



# RESILIENCE IN AFRICAN AMERICAN CHILDREN AND ADOLESCENTS

A Vision for Optimal Development



APA Task Force on Resilience and Strength in Black Children and Adolescents





# **Resilience in African American Children and Adolescents**

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## Task Force on Resilience and Strength in Black Children and Adolescents

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# Executive Summary

The Task Force on Resilience and Strength in Black Children and Adolescents was charged with the identification of factors that contribute to the healthy development of African American children and adolescents. Scholarship has largely ignored the relevance of racial, ethnic, and cultural factors, nuances, and competencies, particularly as they relate to resilience and strength of African American youth. The field of psychology's preoccupation with disparity data in terms of economic conditions, mother-headed households, academic underachievement, and involvement with the criminal justice system fails to inform about attitudes, behaviors, and processes that contribute to the strength and resilience of African American children and adolescents. Meaningful consideration of the strength and protective components of resilience among African American youth should take into account their cultural integrity as well as their unique experience as an involuntary ethnic minority in the United States. Continued cultural oppression places all African American youth, including well resourced youth, at some degree of risk for pervasive, yet subtle, forms of racialized discrimination and oppression.

Understanding resilience and strength among African American youth requires first acknowledging their experience in the United States and recognizing the continuing legacy of oppression and discrimination that affects their daily lives. The intent of this report is to provide a more balanced perspective on African American children and

adolescents by highlighting strengths and protective competencies that have largely been ignored to date. We also hope to provide the next generation of researchers, policy-makers, and programmers with a useful lens through which to view African American youth.

In doing so, we acknowledge the existence of risks and models that highlight risk and protective factor interactions. However, in this report, discussion of risk is limited. We contend that the risks African American youth face derive from proximal concerns, such as underresourced schools, family disruption, or negative peer influences. These risks are related to, and further exacerbated by, the experience of pervasive racism that informs, for example, racial profiling, low expectations, or institutional barriers (e.g., Spencer et al., 2006; Weinstein, 2002). When African American children are subject to excessive institutional reactivity to their behavior as might arise during negative encounters with teachers, principals, or police officers, then drawing on protective factors within themselves (e.g., emotion regulation and problem-solving skills) and within families and communities (e.g., parents as advocates) becomes crucial to their health and well-being. The strength and protective components of resilience are the focus of this report.

While effort was made throughout the report to acknowledge the within-group variations that exist in African American communities (e.g., socioeconomic status, region of country), it is important to note that the focus

of this report is U.S.-born African American children and adolescents only. While the immigrant and foreign-born Black population in the U.S. is significant and continues to increase, the task force recognizes the historical and cultural differences of those who emigrated and are U.S. immigrants. Specifically, the legacy of colonialism impacts each group differently. Thus, foreign-born Blacks may have a different perspective on this country's history of oppression and associated youth outcomes. An in-depth and comprehensive reporting of such noteworthy variations across Black groups is beyond the scope of the current report.

Similarly, we acknowledge the significant biracial youth population that exists in the United States; however, we also recognize that mixed families and the raising of biracial children raise unique concerns and challenges—for example, European American relatives' concerns about the loss of privilege, and African American relatives' concerns about the privileges of biracial children over their African American (especially darker-skinned) relatives. An in-depth and comprehensive review that considers the unique experiences of biracial youth is beyond the scope of this report. For the purposes of this report, review and discussion are limited to U.S.-born African American children and adolescents.

The content of this report is based on available research involving African American middle-childhood (5–11 year-old) and adolescent (12–21-year-old) samples. Despite skewed and/or limited coverage of African American youth, we sought to include research findings on African American youth across all socioeconomic status (SES) and geographic areas. We reviewed several databases that provide fairly comprehensive coverage of the social sciences, education, and biomedical literatures on U.S. populations of persons of African descent: PsycINFO, ERIC, and MEDLINE (via PubMed). The following databases were also used to identify relevant, funded studies (both current and recently concluded): National Institutes of Health (NIH), Computer Retrieval of Information on Scientific Projects (CRISP), and the National Science Foundation (NSF).

## TOWARD A PORTRAIT OF RESILIENCE

Resilience as currently understood is a dynamic, multi-dimensional construct that incorporates the bidirectional interaction between individuals and their environments within contexts (family, peer, school and community, and society). Over time, models of resilience have become more ecologically focused, reflecting a generally understood and accepted principle that youth develop in context and that the consideration of context is fundamental to any serious effort to understand development and experience. Some contemporary researchers have begun to present more ecological models that conceptualize resilience as a process embedded in multiple layers (e.g., individual, environmental, sociohistorical) of experience. There has increasingly been an incorporation of the individual's feelings and perceptions of his or her experience, as well as an understanding of how multiple factors in the environment contribute to risks and protective factors. However, not systematically incorporated within the ecological framing of resilience is the explicit inclusion of factors that specifically encompass the racial, ethnic, and cultural experiences of African American youth. The incorporation of these factors is important in understanding and promoting strength, health, and well-being among African American youth.

With this in mind, we propose a portrait of resilience (informed by Lerner, Dowling, & Anderson, 2003), or optimal functioning, for African American youth. This portrait of resilience encompasses four themes to guide the interpretation of the research and offer new directions for future scholarship:

**Critical mindedness** helps protect against experiences of discrimination and facilitates a critique of existing social conditions.

**Active engagement** includes agentic behavior in school, at home, and with peers, such that children and adolescents proactively and positively impact their environment. Impact on settings, however, must be executed effectively, and flexibility becomes essential.

**Flexibility** promotes adaptation to cognitive, emotional, social, and physical situational

demands and can include bicultural competence or fluency across multiple cultural contexts that youth must traverse.

**Communalism** includes the importance of social bonds and social duties, reflects a fundamental sense of interdependence and primacy of collective well-being, and offers the drive for connection and promotion within and across diverse groups.

For African American children and adolescents to develop into individuals actively engaged in optimal personal and collective development, they must be placed “at promise” as opposed to “at risk” (Boykin, 2000) in order to become contributing members of their families, schools, communities, and the broader society. In this way, they will emerge as agents for meaningful and sustainable positive change within a participatory democratic framework and will thrive.

We have considered multiple levels of influence on individual development and examined the linkages between experiences of adversity, adaptive responses to these experiences, and long-term outcomes. In doing so, we focused on five widely recognized domains for child development within this framework, including how certain domain-specific factors—traditionally considered risk factors—can be reconceptualized as adaptive or protective processes:

- Identity development
- Emotional development
- Social development
- Cognitive development
- Physical health and development

Although the report is organized in this manner, we recognize the integrated nature of resilience components, processes, and outcomes.

## **IDENTITY DEVELOPMENT**

Positive gendered racial identities are essential to the personal and collective well-being of African American youth. African American children and adolescents must develop a

positive sense of self in a society that often devalues them through negative stereotypes, assumptions, and expectations of others (Cross, 1995). Negative racial identity in African Americans has been theoretically linked to low self-esteem, problems with psychological adjustment, low school achievement, school drop out, teenage pregnancy, gang involvement, eating disorders, drug abuse, and involvement in crime (Cross, 1991; Poussaint, 1990). Identity for African Americans is not an individual or autonomous sense of functioning as is often reflected in European American culture but includes the intersection of multiple identity factors, particularly race and gender.

Positive identity is an extended sense of self embedded within the African American collective (Allen & Bagozzi, 2001), and this African American sense of self is a protective factor related to identity development. Although research has begun to explore the influence of racial identity as a buffer for oppression, it lags in assessing the process through which this may occur (i.e., the ability to perceive social, political, and economic oppression and to take action against the oppressive elements of society).

Research has identified racial socialization as a contextual protective factor. Socialization influences children's racial identity and self-concept (Alejandro-Wright, 1999), beliefs about the way the world works, repertoire of strategies and skills for coping with and navigating racism, and inter- and intraracial relationships and interactions (Coard & Sellers, 2005). African American parents are instrumental in transmitting values, beliefs, and ideas about lifestyles based on cultural knowledge of the adult tasks and competencies needed for appropriate functioning in society (Harrison, Wilson, Pine, Chan, & Buriel, 1990). Although the socialization messages of both mothers and fathers benefit the child, research (e.g., Thornton, Chatters, Taylor, & Allen, 1990) has suggested that more optimal outcomes occur when both parents engage in the racial socialization process. African American children and adolescents who learn that others have negative perspectives on African Americans but who have these messages mediated by parents, peers, and other important adults are less likely to have negative outcomes and more likely to be resilient in adverse conditions.

Research has only begun to explore other identity factors for African American children and adolescents, includ-

ing gender, sexual orientation, and ability status. To have a more complete picture of resilience, psychology needs to develop a new conceptual framework for understanding multiple identities and their influence on functioning and development. Training and coaching of children and youth on the integration of multiple identities must promote social relationships. More research needs to explore all areas of identity development and its relation to critical consciousness and resilience.

## EMOTIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Children who are emotionally well-regulated generally display a positive mood, are optimistic, and demonstrate empathy and prosocial behavior with peers (Zeman, Shipman, & Suveg, 2002). *Emotional knowledge*—the ability to understand emotions—is related to social and behavioral outcomes (Izard et al., 2001) and is an important component of emotional regulation, expression, regulation, and perspective taking. As children move through their developmental tasks, the role of cultural factors cannot be ignored. An examination of the cultural expression of emotion (i.e., emotional strengths of African American children, including spirituality, cooperation, respect for others, a sense of humor; Lambert et al., 2005) and expressive individualism (Boykin & Toms, 1985) is critical to understanding emotional development and its relationship to resilience and strength in African American children and adolescents.

*Emotional competence* requires a strong and positive sense of self-efficacy so that children believe they can meet the demands around them when trying to work with others—especially relevant for African American youth who must learn to succeed academically despite their overrepresentation in underresourced schools, get along with peers despite the presence of institutional racism, and develop meaningful relations with others despite society's view that African American children are not as worthy as their non-African American peers. Rather than being distracted with perceived threats and self-defeating attitudes, African American youth with well-developed emotional competence are able to mobilize resources, learn new information, acquire new insights, or develop their talents despite negative messages from society to the contrary.

African American youth need to develop *emotional regulation* (i.e., balanced and appropriate emotional expression for particular situations and circumstances). This is particularly salient given the potential for African American youth to be judged as hostile or excessively reactionary. Positive and optimal emotional regulation includes being critically minded in emotionally tense settings. Flexibility across circumstances is critical for emotional regulation, as is engagement, which in the case of emotional development prevents social withdrawal and isolation through anxiety and depression. The collective culture and socialization experiences will help to buffer African American children and youth from harmful forms of emotional expression.

Family factors are extremely important in emotional development. Research on emotional self-regulation in African American children has demonstrated similar findings with other ethnic samples, showing that, for the most part, the better (i.e., the more positive, supportive, educational) the parent-child relationship, the more able the child is to develop effective emotional regulation (Kliewer et al., 2004; Little & Carter, 2005). Neighborhood and community influences also serve as protective factors for emotional development. High-quality, stable neighborhoods and schools (e.g., resource rich, supportive, non-violent) are important contributors to the well-being of African American youth (Kowaleski-James & Dunifon, 2006).

In addition, programs that foster the growth of empathy in African American youth (e.g., the Aban Aya Youth Project; Jagers, Morgan-Lopez, Howard, Browne, & Flay, 2007), promote racial socialization as a method for reducing anger and aggression (e.g., Preventing Long-Term Anger and Aggression in Youth; Stevenson, 2002), improve aspects of parenting associated with the early development of conduct problems, and promote social and cultural competence in early-school-age children (e.g., Black Parenting Strengths and Strategies; Coard, Foy-Watson, Zimmer, & Wallace, 2007) have shown promise.

## SOCIAL DEVELOPMENT

The need for successful negotiation of social interactions and the development of optimal functioning are particularly important for the development of African American children regardless of their socioeconomic background and

neighborhood context. Central to the resilience of African American children and youth are individual characteristics such as empathy and religiosity (e.g., personal beliefs in God or a higher power, church attendance). Concern for others and a sense of a higher purpose may help children and youth become engaged leaders and advocates for their community.

African American children and adolescents, like other youth, benefit from close relationships with and monitoring by caregivers, two factors which, within the context of family, prevent problem behaviors and promote competence (Sale, Sambrano, Springer, & Turner, 2003; Wills, Gibbons, Gerrard, Murry, & Brody, 2003). African American caregivers have evidenced culturally specific parenting practices (e.g., racial socialization), which can be conceptualized as parental strengths that foster children's social development (Hughes et al., 2006).

In school, the social processes between teachers and students and among peers are important for setting behavioral norms and expectations that promote cooperative engagement in school. Promising protective factors in social resilience are related to teacher practices (e.g., "warm demanders" [Vasquez, 1988] and "compassionate disciplinarians" [Irvine, 2002]), the behavioral norms of the classroom, and the atmosphere of the school as a whole. African American students' social development may also depend on the influence of peers in the classroom, and research on peer norms, peer affiliation in schools, reduced aggression, and increased cooperation is emerging.

Community context is critically important to the well-being of African American youth. High-quality child care, after-school programs, and faith-based institutions are protective resources (Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Shinn & Toohey, 2003), as are preventive intervention programs. Such programs need to be developmentally and culturally appropriate, address multiple health-compromising behaviors, offer services, sustain intervention over time, and include a school focus with family, peer, and community components (e.g., Kellam & Langevin, 2003; Kreuter, Lukwago, Bucholtz, Clark, & Sanders-Thompson, 2002). The most exemplary programs harness cultural and community processes already occurring in African American communities to effect outcomes and enhance participant recruitment and retention.

Promising areas for future research include prosocial attitudes and behaviors, flexible behavioral repertoires, critical mindedness, and active engagement in collective efforts for positive change. It will be important to conduct ecologically sensitive research on individual characteristics and protective factors that promote their optimal social development.

## **COGNITIVE DEVELOPMENT**

Cognitive skills are one of the most important markers of child and adolescent development, and it is highly unlikely that children with underdeveloped educational and cognitive skills will be successful. Resilience in cognitive functioning is the expected expression of ability in intellectual, language, academic, and vocational skill, despite exposure to developmental risk factors. For African American children to be resilient, they must develop self-motivation for critical thinking, engage with academic material, demonstrate flexible thinking, and give their expertise back to the community. It is imperative that African American youth demonstrate competence in fundamental academic skills and in higher order information-processing skills (e.g., analysis, synthesis, problem solving).

Key to the process of developing cognitive skills—consistent with expectations for all children and adolescents—is the environment in which African American youth are reared and the unique individual qualities each child brings to bear on his or her environment. Because we live in a racially conscious society that tends to oppress as opposed to uplift, African American youth are especially vulnerable to that which injustice provides: the suboptimal development of the very skills that are critical for their prosperity. Despite these hardships, African American youth do display resilience, and research is just beginning to examine how this occurs.

Research has suggested that such individual characteristics as academic self-efficacy or the child's belief in his or her academic competence operate as protective factors for African American children at risk for poor cognitive performance (Bandura, 1986). Academic self-efficacy may affect children's choice of activities, the amount of effort they commit to meeting a goal, and their persistence on tasks. Some evidence has supported the idea that academic self-efficacy is particularly important for African



Americans' high academic achievement. Research has also established the relation between self-esteem and academic outcomes for African American children, but exclusive focus on any one factor likely masks the complex associations of self-identity, including racial identity and adaptive cognitive functioning.

Parental involvement in the educational process is a significant predictor of academic achievement for African American children (Shumow, Vandell, & Posner, 1999). Other family characteristics are also predictive of school functioning. In Clark's (1983) analysis of low-income African American families, those children achieving academically had parents who were warm, monitored their children's time, and set standards for academic behavior. Parents who possess and practice attitudes, goals, and behaviors directed toward academic achievement are crucial to fostering positive school outcomes for their children. Contrary to the notion that harsh parenting styles are beneficial to children growing up in urban, low-income settings, research has associated harsh parenting styles with poor academic achievement (Shumow et al., 1999).

African Americans are disproportionately represented in low-income populations. The relation between low SES and academic and cognitive outcomes (i.e., children from wealthy families demonstrate greater academic success than those from low-income families), however, is not straightforward or always strong. Research in this area has moved beyond simply documenting poor outcomes to investigating the process by which financial limitations operate to influence cognitive success. Parental involvement, parent-child relations, and the qualities of the home environment appear to be key mechanisms in the influence of SES on cognitive outcomes (Shumow et al., 1999).

Although a sense of school belonging is important for all students, it may be especially important for African American students, who are more likely to feel estranged in school environments where values and beliefs are discordant with their own (Ford, 1993). Although most children experience some stress (e.g., lower grades) when they transition to middle school and high school, African American children are at greater risk for school failure than their European American counterparts and feel more disconnected when the culture of the school environment is dissimilar from their own (Ford, 1992).

Teachers' discriminatory attitudes and their relationships with African American students pose risk for poor cognitive outcomes (Richman, Bovelsky, Kroovand, Vacca, & West, 1997). Studies have shown that African American children exposed to teachers who displayed sincere concern for their academic success demonstrated better cognitive outcomes (Steele, 1992).

Research indicates that African Americans, among other cultural groups, advocate more of a communal orientation than an individualistic one, and this has stimulated significant research into the role of the communal perspective on learning in school. The associated empirical work has been consistent in demonstrating that African American students learn more and prefer learning contexts that support the expression of a communal orientation (Dill & Boykin, 2000). Because positive ethnic identification is also related to academic achievement, research continues to investigate ways to infuse Africultural themes into the classroom as a means of improving academic outcomes.

By developing the necessary skills for critical and flexible thinking and problem solving and by engaging with academic material, African American children will be better suited to meet societal challenges. Examining the process by which this occurs and developing testable models of the relations between protective factors and outcomes are essential to sustaining and increasing the capacity of African American youths to negotiate societal discrimination. By taking both a universal and a culture-specific approach to explaining cognitive resilience, the field can provide research and services that will meet the needs of African American youth and increase their capacity to be resilient.

## **PHYSICAL HEALTH AND DEVELOPMENT**

Like youth from all racial and ethnic backgrounds, African American youth who are in good physical health are more likely to experience positive mental health, fewer behavioral and social difficulties, and sharper or more responsive cognitive functioning (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [U.S. DHHS], 2000a). In the context of both positive and adverse outcomes, social determinants of health such as poverty and access to quality health care have had a unique impact on African Americans (Giles & Liburd, 2007). Moderating the effects of contextual factors are, among other considerations, SES at an individual and

community level and access to and quality of health care and information (Marmot, 2005; McLoyd, 1998). An important literature has emerged describing the independent and cumulative effect on health of factors such as social inequality, social cohesion, and educational parity (e.g., Berkman & Kawachi, 2000; Marmot & Wilkinson, 2006).

A wide range of health conditions, including obesity, poor oral health, asthma, violent injury, sickle cell anemia, pediatric diabetes, and HIV/AIDS, disproportionately affect African American youth. In this report we address the first four conditions, emphasizing the need to better understand and incorporate physical health and development in the effort to promote resilience in African American children and adolescents.

Childhood obesity is a serious public health problem.

Current rates are higher among African American and Hispanic youth (Ogden, Carroll, & Flegal, 2003) than European American youth, especially among African American girls and adolescents (Shaibi, Ball, & Goran, 2006). Although a number of health maladies result from obesity in youth (e.g., pediatric diabetes, hypertension), one of the more pronounced impacts has been

on psychological health, specifically in the form of depression (Pi-Sunyer, 1999). The African American community has begun to address obesity and its comorbid conditions in a number of ways, focusing on two important protective factors for childhood obesity: diet and physical activity. For example, a number of churches have developed and promoted cookbooks supportive of traditional recipes that use ingredients that promote good health. Likewise, a number of churches now offer athletic activities for youth congregants or dance ministries as a way to promote physical activity.

Significant disparities exist between poor children and their more affluent peers in terms of oral health, as reflected in regular dental care and the presence of early periodontal disease (U.S. DHHS, 2000b). Poor African American youth, for example, are significantly less likely than their middle-class peers to see a dentist prior to starting kinder-

garten, resulting in an increased risk for periodontal disease, which has implications for diabetes and cardiovascular disease. There is strong evidence for strategies that promote oral health in children, including school-based sealant-delivery programs and community-based water fluoridation.

Asthma is a chronic respiratory illness associated with familial, socioeconomic, psychological, and ecological factors. The African American community has begun to address respiratory disease and the adverse conditions that promote its occurrence through organized efforts to combat environmental racism manifest in the proximity of landfills and dumps to African American communities (see Braveman, 2006). Other efforts include educating the caregivers (e.g., parents, teachers, and coaches) of African American youth about the early warning signs of respira-

tory ailment, thereby allowing early intervention and reducing the likelihood of hospitalization and school absenteeism.

Interpersonal violence has exacted a tremendous toll on African American youth in terms of shortened life expectancy, physical disability, physical injury, and comorbid psychological injury. A number of programs have touted positive and sustainable effects in

the reduction of interpersonal violence, and a number of government agencies (e.g., Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, Departments of Education and Justice) have highlighted a number of best-practice programs. Programs such as multisystemic therapy have begun to acknowledge the importance of understanding and incorporating cultural frames of reference.

Limited research examining resilience within the African American community reflects its health and strength. This report aims to provide a more balanced and holistic perspective on African American children and adolescents. Although the extant research has significant gaps in definition and theory that limit an understanding of resilience, especially as it relates to African American youth, this body of research provides an important foundation upon which to build. While the discourse on resilience contained in this report follows a domain-specific structure

# THE AFRICAN AMERICAN COMMUNITY HAS BEGUN TO ADDRESS OBESITY AND ITS COMORBID CONDITIONS IN A NUMBER OF WAYS, FOCUSING ON TWO IMPORTANT PROTECTIVE FACTORS FOR CHILDHOOD OBESITY: DIET AND PHYSICAL ACTIVITY.

for readability, we acknowledge and maintain that resilience is a holistic developmental process and consists of interdependent dimensions—that is, domains of functioning that are interwoven and develop simultaneously.

Early health education and positive role modeling are central to a young person's ability to make critical choices regarding his or her physical health. As young people get older, they become increasingly responsible for lifestyle (e.g., diet, problem-solving) choices. Youth who view resilient physical health as an important facet of communal health and empowerment are likely to manifest optimal functioning in other areas of their lives (i.e., cognitive, social, emotional). Caregivers and institutions that influence the development of African American youngsters must support, encourage, and model the elements proposed as central to their optimal functioning or resilience.

## CONCLUSIONS

The majority of studies and reports that focus on African American children and adolescents examine risk factors and their association with negative outcomes. Given the societal realities that exist (e.g., racism, discrimination, prejudice), African American youth face challenges that can compromise their health and well-being. Yet most studies omit race, ethnicity, and culture altogether or attempt to “control” for variables related to culture and SES. To do so is misleading, as culture and related variables are embedded in potential mediators, moderators, and outcomes.

Constructs such as positive family environment and social support are not the domain of any particular gender, age, or ethnic group and exist to some extent for all groups of children. These constructs are shared across racial and ethnic groups, but their expression may be culturally defined. Research has shown that diverse cultural groups have different ways of enhancing positive outcomes for their children (Johnson-Powell & Yamamoto, 1997). What is needed is a balanced approach that accepts the limitations of past perspectives and acknowledges the role of contemporary society, social policy, and history in the development of African Americans in the United States. The complexity outlined in recent theories demonstrates a desire—albeit ambitious—to describe children in the various contexts in which they live. As with most theoretical discussions, the problem lies in a lack of consistency in the use of terms and the definition of constructs.

African American youth will need resilience to navigate future challenges. It is important that collective efforts continue to foster and further develop identified “protective mechanisms.” Identifying and promoting strength and resilience among African American youth merit the consideration of educators, researchers, practitioners, and policymakers to ensure the success of African American youth in the 21st century.

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# Introduction

**T**he Task Force on Resilience and Strength in Black Children and Adolescents was charged with the identification of factors that contribute to the healthy development of African American children and adolescents. The field of psychology's preoccupation with disparity data in terms of economic conditions, mother-headed households, academic underachievement, and involvement with the criminal justice system fails to inform about attitudes, behaviors, and processes that contribute to the strength and resilience of African American children and adolescents. The overall goal of this report is to offer conceptualizations and a critical review of research that move scholarly and popular perceptions of African American youth away from putative deficits toward a more central focus on strengths, resilience, and optimal functioning.

Three goals guided the task force in preparation of this report:

- To introduce issues that affect the lives of African American children and adolescents, with an emphasis on their strengths and areas of resilience.
- To familiarize readers with a sampling of research that moves beyond a deficit view of the development of African American youth and takes into account the historical, cultural, and social factors that influence developmental outcomes, thus generating more

optimistic perspectives on the psychological functioning of African American children and youth.

- To stimulate critical thinking in psychology about future directions for research and practice with African American children and adolescents. The intent is to provide the next generation of researchers, policy-makers, and programmers with a useful lens through which to view African American youth.

## RATIONALE

Psychological research has long been criticized for its focus on Eurocentric values in theories and methodology. Much of the psychological literature has derived from the European American cultural perspective, and as a result, the knowledge base in developmental and other areas of psychology is founded largely on the assumptions, expectations, and perspectives of middle-class European American youth. With some notable exceptions (e.g., Brody, Dorsey, Forehand, & Armistead, 2002; Brody, Murry, Chen, Kogan, & Brown, 2006; Brody, Murry, Kim, & Brown, 2002; McLoyd, 1991), scholarship has largely ignored the relevance of racial, ethnic, and cultural nuances and competencies, particularly as they relate to the resilience and strength of African American youth.

Rarely are the terms *competent*, *resourceful*, *aspiring*, or *motivated* used to describe African American youth, their



social and behavioral competencies, or their academic performance in school (Barbarin, 1993a). The preponderance of research has reported the problems associated with African American youth (Barbarin, 1993a; Mackler, 1970), and discourse focused on deficits, failure, and lowered expectations of African American youth has become commonplace. We maintain that placing primary focus on the problems of African American youth in isolation from data that highlight positive growth and development and possible solutions perpetuates distorted and negative stereotypes that contribute to social disenfranchisement.

As Garmezy (1991) contended, the study of success is just as important as the study of failure. Focusing solely on problems frequently yields inaccurate and often unnecessary data. Studies have shown that even poor African American youth can achieve socially and academically, despite low socioeconomic status (SES), minimal expectations, and inadequate representation of their successes (Barbarin, 1993b; Freiberg, 1993; Rutter, 1987; Werner, 1989). The natural abilities and intelligence levels of African American youth suggest that more such children should be having similar success, but they are not (Edmonds, 1982, 1986).

## **SOCIOHISTORICAL CONTEXT**

Meaningful dialogue about strength and resilience among African American children and adolescents is impossible without first examining the historical and contemporary social context within which these youth reside. Race-based violence and wholesale marginalization have defined the history of African Americans in the United States. Following the enslavement of their African ancestors, African Americans in the United States have experienced perpetual discrimination and recrimination and an official status as less than fully human. During the 20th century, Jim Crow segregation prohibited African Americans from accessing resources (e.g., education, health care, economic opportunity, employment) equal in quality and scope to those available to other members of society. Most, if not all, of these disparities remain evident today.

The Surgeon General's report *Mental Health: Culture, Race, and Ethnicity* (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services [U.S. DHHS], 2001) emphasized that the psychological understanding of ethnic minorities, including

African Americans, has not fully incorporated their unique sociocultural and political realities. The unwillingness or inability to accurately understand the life experiences of ethnically and culturally diverse communities has frequently resulted in a pathological view of these communities (Sue, 1981). In describing the evolution of psychology and its views on ethnic minorities, both the genetic deficiency perspective and the culturally deficient view have represented the distinct conceptual zeitgeist over time (J. Katz, 1985). These perspectives have served to justify the unequal treatment of people of color, especially African Americans.

The subsequent shift to the culturally different model (see Sue & Sue, 1990, for a full description) has provided for a fuller understanding of racially and culturally distinct groups. This model suggests that to examine resilience among African American youth, researchers and others should consider the cultural integrity as well as the unique experience of these youth as an involuntary ethnic minority in the United States. In our view, continued cultural oppression places all African American youth, including well resourced youth, at some degree of risk from pervasive, yet subtle, forms of racialized discrimination and oppression. Research that seeks explicitly to understand the processes that inform and underlie within-group variations in resilience among African American youth is overdue.

## **CONTENTS OF THE REPORT**

The Task Force on Resilience and Strength in Black Children and Adolescents was concerned with the attainment of positive outcomes among African American youth. Our objective was to provide a critical, interpretive review of the resilience, strength-based, and adaptive coping literatures related to African American children and adolescents. Given the relative paucity of research in this area, this admittedly ambitious yet critical report seeks to identify individual and contextual factors that contribute to the healthy development of African American children and adolescents, and in doing so, considers resilience and strength as they relate to identity, emotional, social, cognitive, and physical development within a culturally relevant and developmentally integrative approach. We recognize that resilience theory and subsequent frameworks presented in the literature include discussions of both risk and protec-

tive factors (and their interaction). This approach has been instrumental in furthering the field's understanding of the role of protective factors and vulnerability factors in the study of resilience. While it is not our intention to ignore risk, which is a topic mentioned periodically in this report, it is our intention to highlight the strength and protective components of resilience. For the purposes of this report, the term *resilience* is used to refer more specifically to strength and protective factors and the maximization of positive outcomes.

This report focuses on available research involving African American middle-childhood (5–11-year-old) and adolescent (12–21-year-old) samples. Despite the acknowledged limitations in coverage, we include research findings on African American youth across socioeconomic conditions (low-, middle-, and upper-income levels) and geographic areas (urban, rural, and suburban environments). This report intends to advance knowledge of how the extant research has conceptualized and examined resilience in African American children and adolescents and to shed light on the existing research gaps and misconceptions related to coping, adjustment experiences, and healthy functioning in this racially conscious society.

In preparation for this report, we reviewed several databases that provided fairly comprehensive coverage of the social sciences, education, and biomedical literatures on U.S. populations of African Americans: PsycINFO, ERIC, and MEDLINE (via PubMed). We also used the following databases to identify relevant, funded studies (both current and recently concluded): National Institutes of Health (NIH), Computer Retrieval of Information on Scientific Projects (CRISP), and the National Science Foundation (NSF). Efforts were made to include research conducted in the past 15 years (including national probability studies, school-based research, etc.). Although this report strives to be a comprehensive review, it is likely that relevant literature inaccessible through these means was not included. We acknowledge that scholarship in this area varies in its distribution to diverse audiences; we therefore include emerging and innovative scholarship. We hope that this document will be useful to researchers, service providers, communities, and policymakers in their efforts to understand and support the healthy growth and development of African American youth.

The report begins with a chapter on conceptualizing resilience. We briefly discuss theoretical issues and applied models that allow for a more complex understanding of vulnerability and resilience among African American children and youth. We then offer a portrait of thriving (Lerner, Dowling, & Anderson, 2003), or optimal functioning, for African American youth that encompasses four themes to guide our interpretation of the research and offer new directions for future scholarship:

- Critical mindedness
- Active engagement
- Flexibility
- Communalism

We consider multiple levels of influence on individual development and examine the linkages between experiences of adversity, adaptive responses to these experiences, and long-term outcomes.

We address five widely accepted developmental domains of functioning in the subsequent chapters of the report. Each of the domain chapters includes a discussion of individual and contextual protective factors and areas of strength:

- The **Identity Development** section discusses racial, ethnic, and cultural identity models and racial socialization processes.
- The **Emotional Development** section includes a discussion of emotional expression and regulation, mental health, and psychological well-being.
- The **Social Development** section highlights burgeoning areas of research as they relate to healthy social development and assets in the lives of African American children and adolescents.
- The **Cognitive Development** section explores resilience in cognitive functioning in terms of intellectual, verbal, academic, and vocational abilities despite exposure to risk factors believed to be detrimental to development.



- The **Physical Health and Development** section focuses on physical health and health promotion as mediators for resilience and includes a discussion of health-specific research and interventions.

Although the discourse on resilience contained in this report follows a domain-specific structure, we recognize that resilience is a holistic developmental process and consists of interdependent dimensions. That is, the domains discussed are interwoven and develop simultaneously. Resilience is dynamic and multidimensional. Furthermore, although we discuss each domain within a risk and resilience framework, we focus on the variations within these domains, including how certain factors traditionally considered risk factors can be reconceptualized as adaptive or protective processes. Each chapter also highlights program development and implementation with and/or for African American children and adolescents. This includes programming at varying levels of renown and with varying levels of evidence (e.g., evidence-based trials, promising community-participatory programs). The sections acknowledge the complexities of applying programs and examine cultural and race-related strengths that exist on an individual and group level but that are typically ignored or underutilized in programmatic efforts.

## WORKING DEFINITIONS

This report focuses on processes and concepts for which working definitions are warranted.

### RESILIENCE

For the purposes of this document, resilience is understood as a fluid process not easily encompassed by a list of protective factors; rather, it is the interaction of strength, resources, and risk factors within context, across space and time. We conceptualize resilience as a dynamic, multidimensional construct that incorporates the bidirectional interaction between individuals and their environments within contexts (family, peer, school and community, society). In the Conceptualizing Resilience chapter, we further elaborate on our working definition of resilience and the conceptual models that inform our characterization.

## RISK AND PROTECTIVE FACTORS

### *Risk*

Resilience research has used *risk* to designate factors that contribute to making certain youth susceptible to unhealthy outcomes. Spencer et al. (2006) defined risk as the “exacerbation of normative challenges encountered in the pursuit of myriad stage-specific competencies and is linked to broad sociopolitical processes (i.e., racism, sexism) and/or lack of resources” (p. 628). Essentially, statistical risk states that all children experiencing a certain risk factor are susceptible; however, statistical risk does not take into account the true or actual risk experienced by an individual child. We endorse the definition of risk articulated by Spencer et al. (2006).

### *Protective Factors*

There are multiple definitions of *protective factors* depending on their use within the conceptualization of the research design. Rutter (1985) defined protective factors as those factors that influence, modify, ameliorate, or alter a person’s response to an environmental risk that predisposes him or her to a maladaptive outcome. Spencer et al. (2006) defined protective factors as “social (e.g., cultural capital) and material (e.g., intergenerational transmission of wealth) resources [that] help individuals to cope with exacerbated normative challenges and thus maximize available supports” (p. 628). Fergus and Zimmerman (2005) discussed protective factors in terms of promotive factors—factors which increase or create a positive outcome or reduce or circumvent a negative outcome. Promotive factors can be individual assets, including competence, coping, and self-efficacy, or external resources, such as parental support, adult mentoring, and youth programs that promote positive development. In this report, protective factors include the presence of assets (e.g., more social supports), as well as factors that reduce risk, as determined by statistical tests.

## RACE, ETHNICITY, AND CULTURE

The concepts of race, ethnicity, and culture have been prominent in efforts to understand the psychological functioning of African American children and youth. In our examination of strength and resilience, we consider these concepts to be critical. Unfortunately, the terms *race*, *ethnicity*, and *culture* are often used interchangeably. We

agree with scholars who have viewed these terms as distinct, yet related, influences on the psychology of the African American experience (Boykin, 1983; Jones, 1991).

For the purposes of this report, we define *race* as a social construct derived from fairly arbitrary classifications based on biological or physical traits/characteristics (e.g., skin color, facial features, hair texture)—classifications used largely to justify the limited opportunities afforded African Americans. For instance, skin color, the most visible and salient phenotypic feature associated with racial categorization and related biases, determined the educational, economic, and occupational opportunities of African Americans during the era of *de jure* segregation, with greater opportunities available to lighter skinned African Americans (Russell, Wilson, & Hall, 1992).

*Ethnicity* refers to social groups with a shared history, sense of identity, geography, and cultural roots that may occur despite racial (color) difference (e.g., dark-skinned vs. light-skinned Jamaicans). Ethnicity shapes a group's culture—the food, language, music, and customs of one's nation of origin—and the interconnection of groups of people on the basis of shared history, nationality, or ancestry. Although ethnicity is often used as a euphemism for race in the United States, we make a distinction in this report.

*Culture* is a system of meaning shared by a segment of a population and transmitted within and across generations. Cultural meaning systems contain an array of fundamental themes that define the preferred functional psychology (e.g., cognitive, emotional, and behavioral inclinations) of individuals, groups, and institutions (Jagers, 1997). The concept of ethnicity is related to culture, since ethnicity refers to groups that share nationality, language, and/or culture. Ethnicity or ethnic group affiliation, however, is often a means through which culture is transmitted (Betancourt & Lopez, 1993).

The scholarly literature has often interchanged the term *African American* with the term *Black*, and Americans of African descent have increasingly used African American as a self-referent. The perceived significance of African American for psychological self-affirmation, cultural identity, and the collective progress of Americans of African descent (Coard & Sellers, 2005; Ghee, 1990) has established a preference for the term. For the purposes of this report, we make a distinction between the terms Black and

African American. When we use Black to refer to race, the term encompasses African Americans. However, Black applies to a myriad of geographic sources including, but not limited to, Africa or the Americas. Some members of Black immigrant communities, such as Senegalese, Jamaicans, Haitians, Nigerians, or Dominicans, have identified themselves more closely with their country of origin than as Black or African American. While critically important, addressing the significant differences documented within the Black community (J. S. Jackson et al., 2007) is beyond the scope of the current report. For the purposes of this report, we have chosen to use African American and to use Black only when cited as such in the referenced literature and/or when within-group distinctions are not made in the referenced literature.

## **GUIDING ASSUMPTIONS**

A number of guiding assumptions have informed the current report.

### **HETEROGENEITY AMONG AFRICAN AMERICANS**

African Americans have not experienced race as a monolithic state, and this report attempts to acknowledge the many ways in which African Americans have experienced and identified with being African American. On the basis of demographic and psychological variations, the African American experience is best thought of as variegated rather than homogeneous. Evidence has shown that within-group distinctions, including physical features (e.g., skin tone), SES, and region of the country, do matter. For example, differences in SES between light- and dark-skinned African Americans were similar in magnitude to the gap in SES between African Americans and European Americans (M. Hughes & Hertel, 1990; Keith & Herring, 1991). We recognize that SES is an important issue for African American youth development. Taking these differences seriously contributes to a better understanding of the ways in which race and other factors influence strength and resilience in diverse segments of African American communities.

Although we have made efforts throughout the report to acknowledge the within-group variations that exist in African American communities, it is important to note that the report focuses on U.S.-born African American children

and adolescents. The significant immigrant Black populations in the United States continue to increase, and we recognize their historical and cultural differences. As noted previously, some members of Black immigrant communities, such as Senegalese, Jamaicans, Haitians, Nigerians, and Dominicans, have identified themselves more closely with their country of origin than as Black or African American (Robotham, 2002). While these groups share an African cultural heritage, the legacy of colonialism has affected each group differently. Foreign-born Blacks may have a different perspective on and experience with this country's history of oppression and associated youth outcomes. As previously stated, an in-depth and comprehensive reporting of such noteworthy variations across Black groups is beyond the scope of the current report.

Similarly, we acknowledge the significant biracial youth population that exists in the United States. Mixed families and the raising of biracial children raise unique concerns and challenges—for example, European American relatives' concerns about the loss of privilege and African American relatives' concerns about the privileges of biracial children compared with their African American (especially darker-skinned) relatives. An in-depth and comprehensive review that considers the unique experiences of biracial youth is beyond the scope of this report.

#### SALIENCY OF SPIRITUALITY, COMMUNALISM, RACIAL IDENTITY, AND RACIAL SOCIALIZATION

African American scholars have documented the ways in which a unique sociocultural history has contributed to the complexity of the African American psychological experience (Boykin, 1983; Jones, 1991). They have drawn attention to key African American cultural themes (e.g., spirituality/religiosity, communalism) and elements of the minority experience (racial identity, racial socialization) as critical resources representing strength and fostering resilience (Boykin, 1983; R. Hill, 1971; Jones 1991; U.S. DHHS, 2001). Spirituality, often studied in terms of the related behavioral construct of religiousness (e.g., church attendance), refers to an appreciation of a shared, unifying vital essence and/or personal beliefs in God or a higher power. Communalism connotes the importance of social bonds and social duties and reflects a fundamental sense of interdependence and primacy of collective well-being.

The minority experience of African Americans has made the development of a positive identity a central task for children and adolescents (Spencer, 1982). Racial identity is a social construct that refers to “a sense of group or collective identity based on one's perception that he or she shares a common heritage with a particular racial group” (Helms, 1993, p. 3). By extension, parental racial socialization is an important buffer against racist experiences. Stevenson (1994a, 1994b) defined racial socialization as the parental instruction to children or family members about racism in society, educational struggles, extended family relevance, spiritual and religious awareness, African American culture and pride, and transmission of child-rearing values. We acknowledge the importance and influence of these scholarly contributions in our conceptualization of African American youth and resilience (see the Conceptualizing Resilience chapter).

#### CULTURALLY CONGRUENT INTERVENTIONS, PROGRAMS, AND COMMUNITY INITIATIVES

Throughout this report, we have acknowledged the translation process (efficacy to effectiveness, theory to practice). While the field has placed increasing emphasis on programs that focus on competence promotion, few programs have infused and evaluated culturally congruent content and delivery strategies. We believe these considerations are crucial to bringing about the optimal well-being of African American youth, and we highlight them where appropriate. We are also interested in existing family and community assets and practices that foster optimal growth and development. These can, in turn, inform the next generation of research and practice targeting this population.

In this report, we consider evidence-based programs used with African American youth, emphasizing those explicitly designed for African American youth, and identify promising programs that are not mainstream or readily cited but that have demonstrated promise. These programs tend to be culturally grounded and use existing assets on the individual, family, and community levels. They tend to be more collaborative and responsive to the identified needs of specific populations (e.g., community-participatory methods used to advocate for and develop children's well-being).

## DISABILITY, GENDER, AND SEXUAL ORIENTATION

Historically, the field of psychology has often reflected ableism, sexism, and heterosexism, leading to the exclusion of accurate information or the promotion of biased information. The inclusion of information on the effects of disability, gender, and sexual orientation in psychological knowledge, theory, and research is an ethical responsibility. While we strove to include available research examining these factors, we acknowledge that the heterogeneity of African American youth specific to these factors is not adequately or fully reflected throughout this report. This is primarily due to a paucity of research in these areas as they relate specifically to resilience and African American children and adolescents. In cases in which more research was available (e.g., on gender), we were also restricted in terms of the level of review and analysis we could provide within the scope of this report. When possible, we consider the ableist, gendered, and heterosexist perspectives of resilience in African American children and adolescents—perspectives which are critical to furthering the field's understanding of the heterogeneity of African American youth.

## SUMMARY

We hope to provide readers with a better understanding of the factors and processes facilitating young African Americans to develop their potential fully. The report is intended to stimulate thinking, reflection, and action by researchers, policymakers, practitioners, and the lay community involved in the lives of African American youth in the 21st century.





# Conceptualizing Resilience

As previously noted, resilience is a dynamic, multidimensional construct that incorporates the bidirectional interaction between individuals and their environments within contexts (family, peer, school and community, society). Resilience is a fluid process not easily captured in a list of protective factors. In this chapter, we elucidate our conceptualization of resilience among African American youth. We present a brief overview of resilience literature and a select group of those models most salient to an understanding of resilience among African American youth. We conclude with a brief portrait of thriving, optimally functioning African American youth (Lerner et al., 2003). We explore this portrait further in our examination of individual domains (e.g., identity) and anchor our recommendations for future research, practice, and policy.

Resilience cannot occur in the absence of real or perceived risk or adversity (Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005; Luthar, Cicchetti, & Becker, 2000; Masten, 2001; Spencer et al., 2006). There has been ongoing debate within the extant literature on the definition, conceptualization, and measurement of resilience. Some scholars have defined resilience as a fixed trait and have used terms like *invincible* and *invulnerable* to describe youth who appear unaffected by stressors that seem to greatly affect their peers (Anthony & Cohler, 1987; Rutter, 1985; Werner & Smith, 1998). Genero (1998) viewed resilience as a relational issue rather than as an individual characteristic. This suggests the need for more ecological models. Walsh (1998) suggested that

being resilient includes more than merely surviving and being a victim for life; it also encompasses the ability to heal and to be empowered to live life fully.

Most theorists and researchers have recognized resilience as a dynamic process (Luthar, Doyle, Suchman, & Mayes, 2001; Rutter, 1985; Spencer et al., 2006) encompassing positive individual adaptation within the context of significant adversity and resources (Luthar et al., 2000, 2001). Spencer et al. (2006) suggested that to be fully understood, resilience requires a multifaceted, context-linked, and systems-oriented human development perspective.

In addition to questions about the definition of resilience, questions about the way in which resilience functions also exist. For example, Luthar et al. (2000) construed resilience as domain-specific. If children living in an under-resourced neighborhood have avoided using drugs, one might consider these children resilient. However, were these children resilient if they underachieved in school? Are there gradients or specific types of resilience? Might it be possible that these children were drug resilient but maybe not school resilient? The possibility of domain-specific resilience has implications for both basic and applied research (Ahern, 2006; Fergus & Zimmerman, 2005; Luthar et al., 2000; Spencer et al., 2006; Tusaie & Dyer, 2004; Winfield, 1994).

To build on and develop an understanding of resilience and strength among African American children and adolescents, we reviewed theories and applied models of

resilience and considered their applicability to African American youth. Regardless of ethnic group or cultural background, most research on resilience among children and youth is atheoretical and does not benefit from systematic theory development and testing. The lack of clear theoretical grounding contributes to the confusion in terms of the conceptualization, operationalization, and measurement of resilience and limits our ability to make meaningful comparisons of results across studies. In addition, previous research on resilience has not included cultural or race-related factors in its examination of how children exposed to stressful situational and life events display adaptive behavior. The few exceptions have considered cultural factors as meaningful components in the process of resilience. There have, however, been some notable exceptions to these general trends (Garmezy, 1996; Sandler, 2001; Spencer et al., 2006).

We were interested in identifying models that reflect the dynamic nature of resilience and allow for accurate understanding and support of African American children and adolescents as they live in the United States. Of greatest importance are the following questions:

- How can research better match the reality of the developmental experience of these youth?
- Which mediators and moderators effectively describe the relation between risk exposure and healthy functioning?
- Can research capture strengths and resources within the African American community not documented or prioritized by the current literature?

Although the answers lie beyond the scope of this report, the questions themselves help to frame the expectations and interpretations for models of resilience among African American youth.

Garmezy, Masten, and Tellegen (1984) outlined three models describing mechanisms through which protective factors might moderate the relation between negative life events and adjustment:

- The *compensatory model* posits that individual and environmental protective factors counter or compensate for the impact of negative life events. Negative life events and protective factors combine additively in their ability to predict child adjustment.
- The *challenge model* postulates that negative life events are linearly related to adaptive behavior only when the number of protective factors is small. When protective factors are high, moderate levels of negative life events may actually enhance adjustment. However, very high levels of negative life events may overwhelm even high numbers of protective factors, and adaptive behavior will decrease.
- The *immunity/vulnerability model* returns to a linear conceptualization of the relationship between negative life events and protective factors. This model does not suggest that negative life events and protective factors are equivalent with different valences but rather that protective factors are more important than the number of negative life events in the prediction of adaptive functioning. This model predicts that increasing negative life events do not affect children who have a significant number of protective factors.

A handful of studies (Garmezy et al., 1984; Y. Jackson, Sifers, Warren, & Velasquez, 2003; Luthar, 1991; Masten et al., 1987) empirically examined the predictions made from these models. Y. Jackson and Frick (1998) investigated which of these three models best represented the data derived from their examination of negative life events in school-age children and found support for the compensatory model. For example, girls with fewer reports of significant negative life events and significant social support had fewer internalizing problems than girls who reported negative life events and low social support. In another study, Y. Jackson and Warren (2000) found that social support, positive family environment, and intelligence operated as protective factors.

Masten et al. (1987) examined the effects of negative life events and protective factors on school-based adaptive functioning in a community sample of 205 children ages 8 to 13. Using IQ scores, gender, SES, and parenting quality



as protective factors, this study yielded results consistent with the immunity model. Specifically, higher IQ scores, positive parenting, and higher SES predicted low classroom disruptiveness, regardless of the level or number of negative life events the child experienced in the past year.

Garmezly et al. (1984) also tested these models by using measures of school-based competence (e.g., engagement vs. disengagement in the classroom, disruptive behavior, achievement) as the criterion variables and IQ score, SES, gender, and age as the protective factors. The results showed that children with low IQ scores demonstrated a decrease in achievement as negative life events increased. However, children with high IQ scores did not vary in achievement as negative life events increased, lending support for the immunity/vulnerability model.

Other models of resilience have reflected a more ecological approach to resilience. For example, Mischel and Shoda's (1995) Cognitive-Affective Personality System (CAPS) theory suggests that individual competency cannot be understood unless it is conceptualized in relation to the environment. They proposed that program developers intentionally create opportunities for examining how an African American child's expectancies, goals, and values interact with his or her surroundings. Furthermore, they suggested that the CAPS theory provides an understanding of resilience from a phenomenological perspective, which includes understanding how a youth's motivation and goals give meaning to his or her behavior. Freitas and Downey (1998) stated that CAPS contributes to advancing the process approach of resilience through context, psychological mediating units (i.e., expectancies, encodings, competencies, affects, goals), and the organization of psychological mediators in relation to one another and to relevant features of the context.

Sandler (2001) proposed an ecological approach to resilience that is also a more process-oriented model. According to Sandler, understanding youth resilience requires that investigators consider the quality of risk exposure over time. Risks are threats to an individual's basic human goals (e.g., physical safety, social relations, positive self-evaluation) and ability to achieve competence in his or her desired social roles in various contexts (i.e., developmental tasks). Sandler argued that potential protective factors are best described as occurring on multiple levels: individual, social, family, com-

munity, and cultural. In regard to the latter, cultural resources are important and may be more or less available to ethnic minorities.

Resources or potential protective factors influence outcomes in the same fashion as does risk, in that resources affect the quality and ecology of risk experiences (Sandler, 2001). Resources operate to prevent the occurrence of risk (e.g., wearing a seat belt), to reduce the negative impact of exposure to risk (e.g., support from a friend after the death of a loved one), or to counteract the effect of risk by increasing positive internal motivation and developmental competence (e.g., learning from mistakes). Moreover, resources can have their effects at the individual, micro-, and macrosystem levels of the child's life (Hofboll, 1998; Sandler et al., 2003).

Over time, models of resilience have become more ecologically focused, reflecting a generally understood and accepted principle that youth develop in context and that consideration of context is fundamental to any serious effort to understand development and experience. There has increasingly been an incorporation of the individual's feelings and perceptions of his or her experience, as well as an understanding of the ways in which multiple environmental factors contribute to risk and protective factors. However, not systematically or explicitly incorporated within the ecological framing of resilience are factors that specifically encompass the race/ethnicity and cultural experiences of the child. We contend that the incorporation of these factors is important in understanding and promoting strength and resilience among African American youth.

## **AFRICAN AMERICAN YOUTH AND RESILIENCE**

Among the various theoretical models for studying ethnic youth (e.g., those presented by Coll et al., 1996), the Phenomenological Variant of Ecological Systems Theory (PVEST; Spencer et al., 2006) best serves as the basis for our thinking about strength and resilience as they relate to African American youth. PVEST is particularly relevant because it is one of the only—if not the only—theoretical paradigms that addresses the ecological contextual circumstances (e.g., racism) unique to youths of color in the United States (Coll et al., 1996). PVEST attempts to integrate social, historical, and cultural context within the

normative developmental process for African American youth (see Spencer et al., 2006, for a complete review). The hallmark of the PVEST model is that it links multiple contexts and individual perceptions in a recursive, cyclical fashion. Central to the theory are individuals' perceptions of their experiences and their self-appraisal throughout their development. Spencer et al. (2006) noted that these are particularly relevant for adolescents, as identity formation is a key aspect of adolescents' development, and their awareness of self and context becomes heightened as a function of this developmental emphasis. According to Spencer et al. (2006), PVEST "aids in explaining the frequent diversity obtained for specific life-stage coping outcomes by demonstrating the undergirding mechanisms by which individuals (1) balance new risks against protective factors, (2) encounter new stressors, (3) establish new coping strategies, and (4) redefine how they view themselves, which also impacts how others view them." (pp. 642–643). PVEST is a rare example of a theoretical rendering that attempts to map for resilience processes of African American youth from a cultural-ecological perspective.

One of our goals was to support a paradigm shift in the way in which the field of psychology views and portrays African American youth. We contend that understanding resilience among African American youth requires acknowledging their experience in the United States and appreciating the continuing legacy of oppression and discrimination that affects their daily lives. We are limited in our selection of theories or models that incorporate this context. PVEST is a welcome example of a theory that incorporates this sociohistorical perspective. We believe that this is a step in the right direction, but the need for significant conceptual, theoretical, and empirical research remains.

There is limited research examining resilience within the African American community that reflects its health and strength. The task force calls for resilience research

that considers the interaction between societal forces and individual development in all contexts of African American youths' lives. Our review of the literature on resilience and models of resilience highlights the significant gaps in definition and theory that limit an understanding of resilience, especially for African American youth. Despite these limitations, this body of research provides an important foundation upon which to build.

In the following section, we offer our conceptualization of a healthy, optimally functioning African American child given the sociohistorical experiences of African Americans in the United States. We offer this rudimentary conceptualization as a part of our proposed paradigm shift and to further the understanding of strengths and resilience among African American youth in sociohistorical context.

## **TOWARD A VISION OF THRIVING AND OPTIMAL DEVELOPMENT**

In developing an optimal example of resilience for African American children and adolescents, we faced the dilemma of articulating a healthy, optimally functioning African American child or adolescent. To consider the present-day African American child's or adolescent's assimilation into oppressive social institutions and circumstances is not sufficient and only perpetuates the

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status quo that is plagued with disparities untenable for the positive health and well-being of the African American community or for the United States as a whole. For African American children and adolescents to develop into individuals actively engaged in optimal personal and collective development, they must be placed "at promise" as opposed to "at risk" (Boykin, 2000) in order to become contributing members of their families, schools,

communities, and the broader society. In this way, they will emerge as agents for meaningful and sustainable positive change within a participatory democratic framework and thrive.



*Thriving*, a term rooted in the notion of idealized personhood, implies an adult status marked by culturally valued contributions to self, others, and institutions (Csikszentmihalyi & Rathunde, 1998). According to Lerner et al. (2003), thriving or healthy development involves positive changes in relations between the committed, able contributor and the supporting social contexts

(e.g., family, community) that cultivate idealized personhood. A brief sketch of idealized personhood for present-day African American youth for each of the developmental domains featured in this report follows. We offer this sketch within the context of domains to facilitate readability; however, we recognize the integrated nature of resilience processes and outcomes.

## A PORTRAIT OF RESILIENT, OPTIMALLY FUNCTIONING AFRICAN AMERICAN YOUTH

### IDENTITY DOMAIN

Positive, gendered, racial identities are essential to the personal and collective well-being of African American youth. A communal or extended self-identity (Allen & Bagozzi, 2001) fosters productive and spiritually anchored social relationships within and across diverse groups. For example, an African American male adolescent with a positive sense of himself engages in self-affirming peer relationships while simultaneously viewing females in a positive and respectful light.

### EMOTIONAL DOMAIN

Oppressive conditions and marginalization make it necessary for African American youth to develop constructive ways to cope with destructive emotions like envy and anger. The cultivation and appropriate application of other-oriented emotions (e.g., empathy/sympathy) and self-sanctioning emotions (e.g., guilt) are essential and require emotional awareness, perspective taking, and a flexible form of emotional regulation supporting balanced, situationally appropriate emotional expression.

### SOCIAL DOMAIN

We believe that the prevailing societal emphasis on individual material attainment undermines collective growth and well-being. We view morally engaged, prosocial behavior as an essential element of our conception of African American youth placed at promise. The effective management of negative social interaction is necessary but not sufficient for optimal functioning. Youth should behave in a fashion that reflects genuine respect and concern for the well-being of family,

school, and community. Normative communal behavior will foster and be fostered by a sense of collective agency/efficacy and provide for lifelong civic engagement and service. In the social domain, optimally functioning youth see themselves as positive change agents.

### COGNITIVE DOMAIN

High academic achievement should be part and parcel of any description of optimal adolescent functioning; however, academic performance is a narrow conception of cognitive functioning and is not sufficient for the type of youth we envision. Youth should be self-motivated to critically examine and understand themselves and the world around them. This critical mindedness requires not only fundamental academic skills (e.g., literacy, math), but also an interest in seeking out relevant information combined with higher order information processing (e.g., analysis, synthesis, problem-solving) skills.

### PHYSICAL HEALTH DOMAIN

Many of the health disparities plaguing African Americans result from lifestyle choices and ecologically rooted determinants of health. Personal movement toward optimal health reflects a rejection of dietary and activity patterns that increase negative health outcomes. Constructive choices concerning nutrition, physical/mental exercise, substance use, and sexual behavior support desired intellectual, emotional, and social growth. At a community and societal level, fostering resilience in physical health includes advocacy for access to quality health care and the opportunities for healthy living (e.g., nontoxic living environments).

The portrait of resilience and optimal functioning on the previous page reflects four cross-cutting themes of African American thriving: critical mindedness, active engagement, flexibility, and communalism. These themes are not inconsistent with the six Cs associated with positive youth development: *competence, confidence, connection, character, caring, and contribution* (King et al., 2005) but provide a crisper focus for scholarship on African American youth:

**Critical mindedness** helps protect against experiences of discrimination and facilitates a critique of existing social conditions.

**Active engagement** includes agentic behavior in school, at home, and with peers, such that children and adolescents proactively and positively impact their environment. Impact on settings, however, must be executed effectively, and flexibility becomes essential.

**Flexibility** promotes adaptation to cognitive, emotional, social, and physical situational demands and can include bicultural competence or fluency across multiple cultural contexts that youth must traverse.

**Communalism** includes the importance of social bonds and social duties, reflects a fundamental sense of interdependence and primacy of collective well-being, and offers the drive for connection and promotion within and across diverse groups.

## SUMMARY

In this chapter, we have provided a limited review of the resilience literature and suggest that historically, this literature did not effectively include racial/ethnic or cultural factors that provide sources of resilience to the African American community. The study of the dynamic process of resilience in African American youth must include socio-historical context, and some contemporary researchers have begun to present more ecological models that conceptualize resilience as a process embedded in multiple layers (e.g., individual, environmental) of experience. Although Spencer et al.'s (2006) PVEST model makes a seminal and important contribution to the study of resilience among African American children and youth, it was a challenge to find a culturally grounded theory reflecting idealized personhood that supports the meaningful social change critical to the African American community.

As a result, we derived four dimensions we think contribute to optimally fostering resilience in African American children and adolescents. In the next five chapters, we review resilience among African American youth within five domains: identity, emotional, social, cognitive, and health. Where possible, we infuse the four dimensions presented in this chapter to further explicate our conception of optimally functioning African American youth.





# Identity Development

## **NORMATIVE TASKS**

School-age children develop a sense of competence and a clearer sense of self, and they become more comfortable with their personality traits, attributes, skills, and abilities. They also develop self-esteem, the evaluative component of self-concept, and self-efficacy, defined as feelings of competence or the potential for mastery in an area (e.g., reading, athletics) (Berger, 2004). As older-school-age children begin to develop a sense of perspective taking, they become aware that others have perceptions of their identity (Selman, 1971), and they begin to move from a conceptual understanding of race and gender based on physical attributes to a social perspective that includes an awareness of the sociopolitical context of culture (Alejandro-Wright, 1999; Quintana, 1998). Identity development, then, includes both an understanding of the self and a reference (self) group orientation with comparisons to the dominant group.

There are generally three components influencing the development of the self (Schwarzbaum & Thomas, 2008):

- The notion of the self—individual characteristics, such as dimensions of temperament, unique personality traits, characteristics, and abilities.
- The ideal self—traits and characteristics to which a person aspires.

- The self as reflected in the perceptions of others—an understanding that others have perceptions of traits, characteristics, and abilities based on stereotypes and assumptions (Oyserman, Klemmmeier, Fryberg, Brosh, & Hart-Johnson, 2003).

## **IDENTITY, RESILIENCE, AND STRENGTH**

Positive identity may serve as an area of resilience and strength in a variety of ways for African American children and adolescents, who must develop a positive sense of self in a society that can often devalue them through negative stereotypes, assumptions, and expectations (Cross, 1995). Having a negative sense of self can lead to significant risks for children and adolescents. Negative racial identity in African Americans has been theoretically and empirically linked to low self-esteem, problems with psychological adjustment, low school achievement, school drop out, teenage pregnancy, gang involvement, eating disorders, drug abuse, and involvement in crime (Cross, 1991; Poussaint, 1990). African American children need to resist oppression so that it does not become internalized and lead to negative outcomes. For example, many African Americans have internalized Eurocentric standards of beauty, preferring lighter skin or more Eurocentric facial features. Colorism is a risk factor for low self-esteem in African American children and adolescents (Breland, Coleman, Coard, & Steward, 2002; Coard, Breland, & Raskin, 2001).



The portrait of resilient, optimally functioning African American youth that we present here postulates that positive identity development for African American youth involves multiple identity factors, particularly race and gender. Identity for African Americans is not an individual or autonomous sense of functioning as is often reflected in European culture. Rather, positive identity is an extended sense of self embedded within the African collective (Allen & Bagozzi, 2001). This notion of extended self helps to foster and promote productive and spiritually anchored interpersonal relationships within and across diverse groups. For African American youth, identity development includes the notion of critical consciousness (Watts, Abdul-Adil, & Pratt, 2002). Youth need to be able to understand the reality and influence of racism and to flesh out perceptions of others and stereotypes as they develop their own sense of self.

Identity is also related to academic engagement. As youth feel more positive about themselves and gain a better understanding of their history and heritage, they will be able to engage themselves more critically in learning that matches their sense of self. Communalism allows youth to develop both an extended sense of self and should be developed within a collective kinship network. Identity development is fluid, and although identity is multidimensional, one or more dimensions of identity may have more salience given particular circumstances.

Protective factors related to identity development include an African sense of self, positive racial identity as an individual protective factor, and racial socialization as a contextual protective factor. Positive racial identity has been empirically linked to increased psychological adaptation and functioning, as well as increased self-esteem in adults (Carter, 1991; Parham & Helms, 1985a, 1985b). It is critical to understand how self-concept, racial identity, and racial socialization serve as protective factors for African American children and adolescents.

## PROTECTIVE FACTORS

### INDIVIDUAL PROTECTIVE FACTORS

#### *Self-Concept*

Many psychologists have theorized that self-concept for African Americans includes an African self derived from Africentric culture and the influences of the institution of slavery. The African self strives toward self-determination and fulfillment and the ability to develop self-knowledge. Other models have included the importance of spiritual-

ity, a sense of harmony, unity, and communalism (Myers, 1988).

Allen and Bagozzi (2001) summarized theoretical perspectives on the African self, which include a sense of *we* instead of *I* and take into account the collective nature of African societies. The self is defined according to its function within the group and its ability to promote the survival and well-being of the group. Having

a sense of attachment, belonging, and affirmation helps children and adolescents develop a cohesive sense of self. In fact, most theories on the African self postulate that adopting Eurocentric values, particularly an emphasis on individualism and autonomy, may be unhealthy for African Americans and lead to negative outcomes (Allen & Bagozzi, 2001).

The portrait of resilience described earlier includes an extended sense of self, one that reflects the communal nature of African Americans. Research has not explored this issue for children and adolescents. Instead, limited research has focused on racial awareness and racial identity. It could be hypothesized that African American children and adolescents whose sense of self includes Africentric values and characteristics have healthier and more optimal outcomes and are more resilient in adverse conditions. In a sample of college students, Cokley (2005) found that endorsement of Africentric values along with ethnic identity was negatively related to internalized racialism, a form of internalized oppression that includes negative perspectives on African Americans. More research is needed on the relationship between African/Africentric cultural values and the African sense of self, risk, and resilience in African American children and adolescents.

### ***Self-Esteem***

Researchers and psychologists have been concerned about the self-esteem of African American children and adolescents since the Clark doll studies, in which African American children and adolescents selected White dolls as being good, prettier, and nicer than Black dolls (K. B. Clark & Clark, 1950), leading to the conclusion that African American children have low self-esteem. Research exploring this issue, however, has consistently found that the self-esteem of African Americans across the life span was higher than that of European Americans (Gray-Little & Hafdahl, 2000; Greene & Way, 2005). For most adolescents, self-esteem begins to plummet; however, the change in self-esteem is smaller in African Americans than in European Americans, particularly among African American girls, whose higher self-esteem carries into adulthood (Gray-Little & Hafdahl, 2000). A meta-analysis examining racial comparisons of self-esteem has demonstrated that African American children had higher scores on various self-esteem measures than European American children and that the self-esteem differences for Black and African American children increase with age and is higher for girls (Gray-Little & Hafdahl, 2000).

One particular area in which self-esteem has served as a source of resilience for African American girls is body image. In a large national sample, Brown and colleagues (1998) found that global self-worth remained fairly stable for African American girls across time, along with feelings of social acceptance. Siegel, Yancy, Aneshensel, and Schuler (1999) also found that compared with other groups, African American girls had the most positive body image. Similarly, Nishina, Ammon, Bellmore, and Graham (2006) found that African American girls reported lower levels of body dissatisfaction than did other ethnic or gender groups. Research has not explored whether these differences occur because of socialization messages that focus on critically deconstructing European values of beauty.

### ***Racial Awareness***

Developmental psychologists have recognized the importance of racial awareness in preschool and early-school-age children. While children may be able to categorize themselves racially, they must develop the cognitive skills for appropriate classification and an understanding of the

sociopolitical connotations of race. Alejandro-Wright (1985, 1999) developed a classification model for racial awareness in children. In the first stage, children form racial classifications based on global characteristics, including skin color. They classify individuals who are darker in complexion, regardless of actual racial designation, as Black and all individuals with lighter complexions as White. As children age, they begin to make more refined distinctions and classifications, using not only skin color but also hair texture and color and facial features as a gauge.

At around age 8, as children develop more concrete cognitive abilities, they more accurately categorize individuals' race on the basis of differences in skin tones and shades. After age 8, children begin to understand that race has sociopolitical connotations that influence individuals' perceptions of self and identity. This realization produces depression and anxiety in some children, and they may become hypersensitive to others' perceptions (Alejandro-Wright, 1999). These feelings may be more pronounced for children living and socialized in predominantly mainstream neighborhoods and schools (Tatum, 1987). Children who display resilience may not be easily overwhelmed by negative stereotypes and biases.

Parental socialization has an important effect on racial awareness (Alejandro-Wright, 1999). The manner in which parents emphasize race and racial differences influences children's self-perceptions, so psychologists should understand the importance of the socialization process. African American children and adolescents who learn that others have negative perspectives of African Americans but who have these messages mediated by parents, peers, and other important adults are less likely to have negative outcomes and more likely to be resilient in adverse conditions. Socialization is also critical because it helps to shape racial identity and self-concept, an important task for late-school-age children and adolescents (Alejandro-Wright, 1999).

Racial awareness is linked to critical mindedness or consciousness in the portrait of resilience. Children need to be taught racial pride along with the skills to deconstruct racism. More research on this concept and the factors that influence it is needed to provide avenues to promote resilience.

### ***Racial Identity***

Identity development, which begins in late-school-age children and early adolescence, is a complex process in which individuals begin to solidify their sense of self, ideals, values, and belief systems. Identity integrates self-concept, self-esteem, and perceptions of future development; it includes an awareness of group membership, expectations, social responsibilities, and privileges according to group membership (Spencer, 1988). Adolescents ask the critical question “Who am I?” as they explore their personalities, careers and vocational goals, and values and beliefs. Identity development occurs within a contextual framework that includes ecosystemic factors such as family, peers, school, community, media, sociopolitical systems, economics, and cultural norms. As African American children and adolescents develop, the ecosystem poses unique challenges for them, including racism, discrimination, and challenges created by poverty and urban conditions (Yasui, Dorham, & Dishion, 2004).

There are several postulated models on identity and ethnic and racial identity development that are relevant to an understanding of African American children and adolescents. Marcia’s (1966) universal model of identity development suggests that adolescents progress developmentally from tacitly accepting parental values, norms, and beliefs to exploring their own values as they develop their sense of self. This individual exploration and ego development comprise four statuses: (a) in the *identity diffusion status*, individuals have not committed to a particular identity, nor have they begun to explore their identity; (b) in the *identity foreclosure status*, individuals seem tacitly to accept the opinions of influential others in their lives, usually without any exploration, moratorium, or identity achievement; (c) in the *moratorium status*, individuals are actively involved with identity exploration but have not committed to a particular ego identity; and (d) in the *achieved status*, individuals have committed to a particular identity after exploring the meaning of identity.

The model as originally proposed assumed a linear progression, but in its reconceptualization, both foreclosed and achieved statuses occur after exploration (Marcia, 1989). Higher levels of identity achievement are related to higher levels of psychological well-being (Marcia, 1989).

Racial identity is the part of an individual’s self-concept or sense of self related to group membership status and perceptions of membership. While all adolescents must begin to answer the question “Who am I?”, African American children and adolescents must also answer the question “Who am I as an African American?” (Tatum, 1997). Positive racial identity contributes to the strength and resilience of African American children and adolescents in several ways:

- Families, peers, and community systems (e.g., churches) embedded in Africentric cultural values and beliefs provide socialization experiences that enrich identity.
- A positive sense of ethnic self provides a buffer for individuals from racism and discrimination. Racial discrimination is related to psychological distress, low self-esteem, internalizing and externalizing behaviors, and poorer school performance (Sellers, Copeland-Linder, Martin, Lewis, 2006).
- Positive racial identity is associated with positive global self-esteem (Phinney, Chavira, & Williamson, 1992), which serves as a protective factor.

Understanding the racial identity process of children and adolescents is critical in promoting resilience.

On the basis of Marcia’s (1966) model, Phinney’s (1992) model of ethnic identity draws from social identity and developmental theories and has three developmental stages. The first stage includes tacitly accepting an ethnic identity based on the attitudes of family, communities, or society. The second stage occurs after the individual begins to explore—usually after a crisis—his or her ethnic identity and includes efforts to understand the history of the culture. In the final stage, an achieved ethnic identity occurs after cultural exploration and includes a commitment to the cultural group, values, and a sense of affirmation and belonging (Phinney, 1996).

Phinney’s resulting Multigroup Ethnic Identity Measure (MEIM; 1992) has been widely used with African American middle-school children, adolescents, and college students. Research suggests that adolescents do change in

the nature of their ethnic identity, moving from a more diffuse status to an achieved status, particularly when they reach late adolescence or college age (Seaton, Scottham, & Sellers, 2006; Yip, Seaton, & Sellers, 2006). While Marcia's (1996) model and the MEIM are useful for comparison studies across ethnic groups, they do not capture the unique cultural norms and values that manifest themselves in the racial identity of African American youth. Research needs to include models that include Africentric perspectives and experiences of oppression as they relate to the sense of self.

The most widely researched model on racial identity development of African Americans is a four-stage model developed in 1971 by Cross (1995) in response to changes brought to African American identity as a result of the civil rights movement. The *preencounter* stage has three characteristics: assimilation (pro-American values and low salience to race), miseducation (negative stereotypes about African Americans), and self-hatred (negative attitudes about the self due to race). The *encounter* stage occurs after an experience that changes an individual's awareness of race and is characterized by confusion, depression, or alarm. In *immersion/emersion*, individuals have an overromanticized immersion into Black culture (intense Black involvement) or strong feelings against White culture and values (anti-White). *Internalization* is characterized by working to empower the Black community (Black nationalist) or by Black self-acceptance with other cultural variables emphasized (bicultural and multicultural) (Vandiver, Fhagen-Smith, Cokley, Cross, & Worrell, 2001).

A third model of racial identity, by Sellers, Smith, Shelton, Rowley, and Chavous (1998), has provided a framework for understanding both the significance of race in the self-concept of African Americans and the qualitative meaning attributed to being a member of the racial category. The model assumes that identity is both situationally influenced and a stable property of the individual, the individual has multiple identities within a hierarchical structure, and the individual's perception is the most valid indicator of identity; the model focuses on the status of identity, not identity development.

There are four dimensions to racial identity in Sellers et al.'s (1998) model. *Racial salience* refers to the extent to which a person defines him- or herself with regard to race; this is relatively stable across situations. *Racial centrality*

is more reactive and is relevant at a particular moment. *Racial regard* has an evaluative component and includes private regard (individual evaluation of self and other African Americans) and public regard (others' views of African Americans). Finally, within *racial ideology*, there are four prevalent ideologies: the nationalist perspective emphasizes the uniqueness of being African American and a belief in the importance of African Americans controlling their own destiny without the input of other groups. The oppressed minority ideology recognizes the oppression experienced by all minority groups. The assimilation ideology emphasizes similarities in African Americans and other American (European American) groups. The humanist emphasizes the similarities of all humans. Sellers and colleagues (1998) developed a scale to assess racial identity, the Multidimensional Inventory of Black Identity (MIBI), used with adolescents and college-age students. There is also a version for teenagers.

Research on the influence of racial identity on the psychological functioning of children and adolescents has been limited and has mostly focused on convenience samples of college-age students and adults. The research has also differed in the measures used, from qualitative interviews to the MEIM, the MIBI, and measures developed specifically for children and adolescents (Resnicow, Soler, Braithwaite, Selassie, & Smith, 1999; E. P. Smith & Brookins, 1997). Regardless of the measures used, some general conclusions can be drawn that help to explain resilience and strength in African American children and adolescents:

- Positive and more developed racial identity is related to positive self-esteem (T. R. Buckley & Carter, 2005; Greene, Way, & Pahl, 2006; Rowley, Sellers, Chavous, & Smith, 1998; Sellers et al., 2006). As racial identity is an essential component of self-concept, the values that children place on group membership influence self-perception and self-esteem.
- Positive racial identity seems to buffer acts of racism, discrimination, or prejudice faced by African American children and adolescents. For example, Greene and colleagues (2006) found that ethnic identity affirmation served as a buffer for the negative effects of discrimination on self-esteem. A sense

of affirmation and belonging to the racial group also mediated or reduced the influence of racial discrimination. It is important for children and adolescents to have a healthy sense of their racial group membership to buffer the internalization of negative stereotypes and perceptions.

- Racial identity seems to promote psychological well-being and reduce psychological symptoms, particularly depression and anxiety. Sellers and colleagues (2006) found that private regard—the internal beliefs and perspectives on race—was related to depression, with more positive feelings about being African American related to lower levels of depression. Private regard was also related to lower levels of perceived stress and higher psychological well-being.

More research is needed on racial identity as it relates to resilience in African American children and adolescents. Psychologists need to better understand how positive racial identity serves as a protective mechanism against oppression and how it is related to overall self-concept and psychological well-being. Positive racial identity seems to be related to an ability to critically deconstruct experiences of oppression and racism. For African American youth to be able to thrive, they need to engage in critical consciousness. While research has begun to explore the influence of racial identity as a buffer for oppression, research lags in understanding the process by which this occurs, particularly the role in critical consciousness. The field has also not begun to address the contextual influences on racial identity development. Psychologists need to address the linear fashion of the models and whether it may be more appropriate to conceptualize them in a recursive fashion.

### ***Other Identity Components***

Research has only recently begun to explore other cultural identity factors for African American children and adolescents, including gender identity and sexual orientation. To have a more complete picture of resilience, psychology needs to develop a new conceptual framework for understanding multiple identities. Psychologists and researchers need to understand the complexities and challenges of multiple identities and the influence on functioning and

development. For example, racial identity may be gendered and influenced by social class, sexual orientation, and/or ability status.

**Gender identity development.** *Gender* refers to psychological, social, and cultural features and characteristics associated with being male or female (Gilbert & Scher, 1999). Gender, like race, is an interactive social process and is socially constructed as individuals develop gender identity. Gender socialization occurs in a cultural context shaped in part by race and SES. Gender identity has been examined through two distinct frameworks. The first framework, investigated through decades of research, emphasizes children's sociocognitive capacity for self-labeling and the way in which children are socialized to differentiate who is male and who is female (C. L. Martin, Ruble, & Szkrybalo, 2002). The second framework examines the disjunction between one's psychological sense of gender and one's birth sex, as occurs in those identifying as transgender. Both frameworks are considered below.

The sociocognitive approach to gender is similar to racial/ethnic identity models, which suggest that children and adolescents move from having superficial or naïve beliefs regarding gender, gender role expectations, and gender identity to developing a more sophisticated understanding of the sociopolitical connotations of gender. In the initial stage of gender identity development, children categorize gender according to superficial physical characteristics, including hair length and style of dress, and believe that gender is reversible. Gender stability, the second step, includes the knowledge that gender is stable and remains the same over time (e.g., boys grow to be men). Gender constancy is the third stage, in which children realize that gender is permanent and will not change regardless of appearance. Children and adolescents then develop a clearer understanding of the social connotations of gender and gender role expectations (Broderick & Blewitt, 2006; Kohlberg, 1966).

Helms (1990) developed a four-stage model of womanist identity. In the first stage, *preencounter*, women have traditional gender roles and behave in ways that devalue women. The second stage, *encounter*, occurs when individual women have experiences that cause them to question previously held beliefs. In the *immersion/emersion* stage, idealization of women occurs, as well as rejection of male



definitions of women. This stage is later characterized by an exploration of positive values of womanhood. Finally, in *internalization*, the new definition of womanhood is incorporated into self-concept.

Research in adults has found relationships between womanist identity and self-esteem, perceptions of environmental bias, and gender role expectations (Carter & Parks, 1996; Ossana, Helms, & Leonard, 1992). This model is one that may need to be studied as it relates to African American girls. The stage progression includes a notion of critical consciousness and deconstruction of societal gender role expectations. The nature of womanhood for African Americans may also include a communal component in which girls are raised to value relationships and connectedness.

There is a growing recognition that the constructs of gender and race are intertwined and influence psychological functioning in differing ways (A. J. Thomas & King, 2007). As African American boys and girls develop their identity and gender role perspectives, they must determine how to reconcile negative images and stereotypes and experiences of oppression into their identities and self-concepts. African American girls have to negotiate the images of African American women presented to them, from the all-giving nurturer, to the angry, hostile girl who rolls her head and curses people out, to the scantily clad girls in music videos who use their sexuality to gain status and material goods or to manipulate men (Stephens & Phillips, 2003). Research has suggested that African American girls have been socialized to be independent, with an emphasis on self-determination and education (Bowman & Howard, 1985; A.J. Thomas & King, 2007) as a way to promote resilience over the oppression of the negative stereotypes and images. Buckley and Carter (2005) examined racial identity and gender role expectations for girls and found that African American girls with more masculine or androgynous gender roles had higher levels of self-esteem. Constantine, Alleyne, Wallace, and Franklin-Jackson (2006) found that

girls who endorsed Africentric beliefs also had higher levels of self-esteem.

Similarly, African American boys have to develop a positive identity in a society that portrays them as violent, highly sexualized, and as having poor impulse control (A. J. Franklin & Boyd-Franklin, 2000). The effects of the images and stereotypes of African American men have led to what A. J. Franklin (1999) termed “the invisibility syndrome.” Society’s fear of and tendency to ignore African American men lead them to feel that others are treating them as if they have no worth. The invisibility syndrome is the in-

ner struggle when one’s abilities, personality, and sense of worth are not valued because of oppression. Feelings of being discounted or invisible may lead men to feel invalidated. As a result of experiences of racism and oppression, men are socialized to develop the “cool pose,” as coined by Majors and Billson (1993), a stance that demonstrates a quiet emotional strength and invulnerability. The cool pose helps men reclaim masculinity through physical

posture, style, and speaking (Diemer, 2002). African American boys are socialized to develop specific coping strategies for racism and oppression and for racial pride (A. J. Thomas & Speight, 1999). Learning to cope with racism effectively and developing critical consciousness help African American boys to be resilient.

**Disability identity development.** The disability identity development model (Gibson, 2006) intends to facilitate awareness of the identity development of a person with life-long disabilities by providing insight into his or her possible perceptions and struggles. This model encompasses three stages. We highlight Stage 1, *passive awareness*, which is most applicable to children and adolescents. Characteristics of this stage include the child’s not having a role model of disability or having his or her medical needs met while being taught to deny the social aspects of disability. In turn, the disability can become a silent member of the family; the child may learn codependent behavior and become the “good boy/good girl” so as not to add additional stresses to the family and may shy away from attention. It is during

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this stage of identity development that the child may begin to form an image of self with a disability as being “less than” individuals from the able-bodied world.

Understanding the disability identity process of children and adolescents is critical in promoting resilience. Additionally, culturally diverse clients with disabilities often experience simultaneous oppression within society, belonging to two or more marginalized groups depending on their layers (e.g., gender, sexual orientation, SES) (Gibson, 2007). More in-depth research is needed on disability identity and African American youth.

**Transgender identity.** There is increasing recognition of the needs of youth who experience their own inner sense of gender as being different from their birth sex (APA, 2006a; J. I. Martin & Yonkin, 2006). Transgender African American youth may be at particular risk for drug use and risky sexual activity (Grossman & D’Augelli, 2007). A recent study showed that in a sample of young male-to-females, or biological males who wish to live and be recognized as women, almost half of the youth reported having difficulty finding food, employment, and a safe place to sleep. In addition, the African Americans in the sample, compared to youth from other racial and ethnic groups, were more likely to report being HIV-positive (Garofalo, Deleon, Osmer, Doll, & Harper, 2006).

The gender and racial identity development of transgender African American youth is not well understood (Mallon & DeCrescenzo, 2006). Children as young as 2 and 3 years old have expressed discomfort with their birth sex and later identified as transgender (Schwarzbaum & Thomas, 2008). For these children and youth, exploration of their inner sense of gender may be met with hostility from family members and peers (Mallon & DeCrescenzo, 2006). Thus, the exploration phase of gender identity or the transition stage from one gender identity to another may be delayed, obstructed, or result in alienation from loved ones.

Typical protective factors, such as family, teacher, and peer support, may be less common if adults pathologize transgender youths’ struggles with gender identity. Resilience for transgender African American youth includes successfully coping with racism and the stigma and discrimination facing those who violate gender norms (Mallon & DeCrescenzo, 2006). They may need to seek out and actively engage with caring adults and peers in commu-

nity centers or support groups designed specifically to meet the needs of this marginalized group (Lepischak, 2004).

**Sexual orientation.** Identity models for sexual minorities are similar to ethnic and gender identity in terms of the “coming-out” process and integration of sexual orientation into self-concept. In the initial stage, the individual experiences confusion regarding sexual orientation, which can be followed by sexual exploration. Identity integration includes the coming-out process, resolving internalized feelings of homophobia, and becoming involved in gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transgendered (GLBT) social activities (Rosario, Schrimshaw, & Hunter, 2004). This process of coming out may be more complicated for African American youth, as they simultaneously experience homophobia within the African American community and racism within the GLBT community (Ryan & Gruskin, 2006). Given this complexity, resilience for African American GLBT youth may include developing a shared sense of safety, which buffers discriminatory experiences from multiple communities.

Documenting how one group of African American gay young men insulated themselves from such discrimination, Blackburn (2005) recorded a private vocabulary used among the men. Blackburn theorized that the use of the private vocabulary was an act of agency to protect a shared space for African American gay youth that was distinct from that of European American gay and heterosexual communities. Their active engagement in developing supportive networks can be viewed as a form of resilience. Similarly, another form of resilience may be demonstrated by GLBT youth who develop a critical consciousness about the interconnections between homophobia and racism and subsequently take action to disrupt these processes in multiple communities.

Savin-Williams and Diamond (2000) identified the heterogeneity of sexual identity exploration between males and females. Compared to female sexual minorities, male sexual minorities were more likely to have same-sex sexual contact before self-labeling as nonheterosexual. This may reflect males’ discomfort with an emerging identity as a sexual minority. Such discomfort, in fact, seems to be higher among African American GLBT youth than among youth from other racial and ethnic groups (Rosario et al., 2004). These teens may have difficulty turning to their family members for support—in fact, families can often contribute to teens’

alienation and struggle (Kruks, 1991). When parents do not know about or react negatively to teens' sexual orientation, teens have more mental health difficulties (D'Augelli, 2002). Without additional supports for identity exploration, a teen's ability to develop a healthy sense of self and adaptive coping mechanisms may be delayed. More research is needed to understand the influence of the complexity of multiple identity factors, including race, gender, and sexual orientation and to understand the impact of multiple forms of oppression on identity development of GLBT youth, both in terms of societal oppression and homophobic attitudes within the African American community.

### Summary

The identity development process is multidimensional and can be complicated for African American children and youth, as they intersect multiple marginalities. Research on other important cultural variables and the intersection of these variables is necessary to further understand the strengths of African American children and adolescents. The portrait of resilience includes an extended sense of self, gendered racial identity, and the intersection of other important cultural components including social class, disability, and sexual orientation.

### FAMILY FACTORS

Family context is most important in the early development of the child's self-concept, personal identity, and racial identity (Demo & Hughes, 1990; Spencer, Dobbs, & Swanson, 1988), and parents serve as the primary socializing agent for children. African American parents have been instrumental in helping their children develop positive self-concept and identity through socialization; parents transmit values, beliefs, and ideas about lifestyles based on cultural knowledge of the adult tasks and competencies needed for appropriate functioning in society (Harrison, Wilson, Pine, Chan, & Buriel, 1990). In their discussion of socialization, Boykin and Toms (1985) focused on three types of African

American parents: *mainstream*, *minority socializing*, and *Black cultural*. Mainstream parents focus on racial equality and Eurocentric values; minority socializing families focus on status within an oppressive system; and Black cultural families teach values, including spirituality, harmony, expressive individualism, and communalism (Boykin & Toms, 1985). It could be argued that successful parenting includes

socializing children in all three areas, as children need to become bicultural as well as grounded in their rich African culture and heritage (Bennett, 2006).

Through racial socialization, African American parents raise children to have positive self-concepts in a racist and sometimes hostile environment (Coard,

Wallace, Stevenson, & Miller Brotman, 2004; Stevenson, 1995; A. J. Thomas & Speight, 1999), a process that often incorporates all of the components in the Boykin and Toms (1985) model. Racial socialization includes exposure to cultural practices, promotion of racial pride, development of knowledge of African American culture, and preparation for bias and discrimination (D. Hughes et al., 2006). Research has shown that parents teach messages in a variety of categories, including the presence and reality of racism, preparing for and overcoming bias and racism, cultural heritage, racial pride, self-pride, racial equality and humanistic values, mainstream Eurocentric values, and spirituality and coping (Stevenson, Cameron, Herrero-Taylor, & Davis, 2002; A. J. Thomas & Speight, 1999).

Racial socialization processes have been linked to positive outcomes in children and adolescents (D. Hughes et al., 2006), and research has suggested that practices and messages are related to racial identity attitudes (McHale et al., 2006), self-esteem, depression and anxiety, and anger management, along with school efficacy and achievement in children and adolescents (Constantine & Blackmon, 2002; Marshall, 1995). Children socialized to have a sense of cultural pride were less likely to be depressed (Davis & Stevenson, 2006), and more implicit forms of racial socialization were linked to positive outcomes for African American children and adolescents. Caughy, Nettles, O'Campo, and Lohrfink (2006) found that children with

parents whose homes included African American culture in the form of magazines, artwork, toys, and clothing had greater cognitive competence.

Mothers were more likely to be involved in the racial socialization process than fathers (Frabutt, Walker, & MacKinnon-Lewis, 2002; A. J. Thomas & Speight, 1999), particularly with older children (McHale et al., 2006). Mothers' racial socialization messages were related to more positive ethnic identity in adolescents (McHale et al., 2006). Research has also suggested that more optimal outcomes occurred when both parents engaged in the racial socialization process. Fathers' racial socialization messages were related to higher levels of locus of control and lower levels of depression (McHale et al., 2006). Parents with higher levels of education were also more likely to engage in the racial socialization process (Thornton, Chatters, Taylor, & Allen, 1990). There has been some indication that the racial socialization process is developmental in nature, with parents responding to the psychological tasks of their children (D. Hughes & Chen, 1997; D. Hughes & Johnson, 2001).

Racial socialization is important because it helps African American children and youth develop critical consciousness and provides a backdrop to the African collective socialization process. Parents are also responsible for helping youth become more flexible in social relationships. Racial socialization influences children's beliefs about the way the world works, informs children's beliefs and attitudes regarding the self, helps shape children's repertoire of strategies and skills for coping with and navigating racism, and impacts the nature of the child's inter- and intraracial relationships and interactions (Coard & Sellers, 2005).

#### PEER FACTORS

Despite the fact that many ecosystemic models recognize the importance of peer socialization, there is a dearth of literature on the role and influence of peers on identity development and resilience specific to African American children and adolescents. This is particularly surprising given the premise that peers' perceptions of children behaving in ways that are stereotypically "Black" are related to school performance or academic achievement (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986). Children and adolescents who are perceived as "acting White" are usually associated with speaking

English properly, dressing in a style that reflects European values, or associating primarily with Whites (Fordham & Ogbu, 1986; see the Cognitive Development chapter for further discussion).

#### SCHOOL FACTORS

In research exploring the relationship between ethnic identity and school in African American youth, the majority of studies' samples comprised low-income urban African American youth. There is a relationship between racial/ethnic identity (Oyserman, Bybee, & Terry, 2003) and a child's school experience; however, the nature and direction of this relationship is varying and not conclusive. Youth with a positive sense of ethnic identity are more connected to school, and youth more socialized to endorse mainstream culture have lower school self-esteem. In a sample of African American 14–19-year-olds, Bennett (2006) found that ethnic identity was related to school engagement. Youth with a positive ethnic identity were more likely to perform well academically. Constantine and Blackmon (2002) found that racial socialization messages reflecting endorsement of mainstream culture were associated with lower self-esteem in school.

There is some differentiation of those particular concepts of ethnic identity related to school outcomes for African American youth. For example, Chapell and Overton (2002) demonstrated that a more developed ethnic identity was associated with better reasoning skills but not with grade point average (GPA). Chavous et al. (2003) also found that there was no relationship between ethnic identity and GPA.

Chavous et al. (2003) explored the role of racial identity beliefs on educational achievement and attainment in an analysis of racial identity profiles in 17-year-old African American adolescents divided into four clusters. The *buffering/defensive* cluster demonstrated high race centrality, high private regard, and low public regard. The *low-connectedness/high-affinity* group was characterized by low race centrality, high private regard, and low public regard. The *idealized* cluster had higher than average scores on race centrality, private regard, and public regard, and the *alienated* cluster had lower than average scores on these measures.

Students with alienated racial identity demonstrated less interest in school than both the buffering/defensive and the idealized group. Compared to the other groups, the alienated group also contained a higher percentage of individuals not in school, with lower efficacy beliefs and the lowest percentage of individuals attending postsecondary institutions. Students in the idealized identity group demonstrated more personal value for school when compared to the other racial identity groups. Students in the buffering/defensive group had the highest percentage of students attending 2- and 4-year colleges. For those in the buffering/defensive cluster, high school importance was associated with high school completion, but high school efficacy was associated with not graduating from high school. For those in the idealized group, school relevance was associated with school completion. For the low-connectedness/high-affinity group, higher school importance was related to attending college.

Oyserman, Bybee, and Terry (2003) evaluated differences in racial/ethnic identity on the basis of gender in a sample of urban, low-income African American middle-school students. They found that for boys, positive in-group connectedness was predictive of increased study time, improved grades, and attendance. For girls, embedded achievement predicted improved grades. Youth high in all three components of racial/ethnic identity as defined by Oyserman et al. (2003)—awareness of racism, connectedness, and embedded achievement—were more concerned about school.

Racial identity is associated with several variables related to school functioning, including achievement, performance, and academic engagement. More research is needed in this area. Specifically, psychologists need to explore the relationship between academic engagement and racial identity, as we consider this to be a vital component in the portrait of resilient, optimally functioning youth.

#### COMMUNITY FACTORS

According to systemic approaches, human development needs to be understood within larger contexts, particularly more distal contexts of families, the neighborhood, and the larger community. A small body of research has examined the role of community on racial identity and racial socialization processes, particularly neighborhood influences, including SES and associated risk factors, social climate

(the structure or organization within neighborhoods), and social capital (the presence of goods and resources).

Social class status of a neighborhood was related to ethnic identity of African American children and adolescents, with lower levels of risk associated with better ethnic identity (Bennett, 2006). Neighborhood social climate or status influenced racial socialization processes; parents in negative neighborhood climates were more likely to socialize children with messages of mistrust (Caughy et al., 2006). Davis and Stevenson (2006) found that in neighborhoods higher in social capital where adolescents felt they had social support, adolescents had lower levels of learned helplessness. Adolescents who reported living in safer neighborhoods had more positive self-esteem, and the supportive neighborhoods, combined with parental racial socialization messages on cultural pride, were more protective for boys.

Research is also lacking on the role of the African American church experience on racial identity and racial socialization processes. The church has been a source of social support for African Americans historically, and spirituality has served as a source of cultural transmission (Dancy & Wynn-Dancy, 1994). Church fosters self-esteem and provides an outlet for self-expression, fosters social support as a surrogate family, and helps address racism and oppression (Richardson & June, 1997).

Again, the portrait of resilience promotes an extended self developed within an Africentric context. Because the extended family and kinship networks are seen as strengths for families, more research is needed in this critical area. In particular, psychologists need to understand how socialization processes with peers, extended family members, and religious communities influence the identity development process.

#### INTERVENTIONS AND PROGRAMS

There has been little documentation or evaluation of intervention/prevention programs that focus on the promotion or development of ethnic identity and self-esteem in African American youth. Those programs that do incorporate ethnic identity or self-esteem often focus on the outcomes of health risk behaviors (i.e., substance use, sexual behavior, violent behavior). However, research has indicated that higher or more positive levels of ethnic identity



were associated with higher levels of self-esteem and lower levels of participation in risk-related behaviors (Corneille, Ashcraft, & Belgrave, 2005), and global self-esteem positively correlated and directly related to high levels of ethnic identity in a sample of girls in Grades 6–8 (Carlson, Uppal, & Posser, 2000).

Many programs use Africentric principles to increase African American youths' ethnic identity, expecting that substance use, unhealthy sexual behaviors, and violent behaviors will decrease. Chipungu et al. (2000) reviewed 12 programs primarily focused on substance use/abuse prevention for African American youth and found that Africentric programs contributed to higher rates of satisfaction and perceived program importance.

In Naja, a strength and resilience promotion program for 10–12-year-old African American girls (Belgrave, Chase-Vaughn, Gray, Addison, & Cherry, 2000) that took place weekly over a 4-month period, prevention staff fostered bonding through activities such as a rites-of-separation ceremony and an overnight retreat. The intervention incorporated creative dance, movement, and other art media and addressed topics such as hygiene, health and nutrition, hair, etiquette, exercise, and female sexual development. Girls in the Naja program demonstrated significantly higher scores on the Africentric Value Scale, the Racial Identity Scale, and the Physical Appearance subscale of the Piers-Harris Self-Concept Scale; however, there were no significant differences between the intervention group and the control group on gender roles. Other programs for girls include the Cultural Enhancement Project and the Cultural Experiences in Prevention project (Corneille et al., 2005).

Programs for young men are harder to find. Harvey and Hill (2004) described a youth and family rites-of-passage program for African American boys, ages 11 to almost 15, which incorporated Africentric principles. Boys in the program demonstrated gains in self-esteem and accurate knowledge of the danger of substance abuse. Based in New York City, the Imani Rites of Passage Program (IROP) works with parents, children, and schools. Whaley and McQueen (2004) described this program and the population it serves, focusing on the male participants. They found that the enhancement of cultural identity and the promotion of academic competence reduced the risk of problem behaviors in African American youth.

## SUMMARY

Identity development is multidimensional and complex, and African American children often need to navigate multiple marginalities. Psychologists need to understand the contextual influences on identity development, especially the extended kinship network. Training and coaching of children and youth on the integration of multiple identities must promote social relationships with others. More research needs to explore all areas of identity development and its relationship to critical consciousness and resilience.





# Emotional Development

## NORMATIVE TASKS

Beginning in preschool, children learn to recognize their own feelings and those of others. Emotional understanding is a process that appears to underlie emotional competence in youth. After gaining the ability to understand and produce their own basic emotions, children learn how to understand the emotions of others. During early childhood, children move from the expression of basic emotions (e.g., happy, sad) to understanding self-conscious emotions (e.g., shame) (Saarni, Mumme, & Campos, 1998). In an effort to manage their emotional experiences, children begin a process called *emotional self-regulation* in which they learn strategies to adjust their emotions to a comfortable level so that they can accomplish their goals (Thompson, 1994).

The emergence of more complex language skills and the growth in mental representations increase a child's ability to regulate his or her emotions effectively (Dunn, Bretherton, & Munn, 1987). By middle childhood, understanding self-conscious emotions becomes governed by a sense of social responsibility. School-age children can display these emotions without adult monitoring and tend to report wrongdoing for mishaps that were intentional, such as cheating and lying (T. J. Ferguson, Stegge, & Damhuis, 1991). Children at this age begin to understand that they can have more than one emotion at a time (Pons, Lawson, Harris, & de Rosnay, 2003), and this helps them understand that a person's expression may not reflect his or her true feelings (Saarni, 1999). With the help of an increasing sense of self-

understanding, adults' sensitivity to the child's feelings, and openness to discuss emotions, a child's capacity to display empathy increases as well.

Emotional knowledge—the ability to understand emotions—is also included in emotional intelligence and is related to social and behavioral outcomes (Izard et al., 2001). These skills are an important component of emotional expression and regulation. Emotionally well-regulated school-age children generally display a positive mood, are optimistic, and demonstrate empathy and prosocial behavior with peers (Zeman, Shipman, & Suveg, 2002).

The development of a sense of self or self-understanding is the second normative process of emotional development that begins in early childhood (Harter, 2003). Self-concept in the early years is marked by a child's beliefs, attitudes, and abilities that define who the child is; these develop largely based on observable characteristics, such as physical appearance and possessions (Harter, 1998). Children's sense of self-esteem is first evident in early childhood, and their sense of initiative is often gauged by how competent they feel to try and master new tasks (Cain & Dweck, 1995). As children get older, their self-esteem becomes more complex, and how children feel about themselves is often the product of social comparisons to other peers (R. Butler, 1998).

Many factors influence self-esteem, not the least of which is culture. For example, research has shown that compared to European American children, African American children tended to have higher self-esteem

(Gray-Little & Hafdahl, 2000), possibly because of the presence of warm, supportive caregivers; a larger extended family presence; and a strong sense of ethnic pride. Moreover, African American children and adolescents who lived in neighborhoods where the community and school population was also mostly African American tended to have a stronger sense of belonging and fewer self-esteem problems than their non-African American peers (Gray-Little & Carels, 1997).

### RESILIENCE AND STRENGTH

African American children may face unique challenges in accomplishing developmental emotional tasks. First, emotional expression differs according to culture (Lambert et al., 2005). Many African Americans value expressive individualism—the ability to freely and spontaneously express the self, feelings, or beliefs (Boykin & Toms, 1985). This often extends to comfort with the expression of a variety of emotions—from happiness to anger—as well as with varying levels of intensity of emotional expression. American society, based on European standards, values restraint in emotional expression, and African American youth are often perceived by adults as loud, boisterous, overly emotional, vulgar, or dramatic (Ward, 2000). African American children and adolescents may also face peer pressure regarding emotional expression. Intense emotional expression, particularly in boys, may serve as a protective mechanism for dealing with violence, aggression, or other risk factors (Stevenson, 1997).

Finally, factors such as poverty, single-parent households, and neighborhood violence are linked to internalizing behaviors, including depression and anxiety, which may prevent African American children from developing positive self-esteem or coping with emotions effectively. African American girls display more anxiety than African American boys, placing them at risk for lower self-esteem (Palapattu, Kingery, & Ginsburg, 2006).

As children move through their developmental tasks, the role of cultural factors cannot be ignored. Emotional expression is often based on the norms and standards of the child's cultural reference group. To understand emotional development and its relation to resilience and strength in African American children and adolescents, one must

understand cultural expressions of emotions. Lambert and colleagues (2005) developed a measure to address emotional strengths of African American children and interviewed teachers, clinicians, parents, children, and adolescents to determine emotional strengths. Identified strengths included a sense of spirituality, cooperation, respect for others, and a sense of humor. Many of the emotional strengths identified in the study derived from Africentric strengths of spirituality, communalism, and expressive individualism (Boykin & Toms, 1985). Psychologists who wish to promote resilience in emotional development should take into account the cultural norms for emotional expression based on Africentric culture.

The notion that culture is at work in the development of emotional self-regulation is not new. Barbarin (1993a, 1993b) noted that African American culture and the culture of poverty and racism are both important lines of research for understanding the emotional skills and health of African American children. In a clear resilience-despite-adversity framework, he has suggested that emotional regulation mediates the relationship between exposure to risk and healthy developmental outcomes for African American children. That is, exposure to adversity causes changes in a child's ability to manage his or her emotions, and it is this emotional management that is directly predictive of later developmental outcomes.

According to Saarni (1999), a child's development of emotional competence includes skills that assist in managing his or her social experiences. These notions are consistent with the resilience framework of the task force in that they describe the kinds of behavior that are likely to help a child manage life's challenges. This is especially important for African American children and adolescents, whose social world does not often value their contribution and rejects their social behavior. M. Buckley, Storino, and Saarni (2003) explained that children need to develop emotional skills that

... are adaptive and help the individual  
(a) reach goals, (b) cope with challenges, (c)  
manage emotional arousal such that effective  
problem solving can be undertaken, (d) discern  
what others feel and to respond sympathetically  
as the case may be, and (e) recognize how emo-  
tion communication and self presentation affect  
relationships. (p. 178)



Buckley et al. (2003) have also suggested that emotional competence requires a strong and positive sense of self-efficacy so that children believe that they can meet the demands around them when trying to work with others. To do so is especially relevant for African American youth, as they have to succeed academically despite attending schools that are often underresourced; get along with peers despite the presence of institutional racism; and develop meaningful relations with others despite society's view that African American children are not as worthy as their non-African American peers. Rather than being distracted with perceived threats and self-defeating attitudes, African American youth with well-developed emotional skills are able to mobilize the resources, learn new information, acquire new insights, and further develop their talents despite negative messages from society to the contrary.

Buckley et al. (2003) have acknowledged that the ways in which African American children meet these emotional development demands are not often represented in the research and that much of what is known about typical emotional development is based on Western European acculturated people. It is possible that the process of emotional development is the same for African American children as it is for their non-African American peers, but the context in which African American youth live, both in lower- and upper-SES communities, may be different based on the values and beliefs of their community.

In developing this portrait of resilience, we suggest that optimal functioning in the area of emotional development should include the ability to regulate emotions such that youth can successfully cope with frustration, violence, and anger. Children need to develop resistance to becoming socially withdrawn and succumbing to depression and anxiety. For optimal functioning, they must develop emotional awareness and perspective-taking skills. Given the potential for being judged as overreacting to situations or becoming hostile, African American youth need to develop emotional regulation that supports balanced and appropriate emotional expression for particular situations and circumstances. Positive and optimal emotional regulation includes being critically minded in emotionally tense settings. Flexibility across circumstances is critical for emotional regulation, as is engagement, which in the case of emotional development prevents social withdrawal and isolation through anxiety

and depression. The collective culture and socialization experiences will buffer African American children and youth from harmful forms of emotional expression.

## PROTECTIVE FACTORS

### INDIVIDUAL FACTORS

#### *Emotional Self-Regulation*

Emotional self-regulation refers to the strategies an individual uses to adjust his or her emotional state to a comfortable level of intensity (Eisenberg et al., 1995). Early in life, infants display certain behaviors (e.g., looking away) to control unpleasant emotional states. This process, however, is interactive, as infants depend on caregivers to soothe them when emotional distress is high. As children get older, they develop a larger repertoire of techniques for managing emotions.

Most often, emotional self-regulation occurs when a child is faced with a task that requires emotional control, such as failing to get a need met or a desire granted. Keeping emotional distress manageable makes it easier for children to accomplish goals and meet environmental demands. Conversely, regulating emotions can also include intensifying feelings rather than suppressing them. For example, children may learn that expressing their anger helps when standing up to a bully (Thompson, 1994). Parents may call attention to the distress a child feels after causing another person harm to help the child learn to empathize with the victim or feel guilty and thereby reduce future misbehavior. Finally, caregivers may seek to maintain or increase a child's sense of pride in accomplishments. In this way, caregivers hope to increase a child's motivation for achievement and encourage the development of a positive self-concept. It is in this latter capacity (i.e., positive self-image) that the notion of resilience can be placed. African American children, like other children, face adversity, and the ability to maintain and enhance a positive sense of self despite stressors is crucial to their healthy development.

Kliewer et al. (2004) hypothesized a model of resilience for African American children exposed to community violence, suggesting that emotion regulation skills, among other variables, mitigate risk associated with exposure to violence by promoting adaptive coping. If children who were able to regulate their emotions also had good perspec-

tive-taking ability, they might think through solutions to problems associated with violence exposure more effectively than might youth with less developed emotion regulation skills. Kliewer et al.'s results indicated that emotional regulation was a significant protective factor (i.e., as community violence increased, emotional regulation increased) against psychopathology—albeit not as strong a protective factor as a positive parent–child relationship. Interestingly, at the highest levels of violence exposure, youth with good emotional regulation were as likely as youth with poor emotional regulation skills to have internalizing symptoms. The authors have suggested that good coping skills go only so far and that a certain level of environmental risk might severely diminish the power of protective factors.

Research on emotional regulation and resilience in African American children and adolescents focuses primarily on risks associated with violence, particularly in urban communities. Again, because African American youth are socialized with expressive individualism, a form of emotional

expression that differs from European standards, children and youth will be called on to monitor closely their expressions of anger and frustration in order to function optimally. Expressive individualism includes the notion of freedom and spontaneity of expression, such that emotions are expressed at a variety of intensity levels. For example, youth need to develop emotional regulation for oppressive situations—for example, when low teacher expectations are displayed in school. Youth will need to develop the skills to critically evaluate situations and monitor their emotional expression. More research on factors associated with cultural styles of emotional expression and regulation is necessary.

### ***Self-Esteem***

Self-esteem also serves as a protective factor promoting psychological functioning and well-being. When children and adolescents feel good about themselves, they are

protected from internalizing behaviors, particularly depression. Prelow, Weaver, and Swenson (2006) found that self-esteem mediated between ecological risk factors (e.g., poverty) and depression. The results of their study included a relationship between positive self-esteem and lower levels of depression. They concluded that self-esteem may lead to more positive self-evaluations in relationships and to feeling more valued by others. Barber, Bell, and Armistead (2003) demonstrated similar findings in a sample of girls; in this study, self-esteem served as a mediator between parent–child relationships and psychological functioning. The results suggest that close relationships between parents and children lead to positive self-esteem, reducing levels of depression.

Self-esteem is also a mediator between gender-role orientation and anxiety, particularly in African American girls (Palapattu et al., 2006). One strength identified for African Americans is the flexibility of gender roles (Boyd-Franklin, 2003). While African American girls and boys were more likely

than other ethnic groups to endorse both masculine and feminine traits, girls who endorsed more feminine traits experienced anxiety similar to other ethnic groups that endorse more feminine traits. However, for African American girls, high self-esteem served as a buffer between anxiety symptoms and femininity (Palapattu et al., 2006).

Again, self-esteem needs to be understood within a cultural context. African American girls have higher self-esteem levels than other racial/ethnic groups and African American boys. Perhaps the collective nature of raising girls to be strong and the reinforcement of armoring protect girls from various forms of assault on self-esteem (Ward, 2000). More programs to raise self-esteem levels in African American boys are necessary, as are more studies that examine the cultural context of higher self-esteem.

AFRICAN AMERICAN GIRLS HAVE HIGHER SELF-ESTEEM LEVELS THAN OTHER RACIAL/ETHNIC GROUPS AND AFRICAN AMERICAN BOYS. PERHAPS THE COLLECTIVE NATURE OF RAISING GIRLS TO BE STRONG AND THE REINFORCEMENT OF ARMORING PROTECT GIRLS FROM VARIOUS FORMS OF ASSAULT ON SELF-ESTEEM.

### ***Competence and Efficacy***

African American children need to develop a sense of mastery, competence, and efficacy as part of emotional development. Lightsey and Barnes (2007) examined the relationship between self-efficacy and psychological distress in African American college students and found that assertiveness served as a mediating factor between the two. They concluded that clinicians can reduce distress by improving efficacy and assertiveness. Prelow and colleagues (2006) found a positive relationship between coping efficacy and reduced depression in adolescents. As the belief in the ability to cope increased, levels of depression decreased.

### ***Perspective Taking***

Resilience in African American children and youth includes perspective-taking abilities, such as capacity for empathy and relating to others. Quintana (1994) defined ethnic perspective taking as the ability to understand others' perceptions of race and ethnicity. Perspective taking in this light is another form of being critically minded and helps children develop the necessary fluency to be comfortable in mixed racial settings. To promote optimal emotional functioning, research on the relationship between perspective- or role-taking ability, ethnic perspective taking, empathy, and resilience in African American youth to promote optimal emotional functioning is recommended.

### **FAMILY FACTORS**

The majority of research addressing emotional regulation and African American children has not examined exposure to adversity but has instead considered the factors believed responsible for typical emotional development. On the whole, research like the Kliewer et al. (2004) study has supported the notion that the more positive the parent-child interaction, the greater the child's ability to emotionally self-regulate. For example, Garner (2006) found that for preschool-age children, friendly discussions of emotions between mothers and children were stronger predictors of the child's emotional self-regulation than was showing approval for the child's behavior. Other studies have found similar results (e.g., Little & Carter, 2005); mothers who were more emotionally available (i.e., during positive playtime interactions) had infants (K-12 focus) who were better able to manage distress and frustration on a task than

were infants whose mother-child interactions were hostile. The results suggest that positive mother-child interactions are more strongly associated with emotional self-regulation over and above the child's temperament style.

African American fathers' relationships with their children are also important, although there is little research addressing the impact on emotional self-regulation. One exception (Downer & Mendez, 2005) found that in a sample of African American children enrolled in Head Start, fathers who were more involved in child care and home-based educational activities significantly related to their child's emotional self-regulation skills. The authors suggested that father involvement is consistent with traditional African American culture, in which parenting responsibilities are evenly shared between caretakers.

Research on emotional self-regulation in African American children has demonstrated similar findings with other ethnic samples, showing that, for the most part, the better (i.e., positive, supportive, educational) the parent-child relationship, the more able the child is to develop effective emotional regulation (Kliewer et al., 2004; Little & Carter, 2005). Studies have tested few to no within-group differences for this effect; however, this does not suggest that cultural factors or other within-group differences are not at work. Given that child-rearing styles can be different and operate according to different cultural mandates both within and between groups, it is too early to conclude that culture is not influential in how and to what degree African American children emotionally self-regulate.

Prelow and colleagues (2006) found a direct positive relationship between parent-child relationships and psychological functioning in addition to the mediation relationship between parent-child relationships and self-esteem. Klein and Forehand (2006) found a relation between supportive mother-child relationships and lower levels of depression and disruptive behaviors in African American families with multiple risk factors, including poverty and family disruption. They also found that parental monitoring was associated with more optimal functioning. K. M. McCabe, Clark, and Barnett (1999) found that children who rated lower in anxiety, shy behaviors, sadness, and withdrawn behaviors had families with higher levels of parental warmth. Their research also suggests that kinship social support or extended family support reduces anxiety

and shyness in children. Research on racial socialization has suggested that parental socialization can reduce negative affective experiences, including depression and anger. Specifically, children socialized in an environment of cultural pride were less likely to be depressed, regardless of gender (Davis & Stevenson, 2006). Stevenson, Herrero-Taylor, Cameron, and Davis (2002) discussed how cultural socialization can minimize anger and violence in African American youth.

#### PEER AND COMMUNITY FACTORS

The impact of emotional self-regulation goes beyond the home and classroom contexts and also affects the child's later peer relations. For example, M. Smith (2001) found that among other variables (i.e., gender, emotional knowledge), emotion regulation was a significant predictor of peer acceptance in African American preschoolers. That is, children viewed as emotionally stable by peers were more likely to be rated as popular among their classmates.

Although there is minimal research in this area, research suggests that neighborhood and community influences can serve as a protective factor for emotional development. On the basis of a national dataset, Kowaleski-James and Dunifon (2006) found that neighborhood and community resources, including neighborhood quality, residential stability, and school quality, predicted well-being in African American youth.

African American extended family and kinship networks are pivotal to the emotional development and psychological well-being of African American children and youth (Boyd-Franklin, 2003). Little research has examined how the communal nature of African American families serves as a protective factor for children or how families, peers, and extended family networks can help to promote critical evaluation of circumstances and flexibility for engaging in cross-racial relationships.

#### INTERVENTIONS AND PROGRAMS

Programs that address self-esteem and emotional regulation often combine with cultural or racial identity development (see the Identity Development section). The optimal functioning portrait of resilience for African American youth calls for youth to have emotional awareness, perspective-taking, and emotional regulation skills. The development of programs that focus on critical consciousness as related to emotional regulation is necessary, along with depression and anxiety prevention programs that foster and promote engagement and programs that take into account the communal nature of African Americans.

Jagers, Morgan-Lopez, Howard, Browne, and Flay (2007) developed a program to foster the growth of empathy in African American youth. The Aban Aya Youth

Project was a longitudinal program that included culturally grounded interventions in the classroom focused on school, family, and community, with the aims of reducing development of violence, unsafe sex practices, and substance use—areas of risk for youth. Students involved in the social development training program and family/school/community intervention programs had a larger growth in empathy than did control group students, and empathy

mediated the influence of the program on the development of violence. The Jagers et al. (2007) study also suggests that the ability to connect with others and their feelings may have long-term benefits for children and youth.

Programs that promote racial socialization as a method for reducing anger and aggression are also warranted and help children fit the portrait of resilience. Stevenson (2002) developed the PLAAY project (Preventing Long-Term Anger and Aggression in Youth), which includes basketball and martial arts combined with parental empowerment groups and cultural socialization training. Parents in this program were an important variable in helping children find more adaptive strategies for emotional regulation, particularly concerning anger and aggression.

Another model program is the Black Parenting Strengths and Strategies Program (BPSS; Coard, Foy-Watson, Zimmer, & Wallace, 2007), a culturally- and strength-based parenting program designed to improve aspects of parenting associated with the early development of conduct problems and the promotion of social and cultural competence in early school age children. BPSS is an evidence-based parenting program that aims to promote cultural, social, and emotional health and academic success in young African American children. It is specifically designed to attend to the unique challenges that African American parents face (racism, prejudice, and discrimination). Results suggest that racial socialization practices help to reduce externalizing behaviors (e.g., aggression).

## SUMMARY

In this chapter, we have summarized the literature on emotional development and resilience of African American children and youth, with special attention to emotional regulation, self-esteem, competence and efficacy, and perspective taking as individual protective factors. Research indicates that African American children, like other children, benefit from developing emotional regulation. The portrait of resilience developed by the task force includes emotional awareness and regulation, engagement, and perspective taking. Youth need to develop critical awareness of their emotional expression across situations and circumstances. An important limitation of the extant research in this area concerns efforts to understand cultural forms of emotional expression or its relevance to resilience and strength. Researchers, clinicians, and policymakers need to attend to this critical area of functioning.





# Social Development

## **NORMATIVE TASKS**

With age, children learn to regulate emotions (L. A. McCabe, Cunningham, & Brooks-Gunn, 2004; Mendez, Fantuzzo, & Cicchetti, 2002), take others' perspectives (M. Taylor, 1988), and solve interpersonal problems (Burks, Laird, & Dodge, 1999). Children need these underlying emotional and cognitive abilities to learn increasingly complex social skills used to successfully engage with family members, take part in school routines, and interact with peers in school and community contexts. More complex skills in negotiation and cooperation augment and elaborate on early relational skills, such as sharing and turn taking (e.g., Selman, 1997).

As adolescents progress through high school, they are expected to take increasing responsibility for their school engagement, caregiving in families, and mutuality in peer relationships. Optimal social functioning extends beyond skillful interactions to behavior motivated by a concern for the welfare of others. Prosocial behavior, or voluntary acts benefiting others, can manifest itself in contributions to peers, family members, or community institutions (for a review, see Eisenberg, Fabes, & Spinrad, 2006; McMahon, Wernsman, & Parnes, 2006). Isolated acts of prosocial behavior may reflect a child's or adolescent's more encompassing need for connection and social change within and across communities.

## **RISK**

Identifying protective factors for African Americans is crucial given the trends found in school discipline data, crime statistics, and research on sexual initiation. Across the country, African Americans are three times more likely to be suspended from school than European Americans and Asian Americans (APA, 2006b). Low-income urban African American youth continue to be disproportionately represented among both perpetrators and victims of various forms of violence (Clubb et al., 2001; Tolan, Gorman-Smith, & Henry, 2003; U.S. DHHS, 2001; Valois, MacDonald, Bretous, Fischer, & Drane, 2002). African American youth tend to have earlier initiation of sexual intercourse than other youth and multiple sex partners (Kann et al., 2000). Early initiation is associated with frequency of sexual activity, number of partners, contraction of a sexually transmitted disease, and teen pregnancy (Lederman & Mian, 2003). These trends in social functioning are often cited. Unfortunately, the emphasis on negative social development of African American children and youth has lacked a counterbalancing focus on what helps these children and youth develop social competencies.

The need for successful negotiation of social interactions and the development of optimal functioning may be particularly important for the development of African American children, as they face risks in many areas of their lives, regardless of their socioeconomic background and neighborhood context. The risks they face can derive from

more proximal concerns, such as underresourced schools, family disruption, or negative peer influences. These risks are related to, and further exacerbated by, the experience of pervasive racism that informs, for example, racial profiling, low expectations, or institutional barriers (e.g., Spencer et al., 2006; Weinstein, 2002). When African American children are subject to excessive institutional reactivity to their behavior as might arise during negative encounters with teachers, principals, or police officers, then drawing on protective factors within themselves (e.g., emotion regulation, problem-solving skills) and within families and communities (e.g., parents as advocates) becomes crucial to their health and well-being.

## RESILIENCE AND STRENGTH

This report identifies both optimal social development and social adaptation in the face of risk, referred to as *adaptive social functioning*. Children demonstrate adaptive social functioning to their risky surroundings by reducing negative social behaviors, such as aggression, drug experimentation, or unsafe sex. We argue that optimal functioning as reflected in our portrait of resilience includes engagement, critical mindedness, flexibility, and communalism. Extending this portrait into the social domain, we contend that the optimal social functioning of African American children and adolescents includes prosocial engagement with peers, family members, and the community and involves the following:

- Critical mindedness enables critical appraisal of injustice and a sense of efficacy to initiate change.
- Flexibility allows for successful negotiation of complex social demands as children and adolescents traverse minority and majority cultures.
- A belief in communalism underlies the motivation for positive social connection to others.

The fostering of resilience occurs within cultural and ecological spheres of protection because they support the developing child and adolescent (Bronfenbrenner, 1979). Individual characteristics and familial, peer, school, and community influences interact and propel children toward

adaptive or optimal development (Cicchetti, 2006; Luthar, 2006; Spencer et al., 2006). A cultural perspective recognizes that the social development of African American children and adolescents occurs within a sphere of positive cultural values, traditions, and institutions steeped in the history of African Americans' integrity as well as their struggles and strivings. Children may benefit from specific cultural and ecologically appropriate parenting styles and strong religious traditions and indigenous institutions in the African American community. They may internalize values of communalism and pride in their racial group. These cultural and social assets provide an important lens through which to identify what is missing from an understanding of African American children's and adolescents' social development.

## PROTECTIVE FACTORS

### INDIVIDUAL FACTORS

Studies have rarely examined emotional and cognitive assets in African American children in relation to optimal social development. More common are studies showing that individual characteristics can increase the chances of adaptive social development among African American children. For instance, numerous studies have established that characteristics associated with lowered negative behavior include emotional regulation, positive emotionality (Mendez et al., 2002), attentional control (Wills, Gibbons, Gerrard, & Brody, 2000), and social problem-solving skills (e.g., Dodge, Coie, & Lynam, 2006; Hudley & Graham, 1993). Fewer studies have identified individual characteristics associated with optimal social development. These studies have shown that anger regulation and empathy for peers were promising protective factors and linked to engaged, cooperative, and prosocial behavior in classrooms (McMahon et al., 2006; Shaw, Gilliom, Ingoldsby, & Nagin, 2003). These studies moved beyond the framework of reduction of risk and suggested that anger regulation and empathy link to children's actions that benefit others in classrooms. Additional research might identify whether African American children's and adolescents' consideration of the welfare of others also facilitates prosocial engagement in the family and the community.

A thorough examination of optimal social functioning related to racial identity includes an examination of how a strong racial identity promotes positive connection among African Americans and active engagement in the struggle for a participatory democracy. A substantial body of research on racial identity as described earlier in this report suggests that this is a promising direction for research. Compared to youth with a weaker racial identity, for African American adolescents, a strong racial identity was associated with less concurrent aggression (McMahon & Watts, 2002; Yasui et al., 2004), less delinquency a year later (French, Kim, & Pillado, 2006), and fewer intentions for drug use (J. Butler, Burlew, Cash, & Neely, 1999). Furthermore, there is some suggestion that racial identity moderates the negative effects of discrimination. Caldwell, Kohn-Wood, Schmeelk-Cone, Chavous, and Zimmerman (2004) found that the positive association between perceived racism and engagement in violent behavior was weaker for adolescents who viewed their race as central to their identity.

The research on communalism, church attendance, and spiritual beliefs, often called “religiosity,” is unique in its focus on African Americans’ optimal social development. Religiosity or a religious identity has been associated with females’ safe negotiation of sexual intimacy (McCree, Wingood, & DiClemente, 2003), concerns for the welfare of others (Furrow, King, & White, 2004), and greater civic involvement (Smetana & Metzger, 2005). Given the diversity of participants in the research on religiosity, the effects of religiosity seem to transcend social class. Communal orientation among African American children and youth emphasizes the importance of social bonds and responsibilities (Boykin, Jagers, & Ellison, 1997) and has been associated with positive outcomes among African American children and youth. For example, a communal orientation was associated with cooperative academic attitudes, empathy (Humphries, Parker, & Jagers, 2000; Jagers, 1997; Jagers & Mock, 1995; Jagers, Sydnor, Mouttapa, & Flay,

2007), more sophisticated moral reasoning (Humphries et al., 2000), violence-avoidance efficacy beliefs, and prosocial interpersonal values, such as helpfulness and forgiveness (Jagers & Mock, 1995).

Taken together, the studies described previously point to individual characteristics, such as empathy, positive racial identity, and religiosity, as being central to the resilience of African American children and youth. The research relates these characteristics to the notion of engagement, which includes prosocial behavior with peers, family members, and the community. Concern for others, a sense of a higher purpose, and racial positive regard for self and the African American community may help children and youth become engaged leaders and advocates for their community, which links to several of

the themes in our portrait of resilience. Additional areas of inquiry related to our portrait are numerous—for example, the ways in which these children can successfully negotiate majority and minority cultural and social contexts.

#### FAMILY FACTORS

Many of the salient risk and protective factors for child and youth problem behaviors originate in the family (Spoth, Kavanagh, & Dishion, 2002; Webster-Stratton & Hammond, 1997). Research has focused on family structure, parental goals and beliefs, and socialization processes. Emerging areas of interest are culturally specific protective factors in African American families, including religious involvement and racial socialization. In addition, there is an increased interest in the relative influences of family and peers on risk behaviors.

Research has repeatedly demonstrated that caregiver–youth closeness and caregiver monitoring prevent problem behaviors and promote competence in African American children and adolescents and other youth (Sale, Sambrano, Springer, & Turner, 2003; Wills, Gibbons, Gerrard, Murry, & Brody, 2003). In fact, caregiver monitoring of children’s and youths’ whereabouts, activities, and affiliations was one of the more important protective factors in reduc-

ing youth health risk behaviors (DiClemente et al., 2001; Gorman-Smith, Tolan, Henry, & Florsheim, 2000; Griffin, Botvin, Scheier, Diaz, & Miller, 2000; Stanton et al., 1999). Monitoring was especially important for youth living in high-crime neighborhoods (Bean, Barber, & Crane, 2006; Gonzales, Cauce, Friedman, & Mason, 1996). Given the importance of monitoring, the extended networks of caregivers are an underexamined resource within African American communities.

Networks of kin who provide emotional and instrumental support related to healthy youth development (Jarrett & Burton, 1999; R. D. Taylor & Casten, 1993) may offset the risks associated with single parenting (Astone & McLanahan, 1991; Turner, Irwin, & Millstein, 1991; Vaden-Kierman, Ialongo, Pearson, & Kellam, 1995). Maternal grandmothers are of particular importance in this connection (Jarrett & Burton, 1999). In 2000, over half a million African American grandparents, most of them grandmothers, were raising their grandchildren (Minkler & Fuller-Thomson, 2005). Studies of fictive kin (i.e., emotionally meaningful relationships experienced as family despite not being related by birth or marriage) and natural mentors warrant further attention given societal shifts in family structures.

Closeness or bonding with parents is essential to parental modeling and reinforcement of desirable values and behaviors and likely helps mitigate negative peer influences (Ary et al., 1999; Beal, Ausiello, & Perrin, 2001; Bynum & Kotchik, 2006; Galambos, Barker, & Almeida, 2003; Rai et al., 2003). P. Smith, Flay, Bell, and Weissberg (2001) found that close parent-child relationships increased the likelihood of their African American adolescents' having prosocial friends, which, in turn, limited involvement in violence. The P. Smith et al. study showed the interconnection between contexts (e.g., peers and family) for the positive development of African American youth and suggested that optimal social functioning crosses contexts, so that

youth are both connected to parents and positively engaged with peers.

African American caregivers have evidenced culturally specific parenting practices that can be conceptualized as strengths that support children's social development. Brody and Flor (1998) proposed that rural southern African American caregivers employed "no nonsense parenting"—a pattern of firm control, including physical punishment

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within an affectionate, caring parent-child relationship. This parenting approach contributed positively to children's social competence. Finding that a mother's hostile control was not associated with African American children's externalizing behaviors as it was for the behavior of European American children, N. E. Hill and Bush (2001) theorized that parenting experienced as harsh by European American children might be experienced differently by African American children and buffered by other factors in their

family. Brody et al. (2002) found that involved, supportive, and vigilant parenting was associated prospectively with youth cognitive and social competence and psychological adjustment through self-regulation. This study points to the critical role of parents in the development of their children's self-regulation, which may be critical for African American youth as they develop skills to negotiate majority and minority contexts.

Child and youth religiosity often reflects family efforts to engage children in aspects of religious life. Church attendance is a commonly used indicator of religious involvement in adolescents and frequently demonstrates the most robust negative associations with their risk behaviors, concurrently and prospectively (Christian & Barbarin, 2001; Steinman & Zimmerman, 2004; Wills et al., 2003). Research has linked time spent in religious communities to African American adolescents' low substance use (Zimmerman & Maton, 1992) and infrequent sexual activity (Wills et al., 2003). One study linked time in religious communities to an important optimal outcome for African American youth—the helping of others (Scales, Benson, &



Leffert, 2000). Additional studies might examine the link between a communal orientation, religiosity, and commitment to the betterment of the community.

Researchers are increasingly investigating race-related socialization as a family protective factor that supports positive youth development. The literature uses ethnic/racial socialization to encompass cultural socialization, preparation for bias, promotion of mistrust, egalitarianism, and silence about race (D. Hughes et al., 2006). Research suggests that the content of the messages informs the racial identity of adults (e.g., Demo & Hughes, 1990) and the social and emotional competencies of adolescents (Stevenson, 1997). In addition, findings on the impact of caregiver race-related socialization on youth are not always straightforward. Caughy, O'Campo, Randolph, and Nickerson (2002) reported a negative association between cultural socialization and boys' internalizing and externalizing problem behaviors. For girls, there was a significant relationship between cultural socialization and internalizing behaviors but no association with externalizing behaviors.

Christian and Barbarin (2001) demonstrated that parents' frequent use of racial attributions to explain negative life events tended to increase children's problem behaviors. This suggests that preparation for bias may need to include parents explicitly teaching their children how to respond effectively to perceived discrimination. An African American child or adolescent with critical mindedness about possible discrimination may also need a flexible approach to assessing situations and deciding on the most adaptive response.

Research on parenting styles and parenting practices has elucidated the protective effect of closeness and monitoring for African American children and youth. Religious involvement and racial socialization are emerging areas of culture-specific protective factors in African American families. Additional research is needed to identify how families contribute to resilient outcomes related to prosocial engagement in families and the community—one of the themes in our portrait of resilience.

#### SCHOOL FACTORS

The primary mission of schools is to develop academic competencies. Yet schools play an important socializing function at the teacher, peer, classroom, and school levels (Weissberg & O'Brien, 2004). Although little research has

examined the interdependence of these levels, substantive findings suggest that promising protective factors are related to teacher practices, the behavioral norms of the classroom, and the atmosphere of the school as a whole.

Teachers may promote positive social development with their African American students through their styles of interacting with students (Gregory & Weinstein, 2008; Hamre & Pianta, 2005; Meehan, Hughes, & Cavell, 2003; Wentzel, 2002). Congruent with African American parenting styles in the home, the instructional styles of teachers who are "warm demanders" (Vasquez, 1988) and "compassionate disciplinarians" (Irvine, 2002) boast exemplary results with African American children (Ladson-Billings, 1994). These teachers demand the best, exercise their authority, and show deep caring and respect. Quantitative studies have provided some support for this teaching style as a predictor of African American adolescents' optimal social functioning, including their goals for social responsibility (Wentzel, 2002) and their cooperation in high school (Gregory & Weinstein, 2008). Taken together, these studies suggest that some teachers more than others can elicit African American students' active engagement in classroom tasks.

Why might warm, demanding teachers effectively elicit cooperative and engaged behavior from African American students? Potential mechanisms are numerous—for example, warm, demanding teachers may

- communicate high expectations for behavior and disrupt stereotypes of African American students as defiant or violent (A. A. Ferguson, 2000);
- develop effective regulatory processes with their students (via the relationship) to help students identify and control their emotions (Pianta, 1999);
- offer culturally congruent interaction styles, which many African American students have with parents.

Testing competing hypotheses about possible explanatory mechanisms is an important next step in research. African American students' social development may also depend on the influence of peers in the classroom. That said, research on peer norms, peer affiliation in schools,

reduced aggression, and increased cooperation is nascent. Henry, Guerra, and Huesmann (2000) found that for African American students in urban elementary school classrooms, there is less aggression in classrooms in which teachers and students discouraged aggression. These findings suggest that norms discouraging aggression in classrooms are linked with adaptive social functioning. There is some evidence that positive, community-oriented classroom norms, when strengthened by an intervention in “high-implementation” elementary schools, have sustained effects on students’ optimal social behavior (e.g., academic engagement and helpfulness to others) (Battistich, Schaps, & Wilson, 2004).

Prosocial or antisocial norms for African American students’ behavior may partially arise from the characteristics of the students grouped together. Grouping aggressive or low-achieving children together while separating them from prosocial and high-achieving peers can have detrimental effects on behavior and achievement (Burris, Welner, & Wiley, 2006; DeRosier, Cillessen, & Coie, 1994; Kellam, Ling, & Merisca, 1998; Mager, Milich, Harris, & Howard, 2005; Werthamer-Larsson, Kellam, & Wheeler, 1991). Additional research is needed to understand the teacher- and school-related factors that set the conditions for the protective effect of heterogeneous grouping of African American students.

In addition to classroom norms for prosocial behavior, the general social and disciplinary climate of the school should be considered. Increased use of metal detectors, surveillance cameras, and one-strike-you’re-out discipline policies has raised questions about whether the climate of schools fosters an atmosphere of mistrust and defiance (Advancement Project, 2003; APA, 2006b). Conversely, unanswered is which type of school climate might foster trust and cooperation among African American students in particular.

From the perspective of adolescents in racially and economically diverse schools, clarity and fairness of rules predict school-level differences in victimization and delinquency (Gottfredson, Gottfredson, & Hybl, 1993; Gottfredson, Gottfredson, Payne, & Gottfredson, 2005; Hollingsworth, Lufner, & Clune, 1984; Welsh, 2000). There is also substantial evidence that supportive programming and a principal’s orientation toward prevention can increase

school safety and reduce aggression (Catalano, Berglund, & Ryan, 2004; Skiba, 2004; Wilson, Lipsey, & Derzon, 2003). Promoting optimal social development, these schools may be more successful at redirecting misbehavior before it escalates and reengaging students in the rules and norms of classrooms.

The research outlined here highlights the importance of social processes between teachers and students and among peers for setting behavioral norms and expectations that promote cooperative engagement in school. Less is known about how schools can enhance behavioral flexibility—a theme in our portrait of resilience—so that African American children and youth learn how to calibrate their behavior to the demands of the situation. As Delpit (1995) suggested, African American students may benefit from explicit instruction about the rules of power in classrooms and learn ways to successfully traverse culturally bound rules and expectations for behavior.

#### COMMUNITY FACTORS

Recent comprehensive reviews have highlighted the significance of the community context of child and adolescent well-being (Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000; Shinn & Toohey, 2003). As several studies have shown, victimization and exposure to violence are daily occurrences for a large portion of urban African American youth (Farrell & Bruce, 1997; Martinez & Richters, 1993; Perez-Smith, Albus, & Weist, 2001), and exposure to violence has been associated with a number of social adjustment problems (Cooley-Quille, Boyd, Frantz, & Walsh, 2001; Gorman-Smith & Tolan, 1998). Protective neighborhood factors in inner-city communities can augment positive parenting (Gorman-Smith, Tolan, & Henry, 2000), and institutional and relational resources in all communities benefit African American children and youth (Jencks & Mayer, 1990; Leventhal & Brooks-Gunn, 2000).

Protective institutional resources provide African American children and youth with structured activities and positive adult interactions (McLoyd, Cauce, Takeuchi, & Wilson, 2000). Research has linked access to high-quality child care that has low adult-to-child ratios to positive behavioral outcomes (Benasich, Brooks-Gunn, & Clewell, 1992). Youth crime increases between 2 p.m. and 6 p.m. on school days; thus, after-school programs can serve an im-

portant protective function, especially for youth in under-resourced communities (Gottfredson, Gerstenblith, Soule, Womer, & Lu, 2004; Posner & Vandell, 1999).

Time spent in formal after-school programs has been linked to good conduct grades in school (Posner & Vandell, 1994) and better social adjustment across several years of schooling (Posner & Vandell, 1999). In one of the few quasi-experimental studies of after-school programs, Gottfredson and colleagues (2004) found that African American middle-school students in an after-school program had lower levels of delinquency than did the control group. This effect was greatest in programs that emphasized social and emotional learning. Although underexamined in the research, another institutional resource is African American religious institutions, shown to provide more employment assistance, substance use prevention, and mentoring programs than do non-African-American churches (Tsitsos, 2003).

Community strengths in the form of relational resources or social capital deserve particular attention because, from a resilience perspective, a constructive relationship outside of an underresourced home may be essential for youth to thrive (Caughy & O'Campo, 2006; Rutter, 1995). Research on mentoring of African American youth, however, has yielded mixed findings. While some studies have shown that mentoring was not associated with positive changes in African American adolescents' behavior (Keating, Tomishima, Foster, & Alessandri, 2002), other studies have shown positive effects when taking into account the quality of the mentor-mentee relationship.

For instance, Langhout, Rhodes, and Osborne (2004) used data from the Big Brothers/Big Sisters mentoring program (71% African American) and found that, relative to controls, youth in relationships that were moderately supportive and structured with high levels of activities had better psychological and social outcomes. A promising direction for mentoring with African American children and adolescents is to identify and strengthen "natural" mentors—that is, adults within African American communities who have positive effects on African American youth and their social development (Zimmerman, Bingenheimer, & Notaro, 2002).

Research on community-level protective factors for African American children and youth has emphasized re-

ducing risk, with a specific focus on lowering externalizing behaviors. Studies often identify structured activities and positive adult interactions in the community as important impediments to negative social development. Examinations of community resources should include a focus on how such resources can increase African American children's prosocial engagement and sense of communalism, two themes we have identified in our portrait of resilience. Community organizations and natural mentors have the unique opportunity to provide meaningful interaction among diverse groups. Exposure to diverse experiences in the community (e.g., across ages, professions, racial/ethnic groups, social class) may set the groundwork for African American children and youth to strive for the betterment of their community.

## INTERVENTIONS AND PROGRAMS

Intervention programs serving African American children and youth have emphasized reducing their risk behaviors rather than promoting their prosocial behavior. That said, several risk-reduction programs exemplify well-designed programs and research. Such programs (e.g., Kellam & Langevin, 2003; Kreuter, Lukwago, Bucholtz, Clark, & Sanders-Thompson, 2002)

- address multiple health-compromising behaviors;
- are developmentally and culturally appropriate;
- implement programming over time;
- have a school focus but include family, peers, and community; and
- include systematic process-and-outcome evaluation.

## MECHANISMS OF CHANGE

Intervention research that identifies why change occurs has mostly focused on programs targeting the reduction in aggressive or violent behavior of African American youth. Interestingly, what accounts for the reduced externalizing behavior is increased empathy for others, which is pivotal to prosocial behavior (Eisenberg et al., 2006). Two studies have highlighted the role of empathy in reducing risk. McMahon and Washburn (2003) examined the effectiveness of the Second Step violence prevention program with a small sample of low-income African American youth in

Grades 5–8. Compared to controls, youth in the intervention significantly improved in self-reported empathy, and changes in empathy were associated with lower levels of aggression over time.

The Aban Aya Youth Project (AAYP; Flay et al., 2004) tested the efficacy of two culturally grounded interventions to limit the development of violence, unsafe sex, and substance use among urban preadolescents. The main findings were that both the classroom curriculum and the school/community condition reduced risk behaviors among boys. Subsequent research has revealed that changes over time in empathy mediated AAYP intervention effects on the growth of youth violence (Jagers, Morgan-Lopez, et al., 2007). More research on the linkages between changes in empathy and interventions designed to increase prosocial behavior, civic engagement, or collective action to better the community is warranted.

#### CONTEXTUALLY SENSITIVE

##### AND CULTURALLY COMPETENT INTERVENTIONS

Exemplary programs harness cultural and community processes already occurring in African American communities to impact outcomes and enhance participant recruitment and retention. Brody and colleagues (2004) used a community-based participatory research approach with rural African American families of adolescents to develop the Safe African American Families (SAAF) preventive intervention. The aim was to change parenting practices to leverage behavioral improvement in youth. In addition, they recognized the culturally specific processes of racial socialization and involved vigilant parenting, in conjunction with communication about sex and expectations about alcohol use. Initial findings indicated that parents in the intervention condition had more positive changes in regulated, communicative parenting behavior than did the control group. Changes in parenting behavior were associated with the strengthening of youth protective factors, including the youths' goal-directed future orientation, negative images of drinkers, and negative attitudes about alcohol and sexual risk taking.

The Surgeon General's report *Mental Health: Culture, Race, and Ethnicity* (U.S. DHHS, 2001) highlighted the problem of retention in support services within African American communities. Family and child risk factors can

have a negative impact on family program attendance (Spoth et al., 2002). Exemplary programs should serve families at greater risk as well as, if not better than, those at lower risk, as in the SAAF intervention (Brody et al., 2006). Additional research is needed to explore how to systemically engage African American families in programs and overcome logistical and financial challenges to sustain attendance (August, Bloomquist, Lee, Realmuto, & Hektner, 2006). Additional research is also needed to ascertain the "value added" in cultural adaptations of programs found effective with other populations.

Research on culturally specific interventions has suggested their promise for the social development of African American children and youth (e.g., Caldwell et al., 2004; Dittus, Miller, Kotchick, & Forehand, 2004). For example, substance abuse interventions have used Africentric principles, such as collective work and responsibility (Emshoff, Avery, Raduka, Anderson, & Calvert, 1996) and social skills training (Banks, Houge, Timberlake, & Liddle, 1998). Hip-hop films and music videos have fostered critical consciousness and sociopolitical development in adolescent African American males (Watts et al., 2002).

The strengths of cultural adaptations, however, may not be straightforward. For instance, Kumpfer, Alvarado, Smith, and Bellamy (2002) reported that cultural adaptation of the evidence-based Family Strengthening Program made by practitioners for African American populations increased participant engagement but reduced parent and child outcomes compared to the generic version of the program. The Black Parenting Strengths and Strategies Program, another culturally and strength-based parenting program, realized high rates of attendance and satisfaction while also achieving positive parent and child outcomes (Coard et al., 2007). The program, piloted with children 6–8 years of age, has found that relative to controls, intervention caregivers used significantly more racial socialization strategies, positive parenting practices, and less harsh discipline (Coard et al., 2007).

## SUMMARY

A narrow focus of the bulk of studies on African Americans' social development has been on lowering aggression and delinquency. The cost of a narrow conceptualization of social outcomes has been a sparse body of work on optimal development. Underexplored outcomes include prosocial attitudes and behaviors, flexible behavioral repertoires, critical mindedness, and active engagement in collective efforts for positive change. Research might address such questions as the following:

- What are the protective factors linked with flexibility or adaptability in which African American children and adolescents read environment cues and calibrate their behavior for productive engagement?
- How are these skills important, particularly when faced with potentially racist reactions from institutional authority?
- Which protective factors contribute to an adolescent's development of critical consciousness and civic engagement such that he or she gives back to the community and strives for a more just society?

Research on the protective factors that arise from cultural traditions and sociopolitical experiences of African American children and adolescents has focused on religiosity, communalism, and racial identity. Additional areas of inquiry are numerous. For instance, cultural flexibility and bicultural competence, demonstrated through "code switching," may require children to negotiate majority and minority cultural and social contexts (LaFromboise, Coleman, & Gerton, 1995). African American interdependence in families (Tseng, 2004) may increase children's helpfulness in families. Networks of fictive kin may contribute to an ethos of community giving and a belief in communalism. Related beliefs nurtured during the civil rights movement and the fight for equal access may inform parental socialization efforts (Ward, 2000). In turn, African American adolescents may engage in social justice work. The research on resilience and African American social development has not explored these cultural traditions adequately.

An ecological perspective on social development can identify whether the effects of a protective factor vary depending on contextual specificity of a setting or a community. For instance, research on individual affective and cognitive strengths has often neglected to consider the ecological niche in which children develop (Guerra & Williams, 2006). Beliefs in the acceptability of aggression have been linked with aggressive behavior (e.g., Guerra, Huesmann, & Tolan, 1995). Yet questions remain about whether normative beliefs about aggression may be somewhat adaptive in communities in which violent victimization occurs at high rates (Guerra & Williams, 2006). Lacking is ecologically sensitive research on what types of individual characteristics and protective factors promote optimal social development for African American children and adolescents faced with chronic threat.





# Cognitive Development

**R**esilience in cognitive functioning is the expected expression of ability in intellectual, language, academic, and vocational skill, despite exposure to developmental risk factors. For African American children to be resilient, they must develop self-motivation for critical thinking, engage with academic material, demonstrate flexible thinking, and give their expertise back to the community. To foster the development of African American youth who perform in the way the task force envisions, it is imperative that they demonstrate competence in fundamental academic skills and in higher order information-processing (e.g., analysis, synthesis, problem solving) skills. Moreover, their caretakers must embrace a strength-based, and not a risk-based, perspective.

A long-standing lack of consensus exists about the measurement and demonstration of cognitive skills. The literature has been replete with studies documenting the poor performance of African American children on standardized measures of intelligence and school achievement (Gregory & Weinstein, 2004). Common confounds in the literature (e.g., economic status) have made the results showing poor cognitive skills in African American children hard to decipher (Borman & Overman, 2004; Graham, 1989). Studies that have shown positive cognitive outcomes for African American children, specifically those who are academically successful despite exposure to deleterious environments (Brody et al., 2002), encapsulate cognitive resilience and are the emphasis of the following review.

Most research on cognitive outcomes has operationalized cognitive skills in terms of class scores, IQ tests, or scores related to school functioning or classroom relations. Although these are important concepts, the field's interest in demonstrating the factors that promote positive outcomes is lacking. The use of scores that restrict an accurate representation of the fluid and dynamic process of learning limits methods to one measure and a comparison group between African American and usually European American children and their parents. To demonstrate protection, researchers and clinicians must be aware that protection is only detected when a construct (e.g., maternal education) is greater in the presence of high risk to cognitive outcomes (e.g., scores on a test from a poorly resourced school) than when learning environments are properly resourced. Research must examine directional models of expected buffering relations and test the process of this protection. In this section we examine both the state of the field and put forth suggestions for identifying resilience in African American children.

## **NORMATIVE TASKS**

Cognitive developmental tasks of childhood and adolescence fall primarily into three categories:

- Perceptual skills
- Learning and information processing
- Language skills

Each of these is made up of a multitude of individual skills that make it possible for the infant to accurately perceive stimuli in his or her environment, the preschool child to interact with others, the school-age child to learn in school, and the adolescent to make vocational decisions. Specific cognitive skills are not mutually exclusive and work together to assist the youth in performing interpersonally as well as academically.

As children develop, their inborn ability to sense and attend to the world around them and to store information becomes more complex. Of the basic sensory abilities of the infant, the primary perceptual task of young children is to develop attention. As children reach preschool age, they become better at sustaining their attention for longer periods of time, selectively directing attention, and filtering out irrelevant information (Shaffer, 1996). The ability to select out the relevant stimuli from the irrelevant is the building block for critical thinking and is imperative for cognitive resilience. A child's environment provides the culture-specific content that captures his or her attention. The basic sensory capacities of people from different cultures—such as the ability to discriminate objects or sounds—rarely differ, but their interpretation of the stimuli they receive does.

For example, Eimas (1985) demonstrated that children eventually lost their ability to distinguish between different phonemes that were not important to their culture's language, a finding that in part supports the notion that auditory perception depends on one's linguistic environment. Researchers have also investigated culture's influence on perceptual development and found that children reared in a culture in which parents were authoritarian paid more attention to nonverbal behavior and environmental cues, in addition to parental messages, to determine how to behave (Witkin, 1979).

A child's ability to learn and process information is another key cognitive developmental marker. African American youth must engage with their caretakers and instructors in environments in which engagement and critical thinking are mandatory. Piagetian theory, behaviorism, and the field of information processing have supplied much of what is known about the learning process in children. Many theoretical approaches share the idea that a child's ability to learn is a relatively permanent change in thinking and behavior resulting from experience. When surround-

ings provide rich, age-appropriate stimuli, typical children respond by developing new skills (i.e., coordination, colors, letters, memory) and improving on previously learned abilities (Espy, Molfese, & DiLalla, 2001).

To process and synthesize new information, African American youth must think in ways that foster their success and provide feedback to teachers and others regarding what they have learned and how they have learned it. Others in the community benefit when African American children can demonstrate what they know and, more important, how they know what they know. Despite significant attention to the mechanisms in a child's environment that promote learning, little empirical investigation has focused on explaining differences among children of color in their approaches to learning. Furthermore, perspectives such as Piagetian theory and information processing share a general absence of attention to the role of culture in the learning process.

All cultures expect children to develop language skills, both expressive and receptive, that facilitate their ability to interact with others, communicate their needs, and promote successful learning in school. Research in this area has usually addressed two questions: What is the normal course of language development? What do children acquire that allows them to use language? Most research and theoretical work have described culture-free steps in language development. At about 1 year of age, children produce their first recognizable words. At about 18–24 months, children begin to combine words into sentences. During the preschool period, children begin to add grammatical morphemes, such as *-s* for plurality and *-ed* for past tense, and their language is more similar to that of adults. Middle childhood and adolescence are periods of linguistic refinement in which children learn exceptions to grammatical rules and become able to understand complex syntax. It is clear that all cultures expect children to develop basic phonology (i.e., knowledge of phonemes), semantics (i.e., understanding the meaning of words), syntax (i.e., rules for combining words), and pragmatics (i.e., how language is used depending on the situation) (Papalia, Olds, & Feldman, 1999). What is less clear is if children from different cultures develop these skills at the same time and in the same way.

## RISK, RESILIENCE, AND STRENGTH

Although some cognitive resilience research has directly measured African Americans' exposure to risk factors, most often this relation has been inferred from living conditions, family structure, or discrimination—experiences salient for children of color growing up in the United States. Without sufficient models to use to diagram the relations between environmental variables and methods for measuring risk, the literature has at best inferred and at worst ignored the experience of African American children. We submit that there is a process by which African American youth come to poor or positive cognitive outcomes and, given their place in society, that this process is different from that of European American youth. For example, African American youth disproportionately live in impoverished neighborhoods where crime, unemployment, and violence are commonplace (Harrison et al., 1990). Research has shown that children exposed to this kind of environment were more likely to experience academic difficulties, complete fewer years of schooling, and drop out of school than children from similar families living in more affluent neighborhoods (J. P. Connell, Spencer, & Aber, 1994).

The failure of the educational system to provide the expected quality of instruction and pedagogical environment has often been cited as a proximal cause for the higher representation of African Americans among the unemployed and incarcerated (Garibaldi, 1992). Research has shown that African American males comprised 8% of all children in K–12 schools but 60% of juveniles in jail (R. A. Smith, 2005). Socioeconomic status has not accounted for all of the variance in poor cognitive outcomes for African American children and youth. For example, research has shown that the scores of middle-class African American children and youth were also lower than their European American peers on achievement tests (Ogbu, 2003).

Cognitive resilience research must also take into account the impact of racism and discrimination on the cognitive development of African American children and adoles-

cents. Societal influences negate the experiences of African American youth, minimize their contributions, and often send a clear message that society in general does not expect academic achievement from them. Racism and discrimination are a daily reality for African American children, and much of what is known about their cognitive skills must be interpreted through the lens of achievement despite exposure to oppression.

## ACADEMIC ACHIEVEMENT

African American children tend to perform lower than their European American peers on educational tasks in the classroom (Bempechat, Graham, & Jimenez, 1999). Yet studies examining the academic success of African American children despite exposure to stressors are few and are usually designed to identify dispositional characteristics of the child and environmental features that work in the child's favor.

For the past several decades, data have clearly indicated that African American children are three times more likely to live in poverty than their European American peers (U.S. Census Bureau, 2006). Low-income African American children often score lower than other children in academic achievement in grade school and high school, are three times more likely to be in special education classes for the intellectually, developmentally, and learning disabled, and are twice as likely to drop out of school as their more advantaged European American peers (Alexander & Entwisle, 1988; Krezmien, Leone, & Achilles, 2006). In the African American community, disparities have existed despite a long-standing belief that education increases opportunities and is necessary for a better life (Kantor & Lowe, 2006).

Despite economic hardship, many African American parents have been successful in translating their high academic aspirations for their children into reality (Zimmerman & Arunkumar, 1994). Although decades of research have documented poor school performance outcomes for African American children, analyses have rarely tested the reasons or the mechanisms for positive

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outcomes. Unfortunately, research on the process or the question of why African American children show expected achievement is scant. The social address approach (Bronfenbrenner, 1986), which makes simple comparisons of African American versus European American children with little attention to context, challenges the extant research conducted with minority groups.

Academic achievement has been used as a proxy to indicate one form of cognitive resilience. Although academic achievement has been critical in predicting positive outcomes for African American children, scores on subject-specific tests likely obscured the qualities and talents that represented real cognitive resilience for African American youth. In addition to measuring grades in school, professionals interested in testing resilience need to attend to the process of African Americans' academic achievement. Underlying this outcome variable are the skills that represent resilience; without attention to this variable, it is difficult to make sense of what low or high grades mean. That is, researchers need to investigate how students obtain grades and if factors such as critical thinking and engagement with academic material foster the development of academic outcomes.

## PROTECTIVE FACTORS

Research has only begun to move beyond simple correlations and identify the moderating roles of constructs in increasing cognitive success—especially for African American children—and address the relation between exposure to risk and positive cognitive adjustment. Garmezy (1985) created a template for organizing potential protective factors into those that are individual (a part of the child's social experience) and those that reside primarily within the child's family.

### INDIVIDUAL FACTORS

Research on resilience in children has documented multiple individual characteristics partially responsible for positive outcomes despite risk exposure. Although the majority of

this research is not specific to African American children or cognitive functioning, new efforts are advancing the field. For example, Shumow, Vandell, and Posner (1999b) found that for African American children living in violent neighborhoods, dispositional characteristics like impulse control and academic self-confidence were significant predictors of

academic performance. How children and adolescents conceived of themselves, their abilities, and their avenues for achievement was also an important psychological factor contributing to their success (Elias & Butler, 2005).

Adolescents' ability to think critically and set goals for mastering academic materials predicted

higher grades. In contrast to those concerned about being judged and outperformed, African American ninth-graders concerned with academic self-improvement and being engaged, inquisitive, and interested in the attainment of new skills and materials demonstrated positive changes in math self-efficacy and GPA (Gutman, 2006).

## IQ

Although cognitive functioning encompasses a great number of abilities, scores on standardized intelligence measures have provided one of the simplest measures. Across definitions of intelligence, research has shown that a child's score on an IQ test represents his or her unfixed capacity to think abstractly and solve problems effectively (Sternberg, 1991). Over the past 2 decades, the literature on intellectual functioning in African American children has consistently documented a 10–15-point difference between the IQ scores of European American children and African American children (Brooks-Gunn, Klebanov, & Duncan, 1996; Herrnstein & Murray, 1994), with African American children scoring lower than their European American classmates. The results, however, were not even, as African American children demonstrated stronger verbal skills relative to European American children (Saccuzzo, Johnson, & Russell, 1992).

If IQ scores are a valid measure of cognitive resilience, a straightforward interpretation of the literature on IQ testing might be that African American children are not



cognitively resilient. However, we do not believe that the evidence supports the use of IQ as an outcome measure of cognitive resilience, as the derivation of IQ scores has not been demonstrated to be culture-free. Although research has tended to support the environmental hypothesis that economic disadvantage explains the differences in IQ scores between African American children and their peers, the evidence is not straightforward. Some African American children may manifest high IQ scores despite environmental stressors, whereas others, in similar communities, do not demonstrate high IQ; the literature has failed to study this outcome systematically. Research has not supported the idea that children with higher IQ scores are more likely to display resilience after exposure to stress (Gutman, Sameroff, & Cole, 2003). In addition, despite the frequent use of IQ as an indicator of cognitive resilience (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998), children with high IQ scores have not necessarily displayed resilience in other domains of functioning (e.g., home, peers).

In addition to using IQ as an outcome variable, research has employed IQ scores as a predictor variable directly related to school achievement (Bok, 1985). Research has shown that high IQ was a predictor of academic competence (Masten & Coatsworth, 1998) and was associated with fewer behavior problems, social competence, and successful adjustment in general (Garmezy, 1985). Many children deemed by researchers as displaying resilience, however, have not been especially gifted intellectually, and many children identified as intellectually gifted were at risk for a host of other psychological concerns (Luthar & Ripple, 1994; Werner, 1996). Although intelligence might not be analogous to resilience, it is also not clear if IQ actually operates as a protective factor against academic failure.

To a certain extent, if there is a protective effect, it is likely that the importance of IQ may be embedded in a larger constellation of protective effects in families. Using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Youth, Luster and McAdoo (1994) found that across several measures of academic achievement, African American children who did well had a greater "advantage index." Specifically, high-achieving African American children had more support at home, smaller families, and lived above the poverty line. Their mothers were well educated and had high self-esteem and high scores on measures of intelligence.

Maternal intelligence appeared to be especially important. These researchers found that when maternal intelligence was controlled, the qualities of a supportive home environment and number of children in the family accounted for only 4% of the variance in children's academic achievement.

Although researchers and others will continue to use IQ as a marker of intelligence for African American children, we believe that this score does not fully capture their optimal functioning. To the degree that IQ encapsulates critical thinking and engagement with academic material, it can serve as a rather rough proxy for optimal development. Evaluating the full range of cognitive abilities necessary for optimal functioning in African American youth, however, requires measuring more than IQ, and the development of methods for measuring IQ as a process variable that includes flexibility in thinking and problem solving in everyday life is critical.

### *Academic Self-Efficacy*

Several investigators have suggested that individual characteristics, such as academic self-efficacy or the child's belief in his or her academic competence, operate as protective factors for African American children at risk for poor cognitive performance (Bandura, 1986). Academic self-efficacy may affect children's choice of activities, the amount of effort they commit to meeting a goal, and their persistence on tasks. Some evidence has supported the idea that academic self-efficacy has been particularly important for African Americans' high academic achievement. For example, in a study of urban African American students, Spencer, Cole, DuPree, Glymph, and Pierre (1993) found that academic self-efficacy was the strongest predictor of academic performance for both male and female students and that factors such as academic self-efficacy, critical mindedness, and engagement with academic material were part of the critical pathway to understanding the process of academic success of African American youth. Because African American youth live in a society that does not consistently value their intellectual contributions, youth who have managed to feel efficacious despite environmental messages to the contrary are especially relevant to an understanding of cognitive resilience.

The relation between academic self-efficacy and academic achievement is complex, as a single factor is rarely

responsible for any outcome in human behavior. For example, in a sample of African American children, Gutman and Midgley (2000) found that students who felt more academically efficacious had higher GPAs across the transition to middle school than did their peers. The authors also found significant interactions between family and school factors. Children who had high parental involvement, more perceived teacher support, and a sense of belonging at their school had high GPAs in sixth grade, even after controlling for prior school achievement. Perhaps adding to the complexity, some research has shown that the greater the percentage of middle-economic neighbors in the youth's environment and the higher the self-perceived academic abilities of the adolescent, the higher the educational values of the youth. The combination of all of these factors is subsequently predictive of effort youths are likely to make in school (Ceballos, McLoyd, & Toyokawa, 2004; Plybon, Edwards, Butler, Belgrave, & Allison, 2003). These results suggest that the combination of individual factors—such as self-efficacy, parental involvement, and environment—may be most effective in supporting academic achievement for African American youth.

### ***Self-Esteem***

Research has identified self-esteem as a possible protective factor in managing the risks associated with growing up in an urban or impoverished environment (Townsend & Belgrave, 2000). Behavioral and school-adjustment problems were shown to be related to a negative self-concept (Haynes, Comer, & Hamilton-Lee, 1989), whereas positive self-concept or self-esteem were shown to support positive outcomes, such as academic achievement and school performance (Grover, 2005). Research has established the relation between self-esteem and academic outcomes for African American children, but exclusive focus on any one factor likely masks the complex associations of self-identity, including racial identity and adaptive cognitive functioning.

### ***Problem Solving***

Researchers have indicated that dispositional characteristics such as problem-solving skills are key influences on a child's ability to manage demanding school tasks (Lord, Eccles, & McCarthy, 1994), supporting our view that resilience in African American youth is best represented by one's

ability to think flexibly and approach challenges in new ways. Given that African American youth experience more discrimination than their European American peers, the ability to sort out multiple ways to resolve difficulties may be the core of what it means for African American youth to be resilient.

The ability to problem solve effectively does not operate in a vacuum and is likely influenced by other factors. For example, Caughy and O'Campo (2006) found that African American children who had effective problem-solving skills came from more stable and economically stronger neighborhoods and took part in more parent-child joint activities. In another study, African American children reared by parents who emphasized African American culture and reported more involvement with their children had effective problem-solving skills (Caughy, Nettles, O'Campo, & Lohrlink, 2006). It is not yet clear how problem-solving skills in African American children predict positive cognitive functioning, but it is likely that children's ability to solve problems—a primary task of most IQ tests—is related to their ability to succeed on school tasks.

### **FAMILY FACTORS**

Although African Americans have been disproportionately represented in low-income populations, African American parents have generally supported their children's education (Spencer, 1999). Research over the past decade, however, has documented that inner-city African American children are generally less oriented toward school, earn lower grades, drop out more often, and attain less education than their nonminority peers (Witherspoon, Speight, & Thomas, 1997). Exposure to impoverished environments with few employment opportunities and a paucity of adult models that exemplify the rewards attached to education contribute to school dissatisfaction (Brewster, 1994).

Despite the numerous risks that low-income environments have provided, research in this area has moved beyond simply documenting poor outcomes to investigations of the process by which financial limitations operate to influence cognitive success. This work has mainly focused on parental involvement, parent-child relations, and qualities of the home environment.

Although SES appears related to academic and cognitive outcomes (i.e., children from wealthy families demonstrate

greater academic success than low-income children), the relation is not straightforward or always strong. Studies that examine how SES may explain outcomes for children of differing financial means are more instructive. Within the field, parental involvement appears to be a key mechanism in the influence of SES on cognitive outcomes.

### ***Parental Involvement***

Parental involvement has been a significant predictor of academic achievement for African American children (Shumow, Vandell, & Posner, 1999a). Specifically, parents who visited the school, supervised homework, and provided educational enrichment activities made important contributions to their child's academic performance. Kim and Morningstar (2003) found that parental involvement, support, and monitoring were predictive of academic achievement for African American children living in poverty. Early entry into outside child care was also predictive of positive school outcomes, specifically school readiness, for children of preschool age. C. M. Connell and Prinz (2002) have shown that African American children who spent more time with other children in early child-care had better social skills, school readiness, and communication skills than children who spent less time in an outside-the-home child-care setting, even after controlling for demographic variables. It is likely that these activities allow children more time engaged in educational activities and model interest in learning and the value of schoolwork. Like children of other racial and ethnic groups, African American children are likely motivated to learn when proeducational models are present.

Beyond documenting that more parental involvement is related to better academic outcomes, some researchers have begun to examine how this relation occurs and if the process is different for African American youth. Hinshaw (1992) and McNeal (1999), among others, have documented a consistent negative relation between behavior problems and academic achievement. N. E. Hill et al. (2004) suggested that parental involvement may work to improve academic outcomes by reducing the presence of behavior problems that may impede learning. That is, parental involvement in school may increase social control. Parents establish relationships with teachers and other school personnel and learn important information on school policies

and behavioral expectations (Epstein & Sanders, 2002). As a result, such parents may be in a better position to shape their adolescent's school behaviors. McNeal (1999) suggested that parental involvement reduces problem behaviors because involvement in the school means getting to know teachers and parents and discussing goals and expectations. These new relationships can serve as a social constraint against the development of inappropriate behavior. Leach and Tan (1996) found that increased communication between school and home was related to increases in on-task classroom behavior and a decrease in disruptive behaviors.

The ability of parents to be involved in their child's school and to be collaborators with school personnel may vary, however, across ethnic and economic groups (Lareau, 2003; Lichter, 1996). It seems that parents from higher economic status groups tend to presume that they have more rights entitling them to more involvement in the school, whereas lower income parents often experience barriers to school involvement, such as lack of support or resources and increased stress associated with lack of financial resources (Reynolds, 1991). Eccles and Harold (1996) found that African American parents tended to have more academic involvement in activities in the home environment, whereas European American parents tended to have more involvement in the school (i.e., volunteering).

Moreover, it appears that the academic involvement of parents from different ethnic groups affects academic achievement in different ways. For example, N. E. Hill and Craft (2003) found that for African American parents, school involvement was associated with improved academic skills, which predicted improved school performance. For European American parents, parental academic involvement was related to improved social competence, which was predictive of school performance. These findings underscore the need for researchers to examine not only the direct effect of potential protective factors on cognitive outcomes but also indirect effects that may illustrate the differential pathways to the same outcome (i.e., academic achievement) for African American youth compared with other groups.

For example, N. E. Hill et al. (2004) demonstrated that in examining the direct relation between parental involvement and school performance between African American and European American youth, the only significant direct

relation was for African American youth, not European American youth, suggesting that parental involvement operates differently for each group. The authors suggested that for European American youth, there may be several factors that support achievement, making parental involvement less important (albeit less direct) in predicting achievement than for African American youth.

Parental involvement in school is not always easy for African American parents, and due to experiences with discrimination, African American parents may display their school involvement by monitoring school personnel interactions rather than by collaborating (Lareau, 2003). When the same behaviors are interpreted negatively for African American students and positively for European American students (R. Ferguson, 1998), African American parents may feel the need to defend their children or question school procedures, and this may be interpreted by school personnel as being intrusive and unhelpful.

It appears that parental academic involvement is not only important for academic achievement in youth but also for the development of youths' academic aspirations (N. E. Hill, 2001; N. E. Hill, Ramirez, & Dumka, 2003). For example, after controlling for economic status, N. E. Hill et al. (2004) found that for African American parents, parental involvement in school was related to a reduction in school behavior problems, which was predictive of academic aspirations over time. African American parents often have high expectations for their children's education and want to be involved in school (Moles, 1993). For low-income African American parents, for whom barriers to achievement are plentiful, research suggests that once economic factors are controlled, parents' expectations and satisfaction with the quality of their children's education are some of the only consistent predictors of academic achievement (Reynolds & Gill, 1994).

In keeping with the suggestion by the task force that research address possible mediators or moderators of the ethnicity-academic outcome relation, recent research by Wood, Kaplan, and McLoyd (2007) has suggested that

parental expectations for academic achievement are a mediator of the relation between youth, gender, and academic expectations. That is, although generally, African American males tend to have lower academic aspirations than African American females, the impact of these views is actually more related to how their parents view the child's academic possibilities, and it is this parental expectation that actually is predictive of youth expectations. Moreover, when parental expectations are low, the results suggested that teacher expectations and positive views of the school environment

moderated the relation between negative parental expectations and youth expectations. It appears that teacher expectations may serve as a protective factor for African American youth when parental expectations for academic achievement are low.

Parental involvement has varied widely for children from different ethnic backgrounds, and research has suggested that this may explain

differential achievement levels. Evidence has indicated that parents of high-achieving, as opposed to low-achieving, poor African American adolescents had more conversations with their adolescents about school, monitored organized learning activities, and had frequent contact with school personnel (Kao & Tienda, 1994). According to R. Clark (1983), these actions reinforced the importance of schooling for the child and supported children in working to their maximum potential in school. In addition, children viewed their parents' involvement as evidence of parental expectation for successful in-school performance and of parental acceptance of some responsibility for that performance. As children get older, parental involvement declines and may be nonexistent by high school (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1995). It is especially important to consider the relation between parental involvement and the academic achievement of poor African American students during this period.

Moreover, the role of grandparents as providers of primary child care is also important in promoting the cognitive skills of African American youth (Oberlander, Black, & Starr, 2007). For African American youth, some caregiving

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can be shared by biological parents and grandparents. For example, in the Oberlander study, the researchers found that co-caregiving did not create conflict in the grandmother–mother relation. Moreover, the results indicated that adolescent African American mothers who had supportive grandmothers felt more confident in their parenting role. The authors explained that their results support Apfel and Seitz’s model (1991) of adolescent parenting in which younger mothers gained confidence via exposure to support and experience provided by grandmothers.

Some research, however, has begun to report the psychological toll on African American grandparents who become parents again late in life (Minkler, Fuller-Thompson, Miller, & Driver, 1997; Ruiz, Zhu, & Crowther, 2003). Other research has documented that teachers’ attitudes toward children in their classroom who have been raised by grandparents tend to reflect the perspective that these children have more emotional and behavioral problems than children raised by biological parents (Edwards, 2006). Research addressing the influence of grandparents on the cognitive outcomes of African American youth reared by grandparents is scant. Until more research specifically targets the positive impacts of exposure to caring grandparents on the school and cognitive functioning of African American youth, at best we can assume that the positive role modeling of family values (e.g., spirituality) for biological parents and youth is likely to be indirectly related to positive academic outcomes for African American youth.

### ***Parent–Child Relations***

Other family characteristics have also been predictive of school functioning. In R. Clark’s (1983) analysis of low-income African American families, those children achieving academically had parents who were warm, monitored their children’s time, and set standards for academic behavior. Contrary to the notion that harsh parenting styles have been beneficial for children growing up in urban, low-income settings, Shumow et al. (1999a) found that harsh parenting styles were associated with poor academic achievement. In a sample of both African American and European American children, although harsh parenting style was more common among African American parents than among European American parents, those African American parents who were not harsh but were

firm and responsive had children who excelled academically. Research has also linked parental warmth and praise to higher achievement in early childhood, childhood, and adolescence (Shearin, 2002). In fact, positive parenting may serve as a buffer for the deleterious effects of poverty on African American children’s development (N. E. Hill, 2001). The need for enduring, stable, and supportive bonds with caring adults is especially important for poor African American youth who have limited access to positive adult role models and mentoring (Carnegie Council on Adolescent Development, 1995).

### ***Home Environment***

Family characteristics have predicted higher academic achievement across a range of racial and ethnic groups. For example, maternal education has been a consistent predictor of children’s achievement. African American children who had mothers with high educational attainment were more likely to have high reading scores as they transitioned into elementary school and high grades in high school (Gregory & Rimm-Kaufman, 2008). The quality of maternal responsiveness and stimulating materials in the home as measured in first grade predicted African American children’s higher math achievement by third grade (Burchinal, Roberts, Ziesel, Hennon, & Hooper, 2006). For older children, achievement-oriented practices in the home remained important for their academic development. Beyond parental income, achievement-oriented activities, including parental involvement in school, predicted early kindergarten pre-math performance (N. E. Hill, 2001), higher reading and math achievement, and higher grades (Gutman, Sameroff, & Eccles, 2002) for African American children in middle school.

Parents who possess and practice attitudes, goals, and behaviors directed toward academic achievement are crucial to fostering positive school outcomes for their children. Halle, Kurtz-Costes, and Mahoney (1997) found that in a group of low-income, low-achieving African American children, positive perceptions by parents and children of the child’s academic competence was significantly related to achievement measured 9 months later, even when prior achievement was controlled. The researchers argued that optimistic appraisal of the child’s abilities serves as a protective factor for children at-risk for poor school performance.



Recent estimates have indicated that approximately 500,000 African American grandparents were raising grandchildren in 2000 (Minkler & Fuller-Thompson, 2005). It is important to note that the home environment of a significant number of African American youth includes grandparents as co-caregivers. Although research has yet to address the cognitive benefits to the children in these homes in a systematic fashion, it is clear that grandparents can and do add an important component to the child's sense of well-being, which likely translates to important changes in self-concept and esteem that may be related to positive cognitive outcomes (Edwards & Ray, 2008).

Many of the individual and environmental factors linked to positive school outcomes are not unique to African American children; these same factors promote positive academic growth for all children (e.g., self-esteem, parental involvement). Researchers interested in determining what might be unique to the African American experience have begun to examine cultural explanations as a way to document those factors especially suited to the needs of African American children.

#### CULTURAL FACTORS

Involuntary immigration, a history of discrimination, and subsequent efforts for equal treatment have created African Americans' unique perspective on American life. African American children directly and indirectly experience racism in everyday life, and as a result, face ongoing stress trying to fit in and feel esteemed. Living in an uncaring and unsupportive environment in which individuals do not feel a sense of relatedness has been an important risk factor for poor school performance (Jessor, Van Den Bos, Vanderryn, Costa, & Turbin, 1995). Similarly, young children whose peers tease and pick on them are more likely to do poorly in school, have low self-esteem, and feel lonely than are children who are not so victimized (Ladd, 1990; Wentzel & Asher, 1995). Finally, there is an increased probability for negative academic and socioemotional outcomes when adolescents feel that their teachers do not respect or care about them as individuals (Wentzel, 1997). When families, schools, peers, and other socializing agents communicate messages of devaluation that undermine individuals' feelings of relatedness, there is an increased likelihood of negative developmental outcomes.

Given that resilience is both a universal phenomenon involving skills, behaviors, and outcomes that all children need to negotiate challenges and a culture-specific experience involving expectations that vary depending on the youth's culture of origin, researchers have developed multiple models of parenting that represent both perspectives (Lamborn & Felbab, 2003). *Ethnic-equivalent models* emphasize the commonalities in socialization practices across racial groups, and *cultural-values models* differentiate the effects of parenting practices associated with racially specific ecological contexts. Although both models are important, we believe that within the context of protective factors, one of the most important components of optimal functioning for African American children is to think communally. Researchers studying optimal development need to capture how and when African American youth use their expertise and cognitive skills to give back to their cultural community.

To this end, researchers have investigated the cultural framework for cognitive success (Rogoff, 2003) and positive ethnic identification as a protective factor for African American children exposed to racism-related stressors (Yasui et al., 2004). C. A. Wong, Eccles, and Sameroff (2003) found that for African American children reporting racial discrimination, those who also experienced a strong, positive connection to their African American culture were more likely to evidence stable academic achievement than those African American children who were less positive toward their culture of origin. Jagers, Smith, Mock, and Dill (1997) demonstrated that positive endorsement of Africentric values was associated with more competitive academic attitudes among school-age African American children.

In another example, Altschul, Oyserman, and Bybee (2006) found that African American adolescents who endorsed feeling connected to their ethnic group and feeling that being African American was characterized by high educational attainment had steady increases in their GPAs over the course of 2 years. Moreover, those African American adolescents who endorsed not only a connectedness to African American ethnicity but also demonstrated an awareness of racism toward African Americans had an improved GPA over the transition from elementary to high school.

To determine how a sense of connection or belonging to African American culture might be related to academic outcomes, Oyserman, Brickman, Bybee, and Celious (2006) tested whether physical markers of in-group membership (i.e., skin tone) operated as possible protective factors for positive academic outcomes. The results indicated that having a dark skin tone rather than a light skin tone was associated with academic self-sufficiency, social acceptance, and a higher GPA, especially for males. In an analysis of the combined role of Africentric values and racial identity, D. E. Thomas, Townsend, and Belgrave (2003) found a mediator model such that Africentric values were associated with higher self-esteem and stronger in-group identification, which in turn was associated with more positive psychosocial adjustment in the school setting.

Studies showing that positive ethnic identification is related to academic achievement have at their root the effects of family racial socialization. Most theorists echo Peters's (1985) assertion that racial socialization is the task that Black parents have of raising "physically and emotionally healthy children who are Black in a society in which being Black has negative connotations" (p. 161). Research has shown that African American parents routinely inserted racial socialization messages as a part of their parenting (Thornton, 1997). These messages took many forms, including lessons on mainstream values, African American traditional values, and the ethnic minority experience.

Research has not ignored the importance of African American parents' unique parenting role whereby they (along with other parents of color) provide specific messages to their children about themselves as people of color. Racial socialization in families has been linked with higher GPAs for African American 7th- through 10th-graders (Neblett, Philip, Cogburn, & Sellers, 2006). Research by Caughy, O'Campo, Randolph, and Nickerson (2002) has echoed the findings of other studies on racial socialization. In a sample of preschool-age children, homes that emphasized African American heritage (i.e., pride and self-esteem) had children who had higher academic achievement (i.e., factual knowledge, problem-solving skills) than children reared with less racial emphasis. This result must be considered in an economic framework, however, as the more Africentric families also tended to have more

substantial financial resources and access to more toys, books, and music from African American culture.

### *Africentric Education and Learning Styles*

When Africultural themes have been present in the classroom, African American children have responded well (Lee, 1998). To this end, researchers have identified the cultural significance of African American youths' response to high levels of physical stimulation and the influence of this responsiveness on learning styles and cognitive success (M. E. Franklin, 1992). In an examination of home socialization experiences, researchers have found that African American children described their home life as frequently alternating between varieties of activities (Boykin & Bailey, 2000). Applied to the classroom, Bailey and Boykin (2001) showed that the performance of African American elementary school students on academic tasks was significantly greater when educators presented tasks in a highly variable format (i.e., random) for children who endorsed high variable activities in their home life than when educators presented tasks in a blocked sequence.

Given the gap in educational achievement by some low-income African American youth, researchers have begun to address the use of Africultural themes in the classroom, African American youths' preference for these learning styles, and their function as an important component of academic achievement (Ellison, Boykin, Tyler, & Dillihunt, 2005). Boykin, Tyler, and Miller (2005) investigated whether academically at-risk African American youth displayed high academic achievement when the means to their achievement reflected aspects of their culture in their out-of-school environment. Using four learning scenarios that depicted high-achieving students with different learning style preferences (i.e., individualistic, communalistic, "verve," and competitive), the study compared responses from African American and European American low-income youth. African American youth reported significantly more positive attitudes for the communal and verve high achievers than did European American students, whereas European American students endorsed individual and competitive high-achieving peers. These results indicate that academic success is highly valued by low-income African Americans but that endorsement is based on cultural considerations. It may be that African American

youth do not reject high achievement but instead reject the cultural factors often connected to traditional instructional methods (i.e., competition, individual learning) used in classrooms.

While most research on African American cultural factors uses a comparison approach (i.e., African American vs. European American students), Smalls, White, Chavous, and Sellers (2007) have sought to explain the process of how cultural components (i.e., racial identity beliefs) operated to predict academic outcomes within a sample of African American students. By examining constructs such as beliefs regarding the desire to be more like “Whites” or more like “Blacks,” the results indicated that youths’ endorsement of ideological beliefs that were more related to European values were related to fears of being viewed as high achievers, lower academic persistence, and more school behavioral problems. In contrast, youth who endorsed commonalities with more oppressed groups also reported positive academic engagement.

Smalls et al. (2007) also found a protective role for racial ideologies consistent with the compensatory model of resilience (Sellers et al., 2006). Specifically, regardless of the level of exposure to racial discrimination, youth who felt that it was important to identify with African American culture and a shared history of oppression also reported feeling less worried about being viewed as academically motivated and were more academically engaged than youth with an assimilation perspective. The authors suggested that possessing a perspective in which one feels connected to other ethnic minority groups who have also experienced oppression may motivate students to achieve despite racial challenges to their academic achievement.

## SCHOOL FACTORS

### *School Climate*

The degree to which students feel personally accepted, respected, and included at school may also be an important factor in supporting academic achievement of low-income African American youth. Correlational studies have pointed to the racial composition of the school (Borman et al., 2005), showing that African American children reported higher achievement when they attended racially desegregated schools. Although most children have experienced some stress (i.e., lower grades) when they transitioned to

middle school and high school, African American children were at greater risk for school failure than their European American counterparts, feeling more disconnected when the culture of the school environment was dissimilar from their own (Ford, 1992).

The cultural discontinuity hypothesis suggests that the school failure experienced by some African American children results from a disparity between values cultivated in the African American home and those in the typical school environment (Spencer et al., 1988). Moreover, recent research by Benner and Graham (2007) has suggested that for African American students, ethnic congruence, or the number of students who are ethnically similar, may operate as a protective factor as students transition from elementary to high school. Specifically, for African American students, the greater the ethnic congruence, the stronger the students feel a sense of belonging to the school environment and display less worry about their academic success.

Academic climate is defined as the attitudes and policies of a school and its educational methods. Socioeconomic status of a school’s student body directly relates to the kind of academic climate a school produces, indicating that children who attend schools with a more affluent student body receive strong achievement-related values from teachers and parents about homework and discipline, which foster a positive learning environment (Rumberger & Palardy, 2005). African American children, however, are more likely to attend schools with less affluent peers, exposing them to a school climate that does not promote their abilities and performance.

Although a sense of school belonging is important for all students, it may be especially important for African American students, who are more likely to feel estranged in a school environment in which values and beliefs are discordant with their own (Ford, 1993). Ethnographic accounts (Fine, 1991) have explored students’ perceptions of school belonging, but few empirical studies have investigated how feelings of school belonging moderate the relation between school risk factors and academic achievement for African American youth. One exception, Goodenow and Grady (1993), has found that a sense of school belonging was significantly associated with the school motivation and engagement of low-income African American early adolescents. Although this is a promising start, more research is

needed to determine how school belongingness minimizes risk and promotes cognitive success.

For example, in a large sample of African American children, Slaughter-Defoe and Carlson (1996) found that relationships with teachers were the most important contributors to the child's sense of school climate. When compared with Latino students, African American children rated caring, listening, comforting, and helpfulness as the most important qualities in their teacher-student relationships. If school climate is predictive of cognitive outcomes, perhaps it is the relationship with teachers that serves as the operative mechanism that creates the tone of school climate and subsequently influences academic competence in African American children.

Moreover, Juvonen (2007) found that the ethnic composition of the classroom contributed to African American youths' perception of a positive school climate. For example, having a range of ethnic diversity in the school and in the classroom was related to self-reported social satisfaction and greater feelings of safety for African American youth (Juvonen, Nishina, & Graham, 2006). The authors concluded that the balance of power created by having a wide representation of ethnic groups allows for exposure to the norms of other cultural groups. The authors argued against the notion that children feel "safety in numbers" in the classroom and that having ethnic diversity promotes a sense of connection to the school and to other peers for African American children in large urban school environments.

Wood et al. (2007) found that when either teachers' expectations or the youths' perception of the school environment are high, low parental expectations are unrelated to youth expectations. This result underscores the possibility for schools to promote positive outcomes in students even when family factors are not supportive of academic progress.

### ***Relationships With Teachers***

Teachers' discriminatory attitudes and their relationships with African American students pose risk for poor cognitive outcomes (Richman, Bovelsky, Kroovand, Vacca, & West, 1997). African American children experience less teacher involvement in the classroom than do their European American counterparts. Research has shown that teachers tended to have lower academic expectations of African American children than their non-African American peers (Rist, 1973; Ross & Jackson, 1991; Washington, 1982). This result appears to be stronger for males than for females. For example, Wood et al. (2007) found that even after controlling for academic achievement, teachers had lower academic expectations for their African

STUDIES HAVE SHOWN THAT AFRICAN AMERICAN CHILDREN EXPOSED TO TEACHERS WHO DISPLAYED SINCERE CONCERN FOR THEIR ACADEMIC SUCCESS DEMONSTRATED BETTER COGNITIVE OUTCOMES.

American male students than for their female students for youths as young as 6 years old. Although the effects of this bias over the course of a single school year may not have much impact on the youths' long-term academic trajectory, it is reasonable to assume that the accumulation of these negative perceptions could have significant effects on academic functioning

and opportunities over time.

Teachers of low-income students also reported less positive perceptions of the school and classroom climate than teachers of children from high-income families (Alexander, Entwisle, & Thompson, 1987). It is important to note that students of color may also share these same low expectation biases for African American students, especially for male African American students. For example, Hudley and Graham (2001) found, in a sample that included African American junior high students, that when asked which photos were likely to represent a student described in a vignette as academically disengaged, students most often selected photos of African American males.

Studies have shown that African American children exposed to teachers who displayed sincere concern for their academic success demonstrated better cognitive outcomes (Steele, 1992). Although this association may seem fairly obvious, the nature of relationships with others has been a key component in traditional African American culture.

This is not to say that creating and maintaining meaningful relationships is unique to African Americans, only that these bonds may hold specific importance to African American youth, such that they operate to enhance other areas of development and functioning. Qualitative studies, in particular, have demonstrated the significance of having caring teachers who gave students special attention and took time to work with them (Comer, 1980). Several quantitative studies have documented a positive relation between teacher support and school adjustment and achievement (Cauce, Hannan, & Sargeant, 1992; Gregory & Weinstein, 2008). Beyond this association, research has yet to address the nature of teacher–student relationships with study designs that actually test the possible protective nature of this support variable for African American youth.

### ***Learning Contexts***

Because early adolescence is a time of increased emphasis on competition, ability, and performance, African American students are particularly stressed, as they are more likely than their more affluent European American peers to be placed in lower academic tracks (Midgley, Arunkumar, & Urdan, 1996). Research has shown that for some African American children, academic problems accelerate in middle school. Although African American students begin school with test scores similar to those of their European American peers, by middle school many African American students fall two grade-levels behind (Seidman, Allen, Aber, Mitchell, & Feinman, 1994).

Most of the research on the possible protective processes of the learning environment has focused on the role of communal learning (Serpell, Boykin, Madhere, & Nasim, 2006). Culturally speaking, a communal orientation is characterized by an emphasis on social bonds, awareness of interconnectedness among people, and a sense of mutual responsibility (Boykin, 1986). Research has indicated that African Americans, among other cultural groups, advocate more of a communal orientation over a more individualistic orientation, and this has stimulated significant research into the role of the communal perspective on learning in school.

The associated empirical work has been consistent in demonstrating that African American students learn more and prefer learning contexts that support the expression of a communal orientation (Dill & Boykin, 2000). Ellison and

colleagues (2005) found group differences when they asked African American children about their learning preferences. Compared with their European American peers, African American children reported a significantly stronger preference for cooperative learning over individualistic learning. Moreover, Hurley, Boykin, and Allen (2005) found that African American children performed better on a math task when they studied in a communal setting (i.e., sat in close proximity, shared materials) than when students sat alone in a setting that minimized contact. Although it is not clear what about the communal setting motivates African American students to perform well, it is clear that it does. Perhaps the communal style makes students feel more comfortable asking for assistance and more likely to give and receive encouragement from peers.

### **INTERVENTIONS AND PROGRAMS**

The field of cognitive resilience has directed efforts at understanding the correlates of positive outcomes and developing intervention programs to negate environmental risk factors. To better understand the nature of the risk to African American children for detrimental cognitive outcomes, the field has looked to intervention studies designed to promote cognitive ability despite exposure to environmental hazards. Given the wide range of programs targeted at improving the psychological health of African Americans over the years, the following is not meant to be an exhaustive list of effective or promising programs but rather a meaningful sample of programs that include cognitive functioning as a primary outcome for intervention.

The Perry Preschool Program is a benchmark case in the research literature (Karoly et al., 1998). From 1962 to 1967, the program, based in Ypsilanti, MI, served 58 African American children from low-SES backgrounds and with low IQ scores. Program participants began attending at age 3 and received 2 years of services, while 4-year-olds received 1 year. The Perry Preschool Program provided high-quality staffing and learning opportunities, with low pupil–teacher ratios. Although the program was small, a good portion of the interest generated by this study stems from the fact that participants from the experimental and control groups were followed through age 27. Program participants realized IQ scores 12 points higher than



control participants, and program participation significantly enhanced academic achievement. Although there were no differences in postsecondary participation, the final follow-up (age 27) found lasting differences in employment, welfare, and crime.

In another intriguing intervention, Good, Aronson, and Inzlicht (2003) assigned mentors to seventh graders in a low-income, rural school. Using an experimental design, they asked mentors to communicate educational messages related to the intellectual ability and attributions for failure to the students. They assigned one group of mentors to teach their mentees that intelligence was not fixed and could develop through hard work and support. They asked other mentors to encourage mentees to attribute their difficulties to the normative hardship of entering junior high and not to their own stable, internal deficits. Yet another group of mentors combined messages about intelligence and attributions. Mentors and mentees worked together and completed Web-based projects related to the assigned educational message.

The gender gap in math performance on a standardized test was reduced in all three conditions, compared to the control condition. Overall, the sample of predominantly African American and Latino students, an ability-stigmatized group, had higher reading achievement on a standardized test compared to those students in the control condition. This intervention indicates that a powerful leverage point to reduce the effects of stereotype threat was the students themselves. Teaching about the malleability of intelligence and discouraging stable and internal attributions for failure may have interrupted the underlying mechanisms related to low academic performance.

Another program for school-age children targeted school involvement for African American children by using a small group, activities-based intervention. The goal was to assist children by improving their ability to imagine themselves as successful and competent in the future. In comparison to a no-treatment control group, African American children in the treatment group after 1 year reported more school involvement, feelings of bonding to the school, and concern about doing well in school. Furthermore, the

authors reported other cognitive changes such as improvements in the African American youths' ability to report a balanced self (i.e., desired and feared possible selves) and realistic strategies to achieve their possible selves. Moreover, the authors indicated that children in the treatment group had better school attendance, and specifically for the males, fewer behavior problems in the classroom compared to children in the control group.

#### A POWERFUL LEVERAGE POINT TO REDUCE THE EFFECTS OF STEREOTYPE THREAT WAS THE STUDENTS THEMSELVES.

Although research targeting intervention specifically to the cognitive and academic needs of African American youth is ideal, some programs that instead are designed to target low-income families include a large sample of African American families. One such program is New Hope (Huston et al., 2001), an intervention program for families of preschool- and school-age children in Wisconsin designed to increase parent employment and reduce poverty in a randomized control design. The majority of families are African American, and recent research by Huston et al. (2005) has suggested that one of a multitude of positive effects of the program is improved academic achievement. Although this result is much more pronounced for male children, the authors have also reported that the program has been effective in improving classroom behavior, problem behaviors reported by teachers, and educational aspirations.

Other programs—SAFE Children (Tolan, Gorman-Smith, & Henry, 2004) and GREAT families (E. P. Smith et al., 2004)—address school outcomes by using a family-focused approach to improving the psychological functioning of African American youth who reside in urban communities. The authors of both programs used an ecological approach to reduce risk for behavioral problems and academic failure. For example, in the GREAT families intervention, families attended weekly multiple family group meetings that targeted parenting practices, family relationships, parental involvement in school, parent-teacher relations, and planning for the future. The results of both programs have been promising. Tolan et al. (2004), for example, have found that after 6 months in the SAFE Children program, African American youth improved

academic performance and greater parental involvement in the school setting.

Researchers have also addressed ways to infuse Africultural themes into the classroom in their desire to improve academic outcomes. Efforts have focused on creating an educational environment that reconceptualizes learning by incorporating cultural aspects of the students' lives, values, and competencies in the classroom. Promising approaches include grading based on cooperation among students, multiple performance opportunities (e.g., using oral narratives, art, increased responsibility) that create a sense of personal ownership of the educational process, and validating cultural heritage by making books and texts available about people and events consistent with their cultural background (Gay, 2000). Teel, Debruin-Parecki, and Covington (1998) demonstrated increased motivation and task engagement among African American students at risk for academic failure by allowing them to choose books by or about African Americans. The result was a strong sense of self-worth and motivation to read by the students.

## SUMMARY

African American youth face the challenge of developing cognitive skills consistent with expectations for all children and adolescents. Key to this process is the environment in which they grow up and the unique individual qualities each child brings to bear on his or her environment. Because of the nature of the society in which African American children and adolescents live—one that does not regard them as equal and competent partners but that has overtly and covertly set them up to be second-class citizens—research must investigate the unique and culture-related factors that promote resilience in their lives. As a result of inheriting hundreds of years of oppressive behavior, attitudes, and laws, African American youth are especially vulnerable to that which injustice provides: the suboptimal development of the very skills that are critical for their prosperity. African American children, who come from a

culture that traditionally values collective responsibility, must learn to succeed in a society where the majority values individual achievement.

Cognitive skills are one of the most important markers of child and adolescent development, and it is highly unlikely that children with underdeveloped educational and cognitive skills will be successful. The research clearly shows that African American children and adolescents are

at risk for the poor academic outcomes set up for them by U.S. society, making investigation of the process of resilience all the more important.

Despite these hardships, African American youth do display resilience, and research is just beginning to understand how this occurs. We believe that it not enough for African American children simply to meet developmental cognitive milestones.

They must work to reverse the discriminatory practices that challenge their development. By developing the necessary skills for critical and flexible thinking and problem solving and by engaging with academic material, African American children will be better suited to meet societal challenges. Examining the process by which this occurs and developing testable models of the relations between protective factors and outcomes are essential to sustaining and increasing African American youths' capacity to negotiate societal discrimination.

We assert that African American youth, by thinking collectively, will remain connected to their cultures of origin, which will provide them with much needed support and guidance from members of their community. We believe that by taking both a universal and a culture-specific approach to explain cognitive resilience, the field can provide research and services that will meet the needs of African American youth and increase their capacity to be resilient.





# Physical Health and Development

## **NORMATIVE TASKS**

Unlike the multiple theoretical formulations (e.g., Erikson and Piaget) and empirical evidence for specific developmental tasks associated with cognitive, social, emotional, and identity development in children and adolescents, the psychological and developmental literature has paid uneven attention to physical development in children and adolescents. In fact, it may be somewhat of a misnomer to make global assertions regarding “normal” physical development and African American children. Certainly we do not suggest significant differences between the physical development of African American children and other demographic groups, only that there has not been systematic study of the physical development of African American children. Indeed, physical development in children and adolescents has received the most attention from the field of clinical medicine (i.e., pediatrics), and as such, physical development is often considered from the vantage point of disease etiology and treatment. Physical development, however, plays an important reciprocal role in other areas of a young person’s development, such as those discussed earlier in this report.

Much of the physical development literature focuses on brain and motor development during early childhood, skeletal and muscular development during middle and late childhood, and pubertal changes associated with the release of hormones that prompt male and female physical and reproductive development. The achievement of generally

accepted developmental benchmarks indicates that physical development is proceeding normally. For example, it is generally expected that infants and toddlers will support their weight with their arms (6 months of age), walk (9 months to 1 year of age), and be toilet trained (approximately 2 years). During adolescence, females can expect to begin menarche as prepubescents or during early adolescence (Santrock & Yussen, 1992). The achievement of such milestones is contingent upon the physical development of certain gross and fine motor abilities and muscle development or the release of specific hormones at the appropriate developmental period (Freeman, 2005).

The field has not articulated specific milestones for physical development in middle childhood as clearly, as more scholarly attention has focused on identifying and understanding problems (i.e., developmental psychopathology). There are, however, many questions to be answered. For example, what additional specific physical development is occurring in an 8-year-old besides losing teeth and the expected growth spurt? Are there specific physiological milestones that children must achieve during early and middle childhood for normal physical development to occur in adolescence? As young people enter into pubescence, there is again guidance about specific endocrine actions related to physical development.

There is an instructive literature on mediators of positive (i.e., normal) physical development through early childhood and adolescence (Freeman, 2005). The brain, for example,



plays a critical role in the physical development of a child. The endocrine system that is responsible for the development and release of various hormones that guide physical growth controls many of the physical changes occurring during childhood and adolescence. The pituitary or master gland located in the endocrine system controls the secretion of hormones critical to physical growth. Specifically, the hypothalamus—a structure in the brain with the ability to regulate the release of more or less of particular hormones based on a highly sensitized feedback system telling the brain when a specific hormone is needed—controls the pituitary.

Of the various hormones controlled by the pituitary gland and endocrine system, growth hormone is the only pituitary secretion produced across the life span. Growth hormone plays an important role in the development of all body tissue except for the central nervous system and possibly the adrenal glands and genitals (Melmed & Jameson, 2004). While a detailed review of the specific functioning of the various hormones and the endocrine system is beyond the scope of this report, it is sufficient to say that brain functioning mediates normal physical development much like other areas of development (e.g., emotional) covered in this report and thus plays an important mediating role for development.

Other examples of mediators of positive physical development include good nutrition, physical activity, adequate sleep, and residing in communities devoid of environmental toxins. Research has implicated each of these factors in positive physical development, and they may have implications for the development of resilience (Giles & Liburd, 2007). Likewise, there are a number of ecological factors that influence physical development in young people. For example, living in a home or apartment free of lead paint and rodent infestation has implications for the acquisition of certain diseases; residing in a community with good air quality has a direct influence on respiratory health and can influence a child's physical development trajectory (e.g., asthma) (Braveman, 2006).

Moderating the effects of some of these contextual factors are SES at an individual and community level, access to health care and information, and quality of health care, among other considerations (Marmot, 2005; McLoyd, 1998). Such moderating factors are social determinants

of health, and these, among other factors, are important to understanding both positive and adverse outcomes in health. Important to note is that some of these determinants of health (e.g., poverty, access to quality health care) have had a unique impact on the physical health of African Americans (Giles & Liburd, 2007). An important literature has emerged describing the influences of some of these individual factors (e.g., social inequality, social cohesion, educational parity) and the cumulative effect of these and other factors on health (e.g., Berkman & Kawachi, 2000; Marmot & Wilkinson, 2006). Federal health agencies such as the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) have developed determinant-of-health models that currently inform much of the agency's prevention and health promotion initiatives and reflect an understanding of the extent to which individual health is reciprocally influenced by ecological factors (U.S. DHHS, 2000a).

We consider physical health and well-being to be an important component of thriving and optimal functioning for African American youth. Optimal health reflects a rejection of dietary and activity patterns that increase negative health outcomes and includes constructive choices concerning nutrition, physical/mental exercise, substance use, and sexual behavior that support intellectual, emotional, and social growth. At a community and societal level, fostering resilience in physical health includes advocacy for access to quality health care and the opportunities for healthy living (e.g., nontoxic living environments). This also includes recognition of the social determinants of health that are consonant with promoting positive health.

## **PHYSICAL HEALTH AND AFRICAN AMERICAN YOUTH**

The status of physical health among young people in the United States has been deteriorating over the course of the last decade and beyond (U.S. DHHS, 2000a). There is a wide range of health conditions that disproportionately affect African American youth, including sickle cell anemia, pediatric diabetes, HIV/AIDS, violent injury and death, and obesity. Each of the aforementioned health topics merits careful examination, as do other health outcomes not mentioned. For the purposes of this report, the following review is intentionally limited and is primarily for illustrative purposes regarding the health status of African

American youth. The goal of the review is to make more obvious the need to better understand and incorporate physical health and development in efforts to promote resilience in African American children and adolescents. Finally, in selecting the health conditions covered in this report, we considered conditions closer to the consciousness of the nation and psychologists (e.g., obesity and violence), as well as those conditions receiving less attention (e.g., oral and respiratory health) to emphasize the scope and diversity of considerations important to positive health for African American youth.

Various public health reports cite statistics reflecting near-epidemic increases in childhood obesity, significant decreases in levels of physical activity, and pervasive poor nutritional habits among the country's young (e.g., U.S. DHHS, 2000a). Limited access to health care or substandard health care (P. Wong, 2005) exacerbates these conditions. The consequences of these phenomena are described in this section in some detail and also include increases in the number of cases of pediatric diabetes, obesity, asthma, unintentional and intentional injuries, and hypertension as well as the creation of unique risk for other physical and mental health problems across the life span.

## OBESITY

Childhood obesity is a serious public health problem. Results from the National Health and Nutrition Examination Survey (NHANES) 1999–2002 estimated that 16% of youth between the ages of 6 and 19 are obese (National Center for Health Statistics, 2005). The 2003 Youth Risk Behavior Survey reported that 27% of youth participants were either obese or at risk for becoming obese—a rate that has tripled since 1980 (National Center for Health Statistics, 2005). Current rates of childhood obesity are higher among African American and Hispanic youth (Ogden, Carroll, & Flegal, 2003). Specific to African American youth, one study has reported that 21% of non-Hispanic African American children 6–19 years of age were overweight (Hedley et al., 2004), and evidence has shown that obesity has affected African American female youth more than their male peers (Shaibi, Ball, & Goran, 2006). One study, for example, has shown the obesity rate among African American females between the ages of 6 and 11 to

be 26%, and between the ages of 12 and 19, 25% (Ogden et al., 2006).

While a number of health maladies result from obesity in youth (e.g., pediatric diabetes, hypertension), one of the more pronounced impacts of childhood obesity is on psychological health, specifically in the form of depression (Pi-Sunyer, 1999). Children who are obese are more likely to experience psychological and social distress, including social isolation, behavioral difficulties, negative self-view, and discrimination (Dixon, Dixon, & O'Brien, 2003; D. L. Katz, 2005; Puhl & Brownell, 2003).

Many of the negative health and life consequences associated with youth obesity have impact across the life span. As a risk factor or marker for a variety of adult health conditions, including cardiovascular disease, stroke, certain forms of cancer (e.g., prostate, breast), diabetes, and hypertension (Covic, Roufeil, & Dziurawiec, 2007), childhood obesity is thus best understood from a life span development perspective if its cumulative effects are to be understood.

An important artifact of obesity exists in its impact on body image. The relationship between body image, obesity, and physical health has created significant debate among various segments of the African American community. This debate has raised challenging questions about the definition of obesity from a culturally informed perspective, what constitutes a healthy body image, and the interplay between historical messages about African American female appearance and obesity. It is important that health care providers and researchers collaborate with the African American community to deconstruct these issues in an effort to promote optimal physical health in African American children and adolescents.

Despite the challenges described here, there are a number of ways in which the African American community has addressed obesity and its comorbid conditions. For example, a number of churches have developed and promoted cookbooks supportive of traditional recipes that use ingredients that promote good health. Likewise, a number of churches now offer athletic activities for youth congregants or dance ministries as a way to promote physical activity. Community-based organizations, including the YMCA and Boys and Girls Clubs of America, have partnered with families, schools, and other civic organizations to provide

safe opportunities for physical activity and educate youth and their families about healthy lifestyle choices. For example, the Atlanta Falcons Youth Foundation has partnered with YMCA locations in metropolitan Atlanta to form fitness zones for young people that directly address obesity and healthy eating.

#### ORAL HEALTH

Children and adolescents face a number of challenges in maintaining good oral health. *Oral Health in America: A Report of the Surgeon General* (U.S. DHHS, 2000b) reported significant disparities between poor children and their more affluent peers in oral health as reflected in regular dental care and the presence of early periodontal disease. Poor African American youth, for example, were significantly less likely than their middle-class peers to have seen a dentist prior to starting kindergarten, resulting in an increased risk for periodontal disease. Periodontal disease has implications for diabetes and cardiovascular disease.

#### RESPIRATORY HEALTH

Asthma is a chronic respiratory illness associated with familial, socioeconomic, psychological, and ecological factors. Morbidity and mortality associated with asthma increased among adults in the United States between 1980 and 1999, particularly among ethnic minorities (Rhodes, Bailey, & Moorman, 2004). One recent study has found that non-Hispanic Black youth were 2 to 3 times more likely to have asthma than children from other ethnic groups (National Center for Health Statistics, 2006). Another study has indicated that although asthma was more prevalent among African American youth, residing in an urban environment where residents were exposed to significantly more environmental toxins was a significant mediator of these differences in the continental United States (Aligne, Auinger, Byrd, & Weitzman, 2000). A number of consequences for children and adolescents result from asthma, including school absenteeism and hospitalization. As a result of their disproportionate numbers, African American youth with asthma missed many more days of schools and were hospitalized at a rate twice that observed among other ethnic groups (L. A. Smith, Hatcher-Ross, Wertheimer, & Kahn, 2005).

Like efforts to address obesity, efforts have been made within the African American community to address respiratory disease and the adverse conditions that promote its occurrence. Such efforts have included organized efforts to combat environmental racism that manifest in the proximity of landfills and dumps to African American communities (see Braveman, 2006). Other efforts have included educating the caregivers (e.g., parents, teachers, and coaches) of African American youth about the early warning signs of respiratory ailment, thereby allowing early intervention and reducing the likelihood of hospitalization and school absenteeism. Such examples are reflective of communal engagement and flexibility described earlier in this report and support resilient adaptation in the face of ecological adversity.

#### VIOLENCE

As much as any other disease or health condition, interpersonal violence has exacted a tremendous toll on African American youth and potentially represents the most significant public health crisis facing African American youth today. Although violence manifests behaviorally, it continues to have a profound impact on the physical well-being of African American youth, especially adolescent males. For the last 2 decades, homicide has been the leading cause of death for African American youth between the ages of 14 and 24 and the third leading cause of death among 10–14-year-olds (CDC, 2007b). In 2004, African American males accounted for approximately 50% of all homicide deaths of youths between the ages of 10 and 24. If age 65 is used as the average life expectancy, approximately 280,000 years of potential life were lost prematurely in 2004 due to violence-related death among African American youth (CDC, 2007b). As troubling as these data are, they do not reflect the numbers of African American youth directly affected by violence in terms of physical disability, physical injury, and comorbid psychological injury.

Interpersonal violence has had long-lasting impact not only on its victims but also on the mental health of family survivors, the socioemotional development of witnesses to the violence, and the stability and cohesion within affected communities (Reese, Vera, & Caldwell, 2006). Specific to socioemotional development, young people who witness violence are at unique risk of becoming either perpetrators

and/or victims of violence in the form of child maltreatment, intimate partner violence, or interpersonal violence (Hammack, Richards, Luo, Edlynn, & Roy, 2004).

One of the realities of youth interpersonal violence, beyond its very real impact on African American youth, has been that only a small percentage of youth is responsible for violent behavior. Thus, one of the important areas for resilience investigators to examine and understand in a practical manner is what allows the vast majority of African American youth exposed to many of the same risk factors for violence to elect not to engage in these behaviors. We suggest these behavioral choices are the result of young people's critical consciousness to consider the practical consequences of violence on self, family, and community.

## RESILIENCE AND STRENGTH

As noted earlier in this report, resilience is positive adaptation in the face of adversity or the successful management of a threat that challenges optimal health in a particular developmental domain or across domains (Luthar et al., 2000). While the field has struggled with consistent definitions of resilience, there has been some agreement about the existence of mediators for resilient behavior and positive socioemotional functioning (Prelew et al., 2006). There has been little systematic consideration of resilience specific to physical development. Instead, there have been frequent discussions of positive health or the absence of disease. There is, however, a reasonable empirical literature that has shown that people in general, and African American youth in particular, who were in good physical health were more likely to experience positive mental health, had fewer behavioral and social difficulties, and had sharper or more responsive cognitive functioning (U.S. DHHS, 2000a).

In addition to the absence of research examining manifestations of resilience in terms of physical health, there have been fewer efforts examining the promotion of resilient health despite the presence of numerous adverse conditions threatening positive health. To a large extent,

the treatment of resilience in the research literature has fallen within the purview of social, emotional, and cognitive functioning. Research has identified the notion of adversity as central to most conceptualizations of resilience, but what represents adversity in idiosyncratic or contextual terms for physical development?

Certainly it is easy to identify adverse ecological conditions—for example, pollution, limited access to health care of reasonable quality, high rates of community violence, poor nutrition, and inadequate or unsafe outlets for physical activity. Examples of individual-level adversity include organic brain dysfunction and specific physiological irregularities, such as physical deformities or delays in expressive or receptive speech abilities. Each of these and other examples (i.e., familial or peer influences) represent a form of adversity that needs to be

managed in order to achieve resilient physical development. There appears to be a form of reciprocal developmental determinism at play in thinking about resilience in terms of physical development that may have collateral benefits for other domains of development (e.g., identity, social, cognitive, or emotional development). And while there is a need for more research that specifically addresses the idea of reciprocal determinism, it is unclear whether African American youth who evidence resilience in terms of their physical development are more likely to manifest elements of resilience in other developmental areas.

## PROTECTIVE FACTORS

### INDIVIDUAL FACTORS

#### *Diet and Physical Activity*

Two important risk/protective factors for childhood obesity include diet and physical activity. Recent research has indicated decreases in the levels of physical activity among all young people, but especially among African American youth (Shaibi et al., 2006). The reduction in time allocated for physical education classes by many public schools has contributed to the decrease in physical activity for school-

age youth. Many school districts have redirected the time previously allotted for physical education to core academic classes (e.g., reading and mathematics). For young people of low SES, the practical consequences of not participating in a physical education class have often been exacerbated, as opportunities for physical activity at home or in the community may be limited.

On the protective side, research has shown that physical activity not only decreases risk for obesity but also reduces risk of asthma attacks, increases cognitive acuity, reduces blood pressure in youth with mild hypertension, and promotes positive mental health (Segal et al., 2006). In a study using data from the National Longitudinal Study of Adolescent Health, adolescents with low levels of physical activity and high television/video viewing were less likely to have positive outcomes for risk behavior (Nelson, Gordon-Larsen, Adair, & Popkin, 2005). This same study, however, has indicated that physical activity that parents either supported or somehow participated in was associated with more positive outcomes for risk behavior. In another study examining physical activity and academic achievement among middle-school students, investigators found that students who achieved the Healthy People 2010 (U.S. DHHS, 2006a) recommendations for vigorous activity had significantly higher grades than students who were not involved in any vigorous activity (Coe, Pivarnik, Womack, Reeves, & Malina, 2006).

Like physical activity, good nutrition can be more of a challenge for low-income children, among whom African American youth are overrepresented. Good nutrition for many children and families is costly and it can therefore be expensive to maintain a healthy, well-balanced diet. As a result of cost, and sometimes as a result of not understanding what may constitute good nutrition, some low-income families have resorted to feeding their children in a way that is filling as opposed to optimally nutritious. Poor nutrition has been a risk factor not only for childhood obesity but also for pediatric diabetes and kidney failure as well (Segal et al., 2006).

One of the more obvious impacts of poor nutrition is on academic achievement; research has shown that the absence of a healthy breakfast negatively affected academic performance (Pollitt & Matthews, 1998). The federal government has recently responded to such findings by creating a law

that requires schools participating in the National School Lunch Program (which provides free and reduced-cost lunches to children of low SES) to create local wellness policies for the purpose of improving nutrition and physical activity through the schools.

A study of hunger and its impact on academic functioning in African American children has supported the association between the absence of breakfast and poor academic performance. Hunger was more common among low-income African American children than among middle-class African American youth, and there was a direct correlation between reports of hunger and poor academic performance (Murphy, Pagano et al., 1998). Dani, Burrill, and Demmig-Adams (2005) demonstrated that getting the recommended levels of protein and iron had positive effects on student learning. The empirical literature has replicated findings such as these in various forms and they speak to the positive effects of nutrition on physical health, academic performance, and behavioral outcomes, with the most pronounced effects observed among low-income children (e.g. Kleinman et al., 2002; Murphy, Wehler et al., 1998). These investigators concluded that good nutrition and physical activity may be an important mediator of resilient behavior among U.S. adolescents.

## FAMILY FACTORS

### *Prenatal Development*

Perhaps the most important stage for resilience is set during prenatal development in terms of the conditions created vis-à-vis the mother's nutritional and health care choices (e.g., use of vitamins), lifestyle choices (e.g., smoking, use of alcohol), and stress level during pregnancy. Proactive and intentional well-care while pregnant creates greater potential for the optimal physical development of the child, even in the face of adversity. The American College of Obstetrics and Gynecologists provides specific recommendations for pregnant mothers to promote positive in-utero physical development during pregnancy, as does CDC's *Guide to Community Preventive Services* (2005).

### *Immunizations*

There is a schedule of critical immunizations during the first 2 years of life that primarily serves a protective function against various childhood diseases (CDC, 2007a).

*(continues on page 86)*



## Summary of Recommended Strategies for Promoting Resilience in Some Areas of Children’s and Adolescents’ Physical Health

AREA	INTERVENTION	RECOMMENDATION
<b>Physical activity (PA)</b>	Communitywide campaigns	Recommended <sup>a</sup>
	Point-of-decision prompts	Recommended <sup>b</sup>
	Individually adapted health behavior change	Recommended <sup>a</sup>
	School-based physical education	Recommended <sup>a</sup>
	Nonfamily social support	Recommended <sup>a</sup>
	Creation and/or enhanced access to places for PA combined with informational outreach activities	
<b>Obesity</b>	Multicomponent intervention aimed at diet, physical activity, and cognitive change	Recommended
<b>Oral health</b>	School-sealant delivery programs	Recommended <sup>a</sup>
	Community water fluoridation	Recommended <sup>a</sup>
<b>Violence</b>	Therapeutic foster care for reduction of violence by chronically delinquent adolescents	Recommended <sup>b</sup>
	Early childhood home-visitation programs	Recommended <sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Strong evidence. <sup>b</sup> Sufficient evidence.

In addition, there is a recommended schedule of pediatric and dental exams that can aid in early identification of physical health problems, including periodontal disease. An obvious moderator of these protective factors is access to quality health care. The implementation of these recommended strategies help promote or increase the likelihood of optimal physical development.

## INTERVENTIONS AND PROGRAMS

Protective factors are individual characteristics or elements of an individual's environment that serve a prophylactic function or moderate the influences of specific risk factors (U.S. DHHS, 2000a). Identifying and examining how such factors function are critical to promoting positive physical development and may be as important as individual interventions that promote physical development, which most often focus on mediating the effects of risk factors. As the empirical evidence for resilience factors is not as developed as the literature on risk factors, it may be more appropriate to view these factors as proposed factors, although it is not always clear whether these factors have their protective effect developmentally or if these effects vary over the course of childhood and adolescence, as some risk factors are believed to function.

Protective factors also sustain optimal physical development or may minimally operate to promote "adaptive" physical development. For example, research has identified increased physical activity as a protective factor for promoting positive physical development and decreasing the likelihood of obesity and related adverse health conditions (Segal et al, 2006). Over the last several years, the CDC (2005) has developed the *Guide to Community Preventive Services*, a best practices document informed by comprehensive systematic reviews of the literature, that makes recommendations to promote positive health generally by addressing unintentional and intentional (i.e., violent) injuries, oral health, nutrition, substance abuse, and physical activity. The table on page 85 provides a summary of recommended strategies specific to health conditions covered in this section of the report. Only recommended interventions or strategies or those for which there is sufficient empirical evidence of efficacy are reported here. A more thorough examination of *The Guide to Community Preventive Services*

will reveal the relatively nascent status of the prevention and health promotion fields in terms of empirically supported strategies for promoting resilient or health functioning in some areas of physical development in childhood.

There are a number of preventive and health promoting practices that promote positive or resilient physical development in children and adolescents. Many of these protective or resilience factors, however, manifest primarily as a result of

- parental understanding of such considerations,
- proactive and intentional behavior on the part of parents and other caregivers, and
- availability of adequate fiscal and institutional resources to support implementation of the strategies.

The paucity of empirical findings in some of these areas also highlights the need for innovative programmatic and research efforts that continue to contribute to an understanding of resilience in physical health.

With the increased understanding by health researchers and practitioners of the role of physical development and health in the collective well-being of children and adolescents, there has been a significant turn in the efforts of prevention scientists and practitioners who work with these populations. Specifically, the field has advanced the idea of holistic youth development programs or youth-focused programs that attend to the reciprocity between physical health, mental health, and risk behaviors and attitudes. Flay (2002), for example, found that many risk behaviors shared common risk factors and were reciprocally influenced by physical and mental health, thereby supporting the argument for comprehensive health promotion programs. As many of these types of programs were offered in school environments, they were often referred to as comprehensive school health programs or health-promoting schools (St. Leger, 1999).

Several institutes within NIH have joined together to improve the physical health of young people, particularly to achieve the objectives of the Healthy People 2010 campaign focused on eliminating health disparities (U.S. DHHS, 2000a). One practical result of these collabora-

tions has been the establishment of the Ways to Enhance Children's Activity and Nutrition (We Can!) program. We Can! targets youth between the ages of 8 and 13, and its objectives include encouraging healthy eating, increasing physical activity, and reducing the amount of time young people spend watching TV or playing video games. This intervention represents one effort to extend research into practice and policy. While the We Can! program is a large-scale effort, there have been a variety of smaller scale efforts to develop interventions directed at improving the health of young people by managing challenges to their well-being in resilient ways.

In one of the earlier efforts to develop physical health programs, researchers implemented a 10-week intervention focused on physical activity, nutrition, smoking cessation, stress management, and problem-solving with a multiethnic cohort of 10th graders. In the treatment group, this study has shown positive effects for dietary habits, decreases in body fat, lowered cholesterol, and increased cardiovascular health knowledge (Fardy et al., 1995). A secondary finding has shown that parental education mediated results for youth participants. Specifically, youth of college-educated parents benefited more from the intervention than youth of non-college-educated parents. There has been some limited replication and dissemination of this program.

Body and Soul, a program developed for African American adults (with implications for children), developed collaborative community-church partnerships and sought to promote ecological change by focusing on the nutritional habits of adults and promoting healthy dietary (e.g., increased fruit and vegetable availability combined with decreased fried foods) practices at church-sponsored events (see Resnicow et al., 2004). Participants in the treatment condition were significantly more likely to have higher fruit and vegetable intake than participants in the control condition. Similarly, participants in the treatment condition were significantly more motivated to continue this behavior, had more support for the behavior, and felt it to be more efficacious to continue the behavior. Given the historic role of the Black church in the African American community—and in this case, in the lives of African American children—modifications to programs such as this could promote healthy dietary practices and physical activity.

There have been significant strides in violence prevention over the last decade. A number of programs have touted positive and sustainable effects in the reduction of interpersonal violence, and a number of government agencies, including SAMHSA and the Departments of Education and Justice, have highlighted some best practice programs. There have, however, been examples of programs that have built upon the cultural strengths (i.e., resilience) of the groups with which they have been employed. Multisystemic therapy, for example, has acknowledged the importance of understanding a family's cultural frame of reference and strengths and incorporating that information into empirically based interventions consonant with the family's values. Research has shown that such approaches resulted in change that was sustained over time (Swenson, Henggeler, Taylor, & Addison, 2005). Another intervention that used a similar approach and for which there has been emerging empirical support is the Black Parenting Strengths and Strategies Program (see Coard et al., 2007).

## SUMMARY

Earlier in this report, we offered a portrait of what optimal functioning is for African American youth. The foundation for such young people is first reflected in their physical development as it begins in utero. As children progress in their physical development, the constructs of engagement and critical mindedness introduced earlier are important to their optimal development. Early health education and positive role modeling are central to the ability of youth to make critical choices that reflect a sense of agency (i.e., engagement) regarding their physical health and that of their communities. As young people get older, they become increasingly responsible for lifestyle choices. Youth with a sense of critical mindedness who appreciate resilient physical health as an important facet of communal health and empowerment are also likely to manifest optimal functioning in other areas of their lives.

Optimally functioning African American young people also need to be flexible and adaptive given the multitude of challenges they face in this society. This flexibility might manifest itself in creative solutions, such as church dance teams, to maintain appropriate levels of physical activity

or the development of a broad set of social skills that allow them to successfully manage multiple social situations, including those that present risk.

Our focus in this report on children and adolescents within the person-in-context framework is mindful of the important role that families and other caregivers play in placing young people at promise and not at risk. Thus, caregivers and institutions that influence the development of African American youngsters must support, encourage, and model the elements we have proposed as central to children's and adolescents' optimal functioning or resilience.







## Conclusions

Resilience and strength are not reserved for individuals with privilege and resources, nor are risk and adversity reserved for individuals in low-income and underresourced environments. Risk and protective factors exist among all youth. In this review, we (the APA Task Force on Resilience and Strength in Black Children and Adolescents) found that the majority of studies and reports that focus on African American children and adolescents have examined risk factors and their association with negative outcomes. This report reflects increasing concern for the paucity of research highlighting African American children's thriving, engagement in successful behaviors, and development of adaptive skills. As such, in compiling this report, we strategized ways in which to shift the scholarly landscape and provide the reader with a more balanced and holistic perspective on African American children and adolescents. Given the societal realities that exist, including racism, discrimination, and prejudice, we contend that all African American youth face challenges that can compromise their health and well-being. We sought an accounting of what is known and what needs to be known about African American youth who are challenged by adverse situations/contexts with varying access to resources and yet who exhibit optimal growth and development.

In an effort to facilitate this paradigmatic shift, we argued for a more integrative, culturally congruent, and strength-based perspective to address the unique and shared ways in which African American children and adolescents

develop into healthy, well-adjusted adults. We then used a domain-specific approach to document and critically examine existing research (i.e., risk and protective factors and their associated outcomes). Our purpose was both to provide a synthesis of the limited literature on resilience and to argue for an intellectual agenda that seeks to illuminate the transactive processes that occur between the vulnerabilities/protective factors and the outcomes for African American children and adolescents. We contend that only in knowing how resilience is nurtured can we frame education, research, policy, and practice agendas and push for a new conceptual framework on the healthy development of African American youth.

Theoretical perspectives on resilience in children have outlined some rather complex yet elegant efforts to understand human development. To explore how children become resilient, researchers are moving from simple explanations of reduced risk to identifying protective moderators or mediators and their association with a domain-specific outcome (e.g., low-income and maternal support and their relation to school achievement). By and large, recent efforts attempt to construct resilience in a more ecologically valid way in that they often include aggregates of risk factors, multiple types of moderators or mediators, and multiple outcome indicators across multiple contexts.

The complexity outlined in recent theories demonstrates a desire—albeit ambitious—to describe children in the various contexts in which they live. As with most theoretic-

# Resilience Research: A Balanced Approach

A researcher is interested in conducting a study of how potential protective factors interact with stress exposure in a sample of low-income, African American children. One set of participants is a family of three: a mother, a 13-year-old son, and a 10-year-old daughter. The mother has a history of substance abuse, incarceration, and illiteracy. Her mother and siblings are current substance abusers, and one of her brothers is incarcerated. The son does not display problem behaviors; however, he has difficulty making friends and is often teased in school. The daughter is often in trouble at school for misconduct and acting-out behaviors.

This family would likely be described as having multiple risks that contribute to poor child developmental outcomes. However, one would not know—unless this question was explicitly asked—that this mother receives a significant amount of emotional and instrumental support from her family and neighbors, especially her church. This support has helped her to stay sober for 7 years and to complete a GED and vocational skills training program. This mother has regained custody of her children. She is a staunch supporter of her children and advocates for them, helping with homework each night and attending school meetings and extracurricular activities.

Similarly, despite the boy's difficulty in establishing relationships with others, he is very helpful at home and very responsible. If asked about his experiences, he would say that he enjoys learning, especially about marine life, but does not like getting teased by his peers. At home his opinions are valued, and he spends his time maintaining his fish tanks. He feels a sense of mastery over his knowledge, skills, and abilities in this area.

The daughter has strengths that include assisting her mother in managing household tasks and helping to organize community service activities at the local youth center. She feels competent and useful within the family context and displays emerging community leadership skills. When asked, she can articulate how proud she is that she can assist and motivate others. She has developed a love of learning as a result of her mother's literacy challenges, but she experiences what she is being taught at school as irrelevant to her family and community life.

A balanced perspective would assume and interrogate both risk and protection as part of this family's lived experience. Such a perspective would shed light on how the net vulnerability experienced by this family is offset by significant attitudinal strengths and environmental supports. Simply classifying the family as being at risk would overlook or misinterpret information relevant to understanding strength and resilience in the adults and children of this family. There is more to understand about the daily experiences of African Americans than mere demographics.

Of course, this example of a low-income, inner-city family is not meant to be representative of the African American experience (a heterogeneous group comprised of multiple experiences). This scenario also does not make explicit the macrolevel historical, social, and community factors and processes that contribute to this woman's and her children's world. There are many African American families whose experiences are not represented in this example and who need to be included in the discourse on resilience—for example, African American families living in suburban and rural communities and upper-class, middle-class, and working-class African American families.

cal discussions, the problem lies in a lack of consistency in the use of terms and the definition of constructs. When professionals attempt to test theories, inconsistency in the definition and operationalization of terms combined with insensitivity to contextual issues are more the rule than the exception. Because testing complex theories is difficult, researchers often examine only parts or subsections of the guiding theory. This more pragmatic approach reduces what is complex to a relatively simplistic investigation.

Further, past research on resilience has rarely investigated the concept of resilience in ethnic minority populations, and authors seem reluctant to admit that their findings may have been more germane to European American youth. Most studies omit race, ethnicity, and culture altogether or attempt to “control” for culturally and socioeconomic related variables. To do so is misleading, as culture and related variables are embedded in potential mediators, moderators, and outcomes. Research has shown that diverse cultural groups have different ways of enhancing positive outcomes for their children (Johnson-Powell & Yamamoto, 1997). If one accepts that culture matters, then it is no longer acceptable to control for it or to simply document the numbers of youth representing different ethnic groups as a way to make results more generalizable to the larger population of youth.

The literature has identified multiple potential moderators or protective factors that appear to be responsible for positive outcomes with children exposed to risk. Constructs such as positive family environment and social support are not the domain of any particular gender, age, or ethnic group and exist to some extent for all groups of children. These constructs are shared across racial and ethnic groups, but their expression may be culturally defined. For instance, in the African American family environment, cultural factors related to racial identity, racial socialization, spirituality/religiousness, and communal values are crucial to children’s resilience. Considerations of how families mobilize such culturally specific resources address the next level of complexity for resilience research.

What is needed is a balanced approach that accepts the limitations of past perspectives and acknowledges the role of contemporary society, social policy, and history in the development of African Americans in the United States. The example on page 92 illustrates how this can be done.

WHAT IS NEEDED IS A BALANCED APPROACH THAT ACCEPTS THE LIMITATIONS OF PAST PERSPECTIVES AND ACKNOWLEDGES THE ROLE OF CONTEMPORARY SOCIETY, SOCIAL POLICY, AND HISTORY IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF AFRICAN AMERICANS IN THE UNITED STATES.

Some of the literature has included African American youth who reside in rural communities (Brody et al 2006; Markstrom, Marshall, & Tryon, 2000); however, very little research has included youth who reside in suburban communities or more economically resourced communities. Nettles and Pleck (1993) concluded in their review of protective factors and the process of resilience in Black adolescents that there needs to be a distinction made between African American youth who reside in suburban, rural, and urban communities and between poor youth and those who are not poor. Unfortunately, much of the available

literature still views “African American” as synonymous with “inner-city residence” and “poverty,” a narrow categorization of the rich experience of African Americans in the United States.

The 21st century will be fraught with challenges, both old and new, for African American children and adolescents. Although indigenous strengths of African American children and adolescents exist, the new millennium will challenge their strengths even more. Although African American youth have proven that they have the ability to succeed in spite of serious challenges and to bounce back after facing hardship and adversity, they will need greater levels of resilience to navigate the challenges of the future. It will be important that collective efforts continue to foster and further develop identified “protective mechanisms.” To this end, we envisioned a thriving, well-functioning African American adolescent/young adult to guide our work. As we begin the new millennium and a new political era, identifying and promoting strength and resilience among African American youth merit the consideration of educators, researchers, practitioners, and policymakers and must be a valued goal in our society to ensure success, continued strength, and resilience among African American youth.

We hope our review advances scholarship in resilience as it pertains to conceptualizing and operationalizing resilience among African American children and adolescents. In addition, we hope that readers of this report gain a better understanding of and appreciation for factors and processes that aid young African Americans in developing to their full potential.







# Recommendations

## RESEARCH AND FUNDING

As evidenced in this report, there is a clear need to further identify and strengthen protective factors for the identity, emotional, social, cognitive, and physical/health development of African American children and adolescents. Decades of research point to the assets available in peer groups, families, schools, and communities. However, a focus on reducing risk, not promoting optimal outcomes, pervades the literature. Many African American youth negotiate risky environments to reach their full potential. Additionally, the resources within their proximal ecological and cultural contexts have yet to be fully uncovered or used.

To advance knowledge in the field of resilience and improve the lives of African American children and adolescents and their families, it is recommended that researchers, research-funding organizations, and other stakeholders, including those who establish funding priorities, work together to strengthen the evidence base promoting optimal outcomes. The Task Force on Resilience and Strength in Black Children and Adolescents therefore recommends the following research priorities.

### RESEARCH PRIORITIES

In general:

Use mixed methodologies to conduct longitudinal basic and applied research that is more integrative, interdisciplinary, and in-

formed by the diverse cultural traditions and socioeconomic and sociopolitical experiences of African American communities, families, children, and adolescents. This work should illuminate the joint and mutually reinforcing influences across and within ecological domains of the developing child and the underlying mechanisms to explain why protective factors foster positive development.

More specifically:

- Examine the complexities and intersections of multiple identities (e.g., race, gender, class, sexual orientation, ability), including how socialization processes in family, peer, community, and broader societal contexts influence the identity development process.
- Conduct research to understand emotion regulation, self-esteem, competence and efficacy, and perspective taking in African American youth across situations and circumstances. This would include cultural forms of emotional expression and their relevance to resilience and strength.
- Examine prosocial attitudes and behaviors, flexible behavioral repertoires, critical mindedness in African American youth, and processes that facilitate their

engagement in collective efforts for positive community change.

- Examine the process by which engagement with academic material, critical and flexible thinking, and problem solving occur in African American youth and develop testable models of the relations between these protective factors and cognitive outcomes.
- Conduct research that intentionally documents and promotes health and well-being among African American youth and explicitly seeks to understand the intersection and reciprocal relationship between the various domains of functioning—for example, the impact of positive physical health in promoting resilience in other domains (identity, emotional, social, and cognitive).
- Recognize the resilience of African and Caribbean immigrant children and conduct greater research on their development.

Applied research efforts should:

- Increase research on the cost-effectiveness of programs targeting African American families and experimentally contrast generic and culturally specific approaches.
- Develop interventions that address the mechanisms underlying behavioral, emotional, cognitive, and social functioning, including the complexity of the relation in more moderator/mediator studies.
- Advocate for funding to implement collaborative interventions that enhance capacity and are sustainable at the community level.
- Advocate for the development of centers on resilience that target optimal functioning and form cooperative agreements across funding agencies. With an interdisciplinary approach, the centers would use basic research to identify processes that promote resilience. Applied research would examine interventions

designed to leverage existing strengths for long-term positive functioning.

## **POLICY AND ADVOCACY**

We recommend the following policy engagement activities to promote resilience in African American children and adolescents in contemporary society by bringing together scholars, policymakers, educators, and practitioners to improve the lives of African American children and families:

- Advocate for policy decisions impacting African American youth and families that are informed by and based on research that has identified factors that promote resilience.
- Develop, support, and enforce policies that reduce racism and promote cultural competence.
- Advocate on the national, state, and local levels to articulate knowledge of resilience and encourage dissemination of how protective mechanisms and processes of healthy psychological functioning occur in African American children and adolescents.
- Advocate for local and national funding agencies to incorporate culturally relevant guidelines and recommendations into requests for proposals for research and programming targeting African American youth and families.
- Involve African American families in policy making. Families should participate in policy making and be compensated for their time as consultants.
- Develop policies that foster family, school, and community collaborations and lend themselves to early preventive intervention and reward schools that actively support sustained optimal development among African American children and youth.
- Recommend increased collaboration across federal funding agencies involved in resilience research



(e.g., NIMH, NICHD, CDC, SAMHSA, and Institute of Education Sciences [IES]).

- Create a standing workgroup within APA to monitor progress in resilience research and protective variables and communicate the status of this research to the professional community and the public.
- Facilitate the development of interdisciplinary partnerships among physicians, mental health practitioners, educators/schools, community leaders, government agencies, and families to ensure adaptation, dissemination, and implementation of culturally relevant, evidence-based treatments (e.g., incorporate resilience strategies in community settings).
- Educate across multiple constituencies (APA, Congress, community) about the influence of African American lifestyles and physical health across the life span and the importance of primary health promotion.

## EDUCATION

### PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION

Within the field of psychology, nondeficit theories, strength-based perspectives, and training in cultural competence in research and practice at the predoctoral, postdoctoral, and continuing-education levels are essential. Culturally endorsed values and culturally infused practices should be taught to all basic and applied psychologists working with African American populations and are of paramount importance to all professionals involved in the investigation and treatment of African American children, adolescents, and families. It is recommended that all preservice and in-service settings include such cultural competence training.

#### *Predoctoral Level*

Predoctoral training of professional psychologists should include a broad-based education in the evidence-based treatments and culturally endorsed values, attitudes, and behaviors discussed in this review, including the development of more rigorous cultural competence guidelines to promote

the acquisition of cultural knowledge through formal training, guided mentorship, and supervision. These guidelines should require early career practitioners and researchers to acquire knowledge about and an understanding of the historical, political, and racial context of the communities in which practice and/or research is being conducted.

Specifically, it is recommended that:

- Predoctoral students be proficient in the critical review of basic and applied research literatures to ensure the ongoing review of and familiarity with theoretical, research, and practice innovations with African American children and youth.
- Course work, training practica, and internships include skill development in the evidence-based theories, methods, programs, and therapies for use with culturally diverse populations, especially African Americans.

#### *Postdoctoral Level*

It is recommended that:

- Training at the postdoctoral level further the development of skills in the implementation of culturally relevant interventions and general knowledge of evidence-based treatments, Africentric values, culturally endorsed attitudes and behavior, consistent with current training guidelines for postdoctoral fellowships for child and adolescent psychology.
- Postdoctoral students be encouraged to continue the breadth and further increase the depth of training in evidence-based theory, research, and interventions for postdoctoral students.

### CONTINUING EDUCATION

It is recommended that continuing education for practitioners and training faculty emphasize contemporary evidence-based strategies that are innovative and culturally congruent in both the assessment and treatment of African American youth.

- Encourage the American Psychological Association, as well as each of its divisions related to child prac-



tice, to support continuing education activities in evidence-based culturally competent research and practice.

- Ensure that board certification in clinical child and adolescent psychology, as well as in school psychology, indicates a high degree of knowledge and proficiency in evidence-based interventions.
- Train providers to collaborate with community stakeholders, including caregivers, school personnel, and others involved in the comprehensive care of youth (e.g., tutors, parole officers, case managers).
- Teach providers to develop rewards for desired behaviors and corrective supports in discussion with caregivers, adolescents, and sometimes children to facilitate informed decision making when formulating treatment plans.

#### PUBLIC EDUCATION

A tremendous amount of information regarding risk behaviors and negative outcomes is easily accessible from different sources, most notably the Internet. In addition, media portrayals of African American youth are often inaccurate and misleading. Parents, caregivers, and other stakeholders must have accurate information about positive child and youth development and strategies to support and advocate for desirable academic, social, and emotional growth in various social settings.

To improve recognition and understanding of optimal child and youth development, it is recommended that professional organizations, the medical community, federal agencies, foundations, private industry, youth-serving organizations, accrediting bodies, and other stakeholders commit to educating the public about these issues.

- Understand environmental systemic barriers and emotional regulation/expression that may interfere with the classroom learning experiences.

- Implement check-in periods or adult support within the school context to provide opportunities for youth to give voice to their experiences, concerns, and fears.
- Identify, recognize, and promote critical mindedness and active engagement within schools, teachers, and students.
- Assist parents and other stakeholders in accessing accurate information about evidence-based competence promotion programs for children and adolescents so that they may be informed consumers of services.
- Educate and encourage the media to portray African American children and youth accurately.
- Provide technical assistance and education to teachers, school administration, and the educational system regarding teaching African American youth, emphasizing the need to honor, recognize, and cultivate strengths of African American children and adolescents.
- Establish mechanisms to inform the public and professionals about which practices and programs do NOT work in order to minimize naïve consumer exposure to professionals who make false or unsubstantiated claims.

#### PRACTICE

It is imperative that African American children develop a positive sense of self and racial identity in order to foster resilience and strength. Therefore, programs must target documented culturally relevant protective factors (e.g., racial identity, racial socialization) and purposefully and strategically incorporate content and delivery strategies relevant to these constructs. With a cultural and ecological perspective of optimal social development interventions, provide the opportunity to leverage change in African American children's and adolescents' development. This intervention approach engages stakeholders and youth in a co-constructive process that builds broad consensus around program goals, objectives, practices, and evaluation. Empowering

youth and their primary socializing agents increases the prospect of authentic and sustainable initiatives.

It is recommended that policymakers, professional organizations, educational and training institutions, and providers:

- Develop policy and implement practices ensuring that African American youth are empowered and strengthened through evidence-based, culturally informed strategies.
- Implement prevention programs that recognize the legacy of systemic barriers and oppression and that foster active engagement and ownership among community stakeholders.
- Train clinicians and other service providers and practitioners in strength-based assessment and therapies.
- Support community leaders and partnerships within African American communities.
- Advocate for use of evidence based practices with African American children and youth.
- Engage in practice that integrates the cultural competence guidelines and recommendations made by nationally accredited organizations (e.g., APA, 2002; President's New Freedom Commission on Mental Health, 2003).
- Promote collaborative decision making among providers, parents, and youth (as developmentally appropriate), involving a careful risk-benefit analysis and informed treatment decision-making.

*We—the members of the APA Task Force on Resilience and Strength in Black Children and Adolescents—recognize that there are no quick fixes. The issues explored in this report have many roots, and creating better outcomes requires difficult changes at many levels. More research is needed on the practices that produce inequality and the reforms that can successfully correct them. American society needs to reach the point at which every African American child is treated as if he or she were our own child, with the same tirelessly defended life possibilities. We must have leadership and enforcement to ensure that each African American child receives the quality social, emotional, behavioral, and health supports and services he or she truly needs without diminishing any of the opportunities that are any child's right in American society. We hope our report and continued efforts to inform the federal debate will contribute to that dream.*



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