

Bronx men learn how to be dad at young age thanks to Visiting Nurse Service of New York

BY [Kerry Wills](#)
SPECIAL TO THE DAILY NEWS

Sunday, June 20th 2010, 4:00 AM



Chu for News Norman Salaman, with daughter Nyla Shea Salaman, 2, whose mother walked away days after the girl was born, has gotten help in boosting his child-rearing skills.

Three days after Nyla Shea Salaman was born, her mother washed her hands of her.

The baby's dad, Norman Salaman, then 24, remembers the young, single, accidental mom telling the doctor she wasn't ready for the job.

"She told the doctor she didn't want nothing to do with the child," Salaman recalled. "She just said, 'Forget you, and forget the baby.'" But Salaman couldn't walk away.

Now 26, he is a single dad raising his child and an 11-year-old nephew whose mother died of breast cancer in 2008. He's also working on a master's degree in marketing at Monroe College.

Salaman is one of about 100 young Bronx fathers taking responsibility for unexpected parenthood with help from the Visiting Nurse Service of New York's Fatherhood Program.

In a ceremony at Lincoln Medical and Mental Health Center recently, 18 young men graduated from the free program that teaches low-income dads, ages 16 to 24, parenting skills.

Participants learn how to change a diaper, handle a toddler's tantrum, and gain control over their own emotions so they can be the man who - in many cases - was never in their own lives.

Christopher Smith never knew his dad, and as a teenager, he says his life was all about hanging out. He slept until 11:30 a.m. Skipped school. Didn't work.

Then when he was 18, he became a father, and the birth of his daughter, Johanna, changed all that. "I know how it felt, my father not being there, asking my mother why my father don't love me," Smith said. "I want [Johanna] to know her father loved her."

Smith also knew he would never be able to convince Johanna to stay in school if he didn't have a diploma himself. He went back to high school and even earned an achievement award at graduation.

Now 20, Smith works two jobs - at a restaurant and at JCPenney - and he's considering attending either college or trade school.

Although his relationship with Johanna's mother has ended, Smith shares custody of Johanna, now 2 years old, with her.

David Jones, director of The Fatherhood Program, founded it in 1997 as part of Early Head Start in Far Rockaway, Queens, after noticing programs that help pregnant women often ignore fathers.

"These entities are not as comfortable interacting with men," Jones said.

Despite the urban father stereotype of the absent baby daddy, many of these young men want to play a bigger role in their children's lives, Jones said.

They come to the Visiting Nurse Service of New York at E. 153rd St. in Melrose for help finding jobs, because they believe the father's duty is to be the breadwinner. But Jones tries to change their thinking, telling the new dads that if they want to raise their child they have to be willing to change a diaper.

"For many, they're learning for the first time what it means to be a man," he said.

The program offers parenting workshops, conflict resolution training, counseling and day care. Group counseling is where the fathers often find the most support, Jones said.

Get Morning Home Delivery of the Daily News for up to 70% off.
Call (888) 393-3760
Advertisement

"It made me feel like I wasn't the only one in the world going through these problems," Smith said.

Funded with a \$200,000 grant from the Department of Youth and Community Development, the program is in its third year and has served more than 200 dads in Queens and the Bronx.

"Hopefully, fathers will read this and know that they can do this," Smith said.

For more information about The Fatherhood Program, call (800) 675-0391 or visit www.vnsny.org.