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THE  
Child

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issues of being a scholar, which some—sometimes most—of their peers do not associate with being African American. Thus, a need to support a strong racial and ethnic identity theme arises again. This personal identity serves as a buffer as African American adolescents face challenges or life decisions associated with being an adolescent and an African American. While there is no shortage of research that characterizes some versions of African American culture as currently standing in opposition to academic achievement, the few empirical studies that have measured racial identity in African American adolescents or used a historical analysis to examine African American achievement patterns have noted that students who have a positive racial or ethnic identity tend to do better than students who do not. Additionally, students who are cognizant of historical legacies associated with African American achievement tend to perform at higher levels academically than students who are oblivious to this history.

In conclusion, understanding the lives of African American children has to be done within a perspective that includes an analysis of their overall development, an examination of their socioeconomic conditions, and an understanding of how these two factors interact within a larger sociocultural context, seen historically. In some ways, African American children do not differ from other children of other racial or ethnic backgrounds. All children have developmental milestones that characterize their lives. However, these universal milestones are often not considered when policies and research agendas are set for African American children. Unique challenges associated with the historical legacies are often not considered simultaneously with understanding race-related interactions in the United States. This is not to say that federal policies such as affirmative action are outdated. In contrast, these policies might need to be updated to include the distinctive effects of persistent, diminished intergenerational transmission of socioeconomic improvement among some sections of the African American population. Researchers and practitioners must pay attention to historical research and include innovative new questions that simultaneously address the many facets associated with African American life. In doing so, a well-rounded picture can be drawn of the lives of African American children, their families, and the communities in which they reside.

*Michael Cunningham and Samantha Francois*

**SEE ALSO:** Affirmative Action, Children and; American History, Childhood and Adolescence in; Clark, Kenneth B(ancroft); Education, Discrimination in; Racial Discrimination; Ethnic Identity; Race and Children's Development

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**AFRICAN SOCIETIES AND CULTURES, CHILDHOOD AND ADOLESCENCE IN.** With 53 countries and more than 900 million people, more than half children and youth, the African continent is incredibly vast and diverse. This article will inevitably be both general and selective but hopefully will provide a sense of what broadly characterizes children's lives in many places in sub-Saharan Africa. It is also important to remember that, although this account is of black African society, there are also European-, South and Southeast Asian-, and Arab-descended communities in sub-Saharan Africa who have lived in Africa for generations; they are also African.

Children grow up in African households in local communities. Until the most recent generations, those communities consisted of kin who participated in subsistence tasks and struggled with economic survival. Such communities had a rich religious life and complex political relationships and systems, ranging from kingdoms in West and southern Africa, chiefdoms throughout Central and East Africa, and kin groups throughout the subcontinent. African children still participate extensively in horticultural and mixed-farming subsistence economies, and, in a few isolated areas, in foraging and hunting. They are engaged in cattle keeping, intermittent wage labor (with remittances to rural areas), trade, small-scale trading and commerce, as well as all manner of business, government, and educational or health care work. Children in the many densely packed, vast urban slums and periurban settlements struggle to survive in Africa today.

But African childhoods still often begin in these local homesteads, where a cooking pot is shared, people sleep in the same compound or house, and parents and children depend on others for security and safety. This is where children learn who can be trusted and how to find their paths in life. Families and children in Africa have built rich and vibrant ways of life based in such village worlds.

Of course, African childhoods are changing dramatically as cities grow, poverty persists, wars and conflicts ravage communities, and health is threatened. Africa has been described as the "except for" continent: Most of the world has been economically growing, except for Africa. Across

the subcontinent, African parents and children face public health crises, food insecurity, low or negative economic growth, and the decline or loss of critical infrastructure. The African family has been affected. Multigenerational families are weakened, community moral standards have changed, fewer households are economically viable, and family members have dispersed to cities, to neighboring regions, and into a global diaspora. Local cultural and religious traditions are less often practiced. The language of hearth and home remains important, but African children grow up in a remarkably multilingual, language-fluent world—one particularly fostered in cities, schools, and the media—in which children routinely switch from a tribal language, to one or more lingua franca, to a European-origin language.

Before turning to some of those problems, however, it is important to think about African childhoods as they have been in recent decades and continue today as well. African children, parents, and families, of course, are deeply affected by these often disastrous regional, national, and global crises. Nonetheless, families still retain connections by blood, marriage, and adoption; they share cultural, economic, and psychosocial tools for adaptation.

African childhoods are rich in socially distributed ways of raising children. A child is born to parents who care for and provide for the child, of course. Those parents are, in turn, linked to many other kin, and they and all their children are also possible caregivers for that child at various points in development. The widely used phrase “it takes a village to raise a child” originated from experiences in African communities. An important pattern in African communities involves kin care for children. Siblings, cousins, and adopted children often care for other children. Girls are more likely to do this, though boys take on the task, too. African children might be living with their parents along with kin from the father’s side, or with kin from the mother’s side, or they may be migrating back and forth.

In West Africa and elsewhere, there are customs of child fosterage. Parents foster children to other kin who may be able to provide more opportunities for children to attend school, learn a craft, or assist in a business or learn a skill that can provide a better economic future than parents believe they can provide themselves. Sometimes, children are fostered simply to better ensure that the children will be safe or have a reliable food supply, though fosterage can lead to neglect or exploitation as well. Adoption and child lending are also widely practiced. Adoption serves often to benefit the adopters as well as the child and the natal family. Child lending, in which children spend some period living with a relative, often helping with child care and domestic tasks, is also valuable to adopters. The elderly now are being pressed into service to care for their grandchildren and others, because their own children have migrated, been forced out of their community, or died from AIDS or

other diseases. In the past, elders might have expected to rest and enjoy respect and recognition from their children and grandchildren. These patterns of parenting and childhood are grounded in a deep appreciation and affection for children that is so evident in Africa, as well as from the value of children as resources to help struggling households survive.

African communities are gender-separated in many ways. Boys and girls well into middle childhood may live, play, and work together, and they usually attend the same schools (though they may sit in different sides of the classroom or in different rooms). Yet in many ways that affect children and parenting, boys and girls are separate. Women provide the mothering for infants and children through middle childhood in most of Africa, with assistance from their own and other children and female kin. Single mothers face these challenges without male partners. But more often, although men are providing financial support and help with child care when they are home, they are frequently away seeking work. A father’s own kin may be available to help with child care, even if fathers are not. Women remain responsible for maintaining their households and providing for the everyday needs of their children.

Maternal workloads in much of Africa are heavy and unrelenting. These demands on women have become nearly impossible to meet in many places in Africa today. Whether surviving on horticulture, trading, teaching, and other wage work in the health, education, business, tourist, and manufacturing economy (which millions of mothers participate in), these are working mothers, just as African mothers always have been working. For most children, particularly for girls, their mothers and most female role models are very hard working, and most are to be found in the domestic, school, and trade or business worlds. Fertility and completed family size have been relatively high in most of sub-Saharan Africa for several generations. Six to eight surviving children per woman has been common in most African regions, and four to six is common today. Hence, there are still many children available to help manage and sustain the household, and children are important for family subsistence.

Along with gender, age and status are still important in organizing a child’s life. Appropriate respect and deference to elders continue to be important values. In addition, African communities have historic distinctions based on clan or lineage rank, chiefdoms, and kingdoms, and service obligations are important for children’s social opportunities. Of course, the status that comes with income, political power, wealth, education, high religious standing or office, or military and police or other power increasingly overwhelms these older distinctions.

The economic history of Africa has encouraged trade and migration between African tribes as well as with Europe and the Arab world. West African kingdoms flour-

ished during periods of trade with North Africa across the Sahara. The East African coast was connected with the Arab coastal states long before European contact with Portugal. Therefore, long before colonial Europe divided up African regions, and Christian missions and settlers established themselves, African families were familiar with internal wars and aggression, the taking of territory, trade and commerce, Islam and migration, and separations from kin.

African children continue to make a significant contribution to domestic tasks and child care for family survival. Mate choice, marriage, and the having of children often occur for youth before they have formed a separate household. The new parents and their children find ways to form their own separate household subsequently but may well continue to live with kin. The U.S. model is far different. There, offspring are likely to leave home without much domestic and child care experience, then form their own households with peers, then find a mate and marry, and only then have children and start caring for them.

How can one best characterize the goals and values, hopes and dreams that parents and children have in Africa? Surely, they include safety and security for their families, a stable economy of which they can be a part and in which they can live well enough, with food security and decent health care. An important goal for parents is to train their children to help with survival and to succeed in a very harsh and difficult material and social world. African emotional bonds are expressed more often nonverbally, with less verbal, public expression than U.S. children might experience. African mothers train children to attend respectfully and listen closely to adults' words (social attention and comprehension), with somewhat less verbal production and public display than U.S. parents might encourage. Parents still value the social behaviors and moral standards for children that have long characterized African communities: obedience, respect for elders and kin, vigorous motor skill and physical activity, quiet and attentive public conduct, hospitality, generosity and a good-heartedness toward others in ones' group, a deep social intelligence about kin and community, precocious interdependence, and early competence. Long-admired African traditions of storytelling, singing, drumming, and dancing remain vital for children.

At the same time, parents now value behaviors that they think will help their children in schooling and in the new kinds of jobs and state economy around them: cleverness, quick and school-relevant cognitive skills, verbal and literacy-related talents, public displays of confidence, inquisitiveness, bravery, boldness, and action in the world. Of course, children in households surviving in bare subsistence circumstances without future security need all the skills that they can have. So parents, if ambivalent perhaps about public boldness and cleverness, also want and admire such cognitive, personality, and behavioral patterns in their children. Across all economic and community groups,

African children have been, on average, rated positively on such characteristics as respect for authority, independence, nurturance, maturity, affability, and interpersonal flexibility—all highly valued and specifically socialized in many African societies.

A variety of ceremonies marking important maturational and developmental transitions have also characterized African childhoods. Ceremonies marking the transition from middle childhood and the juvenile period into adolescence are widespread across Africa. Boys and girls are taught special adult religious and tribal knowledge, including specialized secret songs, ceremonies, and lore exclusive to men or women. The group of children initiated together, and the uncles, aunts, parents, and others who arrange and participate in these ceremonies, create important lifelong relationships. Circumcision of boys can accompany initiation, though it is more infrequent today, and to a lesser extent it is a factor for girls. Boys are expected to show unflinching bravery throughout the surgery and process of recovery as they become young adults who can marry and take on new responsibilities.

Girls are expected to show similar stoicism and bravery if they have initiation ceremonies and circumcision. Female surgery varies widely in type and extent and the age when it occurs. Some African women and men believe their body is more beautiful after being modified, that sexual drives are better controlled and chastity, modesty, respect, and honor better protected as a result of the initiation. At the same time, infibulation and more severe, extensive forms of genital surgery can lead to medical complications, and surgery can be forced on girls. There is active debate, including political and legal conflicts, over whether female genital surgery should continue and, if so, in what forms among many groups around the world and within Africa.

There are many circumstances that create and sustain these rich traditions. The marking of puberty, fertility, and marriageability are important in communities where historically child mortality was high and bride-price paid by the groom's family to the bride's, and where the new spouse's labor may have helped a husband's family, and surviving children sustained the lineage, clan, or broader kin group that was the basis of collective survival.

These are all characteristics of African children's social behavior, emotional expression, work and competence, and development that broadly characterize many African lives compared to other communities around the world. These are still present but dramatically changing with the crises that beset so many parts of Africa in the early 21st century.

There are many problems of health, poverty, and hunger that face children and families in sub-Saharan Africa. The United Nations set a goal of reducing child mortality around the world by two-thirds by 2015; of the 62 countries that are making little or no progress toward that goal, 46 (75%) are in Africa. One in six children dies before age 5;

49% of these deaths occur in Africa, despite the fact that only 22% of the world's children are born there. Pneumonia, diarrhea, malaria, malnutrition, and HIV/AIDS are serious and endemic. Basic community health (water and sanitation, immunization, vitamin supplements, early and exclusive breastfeeding, mosquito netting to prevent malaria, and HIV prevention and treatment) remains poor.

The focus on mortality of children younger than age 5 misses what in some ways is the even greater importance of improving the life pathways for older children, teens, and youth in Africa. Mental health concerns, drug and alcohol abuse, homelessness, unemployment, and the loss of possible pathways toward a life of well-being all face tens of millions of African children today. Well-being is the engaged participation of children in the activities their family and community deem desirable and that provide some meaning and hope to achieve their goals. In spite of local African values and hopes, children's hopes for well-being are far too often thwarted.

African families and children increasingly face complex, often catastrophic emergencies that then lead to long-term suffering: armed conflicts, population displacement, food insecurity, mortality, and malnutrition. Families and children are unprotected from such chronic violence and chaotic change. And then there is HIV/AIDS. Fifty-seven percent of the 23 million African adults with the disease are women; 2.3 million children are infected. The United Nations estimates that about 16 million children will be orphaned due to AIDS by 2010 in Africa. Socially distributed care cannot possibly support such numbers. No intervention or program, no matter how well intended and implemented, will have strong impacts if it cannot be sustained by the community and become part of the lives of the family. Programs that use local workers, such as mother-to-mother programs or community care groups (complementing national health care initiatives), have been shown to be effective in African communities for that reason. Local knowledge of family and child life will continue to be essential to supporting and improving the well-being and quality of life for African families and children in the coming decades.

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**SEE ALSO:** Child: Historical and Cultural Perspectives; Islamic Societies and Cultures, Childhood and Adolescence in

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**AGGRESSION.** When children are furious or wish to pursue their social goals, they hurt peers by harming them physically or by disrupting their social relationships. Aggression is defined as behavior that is intended to harm another and is perceived as harmful by the victim. Much research on children's aggression has examined physical fighting, but recently other behaviors have been proposed as meeting criteria for aggression. Called indirect, relational, or social aggression, these behaviors harm others by disrupting friendships and social status.

#### PHYSICAL AGGRESSION

Physical aggression is evident in the second year of life. One longitudinal study of children in Canada found that according to mothers' reports, 47% percent of boys and 37% of girls sometimes engage in hitting, kicking, or biting. For most children, levels of physical aggression decline steadily through the preschool and elementary school years, such that by age 10, only about 10% of girls and 15% of boys are described as sometimes hitting, biting, or kicking. However, some few children persist in engaging in physical aggression into adolescence, and by the age of 10, the propensity for physical aggression is a highly stable trait. Developmental trends in groups' levels of physical aggression must be understood in light of individual differences in physical aggression, and vice versa.

Why do some children persist in engaging in high levels of physical aggression toward peers? Research suggests that there may be a genetic component for physical aggression and that several temperamental characteristics may be related: negative emotionality, difficulty, flexibility in adapting to new situations, activity level, self-regulation, and reactivity. Parental socialization may also influence children's physical aggressiveness. Coercive cycles occur when parents respond to children's noncompliance by giving in, such that extreme noncompliance is reinforced. Parenting styles characterized by low levels of warmth and high levels of verbal hostility and punitiveness may be associated with physical aggression toward peers. Children who experience harsh parenting may be likely to develop negative biases in how they process social information that contribute further to aggressiveness. Aggressive children are prone to hostile attribution biases, interpreting ambiguous, personally relevant information as negative and threatening, which makes them hypersensitive to social slights and likely to lash out. Children who fight tend to get into problems with particular other peers; much childhood aggression takes place within dyads.

The social consequences of aggression in childhood de-