Halting African American Boys’ Progression From Pre-K to Prison: What Families, Schools, and Communities Can Do!

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For the past 30 years, the United States has experienced a steady increase in the number of persons incarcerated in federal, state, and local prisons. According to the U.S. Department of Justice, the number of persons incarcerated in the United States almost tripled between 1980 and 1994. Between 1994 and 2008, this number continued to expand at a rate of 2.4% each year. With the widening trend toward privatization of prisons, the business of corrections has stood out as a reliable growth sector in the American economy.

This industry thrives on a steady supply of African American males, who account for 10% of all youth but 60% of incarcerated youth under the age of 18. Incarceration is a much more common experience for African American males than White males. For example, White males are incarcerated at a rate of 8.5 per thousand, but that figure for African American males is 48.3 per thousand. The Department of Justice reported that in 2007 approximately 815,000 20- to 50-year-old African American men were in U.S. jails.

As a consequence of these high rates, the “school-to-prison” pipeline is often invoked as a metaphor to capture the seemingly inexorable progression of African American boys. African American men figure so prominently in the correctional system that the number of African American 4-year-old males can be used to model the number of people who will be incarcerated 15–20 years in the future. The rationale for this approach is that the more African American preschool males there are in the United States, the more prisons that will be needed when those young children become young adults. Of the approximately six hundred thousand 4-year-old African American males growing up in the United States in 2008, prisons are being planned to house 28,134 of them by 2029.

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These projections are a cynical representation of an unpleasant reality. The models projecting future prison populations are cynical because they are premised on the notion that the problems that contribute to the over-representation of African American males in jail will continue on their current course unchallenged and uninterrupted. These models discount the efforts of Head Start and state-funded early childhood programs, school improvement initiatives, and community-based programming. The models assume these preventive programs will make little headway in altering the developmental trajectories of African American males that propel them toward a life of incarceration. Instead, these well-intentioned efforts will be overtaken by a range of forces that impede boys’ development, place them at risk of school failure, lead to delinquency, and ultimately ensnare them in lifelong involvement in the criminal justice system. Is this process inexorable? Can anything be done to improve the prospects of African American boys?

Addressing these questions in the next section of this essay, I review some of the trouble spots in the developmental progression of African American boys. As a step toward identifying solutions, I discuss the conditions that give rise to the problems. Then I identify some of the steps that families, schools, and communities are taking to reverse the downward spiral of African American boys.

The Precarious Academic Development of African American Boys

The litany of difficulties associated with African American boys developing into men is extensive; it has all the elements of a classic tragedy. African American boys are vulnerable to a range of social, emotional, and academic difficulties from birth through adulthood. Beginning early in life, substantial numbers of African American boys are bombarded with a range of individual, family, and community trauma that divert them onto a developmental trajectory that is filled with adverse academic and social outcomes. Glimmers of the imminent difficulties are easy to detect. For example, the major academic problems seen in high school actually begin with low levels of skills that facilitate adaptation to school—specifically, early and persistent deficits in literacy and language, in combination with minor behavior problems. Early signs of the troubles awaiting African American boys are apparent when they enter kindergarten with respect to academic achievement and socioemotional adjustment.

Specifically, African American boys enter school with less general knowledge of the world. They are less often able to recognize letters and to pair letters to sounds as a prelude to reading. They are less often able to identify primary colors and write their names. They tend to have less well-developed capacities for self-regulation of attention and behavior. One kindergarten teacher described the situation this way: “I have children entering kindergarten already reading and writing. I also have African American boys who have never even held a pencil!” These emergent difficulties are consistently met by inadequate responses from adult caregivers, schools, and communities. The problems grow in magnitude and ultimately overwhelm boys and demoralize those who earnestly seek to help them.

Unfortunately, the story of adjustment difficulties does not end in kindergarten. National and local studies of academic achievement consistently show a striking pattern of underachievement among African American males across grade levels. Although the gap in skills is evident when boys start school, it widens over time with the result that African American boys are consistently underrepresented among the highest achievers and overrepresented among the lowest achievers.

By high school, boys of color are much less likely to participate in college prep classes, and they are often tracked into vocational and less demanding classes. They have lower high school graduation rates and, therefore, lower college attendance rates than their White peers.

Questions for Self-Assessment

1. How do the prevailing norms of family life contribute to the problems of African American boys?
2. What steps can families take to promote positive development of African American boys?
3. How do schools contribute to the challenges that African American boys often have in adjusting to school?
4. What policies and practices can schools implement to facilitate social adjustment and academic achievement at school?
5. How do communities contribute to the problematic development of many African American boys?
6. How might communities be part of the solution?
Suggestions for Further Reading


Some people look at these data and dismiss them as unrelated to race and ethnicity. It is a problem of poverty, they would say. Indeed, these problems are strongly associated with poverty, which disproportionately affects African Americans. Even though these trends are more pronounced among the African American poor, they are also observed to a lesser extent among middle- and high-income African American families. For example, the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study found differences in achievement between African American and White boys at every socioeconomic level. Even with the advantages afforded by being raised in a high-income family, African American boys still underperform White boys. The lower levels of educational attainment have effects that reverberate across most other aspects of African American boys’ lives.

What about African American girls, some may ask; should we not see the same difficulties among them? Although differences between African American girls and boys in math are trivial, on many indicators of achievement and school adjustment African American girls do better than boys especially in the domains of language and literacy. Moreover, boys tend to have more behavioral difficulties than girls, a difference that exacerbates the task of remediating academic skill deficits. Boys of color are almost twice as likely to be designated as having an emotional problem and 1.3 times as likely to have a learning disability as gender and ethnic comparison groups. To wit, African American boys experience higher rates of grade retention, discipline referrals, suspensions, and expulsions than do girls. In some metropolitan districts, as many as 30% of African American boys are in special education classes. In most states, fewer than 40% of African American boys graduate from high school with their cohort. As a consequence, African American girls graduate high school and college at significantly higher rates than African American boys. This fact is starkly evident in the enrollments of historically African American colleges, where young women make up as much as 70% of the student population. African American girls undoubtedly face many of the same difficulties as boys. However, female gender seems to confer relative advantage and lead to somewhat better outcomes.

**Race and gender gaps increase as children grow older**

The birth of a child is often surrounded by optimism over the child’s potential for a bright future. Over time, a family’s bright hopes for their son dims and in time the initial eagerness that African American boys bring when they enter school is replaced by frustration and disengagement. Some teachers feel at a loss in dealing with the issues that arise in teaching African American boys. African American boys are more likely than other groups to be viewed as poorly adjusted, subjected to punishment, and retained in grade. Their masculine posturing is sometimes viewed as hyperaggression and hostility. Relationships with teachers may become strained. Teachers may misinterpret boys’ behaviors, become frustrated, distance themselves emotionally, and resort to overly punitive responses to deal with the problems. This approach exacerbates rather than decreases the problems of African American boys.

A growing disaffection that some develop for school accelerates and reinforces the downward spiral resulting in lackluster academic effort on their part and increasingly coercive regimes by school staff to stem misbehavior. The final act of this tragedy unfolds when African American boys become trapped in an apparently coordinated, and some would claim, racially discriminatory system of sanctions. It is triggered by minor misbehavior at school. Offenses such as tardiness often evolve to truancy. At the same time, adult responses often escalate from admonishing to punishing; brief after-school detentions are followed by longer term suspensions.

As boys spend more and more time away from classroom instruction, they fall further and further behind. Eventually, they are so far behind, they become disconnected from teaching and learning. Schools label these boys as incorrigible who cannot be served in regular schools. Some are transferred to alternative schools for troubled children. Few of these boys are ever reintegrated into regular school. Many are ultimately expelled or drop out. Expulsion and drop-out from school give boys
much unsupervised time that facilitates risky behavior that leave many African American boys on the wrong side of the law.

Once caught for infractions, African American boys with a history of spotty school attendance often are committed to state facilities for juvenile offenders that are best described as finishing schools for crime. Once in the system, it is difficult to emerge from it. Most juvenile offenders recycle multiple times through the system. Recidivism rates hover around 60%. The consequence of this entanglement in the justice system is a life at the margins. As a consequence of this progression, many African American men arrive at adulthood unprepared for its responsibilities and ill-equipped to participate in home, community, and work life. They are beset by chronic unemployment, disenfranchised as citizens, and in time many become disengaged from the children they bear. As they age, most fare poorly on every index of well-being, including financial and marital stability, physical health, psychological well-being, and life expectancy. This progression represents both a personal tragedy for each of the young men are not only disadvantaged materially, but they are also segregated in a way that prevents them from acquiring the knowledge, competencies, and social capital to thrive in the mainstream. They are cut off and relegated to a separate world where mere survival is often the highest aspiration.

In many respects, the schools have failed African American children in general. African American children often attend schools with qualities associated with low quality and poor outcomes. It is a sad statement that in the over 50 years since the Supreme Court decision on *Brown v. Board of Education*, the schools attended by African American children are highly segregated and with high concentrations of students growing up in poverty. Moreover, the schools they attend often have substandard physical facilities, fewer books, fewer well-equipped science laboratories, and less instruction in music, art, and drama. They are taught by teachers who are less experienced and who often have low expectations about the ability of their students to learn. Material deprivation, ethnic denigration, and racial exclusion combine to maintain its key turning points. Families, schools, and communities can play an important role in improving the developmental outcomes for African American boys. In order for them to be effective, they will have to peer deeply and perhaps painfully into areas where they have failed to act when they could and failed to make a difference when it was possible.

Many African American children still attend schools segregated by race and class

and a disaster for our nation.

The most potent forces underlying and sustaining this progression occur at the societal level. At the top of the list of causes are structural inequalities that produce rampant poverty among African Americans and the racism that relegates African Americans to the margins of society. The corrosive effects of poverty and racism are at the heart of this progression and mediate most of the processes that propel African American boys toward prison. The poor highly segregated communities and poorly functioning schools, high unemployment, low social capital, financial marginality, disproportionate police surveillance leading to higher arrests, and more severe treatment by the criminal justice system. These are the forces that propel African American boys movement from pre-K to prison.

Is this situation hopeless? Not if we use our understanding of these processes as a prescription to act and to interrupt the progression at its key turning points. Families, schools, and communities can play an important role in improving the developmental outcomes for African American boys. In order for them to be effective, they will have to peer deeply and perhaps painfully into areas where they have failed to act when they could and failed to make a difference when it was possible.

**What Families Can Do to Help African American Boys**

- Begin with protecting your own health and well-being
- Support and continue child learning at home
- Develop a partnership with the school
- Talk to, read to, and have fun with your child
- Use the three Xs (expose, explain, expand) in conversations with child
- Address any problems in direct but affirming ways
- Raise your son to take pride in his ethnic and cultural heritage
- Raise your son to be caring, responsible, and ethical

**What Families Can Do!**

Parents and families are a child’s first teachers. As such, they play a determinative role in the child’s development. They do so through the experiences they provide and the environments they create for their children. Families create propitious environments for development when they meet a child’s basic physical, psychological, and developmental needs (e.g., food, shelter, security, succor, training, and socialization for adult life). Some of the difficulties in boys’ development are moderated in families where there is emphasis on a spiritual life, a strong ethnic identity, access to extended family, and the
use of practices that foster cognitive development. Spirituality is important because it places value on the nonmaterial aspects of existence and highlights the importance of caring for others.

Certain family practices appear to contribute not only to a spiritual perspective on life but also to children’s early linguistic and cognitive development. I have called these practices the three Xs: eXpose, eXplain, and eXpand. Expose refers to the provision by families of enrichment that builds skills and experiences that augment the knowledge a child has about the world. Explain refers to the use by family conversations that helps a child make sense of his experiences and enlightens his understanding of how things work. Expand refers to the practice of elaborating on a child’s knowledge. Sometimes called scaffolding, it involves building a bridge between what the child knows and what is to be learned.

In both self-report and observational studies, African American parents who used these strategies achieved better outcomes. In addition, in some African American families television viewing supplants enrichment activities, often because of a lack of community resources and programs. Limiting, but not necessarily eliminating, time in front of the television is associated with stronger academic performance. Better school performance occurs when families (a) encourage early learning by teaching the alphabet, colors, and numbers; (b) provide their children access to books and read to them and visit the child’s school, (c) regulate family television watching, and discuss and promote spiritual beliefs and values; and (d) foster an emotionally close adult–child relationship. In addition to the three X strategies and moderating TV viewing, there are a number of practices that parents may employ that are likely to contribute to more positive development.

The success of any of these strategies is highly dependent on the strength and quality of the relationships boys have with the adults in their lives. The importance of mothers is indisputable; most are doing heroic jobs with too little support. However, the strength and the quality of a boy’s relationship with his father or other caring adult men deserves special attention because of the critical role that it plays in the emergence of boys’ social identity and well-being. For boys, the presence of and interactions with nurturing and involved men shapes their view of what men are supposed to be, how they are supposed to act in the world, how they should relate to others, and how they can express feelings. Close-up observations of men struggling with life dilemmas helps boys to temper unrealistic expectations of hypermasculinity and correct the sometimes distorted depictions of masculinity arising in media such as books, music, television, and movies. The significant presence of men in the home protects boys against prematurely assuming the role of protector and provider. Involved men can also help to safeguard against boys asserting freedom

**Children do better when parents eXpose, eXplain, and eXpand**

What Schools Can Do to Improve Outcomes for African American Boys

- Acknowledge the challenges and the promise of African American boys
- Support positive emotional development in African American boys
- Develop strong positive relationships with the families
- Use instructional approaches that motivate and engage African American boys
- Help boys of color to affirm their identities as young men of African descent
- Teach boys to be caring, responsible, and ethical

What Schools Can Do!

A good early start to school is important to boys’ later success at school. Access to high-quality early childhood education makes a significant difference to children’s successful adaptation to school. Boys’ personal and social experiences in the classroom are most determinative of later academic outcomes. Therefore, one of the most important steps that schools can take is to improve outcomes for African American boys is to increase the fit between the organization and demands of preschool and primary-grade classrooms and the nascent skills that boys bring to school. Why is this important? Boys typically enter school with more limited language skills than girls do. They rely on movement and action more than words. By the time that they start pre-K at ages 3 or 4, they tend to have less well refined abilities to stop doing things they should not do and begin activities that are required. These skills are called self-regulation or executive functioning. Moreover,
What Communities Can Do to Help African American Boys

- Raise community awareness of the challenges to the healthy development of African American boys
- Increase the involvement of male role models in the lives of African American boys
- Develop community-wide programs to enrich the daily lives of African American boys
- Organize around systemic changes to improve the lives of African American boys

most early childhood classrooms (pre-K to third grade) are highly feminized environments, taught overwhelmingly by women, and often reflecting feminine interests and activities. The feminization of early childhood offers some advantages for all children; early childhood settings that are typically led by women are usually seen as nurturing and solicitous of children’s needs. At the same time, they are environments that take for granted skills that boys struggle to master and tend not to develop as quickly as girls. As a consequence, most boys attend classrooms where the norm is being still and quiet, the principal task is seat work, and the coin of the realm is language. By contrast, boys’ interactions tend to be boisterous and their currency is movement.

It would be most helpful to boys for program directors and teachers to rethink classroom as a behavioral setting with its emphases on listening over discourse and fine motor skills over large muscle, gross motor skills. To increase the likelihood of success with African American boys, the organization and structure of classrooms and the administration of school discipline policies should better reflect the predilection of boys for movement and action and permit them to draw on the gross motor skills that are so well developed when they arrive at school.

Academic leadership is important to this effort, but the classroom teacher has a seminal role in creating environments that are more responsive to African American boys. Certain teacher qualities, attitudes, and behaviors are critical. To begin with, teachers must cultivate an appreciation of the context from which their students come. They must be willing to consider their preconceptions and discern how their own ingrained attitudes influence their appraisals and responses to African American boys. By first and second grades when reading competence becomes the defining feature of academic success, teachers will be more successful when they are experienced in teaching reading, provide multiple opportunities for reading and writing, and are confident in their students’ abilities to benefit from instruction. Toward that end, teachers need better preparation and support to understand their own psychological processes and address the interpersonal dynamics and academic challenges of teaching boys.

Teachers who employ these strategies, who are sensitive and responsive to their student’s academic and social needs, and who provide rich language interaction can help African American boys to thrive. It is outcomes of African American boys. Boys who live in risky communities are more likely to experience poor outcomes. A risky community can be defined as one that provides limited opportunities for development of children’s talents. Factors that often contribute include isolation, danger, crowding, transience, poor-quality housing, low efficacy (feelings of powerlessness), and concentrated poverty. Frequently, there is little social capital. Boys are unable to form productive contacts and networks that will help them as they progress through school and enter the job market. Risky communities produce struggling young people who have fewer opportunities.

Conversely, communities can play a very positive role in a variety of ways. They can raise consciousness about the plight of African American boys and translate concern into action. They can address policies in schools and justice agencies that unfairly affect African American boys. They can respond to the dearth of men in the lives of boys by recruiting volunteers and supporting those who act as mentors, coaches, and big brothers. They can sponsor enrichment and skill development programs tailored for boys. They can support programs such as Boys and Girls Clubs, YMCA, and other local recreation programs. After-school, weekend, and summer programs, when they are well run,

**Risky communities produce struggling young people**

likely that these same strategies will redound to the benefit of all children.

**What Communities Can Do**

Communities can play a positive or a negative role in the long-term produce significant benefits for children. So do tutoring, homework assistance, and organized sports. Community civic associations can enlist boys in community service, so that boys learn the value of serving others by participating, for example, in community cleanup days, visiting
seniors’ homes, and other community improvement projects. Whatever efforts are undertaken at the community level, they are more likely to be effective if they are multifaceted and address the range of needs that boys have. For example, some community-based programs may establish mentorship, after-school, rites-of-passage, or recreational programs for boys. Although these activities may promote self-esteem, channel excess energy, or keep children occupied, their good work may go to naught if they fail to attend to the nagging academic difficulties that push boys toward disengagement and dropping out of school. Other, more academically oriented programs may fail if they do not address the sources of problems in the home or community, enlist family as partners, or develop leadership to advocate for needed policy changes. Consequently, the outcomes of these isolated efforts are less powerful than they would be with coordinated efforts. The difficulties besetting boys of color have many sources and are not entirely of their own making. A successful intervention must target the multiple sources of the problem and not just one.

Conclusion

Although significant academic difficulties are apparent when boys enter school, they grow worse instead of getting better with time in school. The progression from school to prison commences in early childhood. Early minor difficulties are permitted to mushroom into long-term deviance. As a consequence, boys’ prospects for reaching adulthood with the competencies needed to participate in mainstream of society are severely diminished. As a result, the sequelae of low school readiness and early school failure are dire. This situation not only represents a significant challenge for boys and their families but also imposes significant costs to society. To address this problem, it is necessary to start where the problem begins—in early childhood. This pattern of underachievement is initiated and maintained by a combination of factors that include family life, the school environment, and the community setting.

The situation of African American boys can be improved. Families and communities recognize the seriousness of the problems and are moving from concern to action. If we can intervene early, it may be possible to disrupt this chain of events that lead to dropping out of school and ultimately landing in jail. We need concerted, coordinated, and multi-systemic efforts if we are to be successful in improving the conditions under which African American boys are growing up and ultimately their outcomes. There are green sprouts of activity and appearing in communities around the country. Some are experimental programs such as rites-of-passage programs, all-boys charter academies under strong community control, and single-gender classrooms in public schools under the leadership of charismatic male teachers. Some represent a return to time-tested strategies, such as Boys Clubs, after-school programs, mentoring, and supervised recreation and enrichment programs. Success is attainable if we mount a concerted effort to alter the conditions under which African American boys are growing up. An all-out effort is needed to mobilize community networks on behalf of the boys, raise awareness of the problems in communities, strengthen appropriate practices in families, increase the preparedness of early childhood teachers, expand community-based activities that nurture the role of fathers and father figures in boys’ lives, and promote advocacy around issues of gender equity. With such a full-court press, there is good reason to believe that we will see a decline in the robustness of models that plan prison construction around the number of African American boys.

If families, schools, and communities respond to this call to action, we will see evidence of their response in several ways. Teachers will alter their classroom practices to be more responsive to the interests, needs, and capabilities of African American boys. Families will involve themselves more intensively in their children’s education in a variety of ways: more frequent and verbally rich interaction, explicit socialization of habits conducive to school achievement, and support for the schools’ efforts to educate their sons. Men from the community will nur-
will reverse the negative cycle of development and channel African American males away from prison toward full engagement with their families, productivity in the world of work, and toward contribution to civic life. These changes will constitute a second American Emancipation.

**Keywords:** African American boys; emotional disturbance; incarceration; racism; academic achievement; school suspensions and expulsions; schools; families; communities; linguistic development; prevention; mentoring; early childhood