

GUEST COMMENTARY:

Fathers Hold Key to Communicating with Troubled Teens

By Jeffery M. Leving - Chairman, Illinois Council on Responsible Fatherhood | Posted: Saturday, October 31, 2009 12:00 am

Hilda Franco and the Chicago Freedom School have developed a program promoting outreach to children and teens caught in the crossfire of violence plaguing Chicago Public Schools. I applaud her initiative and agree that active communication with these children is a positive move in the right direction, but I would like to challenge Times readers to take this idea one step further.

As chairman of the Illinois Council on Responsible Fatherhood, I believe the best way to reach these teens is to teach their fathers how to communicate with their children.

In the Riverdale neighborhood where Derrion Albert grew up, nearly 80 percent of households with children do not have a father present. Research shows that fatherless children are twice as likely to drop out of school, consistently score lower than average in reading and math, and are 11 times more likely to exhibit violent behavior. There are gender and economic barriers that must be overcome or these fathers will continue to be kicked to the curb.

We need to go into this community to empower and educate these men on the importance of being actively involved in their children's lives. We need to make sure all fathers in all communities know that they have the legal right to request custody and visitation of their children regardless of their financial situation.

Incarcerated fathers are also victimized by the denial of equal protection. We need to go into the prison systems and give incarcerated fathers the same resources available to incarcerated mothers to help them parent their children both in and out of prison. While Illinois has a program in place giving incarcerated mothers access to their children through virtual visitation (i.e.: video conferencing), the same option is not provided to fathers.

I co-authored the Illinois law giving judges the ability to award virtual visitation to noncustodial parents. Now that this law is in place, let's implement a virtual visitation program for fathers through the Illinois Department of Corrections focused on the best interest of the child. As the goal, incarcerated fathers remain in contact with their children.

Furthermore, during my visit to the Decatur Correctional Center, I learned that incarcerated mothers not only have access to virtual visitation with their children, but are also allowed to live with their babies in prison. The lack of similar programs for fathers is nothing short of institutionalized gender

preference showing what little value our society places on the importance of paternal love and bonding. This bias being perpetuated in our prisons not only illustrates the obstacles in place for fathers wanting relationships with their children, it tramples equal protection safeguards.

Until fathers and children everywhere engage in positive relationships, other proposed remedies to safeguard children from violence are just a Band-Aid on a gaping wound.

As a community, we all need to actively search for a solution to this ongoing violence. I agree that giving teens a forum to express themselves to caring adults is invaluable, and ICRF is committed to ensuring that every father in Illinois has the knowledge and resources to be there for their kids when they are needed most. But, we must never forget that any man's loss of his child is a loss for us all.

Jeffery M. Leving is Chairman of the Illinois Council on Responsible Fatherhood. The opinion expressed in this column is the writer's and not necessarily that of The Times.