

## Daddy: the great equalizer

By Allan Shedlin

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**D**uring almost two decades of interviewing dads across the entire socioeconomic spectrum and a wide variety of ethnic groups, and ranging in age from 16 to 104, I've learned that "daddy" — a term I coined in a 1994 magazine piece — is the great equalizer. Unlike "fathering," which represents a one-time biological act that requires no greater commitment than a shot of DNA, daddying describes the ongoing process and commitment that occurs at the intersection of fatherhood and nurturance; it is distinct.

So it's no real surprise that the aspirations, joys, challenges, worries and frustrations expressed by dads from Ghana, El Salvador, Honduras, Mexico and the United States echoed those I've heard so many other times from hundreds of fathers. Although there may be a different emphasis or intensity between different socioeconomic or ethnic groups, the fundamental challenges and joys of fatherhood are universal; they cut across all groups and generations. And men love to talk about them.

They speak eloquently from their perspectives as fathers and grandfathers, as sons and grandsons, as uncles, big brothers and fatherly figures. Once they get started, it often feels as if a finger has been released from an emotional dike, and they pour out feelings and thoughts that have long sought to be released, expressed and shared.

Here are some useful things I've heard from men:

- There is no such thing as a perfect dad.
- Being the kind of dad we want to be is in our own control; for the most part, most of us have an opportunity to write our own daddying script that keeps us on track.
- There is a reciprocity of joy for fathers and kids alike when daddying succeeds; children and youth feel loved and dads are nourished by their nurturing.
- Being there — really being there — is the single most desired and important daddying quality.

These anecdotal lessons from fathers are backed up by research showing that fathers matter to kids, kids matter to fathers, and families and communities are far better off when fathers and kids are positively engaged in each other's lives.

Father absence is a factor in most negative outcomes among youth, according to various studies — including school drop outs, drug use, teen pregnancy, crimes and violent acts, jail or prison time, depression and suicides. Conversely, research also documents that when fathers are positively engaged in the lives of their children, the kids experience better attachments, develop stronger language and social skills, enjoy school more, get higher grades, participate in more extracurricular activities, are less likely to repeat a grade, more likely to delay sexual activity, and exhibit fewer behavioral problems. And, perhaps least appreciated, when fathers are positively engaged with their children, the fathers are also enriched by broadened perspectives on issues, situations and possibilities.

Being a father is not something you are, it is something you do. Every day is an opportunity to do it. I encourage all fathers and men who play fatherly roles to "daddy-up," and for the rest of us to acknowledge them — like we already do for their moms — when they do so.

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