

Helping Men Be Fathers

by Antwaun Garcia

Friday, July 07, 2006 12:00 AM - Last Updated Monday, April 08, 2013 09:43 AM

My father was not much of a family man. He was always in and out of prison. Growing up in foster care, I missed having a dad to help me learn how to read and write, to play sports and talk to. I wanted him to help me answer questions such as, "Can I make it in life?" and, "What is my purpose?"

I'm not alone in missing a dad. More than half of all black children do not live with their fathers, according to the U.S. Census Bureau. And at least one in four Hispanic kids and one in five white kids live without their dads.

This has an effect on individual families and on society in general. Research shows that kids who don't have dads are much more likely to be depressed, fail school, commit crimes, have sex early on and (for girls) get pregnant. Nationally children without fathers are 10 times more likely to be extremely poor than other children.

As a result, a number of programs have been launched nationally and in New York City to try to help men be better fathers. New York City has a [Fatherhood Initiative](#) and allocates \$3 million in federal Community Service Block Grants to

[12 community organizations](#)

working with local dads. (For more on city programs to help fathers, see

[Gotham Gazette](#)

.)

One of these groups is STRIVE (Support and Training Results in Valuable Employees). It, in turn, runs a program in East Harlem called POPS (Providing Opportunity for Parental Success) that works mostly with black and Latino fathers 18 to 35 years old. It offers an eight-week workshop that helps fathers reunite and connect with their children, and also provides counseling, mediation with family members and legal help. Once a man participates in POPS, he can come back for help throughout his entire life. "We're like a leech. We latch on and don't let go," said Robert Sanchez, the program manager.

In POPS, dads learn how to hold a newborn and how a baby communicates his needs by crying. POPS shows men how to play with their children, help them with homework, ask about their interests, or discover something new by taking kids on outings. Dads learn child development, how to be patient, and how to solve a child's problems without criticizing a child or

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making her feel bad.

POPS advises men not to give up on having a good relationship with their children -- even if a dad has been told he can't see his kids or feels the kid does not appreciate him, Sanchez said. If the mother won't let a father see his kids, POPS workers take the dad to family court and help him exercise his legal rights to see his children.

Beyond the legal barriers, many men stay away from their children out of fear, Sanchez said. Having a child is scary. "A lot of guys worry that they don't know how to care for a child and don't want to look stupid."

Some men don't stay because of "baby mama" drama. "Fifty percent of our fathers have a volatile relationship with their child's mother," and almost none are married to them, Sanchez noted. Frustrated with their child's mother, men may stop seeing their kids to avoid fights and conflict, or the mothers may not let them visit.

Other dads disappear because they get caught up in the streets or prison. Black men in particular are at risk for getting locked up. Over our lifetimes, we face a 32 percent chance of spending at least a year in jail, [Inside Higher Education](#) reported. White men face a 6 percent chance.

And lots of fathers have no idea how to be a good parent because they never had one themselves. At least 15 percent of the men who participate in POPS were in foster care when they were boys, Sanchez noted.

Many men believe a father's only role is to provide for their children. Men with jobs are more likely than unemployed fathers to be present in their children's lives. Those without money or jobs may "associate fatherhood as an extension of their pocket, and think 'I'll stay out of the child's life until I have money,'" Sanchez explained. This has a big effect on black families in New York City where, according to a report by the [Community Service Society](#), only 51.9 percent of black men ages 16 to 64 were employed.

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But Sanchez emphasizes that even the poorest fathers can support their children in important ways. "One question I ask my fathers is, 'What is one great thing you remember about your dad?'" Their answers, Sanchez said, never have to do with money. "That child is not going to remember the sneakers, but he does remember the time you took him to the park, or to a baseball game, or made him feel good about himself," Sanchez.

Sanchez's own history explains why he is so passionate about fatherhood. At 18, Sanchez fathered a daughter. He was also arrested in an apartment where drugs were found and sent to prison for 15 years. While incarcerated, he wrote to his daughter, had her visit and kept communication open with the girl's mother. When he came out of prison, he gave his daughter a cellphone to stay in touch with him. His feelings were hurt when she did not use it much.

One day Sanchez watched a Spanish film, "Mi Familia," In it, a character returns from prison and tries to force his child into a relationship. The child rejects him. An older, wiser relative tells the man, "You can't come home and demand a relationship."

"That, to me, was a lesson," Sanchez recalls. "Her feelings were legitimate. I had been out of her life for 14 years and had to give her space and room to feel what she's feeling."

Sanchez let his daughter know he would always be there for her, but that she could have some say in how much time they would spend together. Now they see each other about twice a month.

Sanchez believes that, to be a good father, a man needs to understand his own anger, his past, and his parents. To end his own family's pattern of absent fathers, Sanchez did not use drugs or alcohol. He went to college and earned a master's degree, and forgave people who had wronged him.

New York City dads, like Sanchez and the men in the POPS program hope to stay in the lives of their children. They want to break the cycle of missing fathers. When it is my turn, I am going to try to break that cycle as well.

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