

# Fathering Fatherless America

*By Dr. Scott J. Larson*

One in two children now grow up without a father in the United States, and in our inner cities only one in five children live with their father. A whole new mission field has developed in America: Fathering fatherless kids.

Perhaps the most relevant missionary challenge for our society was penned by the Apostle Paul in his letter to the Corinthians: *Even though you have ten thousand guardians in Christ, you do not have many fathers, for in Christ Jesus I became your father.* (I Cor. 4:15 NIV) Paul knew that these people didn't need another teacher, their needs were much deeper, they needed a father. One can't be a father to very many, but Paul knew that God was calling him to be a father to some people in Corinth.

My wife and I direct a ministry to incarcerated youth throughout the six New England states. **In working with thousands of juvenile offenders one common thread that keeps surfacing is a hatred toward fathers. The effects of this in a young person's life are generally two -fold:**

## 1. A Hatred for Authority

A hatred for authority is prevalent when that first authority figure of a father is absent or abusive in a young person's life. When a teacher says "Sit down", they stand up. They hate the principal, the coach, the police, their boss at work, the probation officer, and even you if you begin to be an authority figure in their life.

When we began taking boys into our home who were coming out of prison, I remember being confused as to why a kid would like me when I came into the jail to lead a Bible study, but begin to dislike me when I took him into our home. I began to realize that it's natural for a young person to transfer the hatred that he has toward the role of a "father" onto anyone who begins to fill that role in his life.

Vic, a boy who lived with us could express this philosophy quite well, "I've been hurt so many times that I'll hurt you, before you have a chance to hurt me." Shawn, similarly said, "I'd feel more comfortable if you'd beat me than love me." Yet, as one outlives that role of a negative authority figure, slowly a new, more positive one is created in its place. This, in turn opens a kid up to accept every other authority that comes into his life... including God.

## 2. A Deep-seated Anger

Deep anger is resident in kids where rejection is experienced early on. One night at a Bible study in a juvenile jail we asked, "How many of you think that your anger has something to do with why you're locked up?" All but one raised his hand. We then asked how many had ever experienced rejection while growing up. Five kids in the group relayed stories of how someone in their immediate family had tried to kill them when they were young.

How does one go about ministering to this mission field? How do you re-parent such a group of

difficult kids? Paul continues his discussion to the Corinthians with *Therefore I urge you to imitate me* (I Cor. 4:16 NIV). That's a heavy responsibility, but statistics tell us that 94% of incarcerated youth have never had one single positive adult role model!<sup>1</sup> What a mission field! **I believe that if we were to ask young people on our streets and in our detention centers what they need from Christian men today some of their responses would include:**

### **3. What Kids are Looking For:**

#### **1. Model to me what it looks like to be a Christian man.**

One of the plights of "Fatherless America" is that boys grow up in a vacuum of male influence. While 100 years ago, one could only teach elementary school if he was a man, today 90% are women. More than 80% of child custody cases go to the mother, and 95% daycare workers are female.<sup>2</sup> Many boys grow up with little or no male influence in their lives.

What role do men play in the lives of boys? Robert Bly in his book *Iron John* says, "When a father and son spend long hours together we could say that a substance almost like food passes from the older body to the younger. The son's body-not his mind-receives, and the father gives this food at a level far below consciousness. His cells receive some knowledge of what an adult masculine body is. The younger body learns at what frequency the masculine body vibrates. It begins to grasp the song that adult male cells sing."

Manhood is something that cannot be taught in a textbook, it must be passed on. When a boy leaves our home we have a tradition where each one says what that individual has meant to him and vice versa. John had lived with us for two years, and was leaving for Bible college. We had met weekly for discipleship and had many great spiritual conversations. I wondered what he would say had meant the most to him.

John said, "There are two things that really stick out in my mind. The first is that you wrestled with me. My dad never wrestled with me, but you would wrestle with me. If I ever have kids I'm going wrestle with them."

"The second is watching you and Hanne's marriage. I've never really seen a marriage up close. I never thought I would get married, because it just didn't make sense to me. But, now I want to be married some day, and I want to have a marriage like yours."

Paul illustrates this as he addresses the Thessalonians, *We loved you so much that we were delighted to share with you not only the gospel of God but our lives as well, because you had become so dear to us* (I Thes. 2:8 NIV). Do we really want kids to see our lives up close? I've discovered in these past 10 years of working intensely with troubled teens, more anger, selfishness, and pride surfacing in my life than in my previous 15 years as a Christian combined. These kids will tend to bring out the worst in you.

I've concluded that if I'm going to pass on anything of substance to troubled kids, it has to be out of the overflow of what God is doing in my life. In fact, it seems for every pound of grace that I extend to kids, I need to have received 10 pounds of it from Christ! You can't give out what you haven't received. I must experience the love of the The Father, before I can pass on the love of a father.

## **2. Believe in me even when I don't believe in myself.**

At-risk youth have typically experienced so much failure that they no longer believe they can succeed at anything. Steve had a real gift for art. One day while I was in his cell I asked him if he would make a painting for me. He agreed, and within a couple of weeks he had created a real masterpiece. When I reached for it to take it home, he said I couldn't have it because he wasn't finished with it yet.

"What do you have left to do?" I asked. "Oh, I haven't signed it yet", he responded, "I'll give it to you next week." Several weeks went by. Each week I would ask if he had signed it yet. The response was always the same. "Not yet, but by next week I'll have it finished." It finally dawned on my why Steve was afraid to complete the painting. As long as he wasn't finished with it, nobody could criticize it. After all, he wasn't finished with it yet. But as soon as Steve signed it and gave it to me, it was open for inspection, which posed the possibility of failure.

I was also very insecure growing up. In fact, I had developed an ulcer by the eighth grade, due to excessive worry, anxiety, and a major inferiority complex. During the summers of my junior high school years, I worked for Larry, a farmer that I idolized. One evening when my family was visiting Larry, my mother asked him, "What do you think of Scott? Do you think he's going to make it?"

I was in the next room and they weren't aware that I could hear their conversation. As I strained with all my might to hear his reply Larry said, "Some day Scott will be the president of General Motors." Wow! That is the first time I can remember ever receiving a compliment from anybody. And the fact that it was said behind my back made it even more powerful. Someone once said that behind every successful man is a woman who believes in him. Similarly, no teen can really succeed without at least one adult who really believes in him.

## **3. Give me boundaries.**

Tommy was locked up and in a Bible study where we were talking about rules when he said, "I could do anything I wanted growing up. No one ever told me I had to go to school, when I had to be home at night or anything. They never put any rules on me." "Oh here we go", I thought, "bragging about not having any rules. If only he understood..." Then Tommy looked down as he continued, "There wasn't much love in my home." Often times the opposite of love is not hate, but is not caring.

A few years ago we led a team of high school students on a mission trip to Haiti. One day our guys were bartering in a local market and each bought a machete for \$5.00. They were so proud of their purchases, but didn't really know what to do with them. Outside the window in the church where we were staying they noticed a couple of trees. They began having a great time slicing branches off, marveling at the sharpness of the blades.

The next day the homeowner demanded to see the pastor, furious about what had happened to his trees! Little did the boys know that trees are a precious commodity in Haiti, and they had done a great deal of damage not only to the neighbor but to church relations as well.

We had a very difficult meeting that evening with our team. I was very angry, and we talked for a long time about what had happened and about what we should do. On the flight back to America the kids filled out evaluations of the trip. In my evaluation, the machete incident was the only real negative. I expected to see lots of negative comments from the kids on that night as well. Instead that meeting was consistently listed as one of the highlights of the trip! Kids want to know what the boundaries are. It makes them feel safe.

Boundaries are not just restrictive. They also provide a sense of purpose and belonging. I once asked kids in a detention center Bible study if they felt there was a purpose for their life. One of them responded. "No, that's why we're in here." Psalm 16:6 says, "My boundaries have fallen in pleasant places oh God, my lot is secure." It's a privilege to help a young person discover the pleasant places God has prepared for him.

#### **4. Teach me who I am.**

If there was ever a group of people with an identity crisis, it's troubled teens. At a detention center Bible study I asked Jeremy what he'd like to be doing in five years. He quickly responded, "I'll be in prison in five years". "Why do you say that?" I asked, "You'll be out of here in a couple of months."

"Because I've always been a troublemaker and I'll always be a trouble maker," was his response. I wondered how many times he had heard that said about himself, so that now he possessed it as a part of his identity.

The Apostle Paul spends most of the space in his letters telling his readers who they are, before ever telling them what to do. He spends the first eleven chapters of Romans explaining who they are before telling them what to do in chapter 12. He spends the first four chapters of Galatians, the first three chapters of Ephesians, the first three chapters of Philippians, and the first two chapters of Colossians on identity in Christ before giving them anything to do. Anything less merely produces Pharisaic Christians.

We've too often made the mistake of having a young person share his testimony before he was ready. It's a predictable pattern. After the teen shares a powerful testimony, the audience proceeds to tell him how he's one of the most spiritual and wonderful Christians they've ever heard. The problem enters when a kid gets put up on the pedestal of a perfect 10, while they still see themselves down at 1 or 2. They feel very torn with this inconsistency, and subconsciously will mess up big time just to get everything back down to the level of 1 or 2.

The most powerful teaching for at-risk youth is the "identity truths" of who we are in Christ. Ricky, had pulled me aside after Bible study one afternoon. He said he had been secretly making weapons in his room out of combs, plastic silverware, etc. and had them hidden under his bed. I asked him how he felt about that. "I feel bad", he said, "that's why I wanted to talk with you, I'm not even sure why I'm doing it. I guess it's just a habit."

"Ricky" I said, "You feel bad because Christ has made you a new person. The old Ricky would feel very comfortable making and using weapons, but that person doesn't exist anymore." His face began to light up as we talked. Soon we all had to line up. As Ricky came into line a few minutes late, he whispered to me that he had just thrown all the weapons away.

This business of re-parenting troubled kids is certainly not flashy or glamorous. In fact, it can be downright discouraging much of the time. When a kid you've invested so much into ends up getting right back into trouble again, you wonder if it is all worth it.

I recall reading a study cited in Youth Worker Journal some years back. They tracked kids who were walking with Christ ten years after high school to see what the common denominators were. Would it be consistent Bible study as a teen? Attendance at a Christian school? Daily prayer? The two most common factors present were:

1. They saw authentic faith lived out in at least one adult.
2. They rebelled against it for a time.

You can be that one person who God allows a kid to see authentic faith in. He may rebel against it for a time. But some day when he hits bottom, he'll think back to what was really real. And your name and face will come across his mind. And even though he may have had 10,000 instructors in Christ, if he had a father in Christ it'll make all the difference in the world!

## **12 Practical Ways for Men to Impact Fatherless Kids**

1. Be a mentor to a boy without a father through Big Brother or some other agency
2. Contact your local junior or senior high school to tutor a needy kid
3. Teach Sunday School
4. Become a leader in Awana, Pioneer Clubs, or Adventure Club
5. Meet one-on-one weekly, with a boy in your church or neighborhood who doesn't have a father in the home
6. Become a leader in Boy Scouts or Cub Scouts
7. Coach Little League or some other sport
8. Volunteer to work with needy kids in an inner city ministry
9. Hire a potentially "at risk" kid for yard work or in your business
10. Become active youth leaders in your local church or a parachurch organization
11. Start a church-based sports league that reaches out to needy kids in the community
12. Lead a Bible study in a juvenile detention center or group home

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2. Taken from seminar taught by Dr. Robert Hicks in Pittsfield, MA