The present study focuses on change over time in adolescents’ externalizing behaviors as a function of their feelings about how much they perceive they matter to their father. Mattering refers to the feeling that one is important to the lives of important others, yet we know little about change over time in perceptions of mattering across adolescent. Specifically, we sought to model change over time in externalizing symptoms as a function of change over time in perceptions of mattering to the co-residential father. We also examined whether these associations might differ based on age and gender of the adolescent, ethnicity, and family structure. We utilized data from the Parents and Youth Study, a three-wave longitudinal study that included data on 392 adolescents and their families who were followed from 7th to 10th grade. Initially, adolescent feelings of mattering significantly decreased over time. Using a dual-process latent curve growth model, results showed that externalizing behaviors remained mostly stable over time, but increased to a lesser degree when adolescents believed they mattered more to their father (or stepfather). These results suggest that adolescent feelings of mattering to the father are associated with protection against externalizing behaviors.

### Results

We estimated a dual-process latent curve growth model for adolescent externalizing behavior with the intercept modeled at Wave 3 to indicate the ending point in externalizing behavior and the intercept for mattering to the father modeled at Wave 1 (Muthen, 2002). We also entered predictors of family type, ethnicity, and gender of age of adolescent in the model. The chi-square test of model fit retained the null hypothesis at p = .21. Adolescents showed individual differences in feelings of mattering at Wave 1 and significantly decreased in their feelings of mattering, however, there were also individual differences in rates of change over time (see Figure 1 for all values). For externalizing behaviors, we observed a significant decrease in rate of change over time, but with no individual differences. However, at Wave 3, there was significant individual differences reported in externalizing behaviors, as well as a significant ending point.

Of the four predictors (adolescent gender, ethnicity, and family type, and age), family structure ethnicity, and adolescent gender accounted for additional variability in the ending point for externalizing behaviors. Girls perceived they mattered more to their fathers in 7th grade than boys, adolescents from Mexican American adolescents intact families increased or stayed stable with regards to mattering. Additionally, Mexican-American families, decrease at a faster rate in their externalizing symptoms as did adolescents from stepfamilies, as well as stepfather families. Finally, adolescents from stepfather families had higher risk for externalizing behavior at Wave 3.

Importantly, the adolescents with the highest Wave 3 externalizing scores appeared to be those who decreased in mattering most quickly. Alternatively, this relationship could be interpreted that those with lower Wave 3 externalizing scores remained stable in mattering to father or increased over time.

### Discussion

These results shed light on the relationship between father-child, and how it relates to externalizing behaviors, specifically how to prevent dangerous, at-risk behaviors. Our hypothesis that when a child feels important and like they matter to their father, the risk of externalizing behaviors will be less than if the child reported that they felt unimportant is confirmed. Additionally, the structure of the family is significant to this as well, that families with stepfathers run a higher risk of adolescent externalizing behavior. Even families that may have other issues, this study shows that expressing how much someone mattering to you, for instance your child, can make a positive difference in development. For the benefit of the entire family unit, positive father-child relationships are pertinent to the well being of the adolescent.

### Acknowledgements

We are very grateful to the families who participated in the Parents and Youth Study. Learn more about our the Family Interaction Research lab or to download the poster with references visit [http://online.sfsu.edu/devpsych/far/](http://online.sfsu.edu/devpsych/far/).