

Where Did Black Parents Go Right?

✖ I remember sitting at the dinner table with my parents at 8 years old. During that season, the “no elbows on the table” rule was in full force. In addition, my mother constantly chided me for using slang as opposed to proper English. Those three to four years seemed like hell on earth. Nonetheless, years later, I could trace my success in school to my family dinner table and a few great teachers.

My parents always said, “For a black man to do half as well, he must be twice as good!” For them, education was almost a “sacred privilege,” which had been denied my ancestors because of the black and Native American social status. Today, I am shocked by the almost unfathomable swing from my black community’s sense of excellence and purpose to an entitlement mentality.

Not long ago, both *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* reported a growing national trend: Black students are suspended and expelled from school at two to five times the rate of white students. Both articles highlighted the unintended bias of teachers and administrators, zero-tolerance school discipline policies and school leadership styles as possible causes for this

development—and undoubtedly they are contributing factors.

But I wonder whether forcing teachers to sit through another mandatory sensitivity seminar or lobbying to relax school discipline policies will improve the long-term prospects of black students in America?

Five years ago, Harvard's Dr. Alvin Poussaint courageously addressed the elephant in the living room when he brought up the role that parents and family play in the success or failure of black students. Poussaint discussed a shocking study by Yale's Edward Zigler Center in Child Development and Social Policy, which noted that black children were expelled from *pre-school* at twice the rate of white children and five times the rate of Asian children. Clearly, if discipline issues show up in children as young as 3 or 4, the school is not entirely to blame.

Unfortunately, when those obsessed with political-correctness are forced to confront the importance of the family and parenting, they brilliantly miss the forest for the trees. They overlook the obvious problems of out-of-wedlock births and fatherless homes in search of elusive "root causes."

Even Poussaint, despite his brilliance, actually blamed the practice of corporal punishment for the misbehavior of some black

children in preschool. Black parents are more likely to spank their children than white parents. In addition, columnist Clarence Page responded with an article entitled "Sparing the Rod May Save Black Kids." Like so many critics of corporal punishment, both men failed to distinguish between physical abuse and controlled physical chastisement.

At the end of the day, anyone with common sense knows that black children do not act out because they are being disciplined too strictly at home. They act out because of a *lack* of structure and discipline. Others who want to skirt the central role of parents will quickly attempt to turn the discussion of the black family to poverty. While I agree—for the most part—that black families need better economic opportunities to increase their wealth and relieve the financial stress so many are facing, that issue, too, is secondary.

Missing in the hand-wringing and ideological declarations is the obvious question: What are black parents of successful children doing *right*? America is full of black parents doing a good job, including many single parents. Rather than looking outside of our community for answers, we need to examine where black parents are doing well and determine what we can do to reproduce that success in

the parts of our community that are struggling.

Patrick Fagan, a sociologist with the Marriage and Religion Research Institute, has uncovered a key factor in successful black parenting even under challenging circumstances: regular church attendance. Fagan's research shows that even when problems like divorce and low income are factors, black children who attend religious services regularly have more positive outcomes in nearly every measurable area, including academic achievement.

Regular churchgoers in inner cities were much less likely to use drugs or alcohol, commit a crime, drop out of school, become depressed or become pregnant out of wedlock. What is even more interesting is that the more challenging the child's circumstances—the lower the income, the less frequently the father was around—the stronger the positive influence of church attendance became.

This is not actually new information. Fagan notes that a Harvard University study in 1985 “revealed that attendance at religious services and activities positively affected inner-city youth school attendance, work activity and allocation of time ... youth who frequently attended religious services were five times less likely to skip school, compared with peers who seldom or never attended.”

Church attendance provides benefits to low-income children of single parents that secular after-school programs and other

government-sponsored interventions do not: a loving, structured environment that communicates a transcendent set of moral values.

Churchgoing children have access to mentors and positive peer pressure to encourage them to make good decisions and avoid peers who would bring a self-destructive influence.

While *The Washington Post* and *The New York Times* wring their hands about the number of black children being suspended from school, they continue to ignore the fact that the black children—even those living below the poverty line in single-parent homes—who are attending church regularly are faring much better. Maybe it's time to stop looking for a "fresh" solution, and time to start directing more folks to the old solution that is actually working.

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