

Engaging Young Fathers through Support Groups

[Music]

Leon Britton, Jr.: My best friend, Jesus, we had a bet. It was to see who could get Rosa. And the next day we are in Art class, and Rosa actually asked me a question. She said, "If you're not too busy between classes, can you walk me to my next class because I want to tell you something?" "All right, sure. No problem." So, you know, we're walking and stuff; whatever. She goes – she goes, "Yeah, I kind of like you." I was like, "Oh!" And that was like the dagger for me. Yeah, I won.

Rosa calls me up one day while I'm in my house, talking about, "I'm pregnant." And as soon as she said it, her mother picks up the phone, "So what are you going to do now? So what are you going to do now? She's pregnant. My daughter's pregnant." So I was like, "You know what? You need to calm down because, first of all, you yelling at me is probably going to make me hang up this phone on you. I don't want to do that. Look, the first thing I'm going to do is I'm going to take care of my child."

David Jones: Parenting is also an evolutionary process. It's ongoing; it changes over time. Right? Become more competent as you do it...

Leon came to the program through a referral. I think he had his own funny ideas about what to expect, what he was going to experience in the program. And one of the things he didn't want was someone sitting there telling him how to be a father.

Bingo! Okay. There you go. So you continue to grow; right?

Leon: This is my favorite saying about the Bronx Fatherhood Program: You're going to go in there, you're going to hold hands. We guys, we're going to sit together, we're sing camp songs, and we're going – we're going to have corny laughter. So, he immediately went into the program, about how, you know, it was based on helping young fathers. So, it immediately drew my attention because I was a young father.

David: When he came into the program initially, he would have his mp3 player on the music would be blasting. It would take him almost 30 minutes to get settled. And then when we got into parenting and child development, and we started talking about your role as a teacher and mentor for your child, he started asking these really great questions. And in asking these questions, you started to see things being revealed to him as he was making comparisons between his own upbringing and what we were talking about sort of in the workshops.

Leon: My relationship with my – my real dad has been spotty. And I'll never forget this. He said, "If something was to ever go wrong with you, you just messed up completely, I'll make another one of you." You know, he has five kids.

David: I don't think any of them, with the exception of maybe one or two that I've met consciously wanted to get their partner pregnant. But what tends to happen is they see an opportunity to make some real major changes. Things that they didn't have in their own lives, it's an opportunity to sort of correct that. And when they understand that they actually have influence over what can happen with their children, that becomes really exciting for them.

Leon: There was no more "It's all about Leon," because now you have other people to think of. It also made me think, you know, any move you make could affect this child's life.

David: I – I frequently say this, that parenting is probably the hardest job that you will ever do if you take it seriously. So just the mere fact that you have an opportunity to educate, to mold, to shape someone's life; to help them figure out what's going on inside of them; to help them negotiate the social relationships that they're going to develop with peers. All of that takes a lot of real work and real commitment. And when kids grow up without that, you can see why, if someone doesn't have a healthy moral conscience, consequences mean nothing to them.

Leon: Me and Rosa had been going through a couple of problems. It was just a big battle; you know? So I was like, respectfully enough, "Can I have my space?" She said, "Sure," with an attitude, "no problem." At that time my best friend, my right-hand man, was this guy named Mark. I got a text message on my phone from Mark saying, "Yo, Leon, I've got to talk to you." And he said, "No disrespect, Lee, but I have feelings for Rosa. I just thought that you should know." My mind just went blank. Like, what!?! So I said, "Are you out of your mind, bro? Do you want me to kill you? Are you serious? Matter of fact – you know what? – I'm just going to come to your job. I'll holler at you in a few." Click, hung up the phone, got the knife in the kitchen.

Before I went back in the break room... We had just gone over the unit of anger management – just gotten over it. Just gotten over the triggers, what can trigger you. Just gone over the meaning of anger, which is an instinctive response to a threat of external stimuli. So, I really give it a thought. You know? I think about it; I think about it. So I went to his job and I said, "You know what? You're in front of me now. What's the deal, bro? Speak your piece."

He said, "Yo, Lee, yo, I... You know, me and Rachel, we broke up, you know. And I see how you are with Rosa. You guys are always good together. You guys are always happy. I want that." I laughed. I was like, "That's it? That's – you just want somebody to take care of you, bro?" So I looked at him, I said, "You know what, bro? I forgive you."

David: Leon has taken his own experience with growing up with his own father as – as a barometer. And I think if you would ask him, he had a good relationship with his father until he hit his adolescent years, and that's when things became a little bit tumultuous. He wants to position himself so that he doesn't have that same experience. You know, it – it felt really great. He was just so deserving of that award. It felt natural.

He loves his daughter. He's a great father. He was preparing for her and providing for her in ways that – there are men in their 30s and 40s that still can't do that for their children. So, he had so much inherently that was already good about him when he walked in the door that this was a great situation for him to come into because the educational piece is what he didn't have.

Leon: Give Mommy a kiss. Give Michael a kiss. Okay, goodbye.