

Better Fathers Make Healthier Kids

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When men become more engaged in fathering, the health of their children improves. That's the message that Jay-Michael May enthusiastically delivers to a group of 17 men at Odyssey House, a nonprofit facility for addiction treatment. May is there to teach these the men how to become better fathers.

Health educator Jay-Michael May wants to help New Orleans-area men "quench their thirst for fatherhood." (Interview by Fran Simon)

A health educator and outreach coordinator with the [New Orleans Children's Health Project](#) in the Tulane Department of Pediatrics, May speaks like a man who is on a mission.

"An epidemic of fatherlessness is a reality for a lot of kids growing up in the United States," says May, who holds a master's degree in health services management and is certified by the National Center for Fathering and the Fatherhood Foundation. "Post-Katrina, a lot of kids [in New Orleans] are having to step up to the forefront. They're being raised by siblings, non-custodial parents or grandparents. Some of the kids are pretty much having to raise themselves."

There are 23 million children in the United States who are growing up in homes without fathers. Many will lack the economic, financial, emotional and spiritual support that May believes will help them become stewards of their own health.

The top three killers of children in the United States are preventable: motor vehicle accidents related to substance abuse, homicide and suicide. May believes that father figures can serve as mentors to stem sickness and death in children. The life-skills classes that May leads not only address issues of mortality but also the top causes of childhood illness, including substance abuse, obesity, teen pregnancy and

mental health disorders.

In addition to teaching fatherhood classes, May talks to groups of children at community summer camps about eating right, staying fit and avoiding cigarettes, drugs and alcohol. During the school year, he also teaches in classrooms around the city. May can relate to the issues facing both the men and children he works with. His own father died when he was 11 years old and he had to assume the role of head of his family's household.

"The thirst for fatherhood is there. These men need somebody to help them quench it," May says. "I hope I can be that person to help them quench that fatherhood thirst with this program."

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