

Breastfeeding Communities for Fatherhood: Laying the Groundwork for the Black Fatherhood, Brotherhood, and Manhood Movement

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Abstract

The role fathers play in the lives of their children is, as any behavior, dependent on their knowledge of factors influencing the health and safety of children and the societal context in which those fathers live, work, and worship. In the context of maternal and child health, the role of supportive partners of the mother dramatically strengthens the ability of the mother to set and achieve appropriate early life goals for their child, including wise nutritional choices and infant safety.

Reaching Our Brothers Everywhere (ROBE) developed in 2014 as an independently integrated program of Reaching Our Sisters Everywhere, Inc. (ROSE), with the mission of educating, equipping, and empowering men to assist in the ROSE effort of increasing breastfeeding initiation and duration rates, primarily in the Black community, by educating men of the numerous health, nutritional, social, and economic benefits of breastfeeding. Similarly, through education about the national Safe Sleep campaign, ROBE hopes to assist in the mitigation of infant mortality rates. Then, this article seeks to elucidate the modern Black Fatherhood Movement, in which ROBE observes and interacts, and to lay out axioms from the natural and social sciences that will allow us to achieve strengthened American family structures through transformative change, using the medium of Fatherhood work.

Keywords: breastfeeding, fatherhood, equity, communities

The History of (Black) Fatherhood Work in the United States

THE ROLE fatherhood plays toward the optimal health of the mother and baby has been well documented, and for an analysis of the history of this field in the United States, we refer readers to LaRossa's work on the social and political history of modern fatherhood.¹

The authors' niche is at the intersection of American fatherhood and the African American/Black culture, whose roles of fatherhood have, as is well known, been negatively influenced by the dominant, white male culture of the United States, which, for centuries, subjected the Black father to roles of helplessness as chattel (slaves),² and for centuries, after found legal and extrajudicial means to terrorize the Black male *among* his woman and children, leading to intense psychological and psychosocial confusion as to his role in his community and family.

Today, Reaching Our Brothers Everywhere (ROBE), along with the Black Fatherhood Movement in general, continues to

consolidate information regarding the specific barriers Black fathers face (in relationships with the Black mother and child). A brief list and associated narrative of these barriers are appended (Appendix A1), and includes well-known barriers such as those tied to U.S. mass incarceration, and subsequent economic and social ostracization that leads to material and psychological ineptitude as a father and partner.³

The History of ROBE

ROBE developed in 2014 as an independently integrated program of Reaching Our Sisters Everywhere, Inc. (ROSE), with the mission of educating, equipping and empowering men to assist in the ROSE effort of increasing breastfeeding initiation and duration rates, and to decrease infant mortality rates by advocating for safe sleep in the African American community.

The ROBE Wisdom Council was founded in concert with the first ROBE conference in 2014. The Wisdom Council

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model helped ROBE grow quickly, utilizing the path taken by the parent organization in ROSE; that is, the aggregation of individual fatherhood advocates onto a nationally recognized fatherhood practitioner network. The idea of ROBE and the Wisdom Council is to act as an *emulsifier* of fatherhood practitioners and policy influencers in the growing, nationwide Black Fatherhood Movement.

The Role of Fathers in Supporting Breastfeeding

When a man is serious about his role as a father, coparent, or caregiver, he naturally seeks to educate and equip himself for the journey ahead. Usually, the choice to breastfeed is left to the mother of the child, but feeding choices can be made easier when the man involves himself and provides his input.⁴ This review⁴ explored fathers' views on the pros and cons of breastfeeding, under the themes of (1) Breastfeeding and father-infant bonding, (2) Partner relationships and breastfeeding, and (3) Breastfeeding in public. It is clear from the study that well-informed fathers who understand the benefits of breastfeeding are better equipped to deal with the "cons" of breastfeeding, such as the perceived lack of father-infant bonding or the realistic insufficiency of breast milk, at times. Therefore, it is imperative to educate, equip, and empower men to assist in their partner's breastfeeding initiation and duration rate goals.

Finally, with an increasing rate of young fathers in the Black community, special attention must now be paid to the psychosocial factors surrounding young Black males in their journey of fatherhood. Ayton's 2016 study, conducted in another spatial, yet, similar temporal context, found that "Young fathers in our study had complex social and emotional circumstances that meant breastfeeding was not a high priority despite them valuing the health benefits of breastfeeding for their babies."⁵ However, the study concludes that "If supported by peers and their community, they appear to have a more positive parenting experience."

The Role of Fathers in Decreasing Maternal and Infant Mortality

The relationship between mother and baby is natural, but the relationship between a father and baby must be intentional or forged. When and if the father of the child is present, there is "double-coverage" to guard against any harm or danger which may befall the child. Responsible fathers have a tendency to be very protective of loved ones, especially their children, by making their environment safer. The father also provides comfort to the mother by being a present help for her should she need him or when he sees that something is not right.

Again, in another spatial context, a study of fatherhood in Africa and Asia found that "the man's participation in maternal and child health programs can counteract maternal and infant mortality in relationship to pregnancy and birth by increasing the possibility of women receiving immediate care in obstetric emergencies."⁶ This role is very similar to the role of fathers and breastfeeding in public, as it situates a fundamental role of the father; emotional and social support toward a natural process often stigmatized in many "developed" regions of the world.

Finally, and again considering contemporary (Black) society, a World Health Organization (WHO) report stated that "There are many reasons to highlight teenage pregnancy and teenage parents from a health perspective. The National Health

Service (NHS) in England shows that infant mortality rates for babies born to teenage mothers are more than 50% higher than the average... (and that) The infant mortality rate for babies born to mothers younger than 18 years of age is more than double the average, and this group also has an increased risk of maternal mortality."⁷ Since "the children of teenage parents are more likely to live in poverty, (and to) grow up without a father," they are again placed into the regime of social, political, and economic causes for maternal and infant mortality. Thus, one must work toward, and seek to influence, positive societal programs and factors that will reintegrate the role of the father in the early stages of child development ubiquitously.

Recommendations for the Future

For many reasons, including those of systemic oppression and racism, many Black men have been unable to be an active part of raising their children. ROBE's main purpose is to educate, equip, and empower Black fathers on how to coparent under different and difficult circumstances. An analysis of over 200 hundred studies on parent-child relationships found that having a loving and nurturing father was as important for a child's happiness, well-being, and social and academic success as having a loving and nurturing mother.⁸ Public policy and provisions must be revisited in an effort to support the inclusion of men and fathers.

A big take away from the first grant funded project was the lack of resources for men to learn about and advocate for breastfeeding. Black men deserve to be educated in culturally competent ways about prenatal and postpartum care to advocate for their partners. This is not happening in a systematic way in the Black community. In the Reproductive Justice space, Black men are basically being treated as if they are invisible. This is a crisis situation and a major reason why Black women do not get the support they need from the men in their lives to help keep them alive while pregnant and in the fourth trimester. Another big takeaway was the excitement and eagerness of Black men (uncles, brothers, stepdads, barbershop owners...) to learn and help improve birth and breastfeeding outcomes in communities of color. Recommendations include direct funding of community-based fatherhood initiatives that interact with established fatherhood organizations and a strong social media campaign that is focused on Black fatherhood and breastfeeding.

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Appendix A1. Barriers to First Food Fatherhood Involvement

A Survey of Political Determinants of Health

Partner-to-partner and partner-to-family relationships

When there is separation, or a bad relationship, esp. Those that involve “throwing rocks,” this inhibits access. Parenting workshops and training can help the parents understand that it is about the child, and not about them. We see partners here using the child as a “hostage,” esp. when partners are moving on to start romantic relationships with other partners.

Incarceration

Physical Access, including visitation, limits the father's role, esp. Physical support. We must create, maintain, and expand visitation privileges. Some correctional facilities are being set up to be “father friendly” (as judged by mother and child standards). Look at programs that have done this (e.g., Aid to children of imprisoned mothers, now Forever family). Reaching Our Brothers Everywhere personnel has good relationships with some of these organizations that were recently nationalized.

Employment

Look toward JUUMA with young fathers (opportunity youth) at sports venues in major cities, which provide employment opportunities. Workforce development. Insufficient employment for livable wages, including incarceration and other identified barriers. NUL has come to us asking for support for Department of Justice (DOJ) grant working with (specifically) adjudicated fathers.

Child support

Usually isolates men, we must help them understand that their presence is a form of currency for the father-to-child relationships. We must also be cognizant of the fact that there is a floor of financial support necessary, for a man to feel comfortable in the family. What do individual states do to punish fathers? Who is responsible for filing paperwork?

Establishing paternity

Legitimation, getting legal rights to your child. In General, when you sign the birth certificate, that is not legitimation. In Georgia (GA), you're basically signing up for child support. When you are unmarried, you HAVE to establish legitimation. In GA, they go after the father first before offering social safety nets. A man filing to establish paternity may come across as “challenging integrity,” how do we educate/train against this with responsible parenting curricula. Teaching why we legitimize and coparent.

Transportation

In a metro area like Atlanta (ATL), transportation becomes an issue for the man, woman, and child. Legitimate car seats! Programs across the country are cutting free car seats for the public (given by fire departments), often by bureaucracy.

Chronic health conditions

Lack of adequate health care, financial drain, and physical drain (when interacting with children), may be generational (esp. Diet-based health disparities), being comfortable in these conditions (lack of self-care) all harm the baby and family.

Irresponsible fathers

Dead-beat versus dead-broke: dead-beat will do whatever they can to avoid paying, including loss of employment as a way out. He is our “enemy” from our system standpoint, a quintessential example of irresponsible fatherhood, however, we have to make him a friend (feeling indicators). Black men make up about 6% of U.S. population, 13% of the race, upwards of 50% of prison population. Responsible fatherhood!

Summary of Solutions

Creating and disseminating a responsible fatherhood philosophy/curricula, including precepts of coparenting, through fatherhood trainings. Additional work on incarcerated fathers. Understanding the dead-broke is victim of systemic barriers (we can target these socioeconomic indicators readily).