

When fathers and sons spend time together,

they grow rich “with love, caring, understanding, quality time, and sharing,” says one graduate of a novel project that’s changed the lives of nearly 200 families in Flint, Michigan.



WILLIE SMITH JR.
AND SON WILLIE III

by Billie Ochberg

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.

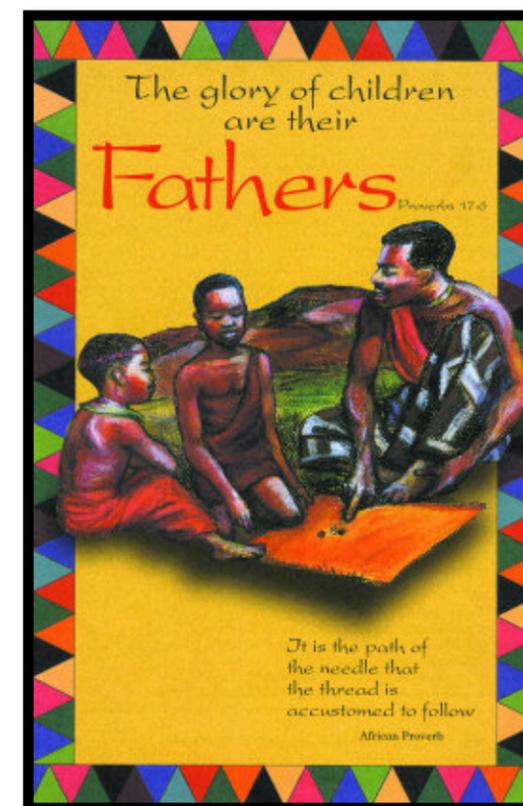
The problems of violence and tobacco, drug, and alcohol use, as well as early sexual initiation among the nation’s youth, have long been identified as critical public health issues. While many programs and education efforts exist to combat these concerns, few have previously focused on the role of fathers as responsible parents with the potential to influence their sons’

“I like when me and my dad start talking about this program.”

SON

“This is very beneficial for a broken family.”

FATHER



“Fathers can have a positive effect on their sons’ development even when they do not reside with their sons. This means a single mother does not equal an absent father.”

MARC ZIMMERMAN

decisions about risky behaviors. But a growing body of evidence suggests that positive father involvement—whether or not the father resides with the child—is linked to better health outcomes in children and adolescents. These findings compelled a group of dedicated public health faculty to join forces with the Flint community to study the issue and to try to make a difference.

“We started with very little steps and began testing various ideas for developing an intervention curriculum to prevent compromising health behaviors in youth by using a family-centered approach,” says Cleopatra Howard Caldwell, associate professor of health behavior and health education and principal investigator for the Fathers and Sons Project. “We ultimately developed an innovative, theoretically-based intervention program that was not only appealing from a scientific perspective, but was also appealing to the community in which it’s been implemented.”

“What’s unique,” says her colleague Marc Zimmerman, co-principal investigator on the study, “is that we’ve learned that fathers can have a positive effect on their sons’ development even when they do not reside with their sons.” That means a single mother does not equal an absent father. From a public health perspective, adds Zimmerman, who is also director of the PRC and chair of the

Department of Health Behavior and Health Education, “we’re all better off if we can engage the fathers.”

Recently, the Fathers and Sons Project received funding to begin disseminating successful aspects of the intervention to four other communities in Michigan. Since its inception in 2000, 159 families have completed the intervention component of the study. A comparison group of families in a neighboring community in Saginaw, Michigan, did not get the intervention.

The primary challenge the project's steering committee members faced was to design an intervention program that made sense to the community. They needed to devise a comprehensive approach to program development that included focus groups and pilot tests with non-resident African-American fathers and sons. This would allow the researchers to constantly assess the effectiveness of the intervention under development, thereby increasing not only the reliability of the curriculum content, but also the chances of its being replicated in other communities. It was also critical that the intervention be culturally relevant.

"We knew from the beginning that we wanted the Fathers and Sons Project to be culturally relevant and gender-specific," says Caldwell. "We had to think of unique ways to reach a population that had not been the focus of much research before—that is, non-resident African-American fathers—and bring them into an intervention setting for two months."

Because Zimmerman had previously conducted research with African-American adolescents in the Flint community, the researchers were able to build on relevant empirical findings that suggested that fathers mattered in the lives of their children when it came to health risk behaviors.

After three years of collaboration with community partners, a comprehensive 15-session curriculum emerged.

The intervention is conducted in small groups of fathers and sons that meet twice weekly, over the course of two months, in two-to-three-hour sessions led by community facilitators. Sessions focus on three areas: enhancing parenting skills for

"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

fathers and refusal skills for sons, strengthening father-son communication, and reinforcing cultural values.

Participants are given an extensive pre- and post-test that assesses everything from fathers' employment status, education, financial situation, and stress levels to how they define themselves and what connection they have to their ethnicity as well as their perceptions about discrimination. Both fathers and sons are asked to describe their physical activity, substance use, and the nature of their communication with one another. In addition, sons are asked about their sexual activity.

Although mothers are not yet part of the intervention, they are integral to their sons' participation, because mothers must be in favor of their sons having a relationship with their non-resident fathers. The mothers are the ones who give permission for their sons to participate. Mrs. E. Hill De Loney,

the project's community co-principal investigator and a long-time Flint resident, is especially passionate about the cultural emphasis of the program. She remembers well the days when racism and segregation were blatant in Flint. In the fifties and sixties, she says, "if a woman wanted to qualify for public assistance, she couldn't have a man in the house. A mother had to live alone."

In traditional African cultures, mothers and fathers loved and reared children they knew were not even their own—the idea that it takes a village to raise a child. And that's an essential component that De Loney is most passionate about, connecting family members and showing them how much influence they can provide whether or not they reside with a child. "We start early in the program getting families connected and talking

about what it means to be a father and a man, and how critical a father is in his child's life."

During the third session, participants learn about Adinkra symbols from Ghana—African designs that illustrate specific moral values. Each group selects an Adinkra symbol as its own. The symbol is printed on a T-shirt that they get to keep and wear at later community activities. One symbol, Sankofa, meaning "return and fetch it," illustrates the idea of retrieving and going back, never forgetting your history and knowing you can undo mistakes.

Project Supervisor Cassandra Brooks oversees the project's implementation and practical challenges, which have included a bus strike and city budget cuts. She's seen firsthand how those who may have been initially cautious or reluctant have quickly become invested in the intervention and its

goals. "Our community partners use the phrase 'we are not doing business as usual,' meaning we're not doing things the way many other institutions have in the past, bringing programs to Flint without taking the time to first determine the needs of the community," Brooks says.

The emphasis throughout the curriculum is on positive strategies to avoid negative health behaviors. According to the CDC's 2003 Youth Risk Behavior Survey, too many high school students engage in risky behaviors such as drinking alcohol, using marijuana, getting into physical fights, and having sexual intercourse. Males tend to have higher rates of several of these behaviors.

Parental monitoring has been found to be one of the best predictors of positive health behaviors in adolescents. So in addition to studying African-American

"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

culture, fathers who take part in the intervention are encouraged to get to know who is important in their sons' lives. Using a hierarchical mapping technique, each son maps out his own social network of family and friends by writing the names of those closest to him in three concentric circles. "The purpose of this activity is to allow the fathers to see who is important in their sons' lives, especially with regard to their friends," says Caldwell. The

fathers don't make their own social network diagrams but instead work with their sons to complete the sons' diagrams. If a son includes someone his father does not know, facilitators encourage the father to find out more about that person.

Communication is vital. Early on in the program, facilitators ask both fathers and sons to write a letter to each other and say whatever it is they want the other to know. It's very open. Facilitators then put the letter into a

memory book, along with other journal entries, photographs, and the map of each child's social network. Participants get to keep their memory books as a reminder of their experience in the program.

They also write letters later on in the program. Program researchers have analyzed the two sets of letters and found a clear transition. For example, one father's first letter showed his need to establish himself as the child's father. By the second letter, the same father used language that revealed more emphasis on his child's future and his expectations for his son. In another example, a son wrote in his second letter, "When we do things together..." The phrase demonstrated his expectation that he and his father would now spend time together.

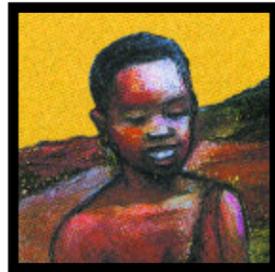
The Fathers and Sons curriculum provides all kinds of additional techniques to guide participants and to teach effective communication. There are two sessions at the recreation center, for example, where participants learn communication through sport without aggression. They get to swim, play basketball, 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 at the Fathers and Sons offices in Flint. “Fathers and Sons” is printed on pens, water bottles, Frisbees, and stress balls. “It lets them know we care,” explains Brooks, “because so often, especially in this community, people just don’t think they matter. That’s simply not the case here. They know beyond a shadow of a doubt that everyone involved in this program cares about them.”

One of the ways the program curriculum helps break down some of the barriers to communication is through role-play. Willie Smith Jr. remembers role-playing with his son, Willie III, about smoking. Willie III pretended to be a father who discovers his son is smoking. “I was acting the role of the son,” says Smith, “and Willie III gave me a 20-year punishment for smoking! I learned how seriously he wanted me to take it and what a taboo smoking was to my son.”

*Dear Dad,
I wish that me and you
can be with each other
every day. I wish that
you will give me some-
thing 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 Son,
I am writing you this
letter for these reasons:*

- 1. It's our homework.*
- 2. Sometimes words
look and sound better
on paper.*

*I want us to have a
relationship and maybe
even understand each
other a little better,
I'd like to make a little
into a lot. And I hope
that by the end of this
program my wish may
come true.*

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 Fathers 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 those organizations 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 revisit 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 initiation.

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 and 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 issues and carefully 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 communicat-
ing 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