

Daddyng – *The Great Equalizer*

By Allan Shedlin

It was no real surprise that the aspirations, joys, challenges, worries, and frustrations expressed by dads from Ghana, El Salvador, Honduras, Mexico, and the United States who participated in my discussion group echoed those I've heard so many other times from almost 200 fathers and grandfathers from 20 countries. During more than two decades of interviewing dads across the entire socioeconomic spectrum, a wide variety of ethnic groups, and ranging in age from 16-104, I've learned that daddyng is the great equalizer.

Daddyng is a term I coined 25 years ago to describe the ongoing process and commitment that occurs where fatherhood and nurturance converge – it is distinct from fathering which describes a one-time biological act that requires no greater commitment than a shot of DNA.

During hundreds of listening hours, one-on-one and in small fatherhood groups, I've learned that dads are not only willing to talk about daddyng but are eager to do so. Speaking from their perspectives as fathers and grandfathers, as sons and grandsons, as uncles, big brothers and fatherly figures, when questions are posed and it is clear that they have an attentive and eager listener, dads speak eloquently from their hearts. 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 and shared.

The men who have shared their thoughts with me spoke a lot more about the kind of father they did not want to be rather than the one they did want to be. The heart-wrenching expressions of daddy yearning far outnumbered those of the joys. The soulful sadness was often what came to mind first; the joys often needed a prompt to be expressed.

When I first started writing about daddyng there was little research readily available to substantiate the importance of positive father involvement to child well-being. And there was almost none that

I could find that discussed its importance to fathers and adult male development – this is an area that could benefit from greater attention.

Now the research supporting the benefits for child development of such involvement seems everywhere and includes the benefits to families and communities.

The research documents that father absence is a factor in 60-95 percent of all negative outcomes among youth – including school dropouts, drug use, teen pregnancy, crimes and violent acts, jail or prison time, depression, and suicides. Research also documents that when fathers are positively engaged in the lives of their children, infants experience better attachments, children develop stronger language and social skills, enjoy school more, get higher grades, participate in more extracurricular activities, are less likely to repeat a grade, experience fewer behavioral problems, and delay sexual activity. And, as noted above, perhaps least well-appreciated: when fathers are positively engaged with their children, the fathers are also enriched by broadened perspectives on issues, situations and possibilities. The research clearly substantiates that fathers matter to kids, kids matter to fathers, and families and communities are far better off when fathers and kids are positively involved in each other's lives.

With the plethora of research now available, I sometimes worry that our increased reliance and focus on it, tends to diminish and undervalue the essence of daddyng. Daddyng, after all, is a matter of the heart. One hundred percent of the men I interviewed believed that it enriched their lives.

As we think more about the kind of father we each want, or want to be — or want for our daughters and sons — here are some of the most useful things I learned from the men, as well as from my own experiences as a son, grandson, dad, granddad, and lifelong educator:



- There is no such thing as a “perfect dad.”

- Being the kind of dad we want to be is within our own control — for the most part, most of us have an opportunity to write our own daddying script.

- 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.

- Being an involved dad has a positive

tenderizing effect on men that also enables our hearts to expand.

- Although there may be a different emphasis or intensity between different socioeconomic or ethnic groups, the challenges and joys of fatherhood are universal – they cut across all groups and generations.

Being a dad is more than just who you are, it’s what you do. You can become a father by accident but you can become a daddy only by intention. Every day is a new opportunity to be a dad, and I encourage all fathers and men who play fatherly roles to just do it and “DADDY UP!”



Allan is, first and foremost, a dad, granddad, and founder of the DADvocacy Consulting Group. He’s also a former teacher, adjunct professor, school principal, writer for the popular and professional press, and advisor to the US Secretary of Education (Reagan), state education superintendents, and White House Office of Faith-based & Neighborhood Partnerships (Obama). Previously, he founded the National Elementary School Center, REEL FATHERS, and the NM Alliance for Fathers & Families. He earned his MA in Elementary Education and Special Education from Columbia University Teachers College.