It's Time for Us to Raise the Daddying Bar

By Allan Shedlin

Two and a half years ago, when I was invited by the White House Office of Faith-based and Neighborhood Partnerships to share some ideas about how the Obama administration could start a "fatherhood movement," I seized the opportunity.

As this is the designated lead office on fatherhood issues, and because I had been working in, researching, and writing about fatherhood topics for almost two decades, I was eager to brainstorm with an administration led by a president who vigorously embraced his role as a dad.

Beginning boldly, I pointed out that a fatherhood movement was already underway, so a more appropriate question might be "how can this administration harness the energy and momentum that already exists" in the "Daddying Movement" I had been writing about since my first commentary on the topic was published back in 2008.

During this initial White House office meeting, I suggested it might be a good idea to convey a more energetic approach to bringing fathers fully into the family picture, one that accurately reflected the president's enthusiastic embrace of being a dad and embodied his obvious personal commitment. A starting point could be replacing the phrase that has been used by the prior three administrations: "encouraging responsible fatherhood."

That "tagline" may have been a safe starting point during the Clinton administration, but it now seems a bit too old, tired and modest a goal. Dads are ready for a bolder challenge.

The new realities of recognizing the importance of including fathers as vital family members demands a new rallying cry that raises the bar of expectations. The
years since the White House first used its bully pulpit to encourage responsible fatherhood have been marked by a number of broad social changes for fathers, including:

- Dramatic increases in work-at-home dads;
- Burgeoning numbers and varieties of fatherhood groups;
- More commonplace outreach by schools and libraries to include fathers;
- Ubiquitous coverage of male celebrities and public figures pictured in parenting roles and talking about the joys of fatherhood;
- Ongoing qualitative research findings documenting the benefits to dads of greater engagement with their children;
- More movies and television shows that actually portray dads as solid nurturers, not just buffoons; and
- An increase in workplace policies to include "parental" leave, not just "maternity" leave.

Because there are many more fathers behaving responsibly, it's time not to merely settle for "responsible fathering." Instead, I suggested during our White House meeting that we make a national call for "exuberant daddying." With an immediate wince, smile and polite response, "I don't think we're quite ready for that yet," we moved on.

As I continue to think about that meeting, the subsequent ones I've had, my ongoing research, and the fatherhood programs I'm fortunate to work with in New Mexico and elsewhere, I'm more convinced than ever that it's time to boost expectations about how fathers are involved in the lives of their children and families. Of course, there are still way too many fathers who need to aspire to "responsible fatherhood" as a first step, but my experiences and observations tell me that dads are ready to be stretched. They aspire to a raised bar.

Though we may not yet be ready to call it "exuberant daddying," we are ready to call it "vibrant father engagement." Indeed, the sixth and final White House-sponsored national Fatherhood Forum in 2010 in New Mexico was sub-titled "Encouraging Vibrant Father Engagement." From that meeting, and in the time since, my colleagues and I have identified the following key steps we can take to bolster the level of father engagement fathers nationwide:
• Promote the benefits to kids and fathers alike.
• Foster an awareness and understanding that families, schools, communities and worker productivity are served when fathers and children are positively engaged in each others' lives.
• Identify specific areas that either encourage or discourage father engagement and take specific actions to support those that encourage and change those that discourage vibrant engagement.
• Urge the news and entertainment media to develop and highlight stories of positive father engagement throughout the year — not just during the days surrounding Fathers' Day.
• Shine a spotlight on the variety of ways that our culture continues to positively change in recognition of the importance of fathers.

In many ways we've already raised the bar in recognizing that fathers matter to kids, kids matter to fathers, and that families, schools and communities are better off when fathers and children are positively engaged in each others' lives.

Maybe now we just need to establish it as a stated goal. Who knows, once such a goal is declared, it may not be long before we recognize that nurturing can be a male as well as a female descriptor and we can expand the adage to "It's as American as motherhood, fatherhood, and apple pie."

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