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Epidemic: Fathers Failing Their Sons

By John Howard Prin, L.A.D.C.

As a busy chemical dependency counselor, I see damaged young men enter my office every day as part of my job. They tell me their stories, tales of how they started drinking or smoking grass in junior high, of their arrests for minor consumption or disturbing the peace, and of how they dropped out of school in tenth grade or got a girl pregnant at the junior prom. I always listen for two facts about their upbringing: "When was the divorce?" and "When did your father leave home?"

Sure enough, although the details vary, their answers are sadly—and consistently—affirmative to both.

Bryan, James, and Todd— three young men in need of fathering

Bryan's parents divorced when he was one and he never remembers seeing his father. At 19, Bryan (no real names are used in this article) looks like your typical computer nerd due to his spacey "the lights are on but nobody's home" eye contact. It's because of the many drugs he's taken. Lurking under the inoffensive facade is a hurting, lost boy with more than 25 arrests and half as many jail terms, a compulsive drug user with a history of several CD treatments and overdose/ER/paramedic rescue episodes. Since seventh grade, when his mother "lost control and never regained it," Bryan's past has shaped his life. His boyhood is now irretrievable, his present is stuck, and his future is dismal.

As his counselor, I realize drug abuse is merely symptomatic of the immense issues plaguing him, and that CD therapy can do little more than "rearrange deck chairs on the Titanic."

James's dad divorced his mom when James was nine and has gambled compulsively all of James's life. Since the divorce, says James, "He's been in and out of my life, but mostly out." When his dad is *in*, however, "Dad needs me more than I need him and so I have to be the 'adult' meeting his needs, which is backwards and ridiculous." James's drinking and drug use since he was 11 has mainly been an attempt to fill the "hole in his soul" and deal with the upside-down imbalances of his life. At 20, he spends great amounts of energy enforcing boundaries with his dad but at the same time is torn because he is missing the love and affection every son craves "but, in my case, will never be."

As his counselor, I can educate him about drug facts and motivate his interest in sobriety, but it's impossible to undo the decades of devastation his home life has wrought on his psyche. He says his mom "means well but is spineless."

Todd grew up in a large family where he was lost in the shuffle. From the time he can remember, he was ignored and overlooked. His dad lived in the house but was emotionally absent to everybody. Todd cannot recall ever having a



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conversation with his father, and his grades, hopes for the future, and plans for his life were never discussed. "I learned to think 'I don't count' and 'I'll never amount to anything,'" says Todd.

When he started smoking marijuana and drinking in sixth grade, "nobody noticed and nobody cared." He hung out with the wrong crowd and, when one of his drinking buddies was shot and killed in a late-night drug deal, which he witnessed while sitting beside him in the front seat, only then did Todd come to anybody's attention.

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As his counselor, I feel challenged to convince Todd that a life of recovery is worth all the hard work of re-inventing himself. At 24, after years in the criminal justice system, he showed up on my doorstep, addicted, underemployed, a high school dropout, and aimless. To help him have hope, more than addressing chemical abuse must be done.

Don't leave the job to somebody else. Be a Dedicated Dad

Stories like these are typical and only too common. For every teenager or young man in his early 20s who enters my treatment program, only one in 20 has a father who lives at home and takes an interest in his son's recovery. In the past year, just three fathers have either visited or phoned to involve themselves in their son's care. That means upwards of 50 or more young men I've tried to help have been abandoned and discarded by the one person in their life who can make the most difference.

My message to fathers? "Wake up! You are failing your kids! They're missing out on the love only you can give—and you're missing out too!"

In my official role as CD counselor, I'm a listener, teacher, group facilitator, case manager, and often advocate with the legal system. The unofficial role I play most often is that of "Designated Dad." With the majority of young clients who allow me to step into that role during the three to six months we spend together, I talk/think/encourage/hug/challenge them as any responsible father would.

When Todd ("I don't count") started treatment, his slow and erratic progress signaled, "Help!" I talked to him privately about his poor attendance and low participation in group—and the lifestyle factors that he admitted were overwhelming his ability to engage in therapy. He expressed a strong, sincere desire to change but drug tests showed he was not remaining abstinent. He dropped out for a while and a month later he returned at the insistence of his probation officer. We all agreed to

set up a series of one-on-one meetings. The conditions to "father" Todd were ripe. In our first meeting, I didn't focus on drugs or chemicals but asked instead about his upbringing, his underpaying job, his flimsy finances, and his buried dreams, which he'd never expressed to anyone.

As our rapport developed, Todd opened up and grew slowly in the areas of examining his beliefs, behaviors, and emotions. The connection he'd tried futilely to find in drinking and drugs (substances are substitutes, after all) happened instead at a human level as I coached him to improve his hygiene, to get a daily planner and schedule his time, to earn his GED and visit

guilt and admit it plainly to him. He may not believe you at first, and may act indifferent, resistant, or hostile. Let him know you expected his skepticism and will accept his mistrust. Then move on. State your willingness to stay in his life and to provide the missing pieces from now on, that nothing will change your commitment to do so. Tell him you have come to understand that both of you have been damaged by your actions and inactions—him most of all—and that you want the damage to end, the hurts to be healed, and new possibilities to begin that depend solely on your taking responsibility and staying accountable. Then stop, wait, and listen."

Next I would tell you, "Let him have his

It's never too late for you to be a good father.

vo-techs, to register for classes that would serve his goal of becoming a plumber, and to change his negative self-talk to more positive "I can amount to something" messages. As he soaked up this personalized direction, he thrived in ways that surprised and delighted us both, in terms of boosted self-esteem and *successful abstinence*. For the first time in Todd's life, he learned to trust a man whose sole interest was seeing him identify his best interests and achieve rewarding results.

Fathers, start loving your sons. It's your job. Don't leave it to someone else. Start now before it's too late. Your son will make your life 20 times happier than Todd made mine when his personality and character finally reflect the loving care of a Dedicated—not Designated—Dad.

It's never too late for you to be a good father

So, let's say you're one of these dads. Let's say you'd like to reconnect with your son. But...but so much time has gone by and you know a lot of damage has occurred. If I had a chance to talk to you, I'd put my arm around your shoulders and say something like:

"You've made the right decision. It's not too late. The first thing is to face your

say, or have his silence. Whatever happens, remain calm and patient, realizing that your new message may take time to sink in and will no doubt need to be repeated in different ways over the course of time. You have just asked him to participate in a relationship you have not participated in yourself, so be gentle and steady. If he walks away, don't argue. If he attacks, don't defend. If he caves in or cries, put your hand on his shoulder and remain quiet until he is ready to talk. In any case, give him room for his feelings. Show your patience and calm assurance that something new can really happen, then give him time. Time with you has been missing in his life, now he is being asked to give you the kind of time that you denied him."

Regardless of the immediate or long-term outcome, you will know that you acted as a Dedicated Dad to your flesh and blood—and he will know, too.

John Prin heads the men's outpatient program at a treatment center in the Twin Cities. He is currently writing a nonfiction book, Stolen Hours, about the secrets that make us sick and how we lead double lives. He also lectures on recovery topics to a variety of audiences about healthy ways to think, behave, and live. To comment on this article, contact Prin at prinwriter@aol.com or 952-941-1870.