



CHILDREN'S SUNDAY (BIRTH-AGE 12) (BUILDING SELF-ESTEEM) CULTURAL RESOURCES

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Scripture: Philippians 4:13

I. The History

The African American community has historically been a reservoir of encouragement, esteem-building, and exhortation for young children. Whether in church, at a school assembly, or out in the community, pride bubbles over and overflows on account of our children. It is not uncommon to hear voices unabashedly crying out, “That’s my baby!” and “Go ahead!” when children take the mike, shoot the ball, or play in a recital. And, of course, no conversation about self-esteem-building for African American children would be complete without including the role of the black church.

One of the primary ways in which self-esteem in children has been built has been through the Church. Involving children in worship services, especially on Children’s Sunday, developing children and youth choirs, and allowing children to read Scripture, pray, and recite speeches

before the congregation causes children to gain confidence. They walk forward feeling affirmed, confident, and loved. The verbal and boisterous expressions of pride, encouragement, and exhortation that are verbally and bodily demonstrated in response have not only been the natural responses to our children, but they have also been necessary.

Given the realities of racism, classism, and discrimination that have permeated the African American lived experience in America, adult members of the village—parents, grandparents, pastors, teachers, elders, mentors, and community leaders—have understood the vital importance of affirming our children. During the eras of slavery, Jim Crow, and the Civil Rights Movement, adults and children alike were treated as second-class citizens, called out of their names, physically assaulted, and regarded as less than human. Adults knew that if black children were to survive and thrive in the world then the black family and community as a whole would have to step in. They would have to commit to being responsible for combating the negativity from the majority community by teaching children the truth about who they are and where they come from.

There are many methods that have been historically employed by African Americans to build young people up and foster positive self-esteem in them. One such example is The Children's Defense Fund Freedom Schools program. This initiative was born out of the Freedom Summer Movement of 1964 when members of the Student Nonviolent Coordinating Committee proposed the need to teach children and youth political activism, as well as provide them with quality educational resources and opportunities as the country sat on the verge of integration in schools. Freedom Schools would provide the instructors, most of whom were college students, to teach students these things, as well as build the children up so that they would continue to believe in themselves and in their ability to be successful in the midst of the continued struggle for equality in America. Over the course of Freedom Summer more than forty Freedom Schools were established in African American communities throughout the state of Mississippi. More than 3,000 students, from small children to adolescents, attended the program. The legacy of the Freedom School program lives on today.

Upon entering a Freedom School site, many of which are located in churches, on any given morning there are a few things for which one should be prepared. Number one: extreme noise. Number two: extreme energy. Number three: extreme excitement. Each day begins with "Harambee Circle," which means "Let's pull together" in Swahili. Harambee's overall purpose is to provide students with a deeper understanding of their history and culture, to promote excellence in reading, and to be empowered to succeed. For thirty minutes, students engage in cheers, chants, and recognitions, read-a-louds, and daily announcements. Given the connection to the Civil Rights Movement it comes as no surprise that chants are a major component of esteem-building in the Freedom School Curriculum. Children are taught chants that highlight the importance of reading, self-esteem, self-respect, and respect for others. They chant, dance, clap, stomp, and sing in unison, having been encouraged by their instructors to generate an energy that can "make the room shake." The hook from Nas's popular anthem for children, "I Know I Can" is often chanted in the Harambee Circle. Other chants include a call and response such as, "I am special. Yes I am. So don't abuse me. And don't misuse me. Just 'R-E-S-P-E-C-T' me." This chant extends to the individual (I am special) to another student (you are special) to the collective whole (we are special).

The themes of being special, holding oneself and others in high esteem, and achieving academic success and greatness are reinforced in the context of the reading materials provided, guest speakers, history lessons, field trips, and daily activities. Today the six-week enrichment Freedom School program continues in its mission to provide educational enrichment and increase self-esteem of students. During the summer of 2012 Freedom Schools served more than 11,500 children in 83 cities and twenty-five states.¹

II. The Challenges and the Charge

There are a myriad of challenges that threaten to destroy the self-esteem and self-worth of African American children of all ages and stages of development. There is poverty, lack of access to quality education and healthcare, family dysfunction, child abuse and neglect, racism, and other challenges. Materialism is at an all-time high in America. The acquisition of material possessions, overconsumption, and equating self-worth with a horse on a shirt, a swoosh on a shoe, or an ‘i’ this or ‘i’ that can cause children at increasingly younger ages to feel inadequate if they don’t have those things. Traditional standards of beauty that suggest that kinky hair and curvaceous or fuller figures are unacceptable and the massive pervasiveness and accessibility of such images in the media cause young black girls to feel physically inferior. Family dysfunction, incarceration, addiction, poverty, and abuse cause children to feel ashamed of who they are, where they live, and who they are connected to in the family.² And the increase in technology used to escalate bullying has caused young people to feel so badly about themselves that they consider and in some cases succeed in taking their very lives. Peer pressure and the desire to be accepted in school cliques and gangs cause children who don’t feel good about themselves already to subject themselves to negative behaviors at increasingly younger ages in order to fit in and feel special. Each of these challenges, in addition to others, has proven to be detrimental to building self-esteem in children.

The Charge

There are several ways in which adults can commit to build the self-esteem of children and teach them that they are capable of greatness. First, as adults we must work on our own self-esteem issues. Scholars such as Joy Leery in her book *Post Traumatic Slave Syndrome*, bell hooks in *Rock My Soul: Black People and Self-Esteem*, and Jawanza Kunjufu in *Developing Positive Self Images and Discipline in Black Children* note that the issue of self-esteem in the African-American community is and continues to be an intense struggle. According to hooks there has been intensification in the level of low self-esteem in African Americans despite the access to opportunities that were not available to our ancestors.³ Crippling self-doubt in the academy, materialism and trying to keep up with the Joneses—even if it means robbing Peter to pay Paul, ascribing to European standards of beauty, and overall feelings of inadequacy and low self-worth continue to plague African Americans of all ages, stages, classes, and walks of life. How, then, can a generation of adults motivate, encourage, and build up young people if we ourselves struggle with low self-esteem and need to be built up?

As adults, we must take seriously the charge to work on ourselves and “get ourselves together.” To do this we must consider the sources for our own low self-esteem and pain. We must identify

them and name them, which can be a painful process. In the medical world, a prescription cannot be given without first undergoing an examination to identify the root cause or problem. The same applies to the pain in the inner recesses of our souls. Before we tell our children they should love their hair and their skin we must ask ourselves if we love ours. Before we tell our children that they can excel in school and overcome the fear of failure, we must examine our own childhood and adult fears of failure. We must engage in this very intense introspective work and begin the process of rebuilding the rubble within. When we feel better about ourselves as black men, black women, mothers, fathers, educators, disciples, and members of the human race, we will then be in a better position to radiate the kind of confidence and self-esteem that our children will see, feel, and believe in for themselves.

Second, we must teach children their history. Positive reinforcement of one's history is a gateway to building positive self-esteem. According to E. Hammond Oglesby, as he outlines a fourth principle in his book *Ten Principles of Black Self-Esteem*, we must, "Remember always that black history did not begin with slavery, but with ancient Egyptian kings, queens, scientists, sages, and artisans in Africa."⁴ Teaching children from a very early age about Africans and African Americans who have made history, as well as those who are currently making history, are powerful tools that will aid in building self-esteem. It is one thing to learn about prominent Europeans and members of other ethnic groups who have achieved success. It is something altogether different to learn about someone who has done great things and has a hue similar to one's own or has similar life experiences. There is great power in the ability to identify with others. When negative identifications and associations are made, young, pliable, and easily influenced minds and hearts can be led astray. When positive identifications and associations are made, the same young minds and hearts can be catapulted to achieve their destinies and walk in their God-given gifts of greatness.

Finally, from the moment our children are born, and every day of their lives, we must encourage them. Due to the unique challenges our children face in the context of the twenty-first century, the family, the community, the Church, and all other entities in the village must operate with increased intentionality when it comes to empowering African American children. The words of exhortation that Paul speaks to the Philippians must be the words that are spoken to our children. We must encourage our children that academically they can do all things through Christ. They must hear from us that they have the intelligence to pass state-mandated standardized tests. We must tell them that they are phenomenal readers, mathematicians, and scientists. We must tell them that they can do well on college entrance exams and placement tests.

Beyond completing the bare minimum, we must also instill in them the necessity and value of going above and beyond what is expected of them by parents, teachers, mentors, and community leaders. Doing extra work, studying longer, reading for pleasure, rehearsing longer, practicing longer, and engaging in other enrichment activities will set our children up for success. Communicating to a child who has a passion for computers and technology that not only can he master each level of a video game but that he can also be the one to create video games will empower our children to succeed. Telling the child who loves fashion that she can not only rock the most popular fashion fads but that she can earn a fashion design degree and create a fashion label of her own will empower our children to succeed. Connecting a child's love for creating

new inventions to pioneers such as Garret Morgan and George Washington Carver will empower our children to succeed. Adults must teach children to crawl, to walk, to run, and also to soar.

III. Biographical Stories

Below are examples of individuals who achieved greatness as young people in spite of a variety of challenges in their lives. Each individual heard the rallying cries of their supporters, felt the inner drive within, and made history in their own rights as individuals who dared to dream, to work hard, and to succeed.



Gabrielle Douglas is a tremendous example of a young person who has achieved unparalleled success and greatness in the athletic arena of gymnastics. Being an African American gymnast in a sport that has a clear under-representation of African Americans did not deter Gabby. Being a virtually unheard-of gymnast before March 2012 did not deter Gabby. She worked hard and sacrificed a great deal in order to achieve the level of success that she has. In what seems like just a brief moment Gabby has broken many significant records. She is the first person of color of any race and the first African American gymnast in the history of the Olympic Games to claim gymnastics' most elite prize of Individual All-Around Champion. Additionally, she is also the first American gymnast and female gymnast in history to win the gold in both the gymnastics individual all-around and team competitions at the same Olympic Games.⁵

Gabby's love for gymnastics began at age four when her sister, a gymnast and cheerleader at the time, taught her to do a cartwheel. For two years Gabby flipped around the house all of the time. Her bonafide career as a gymnast began at age six when she began formal training. By age eight, she earned the title of Gymnastics State Champion in her home state of Virginia.⁶

It was quite clear to Gabby as well as her family that she possessed a tremendous gift. Her family believed in her so much that they made the difficult decision to allow her move to West Des Moines, Iowa, to train with coach Liang Chow. Gabrielle Douglas has achieved a level of success that has amazed the world—and she's not done yet. Gabby has plans to compete in the 2016 Olympic Games in Rio de Janeiro, Brazil.



In 2009, at the tender age of seven, twins **Peter and Paula Imafidon**, also known as the "Wonder Twins," of Walthamstow, East London, became the youngest children to pass an Advanced level math exam in the United Kingdom. These exams are generally taken by eighteen-year-olds.

Both Peter and Paula earned D grades in AS-level math. Their parents were proactive and enrolled them in the Excellence in Education Program, a non-profit organization that was designed to assist and provide enrichment for inner-city children from disadvantaged backgrounds. Their parents, Chris and Ann Imafidon, came to Britain from Nigeria more than 30 years ago, and they always placed a high premium on education. According to their father, Chris, “Every child is a genius. Once you identify the talent of a child and put them in the environment that will nurture that talent then the sky is the limit.”⁷ The twins have three high-achieving older sisters: Ann-Marie, who earned a scholarship to John’s Hopkins at age 13; Christiana, who is the youngest student in Britain’s history to attend college at age 11; and Samantha, who passed two high school level math and statistics tests at age six.

Paula has ambitions of becoming a math teacher and Peter has aspirations of becoming a Prime Minister.⁸



Stevie Wonder is one of the most notable and renowned musical figures in the history of R&B music. A singer, songwriter, and master of multiple instruments, Wonder was born on May 13, 1950 in Saginaw, Michigan. Shortly after his birth, he became blind as a result of receiving too much oxygen in the incubator as a premature baby. As the world soon came to know, blindness did not hinder him from becoming one of the most talented and celebrated musicians of all time.

Young Stevie showed an early gift for music as a member of a church choir in Detroit, where his family moved to when he was four years old. He later demonstrated his amazing talent with a plethora of instruments, including the harmonica, piano, and drums, all of which he taught himself to play before he was ten years old. He was just 11 years old when he was discovered by Ronnie White of the Motown band, the Miracles. He soon auditioned for Berry Gordy Jr., who didn’t hesitate to sign young Stevie to Motown. In 1962, the newly renamed Little Stevie Wonder, working with a Motown songwriter, released his debut album, *Little Stevie Wonder the 12 Year Old Genius*.

Over the course of his lifetime and career, Stevie Wonder has been honored with numerous awards. He has won 25 Grammys, which includes his Grammy Lifetime Achievement Award. In 1989, he was inducted into the Rock and Roll Hall of Fame. More recently, Wonder was honored with the Second Library of Congress Gershwin Prize for Popular Song in 2009. Though he has been blind his entire life he did not allow his disability to deter him from tapping into the musical genius and greatness.⁹



Michelle Obama and Craig Robinson are a sibling pair that exemplifies greatness. From an early age, both showed academic purpose and the drive necessary to achieve success. Raised on the South Side of Chicago in a one-bedroom apartment in which they slept in the

living room with a sheet serving as a room divider between them, this pair had many odds stacked against them. However, despite being raised in the inner-city and not having much money or access to resources, the Robinson children were taught the value of education by their parents.¹⁰ They took what they were taught seriously and performed at the level of excellence that was expected of them. Both Craig and Michelle were reading at age four and skipped the second grade. According to Craig, "...we were always encouraged to do the best you can do, not just what's necessary."¹¹

This has been how they both have lived their lives. Young Michelle Robinson was a gifted student by the sixth grade. She graduated salutatorian of her high school. Following in her older brother's footsteps, Michelle attended Princeton University, where she graduated cum laude. She went on to receive a J.D. from Harvard Law School.

Craig pursued his love for education while at the same time excelling as a forward on the basketball team at Princeton. He was two-time Ivy League player of the year, leading the league in field goal percentage, and was also the fourth-highest scorer in school history. After graduating from Princeton University, Craig earned an MBA in Finance from the University of Chicago School of Business.

Both Michelle and Craig continue to operate in greatness today. Craig has had a very successful basketball coaching career and is currently the head basketball coach for Oregon State. Michelle Obama is the First Lady of the United States of America.

IV. Songs That Speak to the Moment

Identifying and calling forth the greatness that rests within children is critical. As we speak life to them, we must encourage them that they also have the power to speak life-giving affirmations to themselves each day. As followers of Jesus Christ, children truly are a royal priesthood and a holy nation and have been adopted into the royal family of God. Knowing and embodying this will improve the way children feel about themselves and boost their self-esteem.

There's a King in You

by Donald Lawrence

You come from royalty
An aristocratic dynasty
The goal of the enemy
Is that you don't know who you are
There's power when you speak
Be mindful of words you release

I know that life has challenged you
But the King in me speaks to the King in you
You were born to rule there is a King in you

You come from royalty
An aristocratic dynasty
The goal of the enemy
Is that you don't know who you are
There's power when you speak
Be mindful of words you release

I know that life has challenged you
But the King in me speaks to the King in you
You were born to rule there is a King in you

Is there no King in you then why do you speak,
Speak with such defeat?
Is there no King in you then why do you speak,
Speak with such low esteem?

I know that life has challenged you
But the King in me speaks to the King in you
You were born to rule, there is a King in you
There is a King in you.¹²

Teaching children that they are destined for greatness is a key to building their self-esteem. Encouraging them to move forward toward God's purpose and plans for their lives will help them focus in moments when they may be distracted by friends, bad habits, and the ill intentions of others. Knowing that God had a plan for them before the world was framed can ground them in their quest for achieving the level of success that God has ordained for them.

Destined for Greatness

by Ricky Dillard

I'm moving toward
things I don't see
for I'm determined to get
what God promised me.
I make changes in the company I keep
no more distractions to stop me.
I'm destined for Greatness.....
Now I'm on my way...

Before I was formed in the womb God knew me
He sanctified me then and affirmed me

Now I have favor on my life to sustain me.
I'm destined for Greatness.....
Now I'm on my way...
I'm destined for Greatness (repeat as directed)¹³

Having a sense of identity is a natural part of growth and development for children. The question, "who am I?" is one that surfaces at various points during the life cycle. It is important for the adults who surround children to be a positive force of encouragement as children seek to define themselves and find their place in the world. Identity formation has a direct correlation to the way in which young people view themselves. Exposure to positive images, praise for their positive traits, and receiving compliments for good work all help children feel good about themselves. In addition, young people are much more likely to believe in themselves and their ability to achieve greatness when adults aid in the molding and shaping of such an identity. As parents, teachers, mentors, elders, and village members we must be ever mindful to communicate to our children that they have bright futures and God-given destinies to be great.

Identity

by Israel Houghton

Chorus

You are my father
you are my father
you are my future, my destiny
(yea yea yea)

You are my father
You are my father
In you I find my identity (repeat)

Repeat chorus

Lay your hands on me
Tell me who I am
I can do all things
If you say I can
Show me I am free
Free to accomplish your plan for me

Chorus

Lay your hands on me
Tell me who I am
I can do all things
If you say I can
Show me I am free

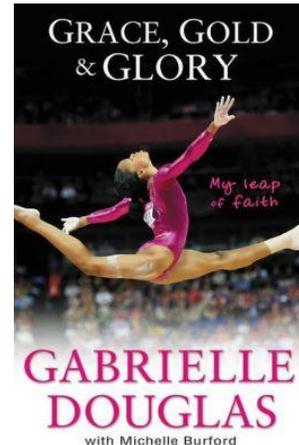
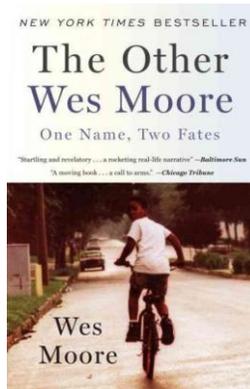
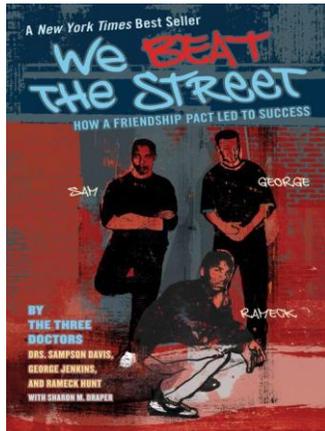
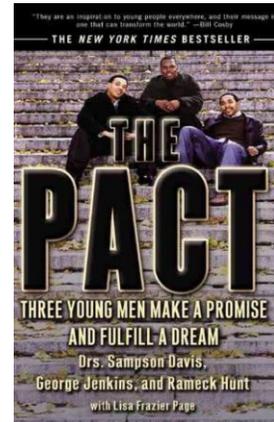
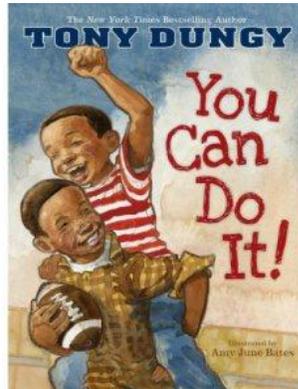
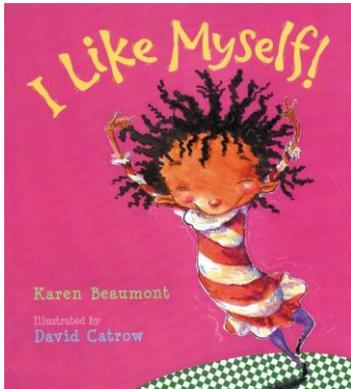
Free to accomplish you plans for me

Oh oh oh oh oo ohh
oh oh oh oh oh oh ohh
oh oh oh oh ooh ohh¹⁴

V. Events or Practices That Create a Memorable Learning Moment

- Introduce the books below to children in a youth group, Bible study, or other church ministry context several weeks before Children's Sunday. For younger children *I Like Myself* and *You Can Do It!* can be read to non-readers and assigned to readers to read on their own or in a group. Middle-school children can read on their own, read as a group, or be presented with excerpts from *We Beat the Streets*, *The Pact*, *Grace, Gold & Glory*, or *The Other Wes Moore*. Organize meaningful discussions about the content of the books. Encourage the children to share their reactions and

reflections. Share the main themes of each book with the congregation as a brief introduction and invite children to share a brief written reflection or reaction from the books during a Children’s Day Worship Service.



- Create a Rites of Passage program for the children of your church and incorporate ritual, singing, and covenant as a part of the worship service in celebration of the children who have completed it.
- If your church is not currently a Freedom School site, consider becoming one. Incorporate children’s art, speeches, and poetry reflections from the Freedom School Program into the worship service.
- Allow children to choose an African American of the past or present who achieved greatness. Invite students to write about how they will follow the example of that

individual to achieve greatness for themselves. Incorporate the children's writings in a Children's Day worship service.

- Create a skit or a play involving children and adults that promotes self-esteem and achieving greatness.
- Encourage children to write poems/spoken word about their dreams and aspirations for the future. Allow them to share their poetry with the congregation on Children's Sunday.
- Encourage children to recite poems written by African American poets that are relevant to achieving success, being great, and feeling good about one's self.
- Honor children during worship services by celebrating their accomplishments. Collect their report cards, awards, extracurricular accomplishments, trophies, sports stats, and other academic successes and share them with the congregation. Ask the children to stand at their seats or to come and stand before the congregation as they are being honored. Do this at least once each month.
- Establish scholarship funds for children (pre-school–age 12) who do well in school and present them with what they have earned on Children's Sunday.
- Create a 3-way "Destined for Greatness" Covenant between the church, the children, and their families. Such a covenant would include statements relevant to the commitment of the child to reach goals and the commitment from the biological and church families to support the child, build their self-esteem, and teach them from an early age that they are capable of greatness. The covenant can be displayed either on screens or in a church bulletin. The words of the covenant can be recited corporately. All covenants should be placed in each Children's Sunday school classroom and church nursery.

VI. Audio Visual Aids

- Create a slide show or photo montage set to music that includes pictures of the children of your congregation. These can be individual photos, group photos, and photos of children "in action." Photos that display them receiving awards or engaging in extracurricular activities should also be included.
- If audio/video equipment is unavailable, create a large poster or mural with photos of the children of your congregation for display in the sanctuary during the worship service.
- Create chants about having positive self-esteem and being great. Teach the chants to the children and allow them to form a Harambee Circle and chant during a designated time during the worship service.
- Include a choreographed liturgical dance using one of the songs highlighted in Part IV above.

Notes

1. www.childrensdefense.org/programs-campaigns/freedom-schools.
2. Kunjufu, Jawanza. Developing Positive Self-Images and Discipline in Black Children (Chicago, IL: African American Images, 2000), 49–57.
3. hooks, bell. Rock My Soul: Black People and Self-Esteem (New York, NY: Atria Books, 2003), xi.
4. Oglesby, E. Hammond. Ten Principles of Black Self-Esteem: Letters of Heritage, Lessons of Hope (Cleveland, OH: Pilgrim Press, 1999).
5. <http://summergames.ap.org/article/douglas-wins-ap-female-athlete-year-honors> (accessed 3 March 2013).
6. Douglas, Gabrielle, with Michelle Burford. Grace, Gold, and Glory: My Leap of Faith (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2012).
7. http://www.newpittsburghcourieronline.com/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=2000:british-wonder-twins-set-new-math-milestone-youngest-brits-to-advance-to-high-school&catid=54:international&Itemid=113 (accessed 3 March 2013).
8. <http://www.dailymail.co.uk/news/article-1116584/Wonder-twins-Seven-year-olds-youngest-pass-AS-level-maths.html> (accessed 3 March 2013).
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10. Colbert, David. Michelle Obama: An American Story (Boston, MA: Sandpiper/Houghton Mifflin, 2009), 7–23.
11. <http://www.biography.com/people/michelle-obama-307592> (accessed 1 March 2013).
12. There's a King in You. By Donald Lawrence. Online location: <http://www.metrolyrics.com/theres-a-king-in-y> Metrolyrics.com Online location: [ou-lyrics-donald-lawrence.html](http://www.metrolyrics.com/donald-lawrence.html) (accessed 24 March 2013).
13. Destined for Greatness. By Ricky Dillard. Online location: <http://www.metrolyrics.com/destined-for-greatness-lyrics-ricky-dillard-new-g.html> (accessed 24 March 2013).
14. Identity. By Israel Houghton. Online location: <http://www.lyrics59.com/Identity-lyrics-966985.html> (accessed 20 March 2013).