sorrow and joy*).” She adds: “Que los dos compartan en el carácter y que los dos juegan bien mas que nada. Y bueno y que los dos sean ehh... como dos tipos mosqueteros, no? Que los dos jalen tanto como el uno como el otro osea que los dos sean los dos como una sola persona, que ellos sean bien osea unidos.” Here, Reina emphasizes how important it is that her son and friend “share the same character and that the two play well more than anything [...] that they are both [...] like two musketeers, right? [...] That they work together [...], that the two are as one person, that they are very [...] close.” Reina thus views ideal friendship not only as communicating feelings, but also sharing a general mindset and outlook on the world. Elizabeth, a Mexican mother of a daughter, similarly spoke of communicating feelings, but also described, in English, an ideal friend as “someone who’s

close to [my daughter], who be there for her, who's not umm, who share things with her, who just right there when you need her, you know? [...] playing games, talking to each other, learning from each other, umm... [learning] what's right, they know what's right for them, what's wrong for them, you know?" Elizabeth carefully describes the ideal friendship as resting on a mutuality, which could take the form of emotional support, but also the establishment of self in front of each other; who they are and what they want.

3.1.3 | Learning morality

Mothers also discussed how ideal friends will have good *morals*, and some suggested that their own children may learn good morals through such friends. Ligia, a Mexican American mother to a young boy, alleged ideal friends are "buen niños de buen comportamiento con modales" (*good children who behave well and have manners*). For Eve, an African American mother, ideal qualities in a friend for her daughter are "honesty and loyalty [...] and a friend that's determined to do good things." Both Ligia and Eve prefer friends who behave well, and while Ligia emphasizes manners and etiquette, which evokes the Latine cultural standard of *respeto* (e.g., Suizzo et al., 2019), Eve appears to focus more on general benevolence. There were mothers who specifically spoke about friends teaching good morals to their children. Alisha, an African American mother of a son, emphasized that "the right friends [...] could tell you when you wrong, when you right," and, similarly, Teresa, a Mexican mother, stated that a good friend is "someone who is sensible [...] who can tell [my daughter] the good and the bad [...] let's say [my daughter] is doing something wrong [good friends] will tell her 'hey, that's not ok'" (*Alguien que tiene sensibilidad. O sea los sentimientos. Eh, alguien que le puede decir lo bueno y lo mala que, oh sea que digamos algo que ella está haciendo mal y que le diga < oyo eso no es > ["yo siento que eso es un buen amigo]*). Jasmine, an African American mother elaborated that her son's slightly older friends are "the kids that tell him, you know that mommy says you can't do that or [...] you shouldn't do that you know you're gonna get in trouble by mommy'. It helps him better I guess when he has someone in his corner to cheer him on is when you get better results you know." It thus seems these mothers perceived moral learning via friendships as more overt, and explicit, with friends purposely telling their child what is morally sound.

3.1.4 | Learning cognitive skills

A few mothers expressed a desire for their children to engage in more traditional *cognitive* learning through friendships. Jayla, an African American mother, preferred for her son to be friends with "kids that definitely know stuff" and who are "into learning". Another African American mother, Farah, maintained that friends can teach her son "the things he don't know. And he can also teach. Similarly, Nina, a Mexican mother, responded that friends can "teach [my son] new games, new things. Help him to... do things that [my son] cannot do (*Que le enseñe juegos nuevos, cosas nuevas. Que le ayude a... a hacer cosas que [my son] no pueda o no sepa hacer*)." Sofia, a Mexican mother, elaborated in English that friends can teach her son "just anything, colors, numbers [...] contribute something good in his life." For these mothers, then, it seems friendships are a source of more practical knowledge, but that this knowledge needs to be actively and intentionally shared for learning to occur.

3.1.5 | Providing companionship

Some mothers emphasized the *companionship* that a friend can offer their child, which can serve multiple purposes and functions. Livia, an African American mother said that with a friend her son "can always have someone to smile with, laugh with, you know, share with, eat with, read with, it's like you're never alone." Livia's sentiment was echoed by Maude, an African American mother of a son, who suggested that it is good to have friends "so you have someone to

talk to, someone to hang out with, to play with, and just, kick back and relax with.” Angie, an African American mother of a daughter, elaborated further, saying that friends are “just like your brother or your sister, it’s just the same thing [...] to know that you have another one added on which is not actually your brother or your sister but, you got friends, you know, [...] to talk to, to do everything that you do with your brother and sister.” Essentially, these mothers largely described friends as companions that their child will experience everyday situations with. Some mothers additionally stressed the importance of regularity in friendships. Luisa, a Dominican mother, said that she preferred her son’s friends to be “... present, that they come often or they visit continually or [that there is] some pattern for them to show up.” Similarly, Desiree, another Dominican mother, stated that “quality at that age is not that important, but I just think that somebody that [my son] is used to and familiarized with [would make a good friend].” Laura, a Mexican mother with a young son, framed it simply: “Bueno que lo llamen y que jueguen con el” (*ideal friends call him and play with him*). Essentially, consistency is key for Luisa, Desiree and Laura, and they look for friends that regularly show up for their children, day after day. The notion of regularity is also present in the earlier statements made by Livia, Maude and Angie, who spoke about their children experiencing everyday situations with friends, and being there for each other through thick and thin.

3.1.6 | Exhibiting similarity

A smaller portion of mothers mentioned *similarity* as additional aspects of friendships serving more emotional functions for their child. The notion of children being similar to peers was expressed in a variety of ways, from shared physical traits (e.g., height), to synchronized rate of physical and emotional growth, and affinity toward common interests. For instance, in discussing qualities that would define a good friend for her daughter, Mischa, an African American mother, said she hoped for “someone who is growing at the same rate as [my daughter] is [...] you get to grow together, share your experiences, switch clothes.” Mischa seemingly suggests that emotional closeness may be heightened, or more readily achievable if there is a commonality to build on, such as maturity rate. Other mothers expressed a preference for ideal friends to be “around the same age” as their child. Reina, a Mexican mother, explained that same-aged children are overall more similar to each other, adding that she’d prefer her daughter to have friends who have the same interests and preferences as she does: “Un niño de su edad, o niña. Que tiene los mismo gustos que ella tiene [...] Pienso que los niños son muy similares los niños. Un niño más pequeño como Sylvia quiere ir allá a la derecha y Nadia a la izquierda. Y Selma es más independiente porque es más grande. Quiere tener el mando, el juego” (*A boy her age, or girl. Who has the same preferences that she does [...] I think that children are very similar to each other. A younger child, like Sylvia, wants to go over there to the right and Nadia wants to go left. And Selma is more independent because she is older. [She] wants to be in control of the game*). It seems to mothers like Mischa and Reina, similarity between their child and their friends is helpful from a developmental aspect, that the children are on the same socioemotional level. At the same time similarity can also improve the quality of the friendship, by making it deeper and more intimate.

3.1.7 | Providing protection

Finally, *protection* was a salient feature of friendships for a few mothers. Indira, an African American mother, expressed a desire for her daughter’s friends to “take care of her, keep her safe [...] be there for her [so she] always have someone to talk to.” To Indira, then, “good friends” provide her daughter with a form of emotional, rather than physical protection, that is, they make themselves emotionally present and available and in that way protect her daughter from emotional vulnerability and harm. Sofi, a Dominican mother, pushed for a “loyal” friend, “someone who would look after [my daughter], look out for her when she is in danger, you know.” Laura, another Dominican mother, suggested that a good friend will “take care of [my son], not hurt him or be mean to him [...], play with him”. To Sofi, friends can protect her daughter from danger emanating from sources outside the friendship, while Laura in a way looks for the

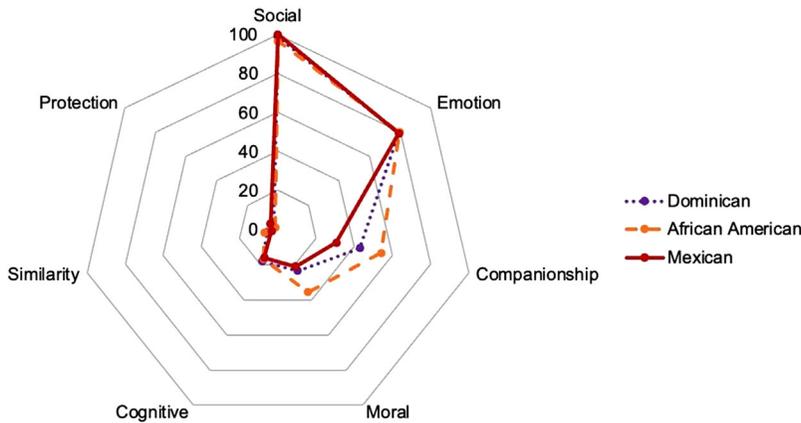


FIGURE 1 Percent of mothers who emphasized the different functions of friendships across ethnicity. Nodes closer to the outer circle represent higher percentages of mothers who mentioned a given function. Nodes closer to the center of the circle represent fewer percentages of mothers who mentioned a given function

friends to protect her son from themselves, by caring for him, and including him in their play. The fact that protection can take many forms may speak to the young age of the focal children. Mothers may construct their 2-year-old children as vulnerable beings, susceptible to danger and hurt from within familiar friendships as much as from unknown, more abstract sources. Such constructions may also be grounded in their intersectional, minoritized status of being Black and Brown women in the United States.

3.1.8 | Descriptive statistics of functions of friendships

Almost all mothers emphasized learning of social skills (98.4%), followed by experiencing/communicating feelings (77.7%), providing companionship (41.5%), learning morality (31.9%), learning cognitive skills (21.3%), exhibiting similarity (5.3%) and providing protection (2.1%) (Figure 1). Most mothers mentioned more than 1 friendship function, with a range of 1 and 5, and an average of 2.72 functions. In terms of frequencies, 14 mothers mentioned 1 function, 62 mothers mentioned 2 functions, 84 mothers mentioned 3 functions, 30 mothers mentioned 4 functions, and 3 mothers mentioned 5 functions. No mothers emphasized 6 or all 7 functions of friendships in their responses. A MANOVA with total functions mothers mentioned as a dependent variable, and child gender and mother ethnicity as between subjects effects did not indicate significant gender ($F(1, 187) = .55, p = .46$) or ethnicity ($F(2, 187) = 2.41, p = .09$) main effects or interactions (See Figure 1 for descriptive statistics for ethnicity; Figure 2 for results for gender). Table 3 presents the percentage of mothers who emphasized each of the functions across ethnicity and child gender. Analyses comparing functions by mother ethnicity and child gender yielded only one significant finding: A higher percentage of Dominican and African American mothers emphasized providing companionship than Mexican mothers. Mothers' emphases of functions of friendships by question are presented in Figure 3. Some questions elicited higher emphasis among the sample of particular functions than other questions. For instance, responses to qualities that made bad friends prompted over 80% of mothers to mention learning of social skills. In contrast, the benefits of friends prompted over 60% of mothers to mention expressing and communicating emotions as an important function of friendships.

3.2 | Most mothers viewed friendships as unidirectional

In response to questions about functions of children's friendships, mothers implied directionality of friendships, that is, are friendships sustained mutually or are they in one direction. Many mothers who framed the friendship process

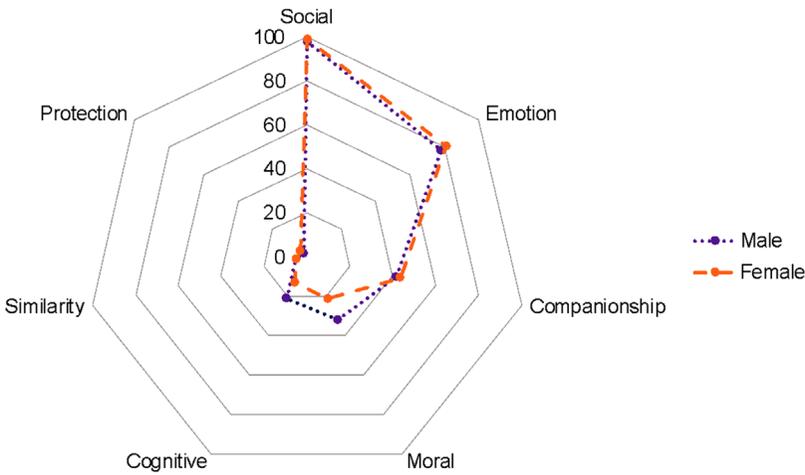


FIGURE 2 Percent of mothers who emphasized the different functions of friendships by child gender. Nodes closer to the outer circle represent higher percentages of mothers who mentioned a given function. Nodes closer to the center of the circle represent fewer percentages of mothers who mentioned a given function

TABLE 3 Proportion of sample emphasizing peer functions by ethnicity and gender

Function	Ethnicity			Chi sq	Gender		
	Dominican	African American	Mexican		Male	Female	Chi q
Learning Social Skills	37.4%	30.0%	32.6%	$\chi^2 = 2.29, p = .32.$	48.8%	51.6%	$\chi^2 = .39, p = .53.$
Experiencing/ Communicating Feelings	37.3%	30.7%	32.0%	$\chi^2 = .01, p = 1.00.$	47.7%	52.3%	$\chi^2 = .29, p = .59.$
Learning Morality	33.3%	41.2%	25.5%	$\chi^2 = 3.79, p = .15.$	58.8%	41.2%	$\chi^2 = 2.8, p = .09.$
Learning Cognitive Skills	39.4%	30.3%	30.3%	$\chi^2 = .09, p = .96.$	60.6%	39.4%	$\chi^2 = .226, p = .13.$
Providing Companionship	37.8%	39.0%	23.2%	$\chi^2 = 6.90, p < .05.$	47.6%	52.4%	$\chi^2 = .08, p = .79.$
Exhibiting Similarity	40.0%	40.0%	20.0%	$\chi^2 = .81, p = .67.$	50.0%	50.0%	$\chi^2 = .01, p = .93.$
Providing Protection	33.3%	16.7%	50.0%	$\chi^2 = 1.03, p = .60.$	33.3%	66.7%	$\chi^2 = .59, p = .44.$

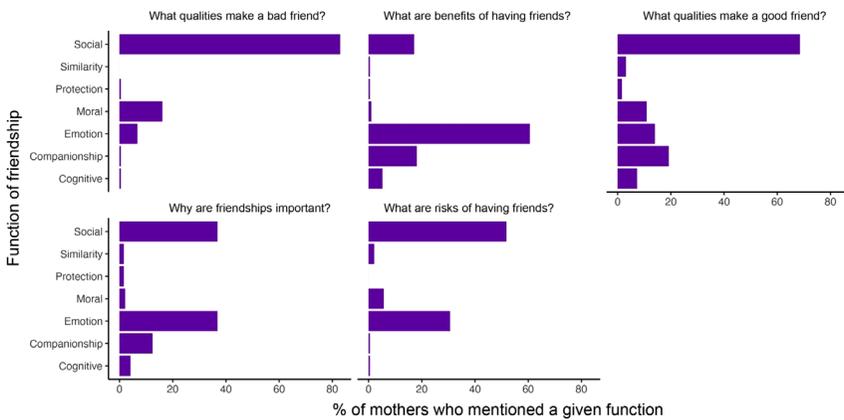


FIGURE 3 Percentage of mothers who emphasized seven different functions of friendships by question

as *unidirectional* spoke of friends as teachers of important attitudes, skills, and behaviors to their children. As Diane, an African American mother, put it: "A good friend [...] would teach [my son] good things [...] as far as walking, talking, being polite." Naomi, an African American mother, would prefer her daughter to be friends with "somebody that's just experienced, I guess that they could, like, talk to her and everything, so she can try to follow in their footsteps, and follow with the learning." Some mothers focused on their children learning physical skill sets from friends such as building blocks or climbing monkey bars. Lauren, an African American mother, suggested that "because [my son] hang out with other kids he started things he wasn't doing. He is trying, like, sliding down a slider, jumping off the deck." Other mothers viewed friends as primarily teaching their children social behaviors. Maria, a Dominican mother, described a good friend as someone that teaches her son "how to share [...] how to play with each other." A handful of mothers specifically pointed to friends teaching their children morals. For example, Tania, an African American mother, stated that "a friend can show [my son] and tell him what he should be doing, right or wrong."

Several mothers mentioned that friends can offer their children various forms of emotional support. Some mothers specified friends as listening ears and accepting shoulders to cry on during hard times. As explained by Adele, an African American mother of a daughter: "If you have a problem, you need someone to talk to and somebody that is going to be there and not try to make you feel bad about the situation. Someone that is trying to [...] ease your pain and make a little leeway for you." To Laila and Kyra, African American mothers of sons, friendship is having "someone to always have your back when things are hard [...] someone that you could tell everything to, like telling it to the wall, and not getting it back (Laila)"; "the benefits is you'll know they'll be there for you regardless of anything. They'll be on your side. They'll help you through thick and thin (Kyra)." Mothers such as Marita, who is Dominican, specifically stressed that through friends, children have someone outside the immediate family to confide in, "you have someone to talk to besides your parents." Dani, an African American mother elaborated that her son "may need just at least one person to talk to, because if anything ever happen to me, or his dad, he don't have anybody else to lean on, to talk to, he'll have that one friend that he can go to and rely on." Emphasizing support in tandem with affection, Rosa, a Dominican mother, suggested "being there, being supportive, uhm, loving" would be ideal characteristics for her son's friends. Relatedly, mothers such as Leyla and Tori, who are African American, also mentioned that friends can provide emotional support through loneliness; "someone [for my daughter] to talk to, hang out with when lonely (Leyla)"; "be there for [my son] when there's nobody else there to play with [to] help build up his confidence, his self-esteem and his social [...] life (Tori)."

Finally, a handful of mothers believed that friends provide their children with connections, favors, and opportunities. Rita, a Dominican mother of a son, suggested that friends are helpful "when you need somebody to do a favor [...] for homework, for coming back from school." Projecting further into the future Daria and Inez, both African American mothers of sons, offered that friends "can help you find jobs, help you do, you know, do other things [...] that you need to be focused on (Daria)"; "education-wise, work-wise [...] they'll help [my son] out a lot (Inez)." Additionally, for Abby, an African American mother, friends may provide her daughter with social capital so that "she gets to meet new people, that way she can network [and] learn something new every day." As such, for most mothers with a *unidirectional* framework, friends are framed as competent and experienced, with an influence that can prove developmentally invaluable to their children.

Significantly fewer mothers in our sample spoke about friendship as *bidirectional*, however many of those who did raised various forms of "sharing" in their responses. For example, Lucia, a Dominican mother, stressed that she wants her daughter to be friends with "someone that shares with her [...] to laugh with, someone that she laughs with." Natasha, an African American mother, both wished for shared emotional support in her son's friendships, but also pointed to the expression of egalitarian and respectful attitudes: "Patience, little kids having to be able to share with each other [...] have compassion for each other [...] identify with each other [...] have basic respect for each other." Diana, a Dominican mother, too raised mutual respect and care in friendships as vital for her son: "Just knowing how to respect people feelings and emotions and things like that. Like having friends you learn how to respect their feeling and they are going through something you know how to deal with it and them through it you know and be

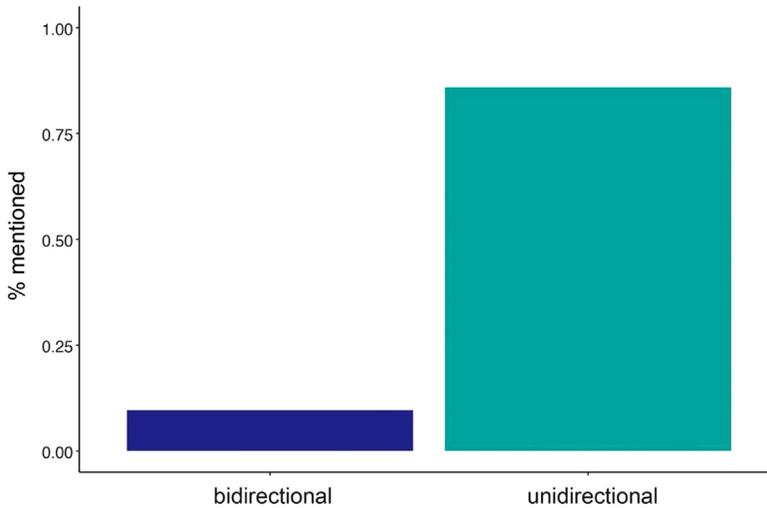


FIGURE 4 Percent of mothers who emphasized unidirectionality or bidirectionality of friendships

supportive to them.” Lucia, Natasha and Diana thus describe friendship processes as mutual endeavors, involving the co-construction of shared experiences such as laughter, compassion, and respect.

A couple of mothers emphasized mutual interactions with friends as opportunities for their children to adjust better socially. Daya, a Dominican mother, suggested that the ideal friend for her daughter would be “somebody that she could interact with and have a lot of things in common [...] to learn how to be friendly, be sympathetic, learn to play with others instead of just, you know, being nasty and fighting and arguing and stuff.” Similarly, Brianna, an African American mother, stressed the importance of her son being able to get along with others and [...] interacting with others [...] being nice to each other.” Overall, mothers with a bidirectional framework primarily centered on shared experiences between their children and friends, and often described how mutual support and understanding can lead to developmental growth.

3.3 | Descriptive statistics on directionality of friendships

We compared rates of directionality and unidirectionality with one another and by ethnicity by using a multivariate MANOVA, with directionality and unidirectionality as dependent variables, and mother ethnicity and child gender as between-subjects factors. Mothers were statistically more likely to emphasize *unidirectionality*, in which a friend is teaching or modeling attitudes and behaviors or providing emotional support to their child ($M = .86$, $SD = .01$) than *bidirectionality*, in which children are mutually learning skills from or offering companionship to one another ($M = .10$, $SD = .01$) when speaking about their toddlers’ friendships, $F(2, 187) = 1399.94$, $p < .000$ (Figure 4). Analysis did not yield gender or ethnicity main effects or interactions.

4 | DISCUSSION

The present study is the first to examine mothers’ beliefs about the function of friendships for their toddlers in a sample of Dominican, Mexican, and African American mothers living in low-income communities in the United States. Most mothers found friendships to be important for their toddlers. Overall, mothers emphasized a variety of functions of friendships, with learning of social skills and communicating and experiencing emotions being most salient. The word

“learning” was prevalent across responses, suggesting that mothers perceived early childhood as an important time for their young children to acquire various forms of knowledge through interactions with others. While many mothers focused on their children learning social skills, such as sharing and playing, others emphasized learning morality or developing their cognitive abilities through friends. Most mothers framed their toddlers’ friendships as exhibiting a unidirectional influence on the child, that is, the child is the recipient but not the provider of social information. Our study contributes to an important body of work on parental socialization beliefs about young children’s friendships among minoritized communities in the United States.

Mothers, on average, listed about three different functions of friendships for their children, with a range of 1–5, suggesting that they saw friendships as serving multiple purposes in early childhood. A majority of mothers viewed friendships as sources of learning for their children, with most mothers emphasizing learning of social skills. In turn, acquiring various types of social skills was typically framed by mothers as their children being taught, by watching and modeling friends, how to act appropriately around others. Similar to previous findings on mothers of adolescents (e.g., Harding et al., 2017), the mothers of toddlers in our sample typically described learning as occurring through peer modeling (“copying”) of attitudes and behaviors, good and bad. “Sharing” was a reoccurring example of “good” behavior in peers, which many mothers deemed a desirable social skill for their young child. Specifically, mothers suggested that by spending time around peers who share, their own child will eventually be inspired to engage in this behavior themselves, reiterating the idea that peer influence is largely a unidirectional phenomenon. It may be that mothers are attuned to the specific developmental milestones during toddlerhood, a time when children are learning skills that enable them to successfully navigate social interactions (e.g., regulate their emotions, share with others, develop a theory of mind, advance in their communicative repertoires; Howes, 1988; Rubin et al., 2006; Watson et al., 1999). In fact, mothers may always direct their attention to what is developmentally salient at a specific point in their child’s development. For example, mothers of adolescents in previous work discussed peers modeling getting good grades, behaving well and not getting into trouble (Harding et al., 2017), while mothers of toddlers, such as those in our sample, may be more invested in their young children learning the basics of how to interact in socially appropriate ways. For some mothers in our study, valuing their children learning cognitive skills, social skills, and morality may be explained by their experiences of being immigrants to the United States, as well as raising children in low-resource communities. In such contexts, parents may tightly link their children’s social and cognitive skills fostered through friendships with later academic outcomes. Such coupling of skillsets may be seen by parents as gates to accessing human capital, whereby young children are expected to adjust both to their social micro-communities, and to academic standards within society at large. For instance, some mothers emphasized learning various forms of “good morals” such as manners, respect for others and general benevolence. These emphases may reflect socialization goals for relatedness that are common among many Latine and African American communities, and previously also found in mothers of adolescents (e.g., Suizzo et al., 2019; Way et al., 2007). Others underscored learning cognitive skills such as counting and color categories, or motor skills such as swinging from monkey bars. Notably, many mothers also stressed the negative influence peers may have on children’s behaviors, citing bad friends as those who speak rudely or behave aggressively, perhaps pointing to a fear that their children will pick up such behaviors themselves. Such beliefs have been documented among other BIPOC samples in prior research (e.g., Harding et al., 2017), including U.S. Latine and African American mothers, whose socialization goals may include ensuring their children are not disproportionately punished in communities for behaviors deemed disruptive by society. Colorism may play a role in mothers’ emphases on good influence from peers, given the correlation between skin tone and discipline places Black and Brown children who display any undesirable behaviors at significantly higher risk of severe punishment in school settings (e.g., Blake et al., 2017; Gregory, Skiba & Noguera, 2010; Hannon et al., 2013; Skiba et al., 2011).

Mothers in our sample also held beliefs around friendships that targeted emotion-related functions. Many mothers who highlighted children experiencing and communicating feelings with friends appeared to ultimately want their children to develop an ability to connect with and navigate others. Specifically, mothers talked about desiring for their children to be emotionally astute; knowing both how to express their own feelings and, in turn, understanding the emotions of others. By being surrounded by peers with whom they connect and identify, and by whom they feel emotionally

supported and protected, mothers believed their children would avoid feeling isolated or alone. Prior work has found similar sentiments expressed by mothers of adolescents, who also emphasize emotionality to establish relatedness, emotional connection and mutual understanding with friends (Way et al., 2007). In adolescence, identity development is a key task that is highly influenced by friendship quality (Erikson, 1968) and mothers of adolescents may therefore be particularly attentive to the more emotional functions of their children's friendships. During toddlerhood, while friendships are not as central to identity, quality of language and social interactions develop rapidly (Rubin et al., 2008), leading young children to not only express their own and others' emotions, but also better understand the concepts of compassion, emotional support, and betrayal in relationships (Castro et al., 2015; Eggum et al., 2011; Tomasello, 2010). As shown in the present study, the emotional function of friendships could therefore also be salient for mothers of toddlers, leading them to share many beliefs around emotionality in their children's friendships with mothers of adolescents.

In line with prior research on Latine and African American families, and mothers of adolescents (Harding et al., 2017; Way et al., 2007), several mothers in our sample mentioned emotional betrayal as a risk of friendships. Additionally, fifteen mothers said they did not find friendships to be important for their toddlers. There could be several reasons for such beliefs. First, some of the mothers may have been wary of their children getting close with peers outside of kin in fears of being less able to regulate those relationships, for example, to avoid hurt, betrayal, or the modeling of undesirable behaviors. Second, mothers may not think friendships are necessary for their children at the age of 2, but instead believe it is something that will emerge as more important later in life. Finally, as mothers in our sample frequently relocated, they might have hesitated at their children becoming too attached to peers they might never see again (as indicated by a mother who said she didn't think friendships are important for her son because she and her family frequently moved).

Most mothers framed friendships as unidirectional, that is, their children's attitudes, behaviors, skill sets, and opportunities are subject to both positive and negative influence from friends. Interestingly, few mothers discussed the influence their own children have on friends. Instead, mothers emphasized that an important function of friendships is for peers to socialize and mold their young children into competent members of their communities. This finding suggests that many mothers in our sample saw their children as indiscriminate in their engagement with social information; like undiscerning sponges, they absorb attitudes and behaviors from the peers that are available to them, which makes it more important to mothers that these peers are "good". Perceived directionality of influence raises the stakes of who the peers are that the child is subjected to, especially since children are not yet able to curate their own peer circles at such an early age. Notably, even though a majority of mothers viewed influence in their toddlers' friendships as unidirectional, most of the functions of friendships they emphasized are inherently relational (e.g., fostering social skills; allowing children to experience and convey emotions). Thus, mothers perceived peers as helping their children learn to be in relationship with others, despite envisioning the learning process as consisting primarily of the peer influencing the child, rather than both children influencing one another. This finding is in line with prior research on Latine and African American families, and mothers of adolescents, which emphasizes the relational goals caregivers hold for their children (Harding et al., 2017; Way et al., 2007).

4.1 | Limitations and future directions

No study is without limitations. We did not have information about mothers' perspectives on friendships longitudinally, precluding us from understanding how parenting ethnotheories may change over development and across pivotal transitions in children's lives (e.g., school entry, puberty). We also did not have observational or self-report data, and were therefore unable to document how parents conveyed to their children the function and meaning of friendships. Additionally, our structured interview format did not allow for follow-up questions to be asked about mothers' perspectives. Future studies should use semi-structured narrative and ethnographic methods to document the within

and across culture variability in parental socialization beliefs as well as practices among ethnically and racially diverse communities.

Our participants lived in New York City, a vibrant metropolitan city in the United States characterized by large ethnic/racial diversity, wide income inequality, and dynamic shifts in neighborhood composition. Parents' ethnotheories in smaller cities within the United States, in rural and suburban areas, across different socioeconomic strata, as well as in other communities and contexts across the globe may vary due to differences in cultural, political, economic, and environmental factors. While no African American mothers in our sample were of immigrant origin, 79% of Dominican and 97% of Mexican mothers were born in the Dominican Republic and Mexico, respectively. Future studies should compare ethnic groups' socialization goals and practices across countries (e.g., Mexican immigrants in the United States compared to Mexican caregivers residing in Mexico) to tease out the many factors that shape parental ethnotheories. Moreover, literature on cross-cultural peer socialization of young children can significantly benefit from perspectives of caregivers in the global south and other communities who are grossly underrepresented in psychological research (e.g., Arnett, 2008; Henrich, et al., 2010).

5 | CONCLUSION

Our findings show that Dominican, Mexican, and African American mothers living in New York City emphasized a variety of functions of friendships of their 2-year-old children, particularly related to the learning of social skills and communicating and experiencing emotions. Across the interviews, most mothers emphasized unidirectionality of influence in their toddlers' friendships. Most mothers viewed friendships as important for their children. This study sheds light on ethnically diverse caregivers' ethnotheories pertaining to what functions friendships serve for young children.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We acknowledge funding that supported the larger project: National Science Foundation Behavioral and Cognitive Sciences Grant O21859 and National Science Foundation Integrative Research Activities for Developmental Science Grant 0721383 awarded to Dr. Catherine Tamis-LeMonda.

CONFLICT OF INTEREST

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest.

DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

Data is available via dataverse.org.

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ENDNOTE

¹ Participants' names have been changed throughout to preserve confidentiality

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How to cite this article: Kuchirko, Y., Bennet, A., Nisanova, L., & De Sousa, J. (2022). “Like Two Musketeers”: Socialization beliefs about toddler's friendships among Dominican, Mexican, and African American mothers. *Social Development, 1*–23. <https://doi.org/10.1111/sode.12626>