The most surprising thing I learned is how my son processes things, the way he takes in information even for simple things like when I ask him to help out with chores. I’ve learned how to talk to him so I can get him to be helpful,” says Willie Smith, Jr. who sat down on a cold December morning in Flint, Michigan, and shared his experience as a participant in an innovative research project designed to improve the health of fathers and sons. “I’ve had a good relationship with my son but I’d never had an inkling to talk about violence or discuss our African heritage as a way to improve our relationship.”

In fact, these are two topics of discussion integral to the Fathers and Sons Project, a community-based participatory research project sponsored jointly by the University of Michigan’s School of Public Health’s Prevention Research Center (PRC), community-based organizations, and the Genesee County Health Department, with funding from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention. The initial demonstration study for the PRC, the Fathers and Sons Project responds to some of the objectives identified in the Institute of Medicine’s “Healthy People 2010,” a set of health goals for the nation to achieve in the first decade of this century. As a strategy for reducing or preventing youth substance use, violent behavior, and early sexual initiation, the project focuses on strengthening bonds between non-resident African-American fathers and their eight- to 12-year-old sons.

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I think this program is good for everybody. Me and my father we need to work together in the program. I love Dad and Mom.

SON

Homework is the cool thing about the class because it has been a long time since I had to do homework. All around, this fathers and sons course is the best thing I have been a part of in my life.

FATHER

I have been having fun in the program playing basketball. I understand my dad better and that is what is good about this program.

SON

Not only did I get to spend time with my son, but I also became closer to him because I was able to learn more about him and his frame of mind. The information I gained actually made me realize the things I was doing right—and the things I was doing extremely wrong.

FATHER
The Fathers and Sons curriculum provides all kinds of additional techniques to guide participants and to teach effective communication. There are two sessions at the recreation center, for example, where participants learn communication through sport without aggression. They get to swim, fish, play basketball, whatever they choose, but they do it as a family. These are “teachable moments,” says Caldwell, where fathers and sons can talk in a less structured environment.

“We have African dancers and drummers come in to teach our families about this form of communication and to discuss the health benefits associated with music and dance,” Brooks says. Participants get computer sessions and learn to use e-mail so they can communicate when they are not together. Families are introduced to places in the community, such as the public library, where computers are available at little or no cost, so that they can stay in touch by e-mail even after the intervention has ended.

The emphasis on communication and on the father-son relationship as a powerful, positive connection is visible everywhere in both the curriculum and on the father-son relationship as a mentor.

“I wish that me and you can be with each other every day. I wish that you will give me something for my birthday. I want you to be there when I want you. I need you to be at school to see what I am doing so I can learn.”

Dear Dad,

I wish that me and you can be with each other every day. I wish that you will give me something for my birthday. I want you to be there when I want you. I need you to be at school to see what I am doing so I can learn.

Love, Daddy

Luckily, Smith doesn’t smoke and now knows how much his son never wants him to start. But, as Smith pointed out, there is another cherished person in his son’s life who does smoke. Smith realized this might cause his son some distress and now knows he can help his son cope with those feelings. The fathers and sons discuss risky health behaviors and come up with strategies for how to avoid them. They use a Maya Angelou poem about black families, for example, as the basis for a family pledge against violence. As a family, the fathers and sons are given a homework assignment in which they must come up with practical ways to avoid engaging in or promoting violence. And an extensive list of resource materials is made available to the fathers.

“Willie Smith Jr., who after being a Father and Sons participant then went through intensive training to become a facilitator of subsequent intervention groups, says the resource guide is invaluable to fathers. “Many of them had never heard of the different social services or organizations available to them,” says Smith, who works in social service himself. “At another session fathers share success stories they’ve had with different community organizations and how closely they felt their sons met their needs.” This strategy puts fathers in touch with agencies that can help them with fathering responsibilities that extend beyond the scope of the program.

While the fathers learn what’s available in their community, the sons are making a family tree and learning about their roots, says Brooks. Halfway through the program, participants are encouraged to share whatever is on their minds and talk about what has been the most or least helpful aspect of the program, as well as what they may still need. One son wrote on his comment form, “I know that my father loves me now.”

The thing I’ve found most startling is how many of the fathers just didn’t know their sons wanted to spend the time with them. They didn’t know it was that important,” Brooks says.

Caldwell is excited about the next steps: disseminating the program and getting other community organizations to implement it. She and her colleagues will distribute aspects of the program to four communities in Michigan, beginning with Saginaw. Caldwell would ultimately like to implement the program nationwide, but her initial focus remains providing scientific evidence that the intervention is beneficial. She’d like to resist some of the Flint sons when they are older to see what kinds of decisions they’ve made on issues like violence, substance use, and sexual issues.

Caldwell is also seeking funding to design new studies that build on findings from the Fathers and Sons Project. Future studies will involve African-American mothers and fathers—regardless of residential status—in intervention programs with their preadolescent sons. Caldwell would eventually like to begin working with daughters, too. She knows from previous research on the father-son experience that boys and girls and mothers and fathers are socialized differently and thus communicate differently. She’s most interested in acknowledging these critical conceptual differences and promoting both of them in designing interventions that are guided by theories, empirical findings, and an understanding of the needs of different populations.

Her ultimate aim is to facilitate further scientific study of parent-child relationships as protective factors in adolescent health intervention research.

In the meantime, as the Flint Fathers and Sons Project wraps up, and its evaluators analyze the quantitative and qualitative data to verify which aspects of the curriculum work, the anecdotal evidence pours in through e-mails, letters, and comments from participants. “The best thing I learned,” says Smith, “is how much I mean to my son.”

Billie Ochberg is a writer who lives and works in Ann Arbor. She holds an MSW from Case Western Reserve University.

Dear Dad,

This is what I want you to know about me…

I am responsible for my own actions and I want you to know that I LOVE YOU with all my heart. And I know that you will be there for me when I need you. But also sometimes you will not be there.

Love, Rashid

Dear Son,

I would like for both of you to know how much I love you both. I would like also for both of you to be more responsible for all your actions and thoughts. Jamiel said it is tough for him to grow up. I am letting both of you know that is going to be tougher if you do not learn responsibility and discipline. This is why I am always talking to both of you about discipline and being responsible for your actions and thoughts. This is why I am trying to get you both to think before you start doing things. It is especially hard because you are not staying with me. It is hard when both parents are not communicating the same things. Rashid, you said you can be responsible, but I am wondering if either of you really understand what responsibility or discipline really is. My job is to help you learn what it means.

Love, Dad