

2009 Absentee Father Conference

Inaction is no Longer an Option

8/19/2009

This the final report of the 2009 Absentee Father Conference sponsored by ReEngage, Inc. taken from the discussions and break-out sessions at the conference. This report seeks to raise awareness of the current epidemic of absentee fathers in our community and provide some beginning solutions to combating it. Our hope is as a result of the conference and this document we will have begun a conversation in which the entire community can participate.

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2009 Absentee Father Conference Final Document

While we have found a myriad of causes that have directly and indirectly affected the state of absentee fathers in our community and the scale of the problem is substantial our resolve must not waver. There is a historical correlation between high unemployment and high absentee father rates in all communities. As we have experienced greater levels of unemployment than the society as a whole this disparity has played out in a gradual degradation of our family structure as more and more of our men have deserted their families. This continued diminishing of our males in the family has placed an undue strain on our women, our extended families and institutions as they have tried to sustain and pass on traditional values and skills. The African American community had a rich heritage of craftsmen and entrepreneurs at its height and this was done for the most part for males through the imparting of skills from one father to his son. As more and more men were lost to unemployment and disillusionment many of these skills and morals were not transferred to future generations. When we include the harmful effects of alcoholism, drug abuse, and self defeating behaviors it creates a toxic mix that has poisoned so many of our families.

If we are to have a lasting impact on the healing of the African American family and the reengagement of fathers to their children there has to be an economic component that addresses the marginalization of the black worker in America. It is an historical fact that men without jobs often times view themselves as burdens and will leave their families. Many times they are viewed as irresponsible by society and failures to themselves. While unemployment does not fully explain or justify the state of the black male and his children it is a major component that must be addressed if we are to become a nation of true equality for all of our children and citizens.

We have attempted to document the many causes of this epidemic however I am afraid that often times we've merely catalogued its symptoms. It appears that there are as many causes as there are absentee fathers, but there are some patterns that I believe we have been able to identify. There has been a deep injury done to the African American family that has never fully been addressed and as a result we have continued to perpetuate certain behaviors that have been counter-productive to the success of raising our children. Instead of passing along the lessons of studiousness and hard-work, as we had done for most of our history in America we have recently begun to pass along a legacy of futility. We believe that education is vital to all members of the African American family. For while education has not always proven to provide equal financial compensation it is still the great equalizer in that with knowledge you can recognize the strategy being used against you and you can then rationally determine a choice of action. Education must become the top priority in the African American community if we are to remain viable in this country. We can no longer afford to overindulge our children's fantasies of becoming athletes, entertainers, or lottery winners.

While the causes and symptoms may be numerous our goal is a simple one. How do we develop children that are healthy and successful? Many of these children are broken and will

require our full commitment as persons, as organizations, and as a community. Research has shown that if we are to have any lasting impact in the lives of these children we must intervene early and with all the resources we can muster. We should begin to address the problems of crime, drug and alcohol abuse, educational failure, and teen pregnancy in a holistic way. Instead of our organizations transforming our people we have allowed the people to conform us to the “crisis mentality”. We are so busy putting out fires that we have lost the ability to step back and take a strategic view of the problems we are facing. It is our hope that we as a community can begin to develop these strategic plans to address this enormous problem.

We must begin to heal the wound in the African American family through love, support, and forgiveness. We as a community must begin the process of reaching out to these damaged men and boys where they are. We must come out from behind the desks, the counters, and the pulpits and engage these men in relationships that are not based in shame but in mercy. We must never forget that these are our sons, our brothers, and our fathers. We do not believe in one weekend we have solved a problem that has festered for generations, but the important step we believe we have taken is that we have begun a conversation, a conversation that must continue with more voices and more ideas. Because this problem permeates so many levels of our community it will take the input of many different people with diverse skills to reach each of these levels. We invite you or your organization to get involved in this conversation with us. While we have outlined some steps they will require the involvement of our entire community to have any impact.

As we become a nation of more female headed households more and more of our children will face the real possibility of growing up without the financial, spiritual and emotional guidance of their fathers and this we must not allow to happen. Regardless of whether the government or the larger society chooses to support our efforts the black community can no longer be excused for refusing to act. These are our children that are being deserted. I can't tell you the times I have gone to meet with young black men and listened to their anger and their pain towards their fathers. They have every right to be angry you see when they were young and needed a father to protect, support, and encourage them no one was there. Not only was there no one there but no one came and no one seemed to care.

We do not believe that our list of next steps is comprehensive or complete. They are merely a starting point where we can all rally and get started. Many of the steps we recommend are already available in some form or another, our hope is that through coordination and collaboration we can bring the full weight of our convictions to bear on this issue that is causing so much pain in our community. If you would like to join the conversation and are ready to do more than talk please contact ReEngage to be added to the mailing list for future meetings and events.

Signed,

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ACTIONS

- Awareness – Alert our community to the enormity and seriousness of this epidemic.
- Communication – Enhance communication between members and organizations in the community concerning this epidemic.
- Transformation – Transform how the community and organizations view this epidemic and our role in its perpetuation or elimination.
- Implementation – Begin to implement strategies and steps community-wide to address this epidemic.
- Outreach – Begin outreach efforts to our black men to begin the healing process and reengaging them into the lives of their children.
- Natural – It is natural for children to have involvement with both their parents. It is not just black children or white children, it is human children. All human children do better with the support and guidance of both parents.
- Support – Begin to provide support for the family as a complete unit and not as separate entities estranged from one another.

Conference Break-Out Sessions

After hearing the presentations of our featured speakers we began the process of identification, causality, and strategizing. We began this process using breakout groups which allowed the participants to ask questions, make observations, and provide feedback. This process covered two days with the first day primarily spent exploring identification of the who, the what, and the where of absentee fathers. The groups then followed this up with exploring some causes of the problem and finish with some possible steps to implement individually, organizationally, and as a community.

In the following pages you will find the results of these discussions. We consider this to be a preliminary discussion so we do not think that we have explored all areas of this issue. The larger conversation will need to take place with all of the stakeholders in this discussion in an ongoing dialog.

Absentee Fathers

Part 1 – Who, What, Where is the problem with absentee fathers?

- Psychological effect of fear of failure connected to socioeconomic disparity
- Lack of significant income
- Spirit of abandonment - No sense of belonging – feelings of abandonment
- Lack sense of family - Peers become family
- Modeling how to be a father (no standard)
- Socially how do we portray fathers in media
- Generational impact of not being able to protect the children
- Developmental milestones (Both physical and psychological) that shape personality are impacted (Difficulty coming to consensus on this one.)
- Alienated fathers

Who are absentee fathers?

- Divorced dads
- Teen fathers
- Substance abusers
- Deceased
- Those incarcerated
- Emotionally detached fathers
- Unskilled – Could be any area, work, being a father etc.
- People who don't understand the art of fatherhood

- Unknowing fathers – Don't know they have kids
- Alienated fathers

Where are they?

- On the street
- Jail
- Institutions
- Graveyards
- Relocated
- Other families – remarried
- Treatment centers
- Homeless
- Military

What causes them to be absentee fathers?

- Injury that's never been corrected (emotional, mental, etc.)
- Ongoing conflicts with the mother or self
- Inability to support family (physical ailment, disability, lack of skills)
- Unresolved paternity issues
- Apathy
- Don't have skills because of job market
- Lack of fathering skills (lack of role models)
- Babies having babies
- Role reversal – Women, "I don't need you to help me"
- Reentry after incarceration
- No respect/Love for the father
- Addiction
- Inter-Generational absentee fathers
- Social policies precluding fathers from being in home
- Defining manhood by procreation – number of children sired

Impact of Absentee Fathers on...

The children

- Disrespect for women – perpetuates the problem – displaced anger
- Matriarchal society – emasculates males (dominant society is patriarchal/conflict)
- Receiving services through women – emasculates the male
- Black adolescents females in female head of households have 100% chance to repeat
- Role model of staying in services keeps from coming into their own manhood

- Children feel disrespected – minor conflicts escalate to life and death
- Children tend to look for love in wrong places
- Boys tend to take on adult roles too early – too much responsibility
- Unresolved grief
- Interrupts development
- Fear of poverty – will do illegal activities to make money
- Identity crisis
- Sense of rejection creates anger and the children may not even realize they are angry
- Cannot overlook how slaves were treated, changing the male personality.

Mothers of children

- Grief
- Stress
- Resentment
- Economic shortfalls
- Social stereotypes
- Baby momma
- Failures (especially after separation)
- Effects future relationships with males
- Lack or loss of self esteem
- Substance abuse
- Become abusive
- Neglectful
- Emotional/Psychiatric problems
- Lower standards of men in their lives
- Lack of emotional support
- Fosters abandonment issues
- Anger
- Role increases
- Degradation
- Aggressiveness
- Over-protective
- Lose hope – Addiction
- Indulge in criminal activity
- Look for replacement father

Other members of family

- Judgmental

- Anger
- Financial caregivers
- Grief
- Choose sides
- Family members become surrogate parents
- Cohabitation
- Alienation
- Facilitates co-dependency

On absentee father

- Manhood threatened – loss of status
- Loss of psychological balance
- Stigma – Deadbeat dad
- Character assassination
- Loss of authority & responsibility
- Rationalization/denial/justification
- Addiction
- Reduces the role of father to a check/provider
- Displaced anger
- Becomes sexual predator to prove manhood
- Self deception
- All women are... “that way”
- Inferiority complex
- Role reduced from father to sibling
- Anger
- Loss of financial well-being
- Creates spiritual dis-ease
- Exploitation through media sensationalism

Do Absentee fathers want to be absent?

- Sperm donors – don’t care
- Too young – Not bonded
- Don’t want to be this way but doesn’t know how to be different – Inter-Generational – No skills

Perception question – What percent of absentee fathers who left for economic reasons how many did not want to leave? 50%

Perceptions of absentee fathers

- Disinterested
- Irresponsible
- Uneducated
- Immoral
- Sexually promiscuous
- Don't protect yourself
- Distorted value system
- Low self esteem
- Selfish
- Pimp mentality
- Distorted sense of manhood
- Non-financial support
- Lack of spirituality
- That's the way it is vs. the way it should be
- Dependent on woman to take care of child
- Weak

Part 2 – Solutions

What next?

- What are high risk situations for absentee fathers
- Parenting as a positive thing – provide societal and cultural support
- Parental relationship doesn't change because of a change in relationship to other parent
- Teach responsibility at junior high school level for dealing with the demands of parenthood
- Movement among therapists and educators of forced child support on communication, relationships
- Movement/corrective action and education to support positive and open communication
- Process to facilitate and re-assimilate into society and family
- Replace punitive objectives with educational objectives
- Public education
- Training – what you need to know before becoming a parent
- Movement to remove words such as illegitimate to remove stigma
- Add balance to **system**
- Add training to the **system**
- Address the family as a holistic entity
- Existing services were designed in a vacuum
- Targeting families separately without regard to future implications
- Have dialog how blacks have bought into the policies that were wrong in the first place

How to get message out?

- DFS/family court
- Social groups – churches, schools, PTA, evening education
- PSA's
- Marital counseling
- Kid programs
- Change social and public policy to treat family holistically
- Support the family at its most vulnerable time at the birth of a child

How do we engage these resources to unify approach?

- Too many variables still not addressed to develop universal approach
- There are needed discussions between African-americans
 - Man or father is head of the household?
 - What did family look like prior to slavery?
 - How can we make this family a whole family?

- Communicate to father significance and worthiness of his role in the families well-being
- Create healthy successful children, healthy stable environments in which to raise them.

2009 Absentee Father Final Recommendations

1. Everyone in community understands they have a role to play and are stakeholders in this process.
2. System to address child support amnesty period for fathers to come forward and begin to engage in children's lives. More corrective and less punitive.
3. Counseling and Support Groups
 - a. Solutions focused counseling
 - b. Black Fathers Anonymous support group to allow fathers a non judgmental environment in which to discuss issues and concerns of fatherhood.
 - c. Client centered counseling.
4. Education
 - a. Psycho-educational training to change attitudes.
 - b. Must be proactive.
 - c. "A day in the life of a parent"
 - d. Abstinence
 - e. Responsible proactive sex education.
5. Outreach
 - a. Engage – go to where men's agenda is. Begin where they are.
 - b. Develop ownership in community and families.
 - c. Mediation as referral service.
 - d. Create male shops – places men can go to discuss issues of fatherhood.
 - e. Media campaign – PSA's

Case Study – Gordon

1. Self-esteem building through encouragement.
 - a. Encourage communication
 - b. Encourage relationship with children.
 - c. Encourage relationship with others
2. Institutionalize fatherhood.
3. Fathers have to want to become engaged.
4. Develop relationships with absentee fathers through one on one session to develop trust.
5. Assess the capabilities of fathers.
6. Provide father and child activities.
7. Educate on the fullness of fatherhood in adult life.
8. Network
9. Develop prevention strategies to implement with younger boys and girls.
10. Priority is developing healthy children and the welfare of the children is our highest priority. We must break the cycle of absentee fatherism in our community.
11. Develop more positive role models for our younger children to emulate.