

# reading care

ESSENCE**CARES**

a mentoring & literacy guide



# mentor

# 2.4

**million Black children have an incarcerated parent**

*Source: All Alone in the World: Children of the Incarcerated  
by Nell Bernstein*

**Of all African-American births,**

# 6.6%

**are to girls under the age of 18**

*Source: U.S. Census Bureau*

# 60%

**of Black fourth-graders did not score at the basic achievement level on national reading tests in 2005**

*Source: 2005 National Assessment of Education Progress*

# 1 in 8

**African-American males between the ages of 25 and 29 is incarcerated.**

*Source: U.S. Department of Justice*

**And in some areas fewer than 20% of Black males are graduating from high school**

*Source: Public Education and the Black Male Student,  
a report by Schott Foundation for Public Education*

# 20%

we are  
the solution



## mentoring works

Welcome to **ESSENCE CARES: A National Mentoring Movement** and coalition of some of the most trusted organizations in the nation and concerned African-Americans like you who are coming together to solve the escalating crisis among our youngsters who are losing ground. Together we are mounting the largest mentoring movement in the history of the nation—advancing the commitment made by our foreparents centuries ago. With far less than we have at hand, they harnessed their resources, gave of their time, and opened their hearts to assist and educate the vulnerable children in their communities.

On our watch, increasing numbers of African-American youngsters—our treasure and future—are in peril. The negative forces claiming our children are powerful, but there is no force more powerful than our commitment and love. We are the solution!

Together we will recruit the millions of caring adults needed to fill the pipelines of local mentoring organizations in urban and rural areas. Failing schools, escalating crime and incarceration rates are sucking the life out of our community. Enough is enough! We need all hands on deck—caring Black mentors, especially

strong Black men. All it takes to become a mentor is having compassion, making a commitment and being a good listener.

The beautiful brown faces of our young—tearstained and frightened—are crying out for help. They are our children, and we must move beyond just talking about the crisis they are in. There is an urgent need for us to act!

Please get involved now. Mentoring is the answer.

Susan L. Taylor  
*Editorial Director, ESSENCE*



## 100 **black men of america**, inc.

You don't need any special skills to mentor. No advanced degrees or impressive resumes are required for making a difference in a young person's life. Honorific titles, fat bank accounts and well-tailored clothes are no guarantee that you will make a good mentor. However, motivation, empathy, commitment and flexibility will make it possible for you to enter a child's world and lovingly establish yourself as a trusted guide, a valued adviser, a cherished role model.

Please get involved now.

Thomas W. Dortch Jr.  
*Chairman Emeritus*



## **national urban league**

The crisis surrounding too many of our Black youth has been well chronicled, and solutions seem complex and expensive. The simplest and most effective way to combat the negative forces affecting our youth and to make a difference is for every able African-American adult to mentor at least one young person in need. The National Urban League and I are committed to lending our support and linking with other organizations to ensure that a caring adult is available to mentor every child who needs one.

Marc H. Morial  
*President and CEO*



**ywca** usa

The YWCA USA has been in the mentorship “business” for nearly 150 years, and the empowerment of girls and women and the pursuit of racial justice have been the core of the YWCA mission. YWCA offers girls self-esteem-building programs, academic support, career planning, health information, fitness activities, and more. We have also been a leader in promoting literacy among youth and adults, including literacy for speakers of English as a second language.

Lorraine Cole, Ph.D.  
*CEO*



**100 black men of america, inc.**

100 Black Men of America is proud to support the **ESSENCE CARES** initiative. Nearly a year ago, a small group of leaders stood up before an audience at the Essence Music Festival and made a commitment to reclaim our youth. Our **ATLANTA CARES** pilot has attracted more than 73 organizations and recruited nearly 800 men and women who have rededicated themselves to our youth as mentors and role models. We know that mentoring literally changes lives.

Albert Dotson Jr.  
*President*



**the links, incorporated**

The Links, Incorporated, is proud to be a national partner with **ESSENCE CARES** because it builds on our 61-year tradition of providing services to youth both nationally and internationally through friendship. We invest in young people of African descent through mentoring, education, and enrichment programs because we recognize the need to serve as role models and mentors.

Gwendolyn B. Lee, Ph.D.  
*National President*



## **national institute** for literacy

Literacy skills are the building blocks for success in our lives, work and communities. The Institute is dedicated to improving opportunities for adults, youth, and children to increase their literacy skills so they can thrive in a progressively literate world. We seek to integrate knowledge, research, and practice to improve literacy and reading instruction. We welcome this opportunity to serve as an expert resource on literacy to **ESSENCE CARES** and its emphasis on increasing literacy, learning, and high educational achievement among youth.

While the Institute views literacy broadly—as an individual’s ability to read, write, speak in English, compute, and solve problems well enough to function on the job, in the family, and in society—reading is the cornerstone for all learning and skill mastery. We learn to read, but as we grow older, we rely on our reading skill to advance in school and work and to make sense of the world around us. Parents are a child’s first teacher, but other caring adults can help children develop and strengthen their reading skills. Mentors can be those other caring adults—you can make a difference!

Sandra L. Baxter, Ed.D.  
*Director*

## **ESSENCE CARES** **objectives**

- Fill the pipeline of local mentoring organizations with caring Black men and women.
- Communicate to our at-risk youngsters that the adults in their community love and value them and are committed to helping them succeed.
- Increase literacy, a passion for learning and high educational achievement.
- Increase high school graduation rates among Black students by 10 percent annually.
- End violence in the Black community and the over-incarceration of our young males and females as well.



# volunteer mentors

## mission and purpose

To mobilize millions of caring and committed adults from every sector of the Black community—corporate and public sector employees, entrepreneurs, union workers, civic and faith leaders, congregations and community activists, fraternities, sororities, and college students—to mentor and secure the educational and lifelong success of our vulnerable young people.

Everywhere that our children are suffering and losing ground, there is a critical need

for volunteer mentors who are generous with their time and spirit and who will give of themselves.

A recent Big Brothers Big Sisters evaluation revealed the positive effects of mentoring in young people's lives. They found that:

- Students who meet regularly with mentors are 52 percent less likely than their peers to skip a day of school
- When mentored, young people of color were 70 percent less likely to begin using drugs.
- Mentored youth were 27 percent less likely to begin alcohol use.
- Mentored youth, especially boys, had improved relationships with their peers

We all had a caring person in our lives who helped us rise to where we are today. Young people—even those most challenged—thrive when caring adults show interest in them, encourage them, and introduce them to a wider world of options than the narrow and painful places that too many Black youngsters call home each day. Don't let myths about mentoring keep you from getting involved.

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## dispelling mentoring myths

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### Myth 1: Mentoring requires a lot of time

**Fact:** Mentoring does take commitment, but not a lot of time. It is the quality of the relationship you establish with a youngster that counts most. Connecting for about four hours a month is enough time to:

- Encourage a child each week
- Be available for a phone call or two
- Listen to challenges, ideas and even their jokes
- Help with problems at school
- Share strategies for achieving academic success

- Have a lunch or a snack
- Attend a worship service
- Introduce your mentee to other positive young people

### Myth 2: Background checks aren't necessary

**Fact:** Background checks help protect children from predators and pedophiles and maintain accountability to the parents, guardians and organizations responsible for the children being mentored. It is a necessary insurance that children will be nurtured and loved appropriately. Keep in

mind that these background checks are necessary, confidential, and shared only with the agency doing the investigation. Your privacy is protected.

### Myth 3: I will feel uncomfortable with a youngster I don't know

**Fact:** All youngsters are in need of love and affirmation; you only have to be yourself. You can hear, so please listen. You have a heart, so open it wide. And you have many gifts and talents, so please share them.





# communicate encourage

## what you may want to know about our national mentoring movement

### What you can do:

- Make a commitment to mentor a youngster or form a mentoring group or tag team with others to support a number of youngsters for a year.
- Our recruitment goal: There are 2.5 million Black children with a parent in prison and millions more youngsters in crisis. Help us by recruiting all of the caring and responsible adults you know to support our children.

### Mentoring models available:

- One-on-one/traditional mentoring—one adult to one child or youngster
- Group mentoring—one adult to more than two young people
- Tag-team mentoring—many adults working with a small or large group of youngsters
- Peer mentoring—a caring youngster mentoring other youth

### Where does mentoring take place?

- Mentoring can occur in a variety of safe, public places like restaurants, parks, schools, libraries, recreation centers, and in places of worship.

### What should mentors communicate to youngsters?

- Let youngsters know that they are smart, capable, valuable and worthy of love; that they should not be ashamed of what they don't know; that critical independent thinking and making good decisions are important.

# the power of literacy



Recruit your **family, friends** and **faith community** to mentor.

- Help youngsters understand the importance of speaking well and effectively. As a bicultural people, we may speak to our friends differently than we do to those in our academic and professional worlds.
- Help them learn strategies for staying healthy and safe.
- Instill in them the importance of setting and achieving personal, academic and career goals.
- Encourage them to give back to vulnerable youngsters what mentors have given to them.

- Speak to them about the importance of learning to read and write well. These necessary skills help to open the doors to success.
- Help instill in your youngster/mentee a lifelong love of learning.

Here are a few critical things that you can say to young people to enhance their academic achievement and increase their chances of getting into college:

- You **can** afford to go to college. Resources are available. Fill out a FAFSA (Federal Application for Financial Student

Aid) form. Funds are available to support students at any achievement level who want to attend a four- or two-year college.

- Take challenging courses—college preparatory—in middle school and high school. If the student's school does not offer these courses, you, the mentor, can speak to the principal or school board official and request them.
- Seek help and advice from teachers, counselor and mentors.
- You **can** be a high achiever!

**“We have a powerful potential in our youth, and we must have the courage to change old ideas and practices so that we may direct their power toward good ends.”**

—Mary McLeod Bethune

## **literacy and mentoring matter**

### **Do you know the literacy basics?**

Do you know that 60 percent of Black fourth-graders are reading below the basic level? And 58 percent of Black eighth-graders? And that only about 50 percent of African-American students graduate on time from high school with a regular diploma? Underlying these troubling statistics is the fact that so many Black children and youth have not mastered the fundamental skills, especially reading, needed to prepare them to succeed in and graduate from high school and to meet the responsibilities of adult life.

### **Why Literacy is Important**

Literacy skills are the building blocks of high academic achievement and a competitive workforce. Even so-called “low-skilled jobs” require English, math, problem-solving and communication skills, according to employers surveyed for *The Working Life: The Labor Market for Workers in Low-Skilled Jobs*.

The 2003 National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL) found that 64 percent of adults with the highest literacy skills were employed full-time and 18 percent were

out of the workforce. At the other end of the literacy continuum, 35 percent of adults with the lowest skills were employed full-time and 51 percent were out of the workforce. If the students who dropped out of the class of 2006 had graduated, the country’s economy would have been strengthened by an additional \$309 billion in income over their lifetimes.

Low literacy skills are not just a problem for our work life and economy. There are consequences, too, for keeping families healthy and for improving one’s quality of life. Individuals with low health literacy are

# foster a love for reading



## **literacy skills:** the building blocks of academic achievement

likely to struggle to find and understand the basic information required for appropriate decision-making on health matters. According to the NAAL, 14 percent of adults had less than basic health literacy skills. These adults may also be responsible for the health of children or elderly family members.

### **We can improve literacy skills and make a difference**

Learning to read is one of the first skills a child must master to become a capable student. In the early elementary grades,

teachers focus on helping children acquire the skills they need to read. By the end of third grade, a child must read with ease and understanding to take advantage of the learning opportunities in fourth grade and beyond. Otherwise, he is faced with the challenge of learning increasingly complex materials without knowing how to read and understand that material.

Using a reading program based on the scientific or evidence-based research helps teachers make sure their students learn all of the essential components of reading. These include: phonemic awareness, or

the ability to notice and work with the individual sounds in spoken words; phonics, or the connection between letters and the sounds of spoken language; fluency, or the ability to read a text accurately and quickly; vocabulary, the words we must know to communicate effectively; and comprehension, or making sense of what we read. Learning to read isn't easy, but with solid instruction, children can develop into successful readers.

As a mentor and volunteer, you can help shape and change young lives through literacy.

**Every great dream begins with a dreamer...you have within you the strength, the patience and the passion to reach for the stars and change the world.**

—Harriet Tubman

These are some of the things that you can do to help your mentee or the youth in your life to build literacy skills:

### **Children in First, Second, and Third Grade**

- Talk with younger children to help them build listening and speaking skills that support their literacy development.
- Ask your mentee to bring a book from school or home to read to you. Be patient if your mentee reads slowly. Let the child know how proud you are of his or her reading.

- Help your mentee spell and write. Encourage the child to write a letter to a family member or friend. Or write a simple story about an activity you've done together.

### **Middle School and High School Students**

The focus of literacy skill-building for many adolescents should be deepening background knowledge, expanding vocabulary, and staying motivated. Middle and high school students who are familiar with the concepts and vocabulary of their school subjects are in a good position to learn more.

- Understand your mentee's interests and encourage him or her to develop more background knowledge about those subjects. For example, if your mentee is interested in other cultures or the environment, keep your eye out for books, specials on television or podcasts.
- Build on activities like visits to museums or local attractions by sharing websites, magazine stories or other information connected to the activity. Find a few minutes to discuss the content, pointing out key ideas and vocabulary.

# we are the solution

- Visit a bookstore or library and help your mentee choose engaging reading material that's not overly difficult.
- Play word games like Scrabble with your mentee, do crossword puzzles, enjoy poetry. Help your mentee become "word conscious."

With the involvement of volunteer mentors and caring communities, young people can find support and enjoy the journey to becoming lifelong readers and learners. We hope you will be inspired to mentor a child who needs a caring adult—you can be a catalyst to empower him and his family to build basic literacy skills and foster a love for reading and learning.

how can you  
**get involved in  
mentoring?**

To connect to a local mentoring organization and to **ESSENCE CARES**, visit [www.ESSENCECARES.com](http://www.ESSENCECARES.com).



## a **pledge** to rescue **our youth**

by **dr. maya angelou**

Young women, young men of color, we add our voices to the voices of your ancestors, who speak to you over ancient seas and across impossible mountain tops.

Come up from the gloom of national neglect; you have already been paid for.

Come out of the shadow of irrational prejudice; you owe no racial debt to history.

The blood of our bodies and the prayers of our souls have bought you a future free from shame and bright beyond the telling of it.

We pledge ourselves and our resources to seek for you clean and well furnished schools, safe and nonthreatening streets, employment which makes use of your talents, but does not degrade your dignity.

You are the best we have.

You are all we have.

You are what we have become.

We pledge you our whole hearts from this day forward.

# ESSENCE**CARES** a national mentoring movement

## with

National Urban League  
100 Black Men of America, Inc.  
The Links, Incorporated  
YWCA USA

with expertise and resources from the **National Institute for Literacy** and MENTOR

## in partnership with

Big Brothers Big Sisters of America  
Alpha Phi Alpha Fraternity, Inc.  
Children's Defense Fund  
Girl Scouts of the USA  
MAD DADS  
Operation Hope  
National CASA

NAACP  
United Negro College Fund  
National Baptist Convention of America  
Progressive National Baptist Convention  
National Baptist Convention, USA  
National Missionary Baptist Convention of America  
The Twenty-First Century Foundation

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