

LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE TWELVE-YEAR  
**AMERICAN PROMISE** PROJECT



JOE BREWSTER, M.D., and MICHÈLE STEPHENSON with HILARY BEARD

# PROMISES KEPT

RAISING BLACK BOYS TO SUCCEED  
IN SCHOOL AND IN LIFE

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to Succeed in School  
and in Life

**Joe Brewster, M.D., and  
Michèle Stephenson**  
with Hilary Beard



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“The truth is the light and the light is the truth.”

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RALPH ELLISON, *Invisible Man*

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# INTRODUCTION

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The year was 1998—when Google was founded, impeachment hearings against Bill Clinton began, Lauryn Hill sang about “miseducation,” and Jay Z rhymed about the “Hard Knock Life.” We were a young black family in Brooklyn trying to figure out how to get our soon-to-be-four-year-old son the education he deserved—one that would help him evade the pitfalls and limitations that tripped up so many black boys. One that would allow him to fulfill his potential.

We lived in the Clinton Hill/Fort Greene section of Brooklyn, New York, before gentrification—back when the community was more racially and socioeconomically diverse and bustling with artists: writers, actors, visual artists, and filmmakers like us. We had purchased a fixer-upper across the street from what would have been our neighborhood elementary school. Unfortunately, it was the sort of public school that is all too common in New York and other big cities: no one who had any other options would ever send their child there. So we began to explore our options for Idris, our firstborn son, who was then three years old.

Both of us had grown up in low-income families. Joe is from South Central Los Angeles and Michèle was born in Haiti (she is of Haitian and Panamanian descent). Michèle had attended predominately white public schools in Canada, where she had been teased for being different, called a nigger. She wanted Idris to attend a good public school, but one where he could have a multicultural experience and not be subjected to the racial isolation and teasing that she’d been through. Joe had gone to Crenshaw High in Los Angeles, which was public and predominately black and Asian. In college—at Stanford—he’d had to play catch-up academically. But at Stanford he was also exposed to exceptionally bright black students who arrived much better prepared than he was: He remembered a kid called Milwaukee, who could write an eighty-page term paper on the night before it was due, and another one who smoked weed but would still score highly on math exams. Joe envisioned Idris as Milwaukee meets math geek—preferably minus the marijuana.

Both Milwaukee and math geek had gotten a college preparatory, or prep school education. Prep schools operate independently from local school systems and receive their funding from a combination of tuition and donations, primarily from alumni. They typically offer more rigorous academics and smaller class sizes—*Forbes* lists some as having student-teacher ratios as low as 5 to 1—than you’ll find in even the best public schools.<sup>1</sup> Many cost around \$15,000 per year, but the most prestigious private schools now fall in the \$30,000 to \$35,000 range. If they are boarding schools, throw in another ten grand for your kid to live on campus. Needless to say, prep schools mostly educate the elite. For parents, the tuition is a steep investment, but the return for their kids is a superior education, a social network of elites, and average SAT scores north of 2000 on a 2400-point scale. Most prep school graduates go on to attend the top tier of colleges and universities.

That’s what we wanted for Idris. His test scores—in the top 3 percent—were high enough for a gifted and talented (G&T) program, but we were shocked to discover that New York City’s public G&T programs are almost exclusively composed of white and Asian, middle-class and affluent children. If we were going to put Idris in a predominately white, privileged

environment, we figured we might as well go all the way and get the full range of benefits prep school promised. Unfortunately, we didn't have private-school money. Someone directed us to Early Steps, a program that helps families of color with grade school-aged children connect with prep schools. When we asked the woman from Early Steps what schools were offering financial aid, she said, "Your son is a Dalton boy."

The Dalton School educates the children of New York City's elite, from the scions of the city's old-money families to the children of artists and others who have risen to the forefront of their fields. The school is also an academic powerhouse: Today, the *average* SAT score there is 2200 out of a possible 2400; the *bottom half* of the high school's graduating class has higher SAT scores than the *top twenty-five students* in most other schools around the country.

Joe went on a Dalton School parents' tour and came home insisting that Michèle visit right away. Michèle had been warned away from Dalton by a Jewish coworker who had gone there fifteen years earlier and had found it too elite and cliquish. But when Michèle went on the school tour, she was completely blown away by the school's commitment to fostering children's social and emotional growth, building self-esteem, and creating "passionate lifelong learners." Babby Krentz, the headmistress (a fancy name for a principal), told us that Dalton was also newly committed to making its demographics match those of Manhattan itself, which is roughly 50 percent non-white. When the school admitted Idris and offered us great financial aid, there was no way that we could turn the opportunity down. We had a son from Milwaukee, math geek, multicultural—and now money!

Idris was admitted to Dalton's third class under this new diversity initiative. It appeared that almost 25 percent of his class consisted of African Americans, Caribbean blacks, Latino and/or children of Asian descent. And the icing on the cake? His friend, Oluwaseun ("Seun" pronounced "shay-on") Summers, had also gotten in. Seun's parents, Tony and Stacey, were as excited and hopeful as we were. Our sons would have an experience available only to a privileged few—one that we dreamed would allow this black boy to bypass racism and achieve his human potential. Since he would be something of a pioneer, we were sure that our son would encounter racial prejudice, issues related to socioeconomic class, and other difference-related challenges. But we had overcome those issues, and Idris could too. We would help him. We promised.

## THE PRICE OF ADMISSION

In addition to being excited as parents, our inner filmmaker was thrilled, too. Wouldn't it be fascinating to film a documentary about diversity in this elite, historically white environment? we thought. It could be a longitudinal film similar to the *Up* series, which has checked in with fourteen British children every seven years beginning in 1964 (the most recent film in the series was *56 Up*, which was released in the United States in 2013). Perhaps we could follow a diverse group of kids through their twelve-year journey at Dalton.

We asked Seun's parents Tony and Stacey as well as the parents of two other students of diverse backgrounds—a white girl and a mixed Latina-Greek girl—and the school leadership at Dalton if they would be involved. They all agreed. We started filming at school, in our homes, and at various events in each student's life (recitals, birthday parties, and the like) for a few days each month. We had high hopes that our film would capture the possibilities that

diversity and a great education offered. But had we known then what we would document, we might never have picked up a camera.

Everything at Dalton started off well. In the beginning we shot the footage ourselves, which meant that we were in the classroom relatively often (the older the boys became, the more they resisted having us behind the camera). We were excited to see Dalton's imaginative approach and access to resources on display in the early grades, like when Idris learned about reproduction in kindergarten by studying, incubating, and raising baby chicks in the classroom. But it didn't take long for us to have some concerns. Just two weeks into first grade, Idris's teacher claimed that he was behind in his reading. The school wanted him to participate in special supportive reading sessions that would pull him out of the classroom. We were shocked! They had decided this based on observing him and without getting to know anything about Idris or his abilities. He had come in reading at a very high level and had continued reading at a high level. We thought they were awfully quick and just a little too comfortable in reaching that conclusion—especially when they offered nothing concrete as evidence. When we pushed back, they told us that we had not quite understood—if this had been public school Idris would be fine, but at Dalton his skills wouldn't cut it.

*Excuse you!*

It is still painful to remember how humiliating and poorly managed those early conversations were—and how naive we were in our belief that Dalton was prepared to educate *our* son. Coming from humble beginnings, neither of us were (or are) quick to throw our credentials around, but did the teacher know that we both were Ivy League graduates with graduate degrees? (In addition to being filmmakers, Joe is a Harvard-educated psychiatrist; Michèle is a Columbia-educated lawyer.) Did the school realize how much time we spent with our son? Did they know how much we read to him? Did they see how verbally Idris was (and is)? What if he had just not been feeling well on the day the observation was made? The reading support had begun right away, but we insisted to the head of the lower school that he not be removed from the classroom. We also asked that they reconsider the assessment. They realized that he didn't need reading support after all. This was one of several early incidents that were all somewhat ambiguous—we didn't yet understand the common roots in racial bias—but created enough of a pattern to make us feel defensive.

As if these sorts of incidents weren't bothersome enough, Idris and Seun were becoming unsettled emotionally. Some of Idris's classmates had interrogated him about whether his parents were rich or poor, which made him very uncomfortable. He decided that he didn't like the name Idris and wanted to change it to John or Tom. Apparently Seun had begun criticizing things at home that related to black people. One night he had brushed his gums until they bled—he wanted pink gums like the white kids' gums, not brown gums like his own. Add academic stresses on top of that. The level of rigor and learning was tremendous. Our sons were competing with the children of millionaires. On one occasion Seun vomited when the teacher called him to the front of the class. In second grade Seun and in third grade Idris began to struggle scholastically. Both sets of parents were surprised, since the boys' test scores up to that point had been very high. Idris now had trouble focusing. He would forget to bring home his homework; when he did his homework, he would forget to turn it in, or he would do well on his homework but get low grades on his tests. None of this made sense given how hard he was trying. The school suggested that we have him tested for ADD. W

didn't buy it. We were convinced that he was going through normal "boy stuff." We had heard many white parents talking about boys forgetting, getting distracted, or struggling with being organized—the same issues we were experiencing with Idris. We worried that he was getting picked on because he was black. In the end, it turned out to be more complicated than that—but we'll get to that story later.

Our concerns about Dalton's ability to handle the needs of a black boy continued to mount. When Idris was in fourth grade, the school had suspended him for two days for hitting another student, a boy who had also hit Idris but had not been punished. Adding insult to injury, the school had suspended our son for an additional day for allegedly lying about not hitting the boy. Idris insisted that he was telling the truth, and knowing a lot about how our son behaved when he lied, we believed him. Was Idris suspended because he was black and the other boy was white? Because the other kid's parents were among Dalton's benefactors and we weren't? For some other reason? There was no way to know. But our Spidey senses were tingling.

By sixth grade Dalton was sending us warnings that Idris was not performing up to the standard the school expected at his grade level. Our constant interventions—from homework help to assisting him to stay organized—helped him keep up, barely. Seun fell behind and was put on academic watch. The school suggested that Seun and Idris take advantage of tutoring that they offered to students on financial aid, which we did. Only later did we learn that the only two kids in the sixth grade seeing the tutor also happened to be the only two black boys. At first we were insulted. But then the school told us that they offered the free tutoring to help level the playing field—apparently our sons' classmates had been getting private tutoring all along; we just hadn't known about it. And not only had they been getting tutored for years, they had been getting tutored to the tune of \$20,000 to \$30,000 a year.

We were flabbergasted! Were they really telling us that a \$25,000-a-year education wasn't enough?! No wonder our sons couldn't keep up! We had stumbled across the inner workings of the Educational-Industrial Complex, a world where private tutors and test-prep classes help middle-class and (especially) affluent families customize their children's educational experiences, increase their children's study time, and maximize their children's academic capacities. Back then people were paying \$250 an hour for some of these private tutors. We couldn't afford that. (Today, we understand, the range is between \$400 and \$500 an hour. Imagine ...) Ultimately these tutoring sessions weren't enough, though. Both Idris and Seun needed more.

The emotional wear and tear on the boys was extremely hard to stomach. Idris was scoring in the 97th percentile nationally on sixth grade tests, but when he went to school, he felt like a failure. Seun hated school.

Idris was also struggling with identity issues. From time to time he would question himself about how he fit into the stereotypes that our society spins about black males—that they are dumb, criminal, violent, dangerous, and naturally gifted athletes and performers. It shocked us to learn that at times even Idris felt more capable of playing in the NBA than being a scientist, the latter of which was far more likely. As he moved back and forth between his predominately white educational environment and his predominately black community at home, we watched him struggle to *code-switch*—change his speech patterns and dialect as he navigated back and forth across cultures. One of his white basketball teammates at Dalton

was picking on him, but so were some of the kids on the mostly black team he played with on weekends, who had been bullying him and telling him he talked “white.”

Culturally, emotionally, and socially, Idris was struggling, and it was starting to look as though his spirit might break. We’d known that Dalton would exact an emotional price, but we were starting to think maybe that price was too high. Of course, we could always have pulled him out of Dalton, but we hoped not to have to do that. We had gotten him into the mess, and it was our responsibility to help him figure it out. In the meantime, one by one the families in our diversity film had dropped out of the project, except the Summerses. But Tom and Stacey were concerned about exposing Seun’s difficulties. We kept filming even though we no longer knew what our film would be about. Increasingly, the cameras were capturing the struggles, tears, frustration, and yelling that were becoming more common in our home—and the less picture-perfect side of Dalton.

## MIND THE GAP

We vowed to figure out how to help our son. We decided that we would start by talking to some psychiatrists about why so many black boys struggle during middle school. We also wanted advice on how to support Idris emotionally and academically: we wanted to help him get test scores that would reflect his level of effort, resist the very limiting and negative images of black males that the media was bombarding him with, and develop a healthy sense of himself that would allow him to navigate different environments and cultures.

Joe arranged a meeting with his mentor, the acclaimed black child development pioneer Dr. Alvin Poussaint, who is also a psychiatry professor at Harvard Medical School. We went with two goals in mind. First, we wanted to show Dr. Poussaint some of the footage we had gotten with Idris’s behavior—for instance, his efforts to try to fit in as he moved between middle-class and low-income black communities and then again between those black communities and the wealthy whites at Dalton—in the hopes that he could give us some advice on how to handle it. We also wanted to film the conversation with Dr. Poussaint. Our documentary was morphing into something that we couldn’t quite wrap our heads around, but we knew it would involve black boys. We had a feeling that Dr. Poussaint might end up being a part of it.

During the meeting, Dr. Poussaint described how stages of childhood development play out differently for black boys because of the unique challenges that they face. He made some parenting suggestions based on the footage—about fitting in, for instance. He suggested that the obstacles we faced were temporary and commonplace. Dr. Poussaint supported us and encouraged us to persevere. He also directed us toward a network of leading authorities on black boys, black families, and multicultural education. Among the experts we would eventually connect with were urban sociologist Pedro Noguera, a professor at New York University and an expert in education, black boys, and *achievement gaps*, the academic performance deficits that impact almost all black boys; Joshua Aronson, an associate professor at NYU known for his research on *stereotype threat*, a type of performance anxiety that can cause black boys in particular to test very poorly; Jelani Mandara, a professor at Northwestern University and an expert in black families and parenting styles; Ron Ferguson, the economics professor who heads Harvard University’s Achievement Gap Initiative, which

focuses on narrowing these types of academic gaps; and Sonia Nieto, a professor at the University of Massachusetts at Amherst, and an expert on teacher training and multicultural education. We already knew Ivory Toldson, an author, Howard University counseling psychology professor, and a senior researcher for the Congressional Black Caucus Foundation before being appointed in 2013 deputy director of the White House's Initiative on Historical Black Colleges and Universities. Since we were making a film, Dr. Poussaint recommended that we also write a book to extend the conversation. He told us that nothing about black boys had been published for a long time. But a book was the last thing on our minds. We were just hell-bent on saving our son.

Between the time Idris was twelve and the time he turned seventeen, we picked the brains of some of our nation's top minds in a wide variety of disciplines that relate to black boys. Some were blown away that we had captured on videotape several of the developmental and racial dynamics they had been researching and writing about for years. They suggested that the video we had compiled would be priceless in advancing the conversation about black boys. In fact, most let us videotape them sharing their expertise about black boys, even though we were still figuring out what our film would become. They also introduced us to some long-standing advocates in education and black male development—from the Black Alliance for Educational Options (BAEO) and the Center for Urban Families to the Coalition of Schools Educating Boys of Color (COSEBOC).

These experts helped us understand the magnitude of the problem. For example, they taught us that educational achievement gaps are not exclusive to race: they exist between rich and poor children, boys and girls, blacks and whites, whites and Asians, whites and Latino and American children and their international peers. In fact, the gap between low-income and affluent children of all races is growing exponentially, as wealthier parents invest in their children in ways that other families cannot compete with. We were particularly interested in the black/white gap, which was most visible in the often inexplicably low GPAs and test scores that black children tend to earn compared to their white peers. The gaps affecting black boys are particularly disturbing. We were shocked to learn the following things:

- On the 2011 National Assessment of Educational Progress test (also called the Nation's Report Card), only 10 percent of black eighth grade males were reading on an eighth grade level, as compared to 16 percent of Latino males and 35 percent of white males.<sup>2</sup> (Notice that even white boys are performing poorly.)
- In a study of more than 7,100 students attending 95 high-performing suburban high schools, 50 percent of whites and Asians had an A or A- grade point average, whereas only 15 percent of blacks and 21 percent of Hispanics did; 35 percent of black and 26 percent of Hispanic students had a C+ to C- average, but only 12 percent of whites and Asians did.<sup>3</sup>
- Black children are three times more likely to be suspended or expelled from school than their white peers—causing them to miss valuable classroom learning time, depressing their academic performance, and increasing the risk that they'll repeat a grade and eventually drop out of school. They are often suspended or expelled for minor or discretionary offenses like being tardy or using their cell phones.<sup>4</sup> Black kids represent 18 percent of all students, but 35 percent of students suspended once, 46 percent of those suspended multiple times, and 39 percent of all students expelled.<sup>5</sup>

Black boys comprise 9 percent of students but 24 percent of students who received out-of-school suspensions and 26 percent of students who were expelled, pushing them into what is known as the school-to-prison pipeline.<sup>6</sup> Not only do black students tend to get punished more often for the same offenses that white children commit, but when they do get punished they also tend to be punished more harshly.<sup>7</sup>

- Even though giftedness is evenly distributed through the population, black boys are 2.5 times less likely to be enrolled in G&T programs, even if their prior achievement demonstrates their ability to succeed. Once students are “locked out” of these programs and tracked into lower-level coursework in elementary school, they tend to remain there for the duration of their academic years. A strong correlation exists that links race, gender, class, and academic-track placement.<sup>8</sup>
- Black boys are no more likely than other children to be diagnosed with a learning disability but are almost 40 percent more likely to be placed in special education. Many black boys in special education *don't have a disability*.
- Black boys are 2.5 times more likely to be classified as mentally retarded. Black male students comprise 9 percent of the student population but 20 percent of all students classified as mentally retarded.<sup>9</sup>
- Only 52 percent of black male students graduate high school within four years, as compared to 58 percent of Latino males, and 78 percent of white males. This, however, reflects an increase of ten percentage points over the 42 percent four-year graduation rate in 2002.<sup>10</sup> Eighty percent of black males have completed high school or have gone on to obtain a GED.<sup>11</sup> Eleven percent of black males drop out, leaving more than two million black men in America without a high school education.<sup>12</sup>
- Black males disproportionately lack the resources and support to complete college. In 2008, 4.6 million black males attended college, but only half actually graduated. Nationally, only 11 percent of black males complete a bachelor's degree.<sup>13</sup> However, both the number and percentage of black males with college degrees are increasing.

We know that people often blame the victim when they see this kind of information and that some will wrongly interpret these facts as “proof” of black male inferiority. But institutional racism, entrenched institutional practices that create a concrete ceiling of opportunity for students of color, and structural and systemic obstacles—primarily poverty and underfunded schools—make it impossible for many black boys to get the education that will allow them to fulfill their potential. As the Schott Foundation for Public Education states in its 2012 report: “[We] firmly believe these data are not indicative of a character flaw of black boys and men, but rather they are evidence of an unconscionable level of willful neglect and disparate resource allocation by federal, state, and local entities and a level of indifference by too many community leaders.” Amen. These statistics reflect gaps in outcomes, but underneath them lie the many structural, systemic, cultural, and personal gaps—and failures—that our society seems not to want to discuss. There are gaps in wealth and income, gaps in the enforcement of drug laws and administration of criminal justice, gaps in employment, gaps in health, gaps in nutrition, gaps in school and neighborhood segregation, gaps in funding (particularly of urban schools in neighborhoods of color), gaps in teacher quality and experience level, gaps in the rigor of course offerings in certain schools, and gaps in media portrayals. There are gaps in the number of parents in homes; gaps in parent

education levels; gaps in social and cultural capital; gaps in the number of books in home; gaps in the hours of television watched; gaps in the expectations black parents have of their sons as opposed to their daughters; and gaps in levels of school involvement. And beyond that, there are gaps in educators' knowledge of the lives of black and brown children; gaps in know-how about how to teach black boys effectively; gaps in educators' expectations of black, brown, and poor children; gaps in society's understanding of black children's strengths and how to leverage them; and gaps in knowledge of how to parent or co-parent a black boy in a society that vilifies him. Uncomfortable, unconscionable gaps that we are all a part of and that compound over the course of children's lives.

## IT'S BIGGER THAN US

Since poverty contributes to some of these shortfalls, we assumed that neither the traditional achievement gaps nor the gaps behind the gaps affected middle- and higher-income black boys. Boy, were we wrong. Ron Ferguson, the head of Harvard University's Achievement Gap Initiative, tipped us to the fact that black middle-class and upper-income boys generally don't achieve to their academic ability either.

“One of the patterns in the data that people find most surprising is that the gaps in test scores tend to be largest among the children of the most educated parents,” Dr. Ferguson told us. “In the National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP), if we compare the test scores of the children of whites whose parents are college-educated with blacks whose parents are college-educated, there's a bigger gap than if you compare the test scores of children whose parents have less education.”

You could have picked us up off the floor. But the truth is we knew that even with Idris's relatively privileged background, he was struggling compared to his white peers and so were his friends. It was something of a relief to know the challenges we were experiencing were bigger than us. It was also distressing. Professor Aronson talked to us about how to help our son perform better on tests but he also told us not to be surprised if Idris still scored 100 points lower than his peers on each of the three portions of the SAT. We protested, but Dr. Aronson turned out to be right. Idris scored well, especially compared to the national average of 1500.<sup>14</sup> But he didn't reach 2200—the average Dalton score. The distance between those two scores is enough to keep a child from attending the college of his dreams. The question we still had to answer was *why*?

We learned more about the special social and emotional stresses faced by black boys in predominately white settings that are, at best, ambivalent about their presence. These stressors include feeling insecure, developing self-esteem issues related to whether they belong or are accepted, having to code-switch, experiencing implicit and explicit bias from their peers and teachers, and suffering from stereotype threat (don't worry if you're not familiar with all of these terms, we'll break them down later in the book). Both Idris and Seun were having these types of troubles. In fact, one of our most heartbreaking moments as parents was listening to Idris talk about being invited to bar mitzvahs at the time when many of his Jewish classmates were having them. He told us that he enjoyed them—except for the part when you have to dance with a girl. His female classmates wouldn't dance with him. This confused and hurt him deeply—he suspected that his race was the problem, which made



him wonder aloud to us whether he would be better off if he had been born white.

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## CANARIES IN THE MINE

But black boys' academic and emotional struggles don't occur in isolation. Education in the United States is in crisis—for all students. Students in Australia, Canada, Finland, Hong Kong, Shanghai (China), Singapore, and other countries have far surpassed American kids,<sup>15</sup> who now earn only average scores in reading and science and below-average scores in math on tests of student achievement internationally.<sup>16</sup> And the problems are especially acute among black boys. Beginning in early elementary school and continuing through their college years, girls are earning higher scores than boys and surpass their male classmates in graduating high school and college.<sup>17</sup>

There's an African American folk adage: "When white folks sneeze, black folks catch cold." At a 2010 conference about black males convened by the Educational Testing Service (ETS), Oscar Barbarin, Ph.D., the head of Tulane University's psychology department characterized black males as being like a "finely tuned barometer," a "canary in the mines" or an "early warning signal that things are not right" in American society. We were surprised to discover that conversations both about achievement gaps and about reducing the prejudice directed at black boys are taking place not only at Harvard and the Educational Testing Service but also at major foundations, in educational nonprofits, in schools, and across other diverse sectors of American society, public and private. Our leaders know that the nation's future depends increasingly upon children of color, that achievement gaps are undermining our competitiveness, and that creating an environment in which all children can excel is vital to our nation's success in a global economy. But while a lot of people have been talking *about* black boys, we think that more conversations should take place *with* black parents as well as educators. We didn't know about these gaps, or the gaps within gaps, or how to close them, and we were betting that many other parents—and a lot of our sons' teachers—didn't know either.

As we began to talk to various educational experts, we began to think that our film—which had evolved into an educational coming-of-age story called *American Promise* that would chronicle Idris's and Seun's educational journeys—could help spark a greater conversation about the barriers that all of our sons face and how to remove them. We envisioned viewers leaving the theater with concrete takeaways to implement in their homes, extended families, schools, churches, and communities. If a lot of people were willing to make one small change we imagined, maybe the collective impact would transform the environment surrounding our sons.

That's when we remembered Dr. Poussaint's suggestion to write a book. It would be criminal to hoard the information that so many experts had generously shared or to pretend that we had navigated our tough times on our own. Other black parents deserve to have the same information that we did. Imagine the possibilities! As one African proverb states: If you want to go fast, go alone; if you want to go far, go together.

## ABOUT THIS BOOK

In this book we will share what we learned along our journey that helped us to support our son in fulfilling his promise. We also reached out to more than sixty of the most accomplished researchers in the nation, experts who are performing cutting-edge studies on a wide variety of issues that impact the intellectual, social, and emotional well-being of black boys. Indeed, a lot is known about how to create an environment in which black males will succeed. Within these pages we set forth ten parenting and educational strategies that researchers have discovered can assist parents, educators, and other members of their proverbial “Village”—aunties, uncles, neighbors, coaches, youth leaders, faith leaders, and others—in helping black boys become the happy, healthy, well-educated, well-developed people they are capable of being. These ideas are intended to address both the achievement gaps captured by official government assessments such as the Nation’s Report Card and No Child Left Behind (NCLB) but also some of the gaps that lie beneath these gaps.

We share these strategies through the lens of our personal experiences raising Idris and Miles and through the stories of other black parents and boys from many different backgrounds, including Tony, Stacey, and Seun. To protect their privacy, we have masked the identifying characteristics of most of these parents and children, except in the final chapter where some activists and advocates asked us to use their real names. For similar reasons we do not include the names of the educators who have shared the joys, challenges, and heartbreaks they’ve experienced while teaching and co-parenting our sons. We do, however, credit the many academic and medical experts whose research and ideas have informed the strategies. Importantly, although they strongly impact the outcomes of black children’s lives, we will not delve into the social, political, economic, or historical factors that have resulted in unearned privilege for some and unearned disadvantage for others, including depressed black male achievement. Experts ranging from Michelle Alexander, to Lisa Delpit, to Arundhati Hilliard III, to Jonathan Kozol, to Carter Woodson and some of the scholars we’ve interviewed can do a far better job of shedding light on these topics than we can. We encourage you to educate yourself.

To our surprise, even before we finished writing *Promises Kept*, we started to receive feedback about it. A lot of folks wanted to swap horror stories, but three concerns surfaced repeatedly:

- Why were we writing a book about black boys when black girls are struggling also?
- Why were we writing a book only about black boys when boys of all races and backgrounds are in crisis?
- And why were we airing black people’s and Dalton’s “dirty laundry” in an era when our nation has elected a black male as president—not once but twice—and the school has been so progressive?

In response, we say that we hope that *Promises Kept* helps improve the lives of all children, but in our household we are raising black males. The questions we asked, the information we gathered, and the advocacy in which we engaged pertains directly to our sons. That said, many of the ideas we share transcend race, gender, and color. We encourage you to apply whatever seems relevant to your own experience, no matter the background of the child you are parenting or teaching. When possible, we include information about black girls (whose well-being is closely intertwined with that of their brothers) and Latinos, who often face

challenges similar to black boys' (also, through Michèle's ancestry, Idris and Miles have Panamanian heritage). In the few instances where data include mixed-race children, we report it, although children of many backgrounds can be classified as mixed-race. And while we don't buy into the stereotype of Asians as a "model minority," in certain areas Asian children set the performance standard. When it makes sense and the data are available we include them in the statistics.

What about the question of dirty laundry? The Dalton School has provided our son with an amazing education, has been a forerunner in providing a diverse independent-school education—today the number of students of color at the school has significantly increased since Idris started kindergarten—and were very generous to allow us to film at the school although as with everyone else, there were times they backed out. No institution is perfect and Dalton, with its tremendous resources and emphasis on critical thinking, has a great capacity to absorb, benefit, and grow from the critique they receive from us. In fact, Dalton still has a lot of growing to do. While it is critical—especially as the nation's racial demographics are changing—that independent schools increase the number of diverse students they educate, that is only the first step.

Particularly in elite schools such as Dalton, but also in our public schools, deeper conversations need to occur with parents of all backgrounds, not just the parents of color whose children are entering predominately white environments. White parents need to understand that diversity is not a one-way street; diversity benefits their children as well. And schools need to advance beyond entry-level activities such as celebrating our respective heritages. School leaders should be encouraging critical thinking and the unpacking of issues such as white privilege, the impact that stereotypes and racial bias have on children of all backgrounds, and the important role that affirmative action plays (especially come college application time)—and not just with the students, but with parents and faculty also. These are difficult conversations, but are an integral part of reducing the racial achievement gap for students who go this route.

At the same time, more than a few middle-class and affluent black parents have worried aloud to us that drawing connections between their sons and lower-income black boys may cause their sons to experience more stigma than they already face. Indeed, we have encountered a surprising amount of resistance from middle-class black parents, many of whom hope or believe that their socioeconomic status, education, good job, great school, and nice neighborhood can insulate their sons from the structural and systemic difficulties plaguing other black males. And they are probably right to a certain degree, but as we discovered firsthand—and as the experts that we cite throughout the book attest—this is largely wishful thinking.

"It's not just poor black boys who are having problems, it's black boys," says developmental psychologist Aisha Ray, senior vice president for academic affairs and dean of the faculty at the Erikson Institute, a graduate school in child development located in Chicago.

In fact, we've concluded that parental denial is one of the greatest risk factors facing middle-class and affluent black boys—and we admit that we suffered from it.

"It's a horrible head game we're playing," Atlanta-based sociologist Adria Welcher put it. "There are not enough markers that you can possess that will make a predominately white

affluent community welcoming of too many of you, even if you're the highest of the high income."

Well said.

And the truth is, Barack Obama may be in the White House, but most black middle-class parents we talk to eventually confess to being worried about something that's going on with their boy. As one suburban Atlanta father told us: "Our daughters are doing well in school, going on to college, and being successful in their lives. But black DeKalb County's secret lament is, 'What's happening to our sons?'"

Even though they are still children with immature and still-developing intellectual, emotional, and social selves our sons are not merely the victims that we may want to portray; they are active participants in life who make choices. At one point or another, some do behave in ways that Dr. Noguera says can "make them complicit in their own failure." For instance, Dr. Welcher told us about black boys who had grown up in suburban McMansions but had internalized a criminal identity from the media—and were breaking into their neighbors' homes.

We hope that by making ourselves vulnerable and by being transparent, we will spark a fresh, frank, and thoughtful conversation about race and gender that doesn't cast aspersions, play the "race card," manipulate (or avoid) guilty feelings, recycle played-out platitudes, or conform to worn-out social conventions. Some of the ideas we share may feel unfamiliar to people who aren't black or of color; people who may not engage in such discussions often; folks who may not even see themselves as a member of a racial group; or those who may not have realized that they experience racial, cultural, or skin-color privilege, for instance. Still, enough nonblack educators have told us that they want to become more effective at educating diverse children. So we feel very optimistic about the prospects honest dialogue holds.

As one white school psychologist told us, "At my school we are just starting to talk about these types of things. We have more diverse students than we have had in the past, and haven't always known how to handle the issues that come up. I want to do a better job."

We believe that she speaks for many.

## **EMBRACING CHANGE**

Joe's training as a psychiatrist taught us that if we talk about uncomfortable topics, step outside our comfort zones, quit worrying about what others will think about us, and use guilt to motivate ourselves rather than paralyze ourselves, we can grow and overcome being stuck. On many different occasions, the truths that we have had to face about ourselves, our sons, our family, our approach to parenting, our educational system, our community, American society, and our world have made us very uncomfortable. But we're learning and growing from them in a way that helps us to advocate not just for our own black boys but for other people's children as well.

Knowing how much we have grown makes us feel very optimistic about the amount of change that we can achieve collectively. Change is extremely difficult, of course, and it's best undertaken as the maxim describes: one bite at a time. We should expect to encounter resistance—you may resist, your son will definitely resist, his Village will resist, society will

resist. Resistance, opposition, and even haters are all part of the change process. Human beings are wired to embrace ideas that feel comfortable and familiar and resist those that require change or extra effort. However, that we live under the gravitational pull of a certain worldview doesn't mean that we shouldn't jump from time to time or attempt to build an airplane, space shuttle, or create some new way of catapulting ourselves into a universe of undiscovered ideas, possibilities, and solutions.

At the ETS conference, Dr. Barbarin informed the audience that although “black boys respond more negatively and have greater deficits when environments are poor and deficient when those environments improve they show the greatest gains. If we improve things for them we improve them for everyone.”

Consistent with this, we think that it's time to stop thinking of black males as a problem and instead start seeing them as solutions to many of the challenges America faces. Rather than only seeing them as being “at risk,” we think we need to see more of their promise.

We hope that you learn something in *Promises Kept* that helps you enhance a black boy's environment, whether you are a parent, a grandparent, a teacher, a school superintendent, a coach, a faith leader, a tutor, the head of a nonprofit, a social service provider, or the president of a corporation. Together we can improve the life trajectories of many children and help them unleash their potential to transform our world.

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# 1 CLOSE THE GAP BEFORE IT OPENS

## How to Make the Right Choices for Your Son—Before He’s Even Born

It was an accident, but understanding how things work, maybe it wasn’t really an accident. I could have been more careful. I took a “morning after” test but was torn about my desire to become a mom. I already had one abortion back in my twenties. I’m thirty-five now; I want to get married and have a family. But my biological clock is ticking, and I haven’t met the right man. I can work on myself, but I can’t manufacture a partner.

Some of my friends who are my age and a little bit older are starting to have problems conceiving and are starting in vitro fertilization. One of my girlfriends is forty-three and just devastated about her inability to conceive. That scares the crap out of me. I don’t want to be that woman. When my boyfriend and I didn’t use a condom a couple of times, I figured we both knew what could happen. Even though I have to admit I didn’t think I would really get pregnant because my doctor had told me some things during my twenties that made me doubt if I was even fertile. When I found out that I was actually pregnant, I panicked.

When I told my boyfriend, he basically told me that I was on my own; he didn’t want me to have his baby. We weren’t exactly in a committed relationship, and he already has a child. That’s what happens to a lot of my girlfriends—they get pregnant and the guy gets scared because he has kids or doesn’t have enough money or doesn’t want the commitment. Dudes run. That’s what they do. I’m choosing not to judge or blame myself or demonize him. There wasn’t any animosity between us before I told him I was pregnant. Maybe he’ll change his mind sometime in the future. In the meantime I’m having the baby. My family has already told me that they’ll support me.

—Janelle, age 35

## A TIME OF HOPE, A TIME OF ANXIETY

We know that for many couples—women, in particular—pregnancy is a time of great anticipation but also of fear. No one can protect the unborn fetus from every risk factor, but there are choices that both expectant mothers and fathers can make to reduce some of the biggest risks.

In this chapter we will share information that will help black mothers- and fathers-to-be

make lifestyle choices before conception and during pregnancy that lay the foundation for strong and stable brain:

- We'll talk about the important role that mom and dad's health play in determining the quality of egg and sperm.
- You'll learn how nutrition builds a fetus's brain and learn about foods that support brain development.
- We'll also talk about the important role men play before, during, and after pregnancy in determining the strength of a baby's brain.
- We also hope to shine a light on some challenging topics in the hopes of sparking fresh dialogue—kitchen table conversations in which partners, family members, babysitters, childcare providers, caregivers, and others can roll up our sleeves and work together to create new solutions that help our sons get a head start on the achievement gap before it gets ahead of them.

Promise your son that you will set him up for success by getting healthy before you conceive, taking parenting classes, obtaining early prenatal care, preparing to breastfeed, and otherwise making lifestyle choices that increase the odds that his life will get off to the start he deserves.

## A SIGN OF THE TIMES

He loves to play peek-a-boo, pull himself up in front of the entertainment center, and jabber with you as though he's making a point. Although nine-month-old children can't yet tell what's on their mind, if you test their cognitive abilities—which at that age include the ability to explore, make sounds, gesture, and solve problems—children of all races and backgrounds tend to perform pretty similarly.

“Around the age of one, there aren't many differences,” says Ronald Ferguson, head of the Achievement Gap Initiative at Harvard University's Graduate School of Education.

But when child development experts test their skills at age two, developmental differences begin to clearly emerge. Smaller percentages of black, Hispanic, and Native American children than white and Asian children are proficient in communicating, understanding what they're told, discriminating between different objects, and knowing their counting words and quantities. So even before black boys have been potty-trained, we see early indications of an achievement gap.

Surprisingly, these differences span the socioeconomic spectrum.

“It doesn't matter whether they're high-income or low-income,” said applied developmental psychologist Iheoma Iruka, of the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill, while speaking at a conference on black boys and the achievement gap convened by ETS.<sup>1</sup>

The gap widens by preschool, when experts can test early language, literacy, math, and numeracy (the ability to understand and work with numbers) skills. By the time black boys are between ages three and five, they lag behind white children by “about half a grade,” says Dr. Iruka.

“By age two, the differences start to become apparent, and we think it has to do with early childhood parenting and early-childhood experiences more generally,” Dr. Ferguson says.

The experts are quick to admit that they don’t have all the answers, and the answers they do have don’t apply to every child—although, as you’ll learn, these statistics apply to more children than you might think. What they do know is that a child’s experience as a fetus and during his first months as a newborn, when his brain is developing at an explosive rate, sets the stage for his physical health, ability to think and learn, and emotional well-being for the rest of his life.

## THE GREATEST WONDER

Of course, our brains all begin in the same truly wondrous way. During the first hour following conception—long before women have any idea they’re pregnant—their baby’s brain and spinal cord have already started growing, and an intricately choreographed dance of cell forming, neurons firing, and structures forming has started to unfold.

During the first few weeks after conception takes place, the neural tube—the precursor to the brain and spinal cord—begins to form. Shortly after it closes, at the four-week mark, immature brain cells begin to proliferate. At this point the mother may still not know that she’s pregnant.

Next, a phase of rapid cell migration occurs as immature cells differentiate themselves and travel to their designated locations, where they take on their preprogrammed roles.

“Think of it as cells taking the subway to a stop,” says Charles Nelson III, chair of pediatric developmental medicine research at Boston Children’s Hospital and professor of pediatrics and neuroscience at Harvard Medical School. Once a cell reaches its destination, “then the cell matures, which means it starts to be capable of forming connections with other cells—synapses,” he adds.

The cortex—the wrinkly outer covering—of a baby’s brain begins to form between the sixth and twenty-fourth weeks. The first synapses begin to appear a little after week twenty. And if a fetus survives to the twenty-fourth week, it reaches what’s called the age of viability. If a fetus survives for this long, the chances are good he will live. At this point most doctors will intervene to save a fetus’s life if something goes awry.

The next phase of brain development occurs during weeks twenty-five through forty (the third trimester), as synapses proliferate and *myelination*, the process of coating certain neurons (nerve cells that send and receive messages) with an electrically insulating substance, takes place.

Synapses continue to form, and myelination occurs even after a baby is born and into late adolescence.

“When you insulate these circuits, the efficiency gain is a factor of one hundred,” says David Grissmer, research professor at the Center for Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning at the University of Virginia. “But if you don’t build the circuits and get them myelinated, they’re inefficient when you use them later.”

The *cerebral cortex* and *cerebellum* explode during the final twelve to sixteen weeks. The cerebral cortex is responsible for thinking, feeling, conscious experiences, voluntary actions, and memory. The cerebellum processes movement, balance, posture, coordination, muscle



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