



“This is My Home”: A Culturally Competent Model Program for African- American Children in the Foster Care System

While I was a professor at the School of Social Work at the University of Maryland Baltimore, I provided clinical supervision at a transitional foster group home. During my time there, I also became involved in an evaluation of the home and decided that some major programmatic and philosophical changes were necessary if we were to enhance the growth and development of the children who resided in the facility from 60-90 days until a permanent placement was located. This is the story of that transformation.

Background

The residents were almost exclusively African American males ages 7-14 who were from economically and emotionally deprived inner-city environments. Most were removed from their homes of origin due to being deserted, abused and/or neglected. Their neighborhoods reflected racial inequality resulting in city service abandonment and high violence.⁴ The environment from which they came usually consisted of derelict houses used for shooting galleries and young men gathering

on street corners to sell their “products” to middle-class white consumers. Gangs flourished; but ironically, they acted as a means of protecting younger neighborhood children from sexual predators, exploitation and criminal initiation.¹ Most of the children had developmental problems that started early. Due to high exposure to violence many of the children exhibited symptoms of posttraumatic stress disorder (PTSD), harboring fear of being attacked and/or being abandoned or abused again. A large percentage of the children had a history of poor school attendance, poor academic performance, and in-school behavioral problems. Regardless of the situation, simply being removed from familiar surroundings is stressful, and can cause sleep disturbance, obsessive-compulsive adaptation, somatic complaints, and elimination disorders.

The basic philosophy of the shelter seemed to be one of warehousing the children until a permanent placement was located. Children attended the neighborhood school, and there were no programs in place to address the academic difficulties that most of the children were experiencing. Many

of these difficulties were due to the children’s irregular school attendance, which was often a problem prior to coming to the shelter and which was further exacerbated when they were removed from their homes of origin and placed in the care of the Department of Social Services (DPSS).

Staff were under-trained; for example, they could not differentiate between normal developmental behaviors and traumatic response behaviors. For the majority of staff this was a part time “gig” and their goal was to keep the children in line and get some rest, if possible, before going home or to their regular job. Due to the agency’s failure to provide training to staff, staff used their “mother wit”—their experience of raising their own children—as the basis for working with these children. The general perception seemed to be that the children were bad and had done something wrong to be in this situation; thus, they required discipline, typically in the form of some sort of punishment. The sad fact is that the punishment paradigm is ineffective with this group of children, because their entire existence has been one based on some sort of punishment.

Most have been in a life situation devoid of any consistent rewards and socially approved behavioral reinforcement. Punishment for these children only reinforced their negative world-view and increased their reactionary behavior.

The new director and I recognized that the children's short-term experience at the foster home provided an ideal opportunity for the shelter to address the biological, social, emotional, educational, and cultural needs of these African-American male children. We had the opportunity to turn a potentially devastating situation into a life success.

A New Approach

The central theme of an Africentric approach is the mutual responsibility that all human beings have to assist each other in developing and maximizing their *raison d'être*—their essential being—through their Creator-given talents. The optimal environment for this to occur is in an extended family- and community-oriented atmosphere,⁵ inclusive of rituals and ceremonies.⁶ The adult's task is to build a strong bonded relationship,² something these children often lacked. Attachment was encouraged through a system of "good touch:" special handshakes and safely designed hugs. Thus, the adults formed a community of care and established a safe environment in which these children could express themselves and test out their potential talents.³ An Africentric philosophy now drove the shelter's programs; no longer was the warehouse mentality the driving force behind the home. Instead, the focus was on preparing children for successful placement by addressing risk factors and stimulating the child's sense of personal empowerment. Personal empowerment resulted from the child's struggle to develop a new repertoire of appropriate behaviors and problem-solving skills.

The shelter's goals now were to foster the socialization and normal development of the children and provide them with the experience of living in a safe, family-like environment.² We wanted the children to be able to develop the ability to establish appropriate relationships, negotiate

differences, advocate for themselves, and develop critical thinking skills and appropriate social skills. Additionally, the staff aimed to assist the children in cultivating patience, persistence, and the ability to be proactive rather than reactive; that is, to be capable, conscious and competent.

Staff were trained to encourage success by creating a nurturing yet accountable environment. Through the residential living environment and individual and group therapy, children began to formulate new thinking patterns and behaviors. Included in the therapy were visualization techniques and journaling. A reward



system was put in place to reinforce successful behaviors. Children earned points for such activities as completing daily tasks, attending school with no negative reports, and completing homework. The more points earned the more money one received for allowance. Additionally, "Behavior Bucks" could be earned through behaviors that supported a child's personal goals and the positive atmosphere of the house. Bucks could be redeemed for toys, games, clothing, CDs, and special privileges available in the house store.

Family Connectedness

Family members were contacted and encouraged to become and/or remain part of the child's support system. Both the program and the program's philosophy were explained to the family, including the point sys-

tem. The family was encouraged to call the director for updates on their child's progress. Family members were encouraged to participate in the shelter's family therapy program.

Academic Support

Shelter staff were now encouraged to be dedicated to coaching the children's development of successful school behaviors. Shelter policy required that each child be enrolled in the local public school within three days of placement, even if it meant assisting DPSS staff in gathering the child's records. When necessary, staff would ride the school bus with the child and/or sit in the classroom and cafeteria with the child. The director and case manager were trained as parent surrogates for foster children. The director, a tall, slim, blond, blue-eyed female, attended all PTA meetings, and parent teacher conferences/meetings on behalf of the children, which was a little bewildering to the other children in the class.

All children were required to attend a two-hour study session each weekday evening where volunteer tutors were provided to assist students. If a student were suspended from school then he would have all day in-shelter schooling.

Participation in school and after-school activities was encouraged; children participated in plays, recitals, and sports. Staff attended these activities as surrogate family members of the child. On the weekends staff were required to take the children to cultural activities such as museums, plays, concerts, zoos, and sporting activities, just as people do with their biological children.

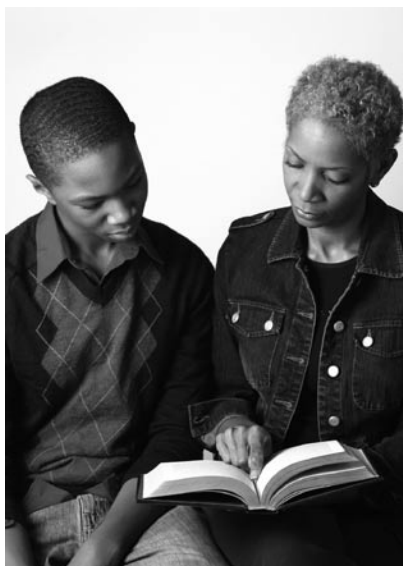
Focus on Culture

Recognizing that knowledge of one's culture can contribute to a feeling of pride and to the development of self-esteem and a belief of "I can also," the shelter demonstrated a culturally stimulating environment. This was accomplished by hanging pictures of accomplished African-Americans on the walls, field trips to African-American museums and festivals, and having African-American magazines and books in the home.

Many of the children did not have the benefit of positive role models who resembled themselves. To address this, African-American males, knowledgeable in child development and behavioral interventions, were hired. All staff were given time off and a pay bonus if they participated in trainings, workshops and/or educational courses that would strengthen their knowledge of positive youth development and/or the importance of cultural relevance. Children were exposed to African American role models during career night. Each Wednesday night a guest speaker was invited into the home. The children prepared the house for the event and one child was selected to introduce the guest. Refreshments were set out on a table, complete with tablecloth and flowers. The speaker shared his personal history and the specifics of his career including its perks and disadvantages. A question and answer period followed the presentation.

Rituals and Ceremonies

The value of ceremonies and celebrations, which were frequently absent from the children's lives, cannot be overemphasized. The shelter celebrated birthdays with special gifts and cakes. Successful efforts in school, sports and other endeavors were celebrated. All the "typical" holidays, along with Kwanzaa, an African-



American holiday, were celebrated. Children who were unable to go home for Christmas and Thanksgiving were invited into the home of a staff member. Children who were able to go home were supplied with gifts for family members. Children had the opportunity to attend religious services; some children actually participated in the church choir. At discharge there was a ceremony, which included an exit interview, a departure gift, party, and a gift for the next placement. The exit interview included a review of

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the child's academic, emotional, and behavioral progress. Departing children were supplied with a luggage bag—not a garbage bag—to transport their belongings.

Results

At the time of program transformation, a quantitative evaluation had not been conducted but qualitative results indicate that at discharge most children demonstrated more positive behaviors: interacting appropriately with peers, staff and other authority figures. Most students became relatively successful students by attending school regularly, remaining in assigned classrooms, and attempting required work; it was not unusual for them to achieve A's and B's during their time at the program. Most children improved their ability to negotiate unstructured environments. There was a drastic decrease in the need for physical restraints, and an increase in social skills, problem solving ability, and critical thinking. In general the children were able to verbalize life-long goals, career choices and the steps necessary to achieve these.

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Notes

This article is adapted from an article originally published in 2002 in the *Journal of Health & Social Policy*, 16(1/2), 195-206, entitled, "A model program for African American children in the foster care system" by Aminifu R. Harvey, Georgette K. Loughney, and Janaé Moore.

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