

Thompson, J. (2018). Dads in the carpool lane. *Early Years: Journal of the Texas Association for the Education of Young Children* 39(3), 29-30.

Dads in the carpool lane

Every kid comes to your classroom with a dad. Do you know him? Ask your students – they do! Even the kid whose dad is not in their home on a daily basis knows their own dad, and most get to see him more often than not (Hall, 2018). There is a real need, a fatherneed (Dyer, Kauffman, Fagan, Pearson, and Cabrera, 2018) in our culture. But there always has been (Pruett, 2000); this is not something new. Even though there are major shifts within family life in America, there still is a dad present in your student’s life. Do you know him? Is he welcome at your school? Here are four stories of dads I know with varying degrees of access and engagement with their preschool child’s classroom teachers.

Room Father

This guy, Carlos, really liked school. He was a bit of a class clown, to hear him tell it. But he knew everybody liked him. School was made for him. Though he wasn’t a great student, earning some A’s and B’s, and the not too infrequent D’s, mostly he was a C student in school; average, and he liked it like that. School was not the place for him to shine – just lay low and live outside, in the backyard, down by the creek, on the practice field, and in the big lights in the stadium.

That was Carlos, until he became ‘Daddy!’ Everything changed about him, he says. Never did he have such a passion, or such a responsibility before. Now, lying before him was the challenge of a lifetime, the make or break moment of his whole experience, his very being. Now he had to help this kid become something, and not screw it up.

Joining our classroom community as a new parent was new to Carlos. He heard about us from a neighbor, made the initial calls himself, came by to pick up enrollment info. At the pre-

registration orientation, he asked questions, from us and the other new parents there as well. They all started listening to him, figured he knew what he was talking about, and let him lead them on their new excursion into school parenting.

Soon after enrolling his daughter, Diana, in our 3 year old program, Carlos started lingering around the office after dropping her off. A successful independent contractor, he pretty much set his own hours, and he decided the few bucks he could make during those early morning hours were nothing compared with the insight and 'withitness' he gained from hanging around these professional early childhood educators, and the other parent volunteers (mostly moms with older children) that he met with every day. At the first open house, I asked for volunteers, and Carlos jumped at the chance to be 'Room Father.' Carlos became the model school dad, inspiring me to 'up my game' as an active participant in my own children's education.

Car Pool Dad

Gregor was definitely involved in his son's life, Gregor, Jr. We would see him at car pool every other Thursday. A professional in the medical field, he had regular hours at the hospital, but pulled weekend duties every other week, so had Thursdays off. He would drive the big van and pick up his kid along with the four kids of two other families in his neighborhood. He was conscientious, always checking seatbelts and providing water for his passengers. But I never knew if he actually knew the names of those other kids; one other 4 year old in that carpool didn't know his name – he was just Greg's dad.

Gregor did not come to parent night, or parent conference. His wife showed up; she came regularly, faithfully, attentive to the needs of her son, and his classroom. She even volunteered for pet duty and took Judy the gerbil home for a weekend, once. Greg, Jr., reported that his dad didn't like the fuss and the stink of having our pet in his house.

One month after school started, I called every home, just to check in. I started on Monday night, and went right down the roster, making 4 or 5 calls a night till I talked with someone in each home. Each call lasted anywhere from 3 to 15 minutes, just checking in, telling something about our class that day, asking if they had any questions or concerns. I had my ‘chit-chat, let’s talk’ mode on, until Gregor answered. “Yes, what do you want?” “What do you want me to do?” “How can I fix it?” were the quick, terse, and to-the-point responses I heard back. I understood that I needed to change gears when talking with this dad – I didn’t need to call just to ‘share’, I needed a script, a plan, a shift in my discourse strategy (Thompson & Garretson, 2011). I needed to have an agenda, tell him why I called, ask him for specific help, and finish up quick. Once I adapted my routine, Gregor became a regular help. He never volunteered when the kids were there, but he did come to weekend workdays after that, and actually approached me to say hello, and to sincerely ask about his son’s progress.

Curious father

Mr. Park went to school in his native Korea. He immigrated to our community as an adult, working first in the Saudi oil fields before he came to Texas as an oil field worker. He had much more ‘street smarts’ than ‘schooling’, especially in this foreign realm of early childhood education. He watched, from afar, our language barrier being only the first layer of our distance. He loved his family, but through years of travel, immigration, rough contrasts between oil field life and family life, he and his wife had come to an impasse and chosen divorce over reconciliation. Mr. Park had visitation rights, but no regularly scheduled custody. He was on the carpool permission list, but never picked his two children up from preschool. He did fill out forms that we sent home, and his children’s mother shared with him. His writing in English was

beautiful, but short. Photos that the children brought often included him, when he took them out for burgers, or once to the zoo.

The weekend workday is more than a parent obligation; it's a real event. Sometimes families (dads, especially) host a barbecue for the families that come to help around the campus. Our old building is beautiful, but it is old, and has quirks and oddities that need periodic maintenance or updates. This Saturday, I had an electric outlet that was acting funky on the 'to-do' list. Mr. Park did have electrical experience, so he was assigned to my classroom for his task. Unfortunately, the electric outlet was up under some cabinets, so Mr. Park and I had to get down on the floor and crawl into the shelving to get to the wall. He held the flashlight while I tested the outlet for current, making sure we had disabled the correct breaker. I held the crimper electric tool while he replaced the outlet with a GFCI one. In the close quarters, in the context of working with our hands, Mr. Park and I bonded, brothers in a common task, each bringing different skills and contrasting perspectives. From then on, I didn't see much change in his involvement in his children's classroom, but I knew that he knew me, his children's classroom teacher.

Cautious for good cause

Roberto and Diego were cousins in my classroom – and they had many cousins throughout the school. Carpool was always interesting, because different parents, other padrinas, often a grandparent would pick up this group, but not that one, for rides home, or to the tia's hair salon, or to the library for homework time. Diego's family I saw regularly; but I never, ever met Roberto's dad. I heard about him, and I even saw him on occasion, at carpool, but not in the carpool lane. He would park half a block away, and somebody, sometimes his wife, sometimes a grandmother, would walk over to pick up their lot for the day. But never would that dad approach the school. Was it because of the fence and barbed wire around the playground? Did

his car have current registration and tags? What about his own legal status? Was he wanted for questioning, or by Immigration? I never knew, but only wondered. Roberto knew him, and chatted about all the good times they had together, one big, BIG happy family. But school and authority and his family were not close. They had what they needed within their extended family, and getting along with us in 'the system' was just something they tolerated, but never saw us as partners or compadres. We were just 'the school'.

Parents come in all shapes and sizes. Some fit into our school routines and join us in our professional duties to teach young children. Some don't. Every one of the children in your program has a dad, some more complicated and distant, or deceased even. Your child knows him. It is an honor and privilege to get to know the dads of the kids in our school.

References

- Dyer, W. J., Kauffman, R., Fagan, J., Pearson, J. and Cabrera, N. (2018). Measures of father engagement for nonresident fathers. *Family relations: Interdisciplinary journal of applied family science* , 67: 381-398. doi:10.1111/fare.12317.
- Hall, J. M. (2018). Every kid has a dad. *Strong fathers, strong families*. Springtown, TX: Strong Fathers. Available online: www.strongfathers.com.
- Pruett, K. (2000). *Fatherneed: Why father care is as essential as mother care for your child*. Harmony.
- Thompson, J., & Garretson, S. (2011). Encouraging men in their conversations with children. In Tamar Jacobson (Ed.), *Perspectives on gender in early childhood education* (pp. 95-109). St. Paul, MN: Redleaf Press.