

Even if they are absent from the home, men can learn to become better fathers

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Social workers can help men become more engaged as fathers, according to researchers at the University of Chicago's School of Social Service Administration.

(PhysOrg.com) -- Fathers' Day is something of an empty holiday in many urban communities where men are often disconnected from family life, but social workers can make a difference against those odds, according to an expert on fathering at the University of Chicago's School of Social Service Administration.

“We need to encourage dads to be involved in their children’s lives, even if they aren’t present on a daily basis in their children’s homes. They can learn how to help care for infants and be available as their children grow up,” said Waldo E. Johnson Jr., Associate Professor in the School of Social Service Administration and a leading national researcher on

fathering.

“Social work, as a profession, has not been as active in engaging fathers in family life as it should be,” he said. “Some young men become fathers too early and do not connect with their children. There exists another set of fathers who are divorced. If they start new families, they often don’t engage with their children as much from their first family.” In addition to helping mothers with financial issues within the family, fathers need support in assuming other critical [child development](#) concerns, he said.

Johnson has authored numerous articles on fathering and teaches a class on how social workers can help men be better fathers. Johnson also has collaborated to develop a curriculum on healthy African American [masculinity](#) that supports a range of healthy paternal roles. Available nationally for professors and social and youth workers, the course examines how societal and personal expectations shape boys’ understanding of masculinity, which affects how they approach adult roles like fatherhood.

Students at SSA do field placements at agencies, in which they work with mothers and fathers on improving their [parenting skills](#). The problem of low rates of paternal engagement is particularly acute for young black fathers, who may face multiple challenges associated with poverty, neighborhoods with high crime rates, and an early transition to fatherhood.

According to the most recent U.S. Census figures on males who had never married, about one in five (22.2 percent) black fathers, age 15 to 54, lived with all of their biological children, compared with two in five (41.3 percent) white, non-Hispanic males.

Johnson contends that violence in cities often stems from a lack of fathering support. He is leading a research project to study, in particular,

the beating death of 16-year-old honor student who was confronted by other teens last year on his way home from a South Side Chicago school.

“That tragedy was very much about a lack of fathering support to young males who perceive daily threats, not only to their developing masculinity, but to their lives,” Johnson said. “Premature death due to avoidable health concerns as well as homicide, incarceration and the loss of economic opportunities have contributed to the departure of men in that neighborhood (and similar other neighborhoods) who are not around to monitor individual and community behaviors that force boys to grow up too soon. As a result, the boys have to establish their own ideas about what a man should be, and that makes them adapt a reactive, non-caring response in order to navigate through the dangers they face,” he said.

Johnson has suggested several ways in which social workers can become part of their families and more effective members of their communities:

- Female [social workers](#) should not immediately negatively judge men’s capacity to be fathers and should encourage single mothers to involve their children’s fathers.
- Fathers who live apart from their children should be informed of developments in the home that potentially threaten their children’s safety and be provided an opportunity to take custody prior to removal into foster care.
- Family support programs should take a gender-neutral approach to parenting enhancement that also will expand the range of paternal roles for fathers.
- Men should be encouraged to look for ways they can show caring support to their children, in addition to providing materially for them to experience a broader range of effective fathering and parenting.

“We must provide opportunities for these young men to see and embrace healthy notions of masculinity and fatherhood,” Johnson said.

Among the students who have studied in Johnson’s fatherhood and public policy classes at SSA is Ashley Cureton, who graduated this spring with a master’s degree from SSA.

In a field placement at a Chicago public high school, Cureton worked with parents to become more involved in the school. The issue of the lack of fathers’ involvement frequently came up. “We would like to use them as mentors to our students. Since we lack the presence of fathers in the schools, we also asked the security guards, deans, teachers and other staff people to engage the students even more,” she said.

Cureton will continue looking for ways to bring more fathers into the schools when she begins a job this month as a researcher for the Chicago Public Schools. “I will be developing an electronic manual as well as a paper version of the resources within several communities, available to parents and community members. I will meet with parents and community members in order to promote their engagement with the schools,” she said.

Cureton’s father was absent when she was growing up, and her interest in fathering emerged from that experience, she said. “Since my father was not present in my life, I think that I missed out on having a male influence during my formative years. He was not actively involved in my educational pursuits, so I had to depend on my mother to assist me with school,” she said.

In her new job, she hopes to help fathers feel comfortable being in their children’s lives.

Another SSA student who is particularly interested in fathering is Aaron

Banman, who is a second-year Ph.D. student. He is interested in writing a dissertation surrounding fatherhood and is researching ways in which fathers can be more effective.

The father of a two-year-old son, Banman said that experience increased his interest in understanding the problems and joys that are part of being a father. Developing more effective interventions involving fathers might ease family tensions and promote child development, he said, noting his interest in the differences in fathering styles across ethnic groups.

“I noticed a big hole in the literature when it comes to fathering. There is quite a bit on the role of mothers,” he pointed out. “When it comes to fathering, the topics include research surrounding [fathers](#) and child support and what the consequences are of a father's absence. I think there is quite a bit more to look at.”

Provided by University of Chicago

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