Pregnancy, birth and mothering are turning points in women's lives; for many young women with little education and few opportunities, they are the only path to adulthood. Lone mothers have to grow up fast, and women after a divorce often discover in themselves unexpected strengths. But where are the points of growth for the equivalent young men? If they have no real, continuing connection with the babies they have fathered, if they cannot make the transition from teenager to worker, let alone to provider, where is the growth into adulthood and maturity to come from?

Patricia Hewitt, "In Search of the Modern Father." The Independent (London) May 10, 1993

In a regional survey in 1987, it was determined that despite burgeoning recognition and support for organized child care programmes around the Caribbean, the vast majority (on average 85%) of children below the age of four remained at home, in the care of parents or other family caregivers (CCDC, 1988). The question was: How do we best support healthy child development among home-based caregivers? From the survey it appeared that parenting education efforts in the region seemed primarily directed toward women and teenage girls.
Further, a search of materials on the Caribbean family produced a wealth of literature on the Caribbean women and mother, but Caribbean studies on men and the family proved almost non-existent. Instead, stereotypes about men's attitudes and behaviors in relation to their families, mostly negative, have substituted for informed data.

CCDC was not comfortable addressing regional parenting education needs with only stereotypes of about 50% of Caribbean parents. Thus we established a research project to study Caribbean men in relation to their mating and family life patterns. Specifically the research was designed:

- to provide a socio-historical perspective of the roles men in the Caribbean have played within and on behalf of the family;
- to survey and describe the current attitudes and behaviors of a cross section of men in Jamaica;
- to use a participatory research design to generate data and also use local analysis and problem-solving related to the topics of study;
- to make research finding available in formats that would serve not only professional research/teaching interests but also the concerns of public educators, family life workers, gender studies groups, etc.;
- to design formats and materials to be used in conducting similar investigations in Jamaica and other Caribbean countries that could provide data to complement the Jamaican study.

**Methods**

There were two distinct paths used to gather data:

1. A survey questionnaire was administered to a total of 700 men from four different communities (two urban and two rural). All respondents were low-income, working class Jamaican men. A total of 110 questions probed a range of issues related to men's attitudes and behaviors about family life and childrearing.

2. The same issues—sometimes expanded—were also explored in a series of discussion groups with men and women in the same or adjoining communities as those surveyed. A male-female facilitation team guided these groups through participatory activities designed to evoke the same themes covered in the survey. The resulting discussions were recorded and findings compared to the harder data obtained in the survey.

In general, the methods were complementary and mutually reinforcing. This brief report will draw on findings from both approaches and will look particularly at some of the aspects of the man/woman relations which affect the lives of fathers and their children.
Man and his Families

It was soon apparent that as investigators we needed to be concerned with “Man and his Families” if we were to fully describe the man's contributions to the family. This meant we had to begin with a man's family of origin, in which obligations and expectations of a son are formed and often remain strong throughout the male's lifetime. We then had to examine how the common multiple-union pattern of men tends to add on more complex obligations and expectations as the man gets older.

In other words, a man's family is defined differently at different points in his life. There are familial responsibilities to parents (especially the mother), to his siblings and their children, to his baby mother(s) (women who bear his children), to his outside children (children he is not living with from earlier unions), and to children with whom he may now reside with a common-law or married wife.

Traditionally, Jamaican culture has been clear that a man's primary obligation to his family(ies), his role as a family man and father, is that of providing for the family. The study confirmed that in all the communities sampled the primary expectation, by both men and women, was that a good father should maintain the family financially (average 57% of all respondents). While in two of the communities more than a quarter of the respondents also thought that it was important for a father to "create a good family life" and "set an example", in the other communities and on all other dimensions no more than 10% of the sample thought that fathers should "guide and educate", "spend time and effort", provide "respect and positive interaction" or "provide discipline." Thus there are very low expectations in terms of father playing an active role in raising the children.

In terms of the good mother, in the two rural communities her primary responsibility was seen as "care of children and home" (60% of the respondents), with "setting an example" coming second (16%). In terms of other characteristics—"showing love", "showing respect", "guide and counsel", "economic support", "educate children", "communicate with/ marry father" and "discipline children"—less than 10% of the sample saw these as characteristics of good mothers. In the two urban communities, however, the pattern was quite different. Here "setting an example" was the most important (27%), with "economic support"(22%), "care of children and home"(19%), and "showing love"(19%) having nearly equal weight.

Defining Family Roles

The study showed that there are widespread common beliefs about the components of a father's role and a mother's role, and about the elements of responsibility required to be a good mother and a good father. But the study also documented the widespread confusion and contradictions men and women experience as they try to live out these expectations in a socio-economic climate which makes fulfilling them very nearly impossible. High unemployment and under-employment, migration to earn, women’s increasing entrance into the formal labor market (away from home),
the erosion of the extended-family's resources to assist with child care, all present barriers for men and women as they attempt to fill their understood roles.

The findings from the study underscored the link between economic stability and family stability. For example, in the most stable community sampled where there was the highest levels of post-primary education and more white-collar employment, men were more likely to be in a marriage or common-law union after age 30 and they had somewhat fewer children outside the present family than their peers in the other communities.

A man is considered the “head” of the family when he provides economic support and does not “give up his responsibility” in terms of the family. The following fairly typical discussion took place during one of the groups.

A chorus of Women: Man is not necessarily the head of the house.

Woman: If a man is living in the house he must be head.

Woman: The man cannot be seen as head of the house all the time. In ancient time, men used to be the sole breadwinners, but not again [now]. Men nowadays have a different view of things; they either leave the house when responsibility is too great, or even when they stay they just refuse to perform the breadwinning role. So the woman has to do it for the sake of the children.

Man: Not all men are like that.

Man: That is not a man, only a gender man, a male. “Man” is different from male. Five and ten-year-olds are males. But then he turns man, he is supposed to act as man. When things get rough he does not give up his responsibility.

Woman: Jamaica then is lacking in “men!” (supported by other women present.)

So what does a man do when he cannot provide sufficiently and regularly to satisfy the family's basic needs?

A Jamaican Man's Choices

So what are the working class Jamaican man's choices if he is to be a man?

1. He can define himself as progenitor. He can have many children to define his manhood. The study indicated that "getting", "having" and "fathering" children have powerful meaning for men. There was extensive discussion of rituals to prove paternity and the powerful two-edged sword of the "jacket."
2. His manhood can be defined by the number of women he has acquired. Because progeny usually result from and accompany these acquisitions, this strategy can become self-defeating, as the inability to support these new family additions often erodes the satisfactions of attainment. The discussion groups especially brought out the pain, distrust and anger between women and men in relation to disappointments, infidelities, jealousies, outside relationships, the distractions of peers, and the resulting vulnerability of the family unit.

3. Manhood can mean donship — a man can use images of power and influence, often through criminality, violence toward women and to other men, misuses of position and patronage, etc., to model male strength. Although men in the study did not generally condone hitting women, 1/3 to 2/3 of the sample admitted having done so. Many men, and some women, noted that "women often deserved it".

4. A man can migrate in search of means for responsible fathering, which may result in barrels and money orders sent back to support the family. There are high costs to the spouse and children in other than material terms. Many participants spoke of the pain of childhood separation from a parent for long periods and its perceived negative impact on their own development.

5. He can define his manhood to include nurturing and other domestic tasks, sharing caring and provision tasks with his partner and participating more actively in the day-to-day life of his child(ren). He can include self-enhancing community roles in his definition of manhood; the street drawings and community gardens created by otherwise idle youth come to mind, as well as the creation of support groups such as Fathers, Incorporated (see inset). Thus he can choose to create new roles to define manliness.

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**Fathers Inc.**

Fathers, Incorporated began in 1991 in Jamaica. It was the outgrowth of the Caribbean Child Development Centre's (CCDC) first parenting symposium, held in that same year. One workshop was held for fathers only and 17 men attended. Their common denominator was a sense that women stereotype them unfairly as irresponsible fathers. Under the leadership of facilitator Dr. Barry Chevannes, the group evolved, and a core group of approximately ten men began meeting weekly, calling themselves Fathers Only.

A year later when CCDC held a second parenting symposium, this time for men only, the Fathers Only group assisted during the day of workshops. As the culminating activity of that day, they officially launched their group and began a recruitment drive. On this occasion they officially changed the group's name to Fathers, Incorporated.

The group has become involved in a range of activities—from providing volunteer work in children's residences to sponsoring a workshop on Violence, Self and the Young Male held in Jamaica in August, 1993. A nother activity has been to form teams to spread messages about
responsible fathering more widely throughout Kingston communities. At present, most of the members (numbering about 70) are from Kingston.

While there was considerable public attention focused on the group when it first began, the men involved resisted being caught up in the publicity. The group worked over time to define itself and develop a sense of direction.

UNICEF was a major funder for the first two years of the group's operation. At this point the group lacks a full-time organizer, and suffers from a lack of funding. All the work is being done on a volunteer basis, and for most members earning a living has to take priority over Fathers, Inc. programs. Thus Fathers, Inc. has begun to lose some of its initial momentum. In response the group has decided to seek funding to pay a professional staff member. They believe this will help solidify the group and provide it with some stability, Says Chevannes, "We're still fledgling, but we have the potential to mushroom into something big."

For more information on Fathers, Inc. contact: Dr. Barry Chevannes, Fathers Inc., Department of Sociology and Social Work, University of the West Indies, Kingston, Jamaica.

The men who have opted for the first four choices have generally informed the popular stereotypes of the irresponsible Caribbean father, seen as having opted out of real concern for his children. But what of the fifth option? For how many men in Jamaica is this a viable way of defining manhood? Are Jamaican men re-defining manhood, by choice or under duress, in other than traditional or stereotypical ways?

The study would suggest that the answer to this is "Yes", albeit with some qualifiers. For example, the study indicated that:

- **MEN CONTRIBUTE MORE TO FAMILY LIFE THAN IS CREDITED**

  The research did not negate the voluminous documentation on the Caribbean woman's role as primary caregiver, nor the fact than many carry this role with the father absent from the home. However, the study did provide evidence that men are far more involved in positively contributing to family life than popular stereotypes suggest. Jamaican men have clear ideas about what a good father should be, and feel responsible with the mother for inculcating moral values and social skills in their children. Although many admit they cannot or do not always fulfill their responsibilities to the extent they feel they should, they define their responsibilities to include not only the undisputed role of financial provider but also counselling and communicating with their children and generally being a role model.

- **MEN ARE ACTIVE WITH THEIR CHILDREN AND IN DOMESTIC CHORES, BUT DO NOT FEEL ENHANCED BY THESE TASKS**

  The majority of men in both the survey and in the discussion groups described their active, often daily, participation in tidying, playing, and reasoning with their children, and in helping regularly
with homework. Forty to fifty percent of the urban sample cooks, tidy the house and go to the shop at least twice a week, although the men living with partners report somewhat less involvement in these activities than when living separately. This active level of parenting, beyond mere minding, is new.

At the same time, men generally admit that these contributions in the domestic sphere are not yet areas for boasting among peers. These tasks are perceived by most men and some women as primarily women's work. Therefore men do not yet see them as self-enhancing, particularly if their economic circumstances do not permit contributions in keeping with the culturally-prescribed role of breadwinner and thus family head, roles which imply authority and decision-making status.

**BEING A FATHER HAS STRONG PERSONAL MEANING FOR MEN**

Fathering is both part of a man's self-definition and his route to maturity. While fathering was not seen as limited to children under a common roof, this was nonetheless considered the ideal, and the arrangement that allowed a man to contribute most to his children's development. For those fathers who lived with children, there was a common acceptance of economic responsibility, but wide variations in their understanding of the social and psychological components of fathering.

**"OUTSIDE" CHILDREN APPEAR MORE PSYCHOLOGICALLY VULNERABLE THAN "INSIDE" CHILDREN**

Those children born early in a man's life, who provided him self-enhancing status when he was young, are of particular concern to us for future study. As these children grow older they get in the way of new man-woman relationships. They are often shunted aside as one or both partners abandon them emotionally and financially in order to consolidate the new romance and/or economic union.

Many children grow up in family arrangements that deprive them of contact with their biological father. If a mother enters a new relationship there is an implicit understanding and respect for the idea that the new man has rights over the woman (and her children). This might well mean the severing of the father-child bond. In this situation the attitude of many of the sample fathers seemed to be win some, lose some.

**CONDITIONS OF POVERTY NEGATIVELY AFFECT CHILDMANAGEMENT PRACTICES**

The extent to which economic deprivation and poverty serve to retard the development of more progressive mating and childrearing behavior must be underscored. It is clear that attitudinal change and structural changes are closely inter-related. To make a difference in attitude, there have to be economic changes.

**Future Considerations**

What happens to the children as a result of multiple union? While some of the men said "you win some, you lose some", it was clear that many felt they lost out on being able to father their
children in all they ways they would like. Sometimes they accept blame for this. Sometimes they blame their dissatisfaction on mothers who no longer want them to relate to their children. We have to ask, though, if children aren't the real losers in the man-woman contests that leave so many children without a relationship with one, or sometimes both parents.

What happens to outside children? 34%—40% of the fathers in the sample had two to three baby mothers; 4%—14% had four or more. While 48%—63% of the fathers in the sample were living at the time with at least one children under 19 years, 56%—71% of these had at least one child “outside”. Urban men under 30, predictably, were more likely to be in this group. Since large numbers of children do not live with their fathers, future research needs to examine the extent to which these outside children are responsibly step-fathered in subsequent family configurations, or are left feeling essentially fatherless.

Are there ways to support a re-definition of manhood that includes active fathering? Given the Jamaican realities of high urban unemployment and generally high under-employment, must we not encourage the trends, however tentative, in the direction of defining manhood and fatherhood (and motherhood) in broader terms that include nurturing, the sharing of domestic tasks and providing financially for the family?

Is the new fatherhood the result of what one may term a relaxation in the rabid macho orientation of our society, or of the new-found economic clout of an ever-increasing number of women, or simply a much more enlightened, humanistic approach to life and family, born out of a reality which has constantly sought to find value in existence.

I rather suspect that irrespective of the real reason, the outcome in terms of benefits can only be positive, and will in actual fact lead to the creation of an environment in which the participants—male, female and offspring—are more at home (no pun intended) and relaxed—providing a fluid and accommodating reality which would allow for healthy development, and for an increasing number of men to be real fathers.


Article Taken From:


Endnotes

1 The Caribbean Child Development Centre of the University of the West Indies School of Continuing Studies was established in 1975 to promote healthy child development in the region.
through training programmes, research, the development of curricula and other materials, and policy development.

2 a jacket is a child, attributed to you by your girlfriend/spouse, who is in fact not your child (or not likely to be yours). Sometimes men accept a jacket knowingly if they really love the woman, and/or if they think it will add to their numbers of children or women when bragging about their prowess. This is a double-edged sword, because if the other persons find out about it, it becomes a source of teasing and even derision. It also means that if you accept paternity for a jacket, you also accept financial responsibility for the child.

3 Jamaicans living abroad traditionally purchase goods, clothing, etc., for their relatives back home and send them in packing barrels. So receiving a barrel from foreign always creates great excitement.

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