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Redefining fatherhood

It is the most striking image among several touching pictures: Young Dashawn Williams offers his father, Steve Dycus, ice cream on a stick. Mr. Dycus may not look like a typical, caring dad, but through his involvement in a parenting program in Indianapolis, he learned the importance of patience, communication and, perhaps most important, taking responsibility for his child.

These are among the lessons learned by all the fathers who are pictured sharing memorable moments with their children in a photographic exhibit called "Dads," which will be on display at the Eubie Blake Cultural Center until April 28. In more than a dozen black-and-white pictures, New York-based photographer Stephen Shames conveys the affection and joy of low-income fathers - all of whom were involved in responsible-fatherhood programs - as they participated in various activities, from changing diapers to playing the violin, with their children. Mr. Shames wanted to break the stereotype of low-income men as "deadbeat" or abusive dads. As he notes, "Rarely do we see 'marginalized' men in a positive role, nor do we witness supports for struggling low-income dads."

He's right that public policies focus disproportionately on mothers, from public assistance to health and nutrition programs. When it comes to low-income men, the two key areas of focus are child support enforcement and the criminal justice system.

A noncustodial father who can barely make ends meet often falls behind in support payments and can wind up behind bars. Add a criminal record to a thin résumé and his chances of getting a job that will allow him to support himself and his children diminish even further.

Maryland has taken an admirable step to put low-income men in a better position to fulfill their financial obligations. A bill recently approved by the General Assembly and signed into law this week by Gov. Martin O'Malley, will establish next year an incentive program to allow many low-income, noncustodial parents who stay current with their child support orders for a year to reduce by 50 percent any arrears owed to the state because of public assistance given to the custodial parent. Those who make payments for two years will have any state-owed arrears forgiven entirely. The program should encourage parents, mostly fathers, to pay up, and it allows the state to clear its books of debt that's not likely to be collected.

Helping low-income dads become better financial providers is an essential part of organized efforts to promote responsible fatherhood, whether or not men feel connected

to the mothers. Each year, the Center for Fathers, Families and Workforce Development in Baltimore helps about 200 men increase their work skills, clean up child support issues and deal with self-esteem, substance abuse or other personal "deficits" that prevent them from being good parents and neighbors.

Joseph T. Jones Jr., director of the center, and others recognize that too many children are growing up without the presence and support of their fathers. As Mr. Jones puts it, "Too many children are taking off and landing without air traffic controllers." And while many strong, low-income single mothers succeed against the odds, the absence of strong fathers hurts not only children and families but also low-income communities that can become fertile territory for violence.

Many fathers are AWOL because that's the model they grew up with. Mr. Jones observes that "the most emotional conversations in the peer support groups at the center are when the men start talking about their own relationships with their fathers." They either weren't around or did not know how to connect with their children.

Fortunately, that won't be a problem for the children featured with their dads in Mr. Shames' photographs.

- Diane Camper

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