

Compassion for Young Fathers



*The Fathers
Support Service
at Catholic
Charities North*

Photograph: Mark Teiwes

Bennie Ashley Jr. is the coordinator of the Fathers Support Service at Catholic Charities in Lynn, Massachusetts. David Babb is a participant turned program volunteer. *Communities & Banking* interviewed them by phone.

Please describe the program.

Bennie ... It's a strength-based, educational program for dads. We use the Five Principles of Responsible Fatherhood: affection, general guidance, financially supporting the mother and the child, demonstrating respect to the mother and the child, and setting an example by living within the law without substance abuse. We prefer guys to come on a voluntary basis, but most are referred through the Massachusetts Department of Children and Families, sometimes through probate court.

Dave ... I came voluntarily. With three kids, I felt I'd benefit learning different things from different guys and from Bennie. I like the structure and principles. The respect thing is really crucial, because I have to teach that to my children, and I have to respect the other parent. I'm divorced. Bennie comes over as a very positive person. He doesn't reject your way of doing things. He just shows how your way can become better by interacting with other people's ideas. There's no book that can teach you to be a dad. You pick up a little from everyone.

Bennie, how did you get into this field?

Bennie ... The field actually got into me. I have a passion for it as a single dad myself. I saw the ad in the paper, and I said, "This is the work I want to do. I want to help men become more positively involved in the lives of their children." Often men don't know how because they didn't have their father involved in their own lives. I knew the hurt that I felt as a child growing up without my father. I didn't want my children or other children to feel that way. I felt it was important to help men understand the psychological and emotional stress that you put on a child if you are not involved in a positive way.

Where did you work before?

Bennie ... I was a corrections officer. I can tell you the exact moment it struck me that someone needed to educate men on the importance of being involved in children's lives. One morning, this young man who was no more than 19 years old asked me to congratulate him. He said, "I'm a dad." I said, "Good for you. How many is that?" And he said three. And I said, "What influence are you going to have on their lives? You're creating a cycle that's going to be repeated by your son one day." That young man went back up to his cell, and he stood there very dejected. That's when it hit me. Having a child should be a joyous occasion. So I went up and congratulated

him and embraced him. And I sat down and started having a heart-to-heart talk about how as a man you are defined by what you do and how you enhance the life of the children you bring in this world. I said, "I'm happy for you, but I want to see you do better for your children by making something out of yourself." It was at that point I realized there was a huge need for educating men on the importance of being involved in their children's lives.

How did you avoid repeating the cycle?

Bennie ... I decided at a very young age I didn't want to follow in my father's footsteps. You always run across people who have influence on you. I remember Miss Finney, a teacher who helped me think about what I wanted out of life. I had uncles if I was looking for a role model, but I wasn't looking for a role model. I was looking for a *dad*, someone to help me define what a man should be. I thank God I was able to figure that out on my own. I became a father very young, 18, and it was sink or swim. You take a look in the mirror and decide that it's time for you to grow up. You brought a child into this world, and that child is dependent on you for everything.

Dave, do you see the program changing the participants?

Dave ... I think the majority are growing.

A lot of these guys are lost and don't know who to turn to. It's a big problem today. There are not enough groups like this.

Please address the fear that discussing this topic automatically makes people think of urban minorities?

Bennie ... How to be a dad is not something that only one group of men need to learn. If there is a stigma on urban minorities, then society must have made it that way. I know African American fathers that are very involved in their children's lives. I also know some that struggle. Bureaucratic barriers may keep them from being involved. If they don't have a job, they may not be able to pay child support. If they don't have housing, that can become the issue. I think society doesn't consider the mental health or the educational piece enough. In the program, we see a lot of illiteracy. Dads—black or white—may want to be involved with their children but can't because they don't have the education to fill out a job application. No man feels like a man when he doesn't have money in his pocket, especially when all he's hearing is that he doesn't provide. He begins to feel like he is just viewed as a dollar sign. We need to look at the causes that make some men throw up their hands. It's not about color. It's about barriers.

Do you feel like father figures to the class?

Dave ... Not really, but they do look to you for guidance about what they need to be doing. My greatest satisfaction comes from taking them somewhere and showing them what they can do, helping them go to court and file to see their kids or to transitional assistance and file for food stamps. Guys don't know. That's what's important today—to show them the avenues and help them feel more confident. All we can do is show them. After that, they need to step up and handle it themselves.

Bennie ... My greatest satisfaction is the thought that you can touch the life of a man so he will become involved in his children's lives and touch their lives, and it can carry over. People need to understand the importance of fathers in children's lives. I walk around and look into the faces of children, and I see too much despair, especially in today's economy. I see they're missing something. To me, the father is the piece that's missing.

Varieties of Outreach

Among the initiatives supportive of fathers and fathering are the blog Playground Dad on the West Coast and the Boston-based Good Men Project. Different as they are, they share with the Catholic Charities program a belief in the importance of helping dads engage in their children's lives.

Playground Dad

When Mike Johnson started taking his children to the playground near his California home, he was struck by the numbers of fathers who were there. That seemed new, different from the culture of the Boston suburb where he grew up.

Johnson soon concluded that the difference was generational. For whatever reason, perhaps because they wished their own dads had played with them more, perhaps because more mothers were employed, fathers were increasingly engaged in child-rearing.

Johnson, a veteran of the video game industry and a web designer, saw numerous mommy blogs on the Internet and had an idea. PlaygroundDad.com was born.

"The average dad spends about six hours a week with his kids. That's not perfect," writes Johnson, "but today's dads are doing better than the previous generation. PlaygroundDad.com is for the dads who dare to make the most of these six sacred hours: no Blackberrys, no conference calls, just quality time. Playground Dad connects this new generation of fathers with the events and products that help them spend better time with their newborn to grade school aged kids."*

Johnson routinely scans the Internet for dad-worthy information for Playground Dad and can be found on Facebook and Twitter:

* Johnson's own father contributes here: <http://playgrounddad.com/2010/10/04>.

The Good Men Project

The Good Men Project magazine, for "thoughtful men with a conscience," is one of many efforts by former venture capitalists Tom Matlack and James Houghton to start what Matlack calls "a national conversation on what it means to be a good man and a good father." There's the book—which captures the voices of men in all walks of life—the DVD, the option for Broadway, the proposed television series.

But a pillar of their work is the Good Men Foundation, which donates to "organizations that provide educational, social, financial, and legal support to men and boys at risk." Matlack and Houghton believe the foundation is helping to generate a "dialogue—by men, among men, and about what it means to be a man in America today" and to create "an increased awareness of the problems specific to at-risk boys and men."

Several of the organizations the foundation assists are in Greater Boston. Street Potential uses art and hip-hop music as vehicles for self-expression and an increased sense of personal accomplishment among men ages 13 to 20 in the juvenile justice system (www.trinityinspires.org). The Boys and Girls Club of Boston helps young people, especially those most in need, to build strong character and realize their full potential as responsible citizens and leaders (www.bgcb.org). Big Brothers Big Sisters of Massachusetts Bay (www.bbbsmb.org) serves 3,500-plus youths through one-to-one mentoring relationships. Dorchester Youth Alternative Academy (www.dyacademy.org) provides education, community services, and counseling to Children in Need of Services (CHINS), an at-risk population of truant youths.

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