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Terence Ray
+ Curtis
Marshall

Course helps young men develop parenting skills

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Overwhelmed with the prospect of being a teenage parent, 19-year-old Will Edwards was among a group of seven young men who recently discovered the true meaning of fatherhood.

Advertisement "They taught us strategies to cope with life," said Edwards, who graduated Saturday from the Nurturing Fathers Program.

The fathers program is a 13-week journey that taught Edwards and other new dads how to love and care for their children.

Many people learn those lessons from their parents, Edwards said, but there are those who didn't have a family structure and can't draw from those experiences.

"I knew I wasn't going to run from my responsibility like my father did, but I didn't have a basic plan of how I would meet the needs of my child," Edwards said.

So each Saturday morning for the past 13 weeks, Edwards, whose child is due in March, and other young men learned the roots of fathering, from establishing a nurturing relationship with their children to fathering without the use of violence.

The program looks at anger, alcohol and substance abuse as well as stress as roadblocks on the course to becoming nurturing fathers.

The hardest part of the training session was teaching participants to use discipline as a guide instead of physical punishment, said Terence Ray, principal consultant for Ray Consulting Group, which leads the nurturing seminar.

"It's one of the most volatile sections. People come in with their own cultural perspectives about discipline. They've learned if you spare the rod, you spoil the child," said Ray, who also benefited from a similar program years ago.

"When I was brought up, I was taught that children should be seen and not heard," Ray said. "We learn

how to parent the way we were parented."

Ray said that through the program fathers learn how to express parental disappointment through means other than "whippings."

"Since parenting is a learned behavior, it can be relearned," he said. "With the nurturing concept, participants find that kids are people, too, and they also have feelings."

The program stresses patience, said Dedric Vaughns, 19, the father of a 1-year-old son. Patience was a virtue that at first was foreign to him, he said.

"I had problems coping with my 1-year-old. He would cry all of the time. I didn't feel comfortable being with him by myself," said Vaughns, who also completed the program.

"Now, we spend more time together and he's fun to be around," Vaughns said. "I didn't think that at first, but I'm learning his patterns and his different cries."

Some of the participants in the fatherhood program weren't fathers themselves but served in that capacity in the lives of others.

Alonzo Beets, 21, whose older brother was shot and killed, said he completed the program in an effort to be a role model for his slain brother's 13-year-old daughter. "She's going to need a male in her life," Beets said. "I spend more time with my niece now, and I treat her like she's my own."

Others said that what they learned through the program helps them combat the negative peer pressure to neglect their responsibilities.

"People have downed me and said I won't make it, but so far I have proved them wrong," said Derrick Childs, 19, who has an 8-month-old daughter.

The men involved in the program participate in the Private Industry Council's REACH program, which is part of a nationwide initiative funded by the U.S. Department of Labor that works with youths living in high poverty areas.

"This population is identified as a troubled population, but these guys embraced us," said Richard Badger, a program facilitator. "They just needed mentors. They need men to be around who are constructive and positive."

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