



EDUCATION AND THE AFRICAN AMERICAN MALE

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Developing Strategies for Success: World Café Work Sessions Briefing for Parents

Introduction

Numerous incidents brought national attention to the violence and challenges facing too many young men and boys of color, and their families, in communities across the country. Our national dialogue has provided another opportunity to examine our legacy of racial inequity, at the intersection of gender, and how it continues to influence opportunities to succeed. We cannot afford to allow so many of our systems to fail boys of color without jeopardizing the well-being of our community. Understanding our shared legacy and its impacts on our boys of color is necessary for us to move forward as a united community.

Children represent our future, the next generation of skilled workers, entrepreneurs and community leaders. They are the most vulnerable and impressionable of our population, and the challenges they face today will impact their development and shape the vitality of our communities tomorrow.

Parents want the best for their children. A deeper understanding of the structures affecting them and how these impact behaviors and attitudes is essential to facilitating a positive and nurturing environment for our children to experience success. The following brief describes three points of tension that are affecting boys of color in Ohio – stress, poverty, and implicit biases. After explanation of all three, we introduce several recommendations to address these points as parents.

Stress: internal reactions to external forces

The brain is made up of multiple systems that develop differently as a result of the combined influences of genetic predisposition¹ and lived experience.² Thus, positive and negative experiences during our infancy and childhood can dramatically impact our physical, mental, and emotional development. This means that our earliest experiences in life literally shape our brains. Eighty percent of the brain is organized and developed in the first four years of life.³ Positive, predictable experiences aid that development, while consistently stress-producing experiences impair it. One study found an almost 9% reduction in the size of the hippocampus—through which memory and emotions are controlled—in children suffering the effects of childhood trauma.⁴

The cumulative effects of stress are toxic to child development. A stress response system that is not strengthened and engaged in positive ways can have a powerful, debilitating effect on a child's development. Although some stress is actually healthy for children, stress that is layered and prolonged can literally make children sick, or even produce health crises in adulthood such as heart disease, diabetes, or stroke.⁵ The more “tuned up” one gets from trauma or stress, the more scrambled the

cortex becomes—the region of the brain that regulates our emotions and attachments, and that houses our intellectual capacity.

The everyday trauma that too often is a part of life for children growing up in very poor families in distressed neighborhoods can inflict long-term damage on children. Such stressors include hunger, housing insecurity, exposure to violence at home or in the community, and so forth. Childhood trauma is not confined to these communities, of course, and is an important social concern wherever it occurs. However, trauma—whether physical, mental or emotional—can result in cognitive and motor delays (such as language development), anxiety, depression, challenges forming healthy attachments and other behavioral disorders.⁶

For example, the stress associated with food insecurity and hunger impact a child’s ability to learn. The recession greatly increased food insecurity for families. Between 2007 and 2011, there was a 94% increase in unemployment. In response, reliance on SNAP (i.e. food stamps) rose by 70% over the same period.⁷ 45% of SNAP participants are under the age of 18,⁸ and 20% of children in the United States live in food insecure households, meaning that they do not know where their next meal is coming from.⁹ Hunger and food insecurity during the early years of a child’s life (0-3 years old) are especially damaging, impacting physical and mental development. Research shows that going hungry makes children sick.¹⁰ And sick children miss more school. When they do make it to class, hungry children have a harder time focusing, and may be more irritable or experience fatigue more than other children.¹¹ Food- insecure children—children not yet experiencing the state of hunger— were found to exhibit higher levels of aggression or distressed behaviors, as well as a greater tendency to be withdrawn.¹² Even mild to moderate undernourishment can limit children’s ability to grasp basic skills.¹³ One study found that food insecure children performed lower on math and reading, and were more likely to repeat a grade.¹⁴ Hunger and food insecurity, above and beyond poverty, have significant and negative impacts on children’s educational performance.

Parental messages about the world can inadvertently limit children’s success

Research documents that parents of Black boys may experience a heightened anxiety for their sons and the challenges they are likely to experience. They worry their sons won’t be granted the benefit of the doubt in perceived instances of trouble, that they will be judged and punished more severely than peers, or that they will inevitably fall victim to “death or jail” despite their best efforts.¹⁵ This narrative of vulnerability was found to exist for Black sons and not daughters, and these differential expectations were based more on concerns of boys experiencing racial discrimination (whereas concerns regarding daughters were more about gender discrimination).¹⁶ These parental narratives and expectations have been found to result in lower expectations held by the boys themselves and were able to predict their on-time enrollment in college.¹⁷ Because of heightened fears of racial discrimination, parents taught their sons to be vigilant, guard against engaging in stereotypic behavior, avoid those who do so, and behave in ways that counter negative stereotypes.¹⁸ However, research indicates that “parents of Black boys who encourage such vigilance may inadvertently cause greater anxiety in their sons along with a distrust of individuals of authority—leading to greater alienation between Black boys and authority figures.”¹⁹

It’s important to note that these messages are not inherently harmful, and given the past year’s coverage of tragedies befalling young Black males, how could parents not feel such anxiety? Indeed, there is research that shows Black children are not afforded the same innocence than their white counterparts.²⁰ These messages, however, should also be matched with messages of resilience and

positivity: “they may lead to worse outcomes if they are not accompanied by more positive racial socialization messages, positive racial identity of the child, and information about effective coping.”²¹ For example, research found that “discussions of racial discrimination were negatively associated with grades when sons had low private regard (i.e. had a less positive view of the Black community).”²² One study found that “Black boys who received more positive racial socialization messages had higher academic performance than boys who received more negative or less frequent racial socialization messages.”²³ Other research found that “Black boys who received more socialization around the importance of coping positively with racial barriers through means such as spirituality were less likely to have fears of falling prey to certain negative life experiences such as dying young or experiencing violence.”²⁴

Poverty is about more than material deprivation for parents and children

It is no stretch to suggest that families living in poverty experience greater stress than more affluent families. This is due not simply to a lack of money, but the constraints poverty imposes on time and mental resources. Adults in impoverished households may find it necessary to work two or three jobs just to stay afloat. They may work shifts or in workplaces that cause them to miss parent teacher conferences. When a car is unaffordable, users of public transit must rely on schedules set by others to get to work, to the grocery store and to other important appointments. Many transit systems offer more limited services at night and on weekends, increasing transit users’ anxieties about how to get to work or other places. Too often for families in poverty, time is not on their side. When a family’s income is inadequate or suddenly reduced due to the loss of a job or a health crisis, adults worry about feeding their children, being able to pay the rent or make mortgage payments and being able to buy needed medicines, among many other things. Poverty is not just about material deprivation, it is an experience felt in nearly every aspect of life.

Parenting in the context of poverty might be rendered more difficult as a result of the increased cognitive load required of parents who have to juggle many balls at once, and put out fire after fire.²⁵ Good parenting, by contrast, is assisted by the availability of stores of untaxed mental resources. Consider a study on food stamps, which recipients receive monthly, at the beginning of the month. For many households, these stamps are not enough to last the month, and so bandwidth (i.e. the level of our mental resources) is more taxed as the end of the month approaches.²⁶ Research has found this is also the time when parenting is likely to be most difficult.²⁷ In fact, one study found that these were the times when children of poor parents acted up the most and were being disciplined in school more often.²⁸ Quite simply, “[b]eing a good parent requires many things. But most of all, it requires freedom of mind. That is one luxury the poor do not have.”²⁹

The development of safe, secure and nurturing relationships (i.e. attachments) is critical for healthy neuro-development, and for children navigating highly stressful environments, these relationships serve as an especially important buffer against the most harmful impacts of that stress. When the cognitive loads of the parents and caregivers of these children are overtaxed, their ability to serve as those buffers is diminished. As put by one expert, “often, the circumstances of a mother’s life overwhelm her natural coping capacity... When you are bombarded by poverty, uncertainty, and fear, it takes a superhuman quality to provide the conditions for a secure attachment.”³⁰ Research suggests that poverty itself cannot fully account for differences in executive function among children, even though we would predict that the child from a more affluent home, with more material resources, would perform better than a child from an impoverished home. While executive function and family income are correlated,

newer research shows that stress—above and beyond poverty—has a significant impact on how well a child can engage his or her executive capacity.³¹

Implicit Bias: internal perceptions impacting actions and behavior

Implicit bias refers to attitudes or stereotypes that influence our decisions and behaviors without our conscious awareness. It differs from intentional bias because it is activated involuntarily without our awareness or intentional control³² and may even conflict with our explicit or declared beliefs.³³

Throughout our lifetime, we are exposed to billions of direct and indirect messages about the world around us. In fact, neuroscientists believe that our unconscious brains can receive up to 11 million pieces of information at any point in time; however, on a conscious level, we are only capable of receiving up to 40.³⁴ This means that the vast majority of the information we receive each day is absorbed without us ever being aware. And many of the messages we receive about Black and Latino/Hispanic boys encompass harmful and pervasive stereotypes. These ubiquitous messages become embedded into our subconscious minds. Without the benefit of first-hand interracial friendships and interactions, perceptions of minorities are often based on popular culture and distorted images in the media, which can reinforce harmful stereotypes and deepen racial misunderstanding. Consequently, even when it is our intention to remain unbiased, we may unknowingly engage in discriminatory behaviors that adversely affect their life outcomes.

As a critical part of this process, acknowledging and mitigating the negative effects of implicit racial bias can help ensure the strengths and assets of Black males are fully realized and appreciated. Fortunately, our implicit biases are malleable. Thus, challenging these associations is the first step in creating positive action that is congruent with the egalitarian values most individuals possess.

Recommendations: forging a path of resiliency and success for our sons

Luckily, there are several strategies for addressing the effects of stress, poverty, and implicit biases on young Black males in Ohio. For parents and caregivers, it is essential to understand what forces our boys are facing so we can understand how to better prepare them for the world.

Research indicates that supportive, responsive relationships with caring adults as early in life as possible can prevent or reverse the damaging effects of toxic stress response.³⁵ For parents and caregivers—or anyone who comes into contact with children on a daily basis—we now know just how critically important it is to provide care that is consistent, safe and predictable. Quite simply, “healthy relational interactions with safe and familiar individuals... buffer and heal trauma-related problems.”³⁶ Even when damage has been done, positive and healthy relationships can promote healing and the healthy development of the child. Early relationships with caregivers “create a very literal template... for the child’s brain about what humans are.”³⁷ For children who experience attentive, nurturing care, they will associate humans with safety, comfort and sustenance; those who experience abuse or neglect will associate humans with fear, chaos and pain.³⁸ These associations have implications for the health of future relationships for the child. In short, early relationships are formative, and thus extremely important. Any relationship that provides consistent, attuned nurture and support can serve as an important buffer for children against trauma.

Furthermore, the development of resiliency in children is impacted by the degree of resiliency exhibited by their caregivers— how parents respond to the stress can actually be more influential than what the

stressor is, in determining the response and outcomes for both the child and the parent.³⁹ Parental resilience benefits not just the parent—in terms of managing his/her own stress—but the child and the relationship itself. The parent is able to provide more nurturing attention, which leads to more secure attachments and feelings of safety by child, and thus a better-attuned stress response system for the child.⁴⁰

As parents and caregivers, we must also model perspective-taking and facilitate the development of empathy in our children, to combat the insidious effects of implicit bias. We should encourage intergroup contact with others who are different from ourselves, and make sure our children are exposed to different cultures, viewpoints, and ways of doing things.

Finally, we should push for more family-friendly policies and programs, and hold our elected officials and other positions of power accountable. Implementing workplace policies that encourage parent engagement in children's education and activities, helping create strong neighborhood-based parent and youth engagement programs, and developing the growth of parent-led neighborhood groups will help improve the outcomes for young Black men in Ohio. We must not forget that raising our children should be a combined effort between parents, teachers, and community leaders. Being the strong base as a parent will help our children utilize the resources available to them to ensure future success.

Conclusion

The challenges facing boys of color are great, but so is the potential for success. Being aware of the outside forces that affect the inside attitudes and behaviors of our children and key people in their lives is necessary to establishing a solid base of support. As parents, we need to work together with the community and schools to ensure everyone is doing their part to provide the resources and encouragement our children need. Future outcomes are dependent on how we choose to raise our children today in Ohio, given the myriad impacts from both external and internal forces. Being strong hubs of support, understanding and challenging implicit biases, and engaging in neighborhood efforts can reduce the challenges and lead the way to a brighter future for all of us.

References

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- ⁷ Dean, Stacy and Dottie Rosenbaum, “SNAP Benefits Will Be for All Participants in November 2013,” Center on Budget and Policy Priorities. August 2, 2013. Accessed August 12, 2013 at <http://www.cbpp.org/cms/index.cfm?fa=view&id=3899>
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- ¹¹ *Id.*
- ¹² *Id.*
- ¹³ *Id.*
- ¹⁴ *Id.*
- ¹⁵ Rowley, Stephanie J. et al. “Framing Black Boys: Parent, Teacher, and Student Narratives of the Academic Lives of Black Boys,” In *The Role of Gender in Educational Contexts and Outcomes* (L.S. Liben & R.S. Bigler, Vol. eds.) In (JB Benson, Series Ed.), *Advances in child development and behavior* 47: 301-332. London: Elsevier. Page 302.
- ¹⁶ *Id.*
- ¹⁷ *Id.*
- ¹⁸ *Id.* For example, “in a sample of Black middle class families, parents’ expectations of their sons’ educational attainment were related to youths’ own expectations both directly and indirectly through sons’ perceptions of their mothers’ expectations. Youths’ expectations in turn predicted their on-time enrollment in college.”
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- ²¹ Supra n. 17
- ²² *Id.*

²³ *Id.*

²⁴ *Id.*

²⁵ Mullainathan, Sendhil and Eldar Shafir. *Scarcity: Why Having Too Little Means So Much*. New York: Times Books, 2013. Page 157.

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³⁶ *Supra* n. 3

³⁷ *Id.*

³⁸ *Id.*

³⁹ Center for the Study of Social Policy, “Parental Resilience,” Strengthening Families Protective Factors. Available at http://www.cssp.org/reform/strengthening-families/2013/SF_All-5-Protective-Factors.pdf Page 1.

⁴⁰ *Id.*