

Quiet Success: Parenting Strengths Among African Americans

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ABSTRACT: *Building on a model of family competence, the authors examined strengths among African American parents. Fifty-three parents described the values and behaviors that they imparted to their children. Support from external caregivers, which reinforced family competence, was studied. The study found substantial parental involvement, considerable support from other adults, and a high frequency of positive role modeling by African American men.*

AFRICAN AMERICAN FAMILIES in the United States currently number 7,854,800 (U.S. Census Bureau, 1992). Millions of these families raise children who become productive members of society. Although these families enrich the diversity of American parenting, little has been written about the strengths of African American parents (Hale-Benson, 1986; McAdoo, 1988). Consequently, it has been difficult to refine social work practice to fit the experiences of this racial minority (Lum, 1992).

The present study explored the values, attitudes, and activities of African American parents by describing what they believed they were doing right. The parents were afforded the opportunity to define for themselves what they considered to be their strengths. This approach was considered a key factor in understanding the dynamics of parenting, despite the fact that other research has not used this approach to empower African American parents. In addition, a concerted effort was made to include African American fathers, because they are rarely used as direct participants in research on African American parenting (McAdoo, 1988). Finally, the communal nature of African American parenting was recog-

nized by asking parents about the child-rearing support they received from others (Boyd-Franklin & Franklin, 1985; Manns, 1988). The findings of this exploratory study provide social workers and other human service professionals with new information with which to modify both the assessment and intervention processes when working with African American families.

Review of the Literature

A modest body of literature describes the strengths of African American families in fulfilling their socially appointed roles and functions (Billingsley, 1968; Billingsley, 1992; Hale-Benson, 1986; Hill, 1972; Lum, 1992; McAdoo, 1988; Royse & Turner, 1980; Smith, 1992; Washington & LaPoint, 1988).

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These strengths seem to belong to all African American families, regardless of their class and individual differences, having been developed in response to a need to survive in a racist society.

By 1903, scholars such as W. E. B. DuBois (1982) already had begun to describe the talents and abilities of their fellow African Americans. However, it was not until after the activism of the civil-rights movement that a new wave of scholars, among them Billingsley (1968) and Hill (1972), returned to the chronicling of strengths rather than deficits of African American families. Hill (1972) noted five major competencies: strong kinship bonds, strong work orientation, adaptability of family roles, high achievement orientation, and religious orientation. Hill's work was expanded by Royse and Turner (1980), who presented African American subjects with Hill's list of family attributes; the subjects believed that this list accurately described them.

Subsequent researchers have substantiated Hill's work. Peters (1988) found that African American parents placed a high priority on developing the self-esteem of their children; instilled the values of love, respect, personal uniqueness, and desire for educational achievement; and prepared their children to survive in a racist society. Washington and LaPointe (1988) included work and persistence, ethnic pride, religion, caring, and regard for achievement in children as African American values. Finally, Billingsley (1992), expanding his ground-breaking work (1968), categorized traditional values currently held by African Americans as a love of learning, a deep-rooted spirituality, a desire for self-governance, and commitment to serving others.

None of these scholars would argue that all these characteristics are exclusive to African Americans or deny that individuals possess differing degrees of these traits. These experts simply desire that family strengths be explored to counteract the general bias in social science research toward defining the African American family as deficient or pathological (Hale-Benson, 1986; Hill, 1972; McAdoo, 1988; Nobles, 1988; Royse & Turner, 1980; Smith, 1992).

Competence Model of Family Functioning

The competence model of family functioning (Waters & Lawrence, 1993) was used as the theoretical framework for examining family strengths. This model presumes that all individuals are motivated to behave as they do by an overriding desire to achieve competence, that is, they have an "inborn striving for mastery and growth, [a] need to make their world work, to grow and change and to strive for mastery both in the external world and in their internal development" (Waters & Lawrence, 1993, p. 7). Individuals carry this striving into their interactions with other family members.

That individuals seek to be competent within their environments is certainly not a new concept in social work practice theory. Social work scholars have long identified client strengths as an essential ingredient in motivating change (Hollis & Woods, 1981; Perlman, 1957; Reid & Epstein, 1972; Solomon, 1976). The competence model focuses on family strength as the *primary* factor to be assessed and utilized by the practitioner. The basic approach of the model is to discover all possible strengths within the family system and then redefine the presenting problems as manifestations of the drive for mastery of the environment gone awry rather than as personal or familial dysfunction.

Thus, the basic assumptions underlying this research were that parents try to raise their children competently, that they will be successful at some aspect of child care, and that parents who have problems with their environments nevertheless have strengths that can be used to improve their situations. Given the extended nature of traditional African American families, one further assumption was made: that adults who were not parents as defined in this study but who were emotionally connected to the family would strive to assist parents in their child-rearing efforts.

Methodology

Research Questions

This assumption of competence, that parents desire to raise children effectively and

that others within the African American community desire to assist them in achieving mastery, led to the development of four research questions:

- What did African American parents perceive as their parenting competencies?
- What positive involvement did parents have with their children?
- Who else supported them in their quest to raise their children in the best way they could?
- How did African American men contribute positively to the care of children?

Participants

Participants were selected randomly from the membership of the Greensboro, North Carolina, affiliate of the National Black Child Development Institute (BCDI). Potential participants were asked if they were African American and if they were parents. *Parent* was defined as an adult who currently had primary responsibility for the care and development of one or more children and with whom the child or children resided. *Family* was defined as all individuals whom the parent considered to be members of the family system. All participants lived in the Piedmont Triad area of North Carolina—a metropolitan area of more than one million people.

Fifty-three parents from 50 families participated in the study. A few parents were hesitant about being interviewed and inquired about the use of the information to be collected. However, none of the families contacted refused to be interviewed.

Procedures

Fifty face-to-face interviews were conducted over a three-month period in 1993. In 47 interviews, one parent was interviewed; in three interviews, married couples were interviewed together. The interviews were held either in the homes of the participants or at the BCDI office. The interviews lasted on average 35 minutes. Each interview was audiotaped and then transcribed by one of the researchers. The parents were interviewed either by one of the researchers (an African American woman) or the research assistant (an African American man); both researchers interviewed the parents of both sexes.

Parents were asked 19 questions adapted from previous studies (Hill, 1972; Manns, 1988; Peters, 1988; Smith, 1992) in consultation with an African American educator who has worked extensively with African American parents and children. Parents were asked to describe their child-rearing activities and philosophies and to discuss individuals who shared caregiving responsibilities. Demographic information was also requested.

Data Analysis

The design for analyzing the interviews was borrowed from the method of thematic analysis developed by Olson and Haynes (1993) in their interviews with single parents. The interviews were read five times by the two researchers. Each researcher independently identified parenting themes and patterns. When both researchers agreed on a theme based on the comments of participants, each interview was checked to determine the presence of the theme.

The executive director of Greensboro's BCDI affiliate, a professional with many years of experience in teaching and advocacy, reviewed 20% of the interviews selected at random. She concurred with the presence of the trends and themes identified by the researchers.

Three focus groups were then held at the BCDI office and the Guilford County Schools Family Resource Center. The purpose of these groups was twofold: to present the themes and accompanying information to five or more African American parents to test their validity and to gain suggestions for translating the research findings into services. These groups were made up of individuals drawn from the Greensboro community and did not include the original participants. One focus group consisted exclusively of African American fathers. All focus group members found the identified themes to be consistent with their experiences.

Findings and Discussion

The purpose of this research was to allow African American parents to describe their family environments while focusing on their self-identified strengths. The 53 parents who

TABLE 1. Parent reports of African American family trends and themes.

	n
<i>Trend</i>	
Substantial parental involvement	41
Plentiful support from external caregivers	36
Considerable male involvement	49
<i>Theme</i>	
Connection with family	43
Emphasis on achievement	42
Respect for others	38
Spirituality	37
Foster self-reliance	37
Importance of education	35
Teach coping skills	35
Self-respect and racial pride	30

N = 50

were interviewed provided new insights into working with African American families, painting a picture of strong, vibrant, loving family systems having to cope with sometimes harsh environments.

Participant Characteristics

Thirty-eight (72%) of the 53 respondents were mothers and 10 (19%) were fathers. Elders—three grandmothers, one grandfather, and one great-aunt—were also participants. The largest group of participants (55%) were single parents; 40% of the participants were married. The remaining 5% were unmarried mothers living with their extended families. The income levels of the participants were neatly divided, with annual family incomes ranging from less than \$10,000 to \$100,000 per year. Equal percentages (19%) of parents earned the following three incomes: less than \$10,000, \$10,000–19,999, and \$30,000–50,000. Seventeen percent earned \$20,000–29,999, and 15% earned \$50,001–100,000. Thus a well-balanced mixture of family economic situations—low, middle, and high income—was obtained.

Trends and Themes

Combining the statements of all respondents, three trends and eight themes of African

TABLE 2. Types of parental involvement.

Activity	n	%
Watching TV together	50	94
Shopping together	49	93
Visiting relatives	48	91
Eating meals together	47	89
Talking with child	45	85
Going to church	44	83
Visiting friends	43	81
Listening to music	43	81
Reading together	42	79
Telling stories/jokes	42	79
Helping with homework	41	77
Driving in the car	40	76
Teaching problem solving	38	72
Singing together	37	70
Teaching decision making	36	68
Cooking together	35	66
Teaching conflict resolution	35	66
Doing chores together	35	66
Playing games/cards	33	62
Going to the movies	33	62
Putting child to bed	33	62
Attending sports events	31	59
Playing sports	31	59
Getting child dressed	31	59
Giving bath	28	53
Going to concerts/theater	27	51
Preparing for church programs	27	51
Doing hobbies/crafts	27	51
Riding on the bus	18	34
Bowling	14	26
Fishing/hunting	12	23
Camping	5	9

N = 53

American parenting emerged (see Table 1). The findings of both the trends and themes answered the first question of this study. *Trends* are parenting patterns based on quantifiable data; they speak to the second, third, and fourth research questions. *Themes* summarize narrative comments regarding self-perceived family values and behaviors; they flesh out the bare bones of the trend results.

Trend one: *Substantial parental involvement in the lives of their children.* The 53 respondents selected activities that they did on a regular basis from a 32-item checklist of activities defined as promoting the welfare of children

TABLE 3. External caregivers sharing parenting.

Relationship	n	%
Grandmother ^a	23	46
Grandfather ^a	13	26
Aunt ^a	10	20
Uncle ^a	9	18
Male friend	9	18
Father	5	10
Great-grandmother ^a	5	10
Female friend	4	8
Great-grandfather ^a	2	4
Godparent ^a	2	4
Great-uncle	1	2
Great-aunt	1	2

N = 50

^aCategory may contain more than one individual with the same relationship to the child.

and offering potential opportunities to bond with or educate children. (For example, cooking together can include lessons on math or nutrition or can entail handing down family recipes.) In the joint interviews, the mothers and fathers completed separate checklists.

All the parents interviewed had some degree of positive involvement in activities contributing to the well-being of their children; all but 12 reported a high degree of involvement, carrying out 16 or more activities regularly. The number of activities in which parents indicated they were involved routinely with their children ranged from 3 to 31. More than 50% of the parents engaged in 28 out of 32 activities on a regular basis (see Table 2).

Despite other responsibilities cited by parents, such as employment, education, church, and community projects, they still placed a high priority on activities conducted with their children. These activities were used as opportunities to teach values or behaviors, to communicate, and to bond with their children.

Trend two: *Plentiful support for parenting from external caregivers.* When participants were asked with whom, other than current spouses, they shared responsibility for parenting, 36 (68%) of 53 indicated that individuals who did not live with the children assisted in

their rearing (see Table 3). Child care was furnished for various reasons: to care for children while parents were at work, to provide respite for parents, and to permit other adults to share leisure activities with children.

Trend three: *Considerable male involvement in the lives of African American children.* Children in all but one family (98%) had male relatives or friends who at least periodically participated in activities with them. Fathers, whether living in the home or not, were the most common male influence in the lives of their children. Other male relatives were the next most common group that spent time with children. Even children who did not have male relatives available interacted regularly with male role models; such men included church members, school personnel, and others, including a bus driver, karate instructor, choir director, and babysitter (see Table 4).

Parents believed that the interactions between these men and their children were uniformly positive, with the men teaching constructive values and giving sound advice. Although much of their time together was spent in recreational activities, such as playing

TABLE 4. Male involvement in child rearing.

Relationship	n	%
Father	37	74
Uncle ^a	28	56
Grandfather ^a	17	34
Great-uncle ^a	10	20
Male cousin ^a	10	20
Family friend (male) ^a	9	18
Minister/church member ^a	9	18
Mother's boyfriend	8	16
Teacher/principal (male)	6	12
Boy Scouts/YMCA staff	5	10
Big Brother	4	8
Great-grandfather ^a	4	8
Older brother ^a	3	6
Godfather	2	4
Coach	2	4
Other men	6	12

N = 50

^aCategory may contain more than one individual with the same relationship to the child.

sports, fishing, or watching videos, these men also routinely helped children with their homework and taught them occupational skills. The most important aspect of the interactions, in fact, was reported to be the communication between the men and the children; trust was established in these relationships and children felt comfortable approaching their male mentors to discuss problems. For example, Mr. W, a father with two adolescents and a preteen, described his relationship with his children as follows:

I think I have a very good relationship with my children because we talk a lot. I always asked them what was on your mind. Whatever it is, you can talk to me any time. [It's] always important for African American fathers to stay as close to kids as possible. A father should be there to talk and let them know he cares, understands their feelings.

Theme one: Connection with family. The theme most commonly developed in the interviews echoed the trends established. Families reported drawing strength from regular interactions with relatives. This phenomenon occurred in two ways not previously mentioned: (1) relatives were used as role models for parenting and (2) visits to relatives provided affection and support.

When asked who served as their role model for their own parenting, most parents (80%) named a relative, most commonly their own mothers. Two mothers who were raising young sons reflected on their mothers. One said, "My mother was a very strong woman who lived through a lot of trials and tribulations; I look up to her"; the other stated: she "taught me how to love, how to treat people, how to live in this world."

Fathers, grandparents, siblings, and uncles and aunts of the parents interviewed also served as role models. One father remarked that his father instilled values in him that he wants to pass along. He added, "I hope that my son becomes a friend and a brother like I have become of my father."

Many parents lived close enough to relatives to visit them regularly. As one mother put it, "We have spent real time knowing our relatives, being around them." Stories about

relatives, living and dead, often were passed on to children during these visits as well.

Theme two: Emphasis on achievement and effort. Despite their experience that achieving occupational success was generally more difficult for African Americans, parents still encouraged their children to work hard and strive for satisfying careers. Parents were content, however, to allow their children to decide for themselves what career would be satisfying rather than to try to influence their choice. Almost three-quarters (74%) said that their notion of success for their children had to do with self-actualization: to "grow up to be somebody," "grow up and be what you want to be," "be the best you can be."

Participants believed that effort was the route to achievement: "Hard work can get you places." Children were admonished to "keep trying to better yourself" even if "they have to do ten times better [than whites] to succeed."

Theme three: Recognition of the importance of respect for others. Parents in this sample were committed to teaching children to respect others, especially their elders. Ways of conveying respect were thought to be showing compassion, helping others, and being moral and honest—"be straight up with people." One mother spoke for many when she said, "My values are that you treat people like you want to be treated."

Theme four: Cultivation of spirituality. The need to nourish the spiritual dimensions of their children was appreciated by many parents. Parents wanted their children "to put God first" in their lives and have "respect for that which is greater than we are." These parents derived considerable comfort and guidance from participating in religious activities such as attending church, joining in church-related activities, reading the Bible, and praying; they wished that their children would share in the benefits of religious faith. Church members also were considered part of some parents' families and assisted in child rearing.

Theme five: Ability to foster self-reliance. When asked to define the "survival skills" with which they prepared their children, parents listed various competencies. These skills would enable children to be self-suffi-

cient in the future. As one father said, "Whatever happens to me, they can face any obstacle in life." Teaching self-reliance, according to the participants, included tutoring in problem solving, conflict resolution, and planning for future goals as well as house-keeping, money management, sex education, safety at home and outside, and self-defense. One mother, a social worker, summed up her teaching on self-reliance by saying, "If I can teach them how to think, they can survive out there."

Beyond the basic life skills, however, many parents recognized the need to prepare their children to survive in a racist society. Children were taught to cope with discrimination, sometimes through assertiveness and sometimes through superior effort. One mother of two school-age daughters told her children, "Being a black child, you have to work extra hard."

Theme six: *Recognition of the importance of education.* The parents who were interviewed were generally adamant that their children should receive the best possible education. They both realized the importance of attaining "a good education" to ensure upward mobility and financial security for their children and encouraged learning for its own sake—"education is the number-one key to freedom." One mother told her sons, "Education is always important—you can learn whatever you want to learn because no one can take it away from you once you have it in your head." Another believed that her grandchildren would "feel good about getting something up there between their ears."

Theme seven: *Acceptance of life's pain and instruction in coping skills.* The consensus among the parents interviewed was that pain and tragedy in life are to be expected: "Life is a testing ground." Children should be equipped to cope effectively—"to endure what you have to endure"—rather than to be protected from reality. One young father was saving words of wisdom for his one-year-old son: "I'll tell him that it's going to hurt. It's all right to cry, but life goes on." A mother, the wife of a high-ranking army officer, told her two sons that "black males are targeted not to do well . . . but your father used his talents and skills to

overcome barriers." The message is that success lies not in avoiding pain but in conquering it: "not giving up even when it's hard." Coping also included maintaining a positive attitude toward life. As one father of three expressed it, "Your attitude carries you in life."

Theme eight: *Recognition of the importance of self-respect and racial pride.* That their children respect themselves and acquire high self-esteem was a paramount concern to parents. Self-respect was inculcated in two ways: by demonstrating love and by informing children about their racial heritage and culture.

Parents promoted self-respect by respecting their children. Children should "feel the love in the house," said one mother. Other parents indicated that they made a practice of

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teaching their children that "they're special," that their children are "worthy of life, worthy of seeking the best"; one tells a daughter that "she is important, wonderful, God's gift"; another says of a son that "we try to make him believe that he is somebody and he can always be somebody."

At the same time, parents tried to instill their children with pride in being African American: "To get a good grip on race, they know they can be proud of their race." Some parents had participated in the civil-rights movement or were currently political activists and thus able to relate their experiences to their children. Others relied on family history to demonstrate how ancestors survived and triumphed over racism. An educational administrator followed the example of numerous parents by surrounding her four children at home with African American literature and encouraging them to take black studies courses in school. Parents saw pride in self as inexorably bound with pride in culture and heritage.

Implications for Social Work and Family Practice

This research reported on a sampling of African Americans' perceptions of their own parenting strengths. It took family competency as its theoretical framework, which assumes that all families strive for mastery of the parenting process and are likely to exhibit some success in that endeavor. Indeed, the parents interviewed proved to be nurturing, insightful, and active in meeting their parenting responsibilities. They also clearly were able to draw upon the support of other adults to supplement their efforts to raise healthy children despite environmental barriers.

Foremost among the obstacles faced by African American families are racism and poverty. It is critical to assert here that the results of this study do not in any way imply that the recognition of family strengths permits society to decrease efforts to assist families affected negatively by the social environment. Families who are poor, 31% of all African American families (U.S. Census Bureau, 1992), or who live in conditions of "ill health, inadequate education, and high unemployment," as do an ever increasing number of African American children (Edelman, 1985, p. 80), are forced to dissipate their strengths in the struggle to survive. The parenting successes that these families achieve beyond survival are extraordinary and deserving of future study. Given adequate resources and support, all parents might taste a measure of success in child rearing; social workers and family practitioners must continue to advocate for that goal.

Notwithstanding, the information furnished by these parents can promote culturally competent social work and family practice by increasing awareness of several factors:

- It is likely that most African American parents are heavily involved in activities that promote the well-being of their children.
- It is likely that parents are being supported in their child-rearing efforts by external caregivers.
- It is likely that African American children have positive male role models.
- It is likely that parents are attempting to

transmit honorable values and teach responsible behaviors to their children.

By recognizing these patterns, professionals will not overlook people or resources in their interventions with African American families. By knowing what is valued in African American families, social workers and others will be better able to empower them. By focusing on the drive for parental competence, they will remember to reward efforts as well as achievements in child rearing.

These findings further demonstrate the need for assessments of families to include members, especially fathers, who may not live in the household but are important elements of the family system. These external caregivers can play a vital role in family counseling, provide respite for at-risk parents, and supply psychologically comfortable placements for children who must be removed from the home. Practitioners need to advocate so that proper recognition by the educational, legal, and medical systems is accorded to these caregivers. Policymakers similarly should take into account the expanded structure of African American families, including the role played by out-of-the-home fathers, when developing programs for families.

When assessing families, it is essential to be cognizant of the competencies and the values and behaviors related to raising children that African American parents ascribe to themselves. It is useful to ask parents, if they do not volunteer information about their strengths, whether they share these same attributes. Practitioners can promote self-esteem in parents by sharing their assessment of perceived parental competencies.

In fact, as was predicted by the model of family competency, the participating parents not only strove to be good parents, but apparently were having some success. The strengths that parents recognized in their own families are the same as family traits correlated with producing stable, high-achieving, resilient children—for example, good communication skills, spirituality, affection, and positive family traditions (Clark, 1983; Garmezy, 1987; Olson & Haynes, 1993; Rutter, 1987).

That is not to say that these parents did not experience problems with their child rear-

ing; they were not chosen as parental paragons. Rather, the competency model suggests that parents who do exhibit parenting problems possess strengths, even if these strengths are not being used effectively. Interventions with parents, in fact, can be tailored to draw upon the inherent desire for successful child rearing. First, this desire can serve as a powerful motivation for change in parental behaviors and thinking (Waters & Lawrence, 1993). Second, it can reveal the specific values and hopes of parents for themselves and their children and therefore offer personalized goals for change. Third, it can illuminate the barriers that keep parents from mastering the parenting process.

Family practitioners can design interventions or programs that build upon and improve existing interactions between parents or secondary caregivers and children. Naturally occurring parent-child interactions are an obvious starting place for necessary work to improve parenting skills; productive techniques already used by parents can be reinforced. If bonding is an issue, parents may be helped to use the activities they engage in regularly to communicate more effectively and to share affection with their children. Bonding may be especially applicable to men, who are more often out of the home than are women. If parental stress places children at risk of abuse, parents can be taught how to make their child-rearing activities less burdensome. If children's performance at school is below par, activities in which parents are already involved can be made more educational.

Continuing in their teaching role, social workers and other practitioners can educate policymakers and the public about the

strengths of African American families. As with all races, a segment of these families is deeply troubled and in need of extensive social services. However, most African American families are in good shape (Billingsley, 1992). These families would benefit from services designed to enhance family strengths rather than focusing on severe psychosocial problems. Further, practitioners can transfer African American parenting skills, such as the ability to teach children how to survive in harsh environments and to face the inevitable pain and tragedy that is part of life, to parents of other races who wish to expand their own child-rearing repertoires.

Finally, future research can contribute to increased understanding of parental and family strengths. More research needs to be conducted on positive interactions between African American parents and their children and between secondary caregivers and children so that social services can achieve a better fit with the needs of these families. Another fruitful topic to examine is the description of family strengths by parents who are not African American; a comparison of similarities and differences among ethnic groups would be useful. Research into successful parenting by individuals living in poverty could identify ways in which social services might break down barriers to effective parenting for clients in poverty.

It is essential to honor successful African American parents by adapting social work practice to recognize self-identified family strengths. Doing so may result in untold benefits; as one mother told her child, "Shoot for the moon—you may land on a star!"

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COMING IN FAMILIES IN SOCIETY . . .

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City/State/Zip _____

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