

ORIGINAL ARTICLE

Mean, Pushy, Reckless, and Different: US Parents' Stereotypes Generate Discomfort With Their Children's Intergroup Peer Interactions

Laura Elenbaas¹ | Aline Hitti² | Ellen Kneeskern³ | Amanda Ackerman³

¹Purdue University, West Lafayette, Indiana, USA | ²University of San Francisco, San Francisco, California, USA | ³University of Rochester, Rochester, New York, USA

Correspondence: Laura Elenbaas (lelenbaa@purdue.edu)

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ABSTRACT

Despite the benefits to children, intergroup peer interactions make some parents uncomfortable. Drawing on social identity theory and an integrated stereotyping framework, this study investigated how US parents' ($N = 569$) discomfort with their children's potential intergroup interactions might differ by child and peer group gender (boy, girl), race (Black, White), and social class (higher-, middle-, or lower subjective social status [SSS]). Across child ages (8–16 years), parents were most uncomfortable with groups that they assumed were mean, pushy, reckless, and different ($\eta_p^2 = 0.03$ – 0.08). Groups perceived in these ways were most often rich White girls (mean), rich and middle-class White boys (pushy), poor White and Black boys and White girls (reckless), and poor Black girls (different). These results demonstrate how stereotypes can underlie parents' discomfort with intergroup peer interactions for their children.

1 | Introduction

Children and adolescents fare better socially and academically when they can get along well with peers from many different backgrounds (Killen et al. 2022), yet some perceive that their parents are uncomfortable with intergroup peer interactions (Burkholder et al. 2021). This is important both because parents may directly discourage diverse friendships and because, even if they never explicitly prohibit them, children and adolescents pass up opportunities to spend time with peers from social groups that they think their parents do not like (Edmonds and Killen 2009). Despite the implications of this prior work on children's and adolescents' *perceptions* of parents' attitudes, few studies have asked parents themselves if intergroup peer interactions make them uncomfortable or what causes that discomfort. A recent study with US parents of 8–16-year-olds found that

many were *most comfortable* with their children spending time with same-gender and same-race middle-class peers (Elenbaas et al. 2024). However, comfort with ingroup members does not necessarily imply discomfort with other groups (Brewer 1999). To address these questions directly, this study tested how US parents' discomfort with potential intergroup peer interactions for their children differed by child and peer group gender (boy or girl), race (Black or White), and social class (lower, middle, or higher subjective social status [SSS]). We further tested whether discomfort differed for parents of youth in late childhood (8–10 years), early adolescence (11–13 years), and middle adolescence (14–16 years), to explore potential changes over a period when family dynamics often shift toward more autonomy in peer relationships for adolescents (vs. children) (Smetana 2008) but adults' stereotypes about teenagers (vs. kids) often become more negative (Durante et al. 2017).

1.1 | Perceptions of Parents' Discomfort With Intergroup Peer Interactions

To date, most of what is known about parents' attitudes about intergroup peer interactions comes from children and adolescents themselves. Drawing primarily on social identity theory (Brown 2000) or its developmental variants (Rutland 2004), these studies have shown that some youth in the United States and other countries *perceive* that their parents prefer them to play, hang out, and become friends with peers who share their gender (Killen et al. 2002), race (Burkholder et al. 2021), ethnicity (Hitti et al. 2020), and social class (Grütter et al. 2021).

One recent study found that there may be some truth to youths' perceptions of parents' ingroup preferences (Elenbaas et al. 2024). However, comfort with ingroups does not necessarily mean that parents are also against outgroup friends (Brewer 1999), and in fact, there is emerging evidence that, when considering intergroup peer interactions, certain social groups may be perceived to cause more discomfort than others for parents. For instance, a recent study with Nepalese 12–15-year-olds from diverse socioeconomic backgrounds found that about a third of participants *thought* that parents did not want their children to have friends who were poor because parents stereotyped poor youth as a “bad influence” who would ruin their child's reputation (Grütter et al. 2021).

These perceptions do matter: children and adolescents forego opportunities to spend time with peers from racial (Edmonds and Killen 2009), national (Brenick and Romano 2016), and religious (Alsimah et al. 2021) groups that they *perceive* their parents do not like. Moreover, a separate body of research on adults' (i.e., parents, teachers, and others) actual stereotypes about youth from different backgrounds suggests that children and adolescents may be at least partially correct about some parents' attitudes.

1.2 | Parents' Potential Group Stereotypes About Children and Adolescents

Although adults' stereotypes about children and adolescents are less well documented than adults' stereotypes about other adults, different lines of research with parents, teachers, and other adults provide useful insights. Regarding gender, even if they are not always aware that they hold these beliefs (Mesman and Groeneveld 2018), both mothers and fathers in the United States tend to stereotype girls as kind, caring, fair, and compliant, and stereotype boys as intelligent, skillful, and leaders, but more difficult to manage (Morawska 2020). In terms of race, many White adults in the United States stereotype Black youth as unintelligent, lazy, aggressive, and irresponsible (e.g., Priest et al. 2018 with teachers). Although Black adults do not generally hold these stereotypes about Black youth (Denessen et al. 2022), less is known about Black or White adults' stereotypes about White youth. Finally, many US adults stereotype poor children and adolescents as unintelligent victims of circumstance (e.g., Gorski 2012 with teachers), stuck living difficult and chaotic lives (Summers et al. 2023). It is not yet clear how much these stereotypes differ across adults from different social class

backgrounds, or how adults stereotype middle-class or rich youth.

Importantly, despite the implications of this work, we still lack direct evidence for how these stereotypes might contribute to parents' actual discomfort with their own children's intergroup peer interactions. Moreover, although studies have separately addressed a range of group memberships (e.g., gender, race, social class), we do not know how parents' discomfort may differ when they consider peers who share or do not share more than one of their child's group memberships. Although it is well established that adults attend to multiple group identities when interacting with other adults (Hudson et al. 2024), it is not yet clear how these multi-group perceptions may inform parents' attitudes about their children's intergroup peer interactions.

1.3 | Potential Developmental Differences in Parents' Discomfort

Finally, parents' discomfort with intergroup peer interactions may also change as their children get older. However, current evidence points to three conflicting possibilities regarding the potential direction of that change. One possibility is that parents may be more likely to hold negative group stereotypes about adolescents than about children. In general, US adults stereotype “kids” as harmless and pleasant but stereotype “teenagers” as hostile and dysregulated (Durante et al. 2017). A social group \times age group interaction may result in parents applying any negative gender, racial, or social class stereotypes more strongly to adolescents than to children, leading to greater discomfort with intergroup interactions as children get older.

Alternatively, over this developmental transition, many US parents shift their involvement in peer relationships from direct facilitation (e.g., hosting playdates for their children) to monitoring activities (e.g., where their teen is going and with whom) (Ladd and Parke 2021), as adolescents, in turn, often seek more personal choice in their friendships (Smetana 2008) and may actually have more opportunities to seek out cross-gender, cross-race, and cross-class acquaintances as they transition to larger and (potentially) more diverse schools (Juvonen et al. 2019). As a consequence, parents' discomfort with intergroup interactions may fade over time as they grant more autonomy for peer-related decisions to their adolescents.

Finally, there may be no changes in parents' discomfort with intergroup peer interactions over this age span. The recent study with parents of 8–16-year-olds introduced above found that parents' comfort with same-gender and same-race middle-class peers did not differ based on their child's age (Elenbaas et al. 2024). It is possible that the stereotypes parents hold about kids may generate discomfort with intergroup interactions that endures as their children move into adolescence and their peers become teenagers. To best align with prior research on youths' perceptions of parents' stereotypic attitudes (e.g., Burkholder et al. 2021) and one prior study on parents' ingroup preferences for their children's friends (Elenbaas et al. 2024), the current study explored whether parents' discomfort with intergroup peer interactions might increase, decrease, or stay the same across

late childhood (8–10 years), early adolescence (11–13 years), and middle adolescence (14–16 years).

1.4 | Theoretical Frameworks

Parents (and adults in general) attend to multiple group identities at the same time when interacting with others; the question of how they do this, however, is debated (Hudson et al. 2024). We used a combination of social identity theory (Brown 2000) and a recently proposed integrated stereotyping framework (Abele et al. 2021) to design and formulate hypotheses for this study. Understanding parents' attitudes about their children's potential peers (rather than adults' attitudes about other adults) is a new application for both of these theoretical models. However, prior research (outlined above) provided a basis for some a priori and several exploratory hypotheses.

First, social identity theory proposes that people categorize others into ingroups with whom they share key characteristics and outgroups whom they perceive to be different from themselves (Brown 2000). In general, the more non-shared outgroups people perceive with another person, the more different they feel from that person (Crisp and Hewstone 2007). From this perspective, parents should be most *uncomfortable* with peer groups who do not share *any* of their child's gender, racial, or social class group memberships, and are thus seen as very different from their child (also see: Elenbaas et al. 2024).

Second, we used a recently proposed integrated stereotyping framework that was developed out of a collaboration to identify common threads among five established models of social evaluation: the dual perspective, behavioral regulation, dimensional compensation, stereotype content, and agency-beliefs-communion models (Abele et al. 2021). This new integrative stereotyping framework proposes two primary shared dimensions: people make stereotypic assumptions about others (1) on a "getting along" dimension integrating warmth and sociability with a focus on the presence or absence of friendliness and morality, that is, is this person warm, friendly, and fair, or are they cold, unfriendly, and unfair? and (2) on a "getting ahead" dimension integrating agency and competence with a focus on the presence or absence of assertiveness and ability, that is, is this person competent, assertive, and well-regulated, or are they incompetent, unassertive, and dysregulated?

From this theoretical perspective, parents should be uncomfortable with peer groups they stereotype as low on the *getting along* dimension (cold-unfriendly), for example, mean, disrespectful, or untrustworthy. They may also be uncomfortable with peer groups they stereotype as both low on the getting along dimension *and* high on the getting ahead dimension (cold-unfriendly + competent-assertive); that is, not only ill-intentioned but likely to achieve their goals, for example, pushy, threatening, or dangerous. They may also be uncomfortable with groups they stereotype as low on the getting ahead dimension (incompetent-unassertive), for example, reckless, risky, or out-of-control. Past research hints that at least some parents hold gender (Morawska 2020), racial (Priest et al. 2018), and social class (Gorski 2012) stereotypes about youth that fit all three of these patterns. However, the wide range of theories, methods, and samples used

in prior work made it difficult to identify a priori which gender x race x social class groups would be stereotyped in these particular ways, and by which parents.

1.5 | Overview of the Current Study

The current study built on prior work examining children's and adolescents' perceptions of their parents' attitudes (e.g., Hitti et al. 2020) and one prior study of parents' actual preferences for their children's intergroup interactions (Elenbaas et al. 2024), with two main aims. We investigated how parents' discomfort with their children's intergroup peer interactions differed by (1) child and peer gender (boy or girl), race (Black or White), and social class measured using SSS (lower, middle, or higher) and by (2) child age (8–10, 11–3, or 14–6 years). The design was within-subjects. Parents identified their child's group memberships, then viewed photos of peer groups representing all 12 possible combinations of gender, race, and social class. They considered four questions in which their child could potentially spend time with any of these groups in different contexts, selected the groups with which they would be *least* comfortable in each scenario, and explained why.

1.5.1 | Hypotheses

Based on social identity theory (Brown 2000), we expected parents' discomfort with intergroup peer interactions to be driven by perceptions of difference from their child. Moreover, based on the integrated stereotyping framework (Abele et al. 2021), we expected parents' discomfort to be driven by stereotypes that certain groups are low on the "getting along" dimension (i.e., cold-unfriendly, e.g., mean), with possibilities for other negative stereotypes as well, such as cold-unfriendly + competent-assertive (e.g., pushy) and incompetent-unassertive (e.g., reckless). That is, parents should explain their decisions about which groups make them uncomfortable with reference to differences or to negative stereotypes (most likely of a cold-unfriendly nature). Finally, we explored whether parents' attitudes might become stronger, weaker, or stay the same across late childhood, early adolescence, and middle adolescence. Any of these patterns would provide useful information, as outlined above.

2 | Method

2.1 | Participants and Recruitment

The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Rochester: Study ID STUDY00006155, and conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the American Psychological Association. A priori power analyses in G*Power (Faul et al. 2009) based on the most complex models described in the Analysis Plan below indicated that a sample size of approximately 540 would be necessary to detect medium effects ($\eta_p^2 = 0.06$) with α at 0.05 and power at 0.80. Participants were recruited between summer 2021 and spring 2022 from the online research platforms Prolific.co ($n = 405$) and Amazon's Mechanical Turk ($n = 160$), and from an institutional database of adults interested in participating in research ($n = 5$) for a study

on “how US parents think about diverse peers who their kids or teenagers may meet in everyday life.” Details on screening and exclusion procedures are in the online [Supporting Information](#).

The final analytic sample included $N = 569$ US parents of mono-racial Black (50%, $n = 286$) or White (50%, $n = 284$), cisgender boys (52%, $n = 299$) or girls (48%, $n = 271$), ages 8–10 years (35%, $n = 197$), 11–13 years (32%, $n = 183$), or 14–16 years (33%, $n = 190$), identifying as higher-SSS (32%, $n = 181$), middle-SSS (35%, $n = 202$), or lower-SSS (33%, $n = 187$). Table [S1](#) provides detailed sample demographics, and Table [S2](#) indicates a good balance across all cells.

2.2 | Measures

Participants completed an online survey using Qualtrics XM, taking an average of 22 min and receiving \$5 in compensation. First, participants selected their child’s: (a) age group (8–10, 11–13, or 14–16 years); (b) gender (boy, girl, or another identity); (c) race or ethnicity (Black, White, or another identity), and SSS using the 10-rung MacArthur Scale (Adler et al. 2000); see the online [Supporting Information](#). To test our questions about social class group membership, we combined SSS responses into three groups: participants who chose rungs one through four were labeled lower-SSS, rungs five and six were labeled middle-SSS, and rungs 7 through 10 were labeled higher-SSS.

Next, all participants viewed a total of 12 groups of three peers apiece, in a random order. Each peer group represented one of the 12 possible combinations of gender (boys or girls), race (Black or White), and SSS (higher, middle, or lower), and was matched to their child’s age (8–10, 11–13, or 14–16 years). For instance, all participants viewed a peer group of higher-SSS Black boys, a peer group of middle-SSS White girls, a peer group of lower-SSS Black girls, and so on, but participants only viewed groups that were the same age as their child (e.g., parents of 9-year-olds only saw groups of 8–10-year-olds). Age, gender, and race were conveyed through photographs, and SSS was conveyed using an abridged three-rung ladder version of the MacArthur Scale that parents were introduced to at the start of the study.

All stimuli underwent extensive pilot testing prior to implementation in the final survey. A detailed description of the pilot procedure is in the online [Supporting Information](#), and all final stimuli are on OSF: <https://osf.io/kq64n/overview>

2.2.1 | Least-Comfortable Choices

As part of a larger survey (Elenbaas et al. 2024), participants viewed all 12 peer groups on the screen and were asked four questions in a random order. All 12 peer groups were available as response options for all four questions, and appeared in a random order each time. (a) “Let’s say your kid is going to a local spot where a lot of kids their age hang out. Your kid is thinking of inviting some of these kids to hang out. Which kids would you be *least comfortable* with your kid inviting?” and (b) “Let’s say your kid is having a sleepover at your house. Your kid is thinking of inviting some of these kids to sleep over. Which kids would you be *least comfortable* with your kid inviting?” (c) “Let’s say some of

these kids are going to a local spot [...] Which kids would you be *least comfortable* inviting your kid?” (d) “Let’s say some of these kids are having a sleepover [...] Which kids would you be *least comfortable* inviting your kid?”

Initial χ^2 analyses indicated that participants’ choices were comparable regardless of whether the setting was a hangout or sleepover, $\chi^2(52) = 58.04$, $p = 0.26$ (inviting) and $\chi^2(59) = 55.05$, $p = 0.62$ (invited) and regardless of whether their child was inviting others or being invited by others, $\chi^2(60) = 53.66$, $p = 0.71$ (hangout) and $\chi^2(57) = 63.79$, $p = 0.25$ (sleepover). For all four questions, we coded participants’ choice such that 1 = the gender-race-SSS peer group that they chose and 0 = all other groups not chosen. For analyses, we then created frequency scores indicating how often participants chose each peer group, on a scale of 0–4 times, that is, chose a given group 0, 1, 2, 3, or 4 times. For instance, if, across their four questions, a parent chose higher-SSS White girls three times and middle-SSS White girls one time, then they would score 3 for higher-SSS White girls, 1 for middle-SSS White girls, and 0 for all of the other groups.

2.2.2 | Least-Comfortable Explanations

For each of their four least-comfortable choices, participants were asked: “Why would you be least comfortable with them?” Three study team members later coded participants’ explanations (with their choices masked) into four conceptual categories based on social identity theory (Brown 2000) and the integrated stereotyping framework (Abele et al. 2021), achieving high inter-coder reliability. Multiple codes per response were allowed and were coded as 1 = referenced and 0 = not referenced.

Different: described as different from their child, dissimilar to their family, or something comparable; $\kappa = 0.90$ – 0.93 ; for example, “they are so different from us” or “they are nothing like my kid.” Cold-unfriendly: described as cold, unfriendly, unfair, dishonest, untrustworthy, rude, unlikely, or something comparable; $\kappa = 0.86$ – 0.88 ; for example, “look bratty to me” or “very disrespectful.” Competent-assertive: described as competent, assertive, capable, efficient, confident, purposeful, powerful, or something comparable; $\kappa = 0.81$ – 0.83 ; for example, “the popular kids.” Many “competent-assertive” codes were double-coded with “cold-unfriendly”; for instance, “they look like bullies who are up to no good” indicated both unfriendliness and assertiveness. Incompetent-unassertive: described as incompetent, unassertive, incapable, dysregulated, meek, lacking direction, looked down on, or something comparable; $\kappa = 0.84$ – 0.86 ; for example, “confused teenagers” or “very ill behaved.” Responses that could not fit into any category were coded Other; $\kappa = 0.81$ – 0.86 ; for example, “I’m not sure.” Initial descriptives indicated that participants referenced each category at $M > 0.10$. All four codes were retained for analysis.

2.3 | Analysis Plan

For parents’ least-comfortable choices, scored 0–4 for each of the twelve possible peer groups, we used a linear mixed model with a compound symmetry covariance structure to test for mean differences in the frequency with which parents chose

each peer group (i.e., 0, 1, 2, 3, or 4 times) across all twelve possible peer groups (within-subjects: peer group gender, race, social class), whether choices further differed by child group memberships (between-subjects: child gender, race, social class), and whether they further differed by peer and child age group (between-subjects: 8–10 years, 11–13 years, 14–16 years). That is, we tested which peer groups parents chose most often overall, whether choices were moderated by child group memberships, and whether age (kids, tweens, teens) further moderated the effect of child group memberships on which peer groups parents chose.

For parents' least-comfortable explanations, scored 0 or 1 for each of the four possible categories, we used a generalized linear mixed model with a binomial probability distribution and a logit link function to test for proportion differences in parents' (non-exclusive) explanations for their choices (within-subjects: cold-unfriendly, competent-assertive, incompetent-unassertive, different; where 1 = referenced and 0 = not referenced for each code) based on the peer groups that they chose (between-subjects: peer group gender, race, social class). That is, we tested what explanations parents gave for their least comfortable choices overall and whether their explanations were moderated by which peer group they chose.

Missing data were rare, <0.01% for choices and 0.03% for explanations. For all models, likelihood ratio (LR) χ^2 tests are indices of model fit, assessed using maximum likelihood estimation. Restricted maximum likelihood estimation was used to interpret parameter estimates. η_p^2 are indices of effect size. Standard errors (SEs) and 95% confidence intervals (CIs) are indices of point estimate precision. All follow-up comparisons were conducted with Bonferroni correction for multiple comparisons. To further guard against Type I errors, we only interpreted mean or proportion differences when they were both statistically significant ($p < 0.05$), and the 95% CIs for the point estimates did not overlap. All analyses were conducted in IBM SPSS 28.

2.4 | Transparency and Openness

This study design and analyses were not preregistered. We report how we determined our sample size (power analyses, above), all data exclusions (see online [Supporting Information](#)), and we follow APA JARS. We do not have permission to publicly post data from this study, but have provided extensive descriptives for all measures (see online [Supporting Information](#)), and all stimuli and analytic code are on OSF: <https://osf.io/kq64n/overview>.

3 | Results

The following sections report the outcomes of the models described in the Analysis Plan above. For ease of interpretation, key results and figures are reported in the text, and complete tables reporting all details of all statistical tests, point estimates, and comparisons are provided in the online [Supporting Information](#). Table 1 in the main text also provides a summary of key results.

3.1 | Least-Comfortable Choices

The overall model was significant, LR χ^2 (420) = 795.72, $p < 0.001$. First, parents chose some peer groups more frequently than others, $F(11, 5852.11) = 44.73$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.08$. As displayed in Figure 1 and detailed in Tables S3 and S4, overall, parents chose higher-SSS White girls ($M = 0.78$, $SE = 0.03$), higher-SSS White boys ($M = 0.64$, $SE = 0.03$), and lower-SSS White boys ($M = 0.62$, $SE = 0.03$) as least comfortable significantly more frequently than they chose any other peer groups. Parents chose three other groups moderately frequently: lower-SSS Black boys ($M = 0.45$, $SE = 0.03$), middle-SSS White boys ($M = 0.32$, $SE = 0.03$), and lower-SSS White girls ($M = 0.30$, $SE = 0.03$). The other six peer groups were less frequently chosen (see Figure 1).

3.1.1 | Moderation by Child Group Memberships

Moreover, some parents were even more uncomfortable with certain peer groups than were other parents, $F(132, 3187.48) = 3.26$, $p < 0.001$, $\eta_p^2 = 0.07$, as illustrated in Figure 2 and detailed in Tables S5 and S6. First, among the three peer groups *most* frequently chosen (see above), higher-SSS White girls (Figure 2 first row/first column) were especially frequently chosen by parents of middle-SSS Black boys, lower-SSS Black boys, and lower-SSS White boys, with parents of middle-SSS White boys and higher-SSS Black boys choosing them moderately frequently. Additionally, higher-SSS White boys (Figure 2 first row/third column) were especially frequently chosen by parents of lower-SSS White girls, with parents of lower-SSS Black girls, middle-SSS White girls, and middle-SSS Black girls choosing them moderately frequently. Finally, lower-SSS White boys (Figure 2, third row/third column) were less often chosen by parents of lower-SSS Black boys.

Second, among the three peer groups *moderately* frequently chosen (see above), lower-SSS Black boys (Figure 2, third row/fourth column) were especially frequently chosen by parents of middle-SSS White girls and higher-SSS White girls, with parents of higher-SSS Black girls and middle-SSS Black girls choosing them moderately frequently. There were no significant moderating effects of child group memberships for middle-SSS White boys (Figure 2, second row/fourth column). However, lower-SSS White girls (Figure 2, third row/first column) were especially frequently chosen by parents of higher-SSS Black boys, with parents of higher-SSS White boys and middle-SSS Black boys choosing them moderately frequently.

Finally, although lower-SSS Black girls (Figure 2, second row/second column) were *less* frequently chosen by the sample overall, they were especially frequently chosen by parents of higher-SSS White boys, with parents of middle-SSS White boys choosing them moderately frequently. There was no significant moderation by child group memberships in the frequency with which parents chose any of the other five peer groups as least comfortable. As a reminder, all of the findings in this section are illustrated in Figure 2 and detailed in Tables S5 and S6.

3.1.2 | Further Moderation by Age Groups

Finally, for some groups of parents, choices further differed by child and peer group age, $F(288, 3187.48) = 1.24$, $p = 0.005$, η_p^2

TABLE 1 | Results summary.

Peer group	Chosen as least comfortable (see Figure 1 and Tables S3 and S4)	More often by (see Figure 2 and Tables S5 and S6)	Because (see Figure 3 and Tables S11 and S12)
Higher-SSS White Girls	Often	Middle- & Lower-SSS Black Boys & Lower-SSS White Boys	Cold-unfriendly (mean)
Higher-SSS White Boys	Often	Lower-SSS White Girls	Cold-unfriendly + competent-assertive (pushy)
Lower-SSS White Boys	Often	Inconsistent	Cold-unfriendly or incompetent-unassertive (mean or reckless)
Lower-SSS Black Boys	Sometimes	Middle- & Higher-SSS White Girls	Cold-unfriendly or incompetent-unassertive (mean or reckless)
Middle-SSS White Boys	Sometimes	n/a	Cold-unfriendly + competent-assertive (pushy)
Lower-SSS White Girls	Sometimes	Higher-SSS Black Boys	Cold-unfriendly or incompetent-unassertive (mean or reckless)
Lower-SSS Black Girls	Rarely	Higher-SSS White Boys	Cold-unfriendly or different (mean or different)
Higher-SSS Black Boys	Rarely	n/a	Cold-unfriendly + competent-assertive (pushy)
Middle-SSS White Girls	Rarely	n/a	Cold-unfriendly (mean)
Middle-SSS Black Boys	Rarely	n/a	Cold-unfriendly (mean)
Higher-SSS Black Girls	Rarely	n/a	Cold-unfriendly (mean)
Middle-SSS Black Girls	Rarely	n/a	Cold-unfriendly (mean)

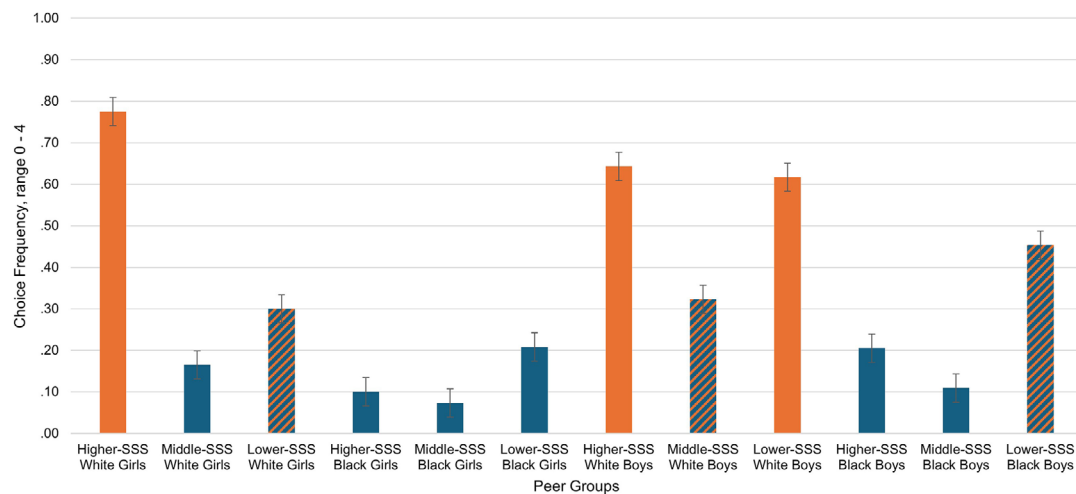


FIGURE 1 | Parents' least comfortable choices. *Note:* Orange = more frequently chosen, blue = less frequently chosen, gradient = not significantly different from same-colored bars.

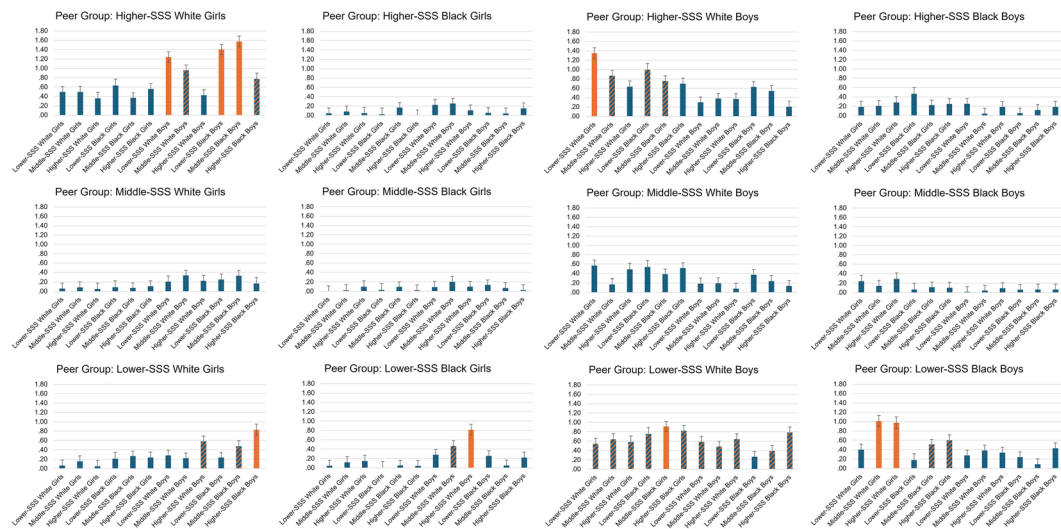


FIGURE 2 | Parents' least comfortable choices by child group memberships. *Note:* Orange = more frequently chosen, blue = less frequently chosen, gradient = not significantly different from same-colored bars. Child group memberships are on the x-axis; the y-axis is choice frequency (range 0–4).

= 0.06. However, these effects were sporadic and inconsistent. A few reflected increases across 8–10, 11–3, and 14–16 years, while others reflected decreases. A few moderated the peer group x child group findings above, while others produced unrelated patterns. As it was clear that this exploratory hypothesis was null, we opted not to interpret these effects in detail but to report all means and comparisons in Tables S7 and S8.

3.2 | Least-Comfortable Choice Explanations

The overall model was significant, $LR\chi^2(41) = 807.63, p < 0.001$. First, parents referenced some explanations more than others, $F(3, 8720) = 158.51, p < 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.06$. On the proportion scale of 0–1, parents referenced cold-unfriendly the most ($M = 0.42, SE = 0.01$), followed by different ($M = 0.15, SE = 0.01$), followed by competent-assertive ($M = 0.09, SE = 0.01$) and incompetent-unassertive ($M = 0.10, SE = 0.01$); see Tables S9 and S10.

The explanations that parents gave also differed based on the peer groups that they chose, $F(44, 8720) = 5.77, p < 0.001, \eta_p^2 = 0.03$. As illustrated in Figure 3 and detailed in Tables S11 and S12, parents who chose middle-SSS White boys and higher-SSS White girls were especially likely to describe them as cold-unfriendly (Figure 3, top left). For example: “cannot be trusted, I would be suspicious of why they would invite my kid,” or “kids like these are judgmental and rude.” Additionally, parents who chose lower-SSS Black girls were especially likely to describe them as different (Figure 3, top right). For example: “They are the total opposite of my child and may not get along well.”

Moreover, parents who chose higher-SSS White boys, middle-SSS White boys, and higher-SSS Black boys were especially likely to describe them as competent-assertive (Figure 3, bottom left). For example, the responses “I would be afraid my child would be bullied” and “look like they get away with all kinds of things and push boundaries when no one is looking” were coded as cold-unfriendly *and* as competent-assertive. Finally, parents who chose lower-SSS Black boys, lower-SSS White girls,

and lower-SSS White boys were especially likely to describe them as incompetent-unassertive (Figure 3, bottom right). For example: “troubled kids without good parental guidance” or “look reckless.”

4 | Discussion

To date, studies of children's and adolescents' *perceptions* of parents' attitudes about intergroup peer interactions suggested that some youth believe parents hold stereotypes that make them uncomfortable with the idea of their children interacting with peers from certain social groups (e.g., Grütter et al. 2021). This study took the question to parents directly. When asked to choose, many parents said they were uncomfortable with groups of peers that they stereotyped as cold-unfriendly, cold-unfriendly + competent-assertive, or incompetent-unassertive, or perceived as outgroups to their child, aligning most closely with predictions from the integrated stereotyping framework (Abele et al. 2021). The peer groups perceived in these ways were most often higher-SSS White girls (cold-unfriendly, e.g., “spoiled brats”), higher- and middle-SSS White boys (cold-unfriendly + competent-assertive, e.g., “most threatening, my kid might get hurt”), lower-SSS White and Black boys and White girls (incompetent-unassertive, e.g., “too much worry about underage drinking or drug use”), and lower-SSS Black girls (different, e.g., “least in common with my family”). Choices did not differ meaningfully between parents of youth in late childhood (8–10 years), early adolescence (11–13 years), or middle adolescence (14–16 years). For ease of interpretation, we refer to cold-unfriendly stereotypes as “mean,” to cold-unfriendly + competent-assertive stereotypes as “pushy,” to incompetent-unassertive stereotypes as “reckless,” and to assumptions of difference by the original label of “different.”

These findings are important for both practical and theoretical reasons. First, if parents' stereotypes elicit enough discomfort, they may limit their children's interactions with peers perceived as too “mean,” “pushy,” “reckless,” or “different,” constraining

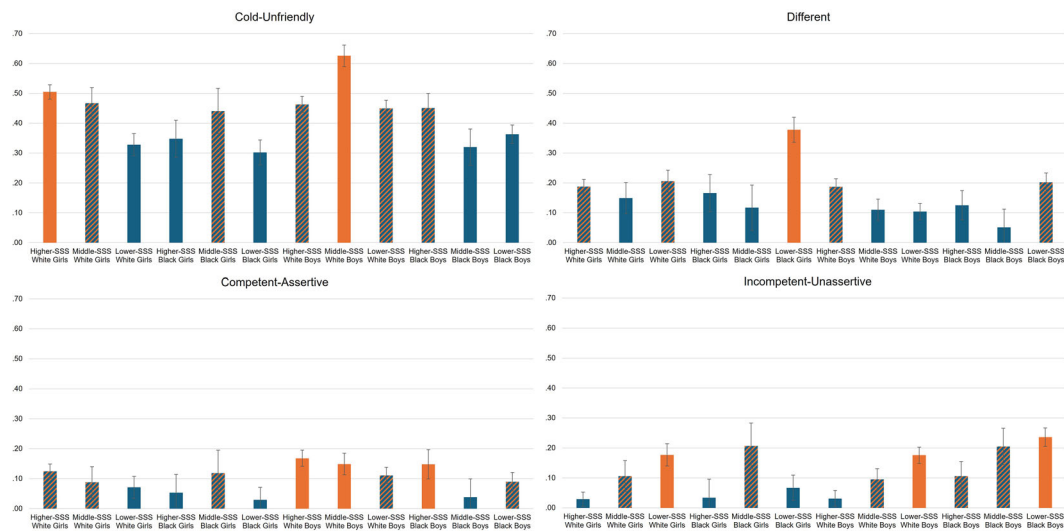


FIGURE 3 | Parents' least comfortable explanations by chosen peer group. *Note:* Orange = more frequently referenced, blue = less frequently referenced, gradient = not significantly different from same-colored bars. Peer groups are on the x-axis; the y-axis is the explanation proportion (0–1).

opportunities for diverse friendships that support social and academic well-being (Killen et al. 2022). Indeed, even *thinking* that their parents would disapprove is enough to cause at least some youth to avoid spending time with peers from certain social groups (e.g., Brenick and Romano 2016).

Second, this pattern of results regarding discomfort differs from what has recently been shown regarding parents' preferences for their children's intergroup peer interactions. Specifically, one recent study found that parents from the same demographic backgrounds examined here were *most comfortable* with their children hanging out with and inviting over same-gender and same-race middle-class peers, and they often referenced similarity (e.g., “they’re the most like my kid”) when explaining their decisions (Elenbaas et al. 2024). By contrast, parents in the current study were *least comfortable* with specific peer groups that they stereotyped negatively (rather than outgroups in general).

Together, these two sets of complementary results suggest that parents' *comfort* with same-group peer interactions for their children and adolescents may be driven primarily by ingroup preferences and a search for similarity, while their *discomfort* with intergroup peer interactions may be driven primarily by stereotypes about certain stigmatized social groups. Thus, when considering who they do and do not want their children and adolescents to spend time with, parents' preferences align better with social identity theory (prior study), while the groups that they seek to avoid align better with the integrated stereotyping model (this study). The following sections provide context and interpretation for these new findings.

4.1 | Stereotypes Generate Discomfort: Mean, Pushy, and Reckless

Overall, parents were least comfortable with peer groups that they stereotyped as *mean*, *pushy*, and *reckless*. Those groups were especially likely to be higher-SSS White girls (mean), higher- and middle-SSS White boys (pushy), and lower-SSS White and Black boys and White girls (reckless).

4.1.1 | Mean

When asked to explain why they were least comfortable with the peer group that they chose, parents' most common response (42%) described the group as “cold-unfriendly,” that is, low on the “getting along” dimension or *mean*. For example: “they don’t seem nice, I just see drama all over this” or “not trustworthy, they might have ulterior motives.” Moreover, although this explanation was common across the board, it was especially prevalent among parents who chose higher-SSS White girls as their least comfortable peer group, 51% of whom described this group as cold-unfriendly, that is, *mean*. For example, parents thought that higher-SSS White girls are “probably stuck up” and “look like they would be snotty and judgmental,” or “the type to invite her and then make fun of her in front of everyone.”

These findings at first seem at odds with prior research showing that US adults tend to stereotype girls in general as kind, caring, fair, and compliant (Morawska 2020). However, it is important to note that this study asked about parents' attitudes considering three group memberships –gender, race, and social class–together. Although it is well established that adults' stereotypes differ when considering single versus multiple social categories (Hudson et al. 2024), how this works is an area of active debate, and research further integrating age (kids, tweens, or teens) is very scarce. Overall, one of our core predictions based on the integrated stereotyping framework was borne out: parents were uncomfortable with peer groups they perceived as low on the “getting along” dimension, that is, “*mean*.”

4.1.2 | Pushy

Next, 9% of parents described their least-comfortable peer groups as “competent-assertive,” and importantly, the large majority (88%) of these responses were *also* coded as “cold-unfriendly.” This meant that parents perceived the group as both low on the “getting along” dimension *and* high on the “getting ahead” dimension, that is, ill-intentioned and also able to carry out their goals, or *pushy*. Moreover, this explanation was especially

prevalent among parents who chose higher-SSS White boys as their least comfortable group, where 17% described this group as pushy. For example, parents thought that higher-SSS White boys are “spoilt White kids without any good home training, they look like bullies and disrespectful” or “don’t understand the word ‘no,’ I would be scared they were trying to hurt her,” and said “I expect bad things to happen, kids like these are a threat to my child.”

These findings initially seem different from prior research showing that many US adults stereotype Black youth (rather than White youth) as overly assertive (Priest et al. 2018). However, considering multiple group memberships together can generate very different stereotypes than considering one at a time. In fact, in addition to higher-SSS White boys, middle-SSS White boys were sometimes chosen as least comfortable for similar reasons, for example, “White boys think they can get away with anything.” Overall, one of our exploratory questions based on the integrated stereotyping framework was answered: parents were uncomfortable with groups they perceived as low on the “getting along” dimension *and also* high on the “getting ahead” dimension, that is, groups they perceived as “pushy.”

4.1.3 | Reckless

Comparably common (10%) were parents’ stereotypes that the peer group they chose as least comfortable seemed “incompetent-unassertive,” that is, low on the “getting ahead” dimension, or *reckless*. For example: “they seem like the most likely to get in trouble doing something without thinking it through.” Moreover, this explanation was especially prevalent among parents who chose lower-SSS White boys, where 18% described this peer group as *reckless*. For example, parents thought that lower-SSS White boys “come with emotional difficulties and problems” and are “loud and rowdy, hard to get them to order.” Additionally, both lower-SSS Black boys and lower-SSS White girls were sometimes chosen for similar reasons, for example, “lower income Black families usually have a rough time, and it shows in their kids, they’re lacking parental supervision and attention and get in trouble because of it,” or “these girls run wild, someone might get hurt.”

These findings align with prior research showing that many US adults stereotype poor children as victims of circumstance living difficult and chaotic lives (Gorski 2012). In this study, one exception was lower-SSS Black girls who were not seen as “reckless” (but were stereotyped in other ways discussed below). Overall, another of our exploratory questions based on the integrated stereotyping framework was answered: parents were uncomfortable with groups they perceived as low on the “getting ahead” dimension, that is, “reckless.”

4.2 | Outgroup Difference Matters

Thus, stereotypes contributed to parents’ discomfort with intergroup peer interactions. However, two sets of findings also point to the relevance of outgroup dislike in generating parents’ discomfort, in line with predictions from social identity theory (Crisp and Hewstone 2007).

4.2.1 | Different

First, when asked to explain why they were least comfortable with the group that they chose, 15% of responses indicated that parents thought the group was *different* from their child or family, for example, “there’s too much difference between them to be relatable.” Interestingly, lower-SSS Black girls were rarely chosen as parents’ least-comfortable peer group overall, but when they were chosen, they were the most likely to be described as different, for example, “they are the least similar to my child.”

Second, within the overall patterns of stereotypes described above were some additional interactions suggesting that certain parents were especially likely to choose their child’s gender, racial, and social class outgroup as least comfortable. The clearest evidence of mutual outgroup discomfort was between parents of higher-SSS White girls and parents of lower-SSS Black boys. Parents of higher-SSS White girls were among those most likely to choose lower-SSS Black boys; for instance, one parent said, “I know this makes me seem racist, but I’m being honest, I feel like these boys are from a totally different upbringing.” Likewise, parents of lower-SSS Black boys were among those most likely to choose higher-SSS White girls; for instance, one parent said, “These kids are the opposite sex, a different race, and are from a wealthy household.” Yet, overall, higher-SSS White girls and lower-SSS Black boys were chosen by a number of parents, and these two particular groups of parents were high, but not entirely unique, in their discomfort.

There was also evidence of outgroup discomfort from parents of higher-SSS White boys toward lower-SSS Black girls and from parents of higher-SSS Black boys toward lower-SSS White girls, for example, “they don’t seem to have anything in common with my child.” However, the same effects did not operate in reverse; parents of lower-SSS Black girls did not choose higher-SSS White boys more than anyone else, and parents of lower-SSS White girls did not choose higher-SSS Black boys more than anyone else. Finally, there was no specific outgroup discomfort between parents of higher-SSS Black girls and lower-SSS White boys.

Overall, one of our core predictions based on social identity theory was partially borne out: parents were uncomfortable with groups they perceived as “different” from their child. This applied both across-the-board (15% of responses referenced differences) and in the sense that, in about half of triple-outgroup gender-race-social class contrasts, discomfort was exacerbated by difference.

4.3 | Developmental Differences in Parents’ Discomfort

We explored but did not find consistent differences in discomfort with intergroup peer interactions between parents of youth in late childhood (8–10 years), early adolescence (11–13 years), or middle adolescence (14–16 years). Prior research pointed to two compelling reasons why parents’ choices might have differed across this age span. First, adults tend to hold more negative stereotypes about teenagers than about kids (Durante et al. 2017), suggesting increasing discomfort with intergroup interactions as parents consider older peers. Yet, parents typically grant more autonomy for peer-related decisions to their adolescents than

to their children (Ladd and Parke 2021), suggesting decreasing discomfort as parents take a step back in this domain.

Without additional data on other attitudes or family dynamics for our participants, the simplest interpretation for the lack of meaningful age-related variability in our findings is that parents' stereotypes are in place and informing their discomfort with intergroup peer interactions already when their children are in late childhood, and these associations do not become consistently stronger or weaker as children enter adolescence. Interestingly, one prior study also found no age differences in preferences for same-group peer interactions among parents of 8–16-year-old youth (Elenbaas et al. 2024). Together, this suggests that parents' *comfort* with their children interacting with ingroup peers, and *discomfort* with certain groups that they assume are mean, pushy, reckless, and different, emerge early and remain stable, influencing their peer interaction preferences for their children and adolescents.

4.4 | Generalizability

There is one primary constraint on generalizability (Simons et al. 2017) for this study. We used the specific context of US parents' attitudes about intergroup peer interactions involving two gender groups, two racial groups, and three social class groups to test broad theoretical questions about parents' general discomfort with intergroup peer interactions. More research is needed to determine the extent to which the conclusions generated in this specific context apply across additional intergroup scenarios. This could include a focus on more gender, racial, or social class groups not tested here, as well as many more dimensions on which stereotypes may emerge, such as sexual orientation, religion, or disability.

4.5 | Limitations and Future Directions

The results of this study raise at least three important questions for future research. First, now that we know that some parents have stereotypical reasons for their discomfort with intergroup peer interactions, and that children pick up on their parents' discomfort (e.g., Hitti et al. 2020), future studies need to investigate how parents' attitudes may be conveyed to their children and contribute to the patterns of homophily observed in children's and adolescents' actual friendships. Second, and relatedly, immediate contexts such as neighborhoods and schools vary in the extent to which they provide opportunities for cross-gender, cross-racial, and cross-class contact, experiences that are well-known to be related to intergroup attitudes in general for both adults and children (Dovidio et al. 2017). Future studies may benefit from investigating how these experiences shape both parents' attitudes about intergroup interactions for their children and children's own opportunities to act on (or potentially disprove) any received messages (Killen and Rutland 2022).

Taking these two points together, future research might investigate how both direct and indirect family processes convey parents' attitudes about intergroup peer interactions to their children. Direct family socialization processes related to peer relationships often include arranging interactions, monitoring

relationships, and providing advice about peers (Ladd and Parke 2021). For example, researchers in the United States have long recognized how families of color explicitly prepare their children for potential bias and discrimination in general (Wang et al. 2020), but we know less about practices regarding inter-racial peer relationships in particular (Aral et al. 2021). Indirect socialization processes, in turn, are internal to the family system but have downstream implications for children's peer relationships (Ladd and Parke 2021). For instance, parents' discomfort with mixed-gender peer groups may be communicated indirectly through other general expectations about gender roles or stereotypes (Leaper 2022). Research on social class socialization is newer, but there is emerging evidence of both direct (e.g., explicit advice about strategic relationships) and indirect (e.g., shielding from potential shame) processes that may likewise contribute to same-class friendships in childhood and adolescence (Mistry et al. *in press*). All of these processes may, as well, be shaped by parents' own personalities (Crawford and Brandt 2019) and antecedent intergroup contact experiences (Turner et al. 2020).

Finally, in addition to our primary aims for this study, we explored how frequently parents explicitly mentioned gender, race, and social class when explaining their discomfort; please see the online [Supporting Information](#) for complete details and discussion. Results suggested that gender and race may have been more salient to parents of girls and parents of Black children, respectively, as they made their decisions. Researchers working from intersectionality perspectives argue that specific patterns of oppression and privilege give rise to unique multi-group stereotypes (Cole 2009) in ways that may not have been fully captured by either theory used in this study. Future work may benefit from exploring how parents' experiences with intergroup power relations shape their perceptions of who is or is not a suitable friend for their child. These studies could also provide further clarity on why parents' discomfort versus comfort (prior work) with their children's potential intergroup peer interactions can sometimes be nuanced, conveying both ingroup preferences and stereotypes at the same time.

5 | Conclusions

In short, children and adolescents benefit from intergroup peer interactions, but this study found clear evidence that parents' gender, racial, and social class stereotypes generate discomfort with certain social groups. This suggests that some parents may aim to limit their children's intergroup friendships, subtly suggesting or directly requiring that they avoid peers from groups perceived as too "mean," "pushy," "reckless," or "different." In addition to the immediate implications for parents' own decisions, in the long term, these attitudes may further turn children's and adolescents' own choices away from intergroup interactions, deepening current patterns of distrust, anxiety, and avoidance.

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Ethics Statement

The study was approved by the Institutional Review Board at the University of Rochester, Study ID STUDY00006155, and conducted in accordance with the ethical standards of the American Psychological Association.

Conflicts of Interest

The authors declare no conflicts of interest.

Data Availability Statement

All stimuli and analytic code are available on Open Science Framework: <https://osf.io/kq64n/overview>. Although we do not have permission to publicly post data from this study, the data are available from the corresponding author upon request.

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Supporting Information

Additional supporting information can be found online in the Supporting Information section.

Supporting File 1: sode70044-sup-0001-SuppMat.pdf