

Rites & Rituals: Bringing a Cultural Lens to Positive Youth Development for Black Girls



Central East (HHS Region 3)

MHTTC

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Positive Youth Development

While the COVID-19 pandemic lingers for Americans, the Black community continues to be disproportionately impacted—our youth, specifically. Black youth are experiencing shifts in their mental health at alarming rates. Recent data from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC) found that rates of suicide have risen among Black youth of all ages and that the biggest increases occurred among teens aged 15 to 17 (Wenner Moyer, 2021). The rate of Black male suicides increased by 60 percent and Black female suicides increased by 182 percent from 2001 to 2017. Suicides were the second leading cause of death for Black adolescents (Price & Khubchandani, 2019). Additionally, in 2017 alone, 94,760 Black females made suicide attempts serious enough that they had to be treated by health professionals.

More than 2.5 times as many Black boys died by suicide as Black girls, but the annual increase among girls—6.6 percent—was more than twice what it was for boys. While many Americans look forward to the day that life returns to “normal,” Black communities, families, and youth worry about an unending epidemic that has plagued them for hundreds of years.

As the nation turns its attention to injustices like the murders of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd, as well as social and health inequities that extend as far back as Henrietta Lacks, these questions remain: How do we enhance the cultural relevance of our evidence-based practices, understanding cultural nuances that should be incorporated into these practices while listening and incorporating youth voices? How do we make a positive shift in our Black youth, specifically our Black girls?

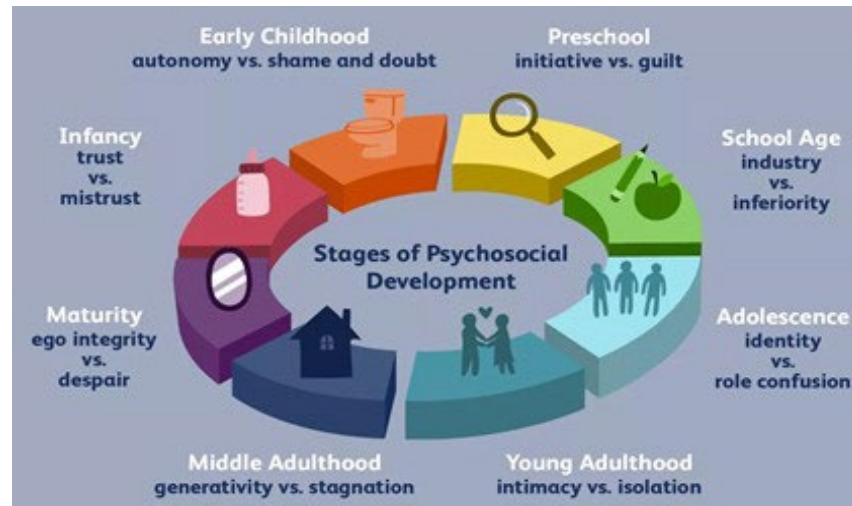
Positive Youth Development (PYD) is an intentional, prosocial approach that engages youth within their communities, schools, organizations, peer groups, and families in a way that is productive and constructive; recognizes, utilizes, and enhances young people's strengths; and promotes positive outcomes for young people by providing opportunities, fostering positive relationships, and furnishing the support needed to build on their leadership strengths (Youth.gov, n.d.). While examining PYD, it is helpful to examine a few aspects while making cultural considerations.

- Adolescent State of Development (Identity versus Role Confusion)
- Adverse Childhood Experiences
- Key Transitions for Youth Experiencing Serious Mental Illness (SMI), Serious Emotional Disturbances (SED), Homelessness
- Addressing Key Needs to Support Positive Identity and Rites of Passage

ADOLESCENT STATE OF DEVELOPMENT (IDENTITY VERSUS ROLE CONFUSION)

Erik Erikson's psychosocial stages of development presents a basic idea that throughout life an individual will experience various stages of development. Successful completion of these stages will lend itself to success or psychological strengths. If a stage is not successfully completed, or there is poor management, inadequacies develop.





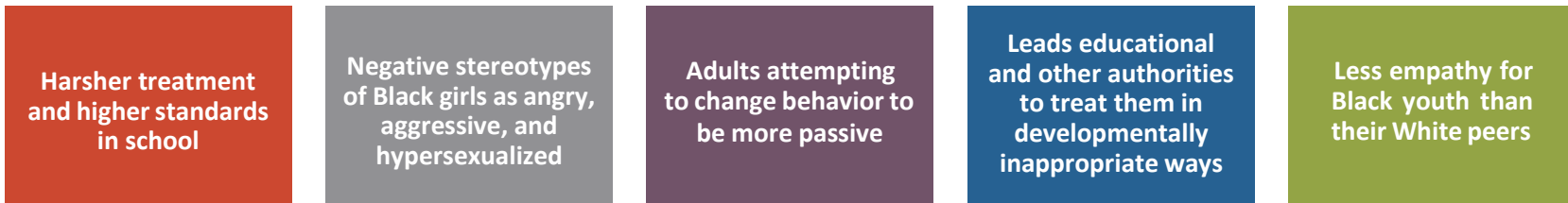
In considering PYD, stage five is the crucial stage, as teens need to develop a sense of self and personal identity. “Success leads to an ability to stay true to yourself, while failure leads to role confusion and a weak sense of self” (Cherry, 2021).

According to the CDC, [one in eight high school girls of all races](#) experiences sexual dating violence, compared with one in 26 high school boys. Black teen girls also appear to be [at a higher risk](#) of sexual violence than girls of other races—and such violence is a known suicide [risk factor](#) (Thompson et al., 2012; CDC, 2021).

Traumatic events like this are linked to increased anxiety, depression, and suicide and are also closely related to adultification bias. As explained in the *Confusing Cases* blog:

“**Adultification** is a form of dehumanization, robbing Black children of the very essence of what makes childhood distinct from all other developmental periods: innocence. Adultification contributes to a false narrative that Black youths’ transgressions are intentional and malicious, instead of the result of immature decision making—a key characteristic of childhood.” (leeburchell, 2021)

What does this look like?



ADVERSE CHILDHOOD EXPERIENCES

Adverse Childhood Experiences, or ACEs, are potentially traumatic events that occur in childhood (0–17 years). ACEs have been at the forefront of many articles, TED Talks, and studies. [California’s Surgeon General, Nadine Burke Harris, is one of the most notable experts on ACEs today.](#)

Examples of ACEs include

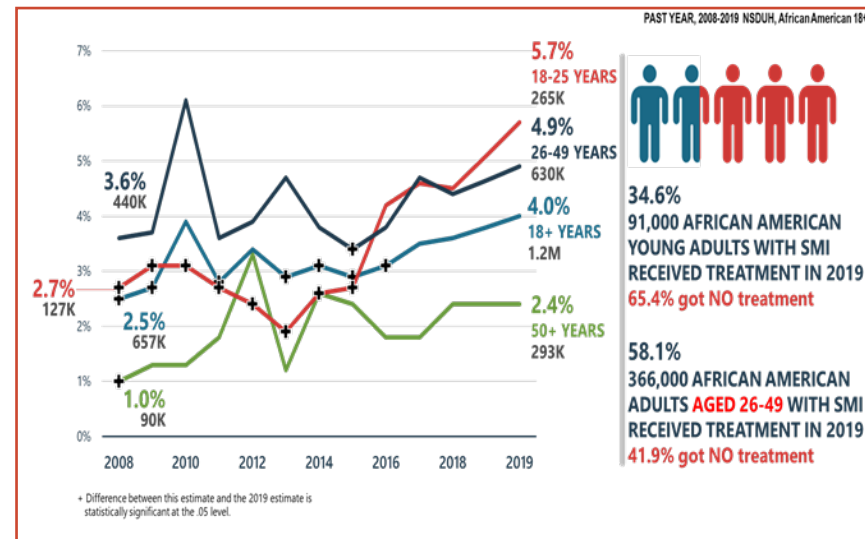
- Experiencing violence, abuse, or neglect;
- Witnessing violence in the home or community; or
- Having a family member attempt or die by suicide.

Key Transitions for Youth Experiencing SMI, SED, Homelessness

Youth of color experience numerous difficulties that are unique to their development. Meanings, expectations, and attitudes around their race/ethnicity are high on this list. The extreme difficulty in the search for adulthood experienced by increasing numbers of Black youths is nonnormative and has far reaching implications, such as teenage pregnancy, substance use, violence, and other antisocial behaviors, which are manifestations of these implications that must be addressed from a developmental perspective. In addition to the typical transitions' Black youth experience, a subgroup of Black youth will experience additional transitional, often traumatic events that impact their development.

Black girls make up 23 percent of all girls in foster care but are the largest group (36%) of those experiencing more than 10 placements in the system (Freeman, 2021). Youth in the foster care system have higher rates of substance use and mental health disorders. Despite having access to case management and other services to address needs, there is a substantial gap in meeting the needs of these youth (Pinckney, Outley, Blake, & Kelly, 2011).

The question here is how we provide interventions that will support youth during these times to provide them with ego strengths—and how will we support those who are even more vulnerable because of their increased likelihood of experiencing trauma?



Interventions

Addressing Key Needs to Support Positive Identity and Rites of Passage

PYD, while embraced in many sectors of youth work, has faced criticism for its primary emphasis on positive personal change and adaptation, without a strong emphasis on social justice and culture, which is especially relevant for African Americans (Ortega-Williams & Harden, 2021). Research indicates that stronger ethnic identity is related to better outcomes in areas such as academic achievement and mental health, so it is important to provide youth in foster care with opportunities to develop their ethnic identity (White et al., 2008). So, what can be done?

- Increase cultural awareness
- Identify what is culturally relevant
- Place people of color in roles that are pertinent to programs (not just in peer roles)
- Understand development associated with cultural identity of youth

“For some Black/African American groups, the cultural arts—visual, musical and drama—were an important participatory process for emotional expression, tapping into traumatic memories, and getting sense of meaning and resilience outside of the SUD (substance use disorder).” (SAMHSA, 2020)



Rites of passage programs are a systematic series of lessons, workshops, and discussions that provide youth of color with a better understanding of who they are by educating them about their ancestry” (Pinkney, et al., 2011).

Rites of passage cover elements that are supportive and correlate positively with the development of Black girls. Rites of passage are diverse and are found in many cultures around the world. While many western societal rituals may look like rites of passage, some of them miss the important structural and functional components.

According to Janusz and Walkiewicz, “The rite of passage concept introduces a structural model for resolving the problem of disrupted sequence of life experiences. The mechanism for this is to introduce a sequence of successive, but isolated phases of the change in progress and to finalize it in the form of engagement: transition to a new state” (2018).

In many Native and Black communities, traditional rites of passage programs are conducted by community-based organizations such as The Brotherhood Sister Sol.

Examples of programs and organizations that use a rites of passage framework include:

- Black Greek letter fraternities and sororities,
- [The Black Girl Tribe](#) programs (Formation Con, SILHE, and the Ujima Collective), and
- [The Brotherhood Sister Sol Rights of Passage \(ROP\)](#).



Conclusion

While PYD is a great practice in working with youth, it is imperative that we look at all theories, practices, and interventions and reflect on how this will impact targeted youth. Black girls are often forgotten and often feel excluded as the world does not reflect them. Based on this text there are so many additional struggles that society has placed on the shoulders of our Black girls and as providers it is our role to place cultural relevancy at the forefront of these experiences. Providers must work consciously to not perpetuate the societal trauma induced by their identity. This is not done by just doing what we think works but by observing, utilizing, and uplifting Black girl voices to help them in reaching their fullest potential.



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