

Rise magazine is written by and for parents involved in the child welfare system. Its mission is to help parents advocate for themselves and their children.

Rise

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BY AND FOR
PARENTS IN THE
CHILD WELFARE SYSTEM

Fathers' Rights and Roles

Children do better when their fathers are involved in raising them, yet child welfare systems have been slow to include fathers in family support services or case planning. It can be difficult for fathers with children in care to access legal representation and appropriate services.

In this issue, parents write about the steps fathers can take to protect and support their children.



COURTESY OF LOUIS ANGEL

IN THIS ISSUE

3 PUTTING FATHERS BACK IN THE PICTURE

4 BURDEN OF PROOF
Fathers must earn their rights.

4 STANDING UP FOR MY SON
I had to fight for my rights.

6 A FAMILY AGAIN
With support, my wife and I recovered from her addiction.

7 SLOWING DOWN IN LIFE

8 A HUG EVERY DAY
Fathers' roles in their children's lives.

9 MR. MOM

9 STEPPING INTO FATHERHOOD

10 'DON'T FORGET ME, MI HIJA'
I can't visit my daughter.

10 BABY GIRL VS. THE GAME

10 TIME TO MAN UP

A Long Road Home

Getting clean was only the first step in becoming a better father.

BY LOUIS ANGEL

Long before my kids went into foster care, I knew they were going to get taken away. Their mother and I were addicted to meth. Our life was out of control.

During this time, she and I were not really taking care of our three kids. We'd put them in front of the TV with their bottles and some food and lock ourselves in our bedroom all day to get high.

I worked long shifts and I knew their mother was not taking care of the girls while I was gone. I'd come home to find the girls still wearing the same diapers I'd put on them before I left.

Scared for My Children

The neighbors started to tell me that my kids were running around the neighborhood by themselves at only 3 years old. One afternoon I came home early from work. Cruising up my street on my bike, I saw my

oldest daughter, Jasmine, across the street from our house, playing in just her underwear and a t-shirt. I was shocked and scared for my children.

I yelled, "Jasmine," and she bolted back home. When I got inside, I saw their mother staring blankly at the television, totally unaware.

At that point, I was determined to stop using. I stopped giving their mother money. But she began to sell things like our table, the brand new couches and our TV. I was too weak to stop getting high on my own.

A Knock on the Door

I look back on this dark time with sadness and regret. I see how different I was when I was getting high. My addiction made me only want to make money and buy drugs.

When I was a child, my parents did the same things to me. They were

heavy into drugs. I can remember being in the second grade and not even coming home until nighttime. I always told myself that I wouldn't do that to my kids, but I was no better than my parents.

Eventually my life was a complete mess. I lost my job, my car was repossessed, I was arrested for welfare fraud, I faced a tax audit because I couldn't pay my income taxes, and I had creditors on my back. My addiction had a grab on me and destroyed my life.

Then came that knock on the door. I knew that once the cops stepped in to our home, our kids were going away for a while. I remember my little ones getting into a police car and slowly driving away.

Two Empty Weeks

After the commotion cleared, I had an empty feeling inside of me. "How

am I going to get them back?" I asked myself. Two of the most empty weeks in my life passed by.

While I waited to find out what I could do next, I separated from my children's mother and made a commitment to myself that I would change my life. I was determined to become the dad my girls needed and deserved. I also promised myself that I would begin a real career so I could provide for my children financially.

I knew that if I was going to reach my goals, I had a long road ahead of me.

Woken Up

At first, I thought that Child Protective Services (CPS) would place me in a treatment program with my kids. I also thought the system could help me get welfare and Section 8 so that, once I was clean, we could get back on our feet.

But I found out that's not how CPS works. You can't just get the help you want, you also have to do what the system thinks is right for you. I also learned that there are no rehab programs in Fresno, Calif., where I live, where a father can live with his children.

CPS told me that I needed to enter drug treatment, take anger management and parenting classes, and go to counseling. I felt that there was a huge possibility that I might not get my children back at all.

The Right Path

In treatment, I learned that I needed to be quiet for a change and accept help. During one of my one-on-one talks with a program leader, he explained that it was good that I tried to do right for myself, but that my judgment was off. Trying to fix my life my way got me into this mess. Now I needed to allow people to guide me in making the right decisions.

His words helped me open up to my mentors, and in a few months, I was on the right path.

Within nine months, I finished treatment, found a new job and moved to a one-bedroom apartment close to downtown. It was a nice, quiet

little place with stucco walls and roses out front.

'I'm Sorry, My Babies'

I felt so good when I was able to bring my girls to our new home for visits. My daughters were happy to explore their new surroundings and draw pictures on the sidewalk—pink and white flowers, and purple and blue rainbows.

I soon learned that it was hard to show my girls all the attention they needed during visits. It was new to me to take care of my girls when I was sober. I had my hands full!

Once my daughters asked me, "When are we going home, Daddy?" Part of me wanted to hold them tight and tell them, "I'm sorry for this, my babies. I love you and you will be coming home soon."



COURTESY OF LOUIS ANGEL

The system saw me as a father who could easily get overwhelmed. I didn't know much about taking care of my children and didn't have any family or support team to help me.

But I was unsure myself if I would ever get them back. So after a long pause, I just said, "Let's not talk about that right now."

My Case Was Stuck

I thought that once I got an apartment, I would get my kids back. To my mind, I had gotten what I needed from the system. But my case seemed to go nowhere. I felt stuck.

Partly, I blame having three different caseworkers. But I also had to realize that CPS saw me as a father who could easily get overwhelmed by trying to work full time and care for three little girls with no one to step in if things got hectic. I didn't know much about taking care of my children and didn't have any family or support team to help me.

Someone Who Supports Me

Luckily, at this time, I met a wonderful woman named Elizabeth who made a huge difference in my life.

I met her one day at work. My cash register broke down while I had a long line. Elizabeth and her mother waited patiently. Then I decided to take them to pay at the front of the store. I started a little conversation and asked for her number. "Are you serious?" she said. Amazingly, she

agreed to go on a date with me.

On our first date, I just came out and told Elizabeth what I was going through. She seemed shocked and didn't say anything but "OK." She needed time to think. But for the last three years, we have been together.

Embarrassed to Cry

Elizabeth has listened to my hurt and encouraged me. Many days I had tears in my eyes as I wondered whether I would get my kids back.

One day I told her, "Maybe my girls are better off in foster care. I can't provide what they need. I can't even afford their clothes or toys." I turned away so she wouldn't see me crying.

I told myself, "Men shouldn't cry," but Elizabeth wiped the tears off my face and put her arms around me, saying, "It's OK. You

don't have to be embarrassed. Your girls don't want material things. All they want is to be with you." I felt good knowing that she was on my side.

Meeting My Girls

At first, my social worker was con-

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ceded that my relationship might have a negative effect on my children. But I introduced Elizabeth to my kids in a gradual way that was acceptable to my worker.

Elizabeth joined us on visits and earned my girls' trust by doing their hair and playing games with them. Elizabeth also began going with me to all of my meetings with CPS and even to court. Soon my case started to move forward. My social worker, Eva Torres, offered me more services to help me reunify with my girls.

The Help I Needed

Although I felt that my parenting skills were OK, the courts believed otherwise, so I started attending a class called Incredible Years. The class taught me how to deal on a daily basis with the emotions of being a parent, especially how to handle all the weapons of mass destruction that little ones know how open up and unleash with no regret. The class helped me a lot.

Ms. Torres also gave me practical help. She got me dressers for my daughters and applied for a voucher so I could get a better car. "It's a long shot, but it's worth a try," she told me. A few weeks later, she gave me the voucher for a down payment on a new car. That was unbelievable!

Finally, in November 2007, my kids started to come home for extended visits. Then I felt confident that I would be a father again.

A Father Again

Now it's been almost two years since my children came home. At 29, I am a proud father with a wonderful girlfriend and three beautiful daughters.

Jasmine, the oldest, enjoys writing stories and reading to her sisters. Casira is the middle child. She dreams of being a ballerina one day. She dances and spins

in circles while quietly singing to herself. Then there is Hanah, the youngest and toughest. She tries to push her 35 pounds around like she's the boss.

All of the girls had trouble adjusting when they came home. Suddenly I was a father who set rules that they had to follow, and it was frustrating for everyone. But we try to be patient and our family life feels positive to me now.

It was also an adjustment for Elizabeth to become a full-time mother, but she loves my girls like her own. She stays home with them while I am at work and the girls even call her "Mom."

Proud of Myself

I am proud of the steps that I've taken to become a better father. Now I am working full time and have gone back to school. I earned a GED and an emergency medical technician certification, and am enrolled at Fresno City College, working on an undergraduate degree.

I am also involved in a new program at CPS called Parent Partners. The program trains parents like me to help families whose children have entered foster care. The hope is that parents who have successfully reunited with their children will be able to break down barriers between social workers and parents.

I especially hope that I'll be able to help parents get help before their lives spiral out of control like mine did, so we can prevent parents from losing the most important thing to them, their children.

At times I did not believe I would reach my goals. Now I believe that with faith, determination, sacrifice and help, all things are possible. I'm also grateful to the people who acted like stepping stones for me, helping me along my way.

Putting Fathers Back in the Picture

Juan Carlos Arean, a senior program director at the Family Violence Prevention Fund, explains how child welfare systems are beginning to reach out to fathers:

In the child welfare system, fathers have historically been ignored. The files are put in the mother's name, and services for women are often designed so that fathers need to be out of the picture. Fathers were not on the radar except as possible problems.

Lately, at state and federal levels, there has been a wave of emphasis on engaging and involving fathers.

On the Radar

Studies show that when fathers are involved in their children's lives, children do better. Child welfare leaders are also recognizing that fathers and fathers' families can provide good opportunities for placement to keep kids out of foster care.

Some states are now requiring that fathers be contacted in every case. Workers are being asked to locate the fathers themselves.

In general, that's great. If fathers have not been in the picture for a long time, or are motivated to play a positive role in their children's lives, it's good that they are reconnecting with their families and taking financial and emotional responsibility for their children.

Issues of Violence

The flip side is that some child welfare system are not thinking well about issues of violence—domestic violence or child abuse. In some cases, child welfare personnel are involving fathers at all costs. That's a real problem.

Some women work really hard to separate from fathers that have used violence. Then child welfare workers with good intentions undo their efforts to

separate from abusive partners. It's not that men who have been violent should disappear, but that they must change their behaviors.

Improving Assessment

Workers must assess the father's role in his family: Why hasn't the father been in the picture? Does the father pose a risk? Assessment can be very difficult, especially for child welfare workers who are not trained to understand domestic violence issues.

As a field, we need to start developing more tools to determine: Is this person motivated to change? Does he see himself as a good father? Can we use fatherhood as a motivator?

The good news is that men can change and fatherhood can be a motivator for change. Most men who change do so through a batterer intervention program. These programs can work for men who have

the motivation, and they are now very common.

The Right Direction

There is still a long way to go in working with fathers. One big problem is that batterer programs do not take any kind of insurance or Medicaid, and that's been an obstacle for poor men.

Another problem is that many child support programs are designed in ways that can damage fathers' relationships with their children. As much as I believe that men must take responsibility for their children, I believe these policies do more harm than good.

But engaging fathers whose children enter foster care is a step in the right direction. Most people want to be good parents. Child welfare systems can help children by giving fathers the tools to stay involved.



ILLUSTRATION BY AVIR SOUJMAN

Burden of Proof

Fathers must take responsibility to earn their rights.

Lauren Elfant, an attorney with Bronx Defenders, explains fathers' legal rights and responsibilities.

Q: How can new fathers protect their relationships with their children?

A: When your child is born, you want the mom to put your name on the birth certificate and you want to stay involved. Regular contact with your children is very important.

If you're not on your child's birth certificate, then you should start by establishing that you're the biological father of your child. You can file an affiliation petition, which says that both you and the mother agree that the child is yours, or a paternity petition to get a paternity test.

Ideally, you want to resolve issues out of court. But if the mother is not letting you visit, file a visitation petition. There's a petition room in the court and they explain how to do it.

Finally, keep track of your involvement. If you have a custody or visit battle down the road, it helps if you can say, "Every time I gave mother money or visited my child, I wrote it down this in a book. Maybe it's not enough, but I tried."

Q: What issues do fathers face when their children go into care?

A: The first issue that has to be addressed is whether the father can prove he's the father. A mother doesn't have to prove her relationship, but it's a process to prove you're the father.

Another issue is that there's a real lack of services available to fathers. There are mother-child drug treatment programs, but very few drug treatment programs are designed for fathers to live with their children. Housing can be an issue for fathers, because there tends to be more services and subsidies for mothers and their children or fathers with full-time



ILLUSTRATION BY THAYNA WALDRON

custody.

The biggest issue here in New York is that there's few services for fathers who are alleged to have perpetrated violence within a family. Most states offer many services for these fathers—programs that take into account what the parents want, what the children want, the degree of severity of the allegation. But here, there's only one service for these programs—a batterers program, and these cost money. Medicaid will not cover batterers programs, so fathers have to pay. It's very punitive, and in my experience, it stops clients from participating. This one size fits all approach to family violence really prohibits families from reunifying in a healthy, safe way.

Q: If children are removed from their mother, what is the father's role in the case?

A: If your child enters foster care, then by law, they have to serve you with a petition and inform you of court dates. But if you're not on the birth certificate, and the mother says she doesn't know who the father is, many times father doesn't find out that their child is in care.

If the father is not named in the case—meaning that he hasn't been accused of anything—then in theory, the court doesn't have jurisdiction. But in reality, the court often will

ask the father to prove that he's a fit parent.

The court can demand that a father seeking custody participate in services, have supervised visits and even take a drug test. That may seem fundamentally unfair, but the court has jurisdiction over the child and often makes it very difficult to get the kid.

Unfortunately, the "non-respondent" parent doesn't have a right to an attorney, either, so many fathers in this situation don't know their rights. But the father's right is to come to court saying, "Why is my child not immediately coming home to me? What can I do?"

Q: What puts fathers at risk of losing the right to see their children?

A: Many times my clients don't consider themselves a batterer and don't want to do the program, or they don't have the money. We see fathers who let years and years go by without getting services so they can legally spend time with their children.

The court will take out a full stay-away order of protection against the father, so if the mothers let them see their kids, they're putting the children at risk of removal. The mothers say, "My children want to see their father." We have to tell them, "You don't have that option." If a father won't do the program or supervised visits, he has to win at trial, and that's very rare.

Fathers are also at risk of having their rights permanently terminated if their children are in care and the mother's rights are terminated. If the court can't find you, or you haven't taken the steps to gain custody of your children, your rights can be terminated even if there is no allegation against you.

—Interview by Bevanjae Kelley

Standing

I had to fight

BY CARLOS BOYET

I was only 15 when my girlfriend of six months came out pregnant. Soon I found out that she was playing me. I was young and didn't know what to do, so I left her with the belly.

When the baby was born, my mother took me to the hospital. We both took a good look at the baby and said the same thing, "That's not my kid!"

The baby's mother did not allow a blood test, nor did she let me be a part of Jeremy's life. It hurt me inside to think, "If he is mine, what type of example am I setting?" But she was picking fights with my new girl and acting crazy. It was like a reality show. Then she fled with the baby.

I had no contact with her for more than two years. Then I received a petition from the court stating that I had to appear for a child support hearing. The court date was for my son's third birthday.

'You Are the Father'

In court, I got to see them both, mother and son. I still didn't know if Jeremy was my son, but I was concerned when I saw him. He looked very small for his age and was not walking or talking at the right level.

The judge asked, "What brings you here today?" I asked for a blood test.

Three weeks later came the big day. The judge said, "Carlos R. Boyet, you are the father of Jeremy Rodriguez." I felt terrible that I had not made an E for effort to see him.

I realize now that I could have asked the judge for visits, but I was unaware of my rights. When we left court, I tried to talk with my

Up for My Son

to get my son out of the system.

son's mother. "No, stay away from us," she said. I thought there was nothing I could do.

'Your Son Is in Care'

One cold October night my cell phone rang with alarming news. A caseworker said, "I am calling you to inform you that your child, Jeremy, will be placed in foster care."

I took a deep breath in disbelief. Then I asked for my son to be placed in my care. With an attitude, she replied, "You would have to go to family court to be recognized as the child's father."

When I hung up I was so upset that I took a long walk to calm down.

Not Getting Anywhere

I was determined to get my son out of foster care, but I did not know my rights. For two years I did not have contact with my son. His caseworker kept changing, and I wasn't getting anywhere. I was caught up in a world I did not understand.

Finally, I went to court. Instead of being given credit for my persistence in finding my son, or being seen as a potential resource for him, I was investigated.

I submitted to drug tests even though I was not using drugs. I took parenting classes that did nothing to educate me about the special needs of my son, who is developmentally disabled. I was compliant and polite. All through this, I did not have an attorney, because the case was not against me.



time. Eventually, I asked if Jeremy could visit me on weekends, because visits at the agency were not helping us bond. It was very difficult to get Jeremy engaged in playing games with me. He would just run around the whole place and pay me no mind.

Challenging Visits

Without court approval, Jeremy began to stay with me each weekend. I'm not going to lie—at first, it was very difficult. Jeremy was bugged out. He would scratch himself, bite himself, scream at the top of his lungs. There was never a day that Jeremy was having a good day. If I got a peaceful couple of hours, I was grateful for it.

I tried taking Jeremy to the beach; he didn't like it. I tried Great Adventure; he didn't like it. I kept asking myself, "What would be nice for Jeremy?" I found out that Jeremy liked video-

Twist of Fate

Despite our growing bond—and the intrusive investigations and meaningless requirements imposed in court—I was no closer to getting my son home.

Then one summer day Jeremy's foster parent called to inform me that my son was in the hospital. Jeremy had taken Valium and was sick for a week. I was furious.

In court, I was told that the agency would conduct an investigation. I asked if Jeremy could come home with me. They said no, but five weeks later he was temporarily discharged to my care. I was relieved to have him home but felt like the system was saying, "Here, just take him and be quiet about this."

The Father He Needs

Now I am a parent organizer at CWOP and I work in partnership with Children's Services to improve how the system treats parents in my community. However, I have to say that there was nothing good about my own experience.

I was stereotyped as a drug user, a deadbeat, a thug. I had to go through obstacles that had nothing to do with my skills as a parent. For instance, I was told to get a higher-paying job, but was not offered any kind of support in doing this. The caseworkers could have taken the time to understand me as an individual. They could have been more resourceful, worked with me and shown me some respect.

These days, Jeremy and I are doing well. At 11, Jeremy is still challenging and difficult. He has not had an easy life. He has behavior issues and learning problems. He struggles in school. But he's my son, and I'm committed to being the father he needs.

I was stereotyped as a drug user, a deadbeat, a thug. The caseworkers could have worked with me and shown me some respect.

Learning My Rights

Finally, I enrolled in a six-month training at the Child Welfare Organizing Project, where I learned my rights. At CWOP, parents learn how to advocate for themselves and for changes in the child welfare system.

I also made progress by working with Jeremy's foster parent. She gave me her phone number to call her any

games, and we played together. He also liked to hang out on the block, listening to music. That's not my idea of fun, but I was good with it.

What got us through was my commitment. I said to myself, "This is my son. I care about him." And, "Carlos, this is your job. You have to do this, no matter what."

A Family Again

With support, my wife and I recovered from her addiction.

BY FRANCISCO RAMIREZ

I took my wife to the hospital because she was having contractions. It was early for her to be in labor, so the doctor did all kinds of lab tests. When he came back with the results, he told us that she had tested positive for meth.

I was so shocked and hurt. I couldn't believe it.

Sandra denied that she was using meth. But I started to put two and two together and I realized that it made sense.

Sad and Scary Changes

At that time, Sandra was so different than when we'd first met. Early in our relationship, Sandra had been my best friend. What attracted me to her most was that she could see and love the good in people. We talked for hours. I just knew she was the woman I would spend my life with.

When we started a family together, Sandra was a very caring and devoted mother. I would go to work and come home to find the house clean and dinner made.

But then I started to come home to find the house a mess and Sandra exhausted. I would take the kids out to play in the yard, wash them, feed them and so on while Sandra slept. When she woke up, Sandra would have an attitude. She was mad at the world. I missed the bond we had shared, the conversations we had.

All we seemed to do anymore was argue. Once I told Sandra that it was over. I said, "I'm tired of you putting me down and tired of fighting." Sandra said some terrible things to me—that she wished that I were dead, that she wouldn't let me see the kids. Her words scared me.

My Trust Was Gone

When I found out she was using

drugs, my trust in Sandra was lost. I wanted to end our relationship for good.

The next day Sandra went into labor and gave birth to our baby girl, Destiny. At the hospital, Child Protective Services (CPS) told us we could not bring the baby home from the hospital. They said our four other kids might go into foster care, too.

made me realize that there were options for my family. They said that some of Sandra's behaviors toward me were probably related to the meth, which causes users to act mad and frustrated because they are up for days without sleeping when they're high, then sleep for days. They also don't eat right and lose a lot of weight. Those were all of Sandra's symptoms.



ILLUSTRATION BY THAYNE WALDRON

I didn't know whether to fight the CPS worker or run out of the hospital and hide my other kids so they wouldn't be taken. The worker told me to come to a meeting at the CPS office later that day.

I Still Had Hope

First I went to a barbecue at my school to celebrate that five other grads and I had finished the class to become certified forklift drivers. Then I went to the meeting. When I got there, I broke down crying. I felt that all the work I had done was worth nothing. My life was falling apart.

But the workers talked to me and

I realized that I still had hope for Sandra, so I told the CPS workers that if she did a program, I'd be willing to work things out. They offered her outpatient so she could be home with the kids and me, but I insisted that she go to a treatment center with the baby. I thought that was the only way that she'd succeed.

A Single Father

While Sandra was in treatment, I became a single father. Life really became chaotic.

I was surprised that our CPS worker helped us out. She came to my house once a week and always asked

if we needed anything. She helped us with child care, clothing and transportation, and with finding a new place to live where our kids could play outside.

Some days I was angry and felt that Sandra had betrayed our family. Other days I missed her and couldn't wait for her to come home.

Help for Us Both

Sandra went to treatment at Westlake, where she and I both got the help we needed.

Regular meetings with our counselor made me feel safe and confident. The Family Group meeting helped me stop feeling scared of talking with other people about my problems. Family visits helped me start trusting Sandra again.

I began to see the difference in Sandra's attitude. She was so attentive to the kids, playing tag with them and taking them on the slides. One day we sat down as a family and had a picnic. We were able to talk without arguing. It was one of the best times we had shared with Sandra in a long time.

'Sorry for Everything'

I also saw the work Sandra was doing to be sober and to take responsibility for the ways her addiction had hurt our family.

One time in Family Group, Sandra got up in front of everybody and told me, "I'm sorry for everything I put you and the kids through. I'm trying my hardest to change. Even though I can't take back things I did in the past, please give me the opportunity to work as a family in our future." She expressed her gratitude for all my support.

I got teary eyed and had a knot in my throat. I told her, "We will give it

Slowing Down in Life

Drugs got between me and my son.

BY PRINCE ARIAS

a try." On the way home, I broke down and cried. For the first time, I believed her and knew that we had a shot at being happy again.

Crying and Hugging

The changes we went through brought us a closeness that I had never felt before. The day Sandra came home felt like the first day of the rest of our lives.

I picked Sandra up from the program by myself. We went to our new apartment to unpack her stuff and we just sat there talking for almost two hours. Then we went to surprise the kids.

I had left them with my sister and told them that I was going to work. Sandra knocked on the door, and when the boys answered, they were so surprised! They started crying and hugging her, not wanting to let her go.

Later we took the kids to get some KFC and had a picnic at a park. We all ran around and played until it got late.

A Family Again

Now Sandra has been clean for 15 months and she is a new person, wife and mom.

At first, she continued with treatment twice a week and went to parenting classes and random drug testing. It was amazing to see her dedication. When she was using meth, she would say one thing and do another.

Now Sandra is in school full-

time, studying business. (The CPS worker helped Sandra get into school and paid for her books and supplies.) I stay home and take care of the children. With the roles switched, I feel that we are both able to appreciate what the other contributes to our family.

Slowly Recovering

Things are not perfect. I would be a liar to say that this has not affected my children. They wonder whether Mommy is going to leave again, and they each deal with it in their own way.

Our oldest son, who is 6, witnessed a lot of our fights. At times he acts like he is scared to trust Sandra or is waiting for her to go back to the way she was. Our 2-year-old also seems to have abandonment fears. When Sandra first got home, he would never leave her side. He is only now feeling comfortable that, when she leaves the room, she isn't leaving him.

Even so, we are all doing so much better. We let our children know that we are not perfect but we love them with all our hearts and that will never change.

I am so thankful for the support that Sandra and I got. Even though I was scared when CPS came into our lives, we wouldn't have made it as a family if CPS hadn't been willing to give us help. Now Sandra and I are a strong couple once again.

Before my son came along, I was with different women and partied all the time. I was smoking marijuana and using cocaine once in a blue moon. I held down a good job but I also liked to have a fun and forget my responsibilities.

I knew things would change when I became a father, but I never expected that my partying might put my son in jeopardy.

Our Baby at Risk

Here's the way I got involved with Children's Services (ACS): My girl was about to give birth. The doctor asked if she ever got prenatal care. She said, "Yes, at two months." That's when she had learned that she had to stop smoking marijuana, but she didn't completely stop.

I guess the doctor saw something wrong, because when the baby was born, they ran tests on my girl and the baby. They both came out positive for marijuana. Our son was not allowed to be released until a social worker spoke with his mother.

A week later, the social workers told us what we needed to do so that our child would not be taken away from us: take parenting classes, enter an outpatient drug program for six months and take random drug tests to prove that we were both clean. They told us that social workers would be stopping by to check on the baby.

Our Problem Got Bigger

I was stressed. I told myself, "For six months these people will be on our backs to see if we are doing the right thing." I thought we could handle it.

But a few weeks ago, we had a setback. I was caught with drugs in my system. I was smoking because I didn't expect that the next day I would have to give urine.

When the caseworkers found out I was positive for marijuana and cocaine, our problem got bigger. The social worker said

my child couldn't live with me. They told my girl to break up with me.

My girl was upset. "We're together!" she said. We were both angry. How could they separate a family without giving me another chance?

Angry and Stressed

That's when I asked for a meeting. We had a big meeting with everyone involved in our case. One of the social workers explained that I had started a drug program and parenting classes. I also got a chance to speak and I said I was committed to my family.

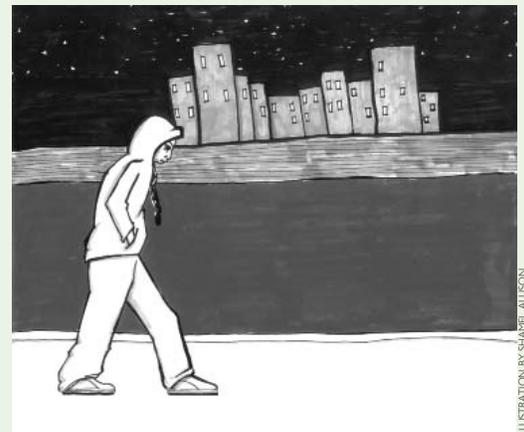


ILLUSTRATION BY SHAHEL ALLESON

Everyone decided that if I am testing negative after three months, and am still attending in the drug program and parenting classes, I can go home again.

Still, I am angry and stressed that I have to live apart from my girl and my son. I'm staying with my father until I can return to my family.

Doing Right

This won't happen again. I will be taking ACS seriously because this is a serious case. No longer will I use drugs or try to be slick.

Now, it's no more partying or seeing other women. It's just my girl, my son and me. I just hope we get through this with no more problems. I am telling myself, "All these programs will help me to slow down in life, to see what's important and what's not."

A Hug Every Day

How to be the father your children need.

BY ANTWAUN GARCIA

I always knew my father wasn't much of a family man. He was in and out of prison. He would show up and then disappear for two or three years.

After I went into foster care at the age of 10, I wondered, "Why didn't he want any part of me?" I wanted him to help me answer questions like, "Can I make it in life?" and, "What is my purpose?"

Kids at Risk

I'm not alone in missing a dad. More than half of all black children don't live with their fathers; one in four Hispanic kids and one in five white kids live apart from their dads.

Research shows that kids who don't have dads are much more likely to be poor, depressed, fail in school, commit crimes, have sex early on and (for girls) get pregnant. Children of single mothers are also more likely to go into foster care.

Why would a man put his kids at such risk?

To find out, I went to a program in Harlem called POPS (Providing Opportunity for Parental Success). POPS runs a workshop to help fathers reunite and connect with their children and offers counseling, mediation with family members and legal help.

It's Personal

Robert Sanchez, the program manager, caught me off guard because he was dressed in a suit, but actually, he had a little bit of the hood in him. Sanchez didn't get to know his own father, "a dope fiend and alcoholic,"

until he was 15 years old.

Sanchez also fathered a daughter at 18. Soon after, he was arrested and sent to prison for 15 years. While incarcerated, he wrote to his daughter, had her visit and kept communication open with his daughter's mother. Now they see each other about twice a month.

Fatherhood and Fear

Sanchez said the main reason fathers don't stick around is fear. Having a child is scary! Guys worry that they don't know how to care for a child and they don't want to look stupid.

mothers may not let them visit.

Not Just a 'Roll of Bills'

Many men believe a father's only role is to provide for their children. Men with jobs are more likely to be present in their children's lives. Those without money often don't stick around because they "associate fatherhood as an extension of their pocket, and think 'I'll stay out of the child's life until I have money,'" Sanchez explained.

But even the poorest fathers can support their children in important ways, Sanchez said. A father is not just a roll of bills, but "a guiding light, a teacher, a friend, a protector, an enlightener. A father is a supporter; someone you can go to for understanding and love.

"One question I ask my fathers is, 'What is one great thing you remember about your dad?'" Sanchez said. Their answers never have to do with money. "That child is not going to remember the sneakers, but he does remember the time you took him to the park, or to a baseball game, or made him feel good about himself."

Real Fatherhood

Real fatherhood, said Sanchez, is "if you gave them a hug every day," spent time with them, and showed you really cared about their feelings. In POPS, dads learn child development and how to care for their children.

POPS teaches dads to hold a newborn, and how a baby communicates

his needs by crying. Men learn how easy it is to play with their children, help them with homework, ask about their interests, or discover something new by taking kids on outings.

If the mother won't let a dad see his kids, POPS workers take the dad to family court and show him how to establish paternity, get a visitation order and enforce his legal rights to see his children.

Find a Role Model

Being a good father is about understanding your own anger, your past and your parents, and looking for role models who can help you find new ways to be a parent, Sanchez explained. "I made it my business to know what a father was, with positive fathers and role models around me," he said.

He encourages dads to search for mentors to help them. A good role model is someone who is accountable (shows up when he says he will and keeps his promises), takes responsibility when he makes mistakes (admits he's wrong, apologizes, and makes amends), and knows how to listen without criticizing. Once you find one, "tell him that you admire him and ask if he can give you guidance," Sanchez advised.

Sanchez wanted to break his own family's cycle of father absence so badly that he was willing to do things that were new and uncomfortable for him, like not using drugs or alcohol, forgiving people who wronged him, earning a master's degree and traveling all over the world. I admire that. When it is my turn, I am going to try to do the hard work to break my family's cycle as well.

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ILLUSTRATION BY WALTER MOORE

Lots of fathers have no idea how to be a good parent because they never had one themselves.

Some disappear because they get caught up in the streets or prison, others don't stay because of baby mama drama. "Fifty percent of our fathers have a volatile relationship with their child's mother," and almost none are married to them, he noted. Frustrated with their child's mother, men may stop seeing their kids to avoid fights and conflict. Or, the

Mr. Mom

My husband is more than a money maker or babymaker.

BY JEANETTE VEGA

On my block a father is usually defined as the man who got you pregnant, left and now you must go to court to get money from him. That is how I would describe my oldest son's father.

But now I see fatherhood in a new light, thanks to my husband; he has shown me that a father can be more than a baby maker or money maker. Fatherhood also includes loving, nurturing and caring for your children.

My husband was always an involved father, but in the last year, he's been more than that. He has stayed home with our children while I work.

No Time for the Kids

For many years, we both worked. Having the babies in school and child care seemed reasonable, but after we had our fourth child, it felt like neither of us was spending time with the

children. We did not want a babysitter to raise our children while we worked just to pay her.

Dad decided that he would stay home. My job paid more, and I was also going to school. Plus, he works in construction and could do some jobs on the side. He told me, "You're the one who wants to go to college. My dreams are your dreams."

Adjusting to Changes

At times Dad feels it's overwhelming to be home all day. His friends also began to get into his head: "Aren't you worried that she's going to meet other guys out there?" He had to tell them, "Our way of living is working for us and we are happy."

The switch has been hard for me sometimes, too. He gets the wonders of the first word, first step, first mean look, all the things babies do

that melt your heart away.

When I got that phone call from my husband to say that the baby took his first steps, oh my God, I started to cry. "Don't cry, he will try it again and you will see him," Dad told me.

As I walked into the house that night, the baby walked toward me. Wow! I was so thrilled that again tears ran down my face.

A Stronger Bond

But this arrangement has made our lives much easier. The babies are happy. All that running back and forth to the babysitter and to work has stopped. I also feel more at ease knowing that the children are safe. Dad is 100% attentive to their needs.

I see how my husband's connection and commitment to his babies has grown. There are times when Dad

has to go out and my boys catch a heart attack, screaming and fighting to get into his coat.

The Right Path for Us

My husband stepped up like a real man. Being with your children, getting to know how special each baby is individually, is part of being a father. Part of being a husband is also supporting your wife's decisions. I am so glad my husband encourages me to finish school. His generosity and love for us all make me love him more.

My husband and I still go through times of stress and doubt. Are we going down the right path? Have we made the right decisions? But this situation works for us now. We'll see how things go as the children get older. Thank God we're both flexible in finding solutions and we have a strong bond.

Stepping into Fatherhood

I want to be a role model for my daughter.

BY MICHAEL ORR

On July 1, 2007, I held my daughter in my arms for the first time. Emma Frost (the nickname I gave her) was 6 pounds and 9 ounces with a head full of hair. I couldn't feel a thing until I left the hospital. As I sat in the cab, looking out the window, I thought about good memories I had of my dad, how he always talked to me and showed me how to look out for trouble and avoid it.

My dad mostly raised me when I was a child and we were close even when I was in foster care. I pictured myself in my dad's place and Emma in my place. I could see myself helping her grow like

my dad did with me.

Being There for My Baby

Since my girlfriend, Erica, and I brought Emma home from the hospital, I've been proud to witness our baby growing up. Just seeing her coo, grab her feet and sit up is a joy.

Of course, some things have been difficult. At first I was dead tired due to her heavy overnight crying. Now she sleeps through the night

and it's much easier for me to keep up with my energetic girl.

Some days things are hard, but easier days follow, so whenever I am having a hard time caring for Emma, I try to remain calm and hope that the next day will be easier.

Not many dads are around for their kids. I am making it a priority to be there for my baby.



The Courage to Grow

Erica and I are raising our baby as a team. We're attending couples therapy and, whatever problems we have, we battle it out there.

My relationship with my dad is getting stronger, too. He rocks Emma in such a lovely way. It braces my spirits to see them together.

I hope that Emma can look to me as a role model as she grows up. Maybe she will find a genuine guy like her father when she gets of age to start dating. That's what I hope for my daughter.

'Don't Forget Me, Mi Hija'

My daughter's mother wants nothing to do with me.

BY JOSE DISLA

Translated from Spanish.

When my girlfriend told me that she was pregnant, I believed that the baby she was carrying wasn't mine. I didn't have confidence in our relationship. Sometimes she didn't pay attention to me. I would say to her, "Come at 6 pm," and she would come if she felt like it, but if not, she wouldn't show. She almost never called me. It was me who called her all the time.

But when I went to see my daughter in the hospital I was very content and I swore before God that I would never leave my family. I helped my girlfriend with the baby and we had three good months together.

Fighting Over Money

I was very happy and was thinking about moving in with my girl. But after I lost my job, things changed.

At first my girlfriend said it didn't matter that I had nothing. I am poor and humble. I live in the Bronx with my mother. We arrived from the Dominican Republic six years ago.

But as time passed, we began to argue about money. She wanted me to give her all of my money, even though I could hardly afford to support myself. She became disillusioned with me, and I began to feel that she only wanted my money.

Losing Touch

Four months after our daughter was born, my girlfriend began to want nothing to do with me.

I tried to make arrangements to see my daughter. I visited when her grandmother was caring for her. But the grandmother acted like she was too busy with the baby or the house, or as if she was bothered by my presence. Sometimes she didn't talk to me or want me to talk.

When I saw my daughter's mother, I started showing contempt and anger toward her because I was hurt that she wasn't paying attention to me. I got tired of calling her and eventually I completely stopped.

A Little Depressed

Recently my daughter's mother brought me to court for child support. I was upset. She didn't need to do that. I am looking for work and had been trying to stay involved with my daughter.

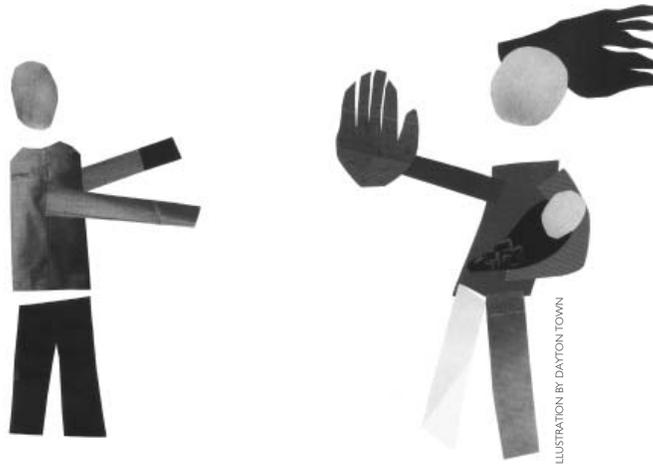
The problem is that I don't have much work experience and I don't know how to do almost anything that could help me move forward. I don't speak English. I didn't fin-

help of God and my will, I will get ahead." I would like for someone to help me open my eyes and show me a way to move forward.

Looking for a Way Out

A few months ago I joined the Bronx Fatherhood Program, a support group for young fathers, so I can learn more about children's development and my rights as a father, and get support with staying connected to my daughter and help finding a job. I have learned a lot so far, especially about the care little children need because they are so delicate.

Last month, I went to court and filed a paternity petition because my



ish school. Every Tuesday and Wednesday I go to an employment agency from 8:30 a.m. until 2 p.m. but I have not found anything.

I am starting to get depressed. Lately, I haven't had the desire to do almost anything. I say to myself, "I don't care if I find work. Nothing much matters to me." I know that I have to be a little bit more responsible for myself and for my daughter, but sometimes I believe my destiny is written. I can't change it.

Other times I tell myself, "With the

daughter doesn't have my last name and my name is not her birth certificate. That is the first step toward getting visits or shared custody.

But after I filed the petition, I decided not to continue with the case. I'm not sure why. Perhaps my depression is the reason why I don't feel hopeful about being a father.

Still, I know that my daughter wants me and needs me. I have to find the strength to return to court. I need to regain my hope that I will find a way out of this complicated situation.

Baby Girl

Am I strong

BY JORGE PARDAVE

I was born in the 80s to two loving parents. But by the time I was 5, my parents got caught up in a drug that was new at the time, crack. It had the power to change people's lives.

Crack robbed me of my parents. My pops took me to my grandmom's house and left me there. When he came to visit, out of shame I would tell my friends he wasn't my father.

Stuck on the Game

I went to the streets because I had no father figure. Gang members and drug dealers were my role models. I also think I started selling crack because I have so much anger inside of me. I wanted to

Time to

My son needs

BY GIOVANNI GARCIA

The day my girl told me she was pregnant, I said to myself, "My life is going to change. It's time to stop chillin' outside a lot and work so I don't have to ask no one for nothing. It's time to step up in life and be a man."

At the time, I was 16 and really didn't have any responsibilities. I was a mama's boy. My moms did everything for me, and my attitude toward school was bad.

"I was working at a sneaker store making only \$6 an hour (less than minimum wage) and that wasn't going to be enough.

I also thought about being a better father than my dad. My father was hardly there when I

vs. The Game

enough to give up the streets?

destroy people's lives, hurt other kids, take their parents away, too.

My block was my life. I loved everything about dealing—the money, the power and the respect. I made a lot of money and started acting real different with my closest friends. I thought I was Tony Montana. Before I knew it, I was alone.

Strong Enough to Change?

Then, in November 2005, my daughter Justina was born. I felt like I'd found the piece that was missing in my life. I thought, "All the love I missed out on, it's finally my turn to feel. I can express all the love I've been holding in for fear of getting hurt."

Two months later, I was set up by two dudes I thought I could trust. They told the police everything. I spent a year in jail.

While I was locked up, Justina ended up in foster care. When I came out and saw her, I told myself that I would get her out of care and that my life as a dealer was over.

Struggling with Life

But since I got out of jail, my life has been a struggle. Sometimes I feel good. I think, "My daughter won't lose me to



GANPAI JONES

that drug dealer lifestyle. She won't lose me to crack."

Other times, I feel trapped with no way out because the changes I need to and want to make feel like too much for me. I feel like I need something behind me pushing me forward, but the only thing behind me is the streets, and I don't want to go back there.

I tell myself, "I lost my parents to the game, I lost my baby for most of her first year. I will change. I won't lose her again." I hope I have strength to do it.

Man Up

me to grow up.

was growing up. I want my son to see me all the time, without his mother and me fighting or us being separated.

Caring for My Son

On October 16, 2007 my son was born. When I saw him, I started to cry. I let my feelings out because I felt really happy.

My son had a lot of hair, his eyes were wide open and his fingers were in fists. He was a white boy, very pale. It was weird knowing he was my kid, but I looked at my



ILLUSTRATION BY OGER DOLPA

son and said, "I love you," and hugged him.

Since Giovanni Jr. arrived, I've learned how hard it is to be a dad. It's been a lot of stress dealing with the baby's mother and dealing with the baby crying.

Caring for my son is a little challenging. When he doo-dooes, it stinks! When he eats baby food, he's messy. When he cries a lot, I feel frustrated.

Close to Home

Recently I was home with my son alone for the first time. He was crying and

he did not stop until my mom came home. I learned that when a baby cries, check everything: see if his diaper is dry, burp him, play with him, feed him and see if he's sleepy.

Most days now, I chill with my son after I get up. I watch TV and play around with him, tickling him and throwing him up in the air. In the evenings I go to class. Once I get my diploma, my next step is to work hard and make money.

My life has been getting better now that I'm feeling close to my family. It feels good to spend a lot more time at home and to be achieving our goals.

ABOUT **Rise**

Rise trains parents to write about their experiences with the child welfare system in order to support parents and parent advocacy and guide child welfare practitioners and policymakers in becoming more responsive to the families and communities they serve.

Our tri-annual print magazine and monthly stories on our website, www.risemagazine.org, help parents advocate for themselves and their children. We work with family support and child welfare agencies to use Rise stories in support groups and parenting education classes. We partner with parent advocacy organizations to use Rise stories in child welfare reform. Contact Rise Director Nora McCarthy at nora@risemagazine.org or (718) 260-8818 for information about reprinting Rise stories or using Rise in your work.

Stories in this issue were written by participants in the Parent Partners program of the Fresno County Department of Children and Family Services in Fresno, California, and at the Bronx Fatherhood Program, a project of the Visiting Nurse Service of New York. Other stories were written by participants in the Child Welfare Organizing Project (CWOP), a parent advocacy and self-help program. For more information about CWOP, call (212) 348-3000.

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Stronger Together

My husband and I support each other.

BY GUADALUPE COHETERO

Translated from Spanish.

When my husband and I were growing up in Mexico, we both lived apart from our parents. Our parents had to work in the city, so they left us in the countryside with our grandparents.

When I was 14, I finally got to live with my mother again, but she didn't have the personality to care for us. I promised myself that, as a mother, I would have patience and understanding.

Checking In

Now that we are parents, it's very important to my husband and me that we live together with our children and that we have a loving relationship with them.

But I have found that it's difficult for me to remain patient with my children. My husband is helping me to be a better mother. He works long hours but calls two or three times a day to find out how we are.

If our oldest, Brenda, is behaving well, we might talk about giving her a privilege for something good that she did, like doing her homework without crying or getting upset.

Her father encourages her, saying, "You're an intelligent girl. You can do it. If you want to, you can."

If Brenda gets angry or throws tantrums, I usually chat with my husband and he talks to her, saying, "This is not the right way to act. Try to behave yourself."

Encouraging Words

I don't get angry as much as I used to, or as much as my mother did. My husband's involvement has made it easier for me to be positive. When I go shopping, he stays with them, and I don't have to worry about anything. At times I play with my children, dance, watch movies with them, sing and hug them.

I also talk with my husband about my thoughts about being a mother. He tells me that, I am a good person, and that I am achieving the patience to educate our children.

As a father, he is usually very loving and tranquil, although at times he is impatient. He speaks forcefully to them, saying, "Calm down!" I tell him he's a good father. I also tell him when I notice him improving. If I hear him speaking nicely with Brenda, I'll say, "You did that very well."

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