*Nurturing that unprejudiced, youthful innocence
may be the answer to better multicultural relations.*

117138–
117142

U.S. Department of Justice
National Institute of Justice

School Safety

CONTENTS
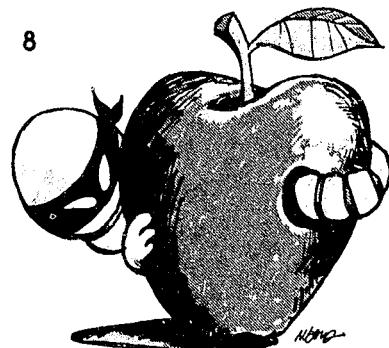
117138

NCJRS

MAY 10 1989

ACQUISITIONS

BY JOYCE N. THOMAS

Dysfunctional families and the inherent conflict they generate are exacerbating problems already existing for many minority youths.

Breeding grounds for multicultural conflict

When one's personal values, the cultural values within one's family and the values expressed by the school system are in conflict, it can cause both immediate and long-term negative or dysfunctional behavior for youths. This is particularly true for young people who are the victims of parental neglect or abuse.

For such youths in our population, traditional values of work, money, education, home and even life itself may have little or no meaning. The ability to show respect and appreciation for others, as well as to have dignity and self-esteem, are personal traits that often are lacking among these youths.

The frightening reality is that an increasing number of these young people are poor, black or some other ethnic minority, and products of parental neglect. These children are in imminent danger, and many are forced to surrender their hopes and dreams very early in exchange for a life of crime. But these youths are like all other children — they have feelings, are vulnerable to victimization, have fears and anxieties, and need support and guidance for proper development. Sadly, the majority of such children must focus much of their energies on the issue of survival,

Joyce N. Thomas, R.N., is president of the Center for Child Protection and Family Support, Inc., located in Washington, D.C.

primarily in hostile environments.

Fifteen percent of those between 16 and 19 years of age will not successfully make the transition into productive and responsible adulthood. The many problems that seem to plague these youngsters have no single cure, and we are all much better at describing the issues than we are at determining strategies for solutions. Yet, because so many minority families find themselves on the negative side of most social, health and educational indicators, we must make it a top priority to focus our attention on the cultural conflicts that affect these high-risk youth.

We must look the problem squarely in the eye, then we must turn our talents, resources and energies toward practical strategies for intervention. The best bet for these young people to beat the odds of self-destruction is an improved family enviornment and obtaining a quality education.

Understanding cultural conflicts

It is within the private intimate relationships of the family that a child learns the most basic lessons: what to value, what to fear, what to expect from others and what sort of life to anticipate. Within the family, a child also takes the very early crucial steps of cognitive and emotional development that either prepares him for later growth or handicaps him when he is

provided with opportunities for growth.

Since child rearing follows no universal standard, what is acceptable or unacceptable will vary based on the culture and beliefs of a given family. Culture represents the traditions and learned patterns of thinking, feeling and acting that are established in an ongoing group process and transmitted from one generation to another. Culture encompasses deeply internalized personal values, which are manifested in our personalities and behavior.

What has been seriously overlooked in our search for knowledge and understanding of the issues involving high-risk children are the implications conflicting cultures have on these children and their families. Research and my own experience as a specialist in the field of high-risk and maltreated children tell me that, unfortunately, many ethnic minority families view culture in response to many undesirable social conditions, such as poverty, racism and oppression. When parents doubt their worth and value in society, this message is transmitted to their children. This conflict that the parents experience affects their interaction with their child and, subsequently, their ability to parent.

To a large extent, how a child views himself depends on what goes on between that child and his parent. How the parent deals with discipline, communication, nurturance, moral values,

spiritual beliefs, socialization and educational values are extremely important as to how any child will function. Studies have shown that maltreatment may result in impaired intellectual functioning, delayed language development, problems in acquisition of motor skills, fear of failure and low self-esteem.

Clearly, no single element of a cultural pattern can be removed from its context and examined in isolation from other integrated aspects of that culture. We have to view the issue in a holistic manner. But because it is difficult to separate out any single element that may cause this conflict, the significance of cultural factors often is overlooked.

If we had a better understanding of the differences in child-rearing practices and beliefs among certain ethnic minority groups, then perhaps we could intervene more effectively for the protection of children. Determining the cultural strengths and positive resources of high-risk families and integrating these issues into the learning process for young people is an extremely important intervention strategy.

Factors of parental neglect
I have seen literally thousands of young children and adolescents from different ethnic backgrounds who have been severely neglected and mistreated by their parents. From this perspective, the issue of cultural conflict is very important to understanding the problems of high-risk youth.

Only through our understanding of cultural strengths can we avoid some of the condescending attitudes and damaging behaviors that continue to foster resistance, anger and negative consequences. As an Afro-American with a strong West Indian cultural background, I am accutely aware of the many contradictions in our society, tremendous barriers to achieving success, daily uphill struggles for survival and seemingly unending frustrations encountered by blacks and other ethnic minorities.

As cultures come into contact with one another, different child-rearing practices and beliefs create conflicting situations for the child. Family traditions, positive male and female role models, quality educational development and parental responsibilities are extremely important for the healthy development of children.

Child abuse and neglect are catchall terms for a variety of childhood injuries that are believed to be derived from negative parental actions, as is the case in abuse, or the parents' failure to act, as is the case in neglect. Neglect or deprivation of necessities is the most prevalent type of maltreatment — almost 66 percent of all maltreated children are reported to experience neglect. In the classic sense, physical neglect may be defined as failure to provide the essentials for normal life, such as food, clothing, shelter, care and supervision as well as protection from assault. This is best understood when viewed as a symptom of family dysfunction caused by a variety of factors and frequently involving multiple determinants.

Recently, while working on a special project investigating the issues of parental neglect, youth gangs and drug trafficking, many community workers reported that they felt parental neglect was a factor in the drug trafficking problem among these youth. As one resident said, "Most of these families are involved in unintentional or ignorant neglect of their children." For example, most of these parents don't want to see their children do "bad," but they provide such poor supervision and limit setting that the kids just simply go astray.

It was further pointed out that in the past, parents could tell their children, "I'm working hard so that you won't have to." But nowadays, many parents are not working hard — in fact, they may not be working at all. Even if their parents are working, the incentive for working so hard and achieving so little does not appeal to today's youth. The value of working for a living is different for these children. It has been said that these youths desire "a million dollar lifestyle with a three dollar skill level."

Many parents are aware of their children's delinquent behavior, but they throw up their hands and seem to turn their heads away as the profits for illegal drug dealing alters the economic status of the family. The underground drug economy is thriving on the favorable environment of parental neglect and absent leadership in our communities.

The motives for abusing and neglecting children are many, and deep emotional scars often result from parental neglect. Although we know that this problem does occur at all social, cultural and economic levels of our society, black and other minority youths are overrepresented in our social welfare and juvenile justice system. It is becoming clear that the neglectful mistreatment of children poses a major threat to the very survival of certain subgroups within our society, namely minority families.

Those who have a commitment and professional responsibility for youth services must focus greater attention toward truly comprehending the underlying issues of high-risk minority children and their families.

The impact of the cycle of neglect
Tremendous strides have been made in improving the logevity and quality of life for most American people. However, a persistent and disturbing disparity exists in both the social and health indicators among certain subgroups of our population. In looking at some of the broader social problems such as drug and alcohol abuse, neighborhood crime and violence, juvenile delinquency, teen pregnancy, school dropouts, children in our foster care systems, and failures in our educational system, minorities are disproportionately represented in these statistics.

If the well-being of our country is predicated upon our ability to continue to produce strong, healthy and productive citizens, then the growing problem of illiteracy and dysfunctional families from all cultural groups must be a major concern. The maltreatment of chil-

dren continues to be an ugly tragedy in our society, and the negative impact on the economic and social fabric of our communities is enormous.

The influence of cultural factors on both the child and the family is pervasive but subtle. Unfortunately, these problems are perpetuated from generation to generation. Many neglectful parents themselves have been neglected or abused during their childhoods and also have frustrated dependency needs. Such parents often have a distorted view of their children and their expectations may be somewhat unrealistic.

After working with many black middle- to low-income families in which parental neglect and substance abuse is a major problem, I have seen that many of these children suffer from mental health problems. They may be involved in youth gangs or drug trafficking, prostitution, delinquency, drug abuse or other high-risk behavior. We are all well aware that high-risk youths have multiple problems that are complex, and it is difficult to understand these interrelationships.

Innovative approaches are needed to develop a liberating educational system that mirrors and perpetuates the world views, values and strengths of black and other minority cultures. Our knowledge of child growth and development tells us that a child who is being neglected or emotionally abused at home cannot function at his or her full capacity in the classroom.

But simply identifying and reporting maltreatment is not enough. Teachers, principals, school administrators and other professionals working with high-risk youth need to recognize and deal with the issue of cultural conflict. Teachers and administrators should examine school policies and procedures that may be feeding the problem.

For example, why are black children three times more likely than white children to receive suspensions in the elementary grades, and twice as likely to be suspended in secondary grades? Data indicate that blacks are suspended, ex-

pelled and receive corporal punishment at rates disproportionate to their percentage of the total public school enrollments. Why is it that, generally speaking, black youths perform below the national means on achievement tests?

The significance of the absence of substantial numbers of black male and female elementary and secondary school personnel cannot be underestimated. For black children, the social influence of similar others (black teachers, counselors, coaches, etc.) often serves to convey an important message. Positive affective expressions by individuals who youths can identify with may result in strong intrinsic positive responses. Consequently, the effects of dissimilar others can be predicted to have an opposite effect on the interest, aspirations and achievements of black youths, sometimes in spite of the presence of parental neglect.

Directing our efforts
The topic of cultural conflicts must move out of the closet and gain full support in academic, research and practice arenas. Professionals from all ethnic backgrounds need to communicate and network more about this issue in order to strategize more effectively for appropriate interventions.

Education is the fundamental ingredient in the search to save our children. More reliable and valid assessment measures are needed to guide the process of determining the culturally relevant needs of these children and the competency of persons who must make policy and administrative decisions that impact these children.

Ideologies that are alien to reality and ignore the needs of the vast majority of black youths must be changed. We need to emphasize the significance of planning and determination to achieve the desired goals and personal success of black and other minority families. Positive reinforcement that emphasizes the achievements of youth is often lacking.

We must appreciate the fact that the traditional black and other minority

families have unique cultural forums with their own inherent resources and patterns. These families usually have flexible and interchangeable role definitions and duties. Attitudes must change if we want to see progress in the future. A hostile, unsympathetic public must be educated about the implications of maintaining the status quo.

Let's turn our attention toward the development and improvement of a culturally effective process of intervention that will yield the positive outcome we all desire. This should include family support services and strategies for positive parenting. On the one hand, black children must be taught to understand the historical experiences that link current urban underclass, symbolically and sociologically, to the long history of racial trauma. But on the other hand, we must stop talking about racism, the enemy without, and start talking about action against apathy, the enemy within most neglectful families. There must be more shared decision making involving these parents, but it must be made clear that accountibility for parenting rests with the parents.

The process of moving forward toward a better understanding of cultural conflict and the implications for high-risk minority youths will require a more rigorous study of our own values and attitudes toward these youth. And, of course, we need a more forceful agenda for policy makers that is backed up by adequate allocations of funding for programs and research. □

References
1. Newberger, C. and De Vos, E., "Abuse and Victimization: A Lifespan Developmental Perspective, American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, 58, 4 (October 1988), pp. 505-511.
2. Kauffman, C.; Neill, K.; and Thomas, J.N., "The Abusive Parent," Nursing Assessment and Strategies for Family at Risk, ed. Suzanne Hall Johnson (Philadelphia, Pennsylvania: Lippincott Company, 1986), pp. 276-294.
3. Korbin, J., "The Cultural Context of Child Abuse and Neglect," Child Abuse and Neglect, 4 (1980), pp. 3-13.
4. Lauderdale, M.; Valiunas, A.; and Anderson, R., "Race, Ethnicity, and Child Maltreatment: An Empirical Analysis" Child Abuse and Neglect, 4 (1980), pp. 163-169.
5. Patton, J., "The Black Male's Struggle for An Education," Black Men, ed. Lawrence Gary (London: Sage Publications, 1981), pp. 199-211.
6. Kunjufu, J., Developing Positive Self-Images & Discipline in Black Children (Chicago, Illinois: African-American Images, 1984).