

Young dads get help in become good fathers

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Rob Varnon, Staff Writer

Every Tuesday, on the third floor of 350 Fairfield Ave., a different kind of Father's Day plays out. This one isn't about celebrating dad, it's about becoming one.

In a classroom in Career Resources, a nonprofit job training center, a man named Peter tells the other participants in the [Fathers for Life](#) program about a problem he faces.

He has an older son who grew up without Peter.

"I feel guilty, so I go easy on him," Peter said, explaining the young man just comes to him for money.

Fathers for Life instructor [Malik Williams](#) challenges Peter on this.

"You allow that," he tells him. Then he walks to the white board in the classroom and writes TIME on it.

"This is the most important thing your child will remember about you. TIME. `I owe no man but to love him,'" Williams says quoting the Bible. "That's what you owe your kids."

Then to explain the problem Peter and others might be facing, Williams plays out what the kids are feeling, even the older ones.

"Remember, you hurt me. I went to those games by myself. I went to school by myself... If you leave me again. I don't want to be abandoned again, daddy."

Williams says now it's up to Peter and the rest to confirm: "I ain't going nowhere."

This is how seven to 35 fathers spend their Tuesdays. They dig into their problems and discuss solutions.

It is a 12-week course that includes case management, counseling, healthy relationships and a host of other sections attempting to help fathers remain part of their children's lives in a constructive and supportive way.

Since 1999, Career Resources, a nonprofit job training center, has offered this program in part to try to help unemployed, non-custodial fathers meet their financial obligations.

But it's more than that, according to Williams, himself a graduate of the program.

Williams became a father at 17 and has four children. He found the program when he was engaged in job training in the center.

Fathers for Life's goal is deceptively simple.

"Help dad be the dad we need him to be," Williams said. And by that he means, for the kids, the moms and the community. Williams noted he's gotten a list from some moms telling him what mom needed from the man.

problem of absentee fathers worsens

An engaged father setting a good example is important on all these fronts, according to [Anibal Torres](#), a [Fairfield University](#) assistant professor of marriage and family therapy. Torres, who is not a part of the program said kids are likely to follow in their parents footsteps, even when the child doesn't like where those footsteps lead. He said that's true of little mannerisms and bigger issues like addiction.

But, it's also true of good examples.

Torres said, however, the cycles of absentee fatherhood gripping some families has to be addressed, otherwise it will get worse, with those fathers creating more fatherless children, who could go on to repeat the pattern. "I think it has gotten worse, I don't think we ever had intervention strategies for it and it just keeps getting worse and and worse," Torres said. That's why it's important to provide help for fathers; "Things won't go away by just hoping," he said.

Dealing with discipline

During the session, the men talked about problems with their current relationships and also discussed discipline and how they were disciplined. There were lots of beatings and confusion, sometimes because it was unclear why they got hit.

John, a man who has been to prison and dealt drugs, is trying to better his relationship with his two sons.

He said his father would surprise him with a punch to the chest.

One man, who didn't give his name, said he had no sense of safety in his neighborhood as a child.

"It was like fear. Every which way I looked I was going to get beat," the man said.

Williams brought the discussion to point, talking about how they can avoid the mistakes of past generations.

He said it's important to not react out of emotion -- to send the child away before punishing the child. He said don't ask the child why they did something.

"All you'll get is 'I don't know,'" if you ask that question. Instead, have the child explain what he or she did, Williams said.

Problems of parenting

As they talked into the night, it was clear that they are facing the normal problems of parenting.

They suspect friends who might not be good influences; teens testing boundaries and getting into adult situations; driving, dating, school work; the list goes on.

And on top of that, they face conflict with ex-wives or girlfriends, new boyfriends, family members of exes, and their children, too.

The men seem to be getting the message that many of these conflicts are rooted in history. Moms are facing broken promises and disappointments, too.

So the dedicated dad has to remember this and hold his peace and, just like he's supposed to tell his kids, he needs to tell the mother, he's not going anywhere.

He's going to raise this kid with her to allow their child to walk a better path taking not the worst from each parent, but the best.

For more information on Fathers for Life, contact Career Resources at 203-953-3269, or visit www.careerresources.org.

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