The family has always been a major strength in the African American community. We have a long and proud history of expanding our homes to include extended family, or even chosen family, in times of need. Even today when we struggle with increasing rates of teen pregnancy and single parent moms, grandparents and aunts and uncles play an important role in taking care of the children who too often fall through the crack of a disinterested system.

Yet, we have some major concerns. In 2007, 72% of African American babies were born to unmarried mothers. And the teen pregnancy rate, having gone down for several years, is on the rise, increasing 5% between 2005 and 2007. Our young black men have high school dropout rates of more than 50% in some cities. While African Americans make up 12% of the population, they make up nearly 44% of the prison population. These issues are related: over 80% of all prisoners are high school dropouts.

We all know these are difficult economic times. People are losing their homes, their jobs, and their savings. It is always those on the bottom of the economic scale who suffer the most. As family’s needs are increasing, public services are being slashed in response to the lack of funding on all levels.

Even in difficult times, the family can provide an oasis and a place where children can grow to become strong, resilient individuals. It was back in 1922 that Langston Hughes penned his classic poem, “Mother to Son,” with the lines:

Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.
But all the time I'se been a-climbin' on,
So boy, don't you turn back. Don't you fall now --
For I'se still goin', honey,

In order to help our children climb, we need to start early – before the children are born. It is crucial that women receive prenatal care from the start, to obtain both physical and emotional support during their pregnancy. Once the child is born, it is important to provide a warm, nurturing home. It does not take money to interact with your infant. To a child, everything in the world is a toy. Sing to your child, tell stories, and read to them regularly.

Most importantly, be patient. Raising healthy children requires that the home be a safe place, not a place where children are hit. Parenting is a very challenging job – and if parents are stressed by inadequate social support, financial hardships, and other trials, it can be hard to remain calm when children act up or are fussy. Sometimes it necessary to simply leave the room. Americans have a long history of using physical punishment on our children. It is particularly common among African Americans. Some have speculated that this may be seen as a legacy of slavery. Slaves were beaten into submission, and they in turn beat their children to make sure they were “obedient” – particularly around potentially brutal white racists.
Physical punishment doesn’t work the way parents want it to work. In the short term, the child will stop the behavior. But in the long run, they do not learn self-discipline; they simply learn not to get caught. They also learn that violence is an appropriate response to conflict. These are not the lessons we want our children to learn.

Too often parents hit children out of their own frustration and anger and this can easily escalate into abuse. It is not just the physical assaults that cause harm – psychological and verbal abuse can be just as damaging. Recent research has demonstrated that chronic abuse actually damages the brain. This is not the way to raise healthy children.

There is a significant difference between punishment and discipline – what we want to do as parents is to teach discipline. Children need to learn the consequences of their behavior, and have consistent rules and expectations. It is also important to reward good behavior and give children choices whenever possible. These approaches help children learn how to control themselves and manage themselves in the world when you are not around.

It is also important to be aware of the culture our children are living in. Our children are inundated with corporate driven media as never before. We live in a world where children are drowning in hyper-sexualized and violent images. Families need to be vigilant in limiting and countering these messages. Our boys and girls are bombarded with advertisements for fast food which contributes to the devastating obesity epidemic that threatens their health and well-being. They are constantly receiving the message that they need more products and services in order to be attractive, and that every need they have can be met with the latest item for sale. This push toward consumerism leads too many of our children to become self-centered and value things over people.

Our young men and women are particularly vulnerable to the gansta rap, thug, images that are glorified in the popular media. It is very sad that too many still believe that to be authentically black they have to be “street.” The images in videogames are increasingly realistic and disturbingly violent. Young people can spend hours each day involved in on-screen battles.

The African American family has a lot of challenges, as has always been the case. It has many strengths as well. We need to build on those strengths by supporting one another, advocating for improved services to the poor, and pushing our government on all levels to eliminate discrimination that continues – even in these glorious days – to limit the opportunities for our children.