

The Difference Between “Deadbeat” and “Dead Broke” Fathers

By Cheri D. Tillis



Parents as Teachers™

“Fathers love their children.” This is a phrase that we at Fathers’ Support Center, St. Louis have used over the years in the introduction of presentations, at conferences, and in speaking engagements around the United States. We use it because the noncustodial father has become a source of ridicule and disdain to many who have had to grow up without him fully participating in their lives.

Because of the structure of the child support laws in this country for noncustodial parents, there is nothing that empowers noncustodial fathers. The Center for Family Policy and Practice noted in an article titled “BEST Incomes for Noncustodial Parents Paying Child Support” that a noncustodial parent of two children paying 25 percent of his or her income for child support would need to earn \$40,016 – more than two and a half times the minimum wage – in order to also pay for basic monthly expenses and have economic security (Center for Family Policy and Practice, 2011).

If the noncustodial father wants to be an active father, he is subject to the whims of the custodial parent and/or gatekeeper. In many situations, the decision to allow him to visit with his children comes down to one thing: Is he paying his child support? A child support payment for some dads has become the golden ticket to interacting with their children. Unfortunately, if he is unable to pay he, is not given access to his children. Consequently, for many unemployed men being “dead broke” has also given them the stigma of being “deadbeat.”

When you think “Deadbeat Dad,” what is the picture that you see? A dad who doesn’t take care of his children? Someone who drives a fancy car or spends his money on himself without thinking about the needs of his children? You may even think of someone who has children that he never sees and for whom he provides minimum financial support, if any, while meanwhile he does provide for his wife’s, girlfriend’s, or significant other’s children. Well, if this is your picture of a deadbeat dad, I agree with you.

However, I would like to open your eyes to the “Dead Broke Dad.” The increase of poverty among noncustodial fathers is closely linked to their diminished ability to find full-time employment since the start of the recession in 2007. According to the 2010 U.S. Census, “Since 2007, the number of men working full time, year round with earnings decreased by 6.6 million” (2011, para. 12). The income of all single male households decreased by 7.9 percent from 2007 to 2010, falling to a median of \$35,627.

As stated earlier, fathers love their children. Unfortunately, sometimes a father is unable to contribute financially to his family. This is the dad who maybe lost his job and hasn’t been able to find additional employment, thus leaving him unable to contribute. This is the dad who will spend time with his children and has their best interest at heart, but because he is not employed he cannot buy the name-brand tennis shoes or latest electronics. This is also the dad who makes an emotional and spiritual investment in his family. He is a father in every sense of the word, providing the stability that comes with having a caring father.





When working with “Dead Broke Dads,” the best thing that you can do is encourage them to never give up. It will be essential to provide a multitude of referrals and resources that can assist them with securing the basic needs of life. It will also be essential to provide them with opportunities to bond with their children. Bonding outings are a tool we like to use at the agency. They consist of planning an activity, providing transportation, and maybe purchasing a meal. This allows a father to treat his children to activities that he is unable to afford.

Another tool I’d suggest is a guide to free family events offered by community organizations that fathers can participate in with their children and a list of free places they can go such as parks and festivals.

I will say it again: Fathers love their children and are an essential component of every child’s life.

What Fathers Are Saying

“I was fortunate enough to attend the Train Time activity with my own two boys, ages 4 and 2. When we arrived at the gymnasium at Davisville Elementary School, I was still filling out the sign-in sheet when my boys clamored past me to join in the excitement. That particular morning, there were perhaps a baker’s dozen of kids running from station to station of the various activities provided. The environment was clean, friendly, and well-organized.

Towards the end of the hour-long activity period, I was surprised to see how much time had elapsed, which is always a good indicator of the level of fun experienced. An informal poll I conducted among the fathers present that day revealed that most had already become regulars at the Saturday morning activities, which typically take place once or twice a month.

Although the group there was certainly lively, it was clear that the place had plenty of room for more young revelers. As for my own possible return to future activities, the deal was sealed when my older son looked up unprompted from cleaning up the mess to say, “Can we come back next time?”

– K. H., *PAT’s Fatherhood Initiative, North Kingstown, Rhode Island*

References

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