

Parents as Teachers: Partnering With Black Families

Introduction

Parents as Teachers (PAT) provides evidence-based prevention and early intervention support to expectant parents and families of young children from before birth through kindergarten. A key characteristic of the PAT approach is that it is designed to meet the needs of individual families and, as a result, can address specific maternal, family and child outcomes in culturally responsive ways.

Research shows that PAT is an effective intervention for families in culturally diverse communities. In addition, specific cultural enhancements designed to further support families result in new parenting skills, more confidence in parenting, and stronger relationships with children. Evidence underscores that Parents as Teachers programs should intentionally engage families in culturally relevant ways to optimize positive child and family outcomes. As an organization, PAT is dedicated to seeking out diverse experiences and perspectives that continue to enrich our products, services, and supports. In 2020¹, more than 298,000 families in the US and its territories received evidence-based home visiting services during more than 3.2 million home visits. Approximately 25 percent of the families were Black, 29 percent were Hispanic, and 3 percent were American Indian/Alaskan Native; 19 percent spoke a language other than English. In 2020², Parents as Teachers reached almost 88,000 families across 48 states, territories and tribal areas during more than 967,000 home visits. Approximately 17 percent of families served by PAT were Black, 30 percent were Hispanic, and 5 percent were American Indian/Alaskan Native; 27 percent spoke a language other than English.

Statement of Purpose

This brief summarizes the existing Parents as Teachers model, curriculum, implementation, and research to address four questions:

1. What is PAT's approach to cultural considerations, specifically with Black families?
2. How does research validate PAT's work with Black families?
3. What experiences have families shared?
4. What future steps must Parents as Teachers take to ensure that Black families are served in a respectful, meaningful and authentic way?

What is PAT's approach to cultural considerations, specifically with Black families?

Parents as Teachers has made a strong commitment to honor human diversity as a central part of our mission. It is the policy of PAT to work and provide services in a culturally competent manner.

As such, the PAT core curricula are regularly revised and enhanced to reflect this commitment, and to support parent educators in their work to provide all parents with the most current research-based information and strategies. For example, Parents as Teachers National Center relies on a diverse set of curriculum writers and reviewers to prioritize reducing disparities and driving equitable change.

This process has increased our understanding, fluency, and practice related to addressing inequities in service delivery.

We continue to work towards improved communication and feedback loops in our curriculum development process. There is more to learn and continued changes ahead to challenge inherent biases. Parents as Teachers has provided information and practical approaches in human diversity that will fortify our responsive and respectful work with families of different races, ethnicities, diverse family configurations, and different economic backgrounds from a wide range of cultures both inside and outside of the United States.^{3,4}

Parents as Teachers trains parent educators that culture sets the scaffolding for parenting and raising children.

According to the PAT implementation framework, the key for parent educators to understand the values, customs and beliefs that are common to a group is to understand that they are often instilled when we are young and reinforced so often that they are not consciously recognized as a reflection of our own culture.^{5,6}

Research further describes the ways in which culture and child development are interrelated across several concepts important to supporting families. However, while research is a source of credibility, we acknowledge that research findings often communicate information—either directly or indirectly—about community conditions and can have policy, programmatic, and funding implications for communities. Even the most thoughtfully conducted research can be harmful if communicated poorly and subsequently misinterpreted. In that respect, PAT is committed to utilizing and conducting research with an equity lens.^{7,8}

- Child development outcomes are based both on individual experiences and group experiences in the child's family, community, culture, and society.^{9,10}
- The cultural rules children learn at home may be very different from the ones they are expected to know when they enter a childcare center or school.^{11,12}
- If adults (parent educators, teachers, and caregivers) don't understand the cultural rules and norms of a child's family, we may misread a child's developmental progress.¹³
- The clash between home culture and the cultures of child care, schools, and parent education can result in children being regarded as having deficits.¹⁴
- When disagreements arise, rather than seeking to 'educate' the parents, parent educators should facilitate a mutual sharing of information.¹⁵
- It is important for adults to learn to recognize cultural information without stereotyping in order to accurately screen, evaluate, and understand a child's development.¹⁶

Cultural competence is grounded in the belief that PAT's work with children and families should acknowledge, respect, and support the integrity and strengths of their cultures.¹⁷ While cultural competence is a process that is ongoing and developmental, the goal of individual and organizational cultural competence is outcome-based. The ultimate outcome is for personal and professional behavior of PAT parent educators to be respectful of and compatible with the cultures of families so that parents can be the best possible first teachers of their children.¹⁸

The PAT core curricula support racial equity by outlining the best information and strategies to assist parents in understanding and closing the opportunity gap between children from different racial and ethnic groups and socioeconomic backgrounds.¹⁹ Relying on data with a racial equity lens offers a

structural analysis of how disparities are produced.²⁰ The parent educator resource *Racial Equity and School Readiness* describes these strategies and the research supporting them.

- Opportunity differences in “life chances” for many Black families and children.²¹
- Differences between the norms and rules of the home culture and the culture of childcare settings and schools.²²
- Systemic racial prejudice and discrimination that can erode the strong identity of the family and child.²³
- Different standards, expectations and treatment of Black students in achievement, behavior, placement, and discipline in many childcare settings and schools.^{24,25,26}

PAT encourages parent educators to remain conscious of these structural factors to refrain from “blaming” the parent or child. The PAT curriculum is also prepared to help parents decrease the effects of adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) on their children.²⁷ The importance of a stable home environment and a secure, attentive caretaker as moderators of ACE outcomes is widely acknowledged and much of the success of PAT is attributed to the abilities of PAT to impact the home environment and parental relationships with young children.²⁸ Additionally, PAT National Center is currently working to offer more ways to support Black parents during visits and as part of parent educators’ professional and personal development.

How does research validate PAT’s work with Black families?

Parents as Teachers Research

An increasing body of studies examining PAT specifically also documents the efficacy of PAT with Black families.

Twenty years of work led by Debra Haire-Joshu and colleagues have illuminated the systemic racism present in health care systems and how interventions can change these systems to promote better outcomes for Black families.

Weight gain during pregnancy and postpartum are important causes of long-term weight gain and the development of obesity-related diseases among women. Moreover, excessive weight gain during pregnancy can have adverse long-term effects on child health. The prevalence of being overweight and obese is high among Black women, particularly those who are underserved and socioeconomically disadvantaged.

Women with obesity are at risk of excessive gestational weight gain during pregnancy and have greater weight retention one year after delivery, thereby increasing the severity of their obesity and the risk of obesity-related medical issues. Although lifestyle intervention is recommended for pregnant women with obesity to prevent excessive gestational weight gain and postpartum weight retention, providing effective real-world therapy for socioeconomically disadvantaged women is difficult because of the many barriers to program participation related to parenting responsibilities, costs, limited transportation and other stressors.²⁹

A recent series of studies reports on the randomized control trial of a weight control program delivered through PAT in a project called Lifestyle Interventions for Expectant Moms (LIFE-Moms) that focused on socioeconomically disadvantaged Black women. Cahill et al. (2018) show that compared with the group receiving PAT alone (8 visits), the group receiving PAT plus an embedded

lifestyle intervention (9 visits) gained less weight weekly during gestation. The PAT plus group also gained less body fat and showed lower increases in plasma insulin and systolic blood pressure than did the standard PAT group.³⁰ In a follow-up study tracking LIFE-Moms over the 12 months postpartum, Haire-Joshu et al. (2019) report that the PAT plus group gained less weight and were more likely to return to their baseline weight. The authors note that the PAT plus lifestyle intervention incurred minimal additional cost to increase indices of health in Black women.³¹

In another set of studies, Haire-Joshu et al. (2018) tested the impact of Healthy Eating & Active Lifestyle Taught at Home (HEALTH), a lifestyle intervention derived from the Diabetes Prevention Program (DPP), embedded within the usual PAT curriculum, and targeting obese and overweight Black mothers of preschool children at risk for excess weight. Women in the intervention group (PAT+ lifestyle) completed significantly more home visits than did the usual PAT group. The majority of participants from both groups rated visits as very good to excellent, and data from lesson plan checklists revealed delivery of 87% of objectives for intervention visits and 97% for usual care visits. At 24 months into the study, the intervention group was significantly more likely to achieve 5% weight loss compared to baseline measurements. There was a significant reduction in sugar consumption through both beverage and food intake for the intervention group from baseline to 12 months, and that reduction in intake of sugar from food was maintained at 24 months. Finally, sedentary activity was reduced in the intervention group from baseline to 12 months, and activity level increased from low or moderate to high physical activity in the intervention group.³²

In 2015, Haire-Joshu and colleagues also applied a multicomponent obesity prevention (Balance Adolescent Lifestyle Activities and Nutrition Choices for Energy – BALANCE) embedded into PAT to another group PAT serves – adolescent Black parents. When compared to the control group, BALANCE adolescents who were more than 12 weeks postpartum were 89% more likely to maintain a normal BMI or improve an overweight/obese BMI by 12 months. BALANCE adolescents also significantly improved fruit and vegetable intake, while younger teens improved water intake.³³

In a foundational set of studies, Haire-Joshu et al. (2003) tested the impact of the High 5, Low Fat program (H5LF), a dietary intervention embedded into PAT. H5LF Black parents achieved an increase in fruit and vegetable consumption, and a higher proportion of H5LF parents reduced their intake to less than 30% calories from fat and improved performance of dietary behaviors.³⁴ In 2005, Haire-Joshu and colleagues extended the High 5, Low Fat program to target preschool children. The High 5 for Preschool KIDS (H5-KIDS) program embedded an intervention to train parents how to ensure a positive fruit-vegetable environment for their preschool child, while tracking changes in parent behavior associated with improvements in child intake. When compared to control parents, H5-KIDS parents reported an increase in fruit-vegetable servings, knowledge, and availability of fruits and vegetables within the home. Parents also decreased their use of coercive feeding practices. Preschoolers' fruit-vegetable servings increased in normal weight but not overweight children, and parents' change in fruit-vegetable servings was a significant predictor of children's change in fruit-vegetable servings in the H5-KIDS group.³⁵

The compilation of research evidence supports Parents as Teachers as a home visiting model with positive outcomes for Black families and children. PATNC has made it a priority to continue to explore the evidence-based outcomes for Black families.

What experiences have families shared?

As families in PAT tell their own stories, we see patterns emerge and problems uncovered, and that helps PAT assess community needs and evaluate the success of our intervention. Stories also help us provide a meaningful exchange for identifying new strategies and possibilities for improvement.

Shauntalae Pitt met Donna Givens, a home visitor at a Parents as Teachers teen parenting program, at the McCluer South-Berkeley High School in St. Louis, Missouri. Shauntalae attended "group

connections" and parenting classes at school. She also received regular home visits from Donna. Both Shauntalae and Ms. Givens are Black. "Ms. Givens welcomed me with open arms. She was someone I could trust," said Shauntalae. "I have six children now, all boys. I have been married for eight years. I'm actually currently a toddler teacher. I went to community college to take my Child Development Associate (CDA) credential for early childhood education.

For a while, I questioned where I should be because my dreams got put on hold, because I was a teen mom. But I realized that it's never too late. And when you have a support system, it makes a difference.

And I was able to come back around and do all of those things. So I'm super, super grateful and excited about where I'm at, in my life," said Shauntalae.³⁶

In a PAT program in St. Louis, Missouri, parent educators serve especially hard-to-reach populations, including expectant and parenting teens and young adults, homeless youth, and parents in highly distressed neighborhoods. One Black father of a teen PAT parent participant said, "You know I was a laid back dad while they were meeting with my son and grandson. My son was 16 at the time, so he was a very young parent. But, the services that the program provides, and Ms. Jennifer of course... I was really amazed in the results. I began to see how much my grandson and my son had grown to becoming more positive, in their relationship. What I take away from that, is to spread the word, to let young people know that there are resources that can help in these types of situations in life. My son has a sincere desire to be a great parent. I see him make the sacrifices to spend quality time with his child, and I think sets him up to grow in a positive young adult. Young people need these types of programs. I think it's opened doors to him becoming a productive citizen, great parent."³⁷

Explicitly soliciting and responding to family and parent educator experiences, feedback, and needs has allowed PAT to keep pace with families' emerging needs and the changing home visiting field.

What future steps must Parents as Teachers take to ensure that Black families are served in a respectful, meaningful, and authentic way?

Taken together, there is mounting evidence that Parents as Teachers is both culturally relevant and efficacious for demonstrating positive outcomes for Black families. The research to date reinforces the policy of PAT to work and provide services in a flexible and culturally relevant manner. This flexibility can also be seen in the feedback loop wherein responsiveness to families prompts revisions to both the curriculum content and implementation strategies, which further enhance PAT's cultural relevance and efficacy for Black families. As Parents as Teachers continues to serve diverse families, it can take several steps to ensure that Black families are served in a respectful, meaningful, and authentic way.

- Continue to engage in and collaborate with research that examines a wide range of parent and child outcomes for Black families.
- Welcome and prioritize the voices of Black families and parent educators to inspire and inform the learning agenda around culturally relevant PAT delivery.
- Follow up on needs identified through the learning agenda to inform curriculum revisions and training.
- Apply a DEIA lens consistently to training, curriculum development, implementation, screening/surveillance, and outcomes assessment processes.
- Modify materials following equitable communication principles.³⁸

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