

Promoting the healthy development of African American babies



Signs of strong and positive parenting

The participants in each of the group discussions expressed their deep love for their children and described how they demonstrated their affection in ways that promoted healthy language development and social and emotional growth. Some believe the bonds they develop and their interactions with their babies are distinctly African American.

J U L Y 2 0 1 2

This research was done by and with the African American community. This report compiles what the African American Babies Coalition learned from community members about raising strong and healthy children that will be helpful for teaching others.

The research findings will be used to tailor materials and meaningful messages for parents, providers, and early childhood professionals in order to improve child-rearing and care-giving behaviors and practices that promote healthy child development.

The African American Babies Coalition partnered with the Wilder Foundation to complete this research. The African American Babies Coalition research team included Sheila Ards, Sameerah Bilal, Jasmine Henry, Sharon Henry-Blythe, Bob-e Simpson Epps, Nedra Robinson, and Antonia Wilcoxon. Wilder Foundation staff included Jennifer Bohlke, Richard Chase, Kirsten Johnson, Lida Gilbertson, Teresa Libro, Amanda Peterson, and Lue Thao.

THANKS to these community-based organizations that hosted the group discussions and recruited participants: Better Futures, Family Alternatives, La Crèche Child Care Center, McDonald Sunshine Place, Model Cities, Oak Park Community Center, Open Cities Health Center, Parent Provider Empowerment Gathering, St. Paul College, Shiloh Temple, SRLA Childhood Center, Umoja Academy, Way to Grow Child Care Center, We Love Kids Child Care Center, and Wilder Child Development Center.

BONDING WITH THEIR BABIES

African American parents believe that it is important to have a relationship with their babies from the start—beginning when pregnancy is first discovered through the prenatal stages. They describe bonding with their babies through physical affection such as hugs, kisses, and holding their children. Also, many African American parents bond vocally, through singing, talking, and reading to their babies.

“I think it starts when you’re pregnant; you’re talking to your baby, listening to music. I think your relationship starts when you’re pregnant... well, by the time you are happy being pregnant.”

“You form a bond when you are pregnant. You start taking better care of yourself and better care of your baby.”

“Talking, singing, and reading make a big difference in how they relate to the world when they get older.”

Some group participants recognized that there can be a lack of a bond between parents and children, which, according to them, is problematic.

“You can tell by interactions who they feel safe with.”

“It is an automatic instinct with the female, unlike for me, she had to teach me how to bond because of my background...I had no idea, I didn’t know what to do. But I have a knack with kids when it comes to having a little kid bond.”

“A lot of people don’t tell their child every day that they love them and that affects the child.”

“Some families don’t communicate or have good relationships. They don’t read to the child. Maybe they can’t read or weren’t brought up to read to their child.”

RESEARCH PROJECT PURPOSES AND ROLES

The African American Babies Coalition partnered with the Wilder Foundation to complete this research, with funding from the Wilder Foundation’s Center for Communities and the Minnesota Community Foundation.

From October 2011 through May 2012, the African American Babies Coalition research team facilitated 16 group discussions involving about 141 parents and caregivers. The group discussions included 118 women and 23 men. They are single and married parents, teen moms, grandparents, foster parents, and child care providers. They have an average of 2 to 3 children. About two-thirds grew up in Minnesota.

These discussions tapped into the knowledge and patterns that show up in the ways African American children are treated, nurtured, taught, fed, and disciplined in order to better understand how they contribute to or inhibit healthy child development. Community-based organizations hosted the group discussions and recruited participants, who were offered \$25 gift cards for their involvement.

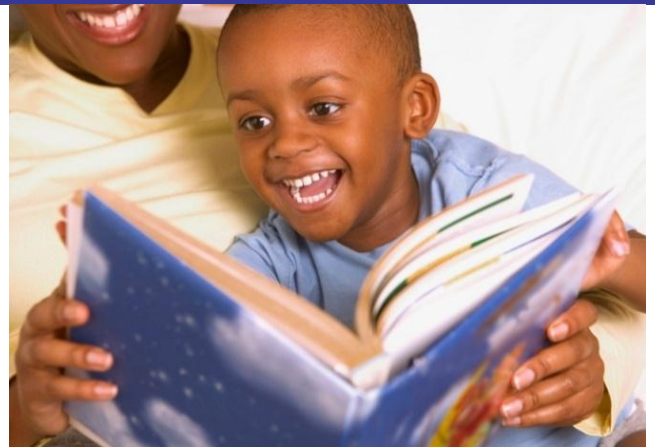
The African American Babies Coalition research team designed the group discussion questions, recruited community partners to host discussion groups, facilitated the group discussions, identified key themes, interpreted study findings, and translated the study findings in to messages for action.

Wilder Research advised the research team on the design of the discussion questions and participant recruitment, took notes during the group discussions, compiled the discussion notes for the 16 groups, conducted qualitative analysis, drafted the results of the group discussions for final review and input by the Coalition research team, and produced this report.

DEVELOPING LANGUAGE SKILLS

When it comes to teaching language skills, African American parents say that language learning begins at birth.

“You can tell what parents talk to their kids! It is different from [when parents are] being quiet because you can’t understand [them] and they talk like infants.”



“When you talk to them make eye contact with them. With my daughter before she could talk, when I made eye contact she would move her lips as I was talking to her. Every moment is a learning process at that age.”

DEVELOPING SOCIAL SKILLS

Developing relationships with other children is also viewed as important for babies. Parents believe that developing social skills and interacting with other children should start early. Many of the parents stated that they have had experiences with children who have a lack of interaction with other children. They believe this lack of interaction has an effect on how children develop their social skills and ability to interact with others.

“Family size matters. My son got involved with other kids right away. Because of my family’s size, he’s always around another child.”

“I think after four months they should be interacting with other kids. My niece is about two and she’s off the chain with other kids, I’m like, why do you fight other kids? And that’s because her mom doesn’t put her in daycare, or have her interact with other kids. They learn they have no choice but to interact with other people.”

“From the beginning, they should develop social skills among peers right away.”

“My niece stayed at home with her father, but when she started school she was a bit more intimidated to interact with other kids because of the lack of interaction.”



COMFORTING, GUIDING, AND PRAISING CHILDREN

African American parents say they show affection and comfort their children through hugs and kisses and use praise and encouragement to build confidence and to empower their children. They make their children feel special by saying “I love you,” talking, and listening to their children every day. They also say that children learn how to

calm or soothe themselves by mimicking their parents and the adults around them and that parents help children to develop coping skills by modeling it for them. Some parents also say they use food to help their babies feel better if they are unhappy or sad.

African American parents also believe that children soothe themselves with an object, such as a toy, blanket, or pacifier, or through physical action such as rocking back and forth, sucking a thumb, or playing with their hair.

“...You have to teach them. Even my daughter, she’ll be playing with her friends. She gets so riled up, and I’m like, ‘you need to go relax for a little bit’ or ‘go wash your face.’ They can keep going and going and not know when to stop.”

“I think it is really important to empower the child. Say special things to them like you are loveable, you are pretty, you are important, beautiful. Start at an early age because others may say that, but not in a loving way and could take advantage of them.”

However, some say they have felt manipulated by their children when they cry, throw temper tantrums, pout or when they play authority figures [like parents, daycare workers] against each other.

“Every day. Every single day. They’re smart. They’re very, very smart. If one person tells them no, they know to go to the next person. And they do that all day, back and forth until they get what they want. Sometimes we forget what’s going on. If I come in to the classroom I pick someone up and the other teacher says, “No, this is what I’m doing.”

SLEEPING AND EATING

When asked about bedtime rituals for their babies, the majority of African American parents in the groups responded that they have bath time and read to their children. Parents also responded that they have a set routine at a specific time with their children. Prayer is also a part of the bedtime ritual for some African American parents and their babies.



“The kids who have a routine are much easier to get to bed because they know what their routine is.”

“I would read to my son all the time. After a certain time I would turn the TV off and we would read. I bought him a lot of books and he would pick the books all week. I would tell my version then of the 3 little bears.”

Parents primarily described healthy feeding and eating. Several groups discussed the importance for their children to eat fruits and vegetables every day and to not eat a lot of sugar, sweets, soda, and candy.

Role models who shape parenting

The majority of respondents named their mother as a primary resource for parenting questions or concerns. On the other hand, some participants say they didn't like the way they were parented. They recognize that it wasn't the right way. They did not want to raise their kids the way they were raised, so they sought out someone else to help them. Grandmothers and other family members such as mother-in-laws, aunts, siblings, and cousins, consequently, are the role models who shaped who they are as parents. Additionally, some participants stated they view both parents as role models for their own parenting skills.



“My grandmother, like a lot of African American families, she was the rock of the family.”

“My mother wasn't there...My grandmother was always there for me. She taught me how to be the woman I am now.”

“My mom and my aunt . She didn't have kids so I was her adopted daughter. She taught me all kinds of stuff. How to clean myself, how to cook, how to clean, how to keep my face from scarring from acne, how to be a young lady.”

“We keep it in the family circle...aunties, uncles, grandparents...then later sisters maybe. We really didn't have many outsiders.”

“My mother was there as a teacher and disciplinarian. My father was also there as a disciplinarian. I think that was a good mix.”

For the most part, African American parents say they look to family members for help when they cannot watch their own babies.



Disciplining children

Discussion participants report using various positive disciplinary methods with their young children, including timeouts, choices, and distractions. Moreover, discussion participants describe commonly using three other types of discipline when children “act up” or have a tantrum, often used in sequence --“the look,” a tone of voice, and a pinch or a slap. “The pinch” method of discipline is used in public. Since the parents are fearful of someone seeing them physically discipline their children, they pinch them so they know they are in trouble. Some also say they retaliate or hit their child back when their child hits them. Some African American parents say that this use of physical punishment distinguishes them from white parents.



“My grandparents created the ‘stare’ and if you got the stare you knew you would get it when you got home.”

“You hit me, and I’ll hit you back. Teach them that there is a cause and effect.”

“If they hit you, you hit them back. I did it with my kids and I do it with my grandkids and then we talk about it. They’re like “that hurt!” and I’m like “well it hurt when you did it!” They need to learn that it is not okay to hit adults, or ever [hit]. I tell them you don’t do this to me and I don’t do that to you.”

“I’m probably thinking for a lot of African American mothers it is natural to smack him. Caucasian women just let their kids hit them. [They] tell them ‘you have to stop it’ and they [children] keep hitting them.”

“There are times when I discipline with spanking if he is being disrespectful and he knows it.”

“I try to teach him that there are some things you don’t do. Spit on me. You’re not going to do it to me. You’re not going to spit on me or nobody else. Bop him. Some people are too quick to send Child Protection Services when the kid isn’t hurt.”

“Discipline—we believe in discipline with our kids—Caucasians let kids run over them. You can just see the difference in the kids. This won’t be tolerated and this is ok. Caucasian women look at you like you’re crazy when you discipline. Have a line—then you won’t be tested. We might slap hands or belt or switch. In some cultures, this is abuse, but in our culture, it is not.”

On the other hand, other African American parents state that they cannot relate to all this hitting.

“I’ve never had that experience [of my child hitting me] so I’m just thankful, I don’t know what I would have done.”

Conclusions

The group discussions, overall, illustrated the dedication of African American parents and yielded positive impressions of the ways they treat, nurture, and teach their children in a loving way -- more positive than many stereotypes depict. The positive interactions described by group participants, starting with strong early bonding, are good models for raising healthy children.

The participants in this study are raising their children while managing the day to day impacts of racism. The African American community in Minnesota is deeply affected by structural racism – evidenced through disparities in education, employment, and health status. This reality necessitates a different set of parenting expectations as African American parents must equip their children with behaviors and skills that will allow them to succeed in environments that are often unsupportive or even hostile to them.

The group discussions, facilitated by members of the African American community, allowed an open airing of usual and culturally-learned parenting behaviors and practices, often used out of love, but with possible unintended unhealthy consequences.

The African American Babies Coalition recognizes a deficit in the access of parents and providers in the African American community to evidence-based research about healthy child development. The Coalition will use the information gathered from these group discussions to develop culturally relevant educational materials, training curriculum, and awareness messaging that can build on the knowledge that exists in the African American community about raising strong and healthy children.

Based on a review of the discussion notes and analysis of key themes that emerged, the African American Babies Coalition recommends the following key topics for messages that would strengthen parenting practices and promote healthy child development for African American babies:

- Help younger parents understand the cultural dimensions of bonding and its connection with raising a healthy child.
- Work toward helping parents understand the potentially harmful social, emotional, and physical effects of employing “the pinch” as a discipline technique.

The African American Babies Coalition is focused on healthy brain and early development of African American children age 3 and younger. About 11,000 African American babies reside in Minneapolis and St. Paul. As detailed in *African-American Babies in Minneapolis and St. Paul* (Wilder Research, 2011), many of these babies are among the most vulnerable in the state because they start life at an increased risk for disadvantage and stress that impede healthy development:

- 88% are born to unmarried mothers, including 22% to teen moms.
- 37% do not receive adequate prenatal care.
- 13% are born at low-birth weight.
- 59% live in poverty.

African American children ages 3 and younger also experience higher rates of out-of-home placements, and their mothers experience higher rates of maternal depression.

- With regard to retaliation-hitting, teach different methods of discipline to parents as well as teach those who work in the child care and child welfare systems about discipline methods used by African American parents.
- With regard to using food to comfort sad or unhappy babies, raise awareness about proper eating habits.
- Raise awareness about healthy coping mechanisms for dealing with sadness and trauma.

Finally, the Coalition felt they learned a lot from all the group comments that will be helpful for teaching other parents but that the discussions did not express some key topics that are important to include in any messaging campaign to support and encourage the healthy development of African American babies.

- Help parents understand the importance of effective early learning experiences for achieving kindergarten readiness.
- Help policy makers understand that many African American children do not have equitable access to educational opportunities.
- Help parents to overcome the negative impressions and stereotypes of African Americans depicted in music and movies and instill in their young children pride and a strong and positive identity.
- Enlist the media in reflecting positive impressions of African Americans using a range of methods.



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The African American Coalition for Babies



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