



A woman with dark, curly hair is shown in profile, looking towards the right. She is wearing a black sleeveless dress with a vibrant, multi-colored pattern. She stands in a field of tall grass and numerous bright red poppies. The background is a soft-focus landscape with trees and a cloudy sky.

## about **this** guide

This guide was developed to assist public and private child welfare staff in their work with prospective and current African American foster, adoptive and kinship families. It is important to remember that there is no “one size fits all” description of African American families. Rather, African American families, like all families, are diverse with various beliefs, values and socioeconomic categories.

### **Acknowledgements**

This guide was developed through interviews with public and private agency staff, as well as through focus groups held with African American foster, adoptive, and kinship parents throughout the United States. The authors of this guide wish to thank the families and agency staff who contributed their time and feedback to the creation of this guide.

# a historical perspective

The term “African American” or “Black” refers to United States citizens of African descent. African Americans share a common historical tie to Africa, to experiences of slavery, indentured servitude, discrimination, and most importantly, a long tradition of resiliency. Additionally, African Americans represent those of different cultural backgrounds, specifically immigrants from the Caribbean Islands and African nations.

According to the 2000 U.S. Census, 13% of the United States population identify themselves as Black or African American. Over half of African Americans

live in the South (53%), while 37% live in the Northeast and Midwest, and 10% live in the West. The majority of African Americans reside in metropolitan areas, with only 15% of African Americans residing in rural areas.

Although African American children were excluded from the public child welfare system until the mid-20th century, informal networks of caring for children have always existed within the African American community. For instance, in many African American communities, informal adoption was and continues



to be more commonly practiced than legal adoption. In an informal adoption, a caregiver may take over childcare responsibilities while still acknowledging the role of the biological parent. Likewise, kinship care is very common in the African American community. In kinship

- arrangements, a relative may take
- over the day-to-day care for a child
- temporarily. Today, an estimated
- two million African American
- children are raised by grandparents,
- aunts or uncles, brothers and
- sisters, cousins and others who are
- not formal relatives.



# strengths of african americans

For many years, the African American experience included episodes of discrimination and hardship; however, it is also characterized by individual and collective strengths that have enabled many African Americans to survive and prosper, often against enormous odds. According to Robert Hill (1999), these strengths include:

- **Strong Kinship Bonds**

Strong kinship relationships with extended family members provide an important source of strength for many African American families. Kinship networks for some African Americans may extend beyond “traditional” bloodlines and may include those not directly related to the family.

- **Strong Religious Commitment**

For many African Americans, religion is an important sustaining element in their lives. Religion provides for the spiritual needs of many African Americans and has traditionally provided a source of socialization, education and social support.

- **Adaptability of Family Roles**

Historically, African Americans have demonstrated a great deal of flexibility and adaptability in regards to family roles. Rather than having specific roles, family members fill whatever role is needed at the time, whether it be working outside the home,



doing chores to maintain the home, or caring for the children while a parent works. This adaptability may become particularly evident in times of crisis, such as when a parent is hospitalized or becomes ill, or when a parent must be separated for other reasons.

- **Strong Achievement Orientation**

Within African American culture, there is a great emphasis on self-improvement and achievement, not only for individual gain but also for the

advancement of African Americans collectively. Traditionally, African Americans have viewed education as the most respected and effective mechanism for achieving upward mobility.

In addition to these strengths, another very important strength which can especially impact work with prospective foster, kinship, and adoptive families is “individual and community self-reliance.” Many African American families are accustomed to being independent, doing things for themselves, and making their own way. This resourcefulness could play an important role in making it possible for foster, adoptive, and kinship families to find the support and services they need to care for their children.



## tips to remember

Cultural competency is a journey to embrace, versus a destination to be reached. As you work on increasing your awareness of the history, strengths and characteristics of African American families, it will be important to keep the following tips in mind:

**First**—Remember, your job is to listen, support, and coach prospective parents to help them succeed as foster and adoptive parents. Recognize that parents, not social workers, are responsible to care for the children 24-7, and your job is to empower them to be the best they can be.

**Second**—Engage experienced resource families as team members in recruitment, training, family preparation, and post-placement activities to support and nurture new families through the system. This will lift your burden somewhat and you will feel supported as well.

**Third**—Be vigilant about recognizing your own cultural, racial, social class, and personal biases. We all operate out of our unique perspectives,

experiences, beliefs, and value systems. Preconceived notions and attitudes may cause us to be less effective and create barriers to forming positive, productive relationships with those who differ from us in terms of race, class, culture, etc, including African American families.

**Fourth**—Be a team player. Establish and maintain strong peer relationships, so that handoffs and case transitions can occur with seamlessly for families. Do your own part in a timely manner so parents are not delayed in the process of fostering and adopting. Advocate for regular cross-functional meetings to reinforce the organization's mission and beliefs and plan better processes and handoffs to achieve the right goals.

**Finally**—Simply try to do your best. When you develop good rapport and respectful relationships with your resource parents, consider them part of the team and help them grow in autonomy and competence, you are more likely to reap more satisfaction from your work and have the results you desire.



## additional information

For additional information about the diverse history, strengths and characteristics of African American families, see the following resources:

Coach, M.E. (2007). Child welfare perspectives and approaches with African American children, youth, and families. In N.A. Cohen, T.V. Tran, & S.Y. Rhee (Eds.) Multicultural approaches in caring for children youth and their families (p.75-113). Boston, MA: Pearson Education.

Cole, E.R. & Omari, S.R. (2003). Race, class, and the dilemma of upward mobility for African Americans. *Journal of Social Issues*, 59, 785-802.

Harris, M. & Skyles, A. (2005). Working with African American Children and Families in Child Welfare Systems. In Barret, K. and George, W., (Eds.), *Race, Culture, Psychology and Law* (p. 91-104). Sage: Thousand Oaks, CA.

Hill, R. B. (1999). *The strengths of African American families: Twenty-five years later*. Lanham, MD: University Press of America.

McAdoo, H.P. (Ed.) (2007). *Black Families*. Sage: Thousand Oaks, CA.

U.S. Census Bureau. (2001). Profiles of general demographic characteristics. Retrieved from <http://www.census.gov/prod/cen2000/dp1/2kh00.pdf>

U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. (2003). *Answering the Call: Getting More Parents for Children from Your Recruitment Efforts, Practitioner's Guide*. Retrieved from <http://www.adoptuskids.org/images/resourceCenter/practitionersGuide.pdf>

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