

[Home](#) > Parent education and the role of young fathers: Response to Diana Slaughter-Defoe's Constance Clayton lecture "What shall I tell my children who are Black?"

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## **PARENT EDUCATION AND THE ROLE OF YOUNG FATHERS: RESPONSE TO DIANA SLAUGHTER-DEFOE'S CONSTANCE CLAYTON LECTURE "WHAT SHALL I TELL MY CHILDREN WHO ARE BLACK?"**

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My remarks will briefly focus on parent education and the role of young fathers. The research on parent education has focused primarily on the dynamic between mother and child. The needs of young fathers have been ignored and their importance has been downplayed, except when discussing dysfunction as Dr. Slaughter-Defoe alluded to in her presentation.

Young fathers have also been largely ignored when it comes to social service programs. According to Mazza (2002), of the large number of adolescent maternity and mother-baby programs available in the US, few focused on young fathers. Further, Mazza found that of the programs that were available to young fathers, the concentration of these offerings was on pregnancy prevention (p. 681). The absence of parent education programs for young fathers has allowed these young fathers to shun their parental responsibilities while experiencing few consequences. It could also be argued that the lack of parent education for young fathers could contribute to many of these young fathers having multiple children with multiple adolescent girls.

It is time to examine ways to provide parent education for young fathers and hold them responsible for the welfare of their children. This past summer, I was asked along with Probation Officer Bennie Price to develop a Fatherhood Initiative program for the Family Court and the School District of Philadelphia. This program, which we call Teaching and Uplifting Responsible Fatherhood (TURF) will serve adjudicated, delinquent youth ages 12-17 who are on probation and are fathers. Since neither myself nor Officer Price were experts in this area, we met with representatives from city and private organizations that specialized in facilitating fatherhood initiatives and programs. From these meetings, we found that there was only one fatherhood initiative program in Philadelphia that served the young adult population; all the other programs catered to adults.

That program was the MARS (Males Achieving Responsibility Successfully) program, which is run by the Communities in School organization and is located in 15 of the 22 comprehensive high schools of the School District of Philadelphia. MARS focuses on parenting skill workshops, lecturers, academic and personal enrichment, and counseling. However, not all young fathers enrolled in these high schools take advantage of MARS because the program is voluntary. The program that my colleague and I have developed would expand the MARS program by mandating that participation be a part of the probation requirements for adjudicated, delinquent youth. This would ensure that the young fathers attended school regularly and were learning valuable parenting, academic, social, and personal development skills. Our program also would add an after-care program where participants would learn valuable job readiness skills, learn how to become self-sufficient, be provided with social services to assist with psychological and personal needs, and learn how to navigate the Family Court system as it pertains to child custody and monetary support. We will also develop program aspects that focus on developing a relationship with the mothers of their child or children that would lead to shared responsibility for the welfare of the child or children.

The program that my colleague and I have developed is in the final stages of approval. The uniqueness of this program is its objective, which is to affect the young father holistically by combining education (academic and parental), social and psychological services, job readiness, mentorship, and parental responsibility. Lastly, this program brought together two systems - education and probation - that do not have a history of collaboration.

Dr. Slaughter-Defoe's presentation provided us the opportunity to challenge traditional views of parent education. By expanding the boundaries through research, we may help to shape a whole new agenda that would take parent education in a direction that is empowering and even more beneficial to the populations we serve.

Mazza, Carl. (2002). Young dads: The effects of a parenting program on urban African-American adolescent fathers. *Adolescence*, 37 (148), 681-693.

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