

# Jamaican teen immigrants do better when they retain strong ties to original culture

October 31 2012

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Many young Jamaican immigrants are succeeding in the United States precisely because they remain strongly tied to Jamaican culture, said University of Illinois professor Gail M. Ferguson.

"Although many of these youths have forged a unique tricultural identity that draws from their Jamaican [culture](#), African-American culture, and mainstream European American culture, the important factor in their academic and behavioral success is retaining strong ties to their Jamaican background," she said.

To learn how Jamaican immigrant teens were adjusting to life in their new country, the study surveyed 473 adolescent–mother dyads from Jamaican [immigrant families](#) in the United States, comparing their well-being with teens from families on the island and from white and black American families.

The researchers asked mothers and teens about the teens' culture, grades, behavior, [friendships](#), home life, community involvement, and character traits.

"Overall, Jamaican immigrant teens were doing just as well as their American peers in terms of grades and positive behavior. Older immigrant teens, in particular, were actually doing a little better than Jamaican teens in the Caribbean," she said.

However, immigrant teens who had shed their Jamaican culture in favor

of either or both American cultures had much lower grades and less positive behavior than those who had kept a strong ethnic affiliation, Ferguson said.

But the study also found that adapting to life in their new country could depend on affiliating, at least to some extent, with two American cultures. That's a new finding and an important piece of the puzzle, she said.

Why? "It shows us that identifying with certain subcultures can be important for success in school. And assimilation, depending on where [immigrants](#) are from and the subculture into which they are assimilating, can also be disadvantageous, as when Jamaican immigrant teens assimilate into a subculture that doesn't value education," she added.

Many black Jamaican immigrants naturally gravitate toward African-American culture, usually prompted by ethnic consumer needs such as getting their hair done or looking for a familiar worship experience. "Those connecting points are important to black immigrants' adjustment," she said.

Ferguson emphasized the importance of encouraging immigrants to retain some of their own cultural values and practices, including a strong priority on family and education because these are protective factors in their adjustment.

"Many immigrant teens who were doing well had the ability to gain things from both African-American and mainstream American cultures, then combine what they'd learned with their own strong attachment to Jamaican culture," she said.

Tridimensional Acculturation and Adaption Among Jamaican Adolescent–Mother Dyads in the [United States](#) appears in the September-

October 2012 issue of *Child Development*. Co-authors are Gail Ferguson, formerly of Knox College, now a U of I professor; Marc H. Bornstein of the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development; and Audrey M. Pottinger of the University of the West Indies.

Provided by University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign

Citation: Jamaican teen immigrants do better when they retain strong ties to original culture (2012, October 31) retrieved 27 April 2024 from <https://phys.org/news/2012-10-jamaican-teen-immigrants-retain-strong.html>

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