

When in your life have you been the most thirsty? I think of playing full-court five-on-five basketball in 103-degree heat. The sun radiates off the concrete, and I feel it through the soles of my shoes. The competition is scorching, and during the next fast break, I run my tongue across my lips for a trace of moisture, but there's nothing there. My whole mouth feels dry and rough. I stop and scream, "Time Out!" and make a bee-line to my water bottle. At that moment, nothing matters more than quenching my thirst.

We have all been thirsty. Our specific memories may be very different, but that all-consuming desire for relief is the same.

Children feel that same urgent desire to be with their dads in a close, caring relationship. They yearn for male guidance and leadership, but too often it isn't there, so many children are forced to go on playing the game of life with that desperate, all-consuming thirst. Sometimes the need for acceptance and belonging gets so strong that they will try anything to quench their thirst—gangs, drugs, sex, etc. But those only provide temporary relief and soon make the thirst even more severe. The only truly satisfying drink comes from a father actively and purposefully pouring his life into his children.

Some Reasons Behind the Thirst

At the National Center for Fathering, we're endeavoring to bring a cup of cold water to some of the most father-thirsty areas of our nation—inner cities. According to Census Bureau statistics, 70% of all urban families have absent fathers, compared to 25% of households nationwide.

Other studies have concluded that the children from these households face a much greater likelihood of problematic behaviors such as dropping out of school, being sexually promiscuous, giving in to peer pressure, engaging in drug and alcohol abuse and committing delinquent acts and crime.

The Center's Urban Fathering Project seeks to re-connect these at-risk children with their fathers and, in the process, strengthen the foundation of the families and the communities where they live.

Urban fathers have some special challenges and barriers to overcome. Because of the high rate of fatherlessness and lack of male role models, many urban communities are mother-focused. Moms have courageously stepped up and taken responsibilities that men have ignored, so children have very strong attachments to their mothers. That can be a healthy situation, but often it creates another barrier for the father as he seeks to connect with his children. The mother is used to being in charge of the child, and she doesn't want to give up any control to a man who hasn't proven himself trustworthy. It's important to encourage the dads to respect their children's mother, work as a team with her, and over time, win back her trust.

There are other challenges related to education and employment. The average urban dad is relatively uneducated and has limited options. If he owes child support, getting a job means that his wages may be garnished, leaving very little for his own expenses. He may soon adopt a "Why bother?" attitude, get involved in drugs or crime to support himself, and lose his motivation to be a responsible father.

Other barriers for urban dads include addictions to gambling, sex, or drugs and alcohol; deep anger related to racial issues or family strife; low self-esteem; and a lack of moral and spiritual grounding.

The Urban Fathering Project

We see signs that our training programs are making a difference in urban dads' lives. They are understanding the importance of their influence, developing specific skills, and raising the level of positive, active and involved fathering.

Our new urban curriculum explores fundamental practices necessary to achieve life-changing improvements like "cups" of cool, refreshing fathering in the father-child relationships. Our ultimate objective with this curriculum is to support and assist men in other father-thirsty urban communities around the nation. We'll focus on three contact strategies:

1. Reconnecting fathers to their children. Various historical, economic and social factors (e.g., slavery and racism) have negatively impacted the role of the father. Many men did not have a father present to model a healthy father-child relationship, resulting in a continuing cycle of disconnection. But a father's presence is vital to helping each child discover and establish a purpose in life. We must not minimize his role in supporting his child physically, emotionally, and spiritually. The Urban Fathering Project emphasizes the father's ability to teach, guide and encourage his child through verbal praise, hugs, kisses, and an "I love you just because you're mine" connection. One of the main goals is to get fathers involved in classrooms.
2. Recruiting father-figures in churches and communities. Reconnecting biological fathers to their children isn't always possible—some fathers are too entrenched in their own problems and pain. But that doesn't mean the child's father-thirst goes away. These children need men who are willing to be positive role models. We are developing a strategy to train, equip and encourage fathers and father-figures to "adopt" fatherless children as mentors.
3. Rescuing fathers from the criminal and civil justice system. A staggering 70% of men in prison come from fatherless homes, and these fathers often continue the cycle since prison is an easy excuse not to be involved in their children's lives. Our efforts are designed to reach out to those prisoners and dads tied up in court actions, help them resolve their own issues of fatherlessness, and assist them in reconnecting with their kids. These connections will provide a powerful motivation to reform their lives and prevent the father-absent cycle from impacting their own children.

It Takes a "Whole" Father to Raise a Child

Lorenzo participated in one of our urban programs. He never knew his father. Facing the deficits from his childhood, he fell into drug and alcohol problems and fathered a child, but he never established a relationship with his son or his son's mother. He was wounded; he needed healing from his broken past to restore a sense of wholeness.

In our sessions, Lorenzo discovered that he must resolve these issues if he was going to become the father that his son so desperately needed. At our graduation ceremony, he spoke passionately about his new-found relationship with his son and committed himself to be the father he never had. The words of his son's mother

confirmed Lorenzo's transformation: "Lorenzo has done a complete turnaround. He has stopped drinking and smoking and is spending much more time with his son." Much of Lorenzo's healing comes from his "new" relationship with his son. He is becoming a whole father who can quench his son's father-thirst.

The National Center for Fathering's Urban Project will focus on inspiring and equipping men like Lorenzo to become positive, active, involved fathers. By quenching the father-thirst of our urban children, we will strengthen the foundations of our families and our urban communities.