Successful Parenting in High-Risk Neighborhoods

Robin L. Jarrett

Abstract

Impoverished inner-city neighborhoods in the United States are threatening contexts for the development of youngsters during middle childhood and adolescence. Nevertheless, some African-American families living in such neighborhoods succeed in protecting their children from the risks of “the streets” and launch them on paths toward achievement. Using quotes and ethnographic material from many studies, this article illustrates some of the parenting strategies that help inner-city African-American youths to overcome risks and achieve success.

Like other Americans, low-income African-American parents aspire that their children will grow up and lead mainstream lives. However, youths growing up in impoverished, inner-city neighborhoods face obstacles to conventional development. Many African-American adolescents are caught up in the subculture of “the streets” and, in the transition to adulthood, risk becoming school dropouts, premature parents, marginally employed adults, welfare recipients, and struggling family members. Some may become drug dealers and users, and the perpetrators and victims of violence. Yet, while neighborhoods with multiple risks and limited opportunities impose developmental boundaries on the youths who reside there, their effects are not deterministic. Some local parents rear adolescents who become high school (if not college) graduates, gainfully employed adults, and stable family members. Some become superheroes whose extraordinary achievements belie their modest backgrounds.

No one recognizes better than inner-city parents how pervasively the neighborhood around them shapes the lives of young people. This article uses qualitative studies of low-income African-American families to identify effective parenting strategies in impoverished neighborhoods. A well-developed set of urban ethnographies describes everyday family life in poor African-American neighborhoods. A review of these detailed case studies, summarized briefly here, identifies three parenting strategies—youth-monitoring strategies, resource-seeking strategies, and in-home learning strategies—that facilitate conventional adolescent development.
The Neighborhood Context for Development

Inner-city neighborhoods provide limited economic, institutional, and social resources for the families and adolescents living there. In the absence of basic assets, “the streets” in impoverished African-American communities become the major lifestyle contender and developmental niche for many young people. Social relations on the street are characterized by an individualistic, competitive, and predatory ethos, where “ hustling” and “getting over” are valid ways of securing scarce resources. Participants in the “street” lifestyle learn key survival skills in a setting where violence is not uncommon and where peers are critical for creating and endorsing a valid identity. The personal characteristics valued by street companions, however, are not consistent with the demands of success in the broader environment.

One ethnographer observed the appeal of the street lifestyle this way: “The ghetto street culture can be glamorous and seductive to the adolescent, promising its followers the chance of being ‘hip’ and popular with certain ‘cool’ peers who hang out on the streets or near the neighborhood school... But also important is the fact that the wider culture and its institutions are perceived, quite accurately at times, as unresponsive and unyielding to the efforts of ghetto youths.”

Most inner-city parents reject the street subculture. Despite their best efforts, however, some of their teens do not resist the lifestyle. Walter’s mother expresses a typical concern: “I know he is out there [on the streets] when I’m at work. I don’t have any other way right now to have someone watch my children... I hope and pray that I taught Walter the right things, though. He knows, too, that when I’m home he better be straight. The Lord only knows, I have to believe that what I taught him, the good I taught him, will bring him through and make him a good man.”

Adolescents whose parents are not as overwhelmed by survival issues as Walter’s mother may not become casualties of “the streets.” They owe much of their success to the vigilant efforts of their parents.

Effective Parenting Strategies in Inner-City Neighborhoods

Qualitative accounts of poor African-American families and youths illuminate parenting strategies that promote conventional youth development. To combat the deleterious effects of living in an inner-city neighborhood, effective parents (1) use stringent monitoring strategies, (2) seek out local and extralocal resources, and (3) utilize in-home learning strategies. The term community bridging can be used to describe this complex of strategies because these parental actions link adolescents to mainstream opportunities and institutions.

Youth-Monitoring Strategies

Community-bridging parents protect their adolescents from negative neighborhood influences by closely supervising their time, space, and friendships. One ethnographer observed the appeal of the street lifestyle this way: “The ghetto street culture can be glamorous and seductive to the adolescent, promising its followers the chance of being ‘hip’ and popular with certain ‘cool’ peers who hang out on the streets or near the neighborhood school... But also important is the fact that the wider culture and its institutions are perceived, quite accurately at times, as unresponsive and unyielding to the efforts of ghetto youths.”

Significantly, “strict” parents take a two-pronged approach in their monitoring efforts. On the one hand, they discourage untoward friendships, while on the other hand, they replace these friendships with prosocial ones.

Another commonly used monitoring strategy is chaperonage—the accompaniment of children on their daily rounds in the neighborhood by a parent, family friend, or sibling. While community-bridging parents explicitly chaperon young children,
they use more subtle forms of monitoring with adolescents. One ethnographer described the pattern of sibling chaperonage: "[Seventeen-year-old] James Earl [Treppit] has begun visiting his girlfriend weekdays from 6:00 P.M. until the 11:00 P.M. parentally imposed curfew ... Since he wants to visit outside the home, Mrs. Treppit had decided to allow him to do it as long as he agrees to take his 16-year-old brother, Johnny, with him wherever he goes. In this way, Mrs. Treppit feels she still may exercise some control over James Earl's activities. Johnny is reliable in reporting all of his older brother's activities to his parents."23

Clearly, Mrs. Treppit acknowledges her son's growing need for autonomy, but she maintains oversight by enlisting her younger son—a peer to his brother—as a chaperon.

When monitoring strategies such as intensive supervision and chaperonage become ineffective, some community-bridging parents resort to extreme measures. Field researchers identified a pattern of "exile" in which concerned parents removed their teens from the local neighborhood altogether. Johnnie, a promising teen, states: "[My mother sent me to live with my uncle in California so] I won't get in trouble ... She wanted me to come out here because she always said if I go to California—every time I come out, I go to school, I do real good. When I go there [St. Louis] I do really bad."24

In cases such as Johnnie's, parents are willing to be geographically separated from their teens to promote conventional development.

Resource-Seeking Strategies
In addition to insulating their adolescents from neighborhood dangers, community-bridging parents garner resources to promote their development by seeking out the well-functioning local institutions and organizations that exist even in poor African-American communities.25,26 They target churches that sponsor scouting and tutoring programs, parochial and magnet schools that promote academic achievement, and athletic programs that support physical mastery and discipline.14,21 For instance, Tina reports to an interviewer that: "My mother ... has made sure I've gotten a head start in life. She got me a scholarship to Dalton. She was connected to people who helped young African-American women get on the right track. She has always networked with the right people."27

Tina's mother is a resourceful and competent woman who devotes large portions of time and energy to finding opportunities for her daughter.

Well-connected parents also take advantage of resources for their teens that exist outside of the local community. Kinship networks of grandparents, older siblings, godparents, and other biological and fictive kin can provide broader opportunities for youths.11,25,28-30 When kin are better off economically, youngsters gain access to resource-rich communities that offer a wider array of institutional, informational, and economic assets, including well-functioning schools. Field worker observations highlight the importance of kinship ties: "Johnnie's family and history are not contained in a single
Kinship connections, such as those in Johnnie’s family, expand adolescents’ resource bases beyond the local neighborhood.

**In-Home Learning Strategies**

At home, community-bridging parents directly promote their adolescent’s development of academic skills and competencies. Field observations of Sheila Johnson, a high achiever, revealed that she and her mother regularly played word games, unscrambling blocks of letters that spelled words found in a word list at the top of each puzzle page. Reflecting a long-term pattern of in-home literacy activities begun in childhood, Mrs. Johnson’s current efforts promote Sheila’s language development.

Community-bridging parents who lack the literacy skills necessary to assist their teens may turn to indirect strategies for promoting learning. For instance, the parents in the Harrison family offer their teens encouragement for school achievement: “Like many ghetto parents Lincoln and Lillie place a great value on education for their children. . . . [T]he Harrisons have translated their concern into several positive steps aimed at encouraging their children to stay in school and excel. This is one area in which the use of positive emotional rewards is most apparent. Both parents make it a deliberate point of complimenting and praising each effort of their children—‘good’ report cards, special honors, even satisfactory homework assignments are celebrated.”

Supportive learning strategies, such as those practiced in the Harrison family, keep youths attached to school authority, classroom routines, teacher directives, and conventional peers.

**The Future of Inner-City Youths**

Community-bridging parents use monitoring strategies, resource-seeking strategies, and in-home learning strategies to enhance the likelihood that their adolescents will develop conventionally, despite neighborhood impoverishment. Unlike so many of their neighbors, these parents are able to mediate the deleterious effects of growing up in inner-city neighborhoods. They create insulated and enriching developmental niches for their adolescents in the midst of neighborhood decline.

The fact that some parents foster positive adolescent development under adverse conditions demonstrates their tenacity and competence, but their efforts entail personal costs as well. Achieving conventional development in impoverished neighborhoods requires adults to concentrate single-mindedly and single-handedly on the welfare of their teens, often at the expense of personal needs and goals. Adolescents whose safety, if not survival, depends on the constriction of their social worlds may forgo a broader range of developmental experiences. Moreover, as the most capable families withdraw from local neighboring relations, the prospect of revitalizing inner-city neighborhoods is further discouraged. As individuals, community-bridging families should be commended for their efforts, but an examination of their experiences draws disturbing attention to the larger social, economic, and political conditions that create inner-city ghettos and the need for such exacting adaptive responses.

Efforts are needed to change the neighborhood conditions that compromise the developmental trajectories of poor African-American youths and place great burdens on their parents. More well-functioning youth-serving institutions are needed, including good-quality schools, youth programs, libraries, parks, and other organizations that provide enriching developmental contexts for youths. Increased job and eco-
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Economic opportunities for residents would provide an alternative to the street lifestyle, and economically stable neighbors could serve as mentors, role models, and supportive coparents to local youths. Such institutional and individual changes would lessen the need for the demanding parenting efforts described here and might allow local parents to become more active members of the larger community.

Community-bridging parents in effect subsidize local institutions by fulfilling functions that are typically shared with well-functioning schools, churches, and other youth-serving institutions. Inner-city neighborhoods with limited social, economic, and institutional resources demand that parents be “super-parents” to ensure conventional development for their adolescents. Supportive neighborhood environments should, at the very least, meet parents halfway. When they do, there is a greater likelihood that both extraordinary and ordinary parents can ensure a promising future for their adolescents.

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9. The literature review focuses on qualitative studies published between 1960 and 1997, which describe parenting behaviors and family characteristics that influence child and youth social mobility outcomes. See note no. 8, Jarrett.
15. See note no. 3, Anderson, quote on p. 91.


23. See note no. 7, Clark, quote on p. 53.


27. See note no. 5, Williams and Kornblum, quote on p. 59.


31. See note no. 24, Davidson, quote on p. 153.

32. See note no. 7, Clark, quote on p. 92.