

## Stepping Into Fatherhood

A parent-to-parent guide for fathers

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## Time to Man Up

*My son needs me to grow up.*

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 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 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-doo's, 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.

ILLUSTRATION BY OGEE DOLMA

# Introduction

Children do better when their fathers are involved in raising them yet many fathers are less involved in their children's lives than they want to be.

Sometimes that's because of conflict with their children's mother. Other times it's because fathers feel ashamed that they can't provide more for their children financially. Some fathers get locked up or caught up. Some just don't feel confident about how to be a good father to their kids.

This booklet is written by young fathers who have struggled with all of these issues. It includes guidance from fathers and from pro-

fessionals about how dads can support their children's sense of safety, learning and joy in life. It also includes information about serious issues including addiction, domestic violence and child welfare involvement to help fathers steer through difficult circumstances.

To read more from the perspective of parents, please go to [www.risemagazine.org](http://www.risemagazine.org). For support services, please call 311 and ask for help before a crisis builds.

Congratulations to all the fathers who are reading this booklet! Fatherhood is exciting, rewarding, funny, tiring, frustrating and soul-building. Enjoy these stories as you build your family life.

## ABOUT Rise

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

Our print and online magazine ([www.risemagazine.org](http://www.risemagazine.org)) helps parents advocate for themselves and their children. We work with family support and child welfare agencies to use Rise stories in parent support groups and parenting education classes.

This booklet developed out of writing workshops at the Child Welfare Organizing Project, Fresno County Department of Social Services in Fresno, CA, Visiting Nurse Service of New York Fatherhood Program, Sing Sing Correctional Facility and Center for Family Life in Sunset Park. Recent Rise workshops have been

at Graham Windham, Sheltering Arms, the Albert Einstein Infant-parent Court project, Brooklyn Defender Services and Center for Family Representation. This booklet was produced with the support of the East Harlem Community Partnership Program.

Contact Rise Director Nora McCarthy at [nora@risemagazine.org](mailto:nora@risemagazine.org) or (646) 543-7099 for information about reprinting Rise stories or using Rise in your work. For youth perspectives on foster care, visit [www.representmag.org](http://www.representmag.org). We regret that Rise cannot offer individual support to parents.

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### Subscribe to Rise

Order print copies of Rise to hand out to parents, foster parents or staff.

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25	\$100
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100	\$250
250	\$550
500	\$995

To order visit [www.risemagazine.org/store/](http://www.risemagazine.org/store/).

Questions? Contact Nora McCarthy at [nora@risemagazine.org](mailto:nora@risemagazine.org) or (646) 543-7099.

## Rise

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Out of consideration for some parents with open cases or for parents sharing private information that could affect future job searches, Rise is not publishing names or full names of contributing writers.

# 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.

ers 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.

*Reprinted from Represent, a magazine by and for youth in foster care.*  
[www.youthcomm.org](http://www.youthcomm.org)



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 moth-

# Saying 'Yes' As A Father

*I'm fighting for my son and my community.*

BY DAVID C.

A few summers ago my son and I heard about a football league and he joined. My son was fearful at first, because he was small and had never played before, but he was determined. Soon he was called "Little Man" and he'd say to me, "Daddy, I want to carry the rock" ("Rock" is another name for a football.)

I talked to his coach about my son playing halfback. He assured me that he would play. But time passed with no action. Meanwhile our team lost the first three games. Finally, another coach was sent to help us and we won our next two games.

The new coach insisted that my son would play, and he did. But he didn't carry the ball.

## Starting a New Team

I could understand why the coach said no to my son, but as a father, I had to say yes. I decided that, despite having no money and little energy, I would help my son get his chance to play. I contacted the first coach and asked him to join me in starting a new team. The Brooklyn Titans were born.

My son and I ate, breathed and dreamed the Titans. In our first season we served almost 100 kids. In our

second season, my son was the conference MVP with 20 touchdowns.

## Driven by Love

Starting our team is something that I am very proud of. But I didn't do it by myself. Our team required a team of dedicated individuals, all of them leaders in their own right, driven by the love of our children.

There is no love like a child's love. It feels good to have a happy child. Every time my son did something good on the field, he looked to see if I was watching so he could get my smile of approval. I also shared that smile with my son's teammates,

especially those whose fathers were not there.

## A Warrior for My Community

After that success, I asked myself, "Where do I go from here?" Pastor TD Jakes is known to say that if you have done something once, you can do it again. Like my son, I want to carry the rock—not on the football field, but in the game of life. I can no longer watch from the sidelines. I have to get on the field.

In my neighborhood, I've joined a group that helps at-risk families. These are people who often feel themselves

# 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.



to be faceless, voiceless, stuck. This is the ball that we carry.

I was called to be a Titan to stand up for my son. Now it is time to be a warrior for my community.

### **Fighting as Fathers**

As with the Titans, we've started with one, then two, then three members. We are growing. It is our passion and faith that keeps us going. To me, it feels like the slow building of another movement to stir our nation's consciousness, another coming from the backs of the bus and saying,

"I have a dream."

Our people's weapons have always been faith, a simple song, and the will to overcome. The Titans got me energized and reconnected to my community. Now I'm using my knowledge and skills to fight not only for my son, but for all of our children.

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



ILLUSTRATION BY OGEE DOLMA

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.

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.

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.

*Reprinted from Represent, a magazine by and for youth in foster care.  
www.youthcomm.org*

Of course, some things have been

# Child Support

*Early Intervention can help your baby grow*

As babies grow, they develop new abilities to move, speak and relate emotionally. At each age, there are "developmental milestones"—typical behaviors or abilities that you'll want to watch for in your children. For example, at 3 months old, babies should be able to make fists with both hands, lift their head and chest, and turn their head toward sounds, bright colors and light.

If your child isn't meeting the milestones (which are listed on p. 7), consider getting your child evaluated for the Early Intervention Program, which provides special services to infants and toddlers up to 3 years old. In New York, all of the services are free.

Cara Chambers, a lawyer at the Legal Aid Society's Kathryn A. McDonald Education Advocacy Project in New York, advocates for services for children with developmental delays or disabilities who are involved in the child welfare system. Here she explains how to get the help your child might need:

## **Q: How can parents know if their babies need help?**

**A:** Parents should try to pay attention to how their babies are developing in a variety of ways. You shouldn't feel that you've done something wrong if your baby's delayed in meeting those milestones. Many children develop delays for unknown reasons and need special help. Parents simply can't be experts in all areas in development, so they should use the expertise of specialists if their babies need extra help.

It's important to get the services your child needs. When kids don't get help with developmental delays, it can be incredibly stressful for the parent and the other members of the family. If you have a 2 ½ year old who can't communicate verbally, then your child might communicate by having tantrums, biting, hitting, or scratching. A specialist can teach your child how to



ILLUSTRATION BY ASAAH AJIBABI

**You shouldn't feel that you've done something wrong if your baby's delayed in meeting those milestones. Many children need special help.**

communicate so the whole family will have an easier time.

## **Q: How can parents get special services for their babies?**

**A:** If your baby isn't meeting the milestones, you might be able to get free Early Intervention Services. Some services help parents, such as respite care, parent training, or nutrition services. Others help your baby directly. Specialists might work with your toddler on daily living skills like feeding themselves with their hands, pulling their socks up, holding their arms up to get dressed, brushing their teeth and washing their faces.

To get these services, you start by requesting an evaluation. In New York, you call 311 and ask to speak to the Early Intervention office in your borough. An Initial Service Coordinator will ask what your concerns are, so you might say, "My baby's not talking very much at 3 years old." Or, "She's a

year old but not really crawling."

The coordinator will set up a meeting, usually in your home, to explain the services and your rights, and to get your consent to do the evaluation. Then the coordinator will set up a number of different evaluations and specialists will come into the home to assess how your baby is doing.

Once they're done, you'll have an Individualized Family Service Plan meeting, where a team will decide whether your child is eligible for services. You are a member of that team and have a right to attend the meeting. Your child will be eligible if he has a disability (a diagnosed condition like Cerebral Palsy, Downs Syndrome, etc.), or if he has one or more developmental delays.

If you don't want the recommended services you don't have to take them. But if you want to go ahead, then they'll develop a service plan to address your child's needs and

specialists will begin coming to your home to help your child develop the skills he needs to catch up.

The greatest benefit of Early Intervention is that, because it's provided in your home, you have an opportunity to learn from the specialist. Parents learn different games and strategies to use with their child, and when the specialist isn't there, you can use the techniques to reinforce your child's skills.

## **Q: Are those services available to infants and toddlers in foster care?**

**A:** For children in foster care, there are sometimes difficulties setting up the services or keeping them going. Often, Early Intervention doesn't know who to go to for consent. When children are in care the parent still has the right to consent to evaluations and services, unless the parent's rights are terminated or the system cannot locate the parent. In that case, Early Intervention appoints a "surrogate" parent, usually the foster parent, to make those decisions.

Children in foster care sometimes change foster homes or return home, so when they move, their services get interrupted. We step in to get those services set up again.

If your child is in care, you have a right to be part of the evaluation or to be with your child while the specialist is there. In fact, it's very important for the parent to be part of the services so they understand their child's needs.

Sometimes you have to get creative. If the parent only has supervised visits it might be possible to have the evaluations and services provided at the agency during the visits. If the parent can go to the foster home where child is living they can be part of the services there.

# Ages and Stages

*Developmental milestones help you know how your child is doing.*

## 3 Months

At three months of age, most babies:

- turn their heads toward bright color and lights
- move both eyes in the same direction together
- recognize bottle or breast
- respond to their mother's voice
- make cooing sounds
- bring their hands together
- wiggle and kick with arms and legs
- lift head when on stomach
- become quiet in response to sound, especially speech
- smile

## 6 Months

At six months of age, most babies:

- follow moving objects with their eyes
- turn toward the source of normal sound
- reach for objects and pick them up
- switch toys from one hand to the other
- play with their toes
- help hold the bottle during feeding
- recognize familiar faces
- imitate speech sounds
- respond to soft sounds, especially talking
- roll over

## 12 Months

At 12 months of age, most babies:

- get to a sitting position
- pull to a standing position
- stand briefly without support
- crawl
- imitate adults using a cup or telephone
- play peek-a-boo and patty cake
- wave bye-bye
- put objects in a container
- say at least one word
- make “ma-ma” or “da-da” sounds

## 1 ½ Years

At 1 ½ years of age, most children:

- like to push and pull objects
- say at least 6 words
- follow simple directions (“Bring the ball”)
- pull off shoes, socks and mittens
- can point to a picture that you name in a book
- feed themselves
- make marks on a paper with crayons
- walk without help
- walk backwards
- point, make sounds or try to use words to ask for things
- say “no,” shake their head or push away things they don't want

## 2 Years

At two years of age, most children:

- use two-to-three word sentences
- say about 50 words
- recognize familiar pictures
- kick a ball forward
- feed themselves with a spoon
- demand a lot of your attention
- turn 2-3 pages at a time
- like to imitate their parent
- identify hair, eyes, ears and nose by pointing
- build a tower of four blocks
- show affection

## 3 Years

At three years of age, most children:

- throw a ball overhand
- ride a tricycle
- put on their shoes
- open the door
- turn one page at a time
- play with other children for a few minutes
- repeat common rhymes
- use three-to-five-word sentences
- name at least one color correctly



ILLUSTRATION BY LEO MANSOURADZE

If your child is having trouble doing some of these things, you might want to contact 311 for information about services to help your child. Early help makes a difference!

## Where to Get Help

### 311

Call 311 to speak to an operator who can help you find family support services in your neighborhood, including family counseling, parenting classes, housing, substance abuse treatment, domestic violence support programs, domestic violence batterer intervention programs, and child and adult mental health treatment.

### Child Welfare Organizing Project (CWOP)

CWOP runs a weekly support group for parents affected by the child welfare system, trains parents to become

peer leaders, and advocates for child welfare reforms. You can speak to a parent leader by calling (212) 348-3000. Go to [www.cwop.org](http://www.cwop.org) for more information.

### Survival Guide to the New York City Child Welfare System

This workbook for parents and by parents includes information about your legal rights and explains how the child welfare system works in New York City. Available in English, Spanish and Chinese. Parents with children in foster care should read this guide for

detailed information about how to move their case forward. Download a copy at [www.cwop.org](http://www.cwop.org).

### Legal Information for Families Today (LIFT)

LIFT provides parents with information about their legal rights in family court and guides parents in representing themselves in New York City family court proceedings. Call the Family Law Hotline at (212) 343-1122 or email [hotline@LIFTonline.org](mailto:hotline@LIFTonline.org). LIFT also provides workshops and resources about family court law. Go to [www.LIFTonline.org](http://www.LIFTonline.org) for more

information.

### ACS Office of Advocacy

Parent advocates and staff at the ACS Office of Advocacy can help you find services, locate your child in foster care, get support with your case, request an administrative review, obtain public benefits like housing, and understand the child welfare system in New York City. To get help, call Parents' and Children's Rights helpline: (212) 676-9421.

# '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.

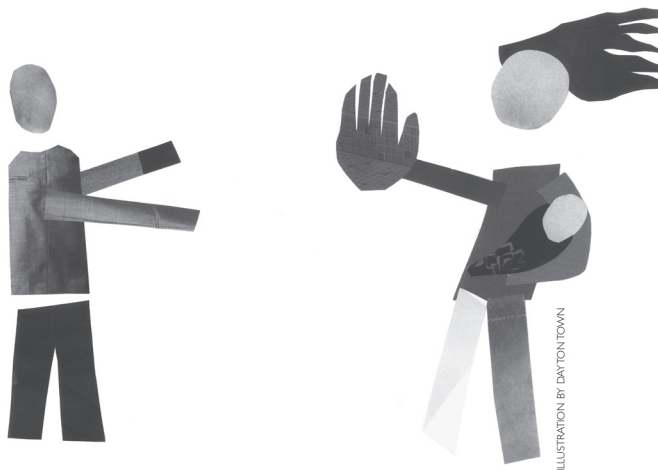
The problem is that I don't have much work experience and I don't know how to do almost anything that could help me move forward. I don't speak English. I didn't fin-

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 grandmother'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

# A Long *I'm proud of*

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 drugs. We 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.

I look back on this dark time with sadness and regret. When I was a child, my parents did the same things to me. I always told myself that I wouldn't do that to my kids, but I was no better than my parents.



## 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.

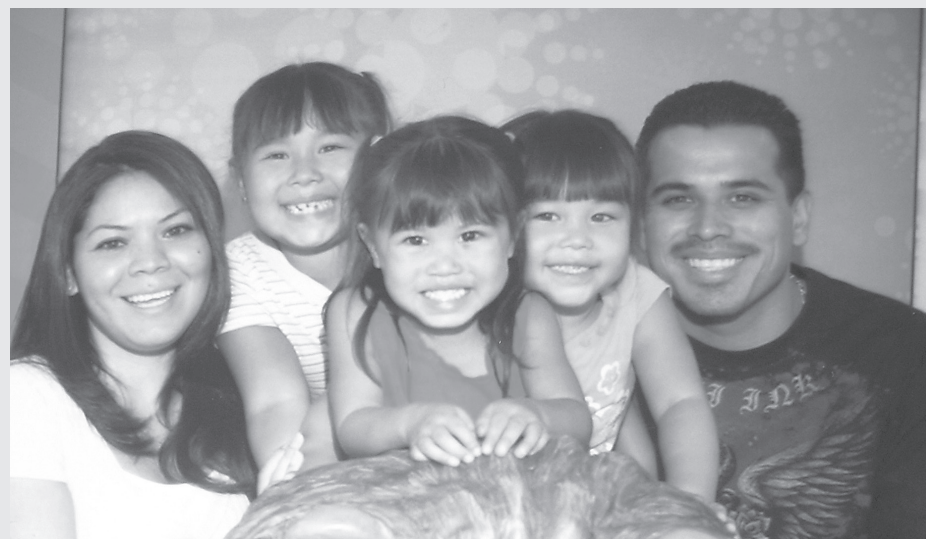
Sometimes I feel good. I think, "My daughter won't lose me to that drug dealer lifestyle. She won't lose me to crack."

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.

## Road Home

*the steps I've taken to become a better father.*



### **Determined to Change**

Then came that knock on the door. I remember my little ones getting into a police car and slowly driving away. "How am I going to get them back?"

I asked myself.

My first step was to separate from my children's mother and make a commitment to myself that I would

change my life.

CPS told me that I needed to enter drug treatment, take anger management and go to counseling. I felt that there was a huge possibility that I might not get my children back but within nine months, I finished treatment, found a new job and moved to a new apartment.

I also took a parenting class that taught me how to deal on a daily basis with the emotions of being a parent.

### **Proud of Myself**

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.

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 EMT certification, and am enrolled in college.

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.

# Benjamins, Blowouts and Breakups

*What comes between poor fathers and their families?*

INTERVIEW BY PIAZADORA FOOTMAN

In my five years of dealing with my daughter's father, he only put his hands on me once. For three months he had been out of work. I noticed him becoming more snappy and less excited about going out to eat, which we did every weekend night. That didn't stop me from putting the pressure on him. One night he exploded and even started choking me. I stabbed him with a pen. He called the police. I left.

The very next morning he came knocking at my door, asking forgiveness, and I forgave him, but we never discussed what happened or where that anger came from. A week later, I watched him cry. Now this was a sign of weakness I had never seen in him. I held him and asked him, "What's wrong?" I had to realize that his pride, ego and manhood were hurt because he was out of work and could no longer provide a lavish life for my children and me. He felt worthless.

It was amazing to me to realize that he only felt like a man when he had a job. When I understood the pressure he felt, I began to get the foods we liked from the fish market and mix him a piña colada at home, and I did my own hair and stopped getting my nails done.

Do all men feel this kind of pressure? For a new perspective, I spoke with Tim Nelson, a lecturer at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government who collaborated on the book *Doing the Best I Can*. Nelson and his wife, Kathryn Edin, moved with their children to Camden, one of the poorest cities in the country, to learn about the experiences and attitudes of poor fathers.

**Q: Why did you decide to**



**write about these fathers?**

**A:** My wife and her colleagues wrote a book called *Promises I Can Keep* about the struggles of low-income unmarried mothers in Philadelphia and Camden. After the book came out in 2005, they were often asked,

there. So we were surprised that, by and large, these guys really were excited to become fathers. Many had concerns about the responsibility and not having a good job, but they were also just really happy. They said, "I always wanted to have a child."

**If men don't even have money to take their kids to McDonald's, they don't even go around because they feel they have nothing to give.**

"What about the fathers? What is their involvement in children's lives?" There are a lot of stereotypes and misinformation about low-income fathers. This book is a corrective to that.

One stereotype is that these guys are just after sex, and when the girl comes up pregnant, they're out of

This was surprising because these men were not living in the best circumstances. Many had dropped out of school, didn't have a job, and some were using or dealing drugs. But a lot of them recognized that they were not on a path they wanted to be on and they saw their child as their reason to get things together.

**Q: What challenges do these fathers face in turning their lives around?**

**A:** When you look at statistics, you see that contact between low-income, unmarried fathers and their kids falls off dramatically within a few years. A study of "fragile families" has found that, by a child's fifth birthday, only half of fathers are still involved—living with their children or seeing them several times a week. A lot of that has to do with the reality that these men were not as successful as they wanted to be in turning lives around.

ILLUSTRATION BY SHAMEL ALLEON

Many of these fathers embraced the "new fatherhood," which is about fathers having an emotional connection to their children: reading to them and playing with them, showing love and being there, not just providing the paycheck. But so much of men's identities revolve around work, and it was much harder for these men to find and keep stable jobs than they'd imagined. At the end of the day, poor fathers had very little left over for their kids, especially if they were not living with the mothers, and that contributed to a sense of failure. If they didn't even have money to take the kids to McDonald's, they didn't even go around because they felt they had nothing to give.

Drugs were a major problem. Men would get involved with dealing when they couldn't make ends meet, and that often led to using. Men who are actively using often keep themselves separate from their children. They don't want their kids to see them in a degraded state. If we can address substance abuse head on, that would change the landscape of fatherhood. We need to be asking, "What is

driving these high levels of substance abuse? How can we work with guys in treatment to make contact with their kids and stay involved?"

**Q: What leads men to drop out of their families?**

**A:** What we saw is that poor fathers' relationships with their children's mothers were fragile. Before the pregnancy, these relationships were often very informal, or even random. The guy was seeing other women, or they'd only been together a very short time. Then they tried to get it together for the sake of the baby, like, "OK, we're having a baby together. We'd better become a real couple."

But once the couple got to the day-to-day routine of parenting, they discovered that they were not all that compatible. And after the baby came, mothers would often raise their expectations of the father. The stress and tension would often lead to blow-outs—substance abuse, infidelity, violence and so on.

In the old days, families forced couples to stay together. In these families, though, the families were usually against the relationship. They'd say to the girl, "This guy is trifling, he has no job." Or they'd say to the father, "How do you know this child's yours?" Nobody was for this couple in the family or the community. It's hard to sustain a bond under stress if it wasn't strong to begin with and everyone is feeding into a split on both sides of the family.

Men underestimated the impact the break up would have on their relationships with their children. A lot of the mothers didn't allow access to the child, or there was a lot of bitterness and tension when they did see each other. We really saw the fall off in

father's involvement when, soon after the break up, both parents had found new romantic attachments. There's a tendency to cut off the whole relationship to make the new relationship work.

**Q: What could help low-income fathers stay in their children's lives?**

**A:** We asked, "If you had something to say to the government about how to make life easier for men in your situation, what would you tell them?" Child support was the main one. Many states have very harsh child supports laws. In South Carolina, for instance, if you miss one payment, the police can come on your job and take you off in handcuffs, and you can serve jail time. They wanted to find a way for child support to be more flexible.

Fathers' relationships with their children and children's mothers also might not break down as much if these parents had more support around how to communicate, express feelings, and cope when you disagree. Some programs have shown that they can help people with these relational skills

We saw that when there were intermediaries between the mothers and fathers after the breakup, the father stayed involved with the child. Sometimes the mother's sister or her mother helped the father see his children without having to deal with the bitterness of the breakup. It might help if the state or other organizations could play that role.

We don't really have specific policy proposals in the book. The first hope is to show that men really do want to become fathers and be connected to their kids. We need to figure out how to partner with fathers so they can overcome their barriers.

## 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."



# 'This Is My Kid!'

*I had to fight to establish myself as my son's father.*

INTERVIEW WITH TIMOTHY BARBEE

My journey in family court started because my fiancée died on me the day before my son's 2nd birthday.

The day my son was born, we'd had a little argument about his middle name. She wanted it to be James. I didn't like it—I knew she'd had a boyfriend named James. She told me, "That's my Daddy's middle name!" But I thought she was pulling a fast one on me!

That day, she submitted the birth certificate without my signature. It didn't seem like a big deal.

Then, when she was 33 years old, my fiancée came down with acute meningitis. That morning she was coming up the stairs to take a shower and she told me, "My side is hurting. I'm going to lay down." I kissed her and

went to work, and that's the last time I saw her.

## **An Unexpected Battle**

When my fiancée died, the police came to the house. Young lady dies suddenly, naturally the police come out. Honestly, it was a mob scene out there. My fiancée's mother was telling people, "He killed my daughter."

While I was outside talking to the police, she said, "I want to take the kids home for a while." I said fine. Then she didn't return my calls or let me see my son. I had to find out from other people that she had petitioned the court for custody. Because I was not listed as my son's legal father, I didn't have any rights.

It took about three weeks to get a court date. It drove me crazy. I talked

to friends and I cried a lot. My fiancée was dead and my fiancée was gone? It didn't make sense.

## **'This Is My Kid!'**

Finally, I was able to go to court. But because I wasn't legally registered as my son's father, I was told, "You're just the alleged father."

I said, "This is my kid!"

The judge said, "Anybody can say they're the baby's daddy. Remember Anna Nicole Smith?"

I was frustrated and confused, even furious. It's not like my fiancée had Anna Nicole Smith's money! Besides, my son and I look so much alike, and we had lived together since his birth. But I had no rights to him. Legally, he belonged to his next of kin.

The judge respected me. He asked me, "Dad, who do you want to have custody?"

I knew that my fiancée's sister would allow me to spend time with my son, so I asked that she get temporary custody, which was granted. Then I started the long and confusing process of establishing that my son belonged to me.

## **'You Can Walk Away'**

That day, the judge told me to go to the office that handled child support. But when I got there and told the lady I needed a paternity test, she didn't understand my problem. She was used to dealing with men taking paternity tests because their children's mothers were trying to get child support from them. She told me, "You got no case. Your name ain't on

# Relax and Refocus

*How to help your kids and yourself recover from family stress.*

Carrie Epstein, senior director of child trauma programs at Safe Horizon, explains how parents and therapists can work together to help children heal.

## **Q: How can family stress, including separations or violence, affect children?**

**A:** Children are affected in different ways. Some children exhibit aggressive behavior; and some feel anxiety and depression, which are not as easy to recognize.

Children might have stomach pains, headaches, insomnia, or bed wetting. They might show symptoms of separation anxiety (fear of being apart from their parent), an inability to concentrate on schoolwork, or feel a lot

of guilt because they were not able to protect their parent.

However, not all children will display symptoms of distress. Some children are just very resilient—they have a natural ability to cope with stress or adapt well to difficult situations.

## **Q: How do therapists help children cope with anxiety?**

**A:** The first task of therapy is to help children cope more effectively with overwhelming thoughts and anxiety.

We work with children around identifying how they feel. Many children of all ages don't have the verbal skills yet to say how they feel. They might

say "Happy," or, "Sad," but that doesn't cover a lot of the emotions they're feeling. We help them learn other words: anxious, confused, helpless, angry. If they can tell others how they're feeling, people can respond better.

We also teach kids different stress reduction techniques like "belly breathing" or "thought stopping" so that when they notice that they feel anxious, they know some ways to calm themselves down.

"Belly breathing" is deep breathing that relaxes the body. "Thought stopping" is a way to take control if you



ILLUSTRATION BY RIKOU TAKAGISHI / STEPHANIE WILSON

have a thought going through your head that's stressful or upsetting. Many children and adults feel that we're at the mercy of our thoughts—that if a thought is in our head we can't do anything about it, but actually



file. You're free. You can walk away."

I said, "But that's my son! I want to get a DNA test!"

There didn't seem to be a process for a father seeking to get a DNA test. I did not know what to do next.

Luckily, a few weeks later, my fiancée's sister went to get food stamps assistance for my son. That got the court involved in coming after me for child support. A bailiff even came to my house assuming that I would want to deny paternity.

Finally, I got the DNA test to prove my paternity. I filed a petition and went back to court. I told the judge,



"I'm his father and I want custody of my son."

Again, it wasn't that simple. The judge said, "You've got to have an order of paternity." It took months to file the paperwork with the help of a pro-bono attorney.

### A Father Again, Legally

For more than a year, my son was in my fiancée's sister's custody. She let him be with me most of the time but it wasn't the same as custody. His auntie had to take him to the doctor, and she made the medical decisions. When he stayed with her, he wasn't getting the attention he needed there. If he went to her

house for the weekend, he would come home to me like a little tumbleweed—dirty shoes, or no socks on.

When I completed the paperwork and went back to my judge, I was granted temporary guardianship. Then my son was home with me all the

time, and I could make all the decisions in his life.

Finally, almost two years after his mother died, the court date arrived for me to get custody of my son. He and I dressed up and went to court together. The hearing was no more than five minutes! After all of that waiting. But at the end of those five minutes, the judge granted me my son.

### A Stroke of the Pen

Seriously, though, I hope no other fathers have to go through what I went through to get my son. A lot of men don't realize what it means to have your name on the birth certificate. Just failing to make that stroke of a pen messed me up.

we can. I talk to kids about imagining a big stop sign and having that pop up to stop upsetting thoughts.

"Positive visualization" is another way to interrupt a thought and help a child or adult relax and refocus. We teach children to replace the unwanted thought with something more calming and less provoking. I might ask, "What do you want to replace it with?" Kids say, "Thinking of butterflies," Or, "A trip to Candyland," or they mention a safe place.

Therapists might also teach kids to do something called "progressive muscle relaxation" where you slowly relax your whole body. When our muscles are tense and anxious, we feel very tight and when our muscles are relaxed we feel calmer. I have children think about a piece of spaghetti

that's uncooked and then cooked, and focus on turning each part of their body into cooked spaghetti.

It's always helpful to learn about these techniques because all children go through situations that are anxiety provoking or stressful, and they can use these methods into adulthood.

### Q: How can parents help their children recover?

**A:** The ability to not get set back in the face of obstacles is called "resilience." There's been a lot of research recently to help us understand why some children are so resilient. Researchers have asked: What are the coping mechanisms that are helping these kids out? What kinds of protections did they have in their families, schools or personalities that

helped them handle the stress?

Caring, supportive relationships with family help build a child's ability to cope with stress and adapt to changes. A deep attachment to a parent is a very basic need, a vital need. But children who are growing up with family stress may miss out on bonding time with their parents. A parent living in fear or feeling depressed or overwhelmed by life may be unable to handle the stressful demands of a toddler or even an adolescent, and kids can usually sense that a parent isn't really available.

Setting aside time to be close to your children can help your child become more resilient. The activities of daily living help children grow, like regular bedtimes and mealtimes. Re-starting those routines, and making time to

bond with a child, can help you and your child recover:

Researchers have also found that kids become more resilient when they have opportunities to participate in activities—like music, sports or after school programs—where they can build relationships with people outside the family. Teachers, coaches, or mentors can offer strong support. Having an adult believe in you and support you can plant a seed.

Parents can identify someone who can give extra care and support to the child, such as a grandparent, coach, teacher or family friend. Parents can also get children involved in positive activities that give them a sense of accomplishment and relaxation.

# 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-



ILLUSTRATION BY THAYNA WALDRON

time 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.

## 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 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 videogames, and we played together. He also liked to hang out on the block, listening to music. That's not my

no matter what."

## Twist of Fate

Despite our growing bond—and the intrusive investigations and mean-



ILLUSTRATION BY RUDIA TILLET

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.**

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,

ingless 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

# 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 THAYNA 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.



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 case-

workers 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.

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."

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 to 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

# Do Over

*Changing as a parent takes courage and practice.*

BY YOUSHELL WILLIAMS

*Most parents like me want their children to have an easy, decent life as far removed from what we ourselves experienced as possible. We want to be good parents, but sometimes it can be very difficult to know how if you grew up in foster care or in a home where you experienced abuse or neglect.*

*Losing my children to the system made me realize that I had a lot to overcome from my past and a lot to change about my ways of thinking as a parent.*

*So, how do you become a terrific parent even if you didn't have one? That's a very good question. It's also the subtitle of The Whole Parent by therapist Debra Wessellmann. Her book helped me think about new ways to overcome my feelings of inadequacy so that I can change my life and my children's lives for the better. Here is her advice to parents:*

It is a challenge to know how to give your child a secure nurturing environment if you grew up in the foster care system, especially if, like many children in care, you were shuttled between foster families or went back and forth between foster care and your birth home many times.

## 'Am I Good Enough?'

A person in that situation grows up not really having an idea what a healthy family life should look like, and often has lots of self-doubts like, "Why me? Why didn't my parents love me? Why didn't another family love me? Was I unlovable?" In truth, the system and the adults in our lives have let us down.

Experiences that lead you to doubt

your self-worth can leave you feeling like you're not good enough when you start raising your own families. Sometimes the anger and pain on our children's faces during difficult moment just triggers all the shame and guilt and "I'm not good enough" feelings that parents feel inside.

One mother I worked with had a lot of traumatic experiences growing up. Her own mother died of alcoholism. Still, she has successfully raised three nice children. It's amazing what she's done, despite feeling at times that she wasn't good enough or lovable.

This mom found a good mate, a good supportive church environment, and supportive friends. She looked to other people who she admired as parents and tried to emulate them. So becoming a good parent even when you have grown up in foster care definitely can be done, but it's important to be conscious of the challenges you face and stay motivated.

**Parents can recognize how past traumas are affecting them, and make changes so their children will grow up safe and secure.**

## Changing Angry Reactions

Another challenge for parents who had negative experiences as children is that early experiences are lodged in the emotional part of the brain, which creates responses that feel so automatic that your actions may not feel like something you can consciously control.

When parents respond to various things that their children do with



negative responses that feel extreme and out of sync with how they want to treat their children, it's often very difficult for them to understand why they respond the way they do. But you can change those automatic responses with a lot of effort.

For example, I worked with a mom who was having strong angry reactions. In therapy, the mom realized that when her son was doing some typical teenage things, like rolling his eyes or not jumping to when she

not rejections, and she was able to deal with those feelings of hurt related to her upbringing.

## Common Misperceptions

In *The Whole Parent* I talk about a number of other common parental misperceptions that relate to negative childhood experiences—like, "my child is invading me," or "my child is abusive," or "I have to have complete control for my child to be safe."

I worked with a father who was having strong rage reactions when his 7 year old would embarrass him in public. His immediate reaction was, "What are people thinking of me? They're thinking I'm a bad father and a terrible person," and he just wanted to kill his son. But as he worked through those feelings with me, he realized that growing up with an alcoholic father had left him feeling very insecure about the way people were looking at him, and this trauma was being tapped into.

That's not to say that we don't all feel embarrassed when our children act out in public, but we're being irrational if we begin to think, "I'm a bad person," or "People think I'm a bad person" and take those feelings out on the child, because every parent has had embarrassing incidents in public.

## A Chance to Heal

The good news is that, when you realize the ways you're thinking and acting might be hurting you and your child, and you consciously set out to change your thoughts and behaviors, you can break those negative patterns. You can give your children much more positive feelings about themselves than you might have had.

One technique is to write out our

# 'Your History Is Not Destiny'

*Most parents who were abused do not harm their kids.*

irrational thoughts and feelings and then practice having different thoughts and feelings. The mother who felt rejected by her teenage son could write herself a little reminder card with her irrational feeling at the top: "My child is rejecting me." Underneath it she might write: "This is not true. All teenagers sometimes act like they don't have respect for their parents. I'm getting him confused with my mom. He's really not my mom. I love him and he loves me." And she could carry that reminder card with her and read it over and over until it really sinks in.

I often have people do writing exercises, such as writing down their irrational beliefs on one side of the paper; like, "My child is abusive" and writing down on other side some rational, logical responses they could have when those feelings come up.

## Finding Support

You can also break negative patterns by getting help from a good support network. Whether you attend a support group or speak to a therapist, religious leader, a loving mate, or a supportive group of friends, you need people who you can talk to openly and honestly.

You can also find another parent who you admire who you can really talk to, and you can read books about the effects of trauma on parenting. Whatever way you choose, it's important to sort out how your past might be affecting the way you feel as a parent and take steps to change your thinking and behavior.

Working on your own childhood issues takes tremendous courage. It's a lot easier to try not to think about what you went through. It's painful to look back on abuse or neglect you faced as a child, but if you don't, your parenting will not get better. Parents can face the traumas of the past, recognize how those experiences are affecting them as parents, and make changes so their children will grow up safe and secure.

*Although people often talk about "breaking the cycle of abuse," studies show that most parents who were physically abused as children do not grow up to physically abuse their children, says Katherine Pears, a research scientist at the Oregon Social Learning Center. Here she explains the research on abuse and parenting:*

That's a notion in people's heads that if you haven't had a good model of parenting, you're unlikely to become a good parent yourself.

But studies that have been going on for 20 years have looked at parents who were physically abused and how they care for their children, and most find that only 20-30 percent of people who were physically abused as children go on to be abusive. That means that at least 70 percent don't go on to be abusive.

A history of abuse is not destiny. It doesn't mean that you will grow up to have difficulties as a parent. There's a lot of room for hope.

## Make a Rule a Rule

In my research, I found that one key to whether parents were physically abusive or not had to do with whether the parent was consistent in enforcing rules. I studied boys who had parents that had been abused, and found the parents who were inconsistent were more likely to be abusive.

Many parents find it difficult to remain consistent, but it's essential to be consistent as a parent. If something is a rule on Monday, but not on Tuesday, kids learn from that that they don't really have to mind what the parent says. Then, if the kid is not listening to the parent—well, that's annoying! The parent gets irritated.

If the parent backs off, that encourages the kid to be more negative next time, and that starts a negative cycle. The parent and child begin one-upping the other, hoping the other will back off, but sometimes the parent gets very angry and responds with aggression or abuse.

Consistent parenting keeps these negative cycles from developing. If

that will help you feel more positive. Can you have a snack together? Do you need a few minutes to cool off, or does your child? If you feel more positive, it's easier to be consistent about setting limits.

We also teach parents to take small steps. Say you want your child to put his backpack and lunchbox away when he comes home from school. We suggest taking small steps—first working with him on hanging up his backpack. Then, when he's doing well with his backpack, showing him how to put his lunchbox away.

## Praise Your Child

We also know that one key to successful parenting is positive reinforcement. If you can catch your child doing something good, and praise your child for what he does well, then everyone feels better.

We ask parents, "What is your child doing well?"

Even if it's just putting a plate on the counter without banging it, then you

a rule is a rule, and the child has to mind what the parent says all of the



**Parents who are inconsistent are more likely to be abusive but all parents can learn to be effective parents.**

time, you nip that cycle in the bud.

## Take Steps to Avoid Triggers

The hopeful message is that parents can learn techniques to stop the cycle. We teach the parent to be consistent and to use tools for reducing tension.

We teach parents to recognize triggers to negative interactions. If you tend to get in fights right after school, maybe you need a routine

can say, "I noticed how you put your plate on the counter without banging!" If kids feel recognized for the things they do well, they are more willing to accept limits.

Programs that teach parents to set consistent limits, reduce triggers, and be positive with their children do help parents stop abusive patterns. Nobody is a lost cause. All parents can learn to be effective parents.



# A Step in My Direction

*I wanted to be left alone, but kindness helped me find my way.*

BY JAMES X. SUMROW

My kids were taken into custody in 2007. At the time, Jayme was 2 and Sheryl was 3. My kids loved to be with me. I rode a bike with a trailer attached to the back that the kids loved to ride in. They would cry when I went somewhere by myself.

I never, ever wanted to hurt my kids. But I was also using meth every day and selling it.

## A Hijacked Brain

I grew up in a home with parents who were good to us kids. I was into sports and BMX racing, but at 12 I drank a beer in our backyard, and that's when I thought I'd arrived. I moved on to weed and coke and eventually meth. My parents did everything they could to keep me on track, and I managed to finish high school, go to barber college and get a job in my dad's shop. But all my money went to drugs. By the time my kids were taken, I was living with them in my barbershop and spending my time going up and down alleys stealing copper and aluminum to sell for dope. I had a house but couldn't live there because I got caught running electricity illegally, so the electric company cut off my power.

My kids had nice clothes and toys, and they ate pretty well. But there were also many times when I'd spent all my money on drugs and they had to eat ramen noodles. Other times I put them in situations they shouldn't have been in. One time a guy who owed me money came into my shop and tried to hit me with a big wrench. I picked up a pipe and hit him in the head with my kids right there.

When my kids weren't with me, they lived with their mother. She and I fought all the time. Still, I thought that if everyone would just mind their business, my life would be OK. I thought what I really needed was for



*James with his daughters, Jayme and Sheryl*

everyone to just leave me alone.

## Allegations of Drug Abuse

Then one day I took some dope over to a motel room where my kids and their mother were staying with a guy who was also selling. I sold him some dope, visited my kids for a few minutes and left.

The next day, my kids' mother called and told me the guy had kicked her out, accusing her of stealing dope. Later that day both my daughters started vomiting. I thought they had caught something. But soon after, child protective services contacted my kids' mother, saying there were allegations of drug abuse around my kids, and when they tested my kids, they tested positive for methamphetamines at very high levels. It wasn't my kids' mother who took the dope: My kids ate it.

## My World Fell Apart

When my children went into custody, my world fell apart.

I didn't want to think of my kids staying with people they didn't know, wanting to be with Mom and Dad. I thought all the time of how my kids were feeling. I felt hopeless about

getting them back. I came to a point where I felt my life was not worth living.

When I found out that it was the guy in the motel room who had called child protective services, I decided to kill him and save one bullet for me.

The day I meant to kill him, I sat on the curb by his apartment for hours waiting for him. But a cop came by and told me to leave, and I did.

Then I ran into a friend and told him my plans. He talked me into going over to a soup kitchen. He also asked to hold my gun, saying he would give it back when I was in a better frame of mind.

As we ate he convinced me to go to the hospital's mental health unit. He told me killing myself or someone else was not the answer: He was a guy I did drugs with regularly and I trusted him, so even though I was terrified of not getting high, I followed his advice. His was the first kindness that helped me change the path that I was on.

I detoxed in the hospital for a few days, then did an intake at a rehab

center. But rehab had a waiting list, so after intake I went out to get high again to escape my feelings.

## Throwing Blame

A few days later, the office of the attorney assigned to me called. I was still high so I made excuses, saying I was busy. A few days later my attorney, Linda Foster, called herself. She told me it would be a good idea for me to come talk to her.

Ms. Foster proved to be another support at a moment when I most needed one. She was positive with me. She told me she had other clients who had gotten their kids back after they changed their lives, and when I explained I had already done an intake for rehab, she said that was a great start. But she also was straight with me and helped me see my part in what was going on.

When we talked about my kids testing positive, I still wanted to throw blame and minimize the situation. Then she asked me one question I will never forget, "How much meth-amphetamine is acceptable in a child's system?" That is when I paused, and then I started to cry, because I knew the answer was zero.

## 'Please God...'

Waiting for a bed in rehab, I got more and more depressed. The night before Thanksgiving, I felt so desperate I had to do something.

I made a flag that was 3 feet by 4 feet, which I mounted to my bike. One side of the flag said, "Do not use drugs or alcohol because it will take your children away." On the other side it said, "Please GOD watch over Jayme and Sheryl!"

I set out Thanksgiving morning with that flag on my bike and rode from church to church, praying for God to help me get my kids back. At the last



# Facing Tough Times Together

*Overcoming shame when you need support.*

INTERVIEW BY DOMINIQUE ARRINGTON

church I fell off my bike and was lying on the ground looking up, cursing God.

Then I was on my knees, telling God, "I don't really know if you are there, but if I ever needed your help it is right now." At that moment I had energy like I had not had in a long time. I rode my bike to my kids' grandmother's house for Thanksgiving dinner. When I got there I explained what had happened. They all looked at each other like I was crazy.

## I Got a Call

But the next day, I got a call from rehab. They had a bed for me. I was so scared, I went out and sold my \$9,000 truck for a thousand dollars and partied one last time. But I still made it to court in the morning, and I made it to rehab the next day, too.

In rehab, my child welfare caseworker, Gloria Taylor, came to see me. She asked if there was anything she could do for me. I told her how difficult it was to be without my kids during the holidays and asked her if she could bring them to rehab for a visit. She said that wasn't usually done but she would see what she could do. A little while later I got a message that my kids were coming.

Each time I took a step forward, someone took a step in my direction to help me.

## Christmas in Rehab

I thought Christmas in rehab was going to be the worst Christmas ever. But some of the people there were very talented and made drawings and toys out of paper for me to give my kids. I also had a

counselor who went out and bought a couple of dolls with some of my money so I could give them to my daughters.

Then my children came and we had Christmas on the floor of the rehab. I didn't realize it at the time but it was a great Christmas. I was with my children and the people around me made sure that it was special.

## Out the Other Side

After I got out of rehab I joined a 12-step group, which was another place where I found community, and my life started to change one day at a time.

Soon the judge, Hon. Charles C. Currier, gave me my kids back. Then he asked me if I wanted to be a mentor to parents going through the system, in a program called First Steps Towards Reunification.

I started attending meetings the judge held at the courthouse. There I saw that the judge had a big heart for people going through the system. He's one of the greatest men I know. I started to feel like I was a part of something good. I had found kindness that others had given to me, and now I was part of a community that I could give back to.

## Encouragement and Hope

Today my life is better than I ever thought that it could be. I have been drug-free for six years. It has been the best gift I could give my kids. I also try to give the gift of support to others. I tell my story to parents and mentor them if they want encouragement and hope.

*Finding support can be especially hard for fathers and for families in tough neighborhoods where friends and family may already be stressed. Here, Ross Thompson, a professor of psychology at the University of California, Davis, and the author of a book about how "social support" can prevent child abuse and neglect, describes the science of social support.*

## Q: What is "social support" and why is it important?

**A:** Social support is the sense that people are with you, looking after you, supporting you emotionally, and available to provide you with information and help if you need it. Social support can really be helpful in getting through tough times, especially for people in challenging situations. There's a lot of research that shows that having social support can reduce stress.

The first thing any parent should know about social support is that it's more important to have a small number of

truths and never talked about. It takes a lot of courage for an individual to encourage someone to seek assistance. So you need people in your network who will be honest with you.

## Q: What makes it hard to get the support we need?

**A:** Social support can help to reduce stress, but unfortunately, stress can also reduce social support. People under stress will often respond by withdrawing from other people. You may be overwhelmed or feeling vulnerable and may hide instead of reaching out. Or you may not want to reach out because asking for help can come with criticism, or the risk of rejection, and you may not want to pay that price for support.

People who have been exposed to trauma in the past or who feel they have to protect their children from bad influences can find themselves especially isolated.

**It's more important to have a small number of very reliable people in your life than to have a large network, and you need people who will tell you the truth.**

very reliable people in your life than it is to have a large network. Just having a few people to rely on can make all the difference in the world.

The other thing to know is that you need people who will tell you the truth. One researcher studied mothers convicted of fatal child abuse and found that, surprisingly, they had great social support, mainly from family members, who were aware of the children showing bruises and made efforts to be emotionally supportive but did nothing to prevent the child's death. Many times in our family and friendship networks there are things that are treated as unspoken

Research also shows that when you're in a crisis, people around you can get overwhelmed and withdraw. When you live in poverty, everyone in your life may be facing lots of stressors. That can leave whole communities exhausted.

If you're a parent under stress and having trouble making ends meet, it takes a lot of time and energy to try to construct a new social network. You may sometimes need to seek out formal supports—from programs or services—because it's hard to find friends and family who can step in to get you through tough times.

# Gaining Control

*Why men batter and how to stop.*

Vicki Gorder is a co-director of *Partners in Change*, a domestic violence offender treatment program in Colorado Springs. Here she explains how the program helps batterers change:

**Q: What is your approach to working with batterers?**

**A:** One thing that's controversial but important to me to clarify is that battering is not simply a pattern of violence, it's a pattern of using certain behaviors, including violence, to control your partner and a relationship. Using violence against a partner is against the law, and it's wrong, but someone who has an incident of violence is not necessarily a batterer.

Treatment for batterers is still relatively new, so there's a lot of debate around what does and doesn't work. I believe that to see long-term change, I have to hold these men accountable and create an environment where men want to change, not because I say it's wrong, but because *they* do.

**Q: What motivates men to change?**

**A:** Most men—and I do say most, not all—truly desire to be a man of honor and integrity. I ask them, “What is your own sense of honor telling you? How do you define your personal code of integrity and live up to that?” Most men are taught not to hit women, so they're violating their own beliefs, not just mine.

A lot of my clients have never thought about it that way. They're used to being told, “You're a batterer; a bad person.” All their defense

mechanisms kick in and they want to minimize their behavior and shift the blame. They say, “It wasn't that wrong. It's not like we're like and Tina.” I say,

for their children, that's the avenue of change. They want their sons to look up to them, and they don't want their daughters to end up getting beaten.

**Q: How can you change a pattern of violence?**

**A:** A lot of our program is about building skills, especially teaching the men how to recognize cues that they're angry much earlier so they don't get to the explosive stage. Part of that is helping them realize that they're not really out of control when they get very angry. It feels like they are, but they're not. They're still making choices.

We ask them, “When did you know you were angry? How? What were you thinking? What were you doing?” A lot of

people don't really think about early signs. They escalate the situation and don't try to stop until they're in that red zone and then it's too late. Those of us who don't offend, we realize we're getting angry and take steps to cool down before we act out.

ILLUSTRATION BY TC



“Well, how wrong do *you* see it as being? How wrong was it *for you*?” Often they've come from a violent home, so the fact that they punched a hole in the wall doesn't seem that bad, because they didn't punch their partner. Sometimes they think they're

Most men are taught not to hit women, so they're violating their own beliefs, not just mine.

handling their anger well.

I also tell my clients, “We all do things for a reason. You use violence because there's a payoff—it gets someone else to do what you want. But what does it cost you?” For a lot of men, when they start to look at what kind of role model they're being

**Q: How can you change a pattern of control?**

**A:** We want to help the men see that abuse is not only physical, it's also a pattern of treating their partners as children and not being able to accept who their partners really are.

We ask them, “How do you accept differences between your partner and yourself?” They might not accept that their partners' experiences and needs are different from their own. We ask, “How can you just talk with your partner; instead of trying to change her? How might you support her?”

We also ask, “Are you treating your partner like an equal or as a child? How do you feel when you're treated as a child?” Maybe a boss or another family member has treated them that way. When they think about it, they're like, “Oh, yeah, I get it. No wonder she doesn't like that.”

**Q: What changes do you see?**

**A:** There are definitely men who use violence who are not going to change. They care about maintaining control more than they care about love and respect. But most men who are working to change will say they feel better about themselves and have a different type of relationship with their partners—one that's loving, warm, and nurturing. They begin to get what they really wanted.

These men want relationships, but they don't know how to get their needs met without using violence. They don't want their partners to leave, or to be looking at other men. When they learn how to earn respect, admiration and love, they realize the difference between love and fear. Love is very different from compliance they've forced out of their partner by using violence.

# 'There Is Another Way'

*Men speak up to stop abuse.*

BY JAMEY BLOCK

Six years ago, I got into an argument with my wife when she was pregnant. I wanted her to quit smoking; she wanted me to quit drinking. She told me, "My smoking doesn't affect our relationship as much as your drinking."

Things got out of hand and she called 911. I was mandated to go to a domestic violence batterers class, drug and alcohol abuse groups, and parenting classes. I was angry but I learned to accept that I chose to go, in the sense that I got myself into a predicament where I had to go.

## Men Against Violence

In the groups, listening to other people talk, I thought, "I could lose my child, my wife, my job." I felt tired of the arguing, of never feeling good and never making others feel good about themselves. I thought, "It'll be so much easier to do the right thing."

Now I'm part of a group in Colorado Springs called Men Against Violence and Abuse (MAVA) that started two years ago. We've spoken at community meetings, the community college, the sheriff's office, a domestic violence summit—anywhere that wants us to come and tell our stories. The way I see it, laws are changing, and we need to give men the tools to change too, not just tell them, "This is not right."

## The Tools to Change

Sometimes people think it's really shocking what comes out of my mouth, that one person can treat another person that way. People ask, "Why did you change? Was it hard?"

In the batterers' group, I learned about things like taking "timeouts" when you get angry, having empathy and sympathy for other people, and showing love in a relationship. I learned that other people have feelings and what you do affects them, which is something I didn't really



understand from my childhood.

My dad was physically abusive, and my mother was not around. When he came home, you feared what you did wrong or didn't do. I grew up in rural Illinois and it was a hush-hush situation. Things weren't spoken about, people turned their eyes away. Now I see that as wrong. I prefer to help and speak up.

## Feeding a Relationship

In the groups, I learned that you have to feed a relationship, you can't

just go home and sit on the couch and expect to have sex. My idea of the relationship was that my spouse would cook and clean, and I would just to stay in power; take care of bills and get groceries.

I learned "romance tools"—things you do to build a connection with your partner. My wife and I started taking weekend trips out of town, and that helps out. I also changed my attitude toward her doing things without me. If she wants to see her family, I say, "I'll see you when you get

back" and make it known that I'm not going to be mad.

When I told her I loved her before, I was kind of saying it without meaning it. Now she can actually feel it. Helping out around the house isn't, you know, a big thing, but it shows that I'm listening to her say "I had a long day" and that I care enough to do something nice, like cooking the dinner or cleaning up.

The hard part was remembering to use these tools and not revert to abuse or even certain looks or verbal tones. It meant stopping all the things that came easy. Once you figure out how the cycle of violence works and start catching your anger earlier and earlier; you can get what you want—and even more—just by being nice to someone.

## 'There Is Another Way'

At MAVA, we tell our stories, and give out information on domestic violence. We've probably gotten about 200-300 pledges. Men fill out the card with our mission statement on the back: that we'll hear women's and children's voices, refrain from abusive activity, refrain from abusing ourselves, and stand up against violence.

I hope people hear that there is another way besides abuse. I didn't realize that controlling the finances was abuse, or that telling my wife she couldn't go somewhere was abuse. I looked at it as, "That's my wife, she should listen to me."

I'm sure my son has benefited from the changes I've made. I don't remember my dad telling me he loves me. When I drop my son at daycare, I make sure to tell my son I love him and to kiss him goodbye. My son hugs people, he knows how to show affection toward others. Hopefully he'll remember these lessons when he grows up.

# Sugar Daddy

*I saw myself as a provider, not a dealer.*

BY JERMAINE ARCHER

It was July 1997, on a hot, humid day. All the neighborhood children were outside. Teenagers were playing in the fire hydrant spray to cool off. Younger girls were jumping rope and boys were playing handball. A few young men were playing stickball in the street.

My birthday was approaching and I had gone out the day before and bought bikes for my two children, Raven and Shai. I always liked buying them presents on my birthday.

## **‘Doing It for the Family’**

I grew up poor with seven brothers, four sisters, a caring beautiful mother and a drunk, abusive father. I vowed never to be like my father. As soon as I was old enough, I decided to buy me a gun and some drugs to sell. At 14, it seemed only logical to me that, so long as I had a gun, I would never be broke.

First I went on several unarmed robbery sprees, some of which were almost comical. Once I barely scraped by with \$55 after a hand-to-hand tussle with a brawny older guy.

With my stick-up money and \$50 chipped in by a friend, I bought a handgun and a couple grams of cocaine. Then, after a number of easier robberies, I had plenty of cocaine to sell. The money came fast and easy. I was living the high life.

## **Addicted to the Money**

I thought of myself as a businessman. I bought a product wholesale and sold it retail at a profit. If I didn't sell it, someone would. This was evident because of the demand for drugs in my neighborhood.

I also truly believed I was doing it for my family. I never thought for a minute that my behavior would lead to my separation from the family I loved.

But when I had enough money to give up dealing and go legit, I didn't. Even though I had been arrested many times and most of my original partners were either dead or serving lengthy prison sentences, I did not want to stop dealing. I was addicted to the money and power; to seeing the look on people's faces when I handed them presents and cash.

The neighborhood children would line up at the Mr. Softee truck and order what they want when I was around. Because the parents couldn't afford it, I always paid for everybody's Klondikes and King Cones.

## **A Day to Remember**

On this day, the ice cream truck had come and gone. All of the children, and some of the parents, were smearing their faces with ice cream. I finished my Banana Boat, went upstairs and returned with a hot pink Barbie bicycle with training wheels.

Raven's eyes lit up like a sparkler and she charged me like an out of control gypsy cab. She hugged my leg, jumped on the bike and took off with

That afternoon, I just pushed him around, and after he went to bed, his uncle Mike and I readjusted the seat pole and the pedals. The next day, I felt on top of the world watching him and Raven race up and down the block, enjoying themselves.



## **Cloudy Judgment**

But those days came to an end. Eventually the local police labeled me a menace to society, which, admittedly, I was. Soon I was targeted by many people—the police, other dealers and stick-up kids.

I thought I could protect myself and was outsmarting everyone, but my

Looking back, I am no longer mad at the people who orchestrated my demise. I realize that how the world perceived me was true. I was a menace.

## **Stuck in Prison**

Today, sitting in Sing Sing Correctional Facility, staring out the dirty windows at the Hudson River; I see how blind I was. I was hurting my children more than I was doing anything positive for them. I was a horrible role model for Shai. Now I am out of their lives.

Their mother relocated to Connecticut and I no longer see them as often as I'd like. I write to my children, but that's not the same as being there.

In 2006, I saw them only twice. Raven is now 14 and Shai is 13. He made it clear that he felt abandoned by me. I missed out on their childhood years. By the time I am eligible to go home, Raven will be 28 and Shai 27, older than I was when I was arrested.

## **Hoping for Forgiveness**

If I could do it all over again, I would raise my kids like my mother raised me: with more love and happiness than money and material things. I tried to do better than my father; to give my kids what I believed I was missing. But I feel I've failed as a father.

I pray that one day I can receive a second chance to connect with my children. I only hope my children can forgive me for what I did.

Sometimes now I look back on that day with the bicycles. My children were happy, their mother was happy, and I had contributed to that happiness. That's a time I'll always remember.

**If I could do it all over, I would raise my kids with more love and happiness than money and material things.**

a bunch of neighborhood kids in hot pursuit.

Shai looked up at me confused: "What about me?" For him I had a black and yellow bumblebee bike. He hopped on so quickly, he nearly toppled over. I steadied him, but as he tried to take off, we both realized his feet couldn't touch the pedals.

judgment had become cloudy. My future was being written by the police. Soon I got locked up for a murder that took place on a block I controlled. The police knew I either did it or allowed it to happen.

I refused to cooperate, not knowing the lengths the police and prosecutor would go to take me off the streets.