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## Black Fathers

In this month's Take Care of Your Health Today (TCYHT), we're focusing on the critical parenting role of Black fathers, including the support they need to pass along their own confidence and resilience to their children. Engaged Black fathers are supremely important to their children's health and well-being long after the children grow into adults.

Joining us with insight on this health topic is Carlos T. Carter, President & CEO of the Urban League of Greater Pittsburgh.

TCYHT: Carlos, fatherhood has been an area of focus for the Urban League. Please share with us some of this history as well as recent efforts.

CARLOS: Core to our mission is empowering families and communities, which includes a strong commitment to supporting fathers. Since our inception 106 years ago, we've worked to remove barriers and connect men to jobs, housing, and opportunities to achieve economic self-reliance.

For example, in the 1960s, our local Urban League was part of the coalition that worked to create Operation Dig. This initiative was the first large-scale construction apprenticeship program in Pittsburgh aimed to provide jobs for Black men.

The Urban League in Pittsburgh also has a long and proud history of being part of the struggle to help Black men who've been incarcerated regain their seat at the table of life.

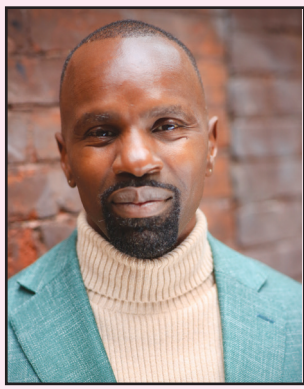
Today, the Urban League supports Black men via our three Family Support Centers in Duquesne, Northview Heights, and the East End. At each of these locations, we work to connect Black men to job opportunities and remove barriers to their success. We've also worked with the Department of Human Services and their fatherhood initiatives to support Black men and their families. We've also partnered with MAD DADS.

Given that Black men are not celebrated enough, we've hosted events where Black fathers are honored and appreciated. We've seen fathers moved to tears over these acts of love and appreciation from our team members, as many have not had people appreciate their contributions.

Finally, in the spirit of Frederick Douglas who said, "It is easier to build strong children than to repair broken men," we've invested in our young men through our Black Male Leadership Development Institute (BMLDI). Through partnership with Slippery Rock University, TriState Capital Bank, and other community partners and mentors, we build upon these young Black men's strengths and empower them to be career-ready, civically engaged, and empowered leaders who are changemakers in their communities.

TCYHT: That's impressive! Where do you see opportunities for new research that focuses on Black fatherhood? What are some of the key questions that researchers need to answer?

CARLOS: Black fathers are often demonized by the "deadbeat" narrative, which makes it important to continue to provide data that changes that falsehood. We need this data to be elevated to help tell the whole and truthful story about Black fathers. We need to empower researchers and community members alike to elevate and communicate the



CARLOS T. CARTER

good reputation of Black fathers. We also need to explore more deeply methods to remove barriers to elevate Black fathers' health and life expectancy, which is among the worst in our country.

TCYHT: What are some promising programs and policies related to fatherhood that the Urban League would like to establish here in Pittsburgh?

CARLOS: We're actively seeking increased financial support for our BMLDI program (as mentioned earlier), which has created many great leaders in the Pittsburgh region and beyond. It's important to invest in our young men before they become fathers.

We're also interested in launching a local version of one of our sister affiliates' programs that's focused on workforce development needs for Black men. Given our region's high unemployment and disenfranchisement of Black men, this is particularly important. A 2020 study from the University of Milwaukee showed that in the Pittsburgh metropolitan area, Black men between the ages of 25-54 had an unemployment rate of 33%. Young Black men between 16 and 24 who were not employed and not in school logged in at 21%. What's more, the Black male median annual earnings (adjusted for regional cost-of-living) was \$27,122.

These alarming statistics show us that special attention is needed, especially when you consider that men are less likely to seek help or assistance on their own. Black men need very targeted relationship- and trust-building measures to empower them so they can achieve their full potential, which includes economic mobility that will reinvigorate the Black middle class in our region.

TCYHT: Excellent points. What should Black fathers tell their sons about creating economic prosperity for the Black family and elevating sustainable wealth for future generations?

CARLOS: Fathers need to communicate the importance of getting an education, pursuing entrepreneurship, and saving for the future. We need to remind our young men that athletics is not the only way forward. They can be entrepreneurs, doctors, lawyers, tradesmen, scientists, investors — or anything they set their minds to.

It's important to note that they must be intentional about building wealth. We need to remind them that they don't have to always work for someone else; they can be their own boss. Most importantly, they need to believe in themselves and know they come from a rich history of great minds and self-made men. They are more than what the media says about them! Our young Black men are created for greatness and prosperity!

## Engaged Black fathers strengthen health of their kids, communities — and themselves.

According to statistics from the CDC, Black fathers are more involved with their kids daily than fathers from other racial groups. About 70% of Black dads who live with their kids bathe, dress, change or help their child with the toilet each day, compared with 60% of white fathers and 45% of Hispanic dads.

These facts go against the racist myth often portrayed in politics, the media, and in higher education: That Black fathers are largely absent and unengaged with their children.

While Black fathers are less likely to marry their children's mothers than white and Hispanic fathers — a fact that's often the result of structural and systemic racism — they are engaged and generally place a high value on parenting regardless of setting. For example Black fathers may live with their children's moms or visit regularly. They may provide joint caretaking, as well as financial and in-kind support. They may be single custodial fathers or stepfathers, too.

According to Dr. Paula Marie Powe, Researcher, Assistant Professor of Psychiatry at Pitt, and Medical Director of the Theiss Center for Child and Adolescent Trauma at UPMC, playing with a child is a simple, but powerful act that's critical to the child's healthy brain development — especially between ages 1 to 3.

Dr. Powe explains, "When a father is down on the floor playing, wrestling, or reading to their toddler, their supportive and responsive



DR. PAULA MARIE POWE

engagement is helping their child form attachments and feel secure. They're teaching their child that his or her needs will be met."

Engaged play helps to build brains that are school-ready, socially developed, and able to cope. "Fathers offer something unique to their children on a social and emotional realm," Dr. Powe adds. "The coping and regulation children learn from their dad is slightly different than what they learn from their mom."

Engagement also benefits fathers. "Playing with your child releases oxytocin, which improves mood," she says. "The enjoyment you both feel is validating and self-perpetuating, not to mention just plain fun, which can shift a father's perspective for the better."

When Dr. Powe was a new clinician, she focused on how to help Black families protect their children's developing brains from trauma and toxic stress. However, in her clinical practice, she most often saw toddlers with their mothers. "My goal then became how to bring this message of prevention to Black fathers

through research," she states.

Dr. Powe acknowledges there are barriers that can make it hard for fathers to be engaged. "The father may not live with the mother and there may be gatekeeping issues between them," she says. "There might be financial or legal custody considerations. Maybe the father feels he can't provide for his kids, so he stays away entirely to avoid the emotional toll this takes on him. There could also be barriers that are rooted in racism, such as inequitable incarceration," she says.

To help fathers overcome these barriers, Dr. Powe has studied what Black fathers need to be the best fathers to their children. "How fathers feel about themselves — their self-image — is hugely important," says Dr. Powe.

Having a positive self-image depends on many things. Does a father understand the important role he plays in his child's healthy development? Can he recognize and rely on the cultural strengths and resilience within Black communities? Is he aware of the toll systemic racism and social inequities have taken on him in areas like employment, education, housing, and health?

Dr. Powe's research also points to the power of supportive networks that come from family members, friends, and community organizations like Parenting While Black and Healthy Start Fatherhood, as well as platforms such as Fathers

Incorporated, The Dad Gang, Dope Black Dads, and the Dear Fathers.

"Representation matters. The more we see healthy, happy, and engaged Black dads on social media and in the news, the easier it is to see yourself in that role," says Dr. Powe. "Positive modeling — along with community and family support systems — serve as a map for navigating the world of Black fatherhood."

Addressing mental health issues and promoting well-being among Black fathers is also essential for building a strong self-image, as well as fostering positive parent-child relationships and family functioning. "Resilience and depression can co-exist in Black fathers," reminds Dr. Powe.

To address this, Dr. Powe has recently helped to add a mental health component to the highly successful Parenting While Black initiative.

Black fathers are so important to their children's lives," says Dr. Powe. "That will never change. Mothers would certainly agree. Dr. Powe and others' research confirms that co-parenting with an engaged father gives mom a break and makes her feel she's not alone on the journey. "When dad is engaged and present, mom can relax a little and tap out," she says. "That can go a long way in improving communication between the two parents, changing perspectives, and making conflict resolution easier."

## Parenting While Black supports children's healthy development and parents' wellness

A Pew Research Survey on fatherhood reported that 57% of participants found it more difficult to be a father today than 20 or 30 years ago. Only 9% said being a father is easier, while 32% said it's about the same. Among dads themselves, 63% said the job is harder now.

There's no doubt Black parents in the U.S. grapple with distinct challenges due to systemic and structural racism, historical injustices, and ongoing discrimination.

The challenges show up in parents' concerns about their children's encounters with police, in biased school systems, in microaggressions, in their dealings with healthcare access, quality, and cost — and with racial stereotypes portrayed in the media.

Research from the University of Pittsburgh's Center on Race and Social Problems confirms this concern finding that 51% of Black youth in Greater Pittsburgh did not believe society valued their lives as Black people. More than 70% experienced racism.

While addressing sys-



DR. JAMES P. HUGULEY

temic and structural inequalities is fundamental for creating a more equitable environment for all Black families, it's essential for Black parents to have the tools and support they need to teach their children to live and prosper in the world now — safely and confidently.

Dr. James P. Huguley, Associate Professor of Pitt's School of Social Work, and chair of the Race and Youth Development Research Group (RaYDR) at the Center on Race and Social Problems, studies how to improve the educational and mental health outcomes of Black youth, including how Black parents can best support and nurture their children in unjust systems — and take care of

their own health, too.

"We gathered a good amount of research about the best ways Black parents can help their children build resilience to racism in social and school settings and promote physical and mental well-being," he explains. "The question became how to get this information directly into families' hands."

To do that, Dr. Huguley and team created the program Parenting While Black: Growing and Healing Together (PWB). "It's become the vehicle for pairing what we learn from our research with powerful, highly-valued intergenerational knowledge from the Black community," Dr. Huguley says.

PWB holds evening workshops at community locations throughout Greater Pittsburgh. The workshops are led by Black parents for Black parents. The content includes best practices in raising kids who have positive racial identities and strong coping skills, which research has shown can help them grow into adults who have better mental health and resilience. Based on input from

PWB's most recent workshop (a collaboration with Awaken Pittsburgh and Homewood Children's Village), 100% of participants would recommend the classes to other Black parents.

Dr. Huguley feels the high success rate has to do with something that happens organically during the workshops. "Parents come to PWB to gain knowledge and learn strategies," he says. "However, they end up being pleasantly surprised by the mutual support and safety they feel. Often, they didn't realize how alone they felt and how much they needed to make connections with other parents who are struggling with the same issues."

He continues. "Since Black people were forcibly brought to this country more than 400 years ago, our families have been continually brutalized by racial oppression — yet we're still here. The story of the Black family continues to be a story of amazing resilience. PWB helps Black parents feel validated in that struggle and to heal and grow through it."

## Family Foundations Early Head Start creates equal opportunity for school readiness and success

For more than 20 years, the Family Foundations Early Head Start program has been helping low-income families with children under 3 get off to a positive, healthy start. The program's goal is to help kids enter school confidently and prepared for success. To do that, Family Foundations Early Head Start focuses on infants/toddlers' physical, social, and emotional health, as well as thinking and movement skills.

Family Foundations Early Head Start is personalized to each family through weekly home visits that include fun activities like baby Yoga, mommy and me time, and group outings. The personalization includes valuing and honoring parents/caregivers and the choices they've made for themselves and their families.

Early Head start staff are kind, caring, and well-trained people who can help parents/caregivers

create a reliable support system within the program as well as with other community organizations that help to strengthen parents/caregivers social and emotional mental health.

For more information, visit the Family Foundations Early Head Start website by logging on to [www.pitt.edu](http://www.pitt.edu) and searching "Office of Child Development." On the Office of Child Development site, scroll down to "Our Work" and click on "Early Head Start."