



# Improving Black adolescent daughter-single mother relationships during the COVID-19 pandemic in the U.S.: A brief exploration of participant experiences

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## Abstract

**Purpose** Understand whether and how Black adolescent daughters' relationships with their single mothers could be strengthened through an intervention to address adverse experiences and stress during the COVID-19 pandemic.

**Methods** Five Black adolescent daughters of single mothers and five Black single mothers with adolescent daughters were interviewed during the pandemic who participated in a program designed to improve Black adolescent daughter-single mother relationships.

**Results** Changes in work and school requirements impacted the daughter-mother relationship, with most respondents suggesting their relationships improved during COVID-19 due to involvement in this program.

**Conclusions** Despite the stress and strain of COVID-19, involvement in similar programs can strengthen daughter-mother relationships.

**Keywords** Family · Parenting · Intervention · Program evaluation · Trial

**Significance** Some groups are especially vulnerable to adverse outcomes from COVID-19, including adolescent girls who identify their race as Black and who reside in single-mother households with limited resources. Most interventions for single-mother households with adolescent girls take a deficit-focused approach; few adopt a strengths-based approach. The Building Our Nation's Daughters intervention capitalizes and builds on strengths of the Black single mother-daughter relationship. The current study examined how programming and related effects were impacted during the COVID-19 pandemic. Results indicate that while COVID-19 presents challenges to members of these

households, through intervention, resilience and strength can emerge.

## Objectives

The coronavirus disease 2019 (COVID-19) and measures to mitigate its impact and spread are expected to significantly affect adolescents from vulnerable populations through severe stress and trauma even after the pandemic has subsided (Golberstein et al., 2020; Holmes et al., 2020; Racine et al., 2020). Increased financial strain in one's family, food and housing insecurity, and illness and death of loved ones could increase existing disparities in adolescent emotional and behavioral health. It has been important to modify one's lifestyle and practice social distancing to reduce likelihood of contracting COVID-19, and it remains important that programming for adolescent well-being continue to offset these strains.

Adolescents racialized as Black and those who reside in single-caregiver households are especially vulnerable to adverse outcomes from COVID-19 (Duque, 2020; Whittle

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et al., 2020). Strong mother-daughter relationships in particular mitigate daughter's behavioral health problems (e.g., Coakley et al., 2017) and can improve both mothers' and daughters' mental and physical health during COVID-19 (Duque, 2020; Whittle et al., 2020). Therefore, the primary purpose of the current study was to examine whether and how a family-focused program targeting adolescent daughter-single mother dyads impacted daughter-mother relationships during the COVID-19 pandemic lockdown.

## Method

Building our Nation's Daughters (BOND) was founded in 2015 to improve Black adolescent daughter-single mother relationships. Prior to 2020, in-person biweekly sessions were provided at two separate sites for 2 h (for more detail on program content, see (Fix, 2022). Programming is provided year-round, and recruitment occurs and programming is offered to participants from early middle school through the end of high school. In March 2020, the BOND program was modified due to the COVID-19 pandemic to weekly online 60-minute sessions – participants from the two sites were combined into one group. IRB approval was obtained.

## Participants and Procedures

Two women who identify as a Black biological mother and stepmother, and a biracial single mother interviewed five Black adolescent daughters and five Black single mothers (Guest et al., 2006). Table 1 provides an overview of demographic characteristics of program participants. Interviews spanning 90–120 min were conducted in the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic between February 2021–May 2021; they were audio recorded and transcribed for analytic purposes. The timing of data collection during COVID-19 made recruitment challenging, because many prospective participants were struggling with changes in employment, child care, schooling, and stress from the pandemic overall. Therefore, we conducted as many interviews as were needed to reach saturation (Saldaña, 2021). In addition to conducting individual interviews, research team members attended multiple BOND program events, and sat in on the beginning of several BOND sessions.

Mothers were asked targeted questions about *how BOND participation has affected your relationship with your daughter*, and daughters about, *how BOND participation has affected your relationship with your mother*.<sup>1</sup> Interview protocols were semi-structured and were developed to provide preliminary program evaluation data. Due to the

<sup>1</sup> For more detail about the interview protocol, please contact the corresponding author.

**Table 1** BOND Individual Interview Participant Characteristics

Alias	Age, Race, Gender, Sexual Orientation, Disability	Relationship Status, Socioeconomic Status, Education
<b>Mothers</b>		
Minthe	35 years old, Black, cisgender, heterosexual, no disability	Single-never married, \$0–20,999 income, high school diploma
Marra	35 years old, Black, cisgender, heterosexual, disabled	Single-divorced, \$0–20,999 income, high school diploma
Maxine	35 years old, Black, cisgender, heterosexual, no disability	Single-never married, \$21,000–40,999 income, Associates degree
Monica	36 years old, Black, cisgender, heterosexual, no disability	Single-never married, \$0–20,999 income, high school diploma
Mary	37 years old, Black, cisgender, heterosexual, no disability	Single-dating, \$61,000–80,999 income, Bachelors degree
<b>Alias</b>	<b>Age, Race, Gender</b>	<b>Education</b>
<b>Daughters</b>		
Dante	12 years old, Black, cisgender	7th grade at time of interview
Diamond	12 years old, Black, cisgender	7th grade at time of interview
Daria	13 years old, Black, cisgender	8th grade at time of interview
Donna	14 years old, Black, cisgender	8th grade at time of interview
Drea	15 years old, Black, cisgender	9th grade at time of interview

*Note.* \* = sexual orientation and disability status were not assessed for daughters. Mothers and daughters were not required to be dyads. If related mothers and daughters each expressed interest in being interviewed, interviews were conducted separately.

semi-structured nature of the interviews, question prompts were developed with some priority content demarcated, but interviewers were able to be flexible with the direction of the conversation depending on how participants responded. Interviews were not intentionally centered around COVID-19, but given the timing of data collection, the topic came up during every interview, prompting unique discussion and an opportunity to examine whether and how daughter-mother relationships were impacted by the pandemic.

The Black and biracial interviewers and another White woman (biological mother) on the research team created a codebook using an inductive approach (Saldaña, 2021). Coding initially was targeted at elucidating program outcomes (*redacted for blind review*), but deeper analysis revealed interesting patterns of responding about COVID-19 and program outcomes. Within this analysis, four key themes emerged: (1) descriptions of the relationship before COVID-19, (2) general improvements to the daughter-mother relationship, (3) strengthened communication, and (4) opportunities to spend time together. We decided to

elevate the voices of daughters whenever possible in results because the voices of young people – particularly Black girls – often go unheard (King & Pringle, 2019; Owens et al., 2019; Price-Dennis et al., 2017). To help guide interpretation below, we assigned all daughters pseudonyms beginning with a “D” and all mothers pseudonyms beginning with an “M” (see Table 1).

## Results

Overall, daughters described their relationships with their mothers as strained at the beginning of their participation in BOND, before the COVID-19 pandemic. They made statements suggesting they did not have good communication with their mothers like, “I wouldn’t talk to [my mother] about certain things that’s going on” [Daria]. Other responses indicated difficulties with finding time to spend with their mother, “[My mother] had been working more overtime...we would never be able to do nothing” [Drea]. These statements are reflective of difficulties experienced in many of the interviews, where daughters felt their relationship with their mother needed work, even before the COVID-19 pandemic.

### Strengthened Daughter-Mother Relationship

Following participation in BOND, daughters described some changes in their daughter-mother relationships. Said one daughter, “I just learned different things that affected our relationship and little by little we’re building back up” [Drea]. Another daughter said, “[Now] I can go to [my mother] about situations, and not being scared to talk to her about things” [Daria]. When Dante described what they like about BOND programming, she said, “I like that parents and their children can interact with each other and try to open up more and have a better relationship”. In response to the same question, Daria said “What I like about BOND is, you can get a better relationship with your mom, and you could talk about things that’s been going on, and you can fix those problems”. During her interview, Diamond described how the group format of the BOND program helped promote improved relationships for her and her mother, saying:

“because I know that what I’ve gone through, I know probably other parents, mothers and daughters probably have, too... Because [BOND’s] a place where you could like express yourself because you know people probably, you haven’t only gone through it with your path but other people might have”.

Drea described how her tumultuous relationship with her mother is improving, yet even if it were strained again, she

felt she is still benefitting from her participation in BOND. Here is what she said:

“What makes me want to keep attending BOND is because I really love my mom and I want to do a better and greater relationship with her because in the future, if I do have kids, I want to have a good relationship with them. And if we ever like, if we don’t have a good relationship, I can use skills that we learned from BOND to gain the same thing... We still have our ups and downs...[but] I think [our relationship] is going to be healthier”.

Donna expressed her gratitude for the ways in which the BOND program strengthened her relationship with her mother because not everyone has that opportunity:

“Most people they don’t have, like, a connection with their mother, and sometimes people don’t always get a chance to talk to anybody. If I put myself in someone else’s shoes, who didn’t have anyone to talk to, I would find a random adult, a random woman to talk to, and to tell that random woman about things that I’ve never talked to another person about”.

### COVID-19 Impact on Daughter-Mother Relations

Daughters were asked to reflect on the impact of BOND following COVID-19 changes in their schooling and their mothers’ work schedules. One daughter simply stated, “Now we more in the house. We’ve been more in the house than outside” [Diamond]. Two described a positive impact on their relationship: “I learned what me and my mom got in common. We like doing fun activities, like drawing and sewing. That’s why we got an office in the dining room. And we create things” [Dante]; and “I learned how, like, to start talking to my mother. Because me and my mother, we didn’t always talk to each other. We [would] just sit there...but now I’m starting to talk my mother about stuff” [Donna]. Diamond described negative impacts of work and school schedule changes due to COVID-19: “Because she works [redacted]...I couldn’t stay in the house by myself... So I’m not always around her... so I don’t really get to talk to her, I only talk to her when she’s here”. Similarly, Donna described how her mother had to leave her home alone some days when she went to work.

### Improved Communication

Three of five daughters reported improved communication with their mothers during COVID-19 through BOND. For example, Diamond reflected on how her mother’s improved ability to address her own stress indirectly improved their daughter-mother relationship, “I think it impacted her a lot because usually she be a lot stressed after work...Um, she’s resolved it more, like calmed down”. Finally, one way that

daughters benefitted from improved communication with their mothers is exemplified by this statement from Daria: “[now I’m comfortable] going to your mother if you need help, because at first, I didn’t feel comfortable talking to my mother about certain things, and [now] I will go to her about those things”.

Dante’s mother had a hearing impairment, so Dante actually described more awareness of communication barriers for her and her mother when participating in BOND virtually during COVID-19. She said, “[our communication] went down. It did have some troubles through it because she couldn’t hear, so I would have to [communicate for her]. And when I would repeat to her, I wouldn’t be able to hear what they were saying... then we would also hold other people down, and we would miss some of the challenges [Dante]. Similarly, Donna recognized ongoing room for improvement in her communication with her mother, “I [still] don’t really talk to my mother about everything that I want to talk to her”.

### Bonding through Activities

“When we do activities, we get better ways to build our relationships” [Drea]. This statement exemplifies how BOND program activities were carefully developed to promote daughter-mother bonding. In one interview, Diamond described how BOND helped strengthen her relationship with her mother despite COVID-19 saying, “I like that every [week], me and my mother get together to do stuff because we got to do BOND”. It is also important to recognize how BOND program leadership promoted improved daughter-mother relationships. This sentiment is realized in Drea’s words, “what makes it a really good program is that there’s somebody who cares about a relationship with their daughters. So they spread that love to other people to have better relationships with their daughters... it makes me feel safe”.

### Mother’s Perceptions

All five interviewed mothers expressed strong sentiments about the importance of their relationships with their daughters. They also described how different elements of the BOND program provided them with opportunities to strengthen that relationship. Select quotes exemplify this theme from each participating mother. Two mothers described improved communication with their daughters:

“me and my daughter... We didn’t talk, but we’re starting to do better... [BOND] impacted me too, just a little bit... It gave us that kinda cushion to start opening up to each other. We still got some ways to go” [Marra].

“I think [my daughter’s] more open with me. She talks more... we’re working together to do the [BOND] activities...[BOND] helps build the mother-daughter relationship. And whether you think you have the best relationship, there’s always room for improvement” [Maxine].

Monica described how the BOND program challenged her to work and improve her relationship with her daughter saying, “The good parts about your mother-daughter relationship, the bad parts, and the ugly parts. Um, you know, just digging deep”. Minthe spoke about a new strategy she and her daughter use to communicate about emotional topics more effectively:

“I think she loves the activities that we get to do...[and] having her side heard...One of the things that we’ve actually adopted is we have a [shared] journal. Like if she’s upset about something and doesn’t want to talk to me about it she’ll write it down in the journal and I may or may not respond depending on what it is”.

The fifth mother we interviewed also recognized that several aspects of BOND have strengthened their relationship:

“[we’re learning] about [our] relationship, about what’s less, what’s more, what can you listen, how to communicate, and what you think is possible, what can you work out, and keep moving forward ...hold onto the past. It’s just a lot of things. Then, it’s making my daughter feel better” [Mary].

### Conclusions for Practice

Adolescents racialized as Black who reside in single-caregiver households are especially vulnerable to adverse outcomes from COVID-19 (Duque, 2020; Whittle et al., 2020). The BOND program focuses on strengthening Black adolescent daughter-single mother relationships. The current study evaluated how Black adolescent daughter-single mother relationships were impacted by BOND programming before versus during the COVID-19 pandemic through individual interviews.

Outcomes based on interviews with daughters and mothers suggest the BOND program holds promise as an intervention that can strengthen adolescent daughter-single mother relationships but more data are needed to verify program efficacy. While programming focused on improving daughter-mother relationships is important regardless, the COVID-19 pandemic presents a unique challenge to families, especially single-caregiver families (Glennon et al., 2020; Htun, 2021). School closures and no vaccine access for adolescents or their mothers for quite some time translated to more time at home. Thus, single mothers were taxed with more child care than usual with their school-aged children, and often had to face increased economic strain from interrupted availability to go to work or unemployment



(Anderson et al., 2020; Htun, 2021). Strengthened daughter-mother relationships could promote public health through improved communication resulting in greater adherence to medical care and other health promoting behaviors for daughters and mothers alike.

Even during COVID-19, daughter-mother relationships improved through BOND programming, with important implications. Existing research demonstrates strong daughter-mother relationships are protective against daughter delinquency, risky sexual behavior, substance use, and educational problems (Allen et al., 2016; Coakley et al., 2017; Janssen et al., 2017; Johnson, 2016; Llorca et al., 2017). Thus, programs like BOND that target increased intrafamilial social support and positive parental relationships are particularly important in these prevention efforts. Moreover, these findings were shared with the BOND program leadership and participants to improve programming and future program evaluations.

This study extends literature on adolescent daughters of single mothers beyond educational outcomes and risky sexual behavior. Still, there were several study limitations worth noting. First, we were unable to interview participants in person due to the COVID-19 pandemic; this complicated recruitment and interview practices. Follow-up or future research should interview participants in person and consider using focus group methods given the group format used in BOND programming. At the time of this evaluation, the BOND program was limited to Baltimore, MD, where 65% of children and adolescents live in single-caregiver households (Baltimore City Health Department, 2017). Future research should extend programming to additional sites. Additionally, the current work is centered around Black girls and women, but the BOND structure could be modified to include other racial or ethnic groups, and to target single fathers and single caregiver-son relationships.

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**Competing Interests:** N/A. **Consent to Participate (Ethics):** The current study was approved by an institutional review board. **Consent to Publish (Ethics):** The current paper does not include individual data or images. All participants consented and/or assented to participate in the current study. **Availability of Data and Material:** Questions about data for the current study should be conducted to the author of the paper.

**Code Availability** N/A.

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