

# What's happening at CFR



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## Shift and Persist

This way of thinking about life might help Black fathers

Over the years, experts have tried to understand what makes someone a good parent. What do they do, or not do, that helps their children grow up healthy and happy? But in those studies, Black fathers, and especially unmarried Black fathers, have often been overlooked. How do they form attachments to their children and help their growth? How do they manage to overcome stressors in life that might interfere with effective parenting?

CFR researchers set about addressing some of those questions with a group of unmarried, Black fathers. For these fathers, their attitude about parenting before the baby arrives plays a crucial role in how they parent when they become a father. We wanted to understand differences in men who think it is important for babies to become attached to them compared to those with more traditional attitudes that men should not be nurturing to babies.

In particular, we wanted to know if these differences might be explained by the amount of stress these men experience in life, such as the level of discrimination and financial hardship they face. We also wanted to understand why some men believe more in nurturing babies even in the face of stress.

We found that a coping strategy called “shift-and-persist” was very important in understanding new fathers’ attitudes. Shifting refers to intentionally changing one’s point-of-view about stressful, threatening things that happen in life so that you see them in a more positive light. So instead of thinking, “I’ll never find a job,” you shift your thinking to, “I may have not found a job yet, but there is a good one out there for me somewhere.”

Persisting refers to the effort of trying to keep a positive attitude despite difficulties and managing to keep going in the effort to succeed. Together, this shifting and persisting attitude may have benefits for Black men.

In our research, we found that among those fathers with more stress in their lives, those who reported more shift-and-persist coping skills also had stronger attitudes toward attachment to their baby. For example, they believed more strongly in things like, “My child should know that it is ok to cry or be sad.”

These findings suggest that having a shift-and-persist approach to life may be an important attitude for Black men to develop before becoming fathers. It may also be a way that organizations can help unmarried, Black men develop more positive attitudes toward attachment before a baby arrives.



Original image from Playground AI



She looked around and saw that the kids in her community in Athens were not getting the kind of support she had while growing up

## The right word at the right time

CFR's Kimberly Bennett knows how the right word at the right time can make a big difference in someone's life. In high school, she was fortunate to be surrounded by people who urged her to take her future into her own hands instead of leaving it to fate. One of those people was a teacher who encouraged her to apply for a youth apprentice program in healthcare because she enjoyed science. Kimberly took the advice, loved the program, and became a phlebotomist (a medical technician who draws blood and other lab work) at Athens Regional Hospital at just 16 years old.

At the hospital other people took her under their wings and offered advice about different paths she could take, "making everything exciting for me," she said. It set her on a course of working in the medical field, and she says her life would have been painfully different without that guidance.

Later, when she had her own children, she looked around and saw that the kids in her community in Athens were not getting the kind of support she had while growing up. They were not getting the guidance they needed "to reach their full potential," she said. She became concerned about the long-term effects of this on the community and individual lives and became determined to do something about it.

So alongside her career in the medical field, Kimberly began working with local groups to provide mentorship to youth around Athens. Eventually, she started her own organization—Cultivating a Lifetime of Legacy—that mentors youth through several programs in Athens and surrounding counties. Through the years, she has earned a bachelor's and master's degree and is currently working toward a doctorate in Public Administration.

Kimberly now works as the CFR recruitment coordinator, helping find families and individuals to participate in research as well as encouraging them to continue participating since many of our projects extend over many years. The work that CFR does is "near and dear to my heart," she said, because she sees "the importance of research and the importance of having data to help families and communities be stronger."

Through her work at CFR and her labor in the Athens community, Kimberly works to "help kids become self-supporting adults, so that we can have the community that everyone wants," she explained. You might say that she is building a community in which all kids and young adults get the right word at the right time.

A new Strong African American Families (SAAF) group started this year in Compton, California led by the organization, Parenting for Liberation. Here, a family group discusses family chores and responsibilities as part of an activity in the SAAF program.

Learn more about how you can bring SAAF to your community to help build strong families.  
<https://cfr.uga.edu/saaf-programs>



# CFR explores Virtual Reality

CFR is exploring new ways to deliver our Strong African American Families (SAAF) and SAAF-Teen programs using virtual reality (VR) technology. In a VR activity, participants can see and interact with a virtual world created to teach different kinds of skills. Youth and caregivers usually participate in the SAAF programs in a group over several weeks. We want to see if VR activities can deepen this experience and enhance learning.

CFR's Dr. Greg Rhodes explores a virtual world at the University of Georgia Center for Advanced Computer-Human Ecosystems.



## Another way adversity and racial discrimination take a toll

Racial discrimination and other stressful experiences can have serious consequences for the physical and mental health of Black Americans. In a new study, we found that the combination of childhood poverty and racial discrimination during young adulthood was especially hard on young Black men. They were more likely to be more socially isolated and have frequent thoughts of suicide. It is an important finding because there has not been much attention paid to the experience of Black men that lead them to suicidal thoughts.

The researchers will continue trying to understand this issue better as well as explore ways of preventing the problem in the first place. But they believe that one thing parents can do is be sure to instill a sense of pride in being Black. This can help counteract the negative messages children may hear.

If you are thinking about harming yourself or attempting suicide, tell someone who can help right away. • Call 911 for emergency services • Go to the nearest hospital emergency room • Call or text 988 to connect with the 988 Suicide & Crisis Lifeline.

## Strong Families Tip > Set Expectations for Substance Use and Sexual Behavior

Some parents avoid the topic of sex and the use of substances like alcohol and drugs with their children. These issues can be awkward or so complicated that parents are not sure what to say. But saying nothing can leave your child at risk.

Parents who just assume their kids know what they expect from them about sexual activity or substance use are more likely to have children who pursue more risky behavior. Instead, parents who state their expectations clearly and talk with their kids about these issues are more likely to get them to make choices that fit their wishes.

These conversations can begin with a simple, “Do you know of any kids your age that are using drugs [or having sex]? What do you think about that?” Or, if a young character in a movie uses drugs or has sex, it gives you the chance to start a conversation. Getting your child’s thoughts is a good place to start and gives you the opportunity to discuss the consequences of substance abuse or early sexual activity and describe your expectations for their behavior. You also have the chance to talk with your child about how to respond when others pressure them to participate. These should not be one-time conversations. It is important to revisit the issues regularly as children grow and mature.



See more Strong Families tips from CFR



# Ongoing research

There are many projects going on at CFR. A few are wrapping up. A couple are just getting under way. And some are still being developed. Here is an update on some of our ongoing projects.

Our Strong African American Families Healthy Adult Project (**SHAPE**) is wrapping up nearly three decades of following a group of rural African American youth from age 11 into adulthood. We wanted to learn what helped them weather the stress in their lives from things like financial pressure and racism, and what supports greater well-being and healthier living. We have learned a lot. For example, we found that nurturing parenting relationships and positive racial identity can help buffer youth from some of the health consequences of racism and other stressors. Now we are recruiting the children of many of these original participants for our Health and Resilience Project (**HARP**)-Generations project. This project will provide us with data from three generations to examine how risk and resilience processes unfold across generations.

Our Promoting Strong African American Families study (**ProSAAF**), which follows 346 African American couples in mid-to-late adulthood, has recently concluded another wave of data collection. Our work has shown that supporting family collaboration leads to decreased problems for youth, and that family strengths support individual and community coping to promote physical health for family members. We have also found that couples tend to be effective in using supportive communication with each other about experiences of discrimination. These recent findings help demonstrate that ProSAAF and similar interventions may play an important role in enhancing families' resilience in the face of stress. We plan to follow-up with all ProSAAF families in the future for additional insights.

Research | Insights | Intervention

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

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