

“Black Kinship Families and Culturally Appropriate Engagement”: Key Takeaways

This document presents key takeaways from a conversation between **Karyne Jones** and **Dr. Anita Thomas**. Karyne Jones is President and CEO of the National Caucus & Center on Black Aging, Inc. (NCBA), the country’s preeminent national organization on issues impacting minority citizens aged 55 and over. Anita Thomas, PhD, is Executive Vice President and Provost of St. Catherine University in St. Paul, Minnesota. She is an expert on culturally affirming counseling approaches with African American families.

The terms “kinship/grandfamilies,” “grandfamilies,” and “kinship families,” used throughout this document, refer to all families in which grandparents, other relatives, or close family friends are raising children whose parents are unable to do so. The terms can be used interchangeably to refer to these families.

[Click here](#) to watch the full conversation between Ms. Jones and Dr. Thomas.

Social/human services agencies and organizations should adopt a “strength-based” approach to African American kinship/grandfamilies.

Dr. Thomas:

- ▶ “There are a number of strengths that African American families have: that collective sense of connection to each other, the importance of underlying spirituality, our sense of groundedness and harmony.”
- ▶ “...I would tell human service professionals that the negative perceptions – that deficit model – is really a detriment, a negative mindset to start working with families.”

Kinship/grandfamilies are cross-cultural traditions.

Dr. Thomas:

- ▶ “[T]raditionally, all heritage really focuses on the importance of those intergenerational connections and relationships and the importance of raising families.”

- ▶ “[I]t’s not just limited to the extended family for African Americans. If you’re raised in a religious household, it’s everyone in the church.”
- ▶ “[E]veryone connected in that larger extended African American community was important for your child-rearing.”

A strong protective impulse causes many African Americans to avoid government agencies and courts that deal with child custody and welfare, even if it means forgoing assistance.

Dr. Thomas:

- ▶ “I don’t necessarily say that it’s a sense of privacy as much as anxiety that an outside entity, an institution, a system has power that could lead to separation in the family. So, it’s guardedness and a protectiveness.”
- ▶ “[W]hen you think about our legacy of people being separated, the arguments we have about discipline and corporal punishment, and those kinds of issues, all of which were actually protective for Black families... It’s a protective factor about not having children be taken away from the family.”

African American children may live in more than one household. That’s not automatically a bad thing.

Dr. Thomas:

- ▶ “And you see, that’s one of those things against the system, even in indigenous families, where there’s much more of that child collective parenting where kids could be at multiple sets of households. From a dominant perspective and from Child Protective Service, it looks like neglect. It’s not. It’s the culture wrapping their arms around the families. ...It’s a value difference in that lens that really is important in terms of working with families.”

Trusted community organizations, such as churches, should create a database of helpful resources for kinship families.

Dr. Thomas:

- ▶ “I think that churches need to have a database of providers that they trust that they can then use as referrals to grandparents, families who need to have that support service.”

The African American community is not widely familiar with the terms “kinship families” and “grandfamilies,” and may miss opportunities because of that.

Ms. Jones:

- ▶ “[W]e’re just working right now on trying to get those relatives who are taking care of younger children to even self-identify as a grandfamily or a kinship family. So, we’re just working on even the language that’s out there, because they would see that and not necessarily know that that means me.”

The Grandfamilies & Kinship Support Network: A National Technical Assistance Center (Network) helps government agencies and nonprofits in states, tribes, and territories work across jurisdictional and systemic boundaries to improve supports and services for families in which grandparents, other relatives, or close family friends are raising children whose parents are unable to do so. For more information, please visit www.GKSNetwork.org.

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