

Understanding the “New Father” Model in the Inner City

Kathryn Edin and Timothy Nelson, Harvard University

“What makes you a man isn’t the ability to conceive a child; it’s having the courage to raise one.” - Barack Obama, February 12, 2013

Buried near the end of February’s State of the Union Address, this line contains an entire theory about poor unwed fathers—one that is held by the majority of Americans across the political spectrum. These men, according to this view, just want to get a girl pregnant as proof of their virility. But when she does conceive, they get scared and run off, leaving her holding the diaper bag. On this account, they simply lack the moral courage to stick around and be there for their children.

Interviews with 110 black and white unmarried fathers in Camden, New Jersey, and Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, offer convincing evidence that this theory is dead wrong. The real problem is not that these men don’t want to be fathers. What’s missing is an ability to overcome fragile and fractious relationships with their children’s mothers, combined with a lack of economic resources and other challenges such as substance abuse and limited access to stable housing.

In the inner city, relationships proceed at lightning speed and there is little in the way of partner selection. The girl who becomes the mother of a man’s child is the one he happens to be with when conception occurs. Once the couple is “together,” one thing typically leads to another and a baby is on the way.

How do men greet the news they are about to become a dad? Seventy percent of the time the reaction is happiness, even downright joy. “Thank you Jesus!” exclaimed a seventeen-year-old when informed that a girl he hadn’t seen for months was pregnant with his child.

What can account for this reaction? When a young man hears the words “She’s pregnant,” his first impulse is often “I have to get it together, be a father to this baby! I have to be better than my own dad.”

To understand this reaction, context is key. These men occupy an extremely marginalized space in American society. Many sum up their lives to that point with a single word: “negativity.” In these contexts, a baby – fresh, innocent – is pure potential, a chance to move away from the mistakes and missteps that have characterized a man’s past and an opportunity to turn to activities that are wholly good, from diapering to swaddling to carefully fashioning a child’s hair. The birth of a child is a potential turning point in a troubled life trajectory.

When men’s relationships with their children’s mothers falter and fail – either through their inability to “get it together” sufficiently or because of unstable employment or low wages – they still want to parent their children. But they define being a good father in a very particular way. While low-income inner city dads say that fathers should not leave all financial provision to the mother, they define providing as doing the best they can with whatever finances are left over after their own needs are met.

At the same time these men have retreated from the traditional aspects of the father role, they have embraced fatherhood’s softer side. Imparting love, maintaining a clear channel of communication, and spending quality time are seen as key activities. Few men are interested in being merely a paycheck. Instead, they seek to form an emotional bond with their child through a continued relationship, what some refer to as “the whole fatherhood experience.”

The transformation of the meaning of fatherhood among poor inner city men is not because of deviant cultural values but due to cultural shifts across the social spectrum. The “new father” model, which came into currency among middle class men several decades ago, has gained much traction with their counterparts at the bottom of the labor market, in large part because it is the kind of fatherhood they can afford. But while middle class men now combine these new roles with the more traditional aspects of fatherhood, these men are trying to swap one for the other.

Society is not willing to go along with this trade-off, however. It is regular child support, not a relationship, which is insisted upon by both their children’s mothers and the state, which doesn’t even extend legal visitation rights to these fathers, much less enforce them.

While ensuring financial contributions from men who can pay is essential, it is time to take seriously what these fathers want so desperately to do, and what seems to go unrecognized by everyone from the president on down—to have a hand in raising their children. In the end, it’s not the courage they lack—it’s the support from the rest of us.

Kathryn Edin is a professor of public policy and management and Timothy Nelson is a lecturer in public policy at Harvard University.

The views expressed in this commentary are those of the author or authors alone, and not those of *Spotlight*. *Spotlight* is a non-partisan initiative, and *Spotlight*’s commentary section includes diverse perspectives on poverty.