The inadequate education many African American children receive perpetuates social, economic, health and other inequalities throughout the course of their lives. This problem is particularly acute for African American males. Research has revealed some of the factors and processes that affect academic achievement of African American children, and one of them is social support networks. More and more research illuminates the importance of social support networks and positive family-school relationships for academic success. In addition to simply having a support network, this research tells us that children and youth need diverse support from their social networks. It is not enough for a student to get help with homework, but emotional support and other types of guidance are needed. Furthermore, individuals in a child’s network must know and communicate with each other and have shared values and expectations for the child in order to better support academic success. This research points to an important task of educators: to identify and form strong relationships with the people in children’s families and communities who provide different forms of support. Unfortunately, the research also shows that there are some common misconceptions among educators about children’s support networks. These misconceptions are a barrier to forging stronger home-school relationships. Therefore, it is important to understand social support networks from the perspective of children themselves: Who do they see as their mentors? What kind of support do they consider most helpful?

Jeffrey Lewis and Amy Hilgendorf set out to answer these questions by speaking with a group of African American boys from 4th to 6th grade and their teachers. The study revealed valuable information that can help educators or mentors in community centers, after-school programs or schools better understand and connect with the social support networks of African American boys. This digest summarizes those findings by identifying the types of people who form social support networks, describing the type of support they provide, and providing recommendations to educators.
What do we know about the social support networks of African American boys?

How does this help educators to better support them?

Expanding Who We See as Mentors

Common conceptions of the social support networks of African American boys are far too narrow. Parents are often considered the only significant source of support. Many assume that social support only comes from adults who are relatives and who belong to a child’s own household, or that children raised by single mothers lack male mentors. Table 1 (above) shows the boys’ responses when asked about the individuals who provide support to them. African American children, particularly ones from low-income households, often have broader more complex social support networks that are overlooked by educators:

- The study found that many boys identified mentors who do not live in the same household or even the same city as themselves. Most significantly, some fathers who do not live with the boys play an important role as they remain in regular communication with the boys and their mothers, provide guidance and collaborate with mothers in monitoring the boys. Other non-household mentors include other relatives, parents of their friends or mentors from school and community programs.

- Nearly all of the boys interviewed had support from an adult male such as fathers, unmarried partners of their mothers, and other relatives.
- Peers were a very common source of social support among the boys, including siblings, cousins and friends.
- Some boys identified mentors not considered supportive adults by some educators who sometimes viewed these individuals negatively. For example, one boy spoke of a supportive male who had been a good student himself but had spent time in prison. He strived to use his experiences to support this child’s academic success and wanted to be involved at their school. Teachers considered him a negative influence simply because he had been in prison, although they had no other knowledge about him.
- Most boys received support from a combination of sources, including both individuals from inside and outside of their households or neighborhoods, both relatives and non-relatives, both adults and peers.

Implications for Educators

Educators can regularly communicate with children and their parents about people who are important in their lives, listening carefully for individuals who might not have come to mind as mentors. Learning about and connecting with these individuals can help educators to better understand and meet the needs of children.

Expanding What Counts as Support

Teachers interviewed in the study considered support to include monitoring of a child’s schoolwork, responding to communication from the school and expressing a positive attitude about school achievement to the child. However, interviews with the boys revealed that the types of support provided by their social networks are much more diverse than this. The support they identified as important to them can be grouped under four main categories:

- **Instrumental support for academic success** includes checking and helping with homework, providing extra opportunities to practice new knowledge, practicing negotiating school situations through playing school with friends and more.
- **Accountability, informational and moral support** includes holding children accountable for their behavior, providing advice and modeling about managing motions...
and behaviors, sharing knowledge about how to navigate school relationships, providing encouragement, staying in touch etc.

- **Support to develop positive attitudes, behaviors and habits towards school** is usually in the form of talks communicating high expectations and encouragement. This includes urgings to do good, conversations about the importance of education and the sharing of lessons from personal experience.

- **Support to meet basic needs** includes efforts to keep the children fed, clothed and supplied for school. It also included providing for their emotional needs. For example, one boy shared, “It helps me a lot knowing that [my mom]’s really going to be there… Then that makes me a lot happier so then I can concentrate up in school.”

**Implications for Educators:**

By inviting children to speak about the support that they need and receive, educators can gain a fuller understanding of the role that various individuals play in a child’s support network and identify the child’s unmet needs for social support. This knowledge allows educators to collaborate more effectively with individuals in children’s support networks in order to better support their academic success.

**The Importance of Natural Mentors**

According to the National Mentoring Partnership, mentors are “caring individuals who, along with parents or guardians, provide young people with support, counsel, friendship, reinforcement and a constructive example” (National Mentoring Partnership, 2005). Programs that match children and youth with mentors from their communities are very common. Most often, these mentors come from outside the child’s family. However, research suggests that these programs tend to be ineffective, with the exception of several programs that incorporate many known best practices for such programs.

Natural mentors, however, are individuals who are already belong to a child’s naturally existing support network, in other words, the types of support people the boys mentioned during their interviews with Lewis and Hilgendorf. All of the boys identified people who play a mentoring role in their lives. These natural mentors are often better positioned to provide effective support to children than assigned mentors in formal programs. Natural mentors are more likely to consider their relationship with the child a high priority in their lives, tend to maintain more stable and long-term relationships, and provide more diverse types of support.

**Implications for Community Organizations and Educators:**

Most children have adults in their social networks who are deeply committed to supporting them and who serve crucial mentoring functions in their lives. Community organizations can consider whether investing in these natural mentors will be more effective and beneficial for the children they serve in comparison to formal mentoring programs. While natural mentors are often in the best position to support children academically, some may lack the necessary resources for doing so. For example, they may lack an understanding of the implicit rules of the school system, knowledge of community resources available to them and the child they care about, relationships with more advantaged individuals and important institutions, or their own social support system that can assist them in supporting the child. Educators and nonprofit practitioners often have access to these resources that children’s natural mentors may lack. Educators can play a crucial role in strengthening a child’s entire social network by acting as a bridge and connecting natural mentors with these valuable resources.

**Conclusion**

African American children have diverse social networks that play an irreplaceable role in supporting their success. The individuals in these networks and the forms of support they provide too often go unrecognized and untapped by educators. Educators can better understand and connect with the social support networks of children by seeing these networks through the eyes of the children themselves. This requires providing opportunities to children to share about their networks as well as deep and respectful listening. Through establishing relationships with members of children’s social networks, educators can play an important role in strengthening these networks and collaborating with children’s natural mentors to better support academic success.
Works Cited


Further Resources on Social Support Networks and Academic Success

- More detailed findings of this study can be found in the report, *African American Boys’ Views of Family as Support for School*, by Jeffrey Lewis and Amy Hilgendorf. The report is available at [http://learningstore.uwex.edu](http://learningstore.uwex.edu) The authors are interested in collaboration with community organizations to support the needs of African American children and youth. Interested organizations can contact Jeffrey Lewis at jeffrey.lewis@ces.uwex.edu


- Partnering for School Success is a comprehensive project that provides a wealth of resources for strengthening family-school relationships for both educations and parents, including guidebooks, research findings, trainings and more. These resources can be accessed at [http://www.extension.umn.edu/ParentEducation/schoolsuccess.html](http://www.extension.umn.edu/ParentEducation/schoolsuccess.html)

- Involve Parents – Improve Schools is a project focused on involving immigrant parents in their children’s education. The project’s website offers toolboxes which include practical activities for a variety of themes related to family-school relationships. [http://www.involve-migrants-improve-school.eu](http://www.involve-migrants-improve-school.eu)