



## THE ROLE OF THE FAMILY

*“Culture mandates that one make home the primary concern of the heart. The heart creates love, support, cooperation, nurturing, and peace. Home is our first school. Let us put our hearts, minds, bodies and souls back into the home as the first step toward eliminating the violence in the streets.” (Iyanla Vanzant in Acts of Faith: Daily Meditations for People of Color)*

We must *heal* the community to end violence. **We MUST reclaim the African proverb that it takes a village to raise a child.** More importantly, we must realize that it takes the *entire* village to help the family raise its children. This includes the schools, communities of faith, social institutions, and community allies. All aspects of the village must take responsibility for raising the children and supporting *all* families in our community.

Therefore, as the village, we recognize the following:

- There are all kinds of families in the African American community – two-parent families, single mothers raising children, single fathers raising children, grandparents and other relatives raising children, and foster care families. The village must support families, no matter what the composition or the orientation. Families need the support of the entire community. Institutions of faith, schools, businesses, and social and educational institutions *must* help them raise children, and provide relevant programs to address the diverse needs of the family, as well as those of the community.
- We have lost an understanding of how the history, cultural values, beliefs, practices, and traditions have sustained and protected the African American family. We have forgotten the significance of the role played by our elders as keepers of wisdom, as teachers of cultural values, and as role models for parenting. Today’s youth feel abandoned and disrespected by the rest of the community. We must heal the distrust and the disconnection that seemingly comes from a breakdown of the strong sense of unity once shared by everyone in the village. We must return to and accept the practice of holding youth accountable whenever we encounter unacceptable or inappropriate behavior. Therefore, to have a healthy community, we must repair the relationship between the generations to help break the cycle of violence permeating our neighborhoods. Furthermore, we must make a commitment to reclaim and institute these values, practices and traditions to save today’s families.
- Parents must see themselves as the children’s first teachers and main role models. Children often learn more from what they see their parents do than from what their parents say. We learn about values and behaviors from our parents. Parents must understand that they have responsibilities as well as rights to raise their own children. They have the *right* to raise children in a safe, healthy, productive and positive environment. Yet, they must take the *responsibility* to empower their children to become

responsible and productive adults. However, they cannot do this alone. The schools, communities of faith, social service agencies, and the community *must assist* families in achieving these goals.

If we truly want to have a healthy community with healthy families, we must recognize the family as the *foundation* of the village. Protected and insulated by the entire village, *parents and families* must make a commitment to:

- **Empower** children with a strong sense of self, community, culture, and spirituality to help them feel self-confident enough to avoid negative peer pressure and make the right choices. Remind our youth that the village will also take part in their individual rearing, and they should respect and listen to elders when approached regarding their appropriate *and* inappropriate behaviors.
- **Instill** children with a sense of responsibility to the family, to the neighborhood in which they live as well as to the wider community. Trust and respect helps to build a healthy family, *and* a healthy community.
- **Support** youth by allowing them to follow their dreams and not be deterred by influences of youth who engage in negative and even criminal lifestyles. Adults must encourage a *positive* mindset and perspective for all youth and must constantly be supportive of the need for young people to "do the right thing."
- **Encourage** youth to only take part in *legal* money-making opportunities. Parents must not allow their children to participate in illegal activities, even when those activities have the possibility of bringing additional income into the household. Parents and guardians must realize that such behaviors can lead to the imprisonment and/or death of their children.
- **Teach** children self-discipline by strongly urging them to resist engaging in unhealthy or illegal behaviors or life-styles. Help them to deal with negative peer pressure, especially with regards to drugs and alcohol.
- **Provide** positive role models. Children must see strong, positive men and women living, working and involved in the community. Fathers must take an active role in raising their children, whether they are in or out of the home. Men in the village must step in to "father" children when biological fathers are incarcerated, or dead, or otherwise absent. In doing so these men can provide the nurturing such children need to be emotionally and physically healthy. Moreover, the *entire* community must serve as extended family to provide support for *all* families in the village.
- **Demonstrate** at all times positive parenting skills and habits to provide a loving and caring environment for the youth under one's care. Parents and guardians should always keep open communications with their children and provide opportunities for young people to feel free to share their deepest fears, concerns, upsets and frustrations. Such an atmosphere of trust might prevent the child from resorting to negative and possibly criminal behaviors
- **Teach** children to be assertive, not aggressive, in expressing themselves. Help them to understand they can resolve conflicts without resorting to inappropriate or violent behavior when they are at home, at school, *and* out in the community. Insist that children

show respect for each other and *everyone* they encounter in the community. Monitor your children's friends or acquaintances and encourage them to develop healthy ways of communication with their peers.

- **Encourage** youth to use mediation techniques when faced with conflict and emotionally devastating situations. Parents and guardians should continually discourage the use of knives, guns and other weapons by young people who might find themselves involved in human conflicts. Parents and adults, in general, should constantly demonstrate positive interpersonal behaviors and practices to the youth of our community.
- **Value** the pursuit of education and raise the standard of excellence as an essential requirement for success. The academic achievement gap between African American children and the so-called "dominant" culture is widening and many of our children are failing. We cannot afford to let our children continue to buy into the mistaken notion that

to be smart, is to be acting "white." We must instill in our children that being an educated person has nothing to do with color. They should understand that education is a right we did not always have as a people, and that we must not forget the blood shed to give us this right. Education provides a path to being productive and successful citizens.

- **Urge** your children to aspire to succeed in school. Insist that our youth graduate from high school, and, if they desire, seek higher education such as college, technical or trade schools. Insist that the schools give *all* children the skills to compete fully in today's society. Advocate for the resources necessary for providing a safe environment conducive to learning, and elicit the help of the village to make certain this happens.
- **Take** a strong interest in every aspect of a child's education. Develop open relationships with teachers, principals and other school officials. Be proactive instead of reactive. Healthy and positive collaboration between the parents and the schools must occur in order for children to receive the best education possible.
- **Develop** and encourage a strong work ethic in children from an early age to prepare them to become productive adults. For example, children can be responsible for chores around the home. Parents can encourage teens to obtain after-school or summer employment. Requiring children to volunteer in their schools, their community and in faith-based institutions provides excellent opportunities to learn leadership and social skills, which facilitate the development of a strong work ethic.
- **Monitor** what teens and children see in the media (TV, movies, videos, games), as well as the music they listen to. We are exposing children as young as two years of age to a myriad of potentially damaging messages about gender roles, self-gratification, and the acceptability of violence.
- **Talk** openly about subjects such as healthy relationships and healthy sexuality with children from an early age, and *before* they become adolescents. As a child's primary and most important teachers, parents are encouraged to address issues such as sexual and social responsibility before their children become adolescents. Urge both boys and girls to value their virginity. Young men must understand that their manhood and masculinity are not solely defined by their ability to make children. Just as important, teen girls should not solely be defined by their sexuality. Encourage youth to seek positive and healthy friendships before they decide to engage in sexual activity. While

marriage is the ideal, parents must strongly encourage youth to wait until they have completed their education or have become financially and emotionally stable to have families of their own. Parents can help their children safely navigate today's society by having positive, committed, and safe relationships.

- **Gather** information about the importance of good mental, physical and emotional health, and consider adopting a healthy lifestyle, which includes proper nutrition and physical exercise for the entire family. Encourage the village to provide the necessary resources that contribute to a healthy community for all families.
- **Recognize** the *necessity* of securing all firearms, *if they are in the home*, to reduce the risk of accidents, theft, or unauthorized use. Just as so much of the violence in the streets is the result of using firearms, deaths or injuries in the home are also committed with guns. Therefore, parents who choose to keep firearms in the home must insure that children and visitors do not have access to them. Moreover, they must provide age-appropriate safety instruction for all members of the family.
- **Advocate** for safer communities. We must hold *every* school, municipality, and state and federally elected official accountable. Urge them to enact legislation that will protect the community and provide *all* of the resources necessary to make our communities safe for *everyone, including families*.

It indeed takes an *entire* village to raise a child. If *our* village does not, many more children and youth may seek another kind of *family* – a family that is fostered in violence – one that is called, “The Streets.” Therefore, the village *must* provide the guidance, and the leadership, as well as have the *will*, to raise all of our children in a productive, viable *and* safe environment.