

THE CINCINNATI POST



SCRIPPS HOWARD

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A little support helps dad be a family man

By **Peggy Kreimer**
Post staff reporter

Brandon Claborn pulled his 4-year-old son B.J. onto his lap and started reading him "The Tale of Jemima Puddle-Duck."

The duck is trying to be independent, but she almost loses her eggs and her life to a crafty fox. Luckily, she gets help from her friends and goes on to raise her ducklings in a more secure home.

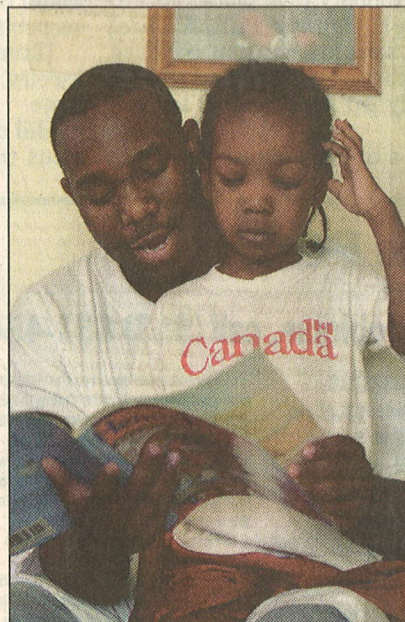
The story by Beatrix Potter resonates with Claborn, a 23-year-old single father who is more than \$2,500 behind in his child support payments and struggling to meet his \$450 a month commitment on a

dishwasher's salary. That debt looms like a fox, but Claborn just found a friend that could make life a lot more secure for him and his family.

The friend is a new program called REAL Dads, run by Light-house Youth Services in partnership with the Hamilton County Jobs & Family Services' Child Support office and Messer Construction. The "REAL" stands for Responsible, Effective, Accountable and Loving.

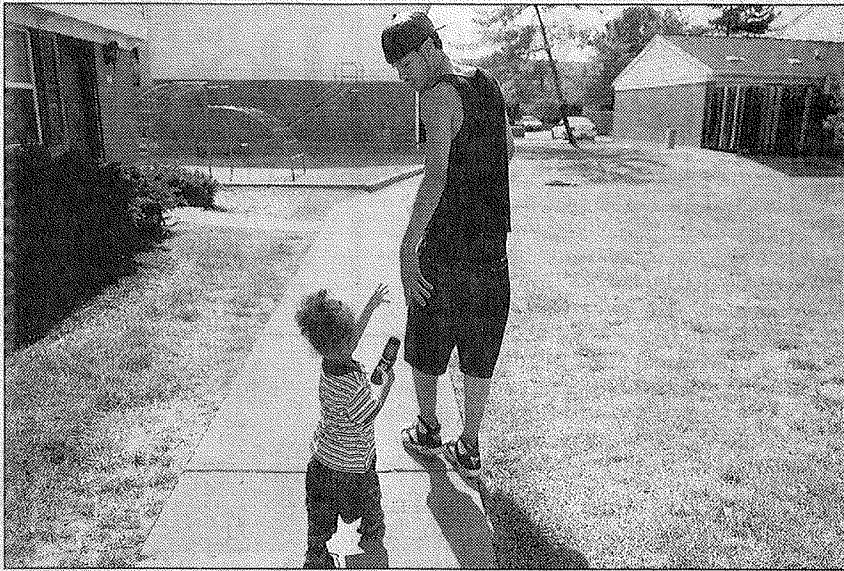
The program helps young fathers who are behind in their child support learn how to stabilize their lives, find a job, start paying off

See **DADS** on 4A



BRUCE CRIPPEN/The Post

Brandon Claborn, 23, reads with his son, B.J.



JASON GEIL/The Post

Kevin Harrison, 22, with his 17-month-old son Kayveon. Harrison works as a lifeguard as he struggles to pay child support to Kayveon's mother.

Dads: Program assists fathers

From 1A

their support debt and forge a stronger relationship with their children.

Lighthouse Youth Services has a long history of working with homeless youth and young people who have been placed in state custody because of abuse or neglect.

"We are well aware of the impact of fathers and the absence of fathers," said Williams.

When the Federal Administration for Children and Families announced it was seeking pilot projects to promote responsible fatherhood, the agency put together a program to attack child support issues from a new direction. Instead of focusing on hunting down dads and threatening them with jail, this program works on the front end of the problem.

Besides helping participants find work, the program teaches participants how to budget and manage money, instructs them in how to deal with the courts and legal issues, and holds parenting classes and father-child outings.

Essentially, the program says: You're behind on your child support payments, you're feeling swamped and discouraged. We want to help.

That's a radical approach.

"The first fathers who came in were very concerned that this was a gimmick, a trap. They thought it was one of those offers that are too good to be true, and we'd arrest them and haul them off to jail," said Williams.

"But they came anyway. That shows how much they wanted to get out of that hole."

Records show more than 2,500 young fathers in Hamilton County are behind in child support payments.

Ken Jones, the Hamilton County child support technician who is assigned to the program, said dads aren't the only scofflaws. "About 20 percent of all child support obligations are from mothers," he said. "But 80 percent of what we deal with are men, so that's where this program is concentrating."

Jones said child support payments can seem insurmountable to young people who often are making minimum wage and may have limited education and chaotic living situations.

"It can become a wedge between you and your children," said Jones. "When you go around your child's mother, the first question is 'Why aren't you paying child support?' To avoid that question, you avoid your child. This way, when you do see her you can look her in the eye. You can look your child in the eye."

One of the keys to the program is the partnership of Messer Construction. The company has promised to hire qualified dads from the program and Messer representatives recruit fellow business leaders to agree to consider program participants who meet their needs.

When Claborn, who lives in Western Hills, joined the program he had no job and few prospects.

"They took a look at my situation from the bottom up," he said. "They helped me get the documents I needed — my birth certificate, ID, Social Security card." He got a life coach through the program and worked on a résumé. "I didn't have any casual clothes for inter-

views. They got me a pair of nice slacks and a button-up shirt and a tie. That went a long way," he said.

"It's funny how things work. Before then I couldn't find a job. Now I feel like there's somebody in my corner."

He got a job at Panera Bread, doing kitchen work. Last week he had a court appointment to try to get his child support amount reduced because his take-home after paying support is just \$100 every two weeks.

"The judge didn't lower it," Claborn said. "He said I have to get a better job with more hours. So that's what I'm going to do."

Claborn's mother, Linda Claborn, said there was a time that news would have devastated her son.

"He determined. He's not taking 'no' for an answer," said his mother. "Since he got in this program he's in overdrive. He knows he's got to do it for his children and for himself."

Claborn's been in the program since it opened in March. Kevin Harrison of Avondale just signed up a couple weeks ago.

"I thought it was a scam," he said. "But if it wasn't it sounded good. I had nothing to lose." He was \$1,700 behind in his support payments, but he wasn't going to run out of his child's life.

"I came down and I was surprised there wasn't somebody waiting there with the cuffs. They listened to me. They really listened."

The program starts with an assessment survey. The father and life coach review the results and the dad decides

what areas to work on:

"They helped me get my IDs and they were a reference for me," Harrison said.

He's working at the Great Wolf Lodge indoor water park in Mason and he wants to go to college.

"I'm trying to rebuild my life before it's too late, said Harrison, who is 22 and the father of 17-month-old Kayveon.

"I don't want him to grow up like I did," said Harrison.

"When I turned 7 my dad got into alcohol real heavy and my mom was doing drugs. My little brother was 4. We roamed around the neighborhood, stealing from stores just to eat." They ended up being placed with relatives and finally moved to their father's custody. "After six months, he disappeared. Me and my little brother stayed at the apartment with no electricity. My grandma stepped in. She was the one who saved us," he said.

But he says he doesn't remember ever being a kid.

Kayveon climbs on his father's lap and reaches a tiny hand to his dad's chest then rocks with giggles. Harrison laughs and tickles back, in a give-and-take game that Kayveon knows well.

"Kayveon is my motivation," Harrison said. "He's too happy to not have nothing."

Harrison said he sometimes sees his dad on the street. "He's just a face I know. There's no emotion there. I don't want my son to grow up and be my age

and look at me the same way I look at my father."

Program director Williams said out of 46 dads who responded to letters, 36 have joined the program. The goal is to help 120 fathers a year.

This is the only program like it in the region.

Steve Elsbernd, child support director for Kenton County in Northern Kentucky, said he'd like to see similar programs open in Northern Kentucky.

"That would get to some of the larger issues that we never get to because we're so busy putting out fires — getting sanctions and going to court," Elsbernd said.

"I often feel I'm banging my head against the wall — why won't these parents take responsibility for their children? You have to keep reminding yourself that a lot of them never had a good role model of a dad. They don't know how to take responsibility. They haven't seen it."

Williams said he thought the main draw would be the lure of a job. "But when we talk with them, it's the fatherhood class, the relationship with their child that's one of their big goals," Williams said.

One of the program's strengths is having its own child support worker cutting through the street myths about child support and providing hard facts.

"Ken Jones can deal with them at a comfort level they have not had. We're taking the negativity, the darkness out of dealing with child support," Williams said.

Of 22 fathers in the program who signed releases to discuss their information, nine are employed and making regular support payments. More are scheduled to start jobs.

"I was surprised at how fast the payments started to come in," Jones said.

He said many of the young men in the program are in the child support office files as children who were not getting support payments from their own fathers.

"This program reaches way beyond the fathers in the program and their children," said Jones. "This program can change generations."

The REAL scoop

Facts about REAL (Responsible, Effective, Accountable, Loving) Dads Program:

- ▶ **Run by** Lighthouse Youth Services, in partnership with Hamilton County Jobs & Family Services' Child Support Services office and Messer Construction Company.
- ▶ **Funded by** \$2.5 million grant from the Federal Administration for Children and Families, providing \$500,000 a year for five years.
- ▶ **Designed to** help stabilize the lives of young fathers who owe child support to enable them to pay support and improve their relationships with their children.
- ▶ **The program** is open to any father age 17 to 24 whose child support payment was set in Hamilton County and who is behind in support payments by any amount.
- ▶ **The program** needs business partners willing to hire men from the program.
- ▶ **For information**, contact Calvin Williams, program director, (513) 487-7102.