

A Pilot Study Evaluating the Parent Proficiencies Questionnaire for African American Parents (PPQ-AA)

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African American students are particularly at risk for academic underachievement, and research has demonstrated that parenting practices have a huge impact on student academic performance. The Parent Proficiencies Questionnaire for African Americans (PPQ-AA) is a novel diagnostic tool that was designed to assess parenting practices among low-income African American parents/caregivers in relation to their child's academic performance, using a culture-centered strength-based approach. The purpose of this study was to assess the utility of the PPQ-AA for assessing academic achievement, as measured by attendance, grade point average (GPA), and mathematics, science, as well as reading scores on the Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test (FCAT), in low-income African American parents of fifth grade students. Correlation analyses and exploratory multiple regression analyses were conducted in a sample of 10 African American parents. Findings showed that only attendance and PPQ-AA score were correlated. Perhaps, even though African American students are attending classes, educational hegemony negatively impacts their GPA, and mathematics, science, as well as reading scores on the FCAT. Implications and recommendations for counselors are discussed.

Keywords: African American, parenting, culture-centered, academic achievement

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES; 2011), as early as the third grade African American students demonstrate significantly lower performance in reading, mathematics, and science, compared to their White counterparts (Aud et al., 2010). Many studies have assessed the impact that parental behaviors (e.g. behaviors in the home environment, discipline/support behaviors) have on student academic achievement (Fan & Chen, 2001; Hill & Taylor, 2004), and have found that parenting behaviors correlate with increased academic performance (Porter DeCusati & Johnson, 2004). However, much of the literature on African American parenting has been deficit-oriented, focusing on student weaknesses that require remediation and familial deficits that necessitate parent education (McNeal, 2001; Schwartz, 2002). This approach has been the popular one because parenting practices that “work” have been assumed to be the same across ethnic groups, comparing all parenting practices to the approach used by White parents. However, African American parents parent differently from White parents, but this difference does not necessary mean they are parenting in ineffective ways. This assumption has led to the marginalization of the African American population in many ways, including as it relates to their parenting practices.

The *Parent Proficiencies Questionnaire for African Americans* (PPQ-AA) is a newly developed diagnostic tool that has been designed to assess parenting practices among low-income African American parents/caregivers in relation to their fifth grade child's academic performance. Due to the novelty of the scale, the psychometric properties of the scale are unknown. The items that make up the instrument were taken from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Class of 1998-99 (ECLS-K), a nationally norm referenced database collected by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES; 2001). The PPQ-AA is a unique assessment tool, as it seeks to utilize a strength-based, culture-centered approach to parenting assessment. By utilizing this approach, the researchers of this study are intentionally taking a collaborative, strength-based approach to enhancing parenting proficiencies in an African American parent population. The researchers of this study seek to determine whether or

not the PPQ-AA is a valid predictor of school achievement, as measured by: school attendance, Grade Point Average (GPA), and scores on a standardized state achievement test (Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test, or FCAT).

Statement of the Problem

African American students are particularly at risk for academic underachievement compared to White students (Braswell, Lutkis, Grigg & Santapau, 2001; Weiss, Lutkus, Hildebrant & Johnson 2002). There is a disproportionality of African American students compared to White students in special education. Nationally, African Americans represented 18.3% of students placed in the special education category of specific learning disability, 26.4% in the category of serious emotional disturbance, and 34.3% in the category of mild retardation; although African Americans represented only 14.8% of the overall population (US Department of Education and Office of Special Education Program, 2001; Office for Civil Rights, 1999). Townsend (2000) reported that African American students had higher rates of discipline referrals, suspensions, and expulsions compared to White students. These disciplinary actions often lead to other effects, such as grade retentions, school drop out, and academic collapse that widen the current existing achievement gap between African American and White students (Cartledge, Tillman, & Johnson, 2001). Given these findings, understanding the parenting practices that contribute to high academic achievement in African American students is important so targeted interventions can be developed to close the achievement gap.

Parenting Practices & Academic Achievement

Current literature has demonstrated that parenting practices significantly impact student academic performance (Epstein, 1990; Mandara, 2006). Parenting proficiencies that affect student academic performance include parent involvement, the home environment and parent discipline/support (Fan and Chen, 2001; Feuerstein, 2000; Hill & Taylor, 2004). Parental involvement refers to interactions between the parent and school that involve communication with the school's personnel, and routine, non-mandated visits to the child's classroom or school community (Epstein, 1990). Parenting proficiency in the home environment involves cognitive and behavioral activities performed by the parent/caregiver that encompass support and facilitating their child's performance in the classroom (Growlnick, Benjet, Kuroski & Apostleris, 1997). Finally, discipline and support refer to an authoritative style of parenting that couples firmness with warmth and caring (Dornbusch, Ritter, Liederman, Roberts & Fraleigh, 1987; Park & Bauer, 2008; Steinberg, Dornbusch & Brown, 1992; Steinberg, Elmen, & Mounts, 1989).

Many studies have assessed the impact that parental behaviors have on student academic achievement (Fan & Chen, 2001; Hill & Taylor, 2004). Parenting styles have been assessed in terms of four attitudes: authoritative, authoritarian, permissive and neglectful (Turkel & Tezner, 2008). Specifically, research has demonstrated that children who are raised in an authoritative environment obtain higher grades than their peers who were raised in an authoritarian environment (Park & Bauer, 2008; Steinberg et al., 1992; Steinberg et al., 1989). Authoritative parents are identified as being warm, supportive and accepting while providing a necessary amount of strictness. However, authoritarian parents are identified as parents who practice a high level of control with low levels of acceptance. African Americans have been often labeled as having an authoritarian parenting style, and research has identified this style as one of the reasons for African American student underachievement. Permissive parents tend to have few rules and expectations, whereas neglectful parents spend little time with their children and offer no rules or support. In general, studies have previously provided inconsistent results across ethnic groups when investigating the impact of parental practices on student's achievement

(Chao, 1994; Leung, Lau & Lam, 1998), indicating that further research is needed to explore the reasons for these inconsistencies.

African American Parenting Practices

Prior studies on African American parenting have conceptualized African American parents as utilizing an authoritarian style of parenting and used this framework to explain why their children underperformed in school (Steinberg et al., 1992). Current research has begun to examine African American parenting in new ways, providing evidence to the contrary (Park & Bauer, 2008; Schwartz, 2002). Mandara (2006) reported that African American parents who use their version of authoritative parenting to teach their children about their cultural heritage gave their children the skills to achieve despite social barriers. Mandara (2006) suggest that African American parents should monitor their children's homework and limit playtime so African American student success increases. Given this new trend, research now needs to focus on the salient characteristics of African American parenting that lead to high academic performance.

Mandara & Murray (2002) utilized a typological approach for assessing African American family functioning, by classifying parenting styles into categories. However, currently there is no parenting instrument that is constructed specifically for African Americans to assess their parenting. Considering the impact that parenting has on student achievement, a diagnostic instrument that assesses parenting practices and offers parent suggestions for strengthening existing capabilities would prove a valuable tool for counselors and parents.

Culture-centered Counseling Theory

The researchers of this study used culture-centered counseling theory as a lens through which to develop the PPQ-AA. The assumptions of culture-centered counseling theory are: (a) that all human behaviors are learned and demonstrated in a cultural context and (b) that each culture is complex and dynamic (Pedersen, 1997). Culture-centered counselors make the client's culture their focus in counseling, as culture is the lens through which the client sees his or her life and draws its meaning (Pedersen, 1992). By taking a culture-centered approach, counselors can adjust their interventions and perspectives in a way that is suited for that culture. The PPQ-AA facilitates this process with parents. As a result, interventions and skills can be adapted for African American parents. The counseling process for African-American parents should provide clients with the opening to explore the meaning of their experiences (Harris & Ford, 1991). Addressing the parenting issues of low-income, African American parents requires knowledge of and sensitivity to their experiences. Seeking to analyze which parenting behaviors are correlated with high student academic performance, the researchers of this study hypothesized that the scores on the PPQ-AA would be correlated with school attendance, grade point average (GPA), and student performance on the *Florida Comprehensive Assessment Test*.

Methods

Participants

The participants in this study consisted of 10 low-income parents/caregivers of 12 fifth grade African American school children in a public school district, located in a suburban area within the southeastern region of the U. S. The data for 12 students were included in the study because one parent was the caregiver of three students. Among the total 10 participants in this study, there were nine mothers and one father. All parents had female students in the school district. One of the nine participants was married. Also, with the exception of one, all parents had a high school diploma, with four parents having achieved some college education and one parent having a college degree. The primary language in all households was English. Of those who reported their income, the range was from just under \$10,000 per year to \$39,000 per year. All

participants would be considered low-income given their annual income and the number of people who lived in their household. The small sample size hugely impacted the results of this study and limited the ability to conduct inferential statistics.

Measures

Demographic questionnaire. Demographic questions were asked that assessed parents' income, race, number of dependents, marital status, level of education, and primary spoken language at home.

Parenting behaviors. Parent behaviors were measured using the *Parent Proficiencies Questionnaire for African Americans* (PPQ-AA; West-Olatunji, Goodman, & Reid, 2008). The PPQ-AA is a diagnostic survey tool that was developed to assist low-income African American parents by identifying parenting skills that correlate with high academic achievement. The items that make up this instrument were taken from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Class of 1998-99 (ECLS-K), a nationally norm-referenced database collected by the National Center for Education Statistics (NCES, 2001). There were 38 "yes" or "no" questions on the questionnaire that parents were asked to answer regarding their parenting practices in the areas of *parent involvement*, *home environment*, and *discipline/support* for a total scale score. Sample items from the *parent involvement* subscale included, "During this school year, I (or another adult in my household) have taken it upon myself to contact my child's teacher or school?" and "I expect my child to attend college or graduate from college." Sample items from the *home environment* subscale included, "In the past month, I (or someone in my family) has visited a library with my child" and "My child does homework either at home or somewhere else outside of school five or more times per week." Sample items from the *discipline/support* subscale included, "I would give my child a *time out*." and "I would spank my child." The reliability of the PPQ-AA total scaled in the current study was 0.047, indicating a weak level of reliability that is probably a result of the low sample size in this study.

Procedure

The PPQ-AA utilized a pencil-and-paper format and was administered to African American parents/caregivers by graduate counseling students. Parents/caregivers were given the questionnaire in small groups or individual meetings. Parents/caregivers of fifth grade students were recruited in a variety of ways. More specifically, parents were sought out through their participation at school events, and by calling parents and seeking their participation over the phone, utilizing a school directory list (after permission was sought from the school administration). Parents/caregivers were informed that participation was voluntary with no monetary compensation and that there were no known risks involved. Informed consent gave researchers permission to access students' academic records from the county school board. These records included students' academic grades, disciplinary, and attendance history.

Data Analysis

Ideally, a structural equation modeling (SEM) confirmatory factor analysis (CFA) or a multiple regression analysis would need to be conducted to assess the validity of the PPQ-AA at predicting academic achievement in fifth graders. A power analysis using an online calculator (<http://www.danielsoper.com/statcalc3/calc.aspx?id=1>) recommended a minimum sample size of 122 participants to conduct a multiple regression analysis. However, given the low sample size there was a lack of the necessary power for this analysis. Means, standard deviations, and correlations were assessed in light of the inability to perform inferential statistics.

For exploratory purposes a multiple linear regression analysis was still conducted using the parent's score on the PPQ-AA as the independent variable and the students' fifth grade GPA, number of days present in their fifth grade year, fifth grade math, reading and science state assessment scores as dependent variables.

Results

Means and standard deviations were calculated for the independent and dependent variables (see Table 1). The PPQ-AA had a mean score of 21.29 ($SD = 3.76$). The mean GPA was 2.75 ($SD = .41$), which translates to a high “C” average GPA. The mean number of days present in school was 174.33 ($SD = 6.56$). The mean reading score on the FCAT was 302.25 ($SD = 54.51$), where 600 is the highest score possible and scores above 300 counted as passing the test. The mean mathematics score on the FCAT was 327.67 ($SD = 60.02$), where 600 is the highest score possible and scores above 300 counted as passing the test. The mean science score on the FCAT was 285.67 ($SD = 84.90$), where 600 is the highest score possible and scores above 300 counted as passing the test.

Table 1.

Means and Standard Deviations of Independent and Dependent Variables (N = 12)

Variable	<i>M</i>	<i>SD</i>
PPQ-AA Total Score	21.29	3.76
GPA (4.0 scale)	2.75	.41
Attendance (days present)	174.33	6.56
Reading score	302.25	54.51
Mathematics score	327.67	60.02
Science score	285.67	84.90

Correlations were also calculated (see Table 3). Days present in school and PPQ-AA score were significantly positively correlated $r(10) = .71, p = .01$. Although not discussed as a hypothesis, reading scores and mathematics scores were positively correlated, $r(10) = .58, p = .049$. Additionally, mathematics scores and science scores were also positively correlated, $r(10) = .70, p = .01$. For exploratory purposes, a series of multiple linear regression analyses were conducted to assess the relationship between PPQ-AA score and school achievement (see Table 2). A series of linear regression analyses was conducted with the PPQ-AA score as the independent variable and: (a) days present in school as the dependent variable; (b) student’s fifth grade GPA as the dependent variable; (c) student’s fifth grade reading state assessment score as the dependent variable; (d) student’s fifth grade math state assessment score as the dependent variable; and (e) student’s fifth grade science state assessment score as the dependent variable.

Table 2.

Results of PPQ-AA on School Achievement Variables

	<i>R</i> ²	<i>B</i>	<i>β</i>	<i>t</i>
GPA (4.0 scale)	.12	.04	.35	1.18
Attendance (days present)	.50	1.24	.71	3.19**
Reading score	.05	-3.17	-.22	-.71
Mathematics score	.10	4.97	.31	1.03
Science score	.02	2.73	.12	.39

* $p < .10$, ** $p < .05$

Table 3.

Correlations

	PPQ-AA	GPA	Attendance	Reading Score	Mathematics Score	Science Score
PPQ-AA	1.00	.35	.71**	-.22	.31	.12
GPA	.35	1.00	.47	-.26	-.07	.08
Attendance	.71**	.47	1.00	-.03	.16	-.03
Reading Score	-.22	-.26	-.03	1.00	.58**	.78*
Mathematics Score	.31	-.07	.16	.58**	1.00	.70**
Science Score	.12	.08	-.03	.78*	.70**	1.00

* $P < .01$, ** $P < .05$

The analyses showed that PPQ-AA score was a significant positive predictor of the number of days a student was present in their 5th grade year, $\beta = .71$, $t(11) = 3.19$, $p = .01$ with days present accounting for 50.4% of the variance in PPQ-AA score. Results of the linear regression showed that PPQ-AA score was not a significant predictor of GPA, $\beta = .35$, $p = .27$. Results of the linear regression showed that PPQ-AA score was not a significant predictor of a student's reading state assessment score, $\beta = -.22$, $p = .50$. Results of the linear regression showed that PPQ score was not a significant predictor of a student's math state assessment score, $\beta = .31$, $p = .33$. Finally, results of the linear regression showed that PPQ-AA score was not a significant predictor of a student's science state assessment score, $\beta = .12$, $p = .71$.

In sum, correlation analysis showed that the PPQ-AA was positively correlated with days present in school. Results of the exploratory multiple linear regressions showed that PPQ-AA is a significant positive predictor of only one of the five dependent variables, that is, days present at school. While the PPQ-AA did have positive beta coefficients for linear regressions on GPA, mathematics FCAT, and science standardized test scores, none of these were statistically significant in the current sample. The results indicate that further investigation with a larger sample size is needed to determine the strength of these relationships.

Discussion

For numerous years, there has been a deficit-oriented approach to African American parenting in the literature (Mandara, 2006). There has been scant research examining the role of African American parenting, relative to academic achievement, using a strength-based approach. (McNeal, 2001; Schwartz, 2002). Current research has suggested that the authoritarian parenting style has been shown to be the most effective parenting style with African American children (Mandara, 2006). Some items that one would expect to be authoritarian in nature on the PPQ-AA are items such as, "I use tough love to set boundaries and structure with my child" and "I spank him or her." However, even though some parents endorsed these items in this study, their children were not highly successful in the classroom, and only one hypothesis of this study was supported.

The goal of this study was to determine whether African American parents' scores on the PPQ-AA was related to low-income, African American fifth grade student success in the classroom, as measured by days present in school (attendance), GPA, and scores on the

mathematics, science, and reading portions of the FCAT. The study showed that PPQ-AA scores were correlated with days present in school (attendance). This finding was supported by a linear multiple regression. However, the study failed to support the hypotheses that scores on the PPQ-AA correlated with high GPA, and mathematics, reading, and science scores on the FCAT.

As expected, the results of the correlation analysis showed that PPQ-AA scores were positively correlated with the number of days (attendance) a student was present in school. A correlation between the PPQ-AA and this dependent variable indicates that scores on the instrument are related to school attendance, which is thought to be beneficial to students' academic performance. Research has shown that students who attend school regularly perform better academically (Nichols, 2003). Further previous research has found that African American students are particularly at risk for academic underachievement compared to White students (Donahue, Finnegan, Lutkus, Allen & Campbell, 2001; Lapp et al., 2002; Weiss et al., 2002). This finding was again supported in the current study where students had high attendance, but did not excel in the classroom, as shown by the mean 2.75 mean GPA of the 12 students in this study. Some students in the study were present at school 100 percent of the time, but were still underachieving. There are several possible reasons for this finding. This lack of classroom success might be created by teaching practices that are not culturally adaptable. Teaching is historically modeled after Eurocentric practices that might not work effectively with students from other ethnic backgrounds. For example, in White culture it is common for a teacher to be at the front of the classroom lecturing to students and then giving students practice exercises. In other cultures, more hands on learning (e.g. role playing, experiential activities, trips to the museum) have been found to be more effective.

This finding also indicates other possible signs of educational hegemony. The number of White families who are from low-income backgrounds is proportionately less than the number of Black families who are low-income (United States Census, 2010). This statistic means that more White students might have access to resources giving them the academic edge over their African American peers. For example, White students might have access to paid tutoring services outside of school whereas their African American counterparts do not. White students might also have more access to computers and other electronic media that aid classroom success. One of the questions on the PPQ-AA was, "Does your child use a computer at home to get on the internet?" Several of the parents in the study endorsed that this was not the case in their home. Given the necessity of computers today, this is a clear disadvantage.

The other hypotheses of this study were not supported. Scores on the PPQ-AA were not correlated with GPA, mathematics, reading, or science scores on the FCAT. Perhaps the reason for this result is the small sample size in this study. Other reasons for this might be that the questions are not tapping in to parenting behaviors that assist students with academic achievement. Perhaps, further research has to be conducted given the novelty of this instrument.

Limitations

There are several limitations in this study that might have affected results. First, the largest limitation is that the sample size is very small, as shown by the a priori power analysis, with only 10 parent participants and 12 students in the study. Perhaps if participants had received compensation, more participants would have been recruited. Second, (sample size aside) the outcomes of this study might have been different if parent involvement had been measured differently when assessing African American parenting styles. Previous research has provided inconsistent results comparing the impact of parental practices on students' achievement in the classroom across ethnic groups (Chao, 1994; Leung et al., 1998). Research has found that that children who are raised in authoritative environments obtain higher grades than their peers who were raised in authoritarian environments (Park & Bauer, 2008; Steinberg et al., 1992; Sternberg

et al., 1989) and have found most African American parents to be authoritarian parents, using this to explain why their children underperform in school (Steinberg et al., 1992). The PPQ-AA aims to be African American-specific and culturally sensitive, but the original questions were taken from the nationally representative ECLS-K dataset. This would mean the majority of people in the data set are White and as such questions are not culturally specific to African Americans. The questions might very well be assessing successful parenting practices of White parents. The researchers did not control for this potential problem by carrying out a qualitative study with the parents of successful African American students. Such a study would assess African American specific parenting that attributes to student success. In sum, the questionnaire might be measuring what it set out not to measure - the successful parenting practices of White parents.

Finally, there may be more to parenting than what the questionnaire asks. Parenting is not a simple affair and there is no one equation for success as a parent. As such, it is difficult to capture what parenting practices specially assist students in the classroom. Furthermore, there is variability across parents in what works for them and their child. There may need to be a revision to the questionnaire to fully capture what parenting styles promote high academic achievement. There is a possibility that the questionnaire is not measuring parenting behaviors and student success at all. Researchers might need to totally re-develop the questionnaire using other questions from the ECLS-K (2001) dataset, questions from another dataset or possibly questions developed from a qualitative study that they conduct. A qualitative study might include African American parent focus groups, where questions asked are about the items on the PPQ-AA and the parenting practices of parents of academically successful African American children.

Recommendations for Counselors

The results of this study could not conclude whether or not the PPQ-AA was a valid predictor of academic achievement in fifth grade students, due to sample size limitations. Currently, there is no parenting instrument of its kind available for counselors working with low-income African American parents. Since much of the research on African American parenting is deficit-based, an instrument that is strength-based would be useful in the field. This development might mean more successful outcomes for counselors who can facilitate strength-based discussion with parents to assist their students, using culture-centered approaches (Pedersen, 1992). Counselors can make suggestions to assist parents with their parenting in a way that parents welcome their feedback. For example, maybe a parent cannot figure out what he/she can do to help their child succeed. After completing the questionnaire and meeting with a counselor, a parent might decide to buy more books for their home and read with their child, or a parent might decide not to ignore when their child is disrespectful and address the issue of disrespect as it arises.

Results from the current study indicate that counselors should advocate for students who are attending school regularly, but not achieving in the classroom. Since this outcome is highly indicative of educational hegemony, counselors are bound ethically to assist students at the institutional level. Counselors can start this process by educating teachers about culturally sensitive teaching practices. Maybe the reason why these students are not achieving is because of the teaching practices being used in American schools. As stated previously, for the most part teaching practices in American schools are Eurocentric and would not work effectively with some African American students. Current teaching practices are based on a White framework. Teachers can then vary their classroom practices in a way that every student in the classroom benefits. For example, teachers might add some more hands-on activities or some more group activities, or maybe even use pictures for those students who are visual learners.

Also, counselors can advocate to administrators for students who they think could achieve but are not. Administrators might be able to require that teachers attend workshops that discuss culturally sensitive teaching practices. Administrators could require that teachers implement such practices and spend time observing teachers to ensure they take the task seriously. Continuing education credit can be offered for voluntarily attending workshops that promote culturally sensitive teaching practices.

Counselors can partner with parents to get appropriate programs in to their child's school that will assist those who should be achieving academically, but are not. This might mean offering an after school program where college students in the community come in to the school and provide free tutoring for students. Another possibility is organizing an after school peer homework program, where students are paired with someone in their grade, with whom they complete their homework on a daily basis. Finally, outside agencies can be brought in to teach teachers culturally sensitive teaching practices and how to treat students from other ethnic backgrounds in ways that have been shown to promote their success. Volunteer activities might be organized that allow students to leave the campus as a group and provide community outreach. This can be used as kind of hands-on learning for students that can supplement classroom instruction and help students succeed.

Finally, counselors can also refer parents to outside programs and agencies that might be able to help parents and their students for little or no cost. For example programs like *Upward Bound* and *Take Stock in Children* provide support and assistance to students from low-income households. *Upward Bound* provides tutoring, counseling and extra classroom support. It also provides opportunities for cultural education and pride. Many agencies in the community such as libraries offer workshops on student success and parenting skills that might also be helpful.

Future Research

The biggest limitation in this study was the sample size. Future research with the PPQ-AA would involve a larger sample with at least 122 parents. By increasing the number of parents in the study, we hope to have a clearer test of the proposed hypotheses. Compensation can be offered to parents who participate, as there was great difficulty recruiting parents to participate in the study. Also, recruitment methods can be altered. Researchers could partner with local agencies like the library to solicit participants. Researchers could also host events for African American history month or parent workshops that entice parents to attend, who can then complete the questionnaire. A qualitative study could prove useful in revising the questionnaire to be more culture-specific to African American parents. Also, if questionnaire feedback sessions for parents were successfully held after parents participated, parents might be able to help with question revision. Finally, an extension to a national study is suggested. The current study was conducted in only one school district in the U.S.

Conclusion

African American students in the United States are at an increased risk for academic underachievement. Parenting behaviors have been shown in the scholarly literature to impact academic achievement in children. Although scores on the PPQ-AA proved to only be correlated with the number of days a student is present in school, there is still possible utility to the instrument, because the sample size in this study was too small. Given the sample size of this study, inferences about the instrument cannot be drawn. The correlation between number of days present and PPQ-AA score does validate that counselors working with African American children have an important role to play in assisting and advocating for these children. By working with parents and building on parenting strengths, counselors can make positive changes in this disadvantaged population.

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