

AMERICAN PROMISE

THE PROMISE CLUB HANDBOOK

PROMISES

TO KEEP

PROMISES TO KEEP: THE PROMISE CLUB HANDBOOK

How can we help our sons navigate a complicated world that is oftentimes unfair and unforgiving? The answer is to be by their side as much as we physically, emotionally, mentally, and lovingly can. Helping them become successful, compassionate, intelligent, men starts when they are young—from the time their toddling in front of us, entering their kindergarten classroom, climbing the bus to take them to middle and high school, and driving off to college. The more actively involved we parents are, the better the child will perform in school and in life.

In 1999, Joe Brewster and Michèle Stephenson, middle class African-American parents living in Brooklyn, NY, turned their cameras on their son, Idris, and his best friend, Seun, as they entered kindergarten at Dalton School in Manhattan, one of the most prestigious private schools in the country, and began filming the documentary “American Promise.” Spanning 13 years—until the boys graduated high school—the provocative, intimate, and touching film reveals the complicated truths about America’s struggle on issues of race, class, and opportunity.

Now *American Promise* is a movement, spurring an organization of the same name, a book, as well as a national campaign to get the dialogue going and our children achieving. Joe and Michele have now begun an initiative for parents to create their own “Promise Clubs” in their communities, or at their child’s school.

PROMISE HIM THAT YOU WILL HELP HIS TEACHER CUSTOMIZE HIS EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE TO HIS LEARNING NEEDS, THAT YOU WILL COMMUNICATE YOUR HIGH EXPECTATIONS BOTH TO HIM AND TO HIS TEACHERS, THAT YOU WILL HELP HIM UNDERSTAND THAT HE MUST LEARN NO MATTER WHAT ANYONE ELSE MAY THINK OF HIM, AND THAT YOU WILL RESPOND QUICKLY TO ENSURE HE OBTAINS APPROPRIATE HELP IF YOU, A TEACHER OR OTHER MEMBER OF HIS VILLAGE NOTICES POSSIBLE SYMPTOMS OF A LEARNING OR DEVELOPMENTAL DIFFERENCE OR DISABILITY.

— EXCERPT FROM
AMERICAN PROMISE: HOW TO HELP
BLACK BOYS SUCCEED IN SCHOOL AND IN LIFE

The idea of creating Promise Clubs actually came to Joe and Michèle after attending Harvard University Achievement Gap Initiative or AGI (a university-wide effort that focuses on academic research, public education, and innovative outreach activities toward eliminating achievement gaps) summit a few years ago, which was led by Ron Ferguson, economist, Harvard University education and public policy professor and AIG co-chairs. At the summit, the couple met a group of parents who had started meeting regularly to support each other and demand more for their kids after feeling that their children were not getting the optimal educational experience.

“They became an extended family. And we thought their system worked, at least was working in that community. It was an example of motivated parents becoming active if not only for their kids, but for their immediate small community,” says Joe. “Groups like this are forming organically in many different places,” says Michèle. “The idea is that the Promise Club could help provide some form of structure to what’s already happening on an ad hoc basis.”

So what exactly can a Promise Club do? It can empower parents so that they can empower their own children to achieve success—academically, socially, and emotionally. The purpose of this guide is to show you why you should start a Promise Club and provide you with tools and tips on how to start the club. Let’s begin.

WHY THE PROMISE CLUB CONCEPT IS NECESSARY AND EFFECTIVE

Yes, you're busy, and maybe the thought of forming this type of club might seem overwhelming, but gathering other parents and starting these complicated conversations so that you can be a driving force behind your child's educational career is extremely necessary. From an academic standpoint, here's why:

When schools, families, and community groups work together to support learning, children tend to do better in school, stay in school longer, and like school more. That's according to A New Wave of Evidence, a report from Southwest Educational Development Laboratory (2002). The report, a synthesis of research on parent involvement over the past decade, also found that, regardless of family income or background, students with involved parents are more likely to:

- Earn higher grades and test scores, and enroll in higher-level programs
- Be promoted, pass their classes, and earn credits
- Attend school regularly
- Have better social skills, show improved behavior, and adapt well to school
- Graduate and go on to post/secondary education

Ron Ferguson and AIG have also researched and reported some interesting facts on the middle class gap in America. According AIG, compared to whites, significant gaps for African- American and Hispanic students are evident in virtually every measure of achievement: National Association of Educational Progress (NAEP) math and reading test scores, high school completion rates, college

enrollment and college completion rates. In addition, there is wide variability across states in educational investment and outcomes.

Ferguson also participated in the Council of the Great City Schools study of the widening gap between white and black boys which found that 12 percent of black fourth-grade boys were proficient in reading on a national test, compared with 38 percent of whites.

Let's take a look at more disturbing statistics: According to a 2010 study from the Schott Foundation, only 47 percent of black male students entering high school in 2003 graduated in 2008, compared to 78 percent of white male students. The academic achievement gap is a harsh reality—all the more reason our sons need us to have their back (and to be on their backs) when it comes to their education. A Promise Club can help you do that.

Of course you can help your son achieve educational and social success by yourself, but the adage “It takes a village to raise a child” is more than true. Having sincere, trusting relationships with other parents and a support group where you can get great advice, helpful tips, and basically “group therapy” can be even more effective and helpful. You don't have to do it all by yourself.

“The empowerment and the engagement to make changes from the ground up as a group, as opposed to waiting for someone else to make that change is amazing,” says Gina Parker Collins, founder of RIISE, a membership-based organization committed to bridging the gaps between families of color and private independent schools. “As a group, you're making changes in your household among other like-minded families who are very concerned about the welfare and power of their young men.”

From a social and emotional standpoint, here's why:

- Children who grow up with a strong sense of self-esteem get into fewer fights, are more confident and tend to bounce back quicker when disappointed or let down.
- It's a tough world out there and the more your child feels that you believe in and value them, the better equipped they are to handle the ups and downs of life. You are your child's first cheerleader...don't let him down.
- Black males are three times more likely to be suspended or expelled from school than their White peers, therefore missing valuable learning time in the classroom.

Sources: The Schott Foundation. “National Opportunity to Learn Campaign. Federal Recommendations.” schottfoundation.org/otl/otl-federal-recommendations-final.pdf and The New York Times. “Black Students face more Discipline, Data Suggests.” March 6, 2012 (data is from the Department of Education)

STARTING YOUR OWN CLUB

You've read why the Promise Club is necessary. So now it's your turn to be an active force in helping your son achieve academic and social greatness. Ready? OK, let's go.

Get the Word Out

Ideally, the smaller and more intimate the group, the better—especially since personal information and sensitive, candid anecdotes will be shared at these meetings. Plus, from a psychosocial standpoint, people tend to be more comfortable with a smaller group. 15 members at the maximum is a decent size that can still be effective and productive, while keeping the group close-knit and familial. Another thing: your Promise Club does not have to be limited to a particular race or gender. As long as folks are comfortable dealing with touchy issues of race and discrimination, they can certainly be part of the group. Here's how to look for your members:

- Start with your immediate circle. Friends who have children. Let them know that you're forming a parent club and ask if they'd be interesting in joining. Mention it to your co-workers with children as well.
- Create a flyer about the Promise Club and talk to your child's teacher about it. Ask her if she can put the flyer in the backpack of the kids in your son's class to take home.
- If you're part of a sorority or fraternity talk to your sisters and brothers with children who might be interested in joining. Same with any social affiliations you may have (i.e. Mocha Moms, Jack and Jill, book clubs, etc.) and church or places of worship.

Decide Meeting Times and Locations

- Consider how often you'd like the Promise Club to meet. Remember that people are just as busy (or even more) as you. "Adding another weekly meeting to their already extraordinarily packed calendars might be a challenge, so it depends on the stage of life everyone's in," says Cheli English-Figaro co-founder and President Emeritus of Mocha Moms. "Ascertain the pulse of the group before you determine how often you meet." Perhaps start off with just monthly meetings, but have weekly "check-ins" or updates via social media or text message.
- Select a convenient monthly meeting time. You can consider a weekend or in the evening, after work. At the first meeting, try to get a consensus of when people would prefer to meet going forward.

- Have the first meeting at your home. If that’s not possible, try to find an easy to get to location. A restaurant might be a little too noisy and distracting for the first few meetings so try to find another location that will have space for the amount of people attending and that won’t incur too much costs. And decide whether or not children will be allowed to attend. If so, space for childcare or for where the children can convene during the meeting will be needed.
- After the members are established, consider having the meetings at a different parent’s house each month. Or if you, as the leader, feel more comfortable hosting it at your home every month, that’s fine.
- Be sure to have food or light refreshments during the meetings. Parents are tired and over extended so a chance to unwind over light fare and wine is a welcoming and much appreciated gesture.

The First Meeting

OK, you have the meeting place and time secured. You’ve got RSVPs from the parents and friends who want to become involved in the Promise Club. But how will you run the pivotal first meeting? Here’s a sample agenda:

- I. Welcome and Introductions
 - A. Each person shares biographical information about themselves (occupation, marital status, number of children, affiliations, etc.) and their children (i.e. child’s grade, school, extracurricular activities, etc.)
 - B. Each person shares how they heard about the Promise Club
- II. Promise Club Backgrounder
 - A. Philosophy and mission of the Promise Club
 - B. Benefits
 - C. What to expect from the Promise Club
- III. Promise Club Goals
 - A. Discuss what the Promise Club would like to accomplish
 - D. Open Discussion about Children and Schools
 - A. Each person shares their child’s current school situation (i.e. whether they like the school and teachers; experiences at the school or with the teachers and administrators)

B. Expectations for their child and the school

V. Suggestions of Promise Club topics

VI. Logistics

A. Next meeting details (establish a convenient time for meetings, duration of meetings, locations, i.e., whether or not participants would like to host meetings, etc.)

VII. Call for volunteers

A. Gathering phone and email logs to disseminate to the Club

B. Keeping the minutes

C. Host next meeting

VIII. Meeting Adjourned

Recommended Topics

So now you know how to run the first meeting, but what matters will you discuss at your meetings? Here are some suggested topics with discussion points:

- **Be More Visible at Your Son's School** — It is important for you to be an active presence at your child's school and for your child to see you at his school. That will show him that you are a willing participant in helping him have the most rewarding school experience as possible. At least eight times a year it's extremely important for teachers and administration to see your face. They need to know who you are. And you need to know who they are as well! "You have to know who's with your kids. You have to know the feel of the school. Casual observation can teach you a lot and just walking through the halls teaches you a lot," says English-Figaro.
- **Back to School Night and Parent-Teacher Meetings and Follow-ups** – Frequent conversations and contact with the teachers is key to a successful academic career for your child. Attending all back-to-school events and having meetings with the teacher on a regular basis is extremely important. Exchange contact information with the teacher so that if a face-to-face meeting cannot happen as often as you like, emails or phone calls can be exchanged.
- **Monitoring Home Work and School Work** – Have the group give suggestions on what they think is an adequate time to spend reviewing homework and the child's school work. Staying abreast of what your son is working on is definitely a must, however, in terms of how long to spend checking his work really depends on the child. "An intrinsically motivated child can have work glanced over, while the parent gleans information for supplemental education to push the child further," says Worokya T. Duncan, B.A., M.T.S., M.A.Ed.,Ed.D., a member of

Mocha Moms. “An extrinsically motivated child needs more focused attention, and may need to be monitored while doing homework. If a child cannot be monitored while doing homework, there should be a daily routine for reviewing homework before the night is over.”

- **Who Are Your Child’s Teachers?** – Discuss who is with your child all day and do they have your son’s best interest at heart. How well do you know this person? Does your child like his teacher? Does the teacher like him? What type of relationship does this person have with your child? What is the person’s teaching style? Have the group discuss what they like about past and current teachers and their previous experiences with their son’s teachers.
- **Achievement Gap and Educational Disparities** –There’s no question that these gaps and disparities exist. Talk about them at length and come up with strategies in dealing with these issues throughout your son’s schooling. Present the club with startling statistics and discuss historical cases.
- **Who is Your Child Hanging With or Not Hanging With?** – Talk about the importance of knowing who your child’s friends are and who their parents are. Your child’s friends have an overwhelming influence over them so it’s vital to know who they’re associating with. Also discuss bullying and cyber-bullying, which has been the hot topic as of late amongst teachers, administrators, parents, and legislators (thankfully so). Have a frank discussion about whether your child is the bully or being bullied and ways you can handle the situation.
- **If Your Child is Doing Poorly** – Discuss tutoring programs. Be involved, have patience, and understanding. Talk about ways to investigate why the student is not doing well. “Do not get on the ‘blame train’,” suggests Dr. Chris Hickey, Sr., executive director of Each One-Teach One. “That is, do not immediately start looking for problems with the teacher, the instructions, or your child’s friends. Investigate what the expectations are and where the disconnect is occurring.”
- **Joining PTA/PTO** – Converse about the benefits of joining your son’s PTA/PTO. You won’t be able to be an active voice in budgetary decisions, happenings at the school, or what the school needs and does not need if you’re not a member and not attending these meetings. “When a child sees that home activities and school activities are consistently important to the parent, it become consistently important to the child,” says Dr. Hickey. Have parents who are part of PTA/PTO discuss their experiences.
- **Extracurricular Activities** – Discuss the benefits of children participating in these activities and ways to fit it into school schedules and the schedules of busy parents.
- **The Importance of Community Service** – Not only does volunteering with your child strengthen your community, but it also brings the family closer. A socially responsible child grows up to be a socially responsible adult. “Children learn to take ownership of their communities when they are involved in activities with their communities. They learn that home is more than their apartment or house. They learn that they are important to the

betterment of the neighborhood and to network with those around them,” says English-Figaro. Suggest different ways families can volunteer together. Visit <http://www.voa.org/GetInvolved/Volunteer.aspx?gclid=CNiogZzo47cCFVKf4AodpmwA1g> for suggestions.

- **Getting More Parents Involved (And Grandparents Too!)** – Share ways to get more parents in the community involved in the Promise Club and grandparents too, who have been stepping up to the plate and becoming very active in their grandchildren’s academic and social endeavors as well.

American Promise Mobile App

American Promise has created the Promise Tracker, a comprehensive, enjoyable interactive mobile app for parents and caregivers of African-American boys to serve as a support device that contains information and habits that you can adopt and customize to encourage your son’s academic success. Backed by in-depth research, the app covers a variety of topics including:

- Creating positive interactions with your son
- T.V. and Media Habits
- Nutrition
- School Involvement
- Reading and Math

Each topic will feature tips and goals to help families navigate these sometimes complex matters. The Promise Club members can download the app to their smart phones or tablets to assist them between meetings. An entire meeting can be dedicated to examining and discussing the app’s exciting features and incorporating it as action steps for the club.

American Promise Book

American Promise: How to Help Black Boys Succeed in School and In Life (Random House, 2013) by Joe Brewster, M.D. and Michèle Stephenson with Hilary Beard, will be published this summer and serve as the companion book to the American Promise documentary. The book relays the practical and often provocative lessons that Dr. Brewster and Stephenson learned along the way from their own experiences, insight, and new research.

Promise Club members should be encouraged to purchase the book and dedicate a meeting to discussing their thoughts on the book and ways the book can serve as an essential tool and

resource for later meetings. Each chapter can also be used as a topic for discussion at subsequent meetings.

“American Promise” Film Screening

As another step in starting your Promise Club, we recommend you plan a screening of the film. Community screenings we have had across the country have sparked deep and meaningful conversations with parents nationwide. Visit www.americanpromise.org or email info@americanpromise.org for details on how you can host screening of “American Promise” in your community, bring the filmmakers to visit, or bring the film to your local movie theater.

Other Helpful Resources

You can incorporate these books and resources into your Promise Club meetings to generate thought-provoking, candid, and exciting conversations and debates.

- Boys into Men: Raising Our African American Teenage Sons by (Plume, 2001) Nancy Boyd-Franklin, Pamela A. Toussaint, and A. J. Franklin
- Countering the Conspiracy to Destroy Black Boys (African American Images, 2004) by Jawanza Kunjufu, Ph.D.
- Understanding Black Male Learning Styles (African American Images, 2010) by Jawanza Kunjufu, Ph.D.
- Other People's Children: Cultural Conflict in the Classroom (The New Press, 2006) by Lisa Delpit
- Challenge the Status Quo: Academic Success among School-age African-American Males (Report) <http://www.cbcfinc.org/oUploadedFiles/CTSQ.pdf>
- Schott Foundation for Public Education’s “Black Male Students: A State Report Card Series” (Report) <http://www.schottfoundation.org/publications/State%20Report%20Card%202nd%20editi.pdf>
- Schott Foundation for Public Education’s Black Male Initiative <http://www.schottfoundation.org/funds/black-male-initiative>
- Coalition of Schools Educating Boys of Color <http://www.coseboc.org/>
- NAACP <http://www.naacp.org/programs/entry/education-programs>

Parents have traditionally leaned on one another for support and advice. But over the last few decades, formal and semi-formal parent groups and organizations have become increasingly popular and very necessary. Already established organizations have created parent groups to address the growing academic and social needs of our children. These groups are effectively breaking ground when it comes to rallying behind our children. When starting your own Promise Club you can turn to these organizations for excellent tips and resources, and motivation.

Club 2012

In 2005, the parents of 15 boys, including every African American male at Eagle Ridge Middle School in Washington D.C.'s Loudon County, banded together for six years to encourage and aggressively propel their sons to achieve academic success. Their strategy was to get parents more involved, set high expectations for their sons, and encourage positive peer pressure amongst the boys. The group organized twice-weekly homework clubs at school and monthly meetings at parents' homes, tracking their sons' grades, test scores, conducting social or community service activities with their children, or discussing at length the causes and effects of the infamous achievement gap. They also visited college campuses (even before the boys entered high school) and actively engaged their sons' teachers and administrators. The group's hard work paid off. The boys had 100 percent graduation rate, were accepted to 76 percent of the universities they applied to; they averaged at least three offers for admission each; most of them took at least three advanced placement classes; and their average grade point average was 3.7.

Excellent Options

The founders of Club 2012 also created the nonprofit organization Excellent Options in 2006 with a mission to see that all African American male students graduate from high school in their designated year, on time, in excellence and are equipped to successfully pursue any academic, professional or technological option that they desire. The mission was expanded to include girls in 2008 and all age groups. According to the organization's website: "We will train young men and women, parents, teachers and other significant persons to interact with those students in such a manner as to promote a culture of learning and achievement. A community/village approach, we believe, will yield the best possibility for these young people to graduate from high school in their designated school year 'in excellence and with options.'" Excellent Options believes every child must have a parent or a parent figure in their life, committed to their excellence; positive peer pressure and great expectations. <http://www.excellent-options.org/index.html>

EXAMPLES OF SUCCESSFUL PARENT GROUP MODELS

Each One-Teach One

Headed by Dr. Chris Hickey, Sr., executive director, the organization's philosophy is that children of color, just as all children, are driven to and committed to the expectations they feel around them. "We feel that children are motivated by the connection they feel to their surroundings. In essence, it is our feelings that children do not automatically assimilate with their environment. Rather, they are either drowned in, or reject, based on their own feeling about how they are connected or not to their environment/surroundings," says Dr. Hickey.

The organization offers parent workshops on the following topics:

- "The Parents' Role in Creating a College Going Culture and Home, School, and Community."
- "Understanding the iGeneration: A New Science of Learning."
- "The Son-Father Relationship Experience and its Effect on Leadership Development." <http://www.e1t1.org/>

Mocha Moms

Mocha Moms, a support group for mothers of color who have chosen not to work full-time outside the home, believes that education is the key to the success for all children, in particular children of color, and is the only thing that can prevent the black community from slipping into a cycle of poverty. "We as parents have to continue to make strides forward for our children," says Cheli English-Figaro, co-founder and President Emeritus. "We have structured our whole organization around paying attention to our children, making sure that they're doing everything they can to achieve everything that they can. We have required educational summits for our chapters, and we encourage the exchange of information between the parents in terms of how to help their children succeed socially." This fall, the organization is launching their Occupy Schools™ Movement, an initiative to help close the minority achievement gap in the United States, as well as encourage to promote and foster parent involvement and engagement in the academic lives of their children,

and encourage parents to be strong advocates for the education of their children, in addition to other children in their communities. According to Mocha Moms, children are far less likely to receive unfair treatment at the hands of teachers and school administration if their parents are an active voice and presence at their children’s school. <http://www.mochamoms.org/>

RIISE

Founded by Gina Parker Collins in 2009, RIISE, which stands for “Resource in Independent School Education,” is a membership based organization committed to bridging the gaps between families of color and private independent schools. They support the recruitment and well- balanced retention of a private independent education with resources and research delivered through events and digital/social media. The organization’s vision is to continue to create legacies amongst families of color. “We feel that a standard of excellence in education can help to do that. But particular an independent school education,” says Parker Collins. “So we support families with awareness of independent schools, the application process, and the recruitment and retention of an independent school education as well as making sure that our children recognize their cultural capital, the legacy that’s already been created for them, and the one they’re creating now for the future.” Annually, RIISE holds a Parent Power Conference full of empowerment workshops and seminars for parents and students. www.4riise.org

Parent University

Various schools districts across the country have formed Parent Universities. With the philosophy that parents are learners too, Parent Universities offer seminars and workshops that provide professional development opportunities and information for parents to help their children be successful in school. The Parent University sessions focus on child development, what children are learning in schools, advocacy, parent leadership and effective parenting skills. Boston Public Schools offers three day-long Saturday learning sessions during the academic year: one each in October, January, and May, with additional sessions throughout the year at schools, libraries and community centers. The BPS also has a “graduation” for parents at the end of the school year for parents who have completed a set of learning sessions. <http://www.bostonpublicschools.org/parentuniversity>

LOOKING FORWARD

Creating your own Promise Club does not have to be difficult. With motivation, commitment, and time it can be an exhilarating, positive journey for you and your child. Do it and see for yourself. Do it for your son! Also, tell him why you're doing this. Hug him and tell him that you're creating a Promise Club because you are his biggest fan and his most enthusiastic advocate. Tell him that you're doing this because you love him and promise him that you always will!

Be sure to watch the film “American Promise” when it premieres on PBS and also visit our website (www.AmericanPromise.org). Also, join the conversation that “American Promise” is setting in motion by liking [our Facebook page](#) and following us on Twitter at [@PromiseFilm](#). Please feel free to contact us at if you have any questions or need additional guidance on starting your own Promise Club.

Good luck!

PROMISE HIM YOU'LL TEACH HIM THAT THE POWER TO GET SMARTER LAYS IN HIS OWN HANDS, THAT HE MUST DEDICATE HIMSELF TO STUDYING HARD AND SPENDING LONG HOURS ON HIS ACADEMICS AND ANYTHING ELSE HE WANTS TO EXCEL IN, AND THAT HE SHOULD EMBRACE CHALLENGES AT SCHOOL AND IN LIFE — IT'S GOOD TO STRETCH YOURSELF AND EVEN SOMETIMES TO FAIL

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