

Urban Trends

A quarterly newsletter published by



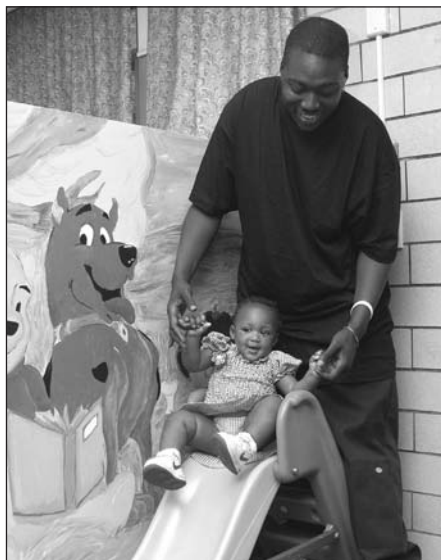
Kids Don't Come with Instructions: Parenting Challenges in Today's Environment

Just about everyone has an opinion on what is—and what is not—good parenting. Successful parenting calls for time, money, energy and love. Keeping those elements—and others—in balance, makes effective parenting hard work, stressful and often challenging, particularly when parents lack the support systems that can step in and help them out from time to time.

Over the past few years, MEE has had several opportunities to learn more about what it takes to be a “good” parent in an urban environment that brings a unique set of realities. We have concentrated on sharing strategies to help even the most stressed-out parents cope with obstacles to positive parenting and raising healthy, happy children.

For a project that led to the development of a culturally-relevant parenting toolkit, MEE conducted focus groups with low-income parents raising inner-city children under six years old in Atlanta, Los Angeles and Philadelphia. We asked them to help us create messages that caregivers like them would need to help them raise their children more successfully. These parents ranged in age from 22 to 31, and had children aged one month to six years old. We uncovered several consistencies that can be useful in understanding and supporting parents who are busy juggling many roles, and have few resources but plenty of stress.

Almost all of the parents cited too little money and too little time as their major concerns. Faced with



challenges in meeting their family's needs, one parent said, “It would be easier to take care of our children if we had money.” Another parent added that even though her household brings in three incomes, still “there's never enough money.”

Lack of time is another stress producer for parents. “By the time I get home, it's time for bed,” said one Atlanta parent. A Los Angeles parent, said, “I don't really have a chance to do much with her [my daughter] because I commute.” In addition to leaving too little time to spend with kids, work demands also mean not being able to take enough time for self. In order to squeeze a little time for themselves, these parents said they sometimes take a day off from work or leave work early and do something for themselves while their children are still in school. Others said they've had to schedule everything in their lives—even quiet time.

Many of the parents spoke of having a serious problem with discipline. Common concerns ranged from “What's too little?” to “What's too much?” Many of the parents were having temper problems with their kids and said that episodes of misbehavior were fairly routine. Discipline, parents said, is especially important for African American children, who need to learn the consequences of their behavior at an early age. As one parent explained, “In this day and age, with us being the color we are, there are consequences; so we teach our child that...you stick with your decision and live with the consequences.”

Parents said they help each other out when they can, whether for babysitting, transportation, or just to give advice. To be good parents, most of the participants either relied on their “natural instincts” or on their mother, grandmother or other adults for coping strategies. One Los Angeles par

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Being a parent is one of the toughest “jobs” and the most important responsibilities an adult will ever have. There’s so much to know, and the information about what it takes to raise a happy, healthy child is constantly changing... just like our kids are.

Low-income parents face even more challenges, particularly those related to economics—housing, jobs, childcare, lack of health coverage, baby supplies. And stressed-out, overworked adults with no support systems often cannot provide beyond meeting their children’s basic needs, such as food, clothing and shelter. Nurturing, bonding and creating a safe space can become overlooked or neglected.

It’s been very interesting to watch as so many of the youth that MEE has been talking to for the last decade have now grown into adults facing a whole new set of issues and challenges. Yes, members of yesterday’s “hip-hop generation” are, in many cases, today’s parents. They still need education, engagement and empowerment in order to achieve their dreams. Now they need support for both themselves and their families.

MEE has found that effective, involved parenting really makes a difference in children’s lives. That’s why we continually look for ways to bring you science-based and culturally-relevant parenting information. In the next two editions of UT, we share what we’ve learned in our audience research, ways that families in underserved communities can get the support they need to raise this newest “hip-hop generation.” This issue focuses on early childhood strategies, and the next will explore some of the tough challenges in raising teens into healthy adults. We hope you find them helpful and look forward to your feedback. Please feel free to share your successes and comments at my e-mail address below.




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ent said she even discusses “how to be a good mother” with her peers.

However, when coming to the aid of others, sensitivity is key. As a Philadelphia parent explained, “You really don’t want them to think you are being judgmental of their parenting skills, because they’ll shut down on you.” Instead, parents suggested that a person who genuinely wants to give advice should “throw some options out there, instead of saying ‘Don’t do this.’”

Every parent, even those who seem to have parenting down to a science, can use culturally-relevant advice, because most will admit that they need to know more about child development and even the “basics” of parenting. A good par-

ent understands that parents are “going to make mistakes” and that they must constantly work on being an even better parent.

MEE supported the Center for Child Well-being in creating the Parenting in the Real World Toolkit (including a video) to support such efforts. The kit and its multi-unit educational curriculum make child rearing less stressful and more effective. Created specifically with the daily realities of low-income African American parents in mind, it is a step-by-step guide that can be used by parenting programs and service providers in a variety of settings. It helps parents understand that it is neither the money, nor necessarily the time spent that children remember most, but the sincerity and love applied to every interaction. 

Parenting in the Real World

Few parenting education products focus on the needs—and realities—of low-income parents of color. However, MEE worked with the Center for Child Well-being to create a toolkit called **Parenting in the Real World: Kids Don’t Come with Instructions**. It is being used as part of a multi-session, interactive program designed to help parents of children under 3. In an evaluation study, parents who went through the program overwhelmingly reported learning new skills that helped to reduce their stress and make them feel more confident as parents. They all said that they would recommend the program to a friend.

The 90-minute PRW sessions deal with discipline strategies; the struggles to balance work, school and family; how parents can take time for themselves; and creating a strong support system. The kit also contains a MEE-produced video that captures real-life moments in the lives of everyday single parents and families in Philadelphia, Atlanta and Chicago. They frankly discuss their difficulties with discipline, finding quality childcare and more. For more information or to order the Toolkit, contact...

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Getting Dads More Involved

Single-parent families are no longer an anomaly in our society. The terms “baby mama” and “baby daddy” are firmly embedded in our popular culture. As marriage rates continue to decline in the U.S., the absence of full-time fathers must be reckoned with. To better understand the day-to-day realities of growing numbers of single parents in urban communities, MEE recently conducted 12 focus groups with low-income parents, as well as with soon-to-be teen mothers and with service providers who work in underserved communities.

A particular focus of this research was to uncover how we could get fathers more fully engaged in childrearing. Women in these and other focus groups have often accused Black fathers of being low participants in the lives of their children; we endeavored to find out why. In response to being criticized as being uninvolved, both African American and Latino males complained that all the mothers want is money, not their involvement in raising the child. Many of these fathers also felt that the justice and human services systems have an unfair bias in favor of women.


Both men and women believe that the primary role of males is to be a father who “provides.” That pressure, men said, causes some fathers to disappear from their child’s life because they can’t support their family. Others speculated that many males aren’t actively parenting their children because *they* didn’t have fathers and don’t know how to really be an involved father. “It’s like nature. If an animal doesn’t have a parent there to teach him how to hunt, he’s not going to learn anything. So if you grow up without a father, it’s gonna happen again [when you have a child].” Issues with the mother of the child often keep fathers missing, too. One African American male explained, “They may like the girl and love the baby, but they’re like ‘I’m not feelin’ this [being in a live-in or married relationship].”

Despite a lack of significant child-rearing

participation on the part of some young fathers, the young men in the groups did not appear to be anti-fatherhood. In fact, many of them felt that having children has made them more responsible. One African American father said, “Having my daughter has humbled me tremendously. Just having her makes me want to get up and go to work in the morning and keeps me focused.” Similarly, a Latino father said that the best part about being a dad is “that I have matured, learned to be patient and to listen.”

Men seemed less interested in formally learning parenting skills—though few classes are targeted specifically to them anyway—than in programs that could help them get or keep a job. They believed that men with jobs would be better fathers, in both the quality and quantity of participation in their children’s lives. Feeling unstable about the future, many unemployed males admitted to hustling, selling drugs, being arrested or getting “caught up in the streets.” They also said, however, that being a father is an incentive to do better, because they

want to be good influences on their children.

Low-income fathers of color need much better support systems. This includes programs that acknowledge and deal with the particular challenges they face as men who have been raised in an often-hostile society. Esteemed Black psychologist Dr. Joe White says that there are many complex issues impacting the social and emotional development of today’s Black man, but says that embracing core African American psychological strengths can help him fulfill his life dreams—and become a better parent. They need to know that they matter in the lives of their children just as much as mothers do—and not just as a monetary resource. Fathers need job support that is easily accessible and deals with their realities. For families to become effective units, service providers need to provide help that brings mothers and fathers together and that equally addresses their needs—whether they are together as a couple or not. 

Children's FUTURES

MEE is currently conducting an information campaign in Trenton, NJ to help low-income parents take advantage of free services that can make child-rearing easier and less stressful. The lead agency is Children’s Futures, a public/private partnership formed to improve health outcomes for children in Trenton.

The bilingual (English/Spanish) campaign encourages pregnant women to get early prenatal care and promotes healthy early childhood development for all families. A hotline directs caregivers to four local Parent/Child Centers and a Father Center that helps dads better connect or reconnect with their children, whether or not they are part of a two-parent household. Free services offered by Children’s Futures and its campaign partners include: parenting classes; instructions on breastfeeding, immunizations and early literacy; and help in finding affordable child care and health insurance.

Campaign messages are being delivered through radio, transit and cable television ads; community (peer-to-peer) outreach; partnerships with community- and faith-based organizations; and a series of community events.

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Successfully Mastering the Journey for African American Male Youth



Learn the seven African-centered psychological strengths Black boys will need on the journey into manhood, from the "father" of Black psychology, Dr. Joe White.

For more information or to order the video, visit www.meeproductions.com or call 1-877-MEE-PROD.

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