NYC dads are trying to break the cycle of fatherlessness

Father's Day isn't always the happiest holiday for the one in three American children who live in "biological father-absent" homes, according to census data crunched by The National Fatherhood Initiative.

Experts believe father absence to be even higher in many parts of New York City, where
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many babies begin life with unmarried moms and dads. Citywide, 45.19% of all births are to unmarried moms, but in New York’s poorest borough, the Bronx, the percentage skyrockets to 69.4%, according to 2010 New York State Department of Health figures.

A cluster of programs -- four in the city for low and no-income noncustodial fathers run by Seedco, for example -- give hope to men trying to break the cycle of father absence by giving them the tools to remain a vital presence in the lives of their children while helping them find jobs. The programs are geared to help the men vault over parenting obstacles that can seem overwhelming: being denied the right to see their children or being unable to do so, an inability to constructively resolve conflict with the custodial parent of their kids, and feelings of depression or shame when unable to financially support the children they love.

"Their stress level is so high," said Marjorie Jeannot, department director of Workforce Development at Bronxworks. "They're under a lot of pressure and often in crisis. They can't even support themselves, much less their children," and are often further challenged by a lack of good role models and ignorance of their own parental rights.

Participants often wind up at the workforce centers due to a court order because they have been unable to keep up with their child support payments, but their participation in the fatherhood programs is voluntarily. (In the last fiscal year, no money was collected from 44% of the noncustodial parents of the 286,196 child support cases in the city currently with court orders, according to the NYS Office of Temporary and Disability Assistance. There are 407,128 child support cases city wide, according to the NYC Human Resources Administration.)

Financial difficulty often begets father absence, as many poor men rationalize their kids might be better off without them.

"Every guy paying child support who can't adequately support himself feels it -- a total inadequacy, the blow to your manhood," said Nathaniel Shokralla, 29, an unemployed father of three in East Tremont who recently graduated from a Strong Fathers/Stronger Families program at Bronxworks.

Primary in the curriculum is diffusing "baby mama drama" to develop a cordial relationship with their children's custodial parent, and instruction on how to forge a loving, respectful relationship with one's children and other adults -- a skill that also pays dividends in the job search. About 225 men have gone through Seedco's local Fatherhood programs and 40 of those men have found work.

"Most of these dads really want to be involved: They just have so many challenges," explained Theresa Dobie, the Fatherhood Program manager for the St. Nicholas Alliance in Northern Brooklyn. Their ability to forge a loving, respectful relationship with their children is important, she said, as the presence of an involved father "increases a child's self esteem, how well they do in school and for girls, reduces the chance of that child having a pregnancy when they're a teenager," Dobie said. Other research shows that the children without dads are five times more likely to be poor, and at higher risk of being incarcerated, using drugs, cigarettes and alcohol, and for suffering from health ailments ranging from asthma to depression.

The men say there is an almost magical alchemy in the groups, which use a combination of peer support, a culturally sensitive accountability curriculum, and critical thinking skills that participants in turn pass on to their kids -- along with a joy of reading and learning. Here are
three recent graduates of the Seedco programs.

Nathaniel Shokralla, 29, East Tremont, the Bronx

Being unemployed in East Tremont while his three girls (Raven Sky, 8, Rain, 7 and Rayleigh, 3) live with their mother in Sullivan County, is a Catch-22, acknowledged Nathaniel Shokralla.

The former security guard now has the time to spend with the daughters he loves, but "it's a tough gig," to see them as often as he'd like because the bus fare is expensive. "I really want to see my kids," but the lack of money sometimes means delaying visits upstate for longer than he'd like.

Through discussions with other men in his fatherhood group, he has come to realize that while adults may emphasize material wealth, "your kids just want to spend time with you. It's OK if you're not rich. A lot of guys, including myself, have come to terms with that."

The financial impediment is an especially cruel irony, given that Shokralla waged and won a court fight for the right to see his daughters every other weekend, which left him astounded.

"A lot of minorities get labeled and beat down by the system," said Shokralla, who felt that way as well -- until his Strong Fathers/Stronger Family's coordinator showed him how to apply for court-ordered visitation. "They showed me how to go about it in a lawful way. I never thought I could go to the system for assistance, that the system could also work for you."

It was both a comfort and an education to be honest with other men in similar straights, all struggling to be better fathers despite economic challenges and messy, often stressful, relationships. Learning how to diffuse conflict with the mother of his children ("just because she's angry doesn't mean I have to get angry") helped him model better conflict resolution skills for his girls.

The fatherhood program emphasizes that it is critical that a dad "keep your promises," Shokralla recalled. "If you say you're going to show up, show up! If you're going to be late, call and say you're going o be late. The program just gave me so many options to have a higher level of thinking -- to treat people the way you would like to be treated. A lot of guys come in here not knowing anything," in part because they lacked the very parental supports they are now endeavoring to provide.

Like many of the men in his group, Shokralla -- who grew up in foster care and group homes -- grappled with how to be a good role model while lacking one himself. After dropping out of middle school and high school, he managed to earn a GED and complete a year of college.

Shokralla is motivated to model reliability so that when the day comes for his daughters to choose mates they will select for suitors who will treat them respectfully. And he wants to be a confidante should their hearts be broken along the way: "One thing I told them is 'no matter what, I'm still going to be your dad.'"

While the system may prove helpful in asserting certain rights, Shokralla is determined to keep his kids as far away from it as possible. "I'm not going to let my children go into foster care or wind up in a group home," he said.

He would love, he said, to have full custody of his daughters. "But I have to get a job first."

Alfredo Chaucer, 40, Woodlawn, the Bronx

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Alfredo Chaucer, who has seven children ranging in age from 8 to 21 via three different mothers lost his job as a warehouseman after being arrested for what he describes as an attempted drug sale. "I was trying to make some extra money," said Chaucer, who was released after serving nine months of a 12-month sentence from federal prison in August of last year. Asea in a brutal job market without a high school diploma or a GED, and a driver's license suspended for nonpayment of child support, Chaucer has faced an economic tsunami. While the courts knocked down his $60,000 child support arrears to $18,000, he struggles mightily with the weight of needing to be "the provider."

Finding work with a criminal record in a bad economy can be full of crushing discouragements, but Chaucer, who is happy about one thing: Newly acquired personal skills have helped him build better relationships with both his kids and his exes. Recently, his 16-year-old son mouthed off to a referee in a basketball game. "Before I would have busted out screaming at him but instead I kept my calm and said, "do you realize what you just did?' They talked through the ramifications of his son speaking disrespectfully to a man who had influence over his basketball ambitions. "He said, 'dang, papa -- you're right,'" - words that are music to any parent's ears. "Through this program, I got the tools to deal with my kids!" he exulted.

Learning how to be accountable, owning up to mistakes, and taking responsibility is another concept taught in the fatherhood program's "Blueprint" curriculum, so Chaucer -- who was married in January to a woman with whom he has no children -- "went to my babies' mama and apologized to her for all the crazy stuff I did on her while we were together. I felt so good about it!"

When he saw this ex at a family gathering recently with her new partner, "I went up and shook his hand. My kids bugged out!" he said, laughing. Before the fatherhood program, he would have behaved in a hostile way, he explained, because he grew up "bullish" in the mistaken belief that if he failed to establish dominance, he was displaying weakness. "Kids really notice your relationships with your wife, your girlfriend or your ex. My kids have really benefited from our relationship being better. They are so happy," to be spared the worry of arguments and angry outbursts.

"I open my soul to my kids more," and has found that they, in turn, confide more in him.

"I don't have a job. I have no income," says Chaucer, whose wife not only supports him and one of his sons, but pays some child support to one of Chaucer's exes. It is painful not to be able to do "things I'd like to do with my boys -- like go see a guys' movie. I can't blow $30 on a theater because I have to spend anything I get on child support and cellphone bills. I'm really feeling it right now. So I get the guy who sells the bootleg CDS and get 'Battleship,' and say, 'c'mon guys!'"

Nicholas Kydd, 21, Williamsburg

Kydd's biggest challenge as a parent to his four year old son, Najier, who he picks up from school three days a week and sees occasionally on weekends, echoes the lament of many noncustodial dads: "Getting to spend enough time with him."

Kydd, a security guard, who dropped out of high school and instead earned a GED to speed his way into the work world, will be working this Father's Day. He prefers weekend shifts because they tend to pay more, giving him more money to give to his son's mother, who was 15 when Najier was born. He gives Najier's mom $100 to $150 a week from his $300-a-week
wages and while he has been to court numerous times, has yet to receive a formal child support order.

He didn't want to attend fatherhood classes, but after being challenged by the program's coordinator at the St. Nicks Alliance, discovered he liked them. "The program is all about keeping the focus on my son. If I flip on somebody and get fired, then I lose my income and there goes the support for my son, so I always keep that in mind so he can get what he needs. I learned to stop looking at the bad things going on and just focus on what goes on between me and him. I want him to live a better life than I have. I was a street kid running around," before settling down into the responsibilities of fatherhood.

He and his son "talk a lot more now," as a result of instruction stressing the importance of father-child interactions: "I pick him up and he does his ABCs forwards and backward. He can count up to 100, but when he gets to '59' he doesn't know the next number. I tell him '60,' and then he's fine until he gets to '69' -- the same thing! I try to get him to sing different songs, but every day it's the same thing: 'Twinkle Twinkle Little Star.' I think it's because it has the same rhythm as the ABCs." There is no greater pleasure, said Kydd enthusiastically, than "watching him learn."

Kydd met his own father once, shortly after Najier was born, when he was 17. "He didn't even greet me. I asked him what he was doing and he swayed past my questions and said you mom's a b----. Then he asked me if I wanted to go hang out and smoke weed. That's when I punched him in his face."

Contentious relationships with a child's mother are often the source of father estrangement, but Kydd and the mother of his son "make agreements," about how to co-parent Najier, ignoring the divisive, if well-meaning, meddling of relatives and friends. "I'm engaged now and she congratulated us: That's how much we get along now," he said.

Still, he doesn't downplay the difficulties of his situation. "Being the financial provider is hard," he acknowledged, noting that the fathers he knows outside of the program "are all gang members or passed away or are smoking weed all day. I used to smoke, but I stopped because I needed a job for good money, not minimum wage and all the employers want drug screens."

The St. Nick's fatherhood program, "really opened my eyes," that he is not alone in the struggle to be a stand-up dad despite limited resources. "What I'm going through is not the worst. No matter what I'm going through, it's not like being in and out of jail for nonsupport with $80,000 in back child support for all the different moms," said Kydd.