



*Motivating African
American Children to stay
Engaged in Academics:*

*A Professional's Guide to
Help Parents*

By: Chantal Whitehead

Table of Contents:

Introduction.....pg. 2

Glossary.....pg. 3

Podcast Script, Parent's Guide to Motivate Black Children.....pg. 4

Suggestions

Do's and Don'ts.....pg. 11

Additional Resources, Websites and Books.....pg. 12

INTRODUCTION

Welcome to this guide that discusses what African-American parents can do to motivate their children to remain engaged and passionate about education. I am a graduate student at the University of Pittsburgh in the Applied Developmental Psychology program, Mental Health track. This project was created because of the Emotional Disorders in Childhood course. I chose to take this class because I'd ultimately like to be a psychologist, working with children in the context of their families. Taking this course has been beneficial because it has explained many of the common DSM disorders that children are courageously facing. This class has helped me develop the ability to recognize some symptoms and red flags that may lead to a disorder which will ultimately allow me to use interventions that are evidence-based and that are designed to address the individual needs of the child, regardless of the disorder. This course has helped me better understand the psychology field as a whole and motivated me to search to gain experiences in the field, directly addressing the struggles that children are experiencing. This course has also helped me in my current position as an Autistic Support Aide in an elementary school. Ideas like art and music therapy, sensory integration and visual cues have helped me better relate to the children I work with and to appropriately meet their needs. Ultimately, this class has taught me that professionals across disciplines should do what they can to make children with emotional disorders feel comfortable in their own skin.

Within this guide you will find a glossary of terms that reflect different words that are highlighted throughout the text. Please refer to the glossary for verification of meaning. This guide also includes a podcast script. A podcast is a "radio show" that you can listen to via the internet. This podcast will give the listener educational information regarding what steps can be made to increase motivation in black children. This podcast is entitled, "Engaging African-American Children to stay Engaged in Academics: A Professionals Guide to Help Parents". This guide provides help for parents as well as additional resources that may be helpful to use with children.

I'd like to say thank you for taking an interest in this topic and using this guide to help you understand more about what can be motivational for black children. I hope this guide is truly helpful and the information is enlightening. The information provided is available for education purposes; however I ask that you contact the University of Pittsburgh for the use of this material.

GLOSSARY

(Terms will be bolded throughout text)

- empower- making people feel as though they have the power to create a positive outcome
- motivation- a reason that causes a person to act
- autonomy- independence, operating on own
- self-efficacy- feeling as though one has the power to control the successes or failures in life
- sense of self- a realistic understanding of who one and being confident in capabilities
- racial Identity- having an understanding of how ones racial background helps mold the person they become
- learning disorder- difficulties learning using “traditional” methods, may need modifications or adaptations to learn easier
- auditory processing problems- difficulty understanding verbal directions (similar symptoms to a lack of motivation)
- ADHD/inattentive type- a form of ADHD that promotes a difficulty focus which makes it hard to follow both verbal and multi-step directions (similar symptoms to a lack of motivation)
- executive function problems- difficulty planning and organizing (similar symptom to a lack of motivation)
- Dysgraphia- difficulty writing and with channeling content into a coherent, written form
- intervention- a treatment or plan that may help an individual be more productive in their goals
- stakeholder- taking responsibility or interest in reaching an outcome
- service learning- taking an interest in volunteering time in some aspect of the community
- positive reinforcement- rewarding positive behavior in hopes that it will encourage the continuance of the behavior

Motivating African-American Children to stay Engaged in Academics:

A Professional's Guide to Support Parents

Hi my name is Chantal Whitehead and welcome to our broadcast. This week we are discussing ways that professionals such as teachers, guidance counselors, child psychologists and social workers can help support parents to **empower** their children to stay academically motivated.

Not caring. Unwilling. Lazy. Uncooperative. Surly. Angry. No Motivation. Uninspired. Lack of aspiration. Underachieving. Not working towards full potential.

The words you just heard are words used as labels that are frequently given to children to describe their work ethic or dedication to academic goals. As someone who dedicates their careers to helping children, can you imagine the impact that these labels can have on your students, clients and consumers? Can you think about how these labels impact the parents of these children? In the United States today, African-American youth are struggling to stay academically engaged in the classroom and you, as a professional working closely with parents, play a pivotal role in equipping these parents with the tools to help their children sustain a high level of scholastic achievement through **motivation**.

This week's show will explore what may be some of the causes for this shift of motivation from academics in the late elementary schools years and what ideas you can suggest to parents to help in supporting their child in their academic efforts to help them value education.

Transitioning from elementary to middle school is a big issue for black children. Some significant changes that take place at this time are that the curriculum and work load get increasingly harder, there may be changes in their peer group as well as their individual role in the community shifts. As the child evolves, parents are often unsure of their ever-changing role in their child's life. Not striking this delicate balance can have a significant impact on the level of **autonomy** their child is seeking. In late elementary

school and middle school, these students are better able to make choices but are still not presented with many opportunities to make those choices. Additionally critical at this age is if this child has perceived themselves as failing in some area of their past, they may now lack motivation in the classroom (Dominguez, 2003).

Self-efficacy means that a child can see themselves being successful in the future and that they are in control of the successes or failures that can happen. Self-efficacy is a large indicator of sustained motivation with academics. Building self-confidence, a healthy **sense of self** and a healthy **racial identity** can help a child stay dedicated to academics. If a child has low self-esteem, they may be less inclined to believe that they can be successful at school (Bowman & Howard, 1985). Similarly, as understanding the cultural mindset of an African-American child could impact their perception of what they are “societally” capable of achieving as a young minority (Mickelson, 1990).

Communication between school and parent and parent and child respectively, seems to be the most critical road-block for children that ultimately impact their view and motivation towards learning. Research shows that in a study done by Giribaldi (1992), showed that parents of African-American children were not extremely active in the communication process with schools. In turn, teachers assume that because this parent was frequently absent from their child’s school endeavors that parent did not value education and did not have positive hopes for their child’s future. As a result of this assumption, teachers then developed lower standards for their black students which hindered their academic success. Another issue that may lower motivation toward academic strengths is that African-American children seemed to be rewarded, by parents, more for their athletic performances and less for their academic success (Giribaldi, 1992).

Something that should be considered especially if your student or client is still young is that, what seems to be a motivation problem could alternately be a **learning disorder** problem. There are four

different learning disorders that have similar symptoms that a professional or parent could describe as a lack of motivation: **auditory processing problems, ADHD/inattentive type, executive function problems** and **Dysgraphia**. It may be advantageous to have your student or client assessed, with permission from the parent, for learning difficulties before deciding to solely address motivation issues. Below I will describe each (Warsaw, 2002):

1. *Auditory Processing problems*: these types of problems will hinder the ability for verbal information to be processed. Children with auditory processing issues may have trouble understanding verbal directions with multiple steps. It is important for this type of learner to have information written down not just spoken.
2. *ADHD/inattentive type*: this type of learner may misunderstand questions and multi-step directions. It will also be difficult for this child to maintain focus. It is not the child's rudeness or disobedience but that they cognitively unable to process problems. It is also helpful to have directions written down.
3. *Executive Function problems*: this type of learner has difficulty planning and organizing. These kids seem to be a "mess", their desks are messy, and they can't find their homework or can't write a coherent paragraph. These children need explicit directions with assignments and help organizing their materials.
4. *Dysgraphia*: these learners experience trouble with the mechanics of writing and cannot write fluently when thinking about content. These children may seem like they are being uncooperative with assignments but they are genuinely having difficulty writing.

If you have determined that your student or client does not have one of the categorized learning disorders mentioned above, here are several steps that you can suggest to parents that will help to increase their child's motivation to learn and sustain passion for education throughout their school careers.

- ✓ Parents should create an overall environment in the home that encourages education including a quiet place to do homework, the creation of a daily schedule and supporting time management skills. (Dominguez, 2003)
- ✓ Parents should have realistic expectations and aspirations for their child. (Dominguez, 2003)
- ✓ Parents should foster meaningful and honest relationships between parent and teacher, parent and other professionals such as social worker, guidance counselor ect. that holds the wants,

needs and interests of the child at the center. They should also create relationships of collaboration and shared responsibility for the success of the child. (Dominguez, 2003)

- ✓ Encourage parents to feel as though they can take an active part in their child's academic lives. They need to keep regular communication with the teacher through phone or email, asking questions to understand their child's strengths and weaknesses as well as attending parent/teacher meetings and other school affiliated events. (Dominguez, 2003)
- ✓ Encourage teachers and other professionals to investigate what interests your motivationally struggling client has by providing information about what child enjoys doing. **Interventions** can be structured around incorporating these interests both at school and at home. (Dominguez, 2003)
- ✓ Help parents make their child feel as though they are "**stakeholders**" in making the decisions that will positively impact their lives. Give your child a say-so in their schedules, projects and other areas will make them feel individually responsible for a positive outcome. (Dominguez, 2003)
- ✓ Explain to the parents how important it is for their child to be involved in **service-learning** so that the child can understand that they play a significant role in the community. Giving back can give them a sense of self-confidence and positive regard for themselves and others. (Dominguez, 2003)
- ✓ Professionals should instill in parents the importance of **positive reinforcement** toward academics as much as, if not more than, athletics so that their child understands how important education is by emphasizing that homework is mandatory. (Giribaldi, 1992)
- ✓ Professionals and parents should make a collaborative effort to support the child's courses and aspirations to go to college by exposing them to experiences and visits to higher learning institutions that model the reality of becoming successful. (Giribaldi, 1992)

- ✓ Encourage parents to seek help and ask questions to community resources such as teachers, school, community agencies and other professionals. Using these resources as an ally will help parents best support their child at school. (Girabaldi, 1992)
- ✓ Provide suggestions to parents about finding structured environments for the child during the times they are not in school either through an after-school program, tutor or an extra-curricular activity. (Girabaldi, 1992)
- ✓ Help parents understand that by making learning material intellectually interesting and personally relevant to your child. If your child takes some interest in the learning it will be easier for them to retain. (Maehr, 1974)
- ✓ Help your parent to see how gaining an education plays into the “bigger picture” of their child’s aspirations. Connect how education is pivotal on their child’s journey to being “what they want to be when they grow up” and that they need to deliver this message to their child. (Stevenson, Chen, Uttal, 1990)
- ✓ As professionals explain to the parent that you understand how racism and prejudice can make their child’s journey to success harder however that despite these obstacles in their education and careers that they can still be successful. Helping African-American children maintain their cultural identity has proven helpful to produce academic success. (Bowman and Howard, 1985)

A quote by Dr. Duane Alexander, director of National Institute of Child Health and Human Development states, “Parents have the most influential job in the world. We know how influential they and other caregivers are in the lives of our children, especially in times of stress. Through collaboration we will translate our research into materials that African-American parents can use to ensure the well-being of their children”

As professionals, it is important to encourage open communication between the families and school administration, including school staff, community professionals and mental health professionals. Considerations regarding the best interests of the child should always be the center focus. Professionals need to understand as well that their positions can often be intimidating to parents who aren't sure who to turn to or what their first question should be. Professionals need to take the first step in initiating interaction with parents and begin to build a friendly relationship that encourages parents to be the primary party in taking an action step to help their children. Professionals should also act as the ultimate resource, in other words, the "one stop shop" providing possible solutions for parents to utilize with their children. Nothing can be more motivational to a child than a parent who is actively engaged and dedicated to their learning and support of their aspirations. And professionals can help to catalyze this engagement.

Thank you for listening to the show this week, I hope this gave you some insight on how to better help your clients, consumers or children, be as successful as we all know they can. Be sure to tune in next week when we'll talk about motivating black children to continue towards higher education. Have a good week and thanks again for listening!

REFERENCES:

- Bowman, P.J. & Howard, C. (1985). Race-related socialization, motivation, and academic achievement: A study of black youths in three-generation families. *Journal of the American Academy of Child Psychiatry*, 24(2), 134-141.
- Dominguez, C. (2003). Involving parents, motivating students. *Principal Leadership*, December Issue, 43-46.
- Garibaldi, A.M. (1992). Educating and motivating African-American males to succeed. *The Journal of Negro Education*, 61(1), 4-11.
- Maehr, M.L. (1974). Culture and achievement motivation. *American Psychologist*, 887-896.
- Mickelson, R.A. (1990). The attitude-achievement paradox among black adolescents. *Sociology of Education*, 63(1), 44-61.
- Stevenson, H.W., Chen, C. & Uttal, D.H. (1990). Beliefs and achievement: A study of black, white, and Hispanic children. *Child Development*, 61(2), 508-523.
- Warshaw, M.D. (2002). Motivation problem or hidden disability?. *Association for the Education of Gifted Underachieving Students*, retrieved Dec. 1, 2009. www.uniquelygifted.org/motivation.htm

DOS AND DON'TS

When attempting to motivate your child:

- Open lines of communication with your child's teacher by fostering an honest relationship.
- Keep ongoing contact with your child's teacher, getting updates about strengths/weaknesses, through email, phone conversations or face to face interactions.
- Help your child see how gaining an education will help them in the "big picture"
- Create a home environment conducive to learning including developing a routine, having a quiet time for homework and being involved as a parent.
- Encourage your child to get involved in extra-curricular activities.
- Involve your child in service-learning opportunities from an early age.
- Make your child feel as though they have control in their success.
- Positively reinforce for academics, more so than athletic efforts.
- Take genuine interest in the activities that your child enjoys and help teachers get on the same page so interventions can be developed.
- Have realistic expectations for your child but encourage them to challenge themselves academically.
- Help them build high self-esteem and confidence in their identities.

What to avoid if you have a child who doesn't seem motivated:

- Don't negate the fact that your child's lack of motivation could be due to a learning disorder.
- Assuming that it's just a phase or believing that they can correct this problem on their own.
- Put too much pressure on your child which will increase stress.
- Blame your child's school or teacher for your child's underachievement, it is important to work as a team in the best interest of your child.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES:

WEBSITES:

<http://www.aegus1.org>

AEGUS-Association for the Education of Gifted Underachieving Students

<http://www.nbdci.org/programs/aapp/default.asp>

NBCDI-National Black Child Development Institute, African-American Parents Project

www.nichd.nih.gov

National Institute of Child Health and Human Development "Adventures in Parenting"

<http://www.nimh.nih.gov>

National Institute of Mental Health

GUIDES:

National Blueprint for Action IV, National Council on Educating Black Children (NCEBC)

Order Information: 3737 North Meridian St., Suite 504, Indianapolis, Indiana 46208

BOOKS:

Clark, R.M. (1983) Family life and school achievement: Why poor black children succeed or fail. Location: University of Chicago Press.

Irvine, J. J. (1991) Black students and school failure, policies, practices and prescriptions. Location: Praeger Paperback.