

Introduction

Many African American preadolescent and adolescent girls face challenges linked to residing in low-income and low-resource communities. Some risk factors include low academic achievement and life-course expectations. Other factors include early and risky sexual behavior, sometimes resulting in unplanned pregnancy or sexually transmitted diseases. Although African American adolescent females are more likely to be exposed to drugs and related problems in their community, they are no more likely to use drugs than girls in other ethnic groups, and many of these girls show strengths, including high self-esteem, positive relationships with adults, spiritual connectedness, independence, and androgynous gender roles.

The *Sisters of Nia* program is aimed at reinforcing and bringing out the strengths of African American girls. In the Kiswahili (Swahili) language, the word *nia* means purpose or goal. Many African American girls have high goals, but they may not know how to achieve them. They may not be able to connect their current behaviors or the behaviors of those around them with their future goals. *Sisters of Nia* seeks to bridge this divide. Studies have shown that culturally relevant intervention programs can give these girls help in achieving the direction, relationship skills, identity empowerment, and critical consciousness that lead to more positive self-esteem and relationships with others, greater ethnic pride, and higher expectations for future accomplishments. Research support for the *Sisters of Nia* program is provided in Appendix A, at the back of this book.

This curriculum is for preadolescent and adolescent girls ages 10 to 14, at the stage when developmental changes coincide with

other transitions—specifically, the transitions from elementary to middle school and from middle to high school. At these points in their lives, girls’ goals, behaviors, and personalities are in transition—not just their bodies. They are in the process of learning from their environment how to be women.

The *Sisters of Nia* program is a supplemental environment from which young African American women can learn. The program serves as a rite of passage that complements other efforts within the family, school, or community. Specifically, the program’s objectives are as follows:

- To increase knowledge of and appreciation for African and African American culture
- To increase ethnic pride and identity
- To increase identification with and awareness of successful African American female role models
- To develop critical awareness and skills for analyzing community and media messages
- To increase positive peer relationships and to decrease negative peer interactions
- To increase leadership skills and creativity
- To increase appreciation for the diversity of physical beauty and attractiveness
- To increase knowledge about personal hygiene and health
- To increase life-course expectations regarding education and other achievements

To accomplish these objectives, the program helps participants do the following:

- Learn about and from successful African American female role models
- Learn about and participate in African cultural activities and traditions
- Become aware of racism and sexism and how to deal with these “isms” in community and media messages
- Become aware of negative behaviors and the consequences of such behaviors

- Engage in role-play and team-building activities and exercises designed to promote positive relationships with other females
- Learn the Eight Principles for African American Living (*Nguzo Nane*) and discover how these principles can be applied to one's functioning in everyday life in the home, school, and community

Effective mentoring and cultural socialization can play a crucial role in positively affecting girls' lives. In implementing the program and helping to create "Sisters of Purpose," you will become one yourself. Take the time to thoroughly learn and understand the curriculum. Become familiar with its Africentric and relational principles and methods, effective teaching strategies, and session content and format. Make sure that materials are prepared and that you and your fellow leaders work cooperatively. Your ability to work well as a team and as individuals will dictate the program's success. Finally, take time to enjoy the important work you are doing.

SISTERS OF NIA PROGRAM AT A GLANCE

Program type

Africentric cultural enrichment for adolescent females

Objectives

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Guiding principles

The Eight Principles for African American Living (*Nguzo Nane*)

Implementation

- Stand-alone or in conjunction with a complementary program (for example, tutoring or substance abuse prevention)
- Number of sessions: 14 (plus one additional optional session)
- Session duration: 2 hours

Sisters of Nia Program (continued)

Target group

African American (or other open and interested) girls, ages 10 to 14

Group structure

At least one facilitator (*mzee*) for each group (*jamaa*) of 8 to 12 girls

Facilitator characteristics

African American females 19 years or older in good academic standing. These could include other females of African descent.

Session environment

A large room with few distractions (windowless or covered windows, no foot traffic)

Session components

Opening and closing rituals, discussion, guest speakers, team-building activities, journaling, *Staying in Focus* activities, intellectual and cooperative challenges, African and African American history and culture, and role plays

Optional activities

Field trips, Kwanzaa celebration