



Can Fathering Be Taught?

by Mark Berkey-Gerard

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A little over a year ago, 32-year-old Samuel Maldonado was sitting in a jail cell. Today, he sits on the bed of his apartment in Crown Heights, stroking the hair of his three-year-old daughter Alyssa and proudly pointing to the nine framed certificates for completing various life-skills classes at the Fortune Society, an organization that works with ex-offenders.

There is a certificate for a course in anger management, for a nutrition class, and one showing that he works as a peer counselor for the organization. But Maldonado is especially proud of a certificate for a course in fathering.

"There is a difference between telling your children what do to – saying, 'do this now!' – and asking them to do something," says Maldonado, who was estranged from his own father and for a time was on a course to repeat the pattern with his kids. "Children respond to respect."

When he talks about parenting, Maldonado speaks not just from what he learned in the class, but also from years of experience.

Maldonado is the father of ten children, ages 17 to 3. Six are his biological offspring from four different mothers, and four are his stepchildren. Of the ten children, four live with Maldonado and his wife Margarita, but all of them cycle through the house from time to time.

"These certificates are reminders that things could be worse," he says. "They are reminders of why I need to be here [with my children]."

For decades, low-income men who have little or no connection with their children have been seen as one of the daunting problems of poverty that policy-makers have been unable to address.

But today, government is increasingly looking to the same men as part of the solution to society's most difficult problems.

In 2003, following the lead of other cities across the nation, New York City launched its "fatherhood initiative," programs to encourage poor men to be more actively involved in the lives of their children.

But can government really teach men how to be better fathers?

There are 175,000 single-mother households with children living below the

federal poverty level in New York City - or about 30 percent of all families, according to the

Community Service Society.

These children are the ones that would ideally benefit if their fathers provided more financial - as well as emotional - support. And they are a segment of society that policy makers are struggling to help.

Across the nation, fatherless children are five times more likely to be poor and ten times more likely to be extremely poor, according to the National Commission on Children. Their risks are also greater for dropping out of school, and for alcohol and drug use, adolescent pregnancy and child bearing, juvenile delinquency, mental illness, and suicide.

Over the last half century, all levels of government have responded to these statistics with a series of programs aimed at helping single mothers and their

children - food stamps, after-school programs, earned income tax credits, and welfare to work programs - but has largely ignored fathers.

"[The government] has invested \$50 billion in efforts for poor women," says Ronald Mincy, a professor of social work at Columbia University and editor of the book "Black Males Left Behind." "There has been little done for men."



Samuel Maldonado with his wife Margarita and three of his ten children - Melvin, 8, Celine, 7, and Alyssa, 3.

But by the early 1990s, researchers and lawmakers began pointing to some of the critical issues associated with children who grow up without their fathers – and looking for ways to get men to reconnect with their families.

Following this trend, New York City currently allocates \$3 million in federal Community Service Block Grants to 12 community organizations working with local dads. The goals of the program are modest: help 1,400 men living in the city's low-income neighborhoods establish some kind of relationship with their children, and move the fathers toward providing some kind of financial assistance for their families.

Each social service organization that receives a grant already has a track record in the neighborhood and has some freedom in how it reaches these goals. Depending on the agency, men have access to a range of services, including assistance with family court and custody issues, job training, supervised visitations, and even "Me and Dad" field trips to the aquarium and the Queens Hall of Science.

"More broadly, we hope for an improvement in the child's life," says Cindy Colter, assistant commissioner for the Department of Youth and Community Development, the agency that administers the programs. "And of course, we hope that it improves the lives of the men as well."

While fatherhood programs are new and receive a relatively small amount of government funding, they represent a growing movement.

In 2001, President George W. Bush named Wade Horn of the National Fatherhood Initiative to a

high ranking position in the Health and Human Services agency to help create such programs. And when Congress reauthorized welfare reform legislation in February 2006, they earmarked an additional \$50 million a year for fatherhood initiatives across the nation over the next five years.

"Hopefully, we are now are coming to a place of more concern for men, and we are including them in the solutions to address poverty," says Mincy.

TEACHING PARENTING SKILLS

On a Monday evening in Brooklyn, five men sit at school desks in the upstairs room of a building on Wyckoff Avenue discussing what it means to be a dad in New York City in the 21st century. The group is known as the "Papas de Bushwick."

"Now, as fathers you can do 99 good things, and then there is the one time when you lose it," says Julio Diaz, who leads the discussion group. "What do you think your kids will remember?"

"The one time you lose it," answers one man, shaking his head. "That's all they remember."

"Now what if we were able to hold back for just a few moments between that time when you feel an emotion and you act?" asks Diaz, pointing to chart entitled "Cycles of Reaction." "How would that help us to stay out of trouble?"

For the men, it is not a rhetorical question.

Most attend the class because a family court judge has either required or strongly recommended that they do so. For 13 weeks, the men work through a support group curriculum of weekly sessions with titles like "The Roots of Fathering," "The World of Feelings," and "Healing the Father Wound."

"By the third week of the class, for most men, it is no longer about the courts, but about their children," says Franc Villalobos, who runs Papas de Bushwick, a program of the non-profit group Coalition of Hispanic Family Services and the Medical and Health Research Association of New York.

The men who have graduated from the program say they have learned tangible lessons: financial support is only a part of being a dad; discipline and punishment are not the same thing; and it only hurts the children to say negative things about their mother.

"Most men need a little coaching when it comes to parenting skills," says Anthony Alexander, one of the veterans of the group.

The facilitators admit they face a great challenge.

"What we are really talking about is re-socializing men," says Villalobos.

Men find that connecting with their children after a separation or divorce is not as simple as just wanting to be involved. They

face a series of legal and financial barriers to being responsible dads – and poor fathers who are the focus of the fatherhood initiatives are particularly hard hit, because they often do not have the education or cannot afford the legal expertise needed to overcome them. In addition to teaching parenting skills, fatherhood initiatives also try to help address these problems for their clients.

Custody Issues

New York is one of only 13 states in the nation that does not have a joint custody statute. In New York State family courts, judges traditionally begin with the presumption that the primary caregiver – the person most directly responsible for the day-to-day care of the child – should be awarded custody, not that both parents should have an equal role in parenting. That is most often the mother.

The standard custody arrangement for many men is two weekend visitations a month.

"You have good fathers and bad fathers, and you have good mothers and bad mothers," says Anthony Alexander, who endured years of legal battles to win custody of his children. "They should be judged equally."

Child Support

In New York, if a man named in a child support case denies being the

father, he may have to go to court and take a DNA test. If it shows he's the father, he will be ordered to pay the child support until the child is 21 years of age.

The amount of child support is based on the non-custodial parent's income and how many children are involved. (See a detailed chart of child support obligations by income level). And while child support is often a financial lifeline for single mothers and their children, it can leave many men feeling overwhelmed with debt, and even deter some from working because a significant portion of their pay can be seized.

Fathers are responsible for child support while they are in school, are unemployed, doing time in prison, or even if the mother marries someone else. As a penalty for owing child support, the government can suspend a driver's license, refuse to grant a passport, or even sentence a man to jail for up to six months.

"The system beats us down," says David Cortez, a father in the Papas de Bushwick program. "It sees us as a cash cow."

Employment

Over the last two decades as the national and local economy have grown, almost every demographic group – even low-skilled women with children – have seen some improvements in employment rates. One notable exception is

young African-American men.

A recent New York Times article highlighted the plight of African-American men in America:

65 percent of black males in their 20s who drop out of high school are jobless;

50 percent of black males in their 20s who graduate from high school are unemployed;

And 60 percent of black males in their 30s who did not finish high school have spent time in prison.

Some experts draw strong connections between low employment rates and the 70 percent fatherlessness rate in the African American community.

"One of the reasons why black males have higher incarceration rates than other populations is because they are more likely to grow up without their fathers," says Mincy.

QUESTIONING THE MOVEMENT

While there is growing support for the idea of government programs encouraging fathers to be financially and emotionally invested in their children's lives, there are also skeptics.

The National Organization for Women has raised concerns that fatherhood initiatives may divert money and efforts away from helping single mothers, who most often bear the responsibility for raising and supporting their

children. And the organization is particularly suspicious of the federal policy that aims to promote the institution of marriage as part of its fatherhood efforts, arguing that it discriminates against nontraditional families.

"We should care about supporting the well-being of all families, regardless of how they are constituted," Jacqueline Payne, policy attorney for the NOW Legal Defense Fund testified before Congress.

While some organizations like the non-profit group National Fatherhood Initiative have been instrumental in promoting men's programs, other fathers' rights advocates say the money and effort would be better spent reforming custody and child support laws, which they argue are rooted in a 1950s idea of family.

"We send these guys to all of these classes so they can learn to be involved with their children," said Jim Hayes, president of the Fathers and Families in New York. "And many find that there is a whole system that prevents them from doing that."

Even some advocates for the poor argue that the focus on fathers may be too narrow and question the notion that, if fathers just pay their child support or visit more often with their children, the problems of poverty will be addressed.

In an ideal world, men would learn how to be effective fathers from their fathers or from the other

male role models in their lives. But the majority of men in the city's fatherhood programs did not have supportive male figures in their lives growing up.

"I grew up with a single mom because my dad died at an early age, but there was a network of black men in my community," Walter Fields of the Community Service Society said in a recent interview on WNYC radio. "Part of it is two-parent households, but we also have to rebuild the social fabric that has been destroyed."

Can these types of programs do that?

Fatherhood initiatives are still too new – and have such modest goals – that is difficult to demonstrate their overall success, but some initial studies of similar programs across the nation have produced mixed results. (An evaluation of a program in Connecticut, for example, found that many fathers were actually deterred from establishing a relationship with their children because the program was also seeking child support compliance.)

But some experts argue that the initiatives can be useful in providing peer groups where men can talk about the challenges they face and in helping some men get jobs to support their families.

From an economic standpoint, the amount of money being spent on these programs is small, and so a

few successes can add up. "If you can change one out of 30 or 40 guys, then it's a worthwhile investment," says Robert Lerman, economist at American University and the Urban Institute, who has done research on the issue.

The more difficult challenge, others say, is helping fathers who do not live with their children to become the kind of parent that a kid really needs.

When most non-custodial fathers get together with their kids for the few days a month, their main objective is to have fun. They go to the park, a ballgame, or the circus, and their goal is to repair — or just to maintain — a relationship with the child.

But these may not be the activities that the child needs most.

In just a few hours a week, it is difficult to discipline, follow a student's progress in school, and know if a child is hanging out with the wrong crowd. In other words, the fathers have to figure out how to both have fun and hold a child accountable.

"I don't think there is any father that doesn't have trouble negotiating that tension," says Mincy. "A guy who is a non-custodial parent is even more reluctant to go into that space."

Still Carlos Rivera, who helps lead parenting classes at Papas de Bushwick, says he has seen first hand that fathering skills can be taught, but not always in the ways the curriculum suggests. "The younger men learn from the older

ones and that can help fill that missing role," says Rivera. "But that is also when the book goes out the window and the real work begins."

BEGINNING WITH THE BASICS

On a Thursday morning, half a dozen men in aprons, most in the early 20s, buzz around a kitchen preparing a lunch of macaroni and cheese, chicken and egg salad, French bread, and fruit salad dessert.

The men, all with criminal records and all fathers, are participants in a weekly ritual known as "Miss Betty's Practical Cooking Class" at the Fortune Society, a Chelsea organization that works with people who have criminal records.

Miss Betty is Betty Wilson, an instructor who teaches the men nutrition, cooking skills, as well as table etiquette.

"Sit, sit," says Miss Betty, instructing the men to sit down at a table and taking the baseball cap off of one young father.

"I never used to eat at the table before," says Mike Davis, the 25-year-old father of a five-year-old son and 19-month old daughter. "I always ate in my bedroom or in front of the T.V."

"I'd be lying if I said I ate at the table," says another man. "But I do cook for my kids."

The goals of the cooking class are to give men practical kitchen skills,

educate them about how to prepare nutritious meals, create an activity they can do with their kids, and encourage them to get in the habit of sitting and talking with their families.

"After eight weeks, the guys can't wait to show off their skills," said Sophia Strong, who heads up the family programs at the Fortune Society. "Before this, the best they could offer was buying their kid sneakers."

Samuel Maldonado says that the fathering class he took has made him calmer with his children, more conscious of what he says and does, and more of a "people person." As a peer counselor, he now helps other men who are new to the program.

But the most practical impact is that he is even around his children at all.

"If it wasn't for this, I'd probably be in jail right now," he says.