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African American Children in Single-Mother Families

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> It takes a whole village to raise a child.
>
> —African proverb

As of 1990, more than half of all African American children under 18 years of age lived with one parent, usually their mother. This is the first time since these data have been maintained that the single-parent family form is the most prevalent among African Americans. Thus cries of alarm have been sounded over this and similar statistics for other racial/ethnic groups (see Table 7.1). Increasing social problems in the African American community as well as greater acceptance (or tolerance) of a wide range of lifestyles have contributed to the increased percentage of African American children in households headed by a single woman. In most instances, the head of these households is the child's mother (biological or adoptive); in other instances, either a female relative or nonrelative may have responsibility for the care of the child. This range of household and family types results in an intriguing cultural matrix that supports and facilitates children's development. However, the picture that is often painted by research and the media suggests that children in these families are at great risk for detrimental outcomes; although some are, many do well.

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Table 7.1 Percentage of Children Under Age 18 Living With One Parent, by Race/Ethnicity for 1960, 1970, 1980, and 1990

	Year of Census Data			
Race/Ethnicity	*1960*	*1970*	*1980*	*1990*
Black	21.9	31.8	45.8	54.8
White	7.1	8.7	15.1	19.2
Latino	N/A	N/A	21.1	30.0

SOURCE: U.S. Bureau of the Census (1991, p. 5).

The problems and strengths of children and their families are discussed in this chapter. An overview of the problems facing children in single-mother families is presented along with race-specific findings. An attempt is made to untangle the cultural matrix that cloaks these children and protects them from poor developmental outcomes. Adaptive strengths that have sustained African American families and communities are presented and discussed as strategies for ensuring optimal development of children in single-mother families. Specifically, dimensions of the African worldview (Nobles, 1974), such as spirituality, communalism, positivity and role flexibility, are used to highlight adaptive strengths of African American single-mother families in fostering development in young children.

EFFECTS OF SINGLE-PARENT STATUS ON CHILDREN: GENERAL FINDINGS

Research has shown that many children in single mother families are as successful as children in two-parent families on emotional adjustment and school achievement (Cashion, 1982). However, in their recent review of mother-only families, McLanahan and Booth (1991) present a summary of literature that suggests several deleterious effects of single-mother status on children. According to their review, these children have poorer academic achievement (boys more so than girls), higher absenteeism from school, higher dropout rates at school, lower earnings in young adulthood, higher rates of poverty, earlier ages at first marriage, children at younger ages in and out of marriage, higher divorce rates, higher rates of committing delinquent acts, and higher rates of drug and alcohol use.

A common theory used to explain these deleterious effects has been that these problems are due to the absence of a male in the household (Davidson, 1990). However, other scholars point to alternative factors. For example, some children from single-mother families have lower self-esteem than children in two-parent families, but this has been found to be due to the negative stigma and expectations associated with their status rather than to family structure. There is also within-group variation among children in single-mother families based on the reason for the mother's single status, family income level, age of mother, or the family's life cycle (e.g., presence or absence of preschool children or adolescents). These points are discussed further in the following sections.

Most notable among the explanatory factors is the family income level in single-mother families. Cherlin (1981) has argued for some time that "it seems likely that the most detrimental aspect of the absence of the fathers from one-parent families headed by women is not the lack of a male presence but the lack of a male income" (p. 81). As others have explained in this volume, one third of all single-parent families live in poverty and the figure worsens for families of color, who have the added burden of racism that keeps mothers from gainful employment or decent housing. Over half of single-parent African American families live in poverty. It is less likely that African American single mothers will be awarded child support or receive child support and alimony in cases of divorce or paternal support decrees or will live in a household with a second wage earner (Grossman & Hayghe, 1982; Johnson & Waldman, 1983). These descriptive accounts of the disproportionate representation of African Americans among single-mother families are only suggestive of the impact of poverty on children's outcomes. Another line of inquiry examining economic hardship and the relationship of maternal behavior on adolescents' socioemotional functioning provides a more complex view of developmental implications of mother-only family structures (McLoyd, Jayaratne, Ceballo, & Borquez, 1994).

McLoyd et al. (1994) examined the relationship of economic hardship on adolescent socioemotional functioning in African American single-mother families. Two economic stressors, work interruption and unemployment, were found to affect adolescents' socioemotional functioning indirectly through their impact on mothers' psychological functioning and, in turn, parenting behavior and mother-child relations. Unemployment predicted depressive symptomatology, which predicted more frequent maternal punishment and was mediated by mothers' negative perception of the maternal role. More frequent maternal punishment was associated with the adolescents' cognitive distress and depressive symptoms, and these relations were mediated by the adolescents' perception of the quality of the parent-child relationship. Moreover, both stressors were associated with maternal perceptions of financial strain, which predicted adolescents' perceptions of the family economic hardship. Adolescents who perceived their families as experiencing more severe economic hardship reported higher anxiety, more cognitive distress, and lower self-esteem (McLoyd et al., 1994). Thus there appear to be complex interrelationships among family structure, maternal functioning, family economic experience, and adolescent functioning in African American single-mother families. Also, as in earlier studies of families with infants and young children, McLoyd et al. found that one form of social support (perceived availability of instrumental support) was associated with reduced maternal reports of symptoms of depression, less maternal punishment of adolescents, and more positivity about the maternal role.

Another explanation related to the economic status of the single-mother family centers on the involvement of children in household management and decision making. This relationship is best understood in terms of its implications for the psychological functioning of single mothers and their children. That is, children in single-parent households, as compared with children in two-parent households, generally do more household tasks and are more involved in household management and decision making (Weiss, 1979). Because the children are seen by the mother as having a major responsibility in the household functioning, they also serve as friends and confidants with whom the mother shares her worries and problems, including economic hardships. This may undermine her children's psychological well-being (McLoyd & Wilson, 1990). For example, McLoyd and Wilson (1990) found that economic hardship per se was unrelated to a child's psychological functioning but was positively related to a mother's psychological distress, which in turn was positively related to a child's psychological problems. It should be noted that in this study social networks, which included satisfying contact with family members, were associated with lower psychological distress in the child. Others have also found that, in general, the kin network provides help to buffer poor outcomes in African American single-mother families (Taylor, Chatters, Tucker, & Lewis, 1990). However, it should be noted that because of poverty or near poverty status, some of these families move more and thus may lose friends and social support networks that could help protect children from detrimental outcomes.

ARE BOYS AT GREATER RISK THAN GIRLS?

The increasing problems of African American boys and men have been presumed to be due to family structures such as those we have been discussing. A major presumption is that the absence of fathers (and thus, presumably, male role models) has led to a lack of parental control that results in aggressive and even self-destructive behavior among African American males. However, a recent study examining mother-only versus father-only family effects on their same-sex children found that among 35 outcome variables same-sex effects were found for only 2: computers in the home and saving for a child's college education. Outcomes such as self-concept, locus of control, achievement, popularity, school behavior, tobacco use, and parental involvement showed no effects. These findings are based on a predominantly White middle-class sample, with mothers' single status due to divorce. In general, there is a paucity of research examining gender-related differences in parent-child relationships and outcomes in African American single-mother families. Thus there is no empirical evidence to date to suggest that the pattern of same-sex findings would differ for African American families. However, factors other than father absence can be examined to explain differential outcomes for African American male children.

The gender role socialization of African American male children is closely tied to the difficult and complex problem of masculine development in the United States generally. Gender-related role expectations intensify around the time of puberty and require accomplishment of specific developmental tasks (Hill & Lynch, 1983). That is, if males are to function successfully in designated adult roles, they are expected to achieve a sense of identity, function independent of their families of origin, and choose an occupation or career (Lloyd, 1985). However, the gendered racism against African American men in the United States makes this an exceptionally challenging task for African American families. That is, post-industrial displacement of unskilled jobs and gender-specific academic problems in public schools have placed African American men (particularly fathers) at alarming risk for chronic joblessness, provider role failure, and familial estrangement (Bowman, 1988).

One well-known gender-based adage about the child-rearing practices of African American mothers is that they "raise their daughters and love their sons." This refers to circumstances in which girls are socialized to take on adult responsibilities at earlier ages than boys and are expected to assist with household maintenance and child rearing, study harder, and be socially responsible, while boys are allowed to "have their way." For example, as early as infancy, gender differences have been shown in the expectations that African American mothers of daughters as compared to mothers of sons have for the age at which they should develop self-help skills; mothers of daughters expect them to develop these skills at earlier ages than do mothers of sons (Rosser & Randolph, 1991).

During the postslavery period, mothers' overprotection of their sons may have been aimed at making them less aggressive and thus less prone to racist attacks. Also, traditionally, even in two-parent, dual-earner families, this may have been so in the industrial era because male children could be expected to get jobs based on their physical strength, whereas the "way out" (of domestic employment in White households) for girls was thought to be through education. During the industrial era this child-rearing strategy may have been viewed as adaptive for African American families, but in the current high-technology and information society, the jobless rate for African American men has been increasing while that for African American women has stabilized or expanded.

Also, the rates of African American women who are never married and divorced with children have been increasing, leaving increasing numbers with primary responsibility for raising both male and female children without regular involvement of their fathers. Thus, although the socialization strategy of the old adage ("loving" sons) may have been adaptive during the industrial era, it may now be less adaptive for African American male children. A growing gender gap in educational preparation has resulted in poorer educational performance and attainment among African American boys as compared to girls at all educational levels, the displacement of unskilled jobs has had more adverse effects on African American boys than girls, and despite increasing acceptance of gender role flexibility, the "provider" and "caretaker" roles still carry differential weights among men and women (Bowman, 1988; Bowman & Saunders, 1988).

Bowman and his colleagues found, for example, that the emotional consequences of failure and success as a provider appear to be especially intense among African American men and that, despite similar experiences in chronic joblessness among African American male and female youths, the developmental implications of such difficulties are quite different for African American males (Bowman, 1984, 1990; Bowman & Saunders, 1988; Harrison, Bowman, & Beale, 1985). Thus, in the face of harsher economic and social realities, African American families now have the added challenge of socializing boys in ways that may protect

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them from situations that render them vulnerable to drugs, alcohol, gangs, and other aggressive or self-destructive behavior. Bowman and his colleagues found that access to cultural resources, such as those discussed later in this chapter, facilitates adaptive models of coping with such chronic role strain (Bowman & Howard, 1985; Bowman & Saunders, 1990).

Another contemporary explanation for the acting-out behavior of boys is that the absence of African American adult males places the younger African American male, particularly the adolescent, in the position of being a parental child (Boyd-Franklin, 1989; Minuchin, 1974). That is, mothers view their sons as fulfilling the adult roles of the absent fathers or surrogates; yet sons are not socialized into these roles. Moreover, sons who may become overwhelmed by the role may reverse generational boundaries and assume spousal or parental responsibilities for the mother (Boyd-Franklin, 1989). Also, the demands of being a single mother, and in many instances a single working mother, may place task and emotional overloads on women that then transfer to the parental child (McLoyd & Wilson, 1990). It may be easier for girls and their mothers to address the situation (violently or nonviolently) than it is for boys and their mothers. Therefore, boys seek relationships outside the home, usually with peers with whom to express their emotions or have age-appropriate interactions. Acting out, other aggressive behavior, and self-destructive behavior may be manifestations of pent-up hostility or the overwhelming feelings about being unable to adequately fulfill the parental child role (Boyd-Franklin, 1989) or normative adolescent roles (Bowman & Saunders, 1988).

Relatedly, McLoyd and Wilson (1990) empirically tested the association between a mother's communication of problems to her children and the children's sex as predictors of psychological distress in African American mother-only families experiencing economic hardship. Although they found that the frequency with which mothers talked to their children about personal problems and financial matters predicted higher levels of psychological distress in children, there were no differences related to the sex of the children. Thus, while the parental child notion may have important clinical implications for working with male youths in single-mother families, more research is needed to fully understand the intervening processes linking maternal behavior to child outcomes or gender-based differences in parent-child interaction in African American single-mother families.

Moreover, recent research reveals mixed findings on the protective influence of family support for children in single-mother families. As noted above, McLoyd and Wilson found that satisfying contact with family members was associated with lower psychological distress in children; sex-of-child effects were not found. A study by Pearson, Ialongo, Hunter, and Kellam (1994) found, however, that for low-income fourth-grade boys, mother-grandmother extended families are not protective (i.e., boys in these families were not reported as less aggressive as compared with boys in mother-alone families). Pearson et al. speculated that for these older elementary-aged children peers have a greater influence than grandmothers, and therefore the protective effects found for grandmothers with young elementary-aged male children (Kellam, Ensminger, & Turner, 1977) were not found in their sample. It should be noted that study methodologies may have influenced findings: The McLoyd and Wilson (1990) sample was composed solely of African American adolescents, and the Pearson et al. (1994) study sample was fourth graders, 70% of whom were African American (however, race effects were not examined).

Jackson's (1993) study of African American single working mothers in poverty found that parenting (preschool) boys may be especially stressful for mothers balancing work and family roles in poverty, particularly when low education is also a factor. Having no education beyond high school and a male child predicted significantly higher role strain, greater depressive symptomatology, lower ratings of overall life satisfaction, and the least favorable maternal perceptions of children. A mediating factor was willingness/preference for employment; higher levels of strain were associated with reluctant employment. Jackson postulated that higher educational attainment may better prepare mothers with coping abilities to meet the special demands of raising young boys, including knowledge about how to access support networks that moderate their role strain. Also, mothers who preferred to be employed were more energetic in their response to the demanding role of raising sons. However, regardless of the reason for working, mothers with education beyond high school perceived their children (boys and girls) significantly more positively than did mothers with no education beyond high school. Another finding was inconsistent with previous research based on samples of middle-class White wives. That is, regardless of the amount of time mothers spent in paid employment, descriptions of boys were significantly more negative than those of girls. Jackson contends that this supports the notion that the effects of maternal employment may be different for diverse populations.

In general, existing literature paints a mixed picture of children in single-mother families. On one hand, the picture is less than optimistic for children's outcomes and, on the other, many African American children survive and even thrive in these family situations. A number of factors need to be considered as we further examine these families or attempt to intervene to strengthen them, particularly because for African American children this is now the predominant family type, with 51.2% of African American children under 18 years of age living in mother-only families (U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1991). Many of the factors commonly pointed to in the literature are "mother blaming" (Kissman & Allen, 1991) or attribute children's problems to "mother failings" (for a review, see Caplan & Hall-McCorquodale, 1985). These perspectives are akin to the victim-blaming perspectives that view single-mother families and children in them as pathological, deviant, devalued, and disadvantaged.

What has been neglected is the wide range of other factors that contribute to family and child outcomes—family processes, environmental stress, and the cultural and ecological contexts in which these families raise their children. Other systems (political, economic, educational, etc.) are failing single-mother families due largely to sexism and elitism (i.e., the relatively low status of women in society and negative expectations about mothers' abilities to parent alone) (Kissman & Allen, 1991). The situation is amplified for single-mother African American families due to the confounding effects of racism. When viewed within this larger environmental context, the strengths of single-mother families and the positive effects on children can be more fully illuminated. The strategies that African American single mothers use to function effectively within this "double whammy" context (racism and sexism) are discussed after exploring what it means to be raised in a single-mother family and what factors make parenting and growing up easier or more difficult.

Many authors would agree that the type of single-parent family may directly or indirectly affect parent-child interactions or child outcomes. The notion of type encompasses a range of factors: family structure, household composition, family member relationships, and the life events that resulted in the single parenting status. The following discussion examines ways in which these factors may contribute to a better understanding of the realities (strengths and problems) of children in families headed by African American single "mothers."[1]

FAMILY STRUCTURE, HOUSEHOLD COMPOSITION, AND FAMILY RELATIONSHIPS

Family structure and household composition combine to refer to the organization of the family as typically discussed in traditional sociological terms—that is, nuclear, extended, or augmented. Family relationships include the biological, adoptive, or kin and non-kin relationships among members in the family or household. For the purposes of this chapter, the nuclear family is composed primarily of the mother and her children (biological or adopted). In some situations, the mother's partner may reside with the family. An extended family situation comprises the nuclear family and at least one other adult relative who resides with the family. An augmented family is referred to as one in which the nuclear family and one adult nonrelative reside together. The relationships among family members in these types of single-mother families are discussed as they relate to their impact on children's developmental outcomes.

Nuclear Families

In nuclear families, the mothers may lack support from extended networks or fictive kin, may have fewer personal and social resources to offset detrimental outcomes, and are extremely burdened by the same tasks of two-parent families (balancing work and family, finding child care, transportation, health care, parenting, and household maintenance). However, it has also been shown that when mothers in these family types have more income, higher educational levels, are widowed, or have a regular male partner, their children's outcomes are more positive.

Extended Families

In extended family situations, the other adult is likely to be a grandmother. Related to life events, a large proportion of single-mother families results from teenaged pregnancy. Adolescent mothers are more likely to remain in the same household as their mother (children's grandmother). This creates a situation that is more properly referred to as binuclear in that two sets of parents (usually both are single parents) are raising children. Another increasing configuration evident in recent years' national statistics (e.g., in the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth) is the two-single-sisters-with-children household. The potential for children's developmental outcomes in binuclear and extended families is both positive and negative.

On the positive side, an older, usually more experienced mother is available to assist with parenting tasks. An extended family situation may make the parenting role less stressful for the younger mother and thus more facilitative of good parent-child interaction than if she were left alone to raise her child (Furstenberg, Brooks-Gunn, & Morgan, 1987;

Stevens, 1988). By sharing a household the generations also share resources, advice and guidance, and emotional support, in a more direct and focused way than if they were in different households (Pearson, Hunter, Ensminger, & Kellam, 1990). This reciprocal exchange of resources may be a key protective factor in offsetting the impact of poverty on children. Also, the presence of older children from the other family may serve a protective function for the younger child(ren) in terms of socialization as well as cognitive and motor development.

On the negative side, conflicts may arise in parenting when the older generation provides guidance contrary to the younger mother's beliefs and practices. This effect may be related to the age of the mother at first birth (Chase-Lansdale, Brooks-Gunn, & Zamsky, 1994). For example, a recent study found that multigenerational families most likely to provide positive parenting were those where older mothers did not reside with the grandmother, whereas in families with very young mothers, co-residing with grandmothers showed higher quality of parenting than did non-co-residing ones. (Chase-Lansdale et al., 1994). Also, children may be confused as to the roles that their mothers and the other "mothers" (grandmothers or aunts) perform. Distribution or sharing of household resources may also limit the parent's ability to effectively raise her children. For example, mothers with infants and toddlers may qualify for programs like the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program that provides vouchers for food. These commodities may have to be shared with the other nuclear family that is not eligible for such assistance; when distribution or sharing is not perceived as equitable by one or the other "mothers," conflicts can result. Because of the potential for such conflicts around child rearing and resource sharing, the most effective extended families are likely to be those in which grandmothers provide support and substitute child care but do not have families of their own to raise.

Among adolescent families, a more prevalent extended family type includes three generations of single parents (mother, grandmother and great-grandmother). Burton (1991) found that in these families the great-grandmother assumes the parenting role for the adolescent mother while the grandmother becomes the chief caregiver for the adolescent's child. This skip in generational parenting may serve a protective function for children in that an older, more experienced caregiver assumes the parenting role and there is less opportunity for conflict between the two closer generations (i.e., mothers and grandmothers or grandmothers and great-grandmothers). This reduction in adult-adult conflict has the potential for lessening stress that could result in difficult parent-child interactions.

Relatedly, in recent attachment research, retrospective accounts of mothers' attachment to their mother have been predictive of mother-infant quality of attachment. Those adults who report difficult attachment relationships with their own mothers have infants who are classified at one year as insecurely attached to their mothers. Secure attachment has been shown to be predictive of more optimal developmental outcomes for preschool- and school-aged children. Insecure attachment has been shown to relate to difficult peer interactions, lower school achievement, and poor relationships in adolescence. The limitation of current attachment research is, however, that it focuses largely on children's attachments to their biological mothers.

In African American single-mother families, an examination of multiple attachments may be necessary to fully explicate how children form socioemotional relationships predictive of optimal performance at later ages. For example, children in extended households or nuclear families with a dysfunctional mother may form attachments to their grandmothers as the principal attachment figure, and even though they show insecure attachment to their mother, they may show secure attachment to their grandmother (Randolph, 1989). An emphasis on multiple attachments may be even more important in cases where children are informally adopted by "other mothers." The extent to which the "other mother" serves a protective role in this regard is tantamount to our developing more culturally appropriate intervention strategies to assist single-mother families. More studies that use an intergenerational framework that respects the cultural integrity of the single-mother African American family are needed to address such issues.

Augmented Families

Little contemporary research has been conducted on augmented family types and the parenting roles played by adult nonrelatives who reside in the same households of single-mother families. However, earlier ethnographic research on the roles of kin and fictive kin in poor African American families (Aschenbrenner, 1973; Martin & Martin, 1978; Stack, 1974) shows that these adult nonrelatives assume significant roles, including parenting, that assist the single parent in managing on limited resources. Such caregivers usually contribute to the family income by paying rent, buying food, or helping with utility payments. This additional resource may buttress the impact of poverty for those who are chronically poor or experience involuntary work interruption, unemployment, or other economic hardship that may result for newly single, formerly married women (i.e., those who are divorced, separated, or widowed). This is important because, as mentioned earlier, the poorer outcomes for single-mother families as compared to two-parent families may be due more to the absence of the father's income than to the absence of the father/male per se (Adams, 1991; Cherlin, 1981). Another factor to consider is the mother's adaptation to the economic hardship, perceived financial strain, and perceived availability of instrumental support (McLoyd et al., 1994). As has been shown by McLoyd et al. (1994), these factors can be indirectly related to children's distress. If the additional "family" member is viewed as offsetting the financial strain, this may result in lower levels of perceived financial strain in mothers and children and thus reduce children's levels of cognitive distress, anxiety, and depressive symptomatology. Thus the augmented family type may provide an alternative to the nuclear type when an extended family arrangement is not available, possible, or desirable.

LIFE EVENTS ASSOCIATED WITH SINGLE-PARENT STATUS: CHOICE OR CIRCUMSTANCE?

> Almost every writer on families headed by single mothers points to the relationship with the larger environment as a determining factor in the well being of those families. (Kissman & Allen, 1991, p. 41)

Throughout the 1980s, teenage pregnancy accounted for the largest proportion of single mothers studied in the literature. Much of the research on single parents has been based on research with adolescents and their children, although more recently multigeneration studies have been conducted (Burton, 1990; Chase-Lansdale et al., 1994). It should be noted that the assumption is that fathers are absent or uninvolved in the lives of children born to adolescents. However, although adolescent fathers and older fathers of children born to adolescents may not function in provider roles, they do value the role of companion to their children (Staples & Johnson, 1993). Other protective factors for children of adolescent single mothers are maternal co-residence with the grandmother for very young mothers (Chase-Lansdale et al., 1994), child intelligence, child self-esteem, quality of the home environment, maternal educational attainment, family support for achievement, and support from caring adults in the community (Nettles & Pleck, 1994).

Although a range of life events contribute to single-parent status (some resulting in more negative or positive outcomes than others), what seems to be important is the interpretation of that event as positive or negative by mothers or surrogate mothers and children. Other factors that influence the well-being of the families are the resources available, the extent to which any issues between the father and mother or children were resolved or remain unresolved, and the mothers' and children's self-perceptions and sense of control (Kissman & Allen, 1991).

Another issue that must be factored in is the meaning of the event to the child. Single-parent status, including divorce, is presumed by some scholars to be a "normative" experience in African American children's worlds (i.e., their neighborhood, church, or school). It is argued that the child is more likely to make a successful transition in this case than if single-parent status is viewed with social disapproval in his or her environment. The presumption of normativeness has not been tested among African American children and their communities. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the phenomenon may not be viewed as normative and that many children face peers who stigmatize them because of their family status; many adults also face such stigma or disapproval from family members, policy makers, educators, and other members of the community (Kissman & Allen, 1991). As with the mother, the child's own sense of control and self-perceptions is an important determinant of his or her adjustment to the situation. Developmental research is needed to examine age-related adjustments to single-parent status among children. Life cycle approaches would help to provide information about how the work history of the parent, presence or absence of varying aged children, and family and household structural changes influence children's interpretation of the meaning of their single-mother family.

Another important issue for children is identity formation, especially for adolescents. For example, at or near age 12, children may become preoccupied with the need to know their father. It should be noted that some parent-child difficulties arise over issues related to the mother either withholding or sharing information that will enable the child to locate his or her father. Again, the precipitating event for the single-parent status may be a major factor influencing the mother's cooperation with or response to her child's request.

Finally, the meaning of the event to the African American community and the larger community may also be factors in successful parenting and child developmental outcomes in single-mother families. Again, although it is presumed by some that single-parent family status is a normative (acceptable) experience among African American families (i.e., that single-parent status is not as stigmatizing as in the majority culture), this is an undocumented presumption. Nonetheless, the community oftentimes assumes responsibility for providing support to assist these families. Whether single-mother status is due to circumstance (adolescent parenting, divorce, death of partner, never-married's unplanned pregnancy) or choice (planned pregnancy, mother-initiated divorce or separation), the extended family or community acknowledges the value of the children in this situation and has typically responded by providing for the basic needs of the mother and child and, in some instances, informally adopting the child. Formal institutions and organizations such as churches and mosques provide educational and recreational activities, male role models and mentors, surrogate fathers, parental support, scholarships, job training, and assistance with daily needs for child care, transportation, and health maintenance (Billingsley, 1993). Also, once a father acknowledges his child, his family becomes an important resource for the single-mother family (Boyd-Franklin, 1989). These and other strengths of African American families and communities protect many children from the harsh reality of problematic single-mother family situations. An elucidation of these strengths follows a discussion about some factors that put some single-mother families at greater risk for poorer maternal and child outcomes.

DYSFUNCTIONAL SINGLE-MOTHER FAMILY TYPES AND IMPLICATIONS FOR CHILDREN'S DEVELOPMENT

Although many children in single-mother families are as successful as those in two-parent families, there are special circumstances that put some African American children at particular risk for poor emotional and academic outcomes. That is, there are some family types that may be dysfunctional. Among the factors which may help to explain these children's problematic behavior is the type of dysfunctional family in which children are being raised. This discussion builds on the earlier discussions on family structure, household composition, and family relationships.

Boyd-Franklin (1989) discusses five types of dysfunctional single-mother African American families and the implications for child development and parent-child interactive outcomes; these types are based on clinical samples:

1. *The underorganized family* has boundaries that are vague, and there is no clarity of rules and responsibilities of the family members. These families are cut off from their extended families or have inconsistent involvement with them. These families often present in mental health settings with one or more children in trouble at home, at school, or in the community.
2. *The overcentralized-mother family* has family power overconcentrated in an overwhelmed, overburdened mother. This may be functional when children are very young but dysfunctional for adolescents when the mother's style may be challenged. These families present with adolescents accused of stealing and lying, who have run away, or displayed oppositional behavior at home and in school.
3. *The dysfunctional-mother family* includes a parental child who may run the family because of the mother's illness, low mental or intellectual ability, mental health problem, or substance abuse problem. The parental child's need for nurturance is neglected, and his or her normative development is negatively affected. Younger children in these families will usually display extreme acting out.
4. *The hidden-family-member family* includes reliance on the mother's boyfriend for financial and emotional support that may result in overload and burnout on his part. His role may also not be clear to all family members, especially the children (e.g., when discipline is concerned). In the case of their mother's transient relationships with men, children may become confused about their relationship with their mother. Young children display acting out and lower school performance, and mother-child relationships are difficult, especially for adolescents.
5. *The multigenerational family* includes types where the extended family network may participate in a reciprocity loop (that is, support is given as well as received by the single-mother family), but there is a perceived imbalance in the reciprocity loop (Boyd-Franklin, 1989) or "kin insurance" (McAdoo, 1981). That is, the single-mother family is providing more support than it is receiving. There may also be confusion about the roles and boundaries of family members. Another critical factor associated with dysfunctional mothers in extended families is loss of an older-generation family member and the unresolved mourning associated with that loss (Lindblad-Goldberg & Dukes, 1985). That is, the single mother is unable to cope with the death of her mother or another adult from an older generation, and this may in turn affect parent-child relations.

McLoyd et al. (1994) also suggest that some families may be dysfunctional when the mother has higher levels of perceived financial strain, which predicts adolescents' perceptions of their family's economic hardship, which in turn is associated with higher anxiety, more cognitive distress, and lower self-esteem in adolescents. Thus in both clinical and empirical samples there is evidence that a complex of variables need to be considered in examining the impact of single-mother family structure on children's developmental outcomes.

STRENGTHS OF AFRICAN AMERICAN SINGLE-MOTHER FAMILIES

Despite the long list of adversities confronting mothers and children in single-mother families, a number of strengths in African American families and communities help to offset detrimental outcomes for many children. These are role flexibility, spirituality, sense of community, and positivity in viewing the situation. These strengths are consistent with an Afrocentric worldview that emphasizes these and other values (Nobles, 1974).

Role Flexibility

African American families have a long history of women working and rearing children. Therefore, there is a long tradition in families of role models for household, family, and resource management. Single mothers aced with emotional and financial overload can consult these role models r rely on their experiences with them to organize and manage their own limited resources in such a way as to be beneficial to family members.

Also, because of this long tradition of working mothers in African American families, expectations for parenting and child rearing have not been as gender based as in White families in the United States. Responsibilities for child care and household maintenance have been shared by men and women, although research suggests that mothers still carry the brunt of the child rearing and housework. In single-mother families where there is a hidden family member, the surrogate father may even function as a househusband and substitute caregiver.

The protective benefits of multigenerational households have been discussed throughout this chapter; the most significant benefit may be role flexibility. In brief, additional role models and substitute caregivers are provided for children, particularly boys when a father surrogate is present; adolescent mothers who have difficult relationships with their own mothers can benefit from having their grandmother as a key attachment figure; respite care provided by older generations is available to mothers who are overloaded; and it has been found that perceived availability of instrumental support, availability of extended families, or satisfying contact with family members may be protective for some children (McLoyd et al., 1994; McLoyd & Wilson, 1990; Taylor et al., 1993). However, it should be noted that under some conditions such familial support may interfere with or impede optimal family functioning, maternal well-being (Frazier, 1989), and child development (Stevens, 1988). For instance, additional adults may model less than optimal child-rearing practices or offer support that is intrusive.

Thus a key ingredient in building on role flexibility as a family strength is clarity in roles and consistency. Without these the potential is high for adult-adult conflict and child-adult interactive difficulty. In the case of families with a parental child, it is important that roles be managed so that the child assumes the adultlike roles while maintaining developmentally appropriate roles and accomplishing normative developmental expectations.

Spirituality

The belief that the nature of all things is spirit is an Africentric principle underlying the development of African and African American religious and social practices (Nobles, Goddard, Cavil, & George, 1987). Thus spirituality refers to a wide range of rituals, rites, and ways of interacting that encompasses more than religiosity. It also assumes that the range of practices is not limited to the Christian experience or only to people affiliated with a religious denomination. Spirituality refers to the reliance on inner strength for self-definition and worth as contrasted with a preoccupation with a material existence.

A mother's sense of spirituality or inner strength enables her to find ways to give positive meaning to potentially stressful life events. This inner strength also communicates to her children the mother's love for them when she cannot directly express it. Social outings and rituals are used as a way to maintain family unity and instill pride and tradition. These outings and rituals may be visits to relatives or fictive kin, family reunions, birthday parties, christenings and baptisms, graduation celebrations, funerals, church picnics and field trips, and other family-focused activities. In these settings, children learn about their connectedness to other family members, both male and female (i.e., their namesakes), become informally adopted by an aunt, uncle, or cousin, and have the opportunity to pursue developmentally appropriate activities with same-age peers even if their mothers have restricted their activity within the neighborhood. Rituals may also include family routines such as eating meals together, saying bedtime prayers, going to worship services together, and having planned outings at regular times.

Although spirituality extends beyond the religious domain, places of worship serve a major role as socializing agents. The educational role is fulfilled through Saturday or Sunday schools, schools run by churches or mosques, and vacation Bible school. Opportunities are provided for mothers and children to engage in diversified roles. For example, mothers serve in leadership roles in auxiliaries, on committees, and on boards of the congregation. This may be the only opportunity that children have to observe her in that leadership capacity. An important socializing function for the mother is that this may be her only time to separate from the children (Boyd-Franklin, 1989). Children have the opportunity to perform as servers and choir members and to participate in plays, speaking events, and other special events that give them a sense of accomplishment and provide for peer interaction in developmentally appropriate activities. Also, role models missing in the family situation may be present in the worship setting. Finally, as has already been mentioned, religious institutions provide family support programs, such as child care, recreation, and nonreligious activities (scouts, girls' clubs, etc.), and may be the only family ritual (Billingsley, 1993).

Sense of Community

The African proverb "It takes a whole village to raise a child" that opened this chapter connotes the sense of community among African Americans. It is best illustrated by the involvement of blood kin as well as fictive kin who rally to support families in times of need as well as prosperity. In single-mother families, the more well known facts about sense of community relate to ways in which the maternal extended family (kin or fictive kin) contributes or in which other women provide support to single-mother families. Discussion rarely focuses on the contribution of the father's family or other men's support. However, there is both anecdotal and empirical evidence to suggest that the roles of the father's family and surrogate fathers are as important and valued.

If a man has acknowledged a child, even if he is physically absent from the home "the community expects the father's kin to help out. . . . By validating his claim as a parent, the father offers the child his blood relatives and their husbands and wives as the child's kin—an inheritance so to speak" (Stack, 1974, pp. 51-52). In the past two decades, however, the sense of community may be changing as African Americans have expanded the range and composition of the neighborhoods in which they reside. Also, as suggested earlier, the extent to which in-law families assist and the types of assistance rendered depends to a large extent on the nature of the relationship between the father and mother. In never-married mother families, assistance may be more likely to be forthcoming than in divorced or separated families, for example.

"Play daddies" for children in single-mother families are often uncles, older brothers of their mother or father, grandfathers, godfathers, and the partners of their mothers (Boyd-Franklin, 1989). Indeed, as Boyd-Franklin and others have noted, often the men who are involved with single mothers as boyfriends are involved with their children as well. A passage from Stack (1974) illustrates that these "play daddies" include those from the father's family: "My kid's daddy's people really take to them—they always doing things and making a fuss about them. We help each other out and that's what kinfolks are all about" (p. 45).

Another source of support for single mothers that is often overlooked in the literature is that of other parents in the neighborhood. A tradition in African American communities that is eroding somewhat due to changing social conditions is that of a neighbor parenting a child in a mother's absence. That is, while a mother is at work or away from home any other parent in the neighborhood would "keep an eye" on her children. There was also implied permission for the neighbor parent to discipline children in the mother's absence. Also, what a mother did or did not do was under the watchful eye of these surrogate mothers. A positive aspect to this sort of public parenting was that mothers shared in child care and child rearing.

An important element in effectively using kin and fictive kin networks, play daddies, and neighbor parents is consistency. If available, maternal and paternal extended families can be used unless such use would be dysfunctional for the target family. However, as with role flexibility, the nature of their involvement should be made clear. Mothers should not abdicate their parenting roles, nor should the role of the mother be undermined or compromised, even if she is overburdened and overwhelmed. A more effective way to build on this strength of African American families is to ensure that decision making for the family resides with the mother but is supported by these significant others and this sense of community.

Positivity: "Making a Way Out of No Way"

African American families have a legacy of making the best out of a bad situation or being able to see the good in what to others might appear to be an adverse situation. Even though they may be in the dire straits of poverty, African American mothers make sacrifices to provide for their children because they want them to have a better life than they did. Therefore, many will purchase expensive or fad clothing for infants and toddlers, enroll their children in parochial or private schools, or go to great expense to present a middle-class image. To service providers, educators, and agency officials this may seem frivolous given the family's economic status, but it is mothers' attempts to provide wider opportunities for their children, instill pride in their children, and enhance their own self-worth. It is also reflective of the peer group pressure that influences many mothers.

Many of the child-rearing practices of African American single mothers have been viewed as less than optimal, particularly those in the area of discipline. However, several authors note that these are adaptive strengths. Looney and Lewis (1983) point out that when a mother is strict in her punishment, adolescents see this as a source of family strength and regard their mother as the center of the family. Strictness is seen by African American mothers as protection from the streets (Boyd-Franklin, 1989; McGoldrick, 1982). Parents emphasize obedience, but this is not seen by them as negative; instead, it is viewed as necessary because it "would make life easier for my child," "means respect," "is equated with my love," or "is necessary if my child is to achieve in school" (Peters, 1981, pp. 216-217).

These ways of "making a way out of no way" may be the key element to ensure that children in single-mother families thrive, particularly those living at or below the poverty level. Further examination of the strategies these mothers pursue to protect their children from the risks so often identified in the literature would greatly enhance the quality of life for all children in single-mother families.

CONCLUSION

The existing literature on African American children in single-mother families presents a varied picture with respect to their outcomes. The effects of father absence per se has received less attention recently than the mother-child relations and the impact of economic hardship on child outcomes. As a consequence of the absence of a male income and the "double whammy" of racism and sexism for African American women, many children live in families at or below the poverty level. The economic, social, and political realities for African Americans make it doubtful that these children and their families will see relief from poverty in the near future. Mounting social problems are likely to increase the numbers of children in single-mother families as well as put the children in these families at even greater risk for poor developmental outcomes. Moreover, the limited opportunity structure for African American adolescents and adults, particularly males, suggests that there are substantial societal barriers to an improved quality of life, even if one has superb individual and familial resources. Even so, some single mothers show amazing resilience that translates into resilience for their children (Nettles & Pleck, 1994).

Scholars need a better understanding of the factors that put some families and not others at risk, or how in the face of adversity some families survive better than others. Qualitative research examining families' daily living and adjustments to the single-mother family structure is needed. Using the data from such research, the adaptive strengths of individuals, families, and communities need to be articulated in such a way that program planners, service providers, and policy makers can develop strategies that respect the cultural integrity of the African American single-mother family.

The presumptions about the lack of male presence or father involvement in African American children's lives have been overstated and thus perpetuate the Moynihan-like, mother-blaming answers to why children in these families fare less well when the evidence points that way. Thus mothers in these families are devalued by society and a self-fulfilling prophecy is created—mothers blame themselves also and give up on self-help, and this translates into poor outcomes for children.

More responsive approaches should be sought in understanding the realities of motherhood and singlehood for African American women, the ways they respond to the stress associated with racism and sexism, how they buffer these stressors, and the impact of their individual development on the development of their children. This will require no less than going straight to the source—single mothers who are single for varied reasons noted in this chapter and others in this volume. These mothers have children of different ages (infancy, preschool, adolescence, adults); come from varied geographic locations and types of communities (urban, rural, suburban); and have varied other demographic factors (age, age at first child's birth, family history, etc.). The immediate purposes of this research strategy would be to (a) dispel the myths about single-mother families that currently limit our ability to respond to their needs and (b) provide needed data for a more responsive approach to meet their needs and the developmental needs of their children.

A transactional approach to the study of child outcomes in single-mother families is needed. That is, if we are to fully understand the risk and protective factors associated with being a child in a single-mother family, we must examine individual characteristics of the child (e.g., age, health status, perception of family status, cognitive processes, socioemotional status, and perception of parent-child relationship); personal characteristics of the mother (perceived life strain, perceptions of maternal role, perceptions of parent-child relationship, reason for singlehood, age at first child's birth, cognitive status, and socioemotional functioning); characteristics of the caregiving environment (availability of instrumental and emotional support, support network characteristics, household composition, and opportunity structure); and the interrelationships among these variables. Models are needed that predict whether the single-mother family structure has a direct or indirect effect on children's developmental outcomes and which family processes, caregiving environment characteristics, and child-rearing practices function as mediating variables.

Inherent in this transactional approach is an individual difference approach that uses a risk and resilience model to examine the family processes and socialization practices underlying the diversity in single-mother African American families. Previous work in this area provides theoretical and empirical arguments for viewing the varied adjustments of family members, especially children, in African American single-mother families (Chase-Lansdale et al., 1994; McLoyd & Wilson, 1990; Nettles & Pleck, 1994; Slaughter, 1988; Spencer, Brookins, & Allen, 1985). Sorely needed are studies that include an expanded range of child outcome variables (e.g., physical and mental health) that are investigated in developmentally appropriate ways.

Finally, grounded theory, ethnography, and other qualitative approaches are needed to fully explicate factors that may provide better insight into the intervening processes linked to developmental outcomes for children in these families. This is especially crucial if we are to intervene on behalf of African American male youths. As suggested by Myers (1989),

> Since theoretical or empirical literature in the past has failed to provide an account of how early gender role socialization may or may not affect role performance among Black women or Blacks in general, there is a need for Black social and behavioral scientists to pursue this kind of research in an attempt to develop as complete a descriptive account of this process as possible. (p. 177)

Regarding practical implications, support groups or community-level supports are needed for mothers and children cut off from family or friendship networks. Support groups can assist mothers in reframing their parenting situation and identifying family strengths (Richards & Schmiege, 1994). To assist mothers in successfully performing their varied roles without taxing their children to assume adultlike roles, these support networks could also include respite care to provide child care for mothers with very young children, trade services for household management, and assistance for mothers and their adolescent children in job search. These groups could also assist mothers with parent-child communication and alert them to the possible deleterious effect of sharing worries and problems with younger children, as noted by McLoyd and Wilson (1990) in their sample of African Americans. That is, the support group could provide an outlet for mothers to discuss their problems and worries and to generate solutions or strategies for coping.

In developing this support network, it is critical to understand that the role of the mother should not be undermined or supplanted by the help network; mothers should be involved in all decisions related to their families. When mothers have naturally occurring networks, support programs should be family focused to ensure that kin networks do not interfere with the possible enhancements of the support group. Frazier (1989) found, for example, that the receipt of kin child care support and African American mothers' life satisfaction scores suggested a detriment to their well-being and that mothers' receipt of financial/material support was related to lower levels of self-esteem and mastery.

Single mothers need assistance to negotiate the complexities of role flexibility, capitalize on spirituality and inner strengths, take advantage of community supports, and continue to see a way out when the walls appear to be closing in. Single mothers are our best resource to ensure that children have the best chance. Foster care and other out-of-home placements should not be presumed to be more viable alternatives for children in dysfunctional single-mother families; these problems are increasing and the system is already overloaded. Therefore, support will also be needed for the nonbiological mothers of these children. Moreover, for some African American women (e.g., divorced women) the single-mother status may result in coping with increased or newly experienced economic hardship. As a result, they may not have a long history of adjustment to the single mother role, managing role flexibility in a binuclear household, or use of extended family supports for assistance. Governmental policies and programs must be reformulated to accommodate the varied needs of children in African American single-mother families. Relief of maternal financial strain and access to instrumental support will require widening the opportunity structure for mothers, including education beyond high school, job search assistance, job placement, child care assistance, financial subsidies or noncash provisions, housing, and family-centered programs for treatment of mental health problems. That education beyond high school has a favorable consequence for maternal perceptions of children, especially preschool boys, provides support for developing intervention programs that go beyond GED (general equivalency diploma) training. Financial support for college education would be a start. Single mothers could mentor each other, with those with experience of college education providing support for those just beginning. Such a program could also be viewed as a preventive approach to the problems experienced by children at later ages, particularly boys (Jackson, 1993).

Thus the larger cultural context in which single-mother families are existing has to be considered as we move toward a better understanding of the outcomes for African American children in these families and as we mobilize resources to ensure these children's optimal development. Undoubtedly, as the numbers of African American children in single-mother families increase, we will find "It *still* takes a whole village to raise a child."

NOTE

1. "Mothers" in this context refers to biological and formal or informal adoptive mothers who serve as head of households or live in family situations where they have major responsibility for parenting an African American child.

Exhibit 21 - 25

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