

What's happening at CFR

Center for Family Research at the University of Georgia

Fall, 2023



Helping babies sleep

A CFR study helps new mothers with this classic struggle

Anyone who has cared for a baby knows that it can sometimes be hard to get them to fall asleep and stay asleep through the night. The challenge can not only rattle the nerves of caregivers but have consequences for the baby as well.

Babies should get at least 12 hours of sleep every day, but Black American babies as a group often do not get that much. This poor sleep pattern can continue into adulthood and affect their mental and physical well-being.

Recognizing this problem, researchers at CFR tested an in-home program for first-time Black mothers in the Augusta area to see if it could help them get their babies to sleep more at night.

Home visitors met with mothers when babies were 3 weeks old and again when they were 8 weeks old. Through discussion and education, they explored topics like understanding infant sleep and feeding as well as how to handle a crying baby.

For instance, mothers were advised to have a consistent bedtime routine that included putting the baby to bed early while they are drowsy but still awake. The program also encouraged mothers to avoid feeding their baby until they fall asleep or putting them to bed with a bottle. Mothers also learned what to do when their baby cries at night, such as giving them some time to fall back asleep on their own and/or shushing them quietly before picking them up.

Results from the study showed that babies whose mothers participated in the program slept longer at night. They also woke up less frequently and had a greater likelihood of getting at least 12 hours of total sleep per day than infants in a comparison group who received information about child safety.

We now hope to find out if the positive changes mothers and babies experienced will last into later childhood and promote child and family health.

Why do we take biological samples in our studies?



In many of our research projects we take samples of things like blood and saliva and sometimes scan the brains of participants. Why is this necessary?

Scholars who do the kind of research we do have typically relied on things like observing parents and children interacting or collecting information from them through surveys. While this method has proven very useful, we have learned that we need to dig deeper to answer some important questions. Just asking research participants about things like the amount and kind of stress they have in their life is not enough. We need to understand how these things are affecting their mind and body—getting “under the skin” as we say. To do that, we collect biological samples and scan the brain (painlessly!) to see the actual effects. And by collecting samples multiple times over several years, we are better able to see how stress affects the body over time and what protects people from the negative effects of stress.

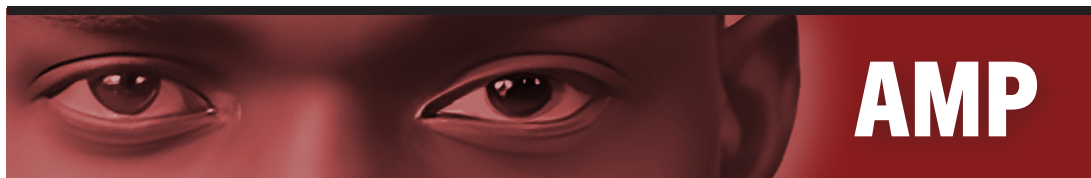
Over the past 30 years, CFR researchers have discovered how adversity early in life can lead to changes in the way the brain and the body interact, and this can lead to health problems that last a lifetime.

Although many of the adversities Black people experience are the result of systemic barriers and challenges, we have identified ways families can protect youth from racism and other stressors and help them become successful despite these challenges. While we have learned a lot about how this works, we want to know more so we can create better ways of protecting people from these negative effects.

We appreciate the volunteers who take time to participate and their willingness to allow these types of data collections. They are helping us learn more about how stress affects people’s lives and how families help make people resilient.

We are set to complete our first round of data collection this year in our Health and Resilience Project - Transitions (HARP-T). Transitions, which is studying 18 to 24-year-olds, has successfully enrolled nearly 200 participants.

Next year, we will review the data we have collected so far and begin our second round of visits with these participants. Thanks to all who are part of this important work!



The **African American Men’s Project (AMP)** has followed a group of young, Black men from rural Georgia as they leave high school and transition into adulthood. AMP participants have taught us a lot about the challenges young men experience during this time. A recent study looked at how young Black men experienced becoming a father. Research confirms AMP participants’ joy, commitment, engagement, and love for their children, despite racist myths to the contrary. For young men in rural Georgia, however, this joy is accompanied by difficult life challenges. Having a baby is stressful in the best of circumstances. For men faced with difficulties in finding good paying jobs, a lack of resources in the community, and racial discrimination, the stress of parenthood can be overwhelming and lead to substance use problems. This study shows how important it is to support, nurture, and link young men to resources. It also points out how structural racism can undermine wellbeing, especially during important life transitions.



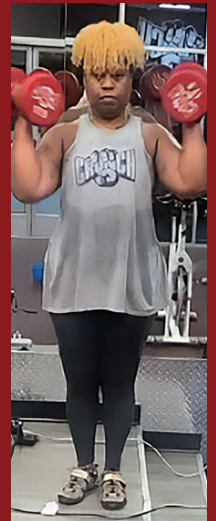
Family members participate in a group activity as part of the **Strong African American Families** program in Suffolk, Virginia. CFR staff continue to train community organizations around the country to deliver SAAF and SAAF-Teen which work to prevent substance use and risky behavior among youth by strengthening positive family



Ragonda Menefield, MPA/MBA

Ragonda Menefield doesn't sit still. One minute she is training a research assistant at CFR, and the next she is shouting orders to members of her fitness boot camp, and then heading off to rehearsal for leading worship music at her church. Energy and determination define both her personal and professional life, and it serves her well in her work at CFR.

Most of that work these days is supporting research about the effects of stress on Black American's health. It is a topic Menefield knows well. "I probably gained over 80 pounds just from the stress of school," she says about her time earning her first master's degree (she has two). She lost the weight and kept it off, and in the process, became passionate about health and helping others. That passion eventually led her to CFR.



As the project coordinator for project SHAPE (SAAF Healthy Adults Projects), Menefield manages the people and processes that go into collecting data for this ongoing study. SHAPE participants were kids when they were part of the original Strong African American Families (SAAF) study, and as adults, they are included in SHAPE. Many of their kids are now enrolled in the HARP-Generations study which Menefield also coordinates. Following people over time like this provides researchers with rich information about how people respond to adversity and improves their ability to develop ways of helping people deal with stress in healthy ways.

Whether she is affecting people's lives through physical training, or spiritually through music, or at her main job at CFR studying ways of building resilience in Black families, Menefield wants to make a difference. "Some people wake up every day mad to go to work. I wake up ready to go to work because everything correlates together—that I'm affecting someone's life in each thing I do."

Strong Families Tip > Have Consistent and Firm Expectations for Children

Effective parents and caregivers are very clear about what they expect from their children and do not let them get away with misbehavior. While you cannot say ahead of time everything that is acceptable or not, children need a good sense of what is expected of them. Some families even make charts with rules and chores.

Expectations for your children need to be consistent to be effective. Sometimes parents let something slide one day and get upset the next day for the same behavior. Such inconsistency is not setting a clear message about what is acceptable behavior and can cause anxiety and inconsistent behavior in children. While it is impossible to be consistent all the time, consistency is a key goal.

Being firm and consistent does not mean being harsh. If you are frequently blowing up at your kids, they may lose confidence in themselves or just find ways to do things behind your back. Being firm and consistent means enforcing house rules matter-of-factly. There are consequences for breaking rules regardless of how upset a parent may be, or not, about what the child has done.



Talk with your children regularly about what you expect, and when necessary, discuss how things are working. Sometimes, particularly as children get older, it becomes time to set new rules that match their developing maturity. If your child gets a bad grade at school because he has not completed homework regularly, for instance, you can talk with him about why this is a problem. Then set a new rule such as requiring he show you completed homework each day before watching TV.

Relationships in the pandemic



The **ProSAAF** (Strong African American Families) study continues to research how family relationships, neighborhood characteristics, and other factors affect Black families. We recently learned some things about how the COVID-19 pandemic affected couples.

The more stress Black adults in the study felt during the pandemic, the more depression they experienced. But it differed based on the quality of their romantic relationship before the pandemic. Those whose relationship quality had improved before the pandemic experienced less depression. In other words, improved relationship quality helped protect them from the negative effects of COVID-19 related stressors. The researchers think that efforts to improve a couple's ability to work together as a team increases their resilience to many stressors, including some big and unexpected ones like the pandemic.

CFR in Numbers

60+

the number of counties in Georgia with home visiting programs supported by CFR



Center for Family Research

Owens Institute for Behavioral Research

UNIVERSITY OF GEORGIA

Research | Insights | Intervention

Research that makes a difference in the lives of African American families

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