



Rebranding the Black Male

Written by Dr. David Rudder



Many Black Americans are alarmed by the increasing “thug” and “ghetto” mentality that has seduced so many of our children. There are two competing value systems: one emphasizes education, careers, and family life. The other embraces the “Code of the streets,” which emphasizes this “me against the world” mentality; you have to be extra tough to survive with little concern on how others from mainstream culture will perceive you. Unfortunately, the thug image is prevalent in the mass media and is being presented as an acceptable way to behave. These attitudes are having severely toxic effects on young black males. By the time they reach their mid-30s, 30% of black men with no more than a high school education have served time in prison. By the time they reach their mid-30s, 60% of black men who dropped out of school have spent time in prison. If we are not careful, this path will destroy the black community.

Young black male students have, on average, the worst grades, the lowest test scores, and the highest dropout rates of all students. It appears that too many young black

males do not value education or see it as an important element of their development. One aspect of black male crisis is the notion that an educated person is somehow less “real” than the thugs and streetwise young men depicted on music videos, movies and television programs. Educated black men are presented as the Carlton character on Fresh Prince of Bel Air who was nerdy and very uncool. This has become the stereotype of educated black men. Black masculinity is almost never seen through the lens of individuals with high levels of educational attainment.

It should not be surprising that young black males desire to emulate athletes, rappers, pimps, criminals, and the like. These are the images depicted in the media. For example, there are 32 National Football League teams. Each team has 53 players, including those on practice squads. This means that there are 1,696 professional players, but the vast majority of them are not seen outside of the playing fields. Most of the major stories are centered on players like Pacman Jones- numerous arrests, Michael Vick – dog fighting, Terrell Owens – his over the top outlandish behavior, or Tank Williams – possession of guns charges. As a result, in part due to the media’s constant obsession with the deplorable behavior all of the black men in professional sports are defined by the antics of few bad actors, the dominant image of black men is based on undesirable behaviors.

To some, manhood is a nebulous concept that does provide a theoretical construct of what it means to be a man, especially a black man, in the current social and political climate. We should present a different image of black manhood to our children. We cannot rely on television or other forms of mainstream media to change how educated black men are perceived considering in inner city communities, more than half of all black men do not finish high school. Education was once the most powerful tool used to fight the racial and

social injustice endured by African Americans. Parents, schools, churches, trade schools, unions and similar institutions, must rebrand the image of the educated African American male as a cool and inspiring role model denoting everything that is righteous and real about black manhood. In our own communities, we need to start showing more love to brothers. We need to hear songs and see movies depicting black males who finish school, attend college and successfully navigate the corporate ladder. We need to see media portrayals in which black men are gainfully employed, parenting their children, engaging in community service, helping family members and supporting their spouses.

We need to demonstrate that the educated black man has a formidable presence. He is not a “punk” simply because he chooses not to resort to violence as a means of problem solving; he doesn’t wear white, oversized t-shirts or low-slung baggy pants. But, this does not make him any less cool or street wise. A generation ago, young African Americans viewed educated blacks as heroes and role models. Somewhere along the way things changed.

Ask a teenager to identify five famous black people who are or were not athletes or entertainers. They cannot include Malcolm X, Martin Luther King Jr., Rosa Parks, Jessie Jackson or Al Sharpton. See what answer you get. I think you will agree, it’s definitely time to rebrand the educated black as the “cool” thing to be.

For more information or to share your thoughts, contact Dr. David Rudder at drudder@dtcc.edu

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