

FEATURE

The Demise Of The Black Family

Editor's Note: This is the first in a three-part series on black families written by Charles Faulkner. He is a nationally syndicated newspaper columnist, psychologist, and educational administrator.

by CHARLES W. FAULKNER

A well-known black professional athlete was recently asked how he felt about being a role model for the black youth of America. His response was, "No, no, their parents should be their role models. When I was growing up, my role model was my father."

This statement reflects the contradictory nature of the black family. The tradition, and the hope, is to have the role model right there at home to teach and guide children, and there are quite a few stable black families in this category. The increasing reality, however, is that the mother raises the children and, in effect, serves as the only role model. According to the 1990 census, 2.9 million is the clearest expression of the problem facing many black families in America.

Parents socialize their children with respect to the kinds of values and aspirations that they hold for them. Even when they are not aware of it, parents serve as the instillers of societal behavioral conditioning. Children usually copy the behavior of their parents, especially the father. The stable conventional family in America is a small society with the father and mother working in tandem.

Although some previous studies of the black family have been extensive, many were completed prior to the current period of

deterioration. The current increase in discrimination, the high unemployment rate, and the problem of drugs have had a tremendous impact upon the structure of the black family and have accelerated its demise as a viable societal institution.

Discrimination has had the effect of demoralizing the black male, who is expected to eventually be the head of the conventional black family. A lifetime of denial of first-class opportunity to prosper has had a chilling influence on the career motivation and the educational preparation required to obtain a job that has the income and prestige expected of a strong father-figure. The recession and its accompanying high unemployment rate have greatly decreased the possibility of even highly motivated black males obtaining respectable employment. Drugs often offer a viable, though destructive avenue for many to earn a decent living.

Perhaps the factor that contributes most to the demise of the black family is the unavailability of respectable, family supporting job opportunities. The family can only prepare its members for jobs. Unfortunately, it cannot provide the jobs that are consistent with the hopes and aspirations of its members. It cannot totally socialize its male members into manhood. Society has a major supportive role to fulfill.

In fact, it might be said that the systematic denial of job opportunities has led to more disillusionment and emotional turmoil than any other element in the lives of black males whom

society expects to be acceptable father-figures. Without a decent job, the father is not able to purchase the material symbols of success that indicate prestige and that say to society, "I have made it in America." The average black family is not able to provide the ingredients of emotional stability, protection, and comfort that would result from a positive self-image.

There are actually two major groupings of black families: (1) the conventional black family, which is generally middle class; and (2) the unconventional black family, which is usually poor or lower class. In both of the above categories, the black family confronts a major obstacle in its effort to survive. Black families that have been able to get a foothold in society and utilize their resources have developed into stable, productive, conventional American families. There are many in this category.

In the unconventional family, the black father is either faced with the enormous problem of obtaining a secure, reputable job, or a "street job" such as stealing, mugging, or selling drugs.

The father, whose duty it is to hold his family together, is often too degraded, disrespected, or demoralized to do so. More and more black families are being abandoned and disrupted. Many black parents board the city bus with their children in the ghetto, making the daily journey to inferior schools. Others simply allow the child to trek to school alone, walking over used drug syringes and fearful of an attack by drugged-out thugs.

A frustrated father may take out

his unhappiness on his wife and children, who become victims of physical abuse. The emotionally defeated husband may sexually abuse his wife simply to reclaim his manhood. Obviously, in this increasingly common situation, neither mother nor father is adequately motivated or capable of properly rearing children. The neglected child might use drugs to escape the torment of life. So might his or her parents.

The child almost certainly will rely upon his or her peer group to provide guidance, the next step in this downward spiral is to turn to crime to provide funds for subsistence, cheers from peers, and a feeling of power. It also provides role models.

If a questioner were to ask, "How's the family?" some blacks might ask, "Are you referring to my mother and sister? Or my daughter

and grandmother? Or my son and me? Or my foster mother and myself? Or my fellow gang members? Are you referring to the organization that I work for that sells drugs? Or is my family the guys with whom I live and rub elbows each day in prison?"

There is of course, a so-called black family but few blacks have experienced the family situation as it is portrayed in the conventional sense. To many blacks, the word *family* is much like the word *love*. It means different things to different people. Most people have a commonly understood concept of the family and of what the black family *should* be. Blacks, on the other hand, have only "The Cosby Show" or their radically different personal experiences to guide them in their understanding of the concept of family.

Parenting Skills Discussed

Don Dinkmeyer Jr., Ph.D., one of the nation's foremost authorities on parent/child relations, will present an evening lecture for county parents and conduct a day of workshops for local parent educators.

Dinkmeyer will present the latest information and teach essential parenting skills in a lecture about "Raising a Responsible Child," in the Olympic College Theater on Thursday, March 25 from 7-8:30 p.m.

A suggested \$2 donation at the door will benefit family-

strengthening programs in the county.

Dinkmeyer is author of *The Effective Parent, Teaching and Lead Children, PREP for Effective Family Living* and other texts and programs on parenting, marriage enrichment and psychology. He and his father, Don Dinkmeyer Sr. Ph.D., are co-authors of *Systematic Training for Effective Parenting, Early Childhood STEP and STEP Teen*.

More information on this event is available by calling Project Family, 373-3030.

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One-on-one tax help is available free at Volunteer Income Tax Assistance (VITA) and Tax Counseling for the Elderly (TCE) sites. To find a location near you, call the IRS toll-free at 1-800-829-1040.

Hearing-impaired persons who have access to telecommunication devices for the deaf (TDD) can call the IRS toll-free at 1-800-829-4059 (TDD users only).



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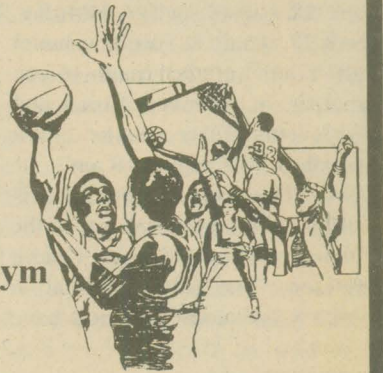
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