

Mrs. Bush's Remarks at the National Fatherhood Initiative Awards

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7:50 P.M. EDT

MRS. BUSH: Thanks so much. I'm very interested to see those ads that Peggy talked about, but I think I interrupted them, and you'll see them in just a minute.

Thank you, Peggy, for everything the Ad Council does to help in the United States to spread the word about all the good things that are going on.

Thank you also, Roland. Thank you very much for the introduction, and thanks to Don Eberly and John Segal, and to the leaders of the National Fatherhood Initiative. I also want to recognize Representative Henry Brown and Representative Donna Christian-Christensen, and thank both of them for being here. And also, thanks to Senator Evan Bayh, who I think spoke to you all earlier today.

Congratulations to the distinguished award winners who are here tonight. It's great to be here at the National Fatherhood Initiative's awards gala. I want to applaud everybody in this room for your commitment to being responsible, involved and loving fathers, and for helping other men become better dads. Celebrating fatherhood is something our whole society should be doing. And it's an important part of a new initiative, the initiative that Roland mentioned, called Helping America's Youth.

We all know that today's children face challenges. These challenges aren't limited to any one part of the country or any particular segment of society. Children from every background and every community have to make choices between healthy behaviors that lead to success and risky behaviors that can lead down the road to bad outcomes. The goal of Helping America's Youth is to get more adults involved in the life of children so that every boy and girl in every community has someone who can help them make healthy decisions so they can grow up to be successful adults.

Research tells us that children have a better chance of success when they have two loving and stable parents at home. Yet across America, 24 million children live apart from their father. ***Forty percent of these children haven't seen their father in the last year. As Roland Warren has said, "Kids have a hole in their soul the shape of their dad."***

Statistics show that when children grow up without a mom and dad at home, they're more likely to fall behind in school, more likely to experiment with drugs and alcohol, more likely to be in trouble with the law. And boys who grow up without fathers are more likely to become fathers themselves at a young age, perpetuating a cycle of absentee fatherhood that has terrible consequences generation after generation.

The evidence is clear: Children need fathers in their lives.

Helping America's Youth includes two proposed federal programs to strengthen marriages and help families. A Responsible Fatherhood initiative would support community and faith-based organizations that provide education, training, and other services to help fathers stay involved emotionally and financially in their children's lives. And the Healthy Marriage initiative would support research into the best ways to keep

marriages strong and provide funding for community groups that help couples establish stable relationships.

The most important part of Helping America's Youth is what you're doing, and that's the work done by concerned parents and citizens who recognize needs in their communities and take action.

In March, I visited Rosalie Manor in Milwaukee. Rosalie Manor runs a program called Today's Dads to help teenage fathers improve their parenting skills and be a positive influence in their children's lives. Teen parents face major challenges. They often struggle with finishing school and finding a job to support their child. And many teen parents have a hard time maintaining a relationship with each other. The young men in *Today's Dads* program want to build a better life for their children, a life with a responsible father. And each one of these young men, each one that I met, had grown up without a father, and they didn't want their own children to suffer the same loss that they had.

One young man named Damion said that his dream was to wear a coat and tie to work every day -- the prototypical, reliable father. Another young man from Milwaukee named Ken Thigpen inspired my interest in this subject. Ken was featured in an article in the New York Times Magazine last summer. Ken's childhood was disrupted by his parents' descent into drug addiction. As a young man, he dealt drugs and promoted prostitution and stealing. But Ken's life changed when his girlfriend became pregnant. He knew that it was his responsibility to give his son a better childhood than he had had. Ken stopped selling drugs and took a job at night delivering pizzas, so he could stay at home with his son during the day. Every day is a struggle to avoid the easy money of his old life and to endure the taunts of the people in his neighborhood who ridicule his more disciplined way of life.

And Ken wants to have a bigger career than delivering pizzas. But he made a courageous start, and it's important that we recognize the young men who commit themselves to being committed and loving fathers.

At every stage of parenting, it's easier for fathers than mothers to get disconnected. For a young man, it can be tempting to leave before his baby presents responsibilities and challenges he's not sure he can handle. Work takes some fathers out of the house for at least 40 hours a week. Fathers aren't always encouraged to trust their paternal instincts. Men aren't expected to be emotional, or to talk about things like love. Hugs are a hurdle some fathers can't cross. And kisses are out of the question.

There are certainly differences in the way men and women parent, and children understand that right from the start. It's mom who usually provides the kiss that makes the pain go away, and dad who's up for wrestling on the living room floor. But the differences don't allow one parent off the hook while the other provides all the support and love. Parenting is best done as a team, with both mom and dad fully committed to raising their children.

George and I were fortunate to grow up both in families where our parents, both of our parents were always in our lives. And we're proud of the young women that our girls

have become. And a big reason for their success is that their dad has always been involved, and he's never been embarrassed or afraid to show his love for them.

In the video that you watched earlier, Johanna said the best advice she could give parents about raising children is that "you have to show your love to let them know how much you care about them, because if you don't show it then they don't know it's there."

Helping men become good fathers who show their love is what this organization is all about, and that's why your work is so vital. Every father faces challenges, regardless of his circumstances. The father who's absent because he's in prison or the father who's absent because he works 80 hours a week both have children who wish they could see their dads more. The National Fatherhood Initiative provides help for fathers in just about every situation imaginable.

Becoming a new parent can be frightening. And it's no shock that men don't like to ask for help. Your "Daddy Pack" is available right at the hospital for new dads who need advice on coping with a newborn or keeping babies safe and healthy. Twenty-one thousand of these "Daddy Packs" have already been distributed.

Another initiative, the "24/7 Dad" program, is designed by experts to help men become better fathers by being involved with their kids emotionally, physically, and spiritually every single day.

Earlier this month, President Bush and I met with some children who have a parent in prison. There are two million children in America just like them, and they yearn for attention from their parents. Your outreach to incarcerated fathers in 161 prisons and jails help these men stay in touch with their children. It's important for dads to know that they can still offer love and guidance even if it's only during a weekly visit or phone call.

Many men in the military are away from their children for long periods of time. By distributing 40,000 Deployed Father and Family Guides, you're helping dads remain a part of their children's lives across thousands of miles. And you also help returning service members handle the transition of coming back home. When dad is away for six months or a year, he'll likely walk back into a household that's different. How a father copes with that adjustment will make a big difference in how his children cope with his deployment.

All of your efforts to help men become better fathers have a profound impact on the quality of their children's lives, and on the strength of our nation. Like Helping America's Youth, the National Fatherhood Initiative is reaching out to every community, to every family, and helping them grow stronger.

Thank you for setting a standard of involved fatherhood that every man can aspire to, and that every woman can support. The health and success of America's children depends on efforts like yours, and as a mother, I am grateful for your commitment. Thank you all very, very much. (Applause.)

END 8:02 P.M. EDT

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