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DADvocacy

by Allan Shedlin

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I was more disappointed than surprised with my in-flight seatmate's response to my question. About midway into our flight between Albuquerque and Baltimore, having learned that Amber was a recent graduate with a Masters degree in gender studies, I was eager to get her immediate association to the term *DADvocacy*. Her response was, "It's something against women."

Having coined the term about a year ago, I've been field testing it with a variety of people to describe my almost two decades of work to encourage greater father engagement. Her response echoed what I heard 18 years ago when I coined the term *daddying* to describe the convergence of fatherhood and nurturing and to express that a father is not something you are, but something you do. Back in 1994, many folks admonished, "No self-respecting man would ever use that term, it's just too soft and wimpy." Sixteen years later Hallmark came out with a *daddying* line of Fathers' Day greeting cards.

Rather than feeling resigned to Amber's negative association, I have become determined to understand why we as a culture paralyze ourselves with knee-jerk polarization on so many social issues. Why is it assumed that if we are for something, we must be against its opposite? Why is it that by working to increase vibrant father engagement, it is assumed to be somehow against mothers? Have we learned so little from the Women's Movement and its consequent half century of gender re-alignment?

DADvocacy, as I define it, is characterized by two primary aspects: public/collective and private/individual. Based on my ongoing qualitative research beginning in 1997 with children and youth and continuing with fathers, grandfathers, and great grandfathers, I have learned that the daddying qualities most desired by kids are precisely the same ones that dads wish to cultivate. As a lifelong educator, my training in child development taught me that these qualities were not only what kids *wanted*, but what they *needed* in order to thrive. The most often cited are being there, taking kids as seriously as they take themselves, being a passionate advocate for them, showing love and being affectionate, and providing them with security and protection.

From a public/collective perspective, *DADvocacy* is a deliberate set of actions and policies to support, encourage, and optimize the opportunities for fathers and father figures to be positively engaged in their children's lives and for children to be positively engaged in their

fathers' life. From a private/individual perspective, *DADvocacy* is the actions that a father takes in support of his children to enable them to reach their fullest potential. It includes a lifelong commitment to their physical, emotional, social, intellectual/creative, and moral/spiritual well being.

DADvocacy in no way diminishes the importance of mothers; rather it acknowledges and supports the importance of fathers. Moreover, given all the research that documents the advantages that accrue to children who grow up in two parent families, *DADvocacy* can rightly be viewed as encouraging enhanced partnerships between fathers and mothers.

Today, one in three American children lives separate from their biological father. These children are more at risk for every social problem faced by youth – and they remain at risk throughout their lives.

If you knew that there was one thing you could do that would reduce school drop outs, drug use among youth, teen pregnancy, crimes and violent acts, jail or prison time, depression and suicides, wouldn't you do it as quickly and exuberantly as possible?! Research documents that father absence is a factor in 60-95 percent of these negative outcomes. If you knew that when fathers are positively engaged with children, infants experience better attachments, children develop stronger language and social skills, enjoy school more, get higher grades, participate in more extracurricular activities, are less likely to repeat a grade, while experiencing fewer behavioral problems and delaying sexual activity, wouldn't that encourage you further? And if you knew that when fathers are positively engaged with their children, the fathers are also enriched by broadened perspective on issues, situations and possibilities. Wouldn't that be icing on the cake?

Daddyding does not take place in a vacuum. There are a variety of societal and cultural habits, policies, and behaviors that can encourage and/or discourage vibrant father engagement. It behooves us to examine these with an eye toward eliminating those that discourage and supporting those that encourage such engagement.

We have done much in the last five decades to chip away at the glass ceiling that still too many women experience in the workplace. Fathers' Day, June 17 – and every day thereafter – is an appropriate time to make a concerted effort to chip away at the glass ceiling that way too many dads experience at home. *DADvocacy* is a good way to begin that chipping; it's ultimately for kids, parents and families...it's not against anybody.

After all, dads matter to kids, kids matter to dads, and families, and communities are better off when fathers and children are positively engaged in each other's lives. Fathers' Day is a good time to begin *DADvocating*. Our children deserve it, our society needs it.

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