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Raising Black Males: Key Ingredients to Successful Outcomes in Black Male Development

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Historically, Black males have had a unique experience in America that has not always been positive. However, today a Black male is the President of the United States. Black males also hold positions as chief executive officers of corporations, attorneys, college professors, doctors, and other prominent and influential leaders in our society. With all of the success gained by Black men, who, in 2009, comprised approximately 12.6% of the U.S. population, they also account for approximately 39.4% of the prison and jail population (Nealy, 2008; U.S. Department of Justice, 2010). Additionally, Black men continually have lower graduation rates and lower standardized test scores than their White counterparts (Stilwell, 2010). A research participant in a qualitative study by Maton, Hrabowski, and Greif (1998) encapsulated the unique experience of Black men in America,

A white male... doesn't have to fight society's view of you. They're already saying, 'Oh well, you can be a doctor, you can be this.' But if

you're a person of color, you have to prove [that you]... can excel, can be a doctor... it's sort of like you're assumed guilty, until proven innocent. (p. 639-640)

Due to the unique experience of Black men in America and the variability of their outcomes, it is imperative for researchers to examine the key ingredients to successful outcomes in Black male development. What is the role that parents, family, and society have in Black male development and what are the key influences that lead to successful outcomes?

Researchers have continually found that parents have a powerful impact on child outcomes (Barth, 2009; Bettelheim, 1987; Mathew, Wang, Bellamy, & Copeland, 2005; Sanders & Turner, 2005). Parenting style, values, attitude, and behavior serve to strongly contribute to the shaping of their children's development (Barth, 2009; Mathew et al., 2005; Sanders & Turner, 2005). Ogbu (1981) attributed parenting style to a particular parent's ideas regarding success. Researchers have also examined common factors in successful men and found that their relationships with their fathers are key ingredients to this success (Hebert, Pagnani, & Hammond, 2009). These relationships included fathers being an example of a strong work ethic, providing guidance, support, encouragement, and maintaining high expectations. Parental behaviors that have led to successful outcomes in Black men in particular include (a) a persistent focus and parental engagement in academic achievement; (b) limit setting and discipline; (c) parental love, support, communication, and guidance (d) fathers who were positive role models and supported the family both financially and with their time, (e) and creating a sense of connectedness to the community and to community resources (Greif, Hrabowski, & Maton, 1998; Maton et al., 1998).

The current authors conducted a phenomenological study in which they interviewed Black fathers raising sons about the parental, familial, and societal factors that influenced the study participants most when growing up. The authors chose to interview fathers raising sons because these men have inevitably pondered their own development and what influenced them in their development in their quest to create a positive life for their sons. The specific research questions included: (a) How do childhood messages and experiences with parents, family, and society influence Black male development in the area of education, male roles, and cultural success? and (b) What do fathers of young sons, based on their own experience, knowledge, and insight, believe that it takes to raise a successful Black male in America today? The specific interview questions included: (a) What messages did you get about education and academic success growing up?, (b) What messages did you get about what it means to be a good son and father?, (c) What messages did you get about what it means to be a successful Black male in America?, (d) What particular childhood experiences represent the messages that you were given?, (e) How do you think those messages influenced who you are today?, and (f) Based on your own experience, knowledge, and insight, what do you believe it takes to raise a successful Black male in America today?

From these interviews, seven themes emerged that epitomized what these Black fathers believe are the key ingredients to successful outcomes in Black male development. These themes are presented followed by a discussion of the implications for counselors and family therapists.

Theme 1: Fathers Are Role Models

Fathers were deemed as momentous influences in the lives of all of the participants. There were no criteria for having a relationship with their father, but each participant had a significant relationship with his father and their fathers served as the most substantial influence on the men that they became. Even though each participant described his mother as doing most of the daily childrearing, when discussing what influenced the men that they became, they each discussed the things that they learned from their fathers. Significant to them were the things that their fathers told them, “[My father] would always preach on... how to conduct yourself”, and how they watched their fathers live, “My dad wasn’t a strong voice... he didn’t really instill a lot into me verbally... but now when I look at it, it was his actions that were speaking louder than his words.”

Theme 2: It Takes a Village!

The participants discussed the significant role that church, grandparents, and extended family had on their development. In going to church, a couple of participants learned about public speaking, “the involvement in the congregation played a huge role in my development... learning bible stories, scripture quoting... speaking at different events... that played a huge role in preparing me to do different things in the world,” while others learned values that continued to guide them as men. Grandparents, aunts, and uncles were also a significant part of the young men’s lives. “We had a lot of family around all the time. Just not my mom and dad, but their brothers and sisters were always around, so that had a lot of influence on me growing up.” They remembered vacations, family gatherings, and Sunday dinners in which they were shaped by the influence of extended family members. The young men honored the role that their grandparents played in their lives. Three of the participants discussed the significant life lessons that they learned from their grandparents. One participant remarked, “My grandpa... he would be like... so ya’ll are learning about so and so [in school], well no it really happened like this...” Church and extended family members added richness, perspective, and additional role models into the lives of these developing Black males.

Theme 3: Critical Juncture

A juncture is “a point of time, especially one made critical or important by a concurrence of circumstances” (juncture, n.d.). It is a point in time in which, “a decision must be made” (juncture, n.d.). The participants each described a time in their adolescence when they had to make a decision about the direction their lives would take. It was a time in their lives where they would either give in to negative peer pressure and experience the consequences that followed, or overcome the imprudence of youth to make choices that would benefit their future. For some, this time involved experimenting with alcohol and drugs, and for others it involved criminal activity, or hanging around individuals who participated in criminal activity. This period aligns with Erikson’s (1968) theory of psychosocial development. According to Erikson’s theory, during the ages of 12 to 18 years old, a young man’s development becomes independent of how he is treated by others, and is led by the decisions that he makes for himself. It is when a boy transitions to manhood and begins to determine his own sense of right and wrong and makes choices based on these convictions. During this transition, many young men make

negative choices that lead to this critical juncture in which they will either continue to make those negative choices, or make choices that will benefit their future. One participant described his experience, “I think the thing that helped me was I knew where to go. A lot of times you have brothers that have the same issues that I have, they only know one place to go. Even if they want to go somewhere else... they have no idea... they are not familiar with... you know... I was getting in trouble but I was fresh off the dean’s list in college.” When living in a society where young Black men heavily populate the criminal justice system, and juvenile pranks and follies committed by these young men are routinely considered criminal behavior, it is crucial that they are given the proper love, support, and guidance during this critical juncture in their development (Maton et al., 1998).

Theme 4: Exposure

The participants discussed the significant influence that being exposed to different experiences through extracurricular activities, family vacations, and parents’ work environments had on their development. They were able to live beyond the routine environment of school and home and experience extracurricular activities such as sports and music lessons, some experienced trips across the country, and others experienced their parents in professional environments. These images and influences broadened their horizons and enlarged their vision for the future. They were able to stay busy with positive activity through extracurricular activities, experience other parts of the country and how other people lived through family vacations, and developed respect for their parents and a glimpse of what it is like to be a professional by visiting their parents’ work environments. They credit this exposure with contributing to their future careers, life goals, and increasing their vision for what is possible for their own lives. One participant noted,

Growing up in [my neighborhood], if I would have stayed in [my neighborhood], if my parents wouldn’t have taken me outside of [my neighborhood] and exposed me to other things, then I many have been caught up with the population there that may be comfortable with what is put in front of them... I think the exposure that I have received [really influenced me]. We got to get around other folks to see their way of thinking and see their way of living. I think that [was] critical.

Theme 5: Education Was Mandatory

As adults, each of the men in our study valued the rewards of education. Though this value was developed in two different ways, half of the participants had parents, aunts, or uncles that graduated from college and success in school was not an option in their home. A sustained value was placed on education and their parents were very involved in their schooling from start to finish. These men grew up to value education as well, graduate from college, and choose various professional career paths. “My daddy instilled in us the value of education. It was one of those kind of homes where you don’t bring home below a B. He would always say, ‘If you want to do well in life you have to get a good job, if you want to get a good job, you have to get a good education.’” The other half of the participants had parents who did not put a sustained focus on education, but instead valued the ethics of hard work and learning a trade. These men wished that

their parents had stressed education and regretted not attending college. They developed a value for education in their own life experiences and hope to pass this value on to their children,

They never really stressed education. It was never really stressed. It was more experiential... where you get experience through life... nobody really talked about doing your homework, getting good grades. I wish somebody would have stressed education because I think I had the smarts to be further along in life. I'm trying to do it now because I understand, but had I had that person there to nurture then I could have been a lot further than I am today.

Theme 6: Essential Ingredients

The last theme emerged from the question, *Based on your own experience, knowledge, and insight; what do you believe it takes to raise a successful Black male in America today?* The essential ingredients that emerged from this question stemmed from the previous themes including: fathers as role models, extended family support, church, exposure, extracurricular activities, and a sustained emphasis on education. An additional factor that was added was the theme of *Friendship*. The participants recalled a strong authoritative relationship with their fathers and they wished that they would have felt comfortable talking to them about the many issues those young men faced as they grew up. The participants desire a friendship with their sons, one in which their sons would feel comfortable talking to them about anything. They valued the parental role, but Randall, a participant summed it up by saying,

I want to [be] their friend, but their parent at the same time. Some people say that you can't do both, but I don't believe that. I think you can be a parent and a friend. I think in certain situations you have to choose one, but I think you can do it in a way that you still show yourself friendly.

Implications for Counselors and Family Therapists

Counselors and family therapists can play a significant role in educating parents regarding the themes that have emerged from this research. Most parents love their children and want what is best for them. Without knowledge of the essential ingredients to healthy development, they are unable to implement these ingredients in their son's lives. Counselors and family therapists can educate parents regarding the important role that fathers play in their developing sons' lives. Divorcing parents need to be especially made aware of the significance of maintaining and nurturing the father-son relationship. Fathers are the main role model in their son's lives and if a father is not present, it is important for grandparents, extended family members, church personnel, coaches, and other male role models to purposely make an impact in the lives of these young men. They are watching for someone to emulate.

Parents and teachers should be educated about the critical juncture that young men experience. It is important that these young men are not eternally condemned for bad choices; this is a time for learning, growth, and second chances. Counselors and therapists should be sensitive to this critical juncture and advocate against injustices that

may occur in the school system or criminal justice system regarding racial inequality that affects the consequences for poor choices. It is imperative that young men are given the opportunity to overcome foolish youthful actions and make choices that can benefit their future.

Counselors and family therapists should educate parents and schools about the importance of exposing young Black men to various activities and experiences. As young people are exposed to different places and people, they are able to discover their own interests and passions. Developing a passion for something early in life where talent and time can be dedicated to creating a future is a huge protector against negative outcomes in young Black men.

Parents also need to be educated regarding the significance of parental involvement in education. If parents aspire to send their children to college, this value must be established early in life and sustained throughout their development (Herndon & Moore, 2002). It is important for parents to value education and let both their words and actions reflect this value. This strongly increases the likelihood that this value will be passed on to their children.

Counselors and family therapists can play a significant role in ensuring the healthy development of young Black men. This can be accomplished through community involvement, creating parenting education programs, and family support and counseling. Ensuring positive outcomes for young Black males benefits the entire community. Counselors and family therapists can contribute to healthy outcomes in Black males by not only influencing the individuals, but influencing the individuals that influence young Black men the most; parents and teachers.

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