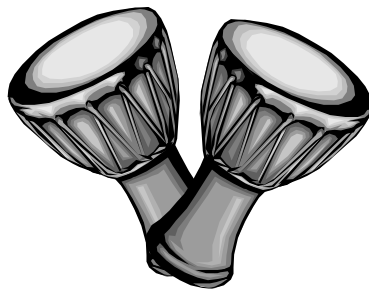


**Domestic Violence Across the Lifespan of African Americans:**



**Children**



## **Domestic Violence Across the Lifespan of African Americans: Children Introduction**

*Ms. Joyce N. Thomas*

As we think about the issues of domestic violence across the lifespan of African Americans, we must start at the beginning—that is, when we were children. It is well documented in the literature and the popular press that who we were as children has set the foundation to determine who we are or will be as adults. For over 2 decades, I have had the good fortune to work with children and families from around the world. I have recently returned from South Africa where I had the opportunity to witness first hand how children from different continents often live very different lives. However, in spite of these differences, all children share a common need for love, family support, nurturing, protection, physical care, and cognitive development. We know that the family is the first and most critical exposure to life and development of children. As a society, we must believe that children are valuable for our future, and we must teach them well and let them lead the way.

As we observe both the elements of traditional intervention practices and the alternative or creative popular cultural strategies to address violence against children, we must reflect first on the realities of childhood and the potential devastation of various types of violence that children often encounter. Violence against children is an everyday occurrence in the African American community, as in many other communities throughout the world.

Each year in the United States, over 2 million children are reported to child protection agencies because they are victims of physical abuse, sexual assault, or are seriously neglected by their parents or caregivers. An even larger number of children suffer from verbal abuse, poverty, gang violence, and witnessing violence in their homes. However, these numbers are difficult to count. Communities are numb, and many African American children grow up feeling that violence is an accepted part of life.

As we close our eyes and think about ourselves during our own childhood or of our children today, many perceptions may come to mind. We often speak of their innocence, fragility, vulnerability, or softness. The specialization of pediatrics has taught us that though they are viewed as small human beings, clearly they are not “little adults.”

Children need to be safe and protected, have freedom and space to grow, be given the opportunities to play and learn, and they must be valued. They must overcome challenging milestones in their development as they progress from infancy, to being a toddler, pre-school age, latency age, puberty (adolescents), and finally into adulthood. Children are often considered to be very sweet, helpful, trusting, fun loving, and happy. These are the lucky ones. Many children who are chronically exposed to violence or experience violence directly reflect images of their childhood.

When children are raised in violent households, the risk of physical and emotional trauma is dramatically increased, and intervention strategies of traditional mental health services, as well

as creative expressive approaches, can aid in the healing process. Abused children often appear to be fearful, angry, sad, anxious, and emotionally traumatized. They seem to have sadness in their faces that is reflective of their feelings of hurt, loss of innocence, and sorrow. Yet we cannot forget that children can be very resilient in spite of experiencing many adversities.

Whether by traditional approaches or through the use of popular culture—using dance, music, art, video, or expressive drama—our interventions must be designed to help them heal, move on with their lives, and reach for their dreams.

The intent of this plenary session is to examine traditional mental health interventions and to learn about alternative popular interactive strategies for engaging children in anti-violence messages. Presenters for this session are Dr. Gloria Johnson-Powell, a child psychiatrist who is a Senior Fellow at Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago; and Ms. Sarah Crowell, with several youth performers from Destiny Arts Center, an Oakland, California-based program committed to teaching youth alternatives to violence through jazz and hip hop dance, theater, martial arts, and self-defense.

## **Social and Cultural Context of Domestic Violence in the African American Community: Consequences for Child Development**

***Presenter:***

Gloria Johnson-Powell, M.D., Sc.D.  
Chapin Hall Center for Children  
University of Chicago  
Chicago, IL

Research in the area of family violence has shown unprecedented growth over the past 2 decades (Finkelhor, Hotaling, & Yllö, 1988; Reiss & Roth, 1993). At the same time, definitions of domestic violence have expanded from solely spousal abuse to include elder abuse, child abuse, or any victimization of a family member by another—with family being defined in its broadest context. Indeed, the most recent headlines across the nation have highlighted the phenomenon of patricide and matricide by minor children, which gives an even more pathological and chilling aspect of domestic violence. The focus here is on family violence and its specific consequences for the psychosocial development of children, as well as the implication for increased incidence of developmental psychopathology and the social health of African American communities.

Research on the consequences of marital conflict is helpful in explaining the effects of family violence on children and has included data on situational determinants of competent parental functioning, the precursors of delinquency, and the adjustment of children after marital disruption or divorce. Each of these factors indicates that discordant and inharmonious marital relationships, including common law arrangements, adversely affects child development. Children are impacted by witnessing conflict between significant adults in their lives, experiencing diminished parental efficacy from caregivers, seeing inappropriate models of interpersonal behavior, and deprivation of the nurturance and support that are contingent on parents' well-being.

Information on the effects of marital conflict also enhances our understanding about the subsequent behavioral problems that emerge and are left unattended or unrecognized by beleaguered or distressed parents, including antisocial and/or aggressive behavior and difficulties in cognitive functioning. Further, such data provide insight into unstable family structures that result in foster placement, instability and impermanence in family membership, and instability in interpersonal relationships, as well as a diverse array of psychological disturbances linked to family instability, continuous marital conflict, and separation from parental figures.

There is some indication that a secure relationship maintained over time with at least one adult is a fundamental precursor and correlate of later competence (Garbarino & Ebata, 1983). Resiliency and risk factors also impact developmental psychopathology, and there is a tendency to predict pathological outcomes for all children in difficult environments. However, an Institute of Medicine report suggests that children can be quite resilient despite incredible risk factors. The pathways of the risk factors may be associated with genetic or biological conditions, as well

as with the duration, intensity, and timing of noxious stimuli. There are also protective factors that result in resiliency, and the dosage and timing of these factors are particularly important. Equally important is the correlation between the temperament of the child and the context or environment in which the child's development is occurring. What one child can tolerate may be poisonous to another child, and vice versa. Indeed, it is important to focus on the developmental stages of children, the developmental tasks to be accomplished during each stage, and the noxious stimuli that may derail developmental processes. Early child development warrants attention because there is a prevailing view that infants and toddlers do not understand as well as older children, and so they are not affected by family problems or family conflicts.

The human infant is dependent on nurturance for a longer period of time than any other mammal. Society tends to ignore this basic fact, hurries children in their development, and discourages the dependency needs of very young children. As outlined in David Elkind's (1987) *The Hurried Child*, many communities regard infants and toddlers who seek adult attention as "spoiled," and parents are labeled "over indulgent" when they respond. Often such chiding is inappropriate for children and the parents, for children less than 2 years of age cannot convey their specific needs in words and can only alert us to their needs by signaling distress.

Rine Spitz (1952) studied infants in orphanages and noted the high incidence of anaclitic depression. Infants in orphanages who were not cuddled, hugged, and engaged in play with a consistent adult stopped eating, became listless, and died by 6 months of age, even though their physical health was not impaired. In an infant orphanage in Uganda, Spitz implemented a "hugging" and "lap time" program and used volunteers to come sit and play consistently with the same infants for 3 to 4 hours a day in an effort to prevent the depression and death of young infants. Such studies are important in understanding how much emotional nurturance young children need.

Children, especially infants and preschool children, need the affection and unhurried time from a consistent caretaker and the assurance of being heard not only when they are hungry or wet, but also when they feel lonely—an emotion that may be conveyed by fretfulness. To ignore the cries of children is to leave the social and emotional needs unattended and risk psychological neglect and the consequences thereof. This issue needs to be addressed as a public health message, particularly in African American communities where the concept of spoiling is particularly widespread.

When the conflict between adults who are the designated caretakers of the child deteriorates into abuse or violence, the consequences for young children are often psychological maltreatment, neglect, or child abuse. The psychological maltreatment of children can lead to emotional neglect, particularly during maternal depression at which time the mother may become unresponsive to a young infant's needs. Indeed, the results of subtle and blatant acts of omission and commission that occur with maternal depression warrant examination. When a mother becomes withdrawn and lethargic, she may provide the physical care of feeding and diapering, but ignore the need to cuddle, play, talk, or provide the lap time activity that stimulates the cognitive and linguistic development of the young child. Sometimes the anger that is often the other side of the depressive episode leads to easy irritability and impatience with the requests and needs of a young child. The caretaker, who can include either of the parents, perceives such

needs as more demands on his/her depleted mental energy and reacts to the child's needs as another psychological assault. The caretaker simply becomes overwhelmed by personal conflicts and depleted of coping skills.

Take, for example, my experience using public transportation. I encountered a young mother who was swearing profusely at a preschooler who wanted a drink of water. Clearly, that mother had significant psychosocial problems with depression and easy irritability, and her young child was the victim of her anguish and despair. The probable consequences for that child are implicit. On another occasion, I observed a Head Start mother at a parent's meeting. The woman had a 7-month-old infant who was crawling towards her mother to be picked up. The mother pushed the child away with her foot, admonishing her to stay on the rug and play with the other infants because she was busy talking to other parents. She used her foot to push her infant away four times when it would have been just as easy to pick the infant up and cuddle her while she chatted with other mothers. She continued to push the 7-month infant away because she felt that responding to the infant's need was "spoiling" her. Through her actions, the mother was teaching her infant not to signal her distress. Although this incident is not considered child neglect or abuse, it sends a negative message to the child early in life: "Don't come to me with your troubles." The parents' lack of responsiveness to the children raises questions about their stress levels and the causes. Were they in destructive relationships? Were their needs going unattended?

The psychological maltreatment of children as a result of the domestic conflict, abuse, and violence jeopardizes the development of self-esteem and social competence, as well as diminishes the capacity for intimacy and positive, healthy interpersonal relationships. Quite often this psychological maltreatment causes handicapping stress for children. This, in turn, has biological effects on the brain and causes subsequent cognitive difficulties for children caught in the middle. When infants or children experience stress continuously, they overproduce cortisol—a chemical the body produces to protect one's well being. The constant overstimulation keeps the child in a state of heightened arousal. Because the stimuli are not timed appropriately, the cognitive processes begin to become diminished. The kinds of synapses in the brain that should be used for cognitive-perceptual development are diverted for another task, which is to keep the child ready to fight or run away in order to survive.

Domestic violence, then, causes a mental injury to children—an injury to the intellectual capacity of the child to function within his/her normal range of performance. Studies indicate that domestic violence, verbal or emotional assault, and inadequate nurturance and affection cause maladaptive behavioral patterns for learning and thinking. Domestic violence causes an impairment of coherent and positive self-concept development of the child, as well as decreases the child's cognitive and social competence.

The primary task of culturally sanctioned child rearing is to create strong personality development in children and a solid capacity for flexibility or adaptation. Because of the cyclical effect it has on interpersonal relationships, including the parent-child dynamic, domestic violence accounts for the bulk of "the walking wounded" in African American communities. Stressful environments increase the likelihood of emotional disturbances and mental illness for parents, children, and communities.

With less access to health and human services to meet the needs of families and children in so many African American communities, the cycle of poor interpersonal relationships, stress, and violence perpetuate the cycle of poverty. The lack of family support programs, coupled with the other economic issues facing so many families, puts African American communities in danger of perpetuating a persistent underclass and a self-destructive process that will deter African American children from participation in the global economy of the next century.

Three decades after a nonviolent protest against the bondage of racism and segregation, African American communities in countless cities across the nation are in bondage again. This time, the communities are held hostage by family violence. Efforts must be made to end the intraracial violence of African Americans, examine the causes of violence, and work on nonviolent strategies to mitigate this brutality.



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**Destiny Arts Center:  
Violence Prevention for Youth Using the Mind, Body, and Spirit**

***Presenter:***

Sarah Crowell  
Performing Arts Director  
Destiny Arts Center  
Oakland, CA

***Destiny***

*something that's going to happen for sure  
something that we ignore or fight  
try to control, feel victimized by or just give in to  
something that is always coming  
that is always knocking at the door  
that will eventually walk in  
whether we answer it or not*

***Destiny***

*something that if we mold and shape  
rather than push away or fear  
begins to be our shining future  
rather than our bleak Armageddon  
it becomes the wind underneath full outstretched wings  
rather than the wind tearing the wings apart*

***Destiny***

*a place we are looking forward to because we are beginning to choose it...  
choosing to transform the fist crashing into a pleading face  
into an open hand reaching toward another  
choosing to pull each other up  
one by one  
hand in hand  
eye to eye  
remembering to remember  
that destiny is ours*

**What is Destiny Arts Center?**

The Destiny Arts Center is a small, nonprofit violence prevention organization with a big name to live up to. The acronym DESTINY stands for De-Escalation Skills Training Inspiring Nonviolence In Youth. Destiny believes that its programs have the ability to intervene in the cycle of violence.

The Destiny Arts Center has operated out of three small storefront studios in North Oakland since 1988 and has a staff of three full-time employees—an Executive Director, a Martial Arts Director, and a Performing Arts Director. The Center also has three part-time

employees, a Board of Directors, and a number of parent and community volunteers. The Center teaches dance, martial arts, self-defense, theater, outdoor education, academic support, and youth leadership to youth ages 3 to 19. The organization's mission is to inspire young people to be nonviolence advocates with a sense of responsibility to themselves and their communities.

Destiny began as the youth component of the Hand to Hand Community Arts Center, an adult martial arts school that has taught Kung Fu and self-defense in North Oakland since 1982. In 1993, Destiny became a separate nonprofit entity that primarily provided Kung Fu training. As Destiny evolved, it gradually began to include more of the self defense and de-escalation curricula, modified to serve young people.

The integration of dance and theater role plays into the violence prevention curriculum was first introduced in the elementary school and community outreach program, Project DESTINY, as a way of combining the strict discipline of the martial arts with the high-energy, expressive release of dance. The combination proved successful and has since been used in the Destiny de-escalation of violence curriculum that is taught throughout the San Francisco Bay Area, as well as nationally and internationally, by adult and youth instructors. Destiny uses the combination of these art forms as a unique way to reach youth from as many different angles as possible.

### **The Cycle of Violence**

The children at Destiny are diverse—both racially and culturally—and violence cuts across all of the different social, economic, racial, and cultural groups. Destiny recognizes that African Americans are under particular economic and social pressures that have led to violence in these communities. More than half of the Destiny student body is African American, and Destiny's programs pay particular attention to the needs of this group of young people.

Destiny staff members have witnessed the increasingly stressful and violent situations that youth face at home, school, and in their neighborhoods. They are forced to deal with parent drug addiction, homelessness, personal assault and robbery, and the threat gun violence. Some of the children are directly exposed to domestic violence on a regular basis, which affects them in unique ways—both physically and psychologically. This repeated exposure to violence in its various forms leaves the children angry, confused, and frustrated, wanting to vent these feelings by participating in the violence themselves.

Through its work with young people, Destiny emphasizes that there are alternatives to being perpetrators or victims of violence. Its primary focus is to teach young people that they have an impact on their worlds and that they matter. Key to all Destiny activities is the building of self-esteem, as Destiny believes that that a healthy balance of discipline, focus, physical skills, self-affirming statements, peer role modeling, leadership training, and creative expression can yield self-realization and empowerment.

The Destiny Arts Center staff has worked for many years to create dynamic and innovative programs that give all of the youth served as many alternatives to violence as possible. Destiny achieves this by providing a healthy physical outlet for the frustration youth feel; a safe, supportive environment to go to after school; practical skills training in conflict

resolution, de-escalation of violence, and self defense; opportunities to have engaging employment that requires serious commitment and teaches valuable leadership skills; help with their academics so that they can feel successful on all levels; and exciting movement classes that inspire and challenge the youth and set realistic goals for themselves.

By working with the minds and bodies of the students, an important and often overlooked link between their mental understanding and their visceral experience of violence is created. Destiny doesn't just talk about violence; it seeks to approach the problem from many different angles by using role plays, meditation, affirmations, and physical activities, as well as dialogue. This approach allows the youth to unlearn the self-hatred that they have around their bodies and allows for self-love on a cellular level. If a child loves him/herself, he/she will be less likely to engage in violent and self-destructive behavior and will be able to make healthy choices.

Given the proper tools, young people can be instrumental in breaking the cycle of violence. They testify about their ability to interrupt and stop harassment, walk away from fights, and get along with people—a stark contrast to previous behaviors of getting into fights often. The students' growth is not limited to behavioral changes. For example, one student who began as an “at risk” youth in the Project DESTINY after school outreach program performed in the Destiny Arts Youth Performance Company and competed successfully all over the State of California in martial arts competitions with the Destiny Arts Center tournament team. He eventually taught as a youth instructor in Project DESTINY, and he is now one of the first people in his family to attend college. Destiny is drafting him to be a youth representative on its Board of Directors.

Indeed, Destiny has witnessed first hand the self-realization and empowerment that has come with the training and support the youth receive at the Center.

## **Destiny Programs**

Destiny Arts Center runs 7 programs, serving more than 200 youth in the Bay Area—40 percent of whom are on some type of scholarship. The following are more detailed descriptions of the programs and how they seek to empower the youth they serve.

### *Dance, Theater and Martial Arts Programs*

The Dance, Theater and Martial Arts Programs are held at the Destiny Arts Center main site and include the “Teddy Bear” program, which teaches 3- to 6-year-old children safety and self defense skills. There is also a jazz/hip hop dance and martial arts technique classes for 7 to 18 year olds. All classes are offered 3 days a week.

The Teddy Bear program combines rigorous martial arts exercises and games with situational role plays that teach the young children to establish boundaries, focus on their feelings, and recognize when their personal space is being invaded by either a stranger, family member, or friend. For example, the students practice safe distance role playing whereby an instructor walks toward a student and asks them, “What’s too close?” The student is encouraged to respond with a loud “STOP” to establish his or her boundary. It sounds simple, but students—especially the girls—initially have real difficulty in standing up for themselves in this way with an adult. Eventually, even the shyest of students learns to find his/her loud, assertive voice.

Central to the Teddy Bear curriculum are the five fingers of self-defense, which offer children options in threatening situations. The first finger is “Use your head.” Children learn to think about the situation and act if it doesn’t feel right. The second finger is “Use your voice.” Children are encouraged to yell for help and scream, “I don’t know you” or “Get away from me.” The third finger is “Use your feet.” Avoiding a confrontation by running away is the single most effective defense strategy for everyone—youth or adult. The fourth finger is “Use your fighting skills only if you have to.” While the youth practice punching and kicking and learn how to immobilize an attacker, they also learn that fighting should be avoided unless there is no other way out. The fifth finger of self defense is “Tell someone what happened.” The youth are taught not to be shamed or bullied into keeping secrets. They learn that if something feels funny or makes them feel uncomfortable, they should trust their gut feelings and talk to someone about it.

For children in abusive family situations self-defense skills are especially difficult to actualize. Who will respond to calls for help? Where is there to run? If the attacker is a relative, it may be impossible to find allies. Silence and denial are crucial aspects of abuse in the home, and breaking out of this pattern can make all the difference for a child who is abused by a family member. One 5-year-old student recently told an instructor that she was “feeling her awareness” when she encountered an adult that made her uncomfortable. This “awareness” could make a serious difference to this young girl in the future if she is faced with a potentially dangerous situation. Her ability to recognize and articulate her feelings could even save her life.

The Teddy Bear program sets a firm foundation for the other programs that serve older children and teens. As a child gets older, he/she has access to an increasing number of activities.

The martial arts program is available to 7- to 18-year-old youth and has a traditional belt system and award-winning tournament team. Classes include rigorous repetition of forms and sparring techniques, as well as ground fighting. The training also emphasizes inner composure and self-control, which, in a sense, redefine Western notions of power. American culture emphasizes winning a battle, rather than avoiding a fight. At Destiny Arts Center, as much time is devoted to learning how to avoid violence and de-escalate conflict as is to developing the skills that would win a fight. Power is measured by self-restraint, as well as strength. The Black belt instructors teach youth an important lesson: Walking away from a potentially violent situation is the path of the true warrior.

This ideology is reinforced by the Warrior’s Code that the youth memorize. This code, developed by Destiny founder Kate Hobbs, articulates the philosophy of Destiny programs. It reads:

**LOVE**—A warrior is skilled in body and kind in heart.

**RESPECT**—A warrior respects him or herself and all living things.

**CARE**—A warrior believes that caring for him or herself means caring for our world.

**RESPONSIBILITY**—A warrior takes responsibility for his or her own actions and makes a superior effort in every situation.

**HONOR**—A warrior uses fighting skills honorably to protect self and loved ones. A warrior never raises a fist in anger.

**PEACE**—A true warrior lives by this code and firmly believes that the greatest warrior of all is the one that stands for peace.

The jazz/hip hop dance program, also for 7 to 18 year olds, gives youth access to confidence and creative expression. The classes include technical skills building in the two integrated dance styles. The students learn to be flexible as well as strong, to be expansive as well as slow and controlled. The students also learn to create their own choreography and prepare for performances. The technique of dance is taught such that anyone of any shape or size can be successful and feel that they are able to move gracefully and with sharp precision.

All Destiny classes emphasize self-respect and discipline in a supportive environment. Each class begins and ends with a circle, which includes a meditation period. This gives the youth the ability to center and focus for the class and also provides a calming technique that may be used outside of the classroom. Dancers and martial artists alike are encouraged to feel their strength and beauty, as well as their inner composure and self control.

#### *Youth Leadership Training Program*

The Youth Leadership Training program enables youth to become violence prevention educators in the Destiny Arts Center de-escalation of violence, self-defense, and conflict resolution techniques and employs them as peer educators. Destiny has found peer education to be a highly effective model for teaching violence prevention skills. Youth from this program have taught workshops all over the Bay Area and the United States and in China at the NGO Forum on Women in 1995. Youth instructors are also an integral part of the Destiny main site and outreach programs.

## *Project DESTINY*

Project DESTINY is an outreach program that brings the Destiny curriculum into various schools and community programs and serves primarily “at risk” youth. This program targets youth in the 3<sup>rd</sup> through 5<sup>th</sup> grade who have self-control problems in the classroom environment. Project DESTINY strives to give these children tools to have more positive classroom experiences and to teach them alternatives to violence. Classes include meditation, rigorous repetition of disciplined dance and martial arts exercises, discussions about violence and peace, role plays of common conflicts for kids, and skills training in stress reduction. Destiny has taught these programs in various neighborhood schools and community programs since 1990. Project DESTINY programs currently run at a North Oakland elementary school; an East Oakland housing project; and the California School for the Blind in Fremont, California.

## *Self-defense and Safety Program*

The Self-defense and Safety Program offers short-term workshops and classes at Destiny Arts Center and in the community. It is specifically designed to teach concrete skills for personal safety. Students learn assertiveness strategies and physical techniques to build self-confidence, awareness, and power.

## *Destiny Arts Youth Performance Company*

The Destiny Arts Youth Performance Company is a high-energy, multicultural group of teens that performs a mixture of martial arts, dance, theater, and rap as they speak out about important issues for youth of the 1990s. This group is the “face” of the organization, the group that expresses the goals of Destiny Arts Center in the most artful and succinct way possible. The Performance Company comprises 15 to 20 youth that are required to audition and participate in dance and/or martial arts classes at Destiny Arts Center, in addition to company rehearsals.

The Company members are encouraged to move and talk about what they see as the seeds of violence and how they envision a world free from the violence that they experience and witness daily. All of the words they speak in every performance piece are their own. The Company has created and performed 5 original works in its 5-year history: *I Have a Dream*, *When Beauty Walked In*, *R.E.S.P.E.C.T.*, and 2 versions of *World of Dreams*.

*R.E.S.P.E.C.T.* is an interactive performance piece created especially for elementary school children. The Performance Company toured 13 Bay Area schools in the 1997-98 school year, through the Young Audiences of the Bay Area organization. Performers and audience members both learned from the strong messages of this theater/dance piece: Respect yourself, others, and the environment. Children in the audience got to hear directly from older youth that it is cool to stay out of fights; recycle trash; and be leaders, rather than followers.

Version two of the performance piece *World of Dreams* was written, edited, choreographed, rehearsed, and produced over a period of 5 months in 1998, with 18 youth between the ages of 12 and 18. The performers trained and rehearsed a total of 6 hours a week and developed a great deal of commitment and discipline in the process. They engaged in heated discussions around the issues in the piece and wrote poetry and stories that eventually become raps or material for voiceovers in their performance. The performers searched within themselves



and became willing to tell an audience who they are, what they fear, and what they hope for in their futures. A 14-year-old student was engrossed in taking the students' written material and devising a script for this production.

*World of Dreams* addresses the issues that the youth see as the seeds of violence racism, poverty, sexism, homophobia, indifference to the environment, fear, and ignorance. The piece also encourages youth to extend themselves beyond the fears and the problems and to envision their lives and a world that is free from these worries. The youth envision a world where husbands do not beat their wives and children, the scent of flowers will overpower the scent of cars and gas, and the KKK no longer exists, among countless other dreams.

Both the youth performing and the audiences are empowered by this work. The youth are given a creative outlet and a voice. Parents and families get to hear the sometimes untold stories of the youth involved. The performers get to take risks and also feel that they are a part of a larger group process in the Company itself, as well as the larger goal of education and redirection of negative, destructive energy.

These young people use the performing arts as a powerful educational and transformational tool for themselves and their audiences. There is a definite trend toward utilizing the performing arts in this way because written and intellectual dialogue around social issues is oftentimes exclusionary and intimidating. The performing arts can raise consciousness by tapping the intellect and the emotions of both the performer and the observer and can provide inspiration for positive change. The Destiny youth performers have come to believe that they can make a difference in their own destinies and the destiny of their communities.

### *Outdoor Education Program*

The Outdoor Education Program provides young people the opportunity to explore different outdoor/wilderness situations in an educational setting. Through outdoor experiences, such as camping, hiking, and swimming, children learn cooperation, respect, awareness, and discipline. Exposing young people to the pristine beauty of a high mountain lake or challenging them to attempt rock climbing or mountain biking broadens their perspectives and inspires them to take care of themselves and their environment.

### *Tutoring Program*

The Tutoring Program provides weekly intensive academic assistance for Destiny's junior high and high school students. Tutors are volunteers who work one-on-one with the students on specific school work and help students in career planning, locating vocational training programs, and preparing for the college application process.

## **How do youth respond to the work?**

The Destiny Arts Center measures the success of its programs by observing its youth become empowered in their voices, in their actions, in their schools, and with their peers and adults. Many young people have grown up in Destiny programs, starting in the Teddy Bear class and eventually performing with the youth Performance Company. Youth who have entered the martial arts programs at age 7 are now competing in statewide tournaments. Destiny has promoted four of its youth to the rank of black belt. Destiny students are now earning money as de-escalation of violence educators in the Project DESTINY programs and other self defense workshops. Through Destiny's programs, young people feel safe enough to take the risk of being themselves, living out the Destiny ideology, and speaking out against injustice and violence. These students are now able to reach levels of success in every part of their lives and in ways they did not dream possible.

### ***Destiny***

*a place we are looking forward to because we are beginning to choose it...  
remembering to remember  
that destiny is ours*

## **Domestic Violence Across the Lifespan of African Americans: Children Conclusion**

Dr. Gloria Johnson-Powell and the creative young people from Destiny Arts Center in Oakland, California presented the traditional and contemporary components, respectively, for this plenary session. Their presentations fostered an understanding of the various theories and practices of traditional mental health and the expanded options for using popular culture techniques—such as rap, hip hop, jazz, or dramatic expressive dance—to convey strong anti-violence messages.

The presentation from Dr. Johnson-Powell emphasized that the psychosocial development of children is deeply rooted in early childhood experiences. She used both research literature and her experiences as a practicing child psychiatrist to document how African American children are seriously impacted by all forms of violence, including spousal abuse, child maltreatment, and community violence. In addition, Dr. Johnson-Powell presented findings from studies on marital conflict to enhance the understanding around negative consequences that emerge within families as a result of exposure to violence. Such problems may include psychopathology and social learning difficulties. She added that factors like an unstable family structure, emotional deprivation, neglect, and abandonment might increase risk factors for poor mental health and produce negative outcomes for children and adolescents. Studies on infants in orphanages suggest that maternal depression, harsh expressions of anger toward a child, and the parents' demonstrated inability to cope also increase the risk factors associated with poor mental health in children. These studies further indicate that affection and consistent parental nurturing are essential to the healthy emotional development of children.

Healthy childhood development is one of many focal points for the Destiny Arts Center. Under the strong leadership of Ms. Sarah Crowell, Performing Arts Director, 15 youth used dance, theater, song, poetry, rap, and martial arts to demonstrate how positive messages to young people can intervene in the cycle of violence. Their performance convincingly communicated to the audience that children can dream, children can express positive feelings, and children should be valued. The group's philosophy promotes love, respect, care, responsibility, honor, and peace, and the performance techniques emphasize self-respect and discipline for young people.

Overall, both presentations conveyed meaningful messages to the audience. Dr. Johnson-Powell outlined how children's exposure to domestic violence can cause mental harm and increase the risk for other negative outcomes. She presented a balanced discussion around risk factors and childhood resiliency, noting that mental health outcomes can substantially change for children who have caring adults in their lives. The high-energy, multicultural youth group from Destiny Arts Center gave an electrifying performance to further the audience's understanding around how popular culture strategies can deliver compelling messages on the importance of issues facing today's youth. The combined effects of reviewing traditional issues impacting children's mental health and experiencing the abundant talent of a performing youth group that collectively demonstrated the effectiveness of alternative intervention strategies indeed set the tone for examining domestic violence across the lifespan of African Americans.