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THE SECRETS TO RAISING REALLY SMART KIDS

We've all heard the sobering statistics: When it comes to academic achievement, African-American students are often coming up short, falling behind their peers in standardized test scores, high school graduation rates and enrollment in the most rigorous classes. But we can make a change. **Jeannine Amber** asked experts across the country for their best tips to propel our kids to excellence. It turns out the key to academic success is not what we've been told. ▶

THE ACHIEVEMENT GAP

Natasha Capers remembers holding each of her two sons the moment they were born and envisioning all that was possible. *He'll be a doctor*, she thought of her first. *This one might be an engineer*, she imagined two years later when her second son arrived. But as the boys, now 10 and 8, entered school, Capers began to worry that their prospects for success were slipping away. "My school doesn't have a science lab or a library," says the single mother, who lives in poverty-stricken Brownsville, Brooklyn, a neighborhood she describes as "a place everyone forgot."

Capers has reason to be concerned. In March the Department of Education (DOE) and the Annie E. Casey Foundation, a philanthropic organization aimed at fostering success in disadvantaged children, both issued reports detailing persistent racial inequalities in American schools. According to the reports, Black children have less access to educational opportunities that will prime them for college. African-American students, particularly boys, score lower on standardized tests, have lower high school graduation rates and are more likely to drop out of college than their White peers. This disparity begins early. In a 2013 survey of academic achievement, the DOE reported that 83 percent of Black fourth-graders scored below proficiency levels in reading, and 82 percent of Black eighth-graders performed below proficiency in math.

What's behind these alarming figures? Decades of studies have revealed African-American students consistently receive less rigorous academic preparation than their White peers, leading many activists to call the achievement gap—the difference in performance between one racial group and another—the civil rights issue of our time. This year the DOE's Office for Civil Rights released

Other experts point to the well-documented link between socioeconomic status and achievement to explain why Black children are falling behind. Thirty-eight percent of Black children in this country live below the poverty level. Poor children disproportionately attend the most underfunded and lowest-performing schools, and almost 25 percent never graduate from high school. But according to research out of Harvard University,

Black students whose parents earned more than \$200,000 per year scored as poorly on the SATs as White children whose parents earned less than \$40,000.

data that showed African-American children are significantly more likely to go to a preschool staffed by teachers with less experience than teachers at predominantly White schools. "African-American students are frequently on the lowest rung of the achievement and opportunity ladders," says David J. Johns, the executive director of the White House Initiative on Educational Excellence for African-Americans. "The health and well-being of our country requires that we find ways to provide opportunities particularly for those who are often neglected, forgotten about or ignored."

the achievement gap is widest among children of well-educated parents. The *Journal of Blacks in Higher Education* reported in 2009 that Black students whose parents earned more than \$200,000 per year on average scored as poorly on the SATs as White children whose parents earned less than \$40,000.

Reversing this trend will take a coordinated effort between teachers, legislators and activists. But the good news is that experts say the most important factor in improving children's chances for success is the role parents play. We have the power to close the achievement gap and to propel our kids to greatness.

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Get Ahead

The years before your youngster begins school are some of the most important for brain development. Parenting behaviors adults exhibit at home can help prepare infants and toddlers

for maximum learning. Harvard education expert Ronald Ferguson shares his best tips for equipping your little ones with the tools to flourish before they enter school.

Limit the Baby Talk: Speak to your baby in your regular voice. "Babies are hearing language and encoding it as soon as they are born," says Ferguson. "Too much baby talk represents a lost opportunity."

Let Them Explore: "Time out of the playpen to explore surroundings is essential for helping children understand spatial relationships and will even help with their handwriting when they enter school," says Ferguson.

Count Objects: Develop math skills by playing number games with toddlers. "Have interactions about how big something is or how far away it is," says Ferguson. Teach your kid to count and add using coins or beads.

Read and Discuss: As cute as it is when a 3-year-old knows a book by heart, learning happens when you introduce new material. As you read, pause and ask your little one what happened and what she thinks will happen next.

START EARLY

For decades we've focused our attention on creating better schools as a way to close the performance gap. But according to Ronald Ferguson, faculty director of the Achievement Gap Initiative at Harvard University, the disparity between Black and White children begins before they've even set foot in a classroom. "From our research, we're seeing that the gap opens up when the children are between 1 and 2 years old," explains Ferguson. Figures compiled by the DOE reveal that Black and White children as young as 9 months displayed cognitive differences as measured by such markers as "exploring purposefully," "jabbering expressively" and "early problem solving."

To address these disconnects, Ferguson and his colleagues have been developing a comprehensive program called Seeding Success, aimed at teaching parents of children newborn to age 3 the best methods to enhance early brain

development. "We've identified what we call the 'fundamental five,'" says Ferguson, referring to distinct parenting behaviors that have been shown to set the stage for achievement. Ferguson's fundamentals include having lots of skin-to-skin contact between parents and infants, encouraging crawling babies to explore their surroundings, and engaging preschoolers in conversations about the text as you read to them aloud. "As brains are developing, learning actually induces physical change," says Ferguson. "So all the stuff we're talking about is helping to build brain architecture that is going to serve children over a lifetime."

Ferguson says one of the most important fundamentals is "maximizing love and minimizing stress." Stress can be triggered in children by all kinds of external stimuli, explains Nadine Burke Harris, founder and CEO of San Francisco's Center for Youth Wellness and expert on the impact of

The effects of **stress**, and its impact on **cognition**, can be seen in children as young as **newborns**.

stress on children. "Experiencing divorce, domestic violence, the loss of a parent (to death or incarceration) and witnessing neighborhood violence can impact their performance at school," she says.

The effects of stress, and its impact on cognition, can be seen in children as young as newborns. "Too much stress causes chemical reactions that can retard brain development," explains Ferguson. Studies show infants suffer from elevated levels of the hormone cortisol, which interferes with concentration and memory, after prolonged periods of crying without being comforted. Also stressful for babies, says Ferguson, are loud, sudden noises. Think of the way your baby startles when she hears a door slam. "Or glance at your baby's expression the moment after you yell at your older kid and you'll notice that you scared the baby more than the other child," says Ferguson. "That is a negative moment for brain development."

DIVORCE OR DOMESTIC VIOLENCE CAN IMPACT PERFORMANCE



MAXIMIZE LOVE AND MINIMIZE STRESS



BUILDING BRAIN ARCHITECTURE SERVES KIDS OVER A LIFETIME



STRESS CAN IMPEDE A CHILD'S ABILITY TO LEARN.

ACHIEVEMENT RX: To promote infant brain development, create a relaxing environment and engage in lots of touching, holding, talking and eye-to-eye contact. >

BUILD CHARACTER

It has been widely accepted that the best way to ready young children for academic success is to focus on the basics: reading, writing and arithmetic. However, new research suggests that soft skills, or character strengths, also play an important role in getting ahead. "Things like the ability to persevere at a difficult task, to bounce back from disappointment or to calm down after a stressful situation matter as much as, if not more than, IQ in how well children do in school," explains Paul Tough, author of *How Children Succeed: Grit, Curiosity and the Hidden Power of Character* (Mariner).

So how do you imbue your child with soft skills? The parenting style linked most strongly to achievement is one that balances expectations with ample doses of warmth and responsiveness. That means assigning house rules goes hand in hand with having discussions about what the

child is thinking and feeling. So when your kid is acting up, "Ask her, 'What's going on?' 'Why are you upset?'" counsels Tough. Help your child articulate her woes by giving her a vocabulary of emotions. Ask, "Are you angry, frustrated or sad?" And let her know you're listening. As your child enters adolescence, help build resilience by allowing her to make mistakes and learn from them.

"What we are talking about is a growth mind-set," adds psychiatrist Joe Brewster, who, along with his wife, filmmaker and human rights attorney Michèle Stephenson, coauthored *Promises Kept: Raising Black Boys to Success in School and in Life* (Spiegel & Grau). Growth mind-set is an educational model that encourages students to see learning as the process of becoming better at something, as opposed to a fixed mind-set, in which academic performance is seen as a measure of one's

intelligence. A child with a fixed mind-set will think, *I failed, therefore I am a failure*. A student with a growth mind-set will think, *I messed up; what can I learn from this?* A 2001 study found that students who were taught a growth mind-set in college experienced significant boosts in their GPAs compared with other students. Those who showed the greatest gains were African-Americans.

"Sometimes Black students see failure as an affirmation of the stereotype that we're not smart," adds Stephenson. "This idea gets perpetuated by teachers who expect less from our boys. Other cultures embrace failure as a way of moving forward. This is where our shift has to happen."

ACHIEVEMENT RX: When your child stumbles, point out the valuable lessons he's learned as you help him get back on track.



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TACKLE BIAS

Many African-American parents with children at predominantly White schools often wonder if their kids are treated differently because of the color of their skin. A 2013 Kirwan Institute report analyzed the race-based assumptions some teachers make about students. Chief among them is that Black students, particularly boys, are less intelligent and more poorly behaved. This bias leads to disproportionate rates of Black boys being suspended from

school and lowered teacher expectations, which can cause kids to underperform.

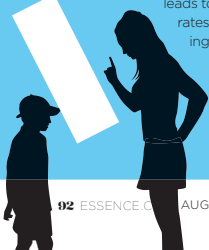
In their riveting 2013 documentary, *American Promise*, Brewster and Stephenson detail their son Idris's 12 years at Dalton, an exclusive Manhattan prep school. When Idris was in first grade, Stephenson says, a teacher told her that testing had revealed he was behind in reading. "When she spoke to us, the teacher's tone was so condescending," recalls Stephenson. "As though we had different standards for our son than the rest of the

parents." Stephenson, knowing Idris to be a strong reader, insisted on more testing, which confirmed he was on track.

Fortunately, the effects of implicit bias can be undone by active parenting. The goal, adds Travis Gosa, assistant professor of Africana studies at Cornell University, is to have the teacher become personally invested in your child's future. "Developing good relationships with teachers helps them imagine that your child is their child. That's when they'll connect your kid to real opportunities."

ACHIEVEMENT RX: Make an appointment with your child's teacher to talk about what he likes to read and his hobbies. Shine a light on him early and often so the teacher takes notice.

42% of suspended 3- and 4-year-olds are Black.

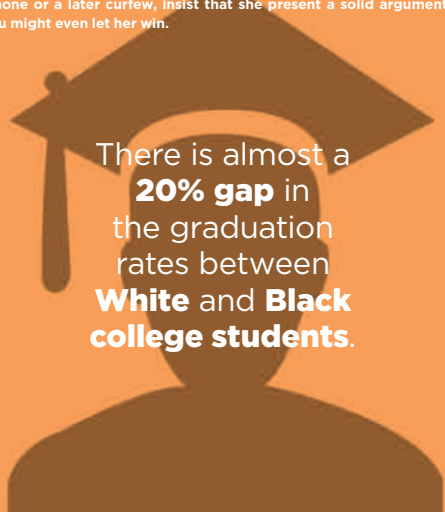


NEGOTIATE WITH YOUR TEEN

Cornell University's Gosa, who has been studying the achievement gap for more than a decade, has a particular interest in what happens to Black students once they arrive at college. According to 2012 statistics from the DOE, there is almost a 20 percent gap in the graduation rates between White and Black college students. The students least likely to graduate are young Black men. Gosa notes that some African-American students, especially those who are the first in their families to attend college, may struggle with feelings of inadequacy that can inadvertently lead to lower grades: "I'm amazed at how often I have to coax Black students to introduce themselves and tell me where they are from and what they are interested in." By comparison, Gosa says, White students routinely come to his office to discuss that day's class or to dispute their grades. Gosa says these students have been "trained" since childhood to negotiate with authority, often to their advantage. "These types of interactions with professors can make huge differences in grading outcomes, letters of recommendation or acquiring scholarships and fellowships," he explains. Even so, Black parents often raise their children with a different type of home training. "We tend to boss our kids around," says Ferguson, who explains that generations ago this was a matter of survival. "We had to teach children early on to be obedient, without talking back or asking questions. But that's no longer the parenting style that's likely to serve them best. Responsive parenting teaches children to expect to be respected by and to engage in conversations with authority figures. This helps children develop a sense of empowerment and prepares them to advocate for themselves, which supports higher achievement."

ACHIEVEMENT RX: Engage children in thoughtful negotiations over matters that are important to them. If your daughter asks for a new iPhone or a later curfew, insist that she present a solid argument. You might even let her win.

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Praising children for their effort helps them develop confidence.



FOCUS ON HARD WORK

This past April, 17-year-old Ghanaian-American student Kwasi Enin made headlines for being accepted into all eight Ivy League schools. When he spoke to the press about his achievement, he remarked that his parents never accepted a grade lower than a 95. While Enin's parents' high expectations yielded amazing results for their son, for many kids, focusing on effort may be even more beneficial than focusing on grades.

For more than a decade, Stanford psychologist Carol Dweck has researched achievement among public school children. In one pivotal study, Dweck engaged a group of fifth-graders in a task; afterward teachers praised half the students for being "good workers" and the other half for being "smart." The students were then offered an opportunity to work on a challenging or an easy task. Those who'd been told they were "hard workers" chose the difficult puzzle, while those praised for being smart selected an easier task. Praising children for their effort helps them develop confidence to tackle obstacles, a trait imperative for success.

"We can pretend that every kid should be able to get really high grades, but that's not realistic," says Ferguson. "One of my sons was an A student, another got Cs when he worked hard. If my A student came home with Cs, we'd have a conversation. If my C student came home with C+, we'd celebrate. Most parents know when their children are working hard. And the harder you exercise the brain, the smarter you get."

ACHIEVEMENT RX: Praise your child for the hours she spends on her homework. That focus, drive and work ethic will carry her a lot further than winning an easy A. □

Jeannine Amber is an ESSENCE contributing writer.