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A Social Work Mother's Love in Action

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It is often a misperception that fathers abandon their children, but it may be more accurate to state that the fathers abandoned the relationship with the mothers — fathers still love, support, and want what's best for their children. Over the past twenty years there has been an increase in resources and programs focusing on fathers' engagement and involvement (Jessee & Adamsons, 2018; Palkovitz, 2019). Although this is a positive step, nonetheless many dads are not in their children's homes. This reality leaves mothers emotionally drained and concerned with raising sons and occupying the unique role of being a nurturing guiding post for their children. Single female-headed households are nothing new, many mothers prevail in raising healthy, productive young men (Ebbert, Infurna, & Luthar, 2019).

Mothers' parenting efforts include being proactive in preparing their sons to combat daily mental challenges of stigma, low expectations, alienation, and societal discrimination. For many mothers who are parenting alone, their daily affirmation before sending their boys or young men to school is to remember "you're just as good as anyone

else,” “be smart” or “I love you.” But what happens when that is not enough, and school seems to be more of an obstacle than ally? This can alienate the student, preventing them from “feeling normal” and causing symptoms of stress, anger, anxiety, and depression. When this occurs, how can a mother become a professional advocate and staunch supporter of a son who is not academically and socially thriving at school? The following strategies are suggested by a mother of four African American sons.

As a graduate social work student and mother of four sons trying to balance school, work and motherhood, life can be very challenging at time— even more so for mothers of African American children. Raising African American sons is in itself mentally strenuous and grueling because at a very early age they need to be prepared for a society that will pre-judge and potentially criminalize them based on their gender, skin tone, physical traits, appearance, and address. So, as a parent myself, I had to train them at an early age to be mindful of their actions when interacting with the police, attending school, and while they are out in public. Every morning, I would prep my sons on how to behave and interact outside of our home to prevent them from becoming targets. Unfortunately, one of my sons was assaulted at his school by a group of his peers and was arrested. He was sent to a Juvenile Detention Center, placed on house arrest monitoring, and expelled, although there was video footage that showed him being assaulted by multiple students. Before this incident happened, my son had never had any behavioral infractions at this school. He also was a straight-A student who had received awards every year for his academic achievements. Still, he was labeled a gang member for being associated with this fight. As a parent, I was shocked and disappointed that my son was being treated like a criminal although he was the victim.

In my opinion no one within my son’s school or the police department considered any of the following: 1) my son’s behavior history, 2) his academic accomplishments, or 3) the video evidence that showed him trying to defuse the situation and getaway. As a mother, first and foremost, and a future social worker, I had to advocate and fight on my son’s behalf to ensure that he would not become another statistic lost within the justice system. Through my diligent efforts, I was able to get all charges dropped and my son’s expulsion overturned. To other mothers of African American children I would suggest that when approaching your child’s school, to know the school’s policy, build a working relationship with your child’s teachers and school administrators, become visible with the school, attend school board meetings, get involved, utilize available resources within your community for support, and do not be afraid to advocate for your child. No matter how many denials, disappointments, or setbacks you receive, never stop fighting for your child.

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Dr. Joshua Kirven is an associate professor in the Department of Social Work at Winthrop University and Part-Time Instructor at North Carolina A&T State University in Greensboro, NC. He is a research-practitioner with over twenty years of experience as an educator-practitioner. Joshua's research areas are fatherhood engagement and impact, neighborhood adversity and safety, prosocial youth development, and the influence of sports culture on behavioral health and academic achievement. He has an array of practice experience with solution-oriented, evidence-based interventions and macro programming across communities and public-private sectors in the area of socially conscious capitalism. He is a Fulbright Scholar and graduate of Hampton University, University of South Carolina, and The Ohio State University, respectively.

Ms. Shawanda L. Erby is a Winthrop University MSW graduate student, community advocate, and mother of 4 sons. She has a passion for community engagement activism, capacity-building and working with youth. She is the Founder/President of the Sisters United As One initiative. An empowerment enrichment mentoring program delivering leadership development, self-esteem building, academic support, community service learning, career development, healthy relationships and Sisterhood for young girls ages 10-18 in York County, SC.

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