



The Inestimable Value of Responsible Fathering

By Ken Canfield, PhD

The economics of fathering, more specifically *fatherlessness*, is a topic that has received no small attention.¹ Recent data estimates a figure of 100 billion dollars annually as the cost of fatherlessness.² This a significant sum, but does that cost include the staggering emotional, moral, and “loss of potential” costs that plague a child when they don’t have a dad? Certainly not, and it likely doesn’t get close.

Conservatively, twenty-five million children under the age of 18 don’t live with their dad.³ Add to that the number of children who live with their dad but aren’t connected to him relationally, emotionally, psychologically, or spiritually. I’d say that’s a much clearer picture of the true costs of fatherlessness.

On the national scale our federal deficit is paralleled by our “fathering deficit.” If we have trillions of dollars borrowed to underwrite our federal deficit, how much are we in arrears for the loss of potential that a generation of fathers have failed to invest, to help their children or their children’s children succeed? It has to be a big number, maybe in the tens of trillions.

Now let’s flip that argument and, instead of looking at the deficits, let’s explore strategies to develop the potential of our children by calculating the value of *fatherfulness*; that is, having fathers are who engaged and involved in their child’s development. The research on child well-being, prevention and developing strengths gives a boost to this discussion.

Infants who have time alone with their dad show richer social and exploratory behavior than do children not exposed to such experiences. They smile more frequently in general, and they more

1 B. Scafidi, The Taxpayer Costs of Divorce and Unwed Childbearing, *Institute for American Values*. Georgia Family Council and Institute for American Values, 2008.

2 S. L. Nock and C. J. Einolf, The One Hundred Billion Dollar Man, The Costs of Father Absence, *NFI*. June 2008

3 Fathers Count. Annie E. Casey Foundation, 1994.

frequently engage in playful behaviors with their dad.⁴

Children who feel a closeness to their father are twice as likely to enter college

or find stable employment after high school, 75 percent less likely to have a

teen birth, 80 percent less likely to spend time in jail, and half as likely to experience depression.⁵

A four-decade study found that when dads encouraged their daughters to excel and achieve and were emotionally close to their sons, their daughters were more successful in school and in their careers, and their sons achieved greater status later in life.⁶

The data is powerful. While the costs and consequences of fatherlessness

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have been described in great detail in the literature, the benefits and assets created by fatherfulness have been less so. The absence of a father leaves a child at risk, with hopelessness and disaster waiting in the wings. But the presence of a dad, particularly one who is humble and compassionate, can breathe hope and life into a child.

How much is the role of “responsible fathering” worth? What does a thousand trillion equal? A quadrillion. And I’d say that at a minimum, that’s the collective asset value of responsible fathering. If we fail to activate this asset and make strategic investments in the next generation, we will be settling for the status quo, which in reality is stagnation. The time has arrived for us to tap into the inestimable value of responsible fathering and cast a vision of hope, so our children’s limbs will not hang limp and lifeless, but rather be resilient and strong.

We need a clarion call to fatherfulness out of which we create a movement that resurrects the ideals, the virtues, and the practices of responsible fatherhood. We need to challenge men that being a father is a matter of honor,

4 Frank A. Pedersen, Joan T. D. Suwalsky, Richard L. Cain, Martha J. Zaslow, and Beth A. Rabinovich, “Paternal Care of Infants During Maternal Separations: Associations with Father-Infant Interaction at One Year,” *Psychiatry* 50 (August 1987):203.

5 F. F. Furstenberg Jr. and K. M. Harris, “When and Why Fathers Matter: Impacts of Father Involvement on the Children of Adolescent Mothers,” in *Young Unwed Fathers: Changing Roles and Emerging Policies*, ed. R. I. Lerman and T. H. Ooms (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1993).

6 John Snarey, *How Fathers Care for the Next Generation: A Four-Decade Study* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1993), 278.

a privilege, something a mature man should devote his life to. We need to equip fathers with the tools and secrets of their trade and empower them to succeed in their homes, where the sincerity of life is truly revealed.

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And when we have made progress that is measurable, we must then turn our attention to the fatherless, those who have been waiting and hoping someone would hear their call. Someone like Latasha.

When we visited Latasha last week to arrange for her to meet her dad, she wept. She hasn't seen her father for 13 years. He has been incarcerated for 10 years and has another 7 before he is paroled. He asked if “Get on the Bus,”⁷ an organization that is dedicated to uniting children with their incarcerated parents, could bring Latasha to see him on Father's Day, as he wants to reconnect with her.

Fulfilling his request required mounds of paperwork. First, Latasha's dad had to make a written appeal. He wrote, “I lost contact with my daughter 13 years ago, and today I got a letter from her. I

would like you to contact my daughter and ask her to come and see me. I really want to see her.” Second, letters

and phone calls were made by a third party to see if Latasha, who lives three hours away, wanted to come. When our staff worker,

Lea, finally sat down with her and read her father's request, Latasha was overwhelmed. She deeply misses her father, even though she hasn't seen him in over a decade and he has made some very poor choices about his life. As Lea left the meeting after getting all the paperwork in order, Latasha asked if she could keep the note from her father, because that's all she has to live on for the moment. “Absolutely,” Lea replied. “Here it is.”

Now, I'm not naïve in thinking that bringing a daughter and a dad together to spend the day in a less-than-optimal environment (the prison visitors center) will change the world. But it's a beginning; a bold beginning. And if daughter and dad are willing, we must make it happen.

If you multiply Latasha's story times 1.6 million, you have the approximate number of children under the age of

7 www.getonthebus.us

18 whose fathers are incarcerated⁸. To facilitate connecting these children with their fathers, where appropriate and wanted, is a daunting task. However, if we dare to believe that “responsible fathering” is a vital contributor to child well-being, how can we mobilize the resources to make father-daughter connections between Latasha and her dad possible and successful? And what preventive strategies can we develop to help dads succeed in their goal of being a responsible father, even if it’s from behind bars?

This is a huge undertaking, and to do so, we need to go to the heart of a father. I’ve

written extensively about this tactic, because the primary influence on a father’s heart is a man’s father⁹. In other words, a first step toward becoming a responsible father is to come to terms with one’s past by resolving feelings, attitudes, and actions as a son.

Fathers, damaged by their fathers,

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pass on their pain to their sons and daughters. Unless the cycle is broken, the damage wreaks havoc for generations. No one knows this more clearly than incarcerated fathers. There is strong evidence of intergenerational imprisonment in which a father, grandfather, brother, or older male relative had also been incarcerated¹⁰. As Samuel Osherson¹¹ concluded in his masterful piece, *Finding our Fathers*, “The psychological or physical absence of fathers from their families

is one of the great underestimated tragedies of our times.”

Despite the overwhelming amount of research confirming the impact of a father on a son’s ability to father, many men I have met are reluctant to think about their fathers and deal with underlying feelings. Some reluctance is certainly a fear of pain. You can dredge up some hurts that seem overwhelming. Yet, psychologist Donald Joy¹² points

8 From Prison to Home: The Effect of Incarceration and Reentry on Children, Families, and Communities, Effects of Parental Incarceration on Young Children. Ross D. Parke University of California, Riverside, K. Alison Clarke-Stewart University of California, Irvine, December 2001. <http://aspe.hhs.gov/HSP/prison2home02/parke-stewart.htm>

9 Ken Canfield, *The Heart of a Father* (Chicago: Northfield, 2006).

10 Mumola, Christopher J. (2000). *Incarcerated parents and their children* (NCJ182335). Washington, DC: U. S. Department of Justice.

11 Samuel Osherson, *Finding Our Fathers* (New York” Fawcett Columbine, 1987), 6.

12 Donald Joy, *Unfinished Business* (Wheaton: Victor, 1989), 34.

out, “Men with a damaged father connection will be healed only to the extent that they can describe the loss and the pain.” Donald Joy learned this truth by leading hundreds of men through small-group experiences over his distinguished career. I have had the same experience, as have Dr. Hershel Swinger, George Williams, Ron Nichols, Rick Wertz and many other leaders who have labored in the vineyards of fatherhood.

I believe that small groups have the greatest potential to achieve lasting and positive change. In Latasha’s father’s case, he was meeting with other incarcerated men, and working on his own fathering, as well as on personal issues, in a small group long before the visit with his daughter. It was during those times that he learned he was not alone. Ninety percent of the men in his small group grew up without a dad. When Latasha’s father recognized his vulnerability and was able to verbalize to other men how being fatherless had stifled his potential and impacted his choices in life, it became clear to him that he didn’t want that for his little girl. So he wrote her a letter.

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This epiphany or revelation came as a result of being in a small group with other fathers. These fathering groups have a profound impact on how men learn. I have listened to hundreds of fathers give testimony over the years about how the small-group experience helped them learn from other men, identify new goals, and put them into specific, concrete actions related to their fathering.

Children’s Institute, through Project Fatherhood, has been a pioneer in shaping both the content and process of strengthening fathers through small groups. I have participated in those groups and have heard fellow fathers attribute their learning to the shared experiences with other fathers and the group leader. It is a transformative experience.

Social psychologists¹³ have also confirmed that members of a group experience higher achievement and greater cooperation than individual efforts in learning. In addition, we have

13 Tindale, R.S., Heath, L., Edwards, J., Prosvac, El, Bryant, F., Surez-Balcazar, Y., Henderson-King, E., and Myers, J. (1998). Theory and research on small groups. New York: Plenum Press.

learned that group members (fathers in small groups) are more apt to:

- Take on difficult tasks and persist, despite difficulties, in working toward accomplishing goals;
- Remember what they learn;
- Achieve a higher level of reasoning and critical thinking; and
- Maintain a positive attitude.

Again, applied to training fathers, whether in prison or a board room, we have the

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opportunity to help another father who may face challenging economic or personal issues. This was the idea Al Gore had in mind when he called for a father-to-father initiative¹⁴. Fathers would meet together for mutual support and extend that outreach to specific fathers in need. In Gore’s words, “I’m asking you to join me in launching a nationwide father-to-father movement. We must mobilize a national movement of fathers meeting together to mutually support and reach out to one another.”

Although this initiative did not mate-

rialize as Gore had hoped, the Bush administration carried the vision forward by providing significant funding to establish fatherhood training for men, particularly fathers in challenging circumstances. Bush said,¹⁵ “Promoting fatherhood was a commitment I made as governor, it’s a commitment I make as President, and it’s a commitment I have made every day since our little girls were born...”

In many cases, the real power of this process – where the inestimable value of a father is vividly portrayed – is among the urban poor. Dads in these settings are facing challenging economics and complex family situations. I have seen more than their fathering skills strengthened through the small-group experience and through their mutual¹⁶:

- Giving and receiving of financial help and assistance;
- Exchange of resources and information; and
- Giving and receiving of feedback on task work;

14 Gore, A. (1994). Speech given at the Family Reunion IV, Nashville, Tennessee July 11th.

15 Bush, G. (2001). Speech given at the Fatherhood Summit, June 11, 2001. Washington, D.C.

16 Williams, G. (2000). [jttp://fathers.com/urban/index.html](http://fathers.com/urban/index.html)

- Challenging of one another's reasoning;
- Advocacy and increased efforts to achieve;
- Influence on one another's behavior; and
- Engagement in the interpersonal and small-group skills needed for effective teamwork.

Regardless of how one comes to the fields and practice of responsible fathering, through the streams of fatherlessness or fatherfullness,

one thing is sure: Unless we create opportunities and a forum for men to become proactive in sharing their pilgrimage, including their challenges and losses, we will have failed to reach our potential. To do so, with humility and dedication, we must challenge every adult male to the high calling of being a father or father figure for the generation to come.

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