

Saving Our Black Teen Boys
Dr. James C. Perkins

You've heard the alarming statistics facing our black teen boys:

- 16.4% of black teens have carried a weapon
- Among 10- to 24-year-old blacks, homicide is the *leading* cause of death
- Black juveniles represent more than 40% of the prison population

These facts paint a bleak picture for our young generation. But remember that 2 Timothy 1:7 points out, "God has not given us the spirit of fear, but of power, and of love, and of a sound mind."

In 1993 I founded the Benjamin E. Mays Male Academy to ensure that our young men had a place to cultivate their own spirit of power and love as well as their sound minds. The lessons we teach there have recently been adapted in my book *Playbook for Christian Manhood: 12 Key Plays for Black Teen Boys* (Judson Press, 2008). The book is written for boys aged 11–15, but it is also useful for parents, church leaders, or anyone else dedicated to these special lives. I want to share just a few of those key plays here.

Know Who You Are. So many black teens lack a sense of identity. Success stories of the rich and famous foster tantalizing dreams, but not necessarily worthy role models. When celebrity dreams seem unattainable, teens imitate the way of life seen in their often violent environment. That's why it is so vital for a boy to know who he is and what he can achieve as a child of God.

Know Your Purpose. Once a young man knows he is God's own child, he can be more focused and hopeful about determining God's purpose for him in this life. Our boys need to hear that God has a plan—and the power to bring that divine purpose to fulfillment in their lives.

Value Your Education. At the Mays Academy, every day I ask my young men, "Why are you here?" and they respond in unison, "To learn, sir!" "Why do we learn?" I demand, and they answer, "Because knowledge is power!" Make education a priority. Attendance is critical; homework is important; adequate sleep is vital, and praise for academic achievements inspires pride. Dropping out of school is like dropping out of life! Don't do it.

Respect Your Parents. The relationship between a boy and his parent(s) is the basis for how he interacts in other relationships. By respecting a parent or guardian, a boy establishes a pattern for respecting authority elsewhere—at a neighbor's house, at school, at church. If our young men would learn this one lesson early on, they would reap the benefits at school, in career, and in the world at large.

Develop a Female Friend. Girls are people too! A boy growing rapidly into manhood needs some game rules for his boy-girl relationships. If he "thingifies" his female peers, he also "thingifies" himself. Reject the common myth that boys and girls can't be friends. When the time is right, a female friend may actually become the ideal girlfriend! Young men, cultivate friendships with girls who will help you pursue your purpose and fulfill your potential.

Be Smart about Your Loyalties. A worthy friend is a person's most valuable companion. But a young man needs to be smart about choosing his "boys." Give your loyalty to someone who is living without purpose, without a firm identity as a child of God, and without respect for authority and other people, and you may be giving away your future. Boys have to be smart about their "brother's keeper"—or they may find themselves declared guilty by association.

Despite the statistics and the realities they describe, be assured that there is a way through this crisis—and that way is Jesus Christ. A young man could have no better role model. Once you bring Jesus fully into the equation, life takes a new direction. Remember the promise in Jeremiah 29:11, which says, "*For I know the plans I have for you, declares the LORD, plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future.*" This generation of young black boys *can* become educated, successful, godly men who will leave this world a better place. May these key plays provide a solid game plan for making a start on that hope-filled future.

Dr. James C. Perkins has been senior pastor of Greater Christ Baptist Church in Detroit, Michigan, for more than 25 years. Founder of the Benjamin E. Mays Male Academy, he is author of *Playbook for Christian Manhood: 12 Key Plays for Black Teen Boys* (2008) and *Building Up Zion's Walls: Ministry for Empowering the African American Family* (1999), both from Judson Press.