



October 31, 2009

Kids benefit from REAL dads

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Aubrey Chase, separated from his wife since 2004, entered Lighthouse Youth Service's REAL Dads program to get help so he could see his children more often.

Scott Merritt, a divorced father of three children, came to Lighthouse to learn how to be a better dad and repair the damage he'd done to himself after his divorce.

Too soon to judge results, they say. Their situations, like most every divorce or separation, is a work in progress.

To a man, fathers say they benefit from lessons learned in the 6-month program.

The centerpiece is 12 weekly fatherhood classes. Two available program perks are the immediate stopping of enforcement activities, such as jail time for being behind on child support, and reinstatement of a driver's license following registration.

Their children benefit, too.

REAL Dads - Responsible, Effective, Accountable and Loving - has helped Hamilton County collect \$168,000 in child support in the past year that would have otherwise gone unpaid. The program will also reduce costs of jailing fathers who don't pay.

Relationships forged

What's priceless, program supporters say, are the long-term relationships that can be forged between father and child.

"What I like so much about it is - we want people to pay (support) - but if you engage them beyond (paying), the kids benefit from having relationships with both parents," said Moira Weir, director of Hamilton County Job & Family Services. "Once non-custodial parents (usually the father) are paying, they are more likely to be interested in the child."

The county's child support enforcement agency handled more than 88,000 cases in 2008 and collected more than \$154 million in support. As many as 16,000 people who live in Hamilton County have had their driver's licenses suspended for failing to pay child support.

Hamilton County's child support enforcement agency, part of the JFS office, has supported the Lighthouse program since it started in 2007.

About 400 men, including the current class of 18, have gone through it. The only requirement is to have an active child-support case.

The idea behind it is that some money is better than none. Almost 40 percent of participating dads

now pay, compared to 90 percent who didn't when they started the program.

People who listen

For fathers, almost all of whom are low-income workers or unemployed and behind on their child support, the program provides empathetic ears and a child-support caseworker available to them on-site at Lighthouse's Walnut Hills location eight hours a week.

The caseworker is a face and name that helps the men negotiate what they say are court and child-support systems institutionally biased and stacked against them. The caseworker monitors progress. Counselors help men with employment, court advocacy and life skills.

There are two sides to every divorce story. Both sides passionately say they are right and their ex-spouses are wrong.

Wives have problems too

At Lighthouse, the grievances fathers voice are consistent: Mothers who dangle children like bait, pulling them away or offering time with them as a means of control.

Communication is a problem. There is no oversight on how a mother spends child support money - often on herself, the men say. She has an unmarried man living in the home. Some support orders leave the father little to live on.

Anger and frustration rose in tandem during a recent two-hour class Tuesday night at Lighthouse. The room was bare and institutional. Fifteen men sat on four couches and folding chairs.

Pizza would be served at the end of class.

During class, many men drank cans of Big K orange and grape soda and ate from bags of Doritos and Lays potato chips. They were dressed as laborers. One man had specks of white paint on his work boots and face.

REAL Dads director Calvin Williams led, first discussing the movie - "Once Were Warriors" - they had watched the week before.

The men saw parts of themselves in the film's main male character, Jake, whose alcoholism makes him angry and is a wedge in his relationship.

"Anger is a secondary emotion," Williams told the class. "It's a matter of 'before I let you hurt me, I'm going to be angry.' Why can't we say we are hurt and let our hearts break? Tears carry out toxins and hormones that are associated with anger and resentment."

Merritt, 38, of Westwood, didn't cry. He turned to another liquid. Fatherless as a child, he never wanted to bring up his three children in a divorce. Yet it happened in 2007.

"I drowned my sorrows in alcohol," he said. Court records show three DUIs.

He was sent into a 90-day alcohol abuse program.

When he got out, the job he had had as a fast-food restaurant manager was gone. His mother became ill. He moved in with her as her caregiver. He now works as a convenience store clerk for \$8 an hour but fell behind about \$5,000 in child support.

"I was without work for 10 months," Merritt said. "I cut grass, took every odd job I could find just to make money. She (his ex-wife) is a great mother. I'm working on myself instead of placing blame on the situation. I hope the communication with my ex-wife can improve so we can raise our children together, even though we're in separate homes. The children deserve it."

Lessons on being adults

Back in class, after discussing the film, the men move to a lesson on adult relationships.

Terence Cook, a lead life coach at Lighthouse, led the last hour.

Men took turns reading from a two-page handout.

"The truth about intimate relationships is that they can never be any better than our relationships with ourselves," read one class member.

Chase, 28, who lives with a friend in public housing in Winton Terrace, is making peace with himself by trying to make peace with his estranged wife.

"I understand better how she feels," he said of the effects of the program.

Still, he remains frustrated. He works full time for \$10 an hour as a window fabricator. He can't afford health insurance. He said he could not afford his Walnut Hills apartment and had to move into public housing with a friend. He has been sleeping on a couch for two months. When his children visit, Chase said he doesn't have enough money to take them out for a pizza. Instead, he feeds them bologna and peanut butter sandwiches.

Men are given \$20 or \$25 Kroger gift cards if they attend three consecutive classes.

"They help a lot," Chase said.

He said he is \$800 in arrears. Earlier this year, child support officials seized his \$1,500 federal income tax return.

Chase and the other men have an advocate in Williams, himself a single father.

Repeatedly jailing men for failure to pay child support makes no sense, he said. Children and families suffer. Men incur more costs in lost wages and legal bills and lost driver's licenses.

"I have not once heard a man in here say he did not want to pay child support," Williams said. "They say, 'I don't mind paying. I want to pay. I love my kids.' They need help dealing with some obstacles."

Additional Facts

About REAL Dads

What: REAL Dads is a free 6-month program, including 12 weeks of fatherhood classes, available for free through Lighthouse Youth Services.

Life coaches work with participants privately on employment, court advocacy and life skills.

Funding: The program is paid by a \$2.5 million grant (five years at \$500,000 a year) from the Federal Administration for Children and Families.

Eligibility: Men must have an active case with the Hamilton County Child Support Enforcement Agency to participate. A caseworker from the support agency is available eight hours a week on site at Lighthouse, 401 E. McMillan St., Walnut Hills.

Information: 891-3320.
