

## TRUTH IN LOVE

### **Hard in the Paint:** *Understanding African American Father Identity*

**By Parris J. Baker**

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Who are fathers and what do fathers do? It's more complicated than you think. In western culture the contributions of fathers are less known, vary by race and class, and at times are reduced to phrases such as "sperm donor" and "my ATM father." Fatherhood has received inadequate academic attention and much of the extant fatherhood research has focused on child support enforcement and the impact of father absence on children. University of Chicago Associate Professor Waldo Johnson asserts that much of what we know about fathers is based on data collected from mothers.

Children who grow up separated from their biological father usually have common characteristics. They are more likely to drop out of high school, become teen-parents, suffer poor psychosocial adjustment, have earlier and increased involvement with juvenile corrections systems, and experience physical and psychological health-related problems (Lamb, 2002). When fathers are not physically present with their children, these fathers are not absent. Their physical absence is felt acutely and chronically by their children, which may explain many of the negative outcomes associated with father-child separation.

The metaphor, hard in the paint, is an NBA basketball euphemism used primarily during the NBA playoffs that describes an attempt by one offensive player to score in the painted area underneath the basket on the arena floor. The typical

attitudinal convention of defensive players is to not allow any opposing player to score in the painted area. This strategy requires the defensive player(s) to sacrifice a personal or flagrant foul to stop the offensive player from scoring. The purpose of the hard, generally aggressive foul is to dissuade the offensive player from returning into the painted area. The offensive player must demonstrate a greater conviction, commitment, and efficacy to score while recognizing he will receive a hard, aggressive foul with every attempt to score. In the painted area he believes must go “hard in the paint.”

Hard in the paint is also an African American colloquialism used by some African American fathers to describe attempts to access systems (the painted areas) where their children live, are educated, and play. “It takes a village to raise a child,” a Nigerian proverb whose origins are generally traced to regions of Igbo and Yoruba, Nigeria, African, suggests that raising children is a communal enterprise that requires multiple contributions from a variety of people or systems. However, African American fathers who live away from their children, primarily noncustodial and incarcerated fathers, express the necessity of going hard in the paint if they want to visit with their children. When confronted by custodial mothers, child welfare and support enforcement officers, and school administrators, these fathers believe these “gatekeepers” create obstacles to keep them away from their children. There is a historic context for these beliefs.

The entire ecology of black people was a space of total rule by white people. From the violent capture and enslavement of Africans, to forced separation and dissolution of families, the role expectations of fathers as provider, protector. And leader of the family and community were destroyed. Using fear and intimidation, white men, and not black fathers, possessed and exercised ultimate hegemonic control over the life and death of black bodies. Rebellion, resistance, and disobedience were met with direct, decisive, and brutal punishment. For many African American fathers, performing these role expectations in an environment of chattel slavery, discrimination, and racism were nearly impossible.

African American fathers have been presented in the media as invisible figures, either absent from the home of their children, tangential to the daily functioning of the family, or irresponsible and incapable of managing a family. According to Dr. Johnson, financial assistance from the United States government was predicated on the assumption the biological father was absent from the home. For poor fathers this expectation effectively encouraged father absenteeism. In 1965, an evaluation of the African American father, his role performance as father and his contributions to family functioning were documented in a treatise titled *The Negro Family: The Case for National Action* (later referred to as the Moynihan Report).

In this report, Senator Daniel Moynihan described the African American family as “the tangle of pathology.” Ignoring the impact of institutionalized racism,

economic discrimination, and residential oppression (a real estate practice called redlining), the Moynihan Report blamed African American fathers, due to their chronic absence, as primarily responsible for the deplorable economic conditions of many African American families in the United States.

In 1972, the Temptations recorded the Grammy-winning single, “Papa was a Rollin’ Stone.” The chorus of this song seemed to reinforce this national perception of African American fathers: *Papa was a rolling stone. Wherever he laid his hat was his home. And when he died. All he left us was alone.* The Child Support Enforcement Program, Title IV-D of the Social Security Act, was created in 1975 with the primary objective of holding noncustodial parents financially responsible for child support. Initially, child support legislation directed aggressive attention to “deadbeat dads,” irresponsible fathers who could afford to pay child support but refused to do so, regardless of whether it was legally required. At that time, the true profile of a deadbeat dad was a parent, generally white fathers, whose annual income exceeded \$75,000 who did not pay child support. The media portrayal of deadbeat dads, however, were black fathers who willfully avoided their financial responsibilities to their families.

During the 1990s, the concept of “responsible fathering” emerged as an expectation of the role of father. Responsible fathering placed greater emphasis on the economic support of children. This concept was viewed as a lifelong commitment for all fathers, regardless of child residency. The goals of Child Support Enforcement found in the Personal Responsibility Work Opportunity and Reconciliation Act of 1996, were to locate noncustodial fathers, establish legal paternity of children, establish child support orders, and improve collection and distribution of child support awards.

Currently, there isn’t a uniformed definition of fatherhood that fully captures the varied cultural scripts or lived experiences of fathers. However, African American men state they find enormous paternal satisfaction in fulfilling father role expectations. When allowed to participate in the lives of their children African American fathers make a world of difference.

Children with involved African American fathers have higher academic performance, are more likely to graduate from high school and attend post-secondary institutions, are less likely to participate in criminal activities, enter juvenile correction facilities, and experience greater mental and physical health.

According to one of the fathers who participates in the Abba Fathers Support Group, “sometime when you go into the paint, you know you’re going to get the hell knocked out of you. You take the blows and get back up to try it again. But when you score, knowing all the things that were used to stop you from seeing your children, man that feels good!”

Happy Father's Day!

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### ABOUT THE AUTHOR

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