



Supporting the School Readiness and Success of Young African American Boys

Strategies for Culturally Responsive Strength-Based Practices



National Center on

Early Childhood Development, Teaching, and Learning



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Supporting the School Readiness and Success of Young African American Boys

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Introduction

Early experiences and high-quality learning environments matter for all children. They lay the foundation for healthy social and emotional development and school readiness. However, [structural racism](#) and other forms of bias have created inequities in the learning environments for African American boys that negatively affect their development and well-being.

As early as preschool, African American boys are nurtured less and disciplined more. Research shows that educators are less likely to form strong relationships with Black boys and tend to watch their behaviors more closely than other children's (Gilliam et al. 2016; Gilliam 2005). Black boys are 9.6% of preschool enrollment but are 34.2% of preschoolers receiving one or more out-of-school suspensions (U.S. DOE 2021). These experiences can have a lasting impact on their social and emotional development and learning.

Head Start and other early childhood education settings have an opportunity to create more responsive learning environments for African American boys, to support their development and promote their strengths.

Supporting school readiness for African American boys begins with a shift from a deficit to a culturally responsive and strength-based mindset in how we perceive (or view) African American boys and their families. The shift requires thoughtful commitment and focus to offer high-quality learning environments where adults recognize and celebrate the diversity of African American boys within their families' culture and lived experiences. It is important that adults develop relationships with African American boys and build upon their strengths. Educators should plan and create learning opportunities that are meaningful and culturally responsive to their needs. Together, these

approaches will help bolster the development, learning, and school success of African American boys.

In 2013, the Supporting the School Readiness and Success of Young African American Boys Project began in response to national data that showed educational inequality facing Black boys. Services like the Head Start program saw an opportunity to address this concern by raising staff awareness and skills to meet the unique needs of Black boys and families. Research, meetings with experts on the subject, and feedback from Head Start educators, child care staff, and families helped create the original guide that was published in 2014 (<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/publication/supporting-school-readiness-success-young-african-american-boys-project-reflections-culturally>).

The 2014 guide recommends a culturally responsive, strengths-based (CRSB) approach using six essential research-based strategies:

1. Build relationships.
2. Communicate high expectations for learning.
3. Promote social and emotional development.
4. Create learning environments with a focus on play and active learning, including literacy.
5. Implement developmentally appropriate curriculum and instruction.
6. Strengthen home-program partnerships.

These six essential strategies are explored in more depth throughout this resource. New research has also been added that complements the research from the 2014 guide.

Some terms used in the strategy guides may be new or require more context and definition. A glossary at the end of this document has definitions and links to dig deeper and learn more about these concepts.

Each strategy guide has the following elements:

Section	Purpose
What is the strategy	Gives a description of the strategy and how it supports the school readiness of African American boys.
Why it matters	Offers supporting research and related practices.
Reflect	Offers an invitation to think about the information shared and consider how that affects your practice.
Practices that promote the target strategy	Recommends methods that directly support the essential strategy, and are of increased importance for the development, learning, and school success of Black boys.
Try it!	Gives an opportunity to select one or more of the practices described, create a plan for trying it (or them), and check your progress.
Deepen your practice	Includes related resources for digging deeper into learning about the targeted strategy.
Head Start Alignments	Makes connections to the Head Start Program Performance Standards, the Multicultural Principles, the Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework and Effective Practice Guides.
References	Cites research and articles used to describe the targeted strategy.

Throughout this resource, the terms "African American" and "Black" are used interchangeably. Choice of a term is sometimes influenced by the term used in cited research. For this document, the term "African American boys" refers to African, Afro-Caribbean, African American, and Black American boys with partial or complete ancestry from African racial groups. African American boys represent a range of ancestries, languages, religions, and cultures.

Finally, we encourage you to use this resource in a variety of ways. The strategy guides are for coaches, education managers, and supervisors to support the learning and ongoing professional development of education staff. The resource can also be used directly by education staff for their own self-directed learning. It can be used by exploring one strategy at a time, or in bundles. No matter how it is used, making time to think about the practice and to plan for how you'd like to do it is well worth the effort.



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Build Relationships

Supporting the School Readiness
and Success of Young African
American Boys

What Is Building Relationships?

Healthy, secure, responsive and nurturing adult-child relationships offer a necessary foundation for lifelong development and learning. From birth, these relationships shape a child's growing sense of identity and belonging within a community and the child's beliefs in their ability to engage successfully as a learner. For African American boys, this includes adults appreciating and incorporating their interests and ways of learning. These positive adult-child relationships allow African American boys to feel safe and engage as learners in ways that work best for them.

The absence of nurturing relationships, especially by an early caregiver, can affect a child's ability to form healthy attachments. [Implicit bias](#) may influence the reciprocal relationship between a child and a caregiver. When boys and young men of color were asked about what aided their success and achievement, they often replied it was the educators who cared about them as people (Boykin and Noguera 2010).

Why Building Relationships with African American Boys Matters

- Caring families, education staff (e.g., teachers, family child care providers, home visitors), and other adults matter in a young child's life. Responsive and supportive interactions with adults are vital to children's learning. However, for African American boys, bias and inequities within the system get in the way of relationship-building opportunities with both adults and their peers. African American boys deserve nurturing, responsive, and consistent care that creates safe environments where they feel secure and valued. In these environments, young African American boys can participate fully in learning experiences.
- African American boys learn about Black identity and self-worth from the most important people in their lives, including their educators. By recognizing and working against the negative impacts caused by bias — both race and gender-based — and structural racism, education staff can help young African American boys feel seen, heard, and valued.
- A large, national sample of 4-year-olds in pre-K learning environments found that how educators interacted with children while teaching predicted how the children performed in school and how their language skills developed. That same study found that how educators emotionally interacted with preschoolers predicted the children's social skills development (Mashburn et al. 2008).
- Black boys are 9.6% of preschool enrollment but make up 34.2% of preschoolers receiving one or more out-of-school suspensions (U.S. DOE 2021). Suspensions and expulsions can disrupt the development of a positive relationship between boys and their educators.
- Relationships that nurture the development of young African American boys are a needed step to change negative conditions that can damage the development of a sense of identity, belonging, readiness for learning — and lifelong success.



“

By recognizing and working against the negative impacts caused by bias and structural racism, educators can help young African American boys feel seen, heard, and valued.

Reflect

- Beginning at birth, young children start developing their identities in the context of family and community relationships. A first step in building relationships with African American boys is reflecting on the beliefs and thoughts you might have, also called perceived strengths and perceived deficits.
- On a piece of paper, write down everything that comes to mind when you think of African American boys.
- Categorize each item as "perceived strengths" or "perceived deficits."

Review your list and consider the following reflection questions:

- What messages were shared in your family and community about African American boys and men?
- How are these beliefs different or similar when compared to other children you work with?
- Do you include all children in learning activities and leadership opportunities?

- How are the perceived strengths and deficits confirmed through materials, activities, or in the design of the environment where African American boys play and learn?
- How do these perceived strengths and deficits affect how you partner with families?
- Are you open and welcoming to fathers, inviting them into the learning process and environment? How? What are some examples?
- How do these perceived strengths and deficits influence how you engage with families of African American boys during home visits or socialization groups?
- What behaviors do you think of as challenging in African American boys? Why?
- How are the beliefs you hold influenced by local, state, or federal policies?
- How can the perceived deficits be viewed positively as strengths?
- How might the beliefs you hold affect building relationships with African American boys?



Write your reflections here.

Practices that Promote Building Relationships with African American Boys

Examine the physical space of your classroom, family child care home, or group socialization area and plan changes that can increase engagement and a sense of belonging.

- Consider how your environment supports the learning goals of African American boys in your care. How do your spaces support child-directed activities? How does your space encourage African American boys to be leaders?
- Give materials that reflect the family and culture of the children, including reading materials featuring African American boys. Children are inspired by the images they see in their environment. Include positive images of African American boys and men in a variety of roles.

Create a climate of trust by showing each boy he is seen, heard, and valued.

- Get to know the child by asking the family about likes, dislikes, ways to be soothed, and how the child learns best.
- Create opportunities for African American boys to begin play, share ideas, pause to wonder, or ask questions. How often are African American boys positively recognized for their behavior? How often is their behavior redirected or scolded?

Set an intention to build relationships with African American boys in your care and make a plan.

- Try the 2x10 strategy. Have conversations or play with one (or more) African American boys for 2 minutes on 10 consecutive days (Cantor and Balfanz 2020). Select a child you don't know well, or you've been having difficulty working with positively. At the end of 10 days, describe your relationship with the child. Did the strategy improve your relationship?

Plan activities and experiences that allow children to express what makes them unique.

- Sing songs to infants and toddlers that celebrate membership in the group and uniqueness. Use the names of each child in verses.
- Include mirror time with infants to allow them to see themselves and view their unique characteristics.
- Ask children about their interests and use those interests to plan learning experiences. Watch and observe infants and toddlers during play to learn about interests that you can include more often.
- Share positive feedback with all children. Each child should feel proud of who they are. For example, if you find yourself complimenting only some children and some families, ask yourself why?
- Show joy in interacting with African American boys and their families.
- Offer materials and activities that allow African American boys to participate, succeed, and feel challenged about building new skills and knowledge.

Support the relationship between a child and their family, which could include parents, grandparents, extended family members, or foster parents.

- Keep in close touch with families to exchange information about the child's interests, successes, and challenges.
- Create opportunities for male role models to join and take part in learning activities.

Try It!

Choose one practice from the list that you will try for one month. Write it down in the space below.

Practice I will try this month:	Child, children, or family I will focus on:
I will use this practice during the following activities/times:	I'll keep track of how I use this practice by:

After one month: Think about the practice you tried. How did it go? What will you keep doing, stop doing, or start doing?

I will keep doing:	I will stop doing:
I will start doing:	I learned this about myself:

Deepen Your Learning

Early Essentials Webisode 2: Building Relationships

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/video/early-essentials-webisode-2-building-relationships>

Tips for Teachers: Fostering Connections

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/no-search/iss/building-relationships/fostering-connections-teachertips.pdf>

Tips for Teachers: Creating a Caring Community

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/no-search/iss/building-relationships/caring-community-teachertips.pdf>



Head Start Alignments

In this section, learn about Head Start practices that support the school readiness and success of young African American boys. Think about your program and your learning setting and consider ways you already do these practices and ways you can more closely align to improve your teaching practice.

Head Start Program Performance Standards

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/policy/45-cfr-chap-xiii>

- §1302.30 ... A center-based or family child care program must embed responsive and effective teacher-child interactions. A home-based program must promote secure parent-child relationships and help parents provide high-quality early learning experiences. All programs must implement a research-based curriculum, and screening and assessment procedures that support individualization and growth in the areas of development described in the *Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework: Ages Birth to Five* and support family engagement in children's learning and development.
- §1302.31(b)(1) Effective teaching practices must emphasize nurturing and responsive practices, interactions, and environments.

- §1302.34(a) Center-based and family child care programs must structure education and child development services to recognize parents' roles as children's lifelong educators and encourage parents to engage in their child's education.
- §1302.35(a) A home-based program must provide home visits and group socialization activities that promote secure parent-child relationships and help parents provide high-quality early learning experiences.

Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework (ELOF)

Building relationships with African American boys can be fostered through the learning and development goals in the social and emotional domain of the ELOF. Visit the Interactive ELOF page on the Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center (ECLKC) to become familiar with developmental progressions. Understanding the development of a skill will help you be aware of what to expect of children.

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/interactive-head-start-early-learning-outcomes-framework-ages-birth-five>

The ELOF Effective Practice Guides offer information about domain-specific teaching practices that support development and learning, from birth to 5. The guides describe what these practices look like in early learning settings. They also help staff reflect on and improve their teaching practices. In home-based settings, home visitors use the teaching practices to work with families to give experiences that support the child's development.

Below are example practices from the Social and Emotional Effective Practice Guides that are especially beneficial for young African American boys.

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/school-readiness/effective-practice-guides/effective-practice-guides>

- Relationships with Adults: Convey warmth and affection toward children by smiling, laughing, showing sensitive caring, and using gentle, nurturing touch.
- Relationships with Other Children: Lead games that teach children how to cooperate, take turns, and accomplish a shared goal.

- Sense of Identity and Belonging: Offer meaningful, specific praise for efforts and accomplishments.

ELOF2GO is a mobile resource for teachers who want to access and learn more about the ELOF. It's your on-the-go guide to children's development and learning: <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/school-readiness/article/elof2go-mobile-app>

Multicultural Principles for Early Childhood Leaders

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/culture-language/article/multicultural-principles-early-childhood-leaders>

- Principle 1: Every individual is rooted in culture.
- Principle 3: Culturally relevant and diverse programming requires learning accurate information about the cultures of different groups and discarding stereotypes.
- Principle 5: Every individual has the right to maintain his or her own identity while acquiring the skills required to function in our diverse society.

References

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Promote Social and Emotional Development

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What Is Promoting Social and Emotional Development?

From birth, children naturally seek quality social interactions with their parents, peers, caregivers, and educators—people like home visitors, family child care providers, and teachers. These positive, consistent, and nurturing relationships foster trust and emotional security. They also support engagement, learning, and other positive health and academic outcomes that can continue into adulthood. As children watch and interact with familiar adults and their peers, they begin to learn how to express and interpret a range of emotions.

The first five years of a child's life are a very important time for learning how to manage and express behavior and emotions that can help build strong social skills and relationships. When children feel confident about themselves and what they can do, they engage more fully in learning opportunities and interactions with adults and their peers. This positive sense of identity and belonging contributes to school readiness and learning by helping children gain self-confidence and willingness to take part in learning and risk-taking.

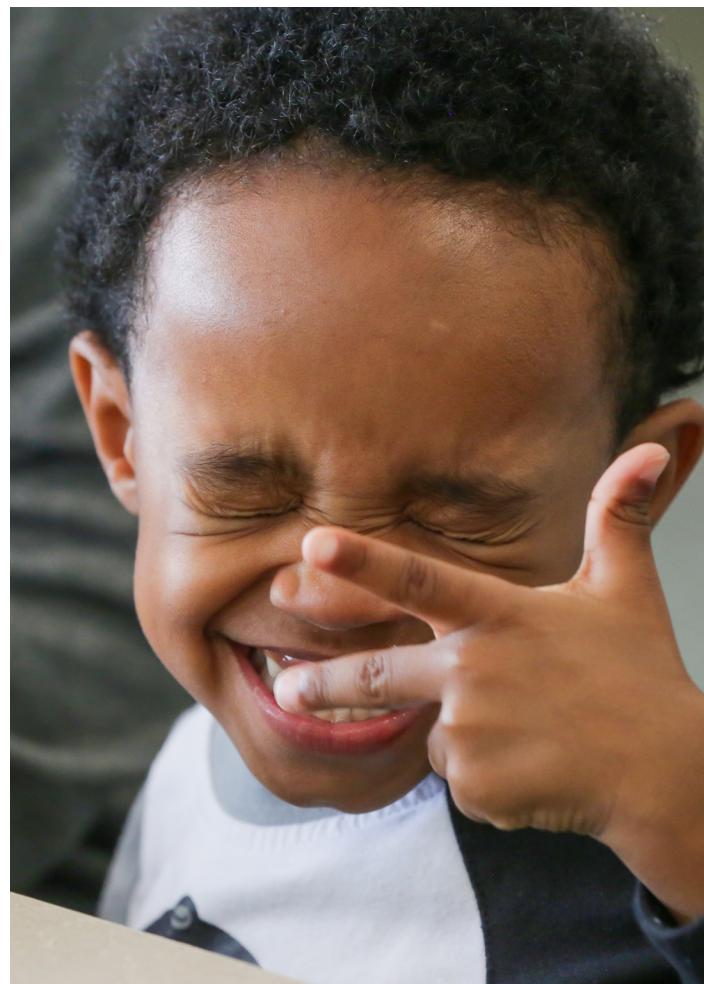
Why Promoting Social and Emotional Development Matters for African American Boys

Current research tells us that African American boys' social and emotional development is not fostered in the same way as their white peers; this negatively affects positive school experiences and the development of social and emotional skills.

- Young children depend on the support of safe, nurturing adults to model and teach social and emotional skills. Developing new skills can be challenging and complex and often happens in inconsistent ways (Wright 2022). So, while one day a child might be able to put their hand out or use words to ask for a turn, the next day the same child might grab the toy without asking. Understanding the developmental progress of skills can stop biases we may have about children's behavior and skills.
- African American boys are seen as less childlike than their white peers. The [adultification](#) of African American boys creates a bias that their behavior is intentional and malicious. Instead, they are children with developing emotional and behavior self-regulation skills like their white peers (Goff et al. 2014).
- Black boys are nurtured less and disciplined more. Studies show that educators are less likely to form strong relationships with African American boys. These boys receive more discipline and are suspended and expelled at a higher rate. Such experiences can have a lasting effect and negatively affect the development of social and emotional skills.
- African American boys develop their sense of identity in the context of a society that often undervalues them. They are often seen through negative stereotypes, assumptions, and expectations of others (Cross 1995).
- A Yale Child Center study found that when looking for disruptive behaviors, preschool teachers spent more time observing Black children than white

children. [Implicit bias](#) affected the teacher's beliefs and expectations about the social and emotional skills and development of Black children. The study suggests that a step toward addressing this inconsistency is to be aware that the bias exists and its impact on children (Gilliam et al. 2016).

- The extent to which educational professionals attend to African American boys, invest resources in them and view them as valued contributors is not the same when compared to their non-Black peers. It is in this challenging setting that young African American boys try to develop a sense of worth, identity, and belonging (Carey 2019).



Reflect

Many adults view African American boys as older than their actual age; this is known as **adultification**. Ask yourself, "Am I holding African American boys to different standards of behavior than other children and, if so, why, and how?" This reflection helps us to understand the impact of our own beliefs or biases.

Think about an interaction you have had with a young African American boy that challenged you.

- Why were you feeling challenged?
- What strategies did you use that showed respect and understanding of his age, gender, and race?

- How did you support his developmental stage of social and emotional growth?
- Are there other strategies you might like to try next time?

Celebrate Black boy joy! Celebrating Black boy joy is about loving Blackness, and making sure that Black boys can be happy, whole, and vulnerable children in a learning space, without being treated like an adult (Browne and Gilmore 2021).



Write your reflections here.

Practices to Promote Social and Emotional Development for African American Boys

Social and Emotional Development

Nurture emotional connection.

- Sometimes our biases get in the way of remembering that African American boys also need to be cuddled, held, and responded to with kind words and a positive attitude. When you are responsive to these needs, you model social and emotional skills that children learn and use themselves.
- Talk with families about the importance of the emotional connection between parent and child. Discuss how family members can express care for one another.

Talk with boys about their emotions and help them label these.

- Sometimes when boys appear to be angry, they have feelings of pain or fear. They may perceive that the expression of anger is more socially acceptable.
- Talk with families about developmentally appropriate ways to label and discuss emotions. Learn from families about how they discuss and label emotions with their child.
- For infants and toddlers, name their emotions when you see them being expressed. Say, "It looks like you feel happy! I see the big smile on your face." Or, "I hear you crying, and your face looks sad. I'll hold you right here on my lap to help you feel better."
- For preschoolers, name emotions and help them name their emotions. For example, "Oh, I hear yelling, and your face is scrunching up. You look like you might feel frustrated or angry." Or, "Oh, I hear yelling, and your face is scrunching up. Can you tell me how you are feeling?"

Diversify the images, books, and objects that children interact with.

- Consider how some current materials might reinforce negative stereotypes. For example, are



African American boys or men only portrayed as athletes in pictures and stories? Offering a wider range of positive pictures and stories can have a good effect on how African American boys value themselves in learning environments.

- Talk with families about the books, photos, and other images that are in the home and how these influence a developing sense of identity.

Create experiences for African American boys with African American men.

- Consider partnering with local fraternities, faith communities, and other community groups to find special guests who can spend time teaching new skills or will support learning through positive interactions.

Emotional and Behavioral Self-Regulation

Respond to young African American boys' behavior with an understanding of their "boyness" and how emotions are expressed.

- Often, boys need more time to process their feelings and they may need support to emotionally regulate their responses to the situation. Support African American boys as they learn about emotional regulation and impulse control.
- Move close to a child who is struggling. Offer calm and kind words of support. Wait. Help to name emotions and ask age-appropriate questions to problem-solve. Responsive caregiving creates safety for young children.
- During home visits, model for parents, or prompt and guide them on how to support their child's emotional regulation.

Before redirecting behavior, pause to ask why you are redirecting the behavior. Practice self-awareness and think about why the behavior is challenging for you. Is redirection really needed? Consider if the behavior is in line with expectations for the child's age.

- If an African American boy needs redirection support, talk one-on-one at a close but comfortable distance rather than raising your voice to be heard across the room.
- Talk with families about their approach to redirecting behavior and how their child responds. Discuss developmentally appropriate expectations for young children's behavior with families.

Learn from the child's family how he processes and regulates emotions, how his family members typically respond, and how they would like him to communicate his feelings. Work together with the family to develop a plan for continued social and emotional growth.

Consider the influence of the [adultification](#) of young African American boys to ask yourself if emotional and behavioral expectations are developmentally appropriate. Individualize how you guide a child's emerging self-regulation skills to give responsive and nurturing support.



When children feel confident about themselves and what they can do, they engage more fully in learning opportunities and interactions with adults and their peers.

Try It!

Choose one practice from the list that you will try for one month. Write it down in the space below.

Practice I will try this month:	Child, children, or family I will focus on:
I will use this practice during the following activities/times:	I'll keep track of how I use this practice by:

After one month: Think about the practice you tried. How did it go? What will you keep doing, stop doing, or start doing?

I will keep doing :	I will stop doing :
I will start doing :	I learned this about myself:

Deepen Your Learning

Foundations of School Readiness:

Social Emotional Development

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/school-readiness/article/news-you-can-use-foundations-school-readiness-social-emotional-development>

Creating a Caring Community: Tips for Teachers

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/no-search/iss/building-relationships/caring-community-teachertips.pdf>

Fostering Connections: Tips for Teachers

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/no-search/iss/building-relationships/fostering-connections-teachertips.pdf>

Head Start Alignments

In this section, learn about Head Start practices that support the school readiness and success of young African American boys. Think about your program and your learning setting and consider ways you already do these practices and ways you can more closely align to improve your teaching practice.

Head Start Program Performance Standards

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/policy/45-cfr-chap-xiii>

- 1302.31(b)(1)(i) Teaching practices must emphasize nurturing and responsive practices, interactions, and environments that foster trust and emotional security; are communication and language-rich; promote critical thinking and problem-solving; social, emotional, behavioral, and language development; provide supportive feedback for learning; motivate continued effort and support all children's engagement in learning experiences and activities.
- §1301.32(e)(4) A program must recognize physical activity as important to learning and integrate intentional movement and physical activity into curricular activities and daily routines in ways that support health and learning. A program must not use physical activity as a reward or punishment.
- §1302.34(a) Center-based and family child care programs must structure education and child

development services to recognize parents' roles as children's lifelong educators and to encourage parents to engage in their child's education.

- §1302.35(a) A home-based program must provide home visits and group socialization activities that promote secure parent-child relationships and help parents provide high-quality early learning experiences...home visits and group socialization activities that support children's cognitive, social, and emotional growth for later success in school.
- §1302.35(e) [Home-based programs] group socializations also must provide opportunities for parents to participate in activities that support parenting skill development or family partnership goals identified in §1302.52(c), as appropriate and must emphasize peer group interactions designed to promote children's social, emotional and language development, and progress towards school readiness goals, while encouraging parents to observe and actively participate in activities, as appropriate.
- §1302.45(a)(1) Provide supports for effective classroom management and positive learning environments; supportive teacher practices; and strategies for supporting children with challenging behaviors and other social, emotional, and mental health concerns.

- §1302.90(c)(1)(i) Ensure staff, consultants, contractors, and volunteers implement positive strategies to support children's well-being and prevent and address challenging behavior.

Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework (ELOF)

Visit the Interactive ELOF page on the Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center (ECLKC) to become familiar with developmental progressions in Social and Emotional and Approaches to Learning domains.

Understanding the development of a skill will help you be aware of what to expect of children, birth to 5.

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/interactive-head-start-early-learning-outcomes-framework-ages-birth-five>

The ELOF Effective Practice Guides give information about domain-specific teaching practices that support development and learning, from birth to 5. The guides describe what these practices look like in early learning settings. They also help staff reflect on and improve their teaching practices. In home-based settings, home visitors use the teaching practices to work with families to offer experiences that support the child's development.

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/school-readiness/effective-practice-guides/effective-practice-guides>

Below are example practices from the Effective Practice Guides that are especially beneficial for young African American boys.

- Social and Emotional Development – Relationships with Adults: Talk to children as you're going about daily tasks like diapering or providing meals. Pause to allow them a turn in the conversation, which will progress from gesturing and cooing to sounds, words, phrases, and complete sentences as children get older.
- Approaches to Learning – Emotional and Behavioral Self-Regulation: Identify, acknowledge, and support self-soothing behaviors.



ELOF2GO is a mobile resource for teachers who want to access and learn more about the ELOF. It's your on-the-go guide to children's development and learning: <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/school-readiness/article/elof2go-mobile-app>

Multicultural Principles for Early Childhood Leaders

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/culture-language/article/multicultural-principles-early-childhood-leaders>

- Principle 1: Every individual is rooted in culture.
- Principle 3: Culturally relevant and diverse programming requires learning accurate information about the cultures of different groups and discarding stereotypes.
- Principle 5: Every individual has the right to maintain his or her own identity while acquiring the skills required to function in our diverse society.
- Principle 9: Culturally relevant and diverse programming examines and challenges institutional and personal bias.

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Communicate High Expectations for Learning

Supporting the School Readiness and Success of Young African American Boys

What is Communicating High Expectations for Learning?

The educational success of African American boys is affected by the expectations that are set for them. To achieve success, families and education staff (e.g., teachers, family child care providers, home visitors) work together on individually appropriate and challenging expectations for African American boys and give opportunities for them to see themselves as learners.

Characteristics of high-quality early childhood education for African American boys include staff holding high expectations for their success and being willing to highlight their strengths (Rashid 2013). To best support African American boys, education staff must challenge their personal biases and prejudices to make sure they have appropriate and meaningful expectations for young African American boys. This requires learning about and understanding the social, cultural, and political contexts in which young African American boys live. It requires engaging

in critical reflection about teaching and home visiting practices and the ideas behind them. These are effective and necessary activities that can prepare education staff to support African American boys in meeting and exceeding expectations.

Why Communicating High Expectations for Learning Matters for African American Boys

- Applying a strength-based approach, caring support, and high expectations are essential for the school success of African American boys (Boykin 2013).
- The biggest obstacle to later academic success for African American boys is the adults who believe they cannot succeed and the behaviors that follow from that belief (Boykin and Noguera 2010).
- One study showed that the impact of educator expectations in the early elementary school years was long-lasting (Hinnant, et. al. 2009).
- Minority boys in preschool to third-grade classrooms had the lowest performance in reading when their abilities were underestimated, and the greatest gains when their abilities were overestimated (Wright 2018).
- Ford (2013) reported that African American boys are underrepresented in K-12 gifted education programs. The number is as high as 65% nationally; that means there are more than 125,000 African American males annually who are not receiving the education needed to reach their potential. They are not being given an appropriate level of academic challenge (Wright 2018).

In many ways, children will go as far as the adults in their lives believe that they can. High expectations play a part in a child's success and what a child aspires to be.



To best support African American boys, education staff must challenge their personal biases and prejudices to make sure they have meaningful expectations for young African American boys.

Reflect

Think back to your childhood and the expectations of your family or educators. Think of a time when the expectations for you changed and became higher or lower.

- How could you tell what their expectations were?
- Were the expectations clearly said or did you sense them?
- How did your behavior change when expectations were changed?
- Did these expectations and behaviors make you feel loved? Valued? Respected? Did they set you up for success? To thrive?
- Now think of African American boys you serve in your program. This might be through home visits and group socializations, in center-based classrooms, or in family child care settings.

- ▶ Think of a boy you don't have high expectations for. How are your interactions affected? What is the basis of your expectation? Gender? Race? What might change your expectations?
- ▶ Think of another African American boy who you have high expectations for. How are your interactions affected? What is the basis of your expectation? Gender? Race? Reflect on what you see and hear through media about African American boys. Does this influence your expectations? What might change your expectations?
- How do you think your expectations affect the success of African American boys in your program?



Write your reflections here.

Practices that Communicate High Expectations for Learning

Set challenging but achievable goals for each African American boy, goals that build on their strengths and interests and positively affirm their identities.

Embed a “history and me” approach to your curriculum that focuses on the important discoveries and contributions of African American men and boys (Wright in Friedman and Mwenelupembe 2020).

- For infants and toddlers, include board books and short story books with African American main characters that allow African American boys to see themselves reflected in a positive light.
- Ask the families about the type of music the child enjoys, and the sounds that soothe the child. Incorporate these sounds into the environment. Include cultural items that are familiar to the children into classroom, family childcare, and group socialization settings.
- For preschoolers, create opportunities to discuss and respond to storybooks about African American men and boys in various roles (community helpers, politicians, parenting, sports, science, activist, etc.)



Be a “warm demander.”

- Combine culturally responsive caring with high expectations.
- Use an encouraging tone, calm or smiling face, and language, such as, “I know you can do this. I’m here to help you if you need it.” This supports children of all ages.

Individualize support. Scaffold, or offer just the right amount of support, so that children are challenged and successful.

- Some children may need more attention while completing a daily routine or activity—for example, a toddler learning to put on their shoes might need an adult to stay close and offer encouragement. Others might need more support for learning certain concepts or skills—for example, for a child struggling to hold writing tools, give more writing opportunities throughout the day by using markers in dramatic play or chalk outside. Some children may need more challenging activities.
- Break challenging tasks into step-by-step activities. Make the first step something that children can already do and build up from there. For example, if an older toddler is learning to do simple puzzles, put all pieces in but one. Next time put in all pieces but two—create opportunities for success and challenge.
- Observe learning environment needs. Some children may find it difficult to learn new skills in loud, busy environments. Can you create a quiet space? Some children may need a lot of room to move when learning a new skill. Is it OK to stand during a “sitting” activity if the child can learn best while standing?



Encourage children to keep trying at solving a problem.

- Be nearby, offer words of encouragement, help with part of the task, and ask questions to help the child think about how to solve the problem.
- Celebrate small progress and be attuned to signals of overwhelming frustration.

Extend the learning.

- Document and display children's ideas, questions, and experiences with photographs, written descriptions, oral storytelling, or video. This gives children opportunities to see themselves as learners (PSU Better Kid Care 2016).
 - ▶ For infants and toddlers, take photos of them learning, write about what they are doing, and display this learning in your classroom, family child care, or socialization group setting. Share this documentation with families too!
 - ▶ For preschoolers, record their experiences and storytelling through their writing and pictures or record them telling a story with an audio or video recorder.

- Introduce and continue an ongoing story so preschool-age children can practice using their working memory to recall the characters and their actions.

When working with families or in home-based programs:

- Explore problem-solving opportunities for young children. For example, "I wonder how excited Jaden would be if he was able to put on his shoes by himself."
- Brainstorm with parents to find different activities and household routines for their child that not only involve remembering and recalling information or following directions to complete tasks, but also offers opportunities to explore and discover other ways of completing tasks. For toddlers, this can look like hanging their coat on a hook or finding a favorite book before reading together. Preschoolers, can help with simple food preparation or get themselves dressed.

Try It!

Choose one practice from the list that you will try for one month. Write it down in the space below.

Practice I will try this month:	Child, children, or family I will focus on:
I will use this practice during the following activities/times:	I'll keep track of how I use this practice by:

After one month: Think about the practice you tried. How did it go? What will you keep doing, stop doing, or start doing?

I will keep doing:	I will stop doing:
I will start doing:	I learned this about myself:

Deepen Your Learning

Supporting Early Brain Development: Building the Brain

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/publication/supporting-early-brain-development-building-brain>

Teacher Time Infant Toddler STEAM series

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/school-readiness/teacher-time-series/infant-toddler-steam-series>

Fostering Children's Thinking Skills: 15-minute In-service Suite

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/video/fostering-childrens-thinking-skills>



Head Start Alignments

In this section, learn about Head Start practices that support the school readiness and success of young African American boys. Think about your program and your learning setting and consider ways you already do these practices and ways you can more closely align to improve your teaching practice.

Head Start Program Performance Standards

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/policy/45-cfr-chap-xiii>

- §1302.30 All programs must implement a ... curriculum and screening/assessment procedures that support individualization and growth in areas of development described in ELOF ...
- §1302.31(b)(1)(i) Effective teaching practices must emphasize nurturing and responsive practices, interactions, and environments that foster trust and emotional security; are communication and language-rich; promote critical thinking and problem-solving; social, emotional, behavioral, and language development; provide supportive feedback for learning; motivate continued effort; and support all children's engagement in learning experiences and activities.
- §1302.35(b)(1)&(2) A home-based program must ensure all home visits are: (1) Planned jointly by the home visitor and parents, and reflect the

critical role of parents in the early learning and development of their children, including that the home visitor can effectively communicate with the parent, directly or through an interpreter; (2) Planned using information from ongoing assessments that individualize learning experiences.

- §1302.35(c)(1)&(2). A home-based program must use such goals and the curriculum to plan home visit activities that implement:(1) Age and developmentally appropriate, structured child-focused learning experiences;(2) Strategies and activities that promote parents' ability to support the child's cognitive, social, emotional, language, literacy, and physical development.

Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework (ELOF)

High expectations can be fostered through the learning and development goals in all domains of the ELOF: Approaches to Learning; Social and Emotional Development; Language and Literacy; Cognition; and Perceptual, Motor, and Physical Development. Visit the Interactive ELOF page on the Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center (ECLKC) to become familiar with developmental progressions. Understanding the development of a skill will help you be aware of what to expect of children, birth to 5.



In many ways, children will go as far as the adults in their lives believe that they can.



<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/interactive-head-start-early-learning-outcomes-framework-ages-birth-five>

Two goals from the Social and Emotional domain of the ELOF reflect high expectations.

- For infants and toddlers, goal IT-SE 12. The child shows confidence in their abilities through relationships with others.
- For preschoolers, goal P-SE 9. The child recognizes themselves as a unique individual having abilities, characteristics, emotions, and interests.

Learn more about these goals and effective practices in the ELOF Effective Practice Guides. The Effective Practice Guides offers information about domain-specific teaching practices that support development and learning, birth to 5. The guides describe what these practices look like in early learning settings. They also help staff reflect on and improve their teaching practices. In home-based settings, home visitors use the teaching practices to work with families to offer experiences that support the child's development. Read the Effective Practice Guides for more ideas on teaching practices.

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/school-readiness/effective-practice-guides/effective-practice-guides>

ELOF2GO is a mobile resource for teachers who want to access and learn more about the ELOF. It's your on-the-go guide to children's development and learning: <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/school-readiness/article/elof2go-mobile-app>

Multicultural Principles for Early Childhood Leaders

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/culture-language/article/multicultural-principles-early-childhood-leaders>

- Principle 1: Every individual is rooted in culture.
- Principle 3: Culturally relevant and diverse programming requires learning accurate information about the cultures of different groups and discarding stereotypes.
- Principle 5: Every individual has the right to maintain his or her own identity while acquiring the skills required to function in our diverse society.

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Create a Play-Based, Active Learning Environment

Supporting the School Readiness and Success of Young African American Boys

What is Creating a Play-Based, Active Learning Environment?

Play-based, active learning environments are key to positive learning experiences. Children develop social, cognitive, language, and physical skills when education staff (e.g., teachers, home visitors, family child care providers) structure learning environments for open-ended, hands-on, active engagement. When families, education staff, and other program staff support active learning, they are affirming the fundamental strengths of young African American boy learners.

Why Creating a Play-Based, Active Learning Environment for African American Boys Matters

- Spatial capabilities, or the ability to understand and remember visual and three-dimensional relationships among objects and space, are more pronounced in young male brain development. For this reason, boys, more than girls, tend to be drawn toward active play that requires space for large muscle movement (Gurian and Stevens 2007).
- The educator and writer Bryan Wright (2018) describes the concept of **verve**, which captures the home environment of many African American children. Verve means
 - ▶ Lively and intensified behavior
 - ▶ Preference for variety and change in an environment
 - ▶ Preference for multiple activities and stimulation that exist at the same time in the environment
- Research shows that verve is an asset of many African American boys and is valued in the home environment (Boykin 1983; 2001). Encouraging verve in group care learning environments and group socializations, which can look like active, lively play, is a culturally sustaining practice.
- Giving opportunities for active engagement and learning through play that matches boys' learning styles can reduce educators' beliefs they are misbehaving. In these learning environments, girls, too, can feel empowered to become more active, independent, and creative (Gartrell 2004).
- Children benefit from multiple and varied experiences to observe, interact with, and interpret open-ended learning opportunities. They learn with hands-on multisensory materials and social interactions with peers. They need time to play, create, and make decisions. Research says these features of the learning environment are critical for young boys (Sprung, Froschl, and Gropper 2010).
- Because children of color are sometimes perceived as "behind" in knowledge and skills needed for school, time to play and be active is often limited, and replaced by more teacher-directed activities (Stipek 2004).



Children develop social, cognitive, language, and physical skills when education staff structure learning environments for open-ended, hands-on, active engagement.



Reflect

Children show and tell us what they can do and what they need. If an African American boy is constantly moving and physically challenging himself in new ways, how can you use this strength to support his continued development?

- In our attempt to keep children safe and help them learn, we often spend a huge part of our days stopping children from moving (Curtis 2018). In group care settings, is this true for you? Do you find yourself saying things like, "Be careful? No running. Put your bottom on the chair. That's too dangerous"?
- Pay attention to which children you redirect most often. Are some children warned more often than others? If so, what can you change in the environment? What can you change about how you respond? ? How can you say "yes" in ways that support learning and active exploration?
- Do you associate a child's need to be active with challenging behavior?

Visually scan your classroom, family child care, or group socialization setting. Consider the room arrangement, materials, activities, daily schedule, and routines with the following in mind:

- How is active learning and play supported for African American boys? How much time in the day or social activity are they expected to be quiet, sit, or listen to an adult vs. be active, explore, and talk with peers?
- What are ways to expand/extend the times for more active learning?
- What can you do to change the environment, so it supports active learning and play for African American boys?
- If you are a home visitor, ask families about how their child plays at home. What works well? Where are they feeling challenged? Collaborate to find ways to adjust routines and schedules, if needed.

Write your reflections here.

Practices to Create a Play-Based, Active Learning Environment

Research shows that creating play-based, active learning environments for African American boys is a culturally relevant practice.

Encourage large motor and whole-body experiences.

- In spacious indoor areas, add play tunnels, large mats, ceiling swings, and more to encourage large motor physical play in group care settings. Create space for infants and toddlers to roll, crawl, and pull up and space for preschoolers to jump, climb, crawl and roll too.
- Ask families what type of outdoor/large motor/whole body experiences their child enjoys. Share about activities the child enjoys in the learning environment you facilitate.
- To extend learning space in center-based or family child care settings, plan outdoor play activities. You can also move indoor activities outside that include lots of opportunities for movement. For example, move large foam blocks to the outside area so children can build tall towers that require climbing on something to get to the tallest blocks. Or bring chalk outside to draw obstacle courses.
- Include open-ended materials that can be carried and used in multiple spaces in the setting as well as in various learning experiences to support fine and gross motor skill development. For example, clay encourages both fine motor skills, like pinching and poking and large motor skills, like using arm muscles for kneading and pounding.
- Typical exploratory toddler play can be loud and boisterous. Allow space for banging blocks together and running in circles. If it's too much inside, bring the activity outside!
- Talk with families about how they engage their child in large motor and whole-body experiences. Home visitors can discuss ideas for using items in the home to extend the play, e.g., using a laundry basket and balled-up socks to play indoor soccer.

Give materials that encourage inquiry and exploration such as water and sand tables with containers, experimenting and tinkering centers, or open-ended art materials.

Talk with families about how they can engage with their child in open-ended play. Discuss the value of exploring alternative ways to play with games and toys in the home. For example, a deck of cards can be used to build towers, as a matching or sorting game, or as a blanket that covers sleeping toy cars).

Do not discourage boys from taking part in gendered dramatic play experiences. Introduce play materials that challenge stereotypes such as "boys don't cry" or "African American boys are only athletes." Introduce dramatic play themes like kayaking/hiking, theater, barbershop, tech, kitchen, and more to show the range of African American identity.

Create a fidget toy basket for children to assist their focus during large group experiences such as circle time.



Try It!

Choose one practice from the list that you will try for one month. Write it down in the space below.

Practice I will try this month:	Child, children, or family I will focus on:
I will use this practice during the following activities/times:	I'll keep track of how I use this practice by:

After one month: Think about the practice you tried. How did it go? What will you keep doing, stop doing, or start doing?

I will keep doing:	I will stop doing:
I will start doing:	I learned this about myself:

Deepen Your Learning

I Am Moving, I Am Learning

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/physical-health/article/i-am-moving-i-am-learning-imil>

Active Play, Every Day at Home

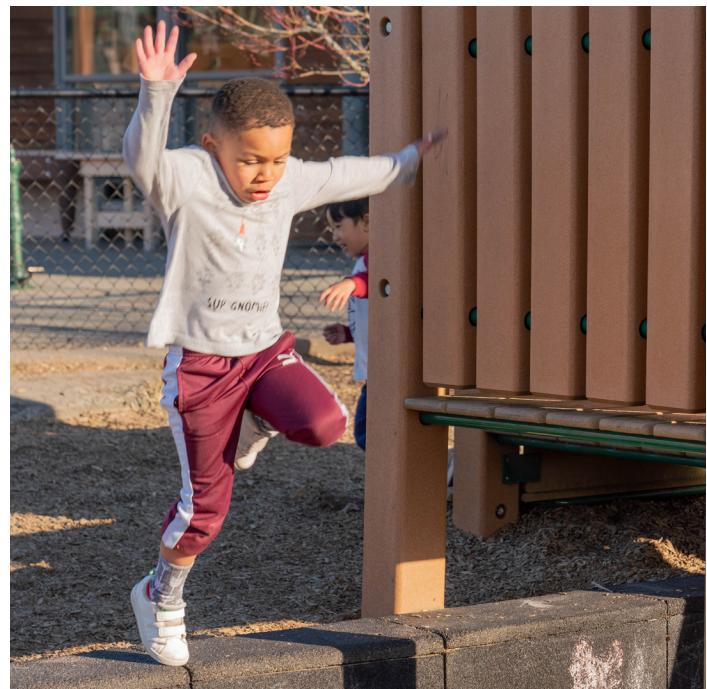
<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/video/active-play-every-day-home>

News You Can Use: Play

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/curriculum/article/news-you-can-use-play#WhyisPlaysoImportant>

Playful and Fun Learning Environments for Infants and Toddlers

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/publication/playful-fun-learning-environments-infants-toddlers>



Head Start Alignments

In this section, learn about Head Start practices that support the school readiness and success of young African American boys. Think about your program and your learning setting and consider ways you already do these practices and ways you can more closely align to improve your teaching practice.

Head Start Program Performance Standards

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/policy/45-cfr-chap-xiii>

- §1302.31(c) A program must ensure teachers implement well-organized learning environments with developmentally appropriate schedules, lesson plans, and indoor and outdoor learning experiences that provide adequate opportunities for choice, play, exploration, and experimentation among a variety of learning, sensory, and motor experiences.
- §1302.31(e)(4) A program must recognize physical activity as important to learning and integrate intentional movement and physical activity into curricular activities and daily routines in ways that support health and learning. A program must not use physical activity as a reward or punishment.

- §1302.35 (d)(1)(i) A program that operates the home-based option must: Ensure home-visiting and group socializations implement a developmentally appropriate research-based early childhood home-based curriculum that: Promotes the parent's roles as the child's teacher through experiences focused on the parent-child relationship and, as appropriate, the family's traditions, culture, values, and beliefs.

Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework (ELOF)

Encouragement of play can be found throughout the ELOF: Approaches to Learning (Creativity), Social and Emotional Development (Relationships with Other Children), Language and Literacy (Communicating and Speaking), Cognition (Imitation and Symbolic Representation and Play), Perceptual, Motor, and Physical Development (Perception, Gross Motor, and Fine Motor). Visit the Interactive ELOF page on the Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center (ECLKC) to become familiar with developmental progressions. Understanding the development of a skill will help you be aware of what to expect of children, birth to 5.

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/interactive-head-start-early-learning-outcomes-framework-ages-birth-five>

The ELOF Effective Practice Guides offers information about domain-specific teaching practices that support development and learning, from birth to 5. The guides describe what these practices look like in early learning settings. They also help staff reflect on and improve their teaching practices. In home-based settings, home visitors use the teaching practices to work with families on providing experiences that support the child's development. Read the Effective Practice Guides for more ideas on teaching practices.

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/school-readiness/effective-practice-guides/effective-practice-guides>

ELOF2GO is a mobile resource for teachers who want to access and learn more about the ELOF. It's

your on-the-go guide to children's development and learning: <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/school-readiness/article/elof2go-mobile-app>

Multicultural Principles for Early Childhood Leaders
<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/culture-language/article/multicultural-principles-early-childhood-leaders>

- Principle 1: Every individual is rooted in culture.
- Principle 3: Culturally relevant and diverse programming requires learning accurate information about the cultures of different groups and discarding stereotypes.
- Principle 9: Culturally relevant and diverse programming examines and challenges institutional and personal biases.

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Implement Developmentally Appropriate Curriculum

Supporting the School Readiness
and Success of Young African
American Boys

What is Implementing Developmentally Appropriate Curriculum?

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) defines developmentally appropriate practice (DAP) as “methods that promote each child’s optimal development and learning through a strengths-based, play-based, approach to joyful, engaged learning” (NAEYC 2020). A developmentally appropriate curriculum is rich in content and offers wide-ranging and diverse experiences and activities to promote the learning and development of all children. It is designed to invite children to think deeply about what interests them and builds on their prior knowledge. The NAEYC Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) Position Statement offers guidelines for developmentally appropriate practices, including the implementation of a developmentally appropriate curriculum. Read the full statement at: <https://www.naeyc.org/resources/position-statements/dap/contents>.

Why Implementing Developmentally Appropriate Curriculum Matters for African American Boys

- NAEYC DAP aligns with Head Start Program Performance Standards requiring developmentally appropriate early childhood curricula (HSPPS §1302.32 Curricula and §1302.35 (d)(1) Home-based curriculum). The Head Start Multicultural Principles for Early Childhood Leaders include DAP too. Principle 4 says: Addressing cultural relevance in making curriculum choices and adaptations is a necessary, developmentally appropriate practice.
- Low-quality early childhood settings do not reflect DAP principles, and African American boys are disproportionately enrolled in those settings (LoCasale 2007; Barnett, Carolan, and Johns 2013; Gillespie 2019). Teacher-initiated activities combined with harsh discipline are characteristics of these learning environments (Center of Excellence 2020).
- To promote Black excellence, African American boys need exposure to books and images that have characters who look, act, and think as they do. These texts encourage and empower action in their own lives and the lives of others around them (Hughes-Hassell et. al 2012).
- African American boys are often perceived as older than they are (referred to as [adultification](#)), and, as a result, they don't receive the nurturing and protection children deserve (Goff 2014). African American boys often do not have opportunities to grow and learn in developmentally appropriate ways.
- African American boys deserve meaningful and robust boyhoods, full of joy, wonderment, leisure, and play. Play is a vital part of well-implemented curricula. By reimagining African American boyhoods in early childhood programs and communities, education staff (teachers, home visitors, family child care providers) can:
 - ▶ Create life-affirming spaces where Black boys' actions and emotions are not perceived as threatening
 - ▶ Inspire Black boys to inquire, play, and explore new ideas, and create space for gender non-conforming boys by breaking down stereotypes of Black masculinity (Browne & Gilmore 2021).



Reflect

It is important to have time to be reflective and intentional to implement a curriculum that shows knowledge of child development, individuality, and contexts where learning happens. Authors Ritchie and Gutman (2014) offer important questions to ask yourself about your curriculum, materials, and instruction. These have been adapted to help you think specifically about African American boys in your program. Use your reflections to individualize your approach and refine your curriculum implementation.

- What assumptions or incorrect guesses am I making about a child's ability to learn or not learn based on my own past experiences or experiences teaching children?
- How am I individualizing teaching practices or home visiting practices to meet the learning needs of every child I work with?
 - ▶ How do I promote parents as each child's most important teacher?
 - ▶ How do I link curriculum to African American boys' experiences at home in ways that promote a sense of identity, belonging, and family engagement?
 - ▶ How does my home-based curriculum promote parents as the most important teachers and foster positive parent-child interactions?
 - ▶ Are African American boys in my classroom, family child care home, or home visiting caseload meeting their learning goals? If not, what support do

I need to increase learning gains? How would I teach a young Barack Obama in my class given his identities and natural talents?

- How can I design learning experiences that celebrate African American boys for all their beauty and brilliance?
- How do I incorporate cultural perspectives that consider various aspects of the African American identity into my teaching or home visiting practices?
 - ▶ How do I select and share identity-positive books, songs, and materials with African American infants, toddlers, and their families?
 - ▶ What meaning and importance does the curriculum have for African American boys, while still meeting the intended learning goals?
- How do I make time for African American boys to discover, practice, play, and share their learning?
- How does new learning relate to African American boys' prior knowledge?
- What do the African American boys in my learning environment already know? What are they able to do? What are they interested in knowing and doing? What can I learn from observing African American boys in my setting (e.g., classroom, family child care home, home visits, group socializations)?

Write your reflections here.

Practices that Promote Implementing Developmentally Appropriate Curriculum

NAEYC recommends that while a curriculum might look different across programs, depending on learning settings and program philosophy, there are essential elements to all curricula. Below are some of the essential elements and ways you can support school readiness for African American boys.

Embrace a philosophy about joyful learning and opportunities for play that foster learning new skills in active and social ways.

- Be responsive and open to African American boys expressing *verve*—or lively, active play and engagement. At table-top activities for toddlers and preschoolers, allow children to stand or sit as they engage in their activity.
- Share in the excitement of joyful learning. Through body language and words, show you are excited to see African American boys learning new skills.

Practice genuineness in your teaching practices.

- Do not assume or force images onto children for the sake of diversity.
- Offer materials but let children lead in how they explore the materials.

Design meaningful learning opportunities that scaffold children's learning by adding complexity and linking new learning to children's earlier experiences. Relate concepts to the children's lives and give them hands-on learning experiences. For early literacy, include pictures of signs or words children see in their neighborhood—such as a stop sign or local grocery store.

Develop activities that foster social, emotional, physical, language, and cognitive development.

- African American boys often thrive in settings that allow them to actively explore and investigate topics of interest (Wright 2018).
- Use the concept of *windows and mirrors*. The curriculum can be a mirror (seeing ourselves reflected) and a window (learning about others

and their cultural ways of being). Offer books where the main characters are African American boys and that promote self-esteem and positive self-identity. During home visits and group socializations, share this link to Black Boy Joy: 30 Picture Books Featuring Black Male Protagonists with families: <https://www.readbrightly.com/picture-books-featuring-black-male-protagonists/>.

Assess and adjust one-on-one and group interaction strategies with preschool-age children to guarantee independence and full participation for each child.

- Offer a variety of ways for children to show what they know. Leaning on strong oral and call-and-response traditions in African American culture, modify rules by allowing children to speak without waiting to be called on in some activities.
- Focus on creativity and interpretation of learning experiences such as art, using a process approach that emphasizes individual expression.

Include families' values, beliefs, experiences, cultures, and languages.

- In group care settings, ask families to share how they engage their infant or toddler during care-giving routines, such as mealtime and preparing for naptime, and integrate these interactions into similar activities.
- Include the oral tradition of African American culture in the early childhood curriculum (Currenton 2006). Use strategies such as:
 - ▶ Ask preschool-age children about what they did the day before and suggest they share their stories, draw them, or act them out.
 - ▶ Ask parents, grandparents, and other family members to record their favorite stories.
 - ▶ Give opportunities for toddlers and pre-school-age children to take part in social pretend play, which improves social skills and leads to longer, more complex stories.

Try It!

Choose one practice from the list that you will try for one month. Write it down in the space below.

Practice I will try this month:	Child, children, or family I will focus on:
I will use this practice during the following activities/times:	I'll keep track of how I use this practice by:

After one month: Think about the practice you tried. How did it go? What will you keep doing, stop doing, or start doing?

I will keep doing:	I will stop doing:
I will start doing:	I learned this about myself:

Deepen Your Learning

Developmentally Appropriate Practice (DAP) Position Statement

<https://www.naeyc.org/resources/position-statements/dap/contents>

The Importance of Windows and Mirrors in Stories

<https://www.pbs.org/education/blog/the-importance-of-windows-and-mirrors-in-stories>

A Culturally Responsive Approach to Implementing Curriculum

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/video/culturally-responsive-approach-implementing-curriculum>

Implementing a Curriculum Responsively: Building on Children's Interests

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/video/implementing-curriculum-responsively-build-childrens-interests>



Head Start Alignments

In this section, learn about Head Start practices that support the school readiness and success of young African American boys. Think about your program and your learning setting and consider ways you already do these practices and ways you can more closely align to improve your teaching practice.

Head Start Program Performance Standards

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/policy/45-cfr-chap-xiii>

- §1302.32 (a)(1) Center-based and family child care programs must implement developmentally appropriate research-based early childhood curricula, including additional curricular enhancements, as appropriate.
- §1302.35(d)(1) Home visiting and group socializations implement a developmentally appropriate research-based early childhood home-based curriculum.

Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework (ELOF)

Developmentally appropriate practice supports children's development and learning in all ELOF domains: Approaches to Learning; Social and Emotional Development; Language and Literacy; Cognition; and Perceptual, Motor, and Physical Development. Visit the Interactive ELOF page on the Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center (ECLKC) to become familiar with developmental progressions. Understanding the development of a skill will help you be aware of what to expect of children, birth to 5.

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/interactive-head-start-early-learning-outcomes-framework-ages-birth-five>

The ELOF Effective Practice Guides offer information about domain-specific teaching practices that support development and learning, from birth to 5.



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African American boys deserve meaningful and robust boyhoods, full of joy, wonderment, leisure, and play.

The guides describe what these practices look like in early learning settings. They also help staff reflect on and improve their teaching practices. In home-based settings, home visitors use the teaching practices to work with families to offer experiences that support the child's development. Read the Effective Practice Guides for more ideas on teaching practices.

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/school-readiness/effective-practice-guides/effective-practice-guides>

ELOF2GO is a mobile resource for teachers who want to access and learn more about ELOF. It's your on-the-go guide to children's development and learning.

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/school-readiness/article/elof2go-mobile-app>

Multicultural Principles for Early Childhood Leaders

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/culture-language/article/multicultural-principles-early-childhood-leaders>

- Principle 1: Every individual is rooted in culture.
- Principle 4: Addressing cultural relevance in making curriculum choices and adaptations is a necessary, developmentally appropriate practice.
- Principle 8: Multicultural programming for children enables children to develop an awareness of, respect for, and appreciation of individual and cultural differences.

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Strengthen Home-Program Partnerships

Supporting the School Readiness and Success of Young African American Boys

What is Strengthening Home-Program Partnerships?

Early Head Start and Head Start programs are strongly rooted in family engagement. The Head Start Parent, Family, and Community Engagement (PFCE) Framework (<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/school-readiness/article/head-start-parent-family-community-engagement-framework>) give guidance for education staff (teachers, home visitors, family child care providers) engagement, or partnership, efforts that support children's school readiness and family well-being. By partnering with families, early childhood programs can help make sure African American boys are ready for school. School readiness is based on the collective efforts of program staff and parents. These connections allow families to grow as their children's first teachers and strengthen their children's identities, relationships, skills, and knowledge.

Programs are successful when they view early childhood education as a partnership between families and education staff. This partnership works best when the education staff gathers cultural information from children's families and communities. That cultural information is known as funds of knowledge. Education staff can use *funds of knowledge* to build meaningful relationships and create culturally and linguistically appropriate curricula. Programs that value family engagement and partnerships are in the best position to support children's development. They can successfully combine all environments, materials, and learning activities with a child's knowledge and experience.



Why Strengthening Home-Program Partnerships Matters

- Many teachers' beliefs about African American families are through a deficit view, affecting their ability to see families with a strengths-based focus (Cooper 2009; Latunde 2018; Wilson and Yull 2016). This deficit view gets in the way of strengthening home-program partnerships.
- African American preschoolers who lived in homes that placed high importance on African American culture showed more factual knowledge, better problem-solving skills, and fewer behavior problems according to their parents (Caughy et. al. 2002). When teachers, family child care providers, and home visitors learn about the family culture of African American boys in their programs, their deficit view may turn toward a strengths-based attitude.
- Many African American families are and want to be involved in their child's education. However, parents have expressed frustration with not being recognized for their efforts to help their children and experiencing barriers when they try to get involved or advocate for their children's needs (Louque and Latunde 2014).
- Social networks, faith networks, community members, and community organizations for African Americans are key resources for many African American families. Learning ways of family engagement and ending comparison to other standards can create pathways to creating home-program partnerships (Grice 2020).
- Culturally responsive education practices and professional development can help educators replace beliefs they hold about family involvement with more accurate, complete, and genuine approaches to engaging families (Gay 2010).

Creating a support system for young African American boys starts with the family. Education staff can help children get ready for school by partnering with children's families.



Programs that value family engagement and partnerships are in the best position to support children's development.

Reflect

Take a few minutes to think about how your views of home-program partnerships influence what you do and how you interact with African American families.

- What are your program's philosophies and guidelines about home-program partnerships?
- What are your expectations and why do you consider the home-program partnership important, especially when engaging families of African American boys?
- Are your expectations different from how the African American families in your programs partner? If so, how are these different?

- Does your approach build on the strengths of the family? If so, how?
- Does your approach create a shared power structure between you and the families or is your way the "right" way? How?
- How can you learn more about collaboration and partnerships between African American families and your program?

Reflect on your experiences and expectations and consider ways you can adjust how you engage with families.

Write your reflections here.

Practices to Strengthen Home-Program Partnerships

Use [funds of knowledge](#).

- Watch Luis Moll explain *funds of knowledge* as a strengths-based approach to home-program partnerships. This approach helps education staff use the cultural values, attitudes, and beliefs of families to create education settings that are more relevant and meaningful for each child and family (Grant and Ray 2018). Video: <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/video/funds-knowledge-video>
- Use the *funds of knowledge* worksheet to learn more about yourself and the families of African American boys in your program: <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/spring-2spring-funds-of-knowledge-eng.pdf>.
- Consider the unique qualities of the African American boys' families in your program. For example, are there specific parenting practices or activities that are important to the family?
- Encourage African American families to share how they are teaching their sons to navigate in society.
- Decide which assets and strengths to incorporate into your group care setting.
- Talk with families about how their child takes part in activities that strengthen their connection to their family and cultural identity. Home visitors can discuss with families how their cultural strengths are visible in their homes.

Create a shared vision with families about their role in supporting their child and their goals for their children. Use the shared vision to plan how to facilitate school readiness in your group or home-based curriculum.

Join in! Knowing that African American families sometimes choose family engagement practices outside of your Early Head Start or Head Start program, take part in community events that are meaningful to the families of African American boys in your program.

Communicate regularly and openly.



Put a system in place to encourage frequent, two-way communication that works best for the families. Figure out the best way to communicate (e.g., phone call, text, email, app). Confirm families' availability and work out a shared understanding of communication and expectations.

- Share regular observations of strengths and successes with the family. Encourage families to share their child's strengths and successes with you.

Create opportunities for African American families to participate in classroom and program activities, especially in the play-based approaches designed for young children and boys.



Engage fathers and male caregivers. The Centers for Disease Control (Jones and Masher 2013) report that African American men spend more time with their children than other ethnicities and races. The National Center for Parent, Community, and Family engagement offers these strategies to support the participation of fathers and male caregivers:

- Encourage staff to plan father-focused interactions and activities.
- Prioritize father and male caregiver participation in staff development and programming. Emphasize the importance of developing positive staff relationships with fathers and male caregivers, especially relationships that focus on their goals for their children, their families, and themselves.
- Show respect for the diversity of fathers' experiences and their goals.
- Develop networks, peer-to-peer groups, and volunteer opportunities that support fathers' goals and strengthen connections to other fathers and community resources.
- Groups of only father and male caregivers, led by a male facilitator, are an effective engagement tool. Fathers and male caregivers report that such groups support open discussion of ideas and concerns.
- Print wall posters that celebrate the ways fathers engage: <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/family-engagement/article/celebrating-what-fathers-do-every-day-wall-posters>.
- Listen actively to what parents say and summarize it in your own words. This shows the family you hear and understand what's important to them.

Creating a support system for young African American boys starts with the family.

Try It!

Choose one practice from the list that you will try for one month. Write it down in the space below.

Practice I will try this month:	Child, children, or family I will focus on:
I will use this practice during the following activities/times:	I'll keep track of how I use this practice by:

After one month: Think about the practice you tried. How did it go? What will you keep doing, stop doing, or start doing?

I will keep doing :	I will stop doing :
I will start doing :	I learned this about myself:

Deepen Your Learning

Building Partnerships with Families

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/family-engagement/article/building-partnerships-families-series>

Funds of Knowledge

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/video/funds-knowledge-video>

Staff Parent Relationships that Honor and Support Parenting

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/family-engagement/staff-parent-relationships-honor-support-parenting/staff-parent-relationships-honor-support-parenting>

5 Questions: Fatherhood

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/professional-development/article/five-questions-child-development-experts>

Strategies for Program Leaders to Support Father Engagement

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/organization-al-leadership/birth-5-father-engagement-guide/strategies-program-leaders-support-father-engagement>

Head Start Alignments

In this section, learn about Head Start practices that support the school readiness and success of young African American boys. Think about your program and your learning setting and consider ways you already do these practices and ways you can more closely align to improve your teaching practice.

Head Start Program Performance Standards

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/policy/45-cfr-chap-xiii>

- §1302.34(a) Center-based and family child care programs must structure education and child development services to recognize parents' roles as children's lifelong educators and to encourage parents to engage in their child's education.
- §1302.35(a) A home-based program must provide home visits and group socialization activities that promote secure parent-child relationships and help parents provide high-quality early learning experiences in language, literacy, mathematics, social and emotional functioning, approaches to learning, science, physical skills, and creative arts.
- §1302.50(a) A program must integrate parent and family engagement strategies into all systems and

program services to support family well-being and promote children's learning and development.

- §1302.51(a) A program must promote shared responsibility with parents for children's early learning and development and implement family engagement strategies that are designed to foster parental confidence and skills in promoting children's learning and development.

Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework (ELOF)

Families can foster the learning and development goals for their children in all domains of the ELOF: Approaches to Learning; Social and Emotional Development; Language and Literacy; Cognition; and Perceptual, Motor, and Physical Development. Visit the Interactive ELOF page on the Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center (ECLKC) to become familiar with developmental progressions. Understanding the development of a skill will help families and you be aware of what to expect of children, birth to 5.

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/interactive-head-start-early-learning-outcomes-framework-ages-birth-five>



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School readiness is based on the collective efforts of program staff and parents. These connections allow families to grow as their children's first teachers and strengthen their children's identities, relationships, skills, and knowledge.

Use the ELOF@Home app and share it with families too. The ELOF@Home app offers practices for home visitors and parents to support their children's growth and development: <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/teaching-practices/article/mobile-tools-home-visitors>

Multicultural Principles for Early Childhood Leaders
<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/culture-language/article/multicultural-principles-early-childhood-leaders>

- Principle 1: Every individual is rooted in culture.
- Principle 2: The cultural groups represented in the communities and families of each Head Start program are the primary sources for culturally relevant programming.
- Principle 5: Every individual has the right to maintain his or her own identity while acquiring the skills required to function in our diverse society.
- Principle 7: Culturally relevant programming requires staff who both reflect and are responsive to the community and families served.

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Glossary

The strategy guides include terms and concepts that may require further explanation and learning. Below are definitions and links to deepen your learning.

Adultification – the experience of treating Black children and youth older than their developmental and chronological age.

Funds of knowledge – the essential cultural practices and bodies of knowledge that are embedded in the daily practices and routines of families.

Implicit bias – a belief or attitude that affects our understanding, decision, and actions, and that exists without our conscious awareness.

Structural racism – Historical, social, political, institutional, and cultural factors that contribute to and support racial inequities. Structural racism is not something that a few people or institutions choose to practice, it is a coming together of racist concepts and theories that control our economic, political, and social systems. Structural racism emphasizes the role of structures like laws, policies, and dominant cultural norms, which uphold racist practices. An example of structural racism in education is the “school to prison pipeline.” This refers to the trend that children, mainly boys of color, are more often disciplined through suspension and expulsion for behavior challenges than other children with similar behavior challenges. For older children, police are more likely to be called to deal with misbehavior by children of color. Police involvement, suspensions, and expulsions raise the risk for incarceration. While this is not an explicit policy or law, the discriminatory beliefs and attitudes rooted in the education system reflect structural racism. Sometimes structural and systemic racism are used interchangeably, even though they are different.

Verve – The educator and writer Bryan Wright in *The Brilliance of Black Boys: Cultivating School Success in the Early Grades* (2018), describes the concept of verve, which captures the home environment of many African American children. Verve means:

- Lively and intensified behavior
- Preference for variety and change in an environment
- Preference for multiple activities and stimulation that exist at the same time in the environment

Windows and mirrors – the concept that books can be a mirror (seeing ourselves reflected) and a window (learning about others and their cultural ways of being).

To learn more about the concepts in the glossary, follow the links listed below.

- Center for the Study of Social Policy, Key Equity Terms and Concepts: A Glossary for Shared Understanding: <https://cssp.org/resource/key-equity-terms-and-concepts-a-glossary-for-shared-understanding/>
- Funds of Knowledge: <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/video/funds-knowledge-video>
- PBS Teacher’s Lounge, The Importance of Windows and Mirrors in Stories: <https://www.pbs.org/education/blog/the-importance-of-windows-and-mirrors-in-stories>

Highlighted Resources

These key resources support the implementation of strategies named in this guide. Use your phone to access the QR codes or click on the link to get to the pages on ECLKC.



[Supporting the School Readiness and Success of Young African American Boys Project: Reflections on a Culturally Responsive Strength-Based Approach](#)



[Multicultural Principles for Early Childhood Leaders](#)



[Head Start Program Performance Standards](#)



[Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework: Ages Birth to Five](#)



[NAEYC's Developmentally Appropriate Practice \(DAP\) Position Statement](#)



[15-minute In-service Suites](#)



[Funds of Knowledge](#)

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