Father’s Day

Father absence is an American crisis. But black families are having a rebirth. Fatherhood programs—and lots of loving men—are showing us how.

July 1, 2005 By Hilary Beard

The earliest memories I have of my father are of his fingers wrapped around my little hand, his bittersweet-chocolate comfort enveloping my light-brown sugar. Daddy made me feel secure and capable as I helped to integrate America, enduring white children’s spitting and taunting and white adults’ hostility, alone. Mommy worked, stayed in our teachers’ behinds and gave us “good home training,” while he was our family’s primary wage-earner, lawn mower and resident big dreamer. My father made it clear that Cs were not acceptable, encouraged me to play sports and told me that I, too, could live in one of the huge houses in Cleveland’s leafy suburbs.

He did not know his own father, who stayed in Georgia when his mother migrated up north. And although Daddy later confessed that there were days when he wanted to leave his marriage, he stayed. Doing so spared us the hardships and dangers of poverty that prevent many black families from becoming—and staying—middle-class.

Disposable Dads?

Because of rising divorce rates and births outside of marriage, 34 percent of American children live without their fathers—the highest rate in the world. And they are more likely to be African American: Only 38 percent of black children live in two-parent homes, while 75 percent of white and 65 percent of Latino children do.

Although many people believe that dads are “nice to have but not essential,” fathers are “irreplaceable, and the well-being of children is tied to what happens to their fathers,” says Roland Warren, president of the National Fatherhood Initiative, a a Gaithersburg, Md.-based nonprofit dedicated to reducing father absence. Research shows that when fathers are involved in their lives, children have higher self-esteem, get better grades and are more likely to become financially independent than children whose fathers aren’t present.

“Fathers’ presence lends children a sense of security and a sense that ‘I’ve got your back,’” says Ronald Mincy, Ph.D, a Columbia University social-work professor and fatherhood expert. This is particularly vital in low-income neighborhoods, “because children will face more adversity, and much of the adversity can take them down.”

Was Papa Really a Rolling Stone?

Black families weren't always so fragmented. In the 1890s, around 85 percent of black children were born into two-parent homes. In the 1950s, about 75 percent of black children were. Black marriages survived slavery, Reconstruction and the Jim Crow South, observes George Williams, executive director of the Urban Father-Child Partnership program at the Kansas City, Mo.–based National Center for Fathering.

But the situation changed when Southern blacks migrated up north, leaving their safety net of friends and relatives. "Racism created the inability for black men to earn a liveable wage to support their family," Williams says. Married or not (back then most were), low-income mothers were forced to choose between receiving food stamps and housing or having their children's father live at home. Many women believed they "could do better 'married' to the government," Williams says.

Add women's increasing economic independence, changing values and laws about marriage and divorce, and the loss of urban manufacturing jobs, and it's easy to see why between 1960, when my parents married, and 1980, when I graduated high school, the percentage of black children born into two-parent households plummeted from 67 percent to 42 percent. Add the scourge of crack and the wholesale imprisonment of black men. Today, only 38 percent of black children live in two-parent homes, and more than 80 percent can expect to live at least a significant portion of their lives without their biological fathers.

The result: a cycle of fatherlessness that spans generations and class. "It's hard to create what you don't see," says Warren. "There's a knowledge gap in what it means to be an involved, responsible, committed father."

Making a Way Out of No Way

Which is why I admire and appreciate 20-year-old Baltimore resident Dominick Walker. This father of 1-year-old Zion has vowed to "flip the script" on his own fatherless upbringing and "learn more about how I can be involved in my son's life," he says. Walker understands too well the risks of father absence. One of six children raised by an impoverished single mom, Walker spent many years in foster care, switching guardians and schools, trying to make new friends and maintain a positive outlook on his difficult life.

When his girlfriend, Charice Diggs, discovered that she was pregnant, the couple attended fifty/fifty parenting classes offered at Baltimore's Center for Fathers, Families and Workforce Development (CFWD). Such classes "bring [couples] together in a safe environment, where they can come to a common accord in an effort to develop a parenting contract," says Johnny Rice II, COO and director of men's services. CFWD also runs programs just for men, which "challenge men to be responsible and step up to the plate" by teaching them what manhood really means—being accountable to themselves, their family and community—and supporting them in dealing with real-life challenges, like keeping a formal job if they've never worked one before.

Organizations promoting fatherhood began on a grassroots level during the 1970s and gained

steam during the 1980s. Today, fathering organizations and programs exist nationwide, raising awareness about the individual and societal costs of fatherlessness and offering services to dads of all stripes and socioeconomic groups, as well as those in the military and those in jail. Because the field is relatively new, there's not a lot of research measuring their results. However, the rate of fatherlessness is declining, and many fathers and families offer personal testimonials about the programs' success.

"We never missed a day. It made our relationship stronger," Walker says of the parenting classes. "We had diaper-changing contests, learned about using 'I' words when talking about different situations, learned about not blaming, not being aggressive or quick to snap or be disrespectful, and telling our significant other how we feel."

Today, Walker lives with Zion, Diggs and her family and works with children seven days a week to help provide for his family. "I do things to make my life better and get where I want to be five or 10 years down the road," he says. "Making a good life for my family—that's worth more than anything. It's my dedication."

A Family Affair

Contrary to how unmarried young parents like Walker and Diggs are vilified in the media and by conservatives, Dr. Mincy's research shows that black people at all income levels believe that it's good to get married. Many of us have a lower acceptance of divorce than other Americans. Studies also show that black parents want fathers involved in their children's lives and that an extraordinary amount of fathering, financial support and overnight child visitation takes place in female-headed households that the government is unable to measure.

The good news is that fatherhood and parenting programs like the one Walker and Diggs took at CFWD, marriage- and family-building initiatives in the black religious community and welfare-reform laws that encourage family formation are working. America's decades-long rise in father absence has stopped, and black America is experiencing the greatest improvement. Our community is the only one in which births outside of marriage are declining, and the number of black children living in two-parent families is up more than 13 percent since 1994, to 38 percent—the highest since 1990.

Families like Dominick Walker and Charice Diggs', who do the hard work that commitment requires, give me hope that coming generations of black boys will learn what manhood really means and that any daughters Walker fathers will learn, as I did, what it's like to be loved by a real man.

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Keeping Daddy in the Picture: Advice for Moms

"I can teach him how to walk and stand, but I need you to help him be a man," sings Jill Scott on her album Beautifully Human. Research shows that a mother's positive attitude about her child's

father increases the likelihood that he won't disappear from the child's life. Johnny Rice, II, COO of the Baltimore, Md.-based Center for Fathers, Families and Workforce Development, suggests that you:

Create a parenting agreement together, covering points like whether it's OK for him to drop by your home unannounced or whether he should call first.

Show respect. To let Dad know that he is wanted and valued, tell him you're happy he's involved and be supportive, whether or not you are intimately involved.

Understand that transitions take time. "Many men are introspective enough to take responsibility," Rice says. "But they still may be trying to get on their feet."
Don't focus on his shortcomings, criticize him or compare him to another man—especially on financial issues.

Be civil, whether toward their dad or his new girlfriend, "Children pick up on tension, frustration and gamesmanship," says Rice. "It's not a good model for them."

Ensure your child's safety. If you are concerned about Dad's care, arrange for visitation at your home, a grandparent's or another safe, neutral location.

Don't manipulate or hold a child hostage. Putting children in the middle is dangerous to their emotional and physical well-being and can lead to domestic violence, Rice says.—HB

Papa, Don't Make No Mess: Advice for Dads
"By running away, fathers can give their children a 'life sentence without the possibility of a father,'" says George Williams of the National Center for Fathering in Kansas City, Mo. Rather than endanger your child, you can reward your children—and yourself—for a lifetime.

Keep your eyes on your child. Forget "he says, she says"; it's not about you or your child's mom. Do right by your kid.

R-E-S-P-E-C-T your ex. Whether or not you revive your relationship with your children's mother, develop a mutual respect and acknowledge the role she plays in their lives.

Educate to elevate. "Adults starting on their journey of fathering may be impacted by wounding from their own father," Williams says. If you're mad, hurt or confused about what being a good dad entails, look for a parenting class at your church, local hospital, adult education center or health department.

Stay in it to win it. Particularly if you've exhibited less-than-stellar behavior in the past, develop a track record of being consistent and reliable. "You can't talk your way out of a situation you behaved your way into," Williams says.

Give a little to get a little. Make a goodwill gesture, like throwing in a few extra dollars, diapers or an offer of extra child-care time every now and then. No matter what your ex or the courts or society may say, “the worth of a man is not defined by his income, but by the outcome of his children,” Williams reminds us. The parenting and protection you provide is priceless.—HB

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