

PARADE

We Need Fathers to Step Up

President Barack Obama

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As the father of two young girls who have shown such poise, humor, and patience in the unconventional life into which they have been thrust, I mark this Father's Day—our first in the White House—with a deep sense of gratitude. One of the greatest benefits of being President is that I now live right above the office. I see my girls off to school nearly every morning and have dinner with them nearly every night. It is a welcome change after so many years out on the campaign trail and commuting between Chicago and Capitol Hill.



But I observe this Father's Day not just as a father grateful to be present in my daughters' lives but also as a son who grew up without a father in my own life. My father left my family when I was 2 years old, and I knew him mainly from the letters he wrote and the stories my family told. And while I was lucky to have two wonderful grandparents who poured everything they had into helping my mother raise my sister and me, I still felt the weight of his absence throughout my childhood.

As an adult, working as a community organizer and later as a legislator, I would often walk through the streets of Chicago's South Side and see boys marked by that same absence—boys without supervision or direction or anyone to help them as they struggled to grow into men. I identified with their frustration and disengagement—

with their sense of having been let down.

In many ways, I came to understand the importance of fatherhood through its absence—both in my life and in the lives of others. I came to understand that the hole a man leaves when he abandons his responsibility to his children is one that no government can fill. We can do everything possible to provide good jobs and good schools and safe streets for our kids, but it will never be enough to fully make up the difference.

That is why we need fathers to step up, to realize that their job does not end at conception; that what makes you a man is not the ability to have a child but the courage to raise one.

See family photos of Obama and his daughters

As fathers, we need to be involved in our children's lives not just when it's convenient or easy, and not just when they're doing well—but when it's difficult and thankless, and they're struggling. That is when they need us most.

And it's not enough to just be physically present. Too often, especially during tough economic times like these, we are emotionally absent: distracted, consumed by what's happening in our own lives, worried about keeping our

jobs and paying our bills, unsure if we'll be able to give our kids the same opportunities we had.

Our children can tell. They know when we're not fully there. And that disengagement sends a clear message—whether we mean it or not—about where among our priorities they fall.

So we need to step out of our own heads and tune in. We need to turn off the television and start talking with our kids, and listening to them, and understanding what's going on in their lives.

We need to set limits and expectations. We need to replace that video game with a book and make sure that homework gets done. We need to say to our daughters, Don't ever let images on TV tell you what you are worth, because I expect you to dream without limit and reach for your goals. We need to tell our sons, Those songs on the radio may glorify violence, but in our house, we find glory in achievement, self-respect, and hard work.

We need to realize that we are our children's first and best teachers. When we are selfish or inconsiderate, when we mistreat our wives or girlfriends, when we cut corners or fail to control our tempers, our children learn from that—and it's no surprise when we see those behaviors in our schools or on our streets.

But it also works the other way around. When we work hard, treat others with respect, and contribute to our communities, those are the lessons our children learn. And that is what so many fathers are doing every day—coaching soccer and Little League, going to those school assemblies and parent-teacher conferences, scrimping and saving and working that extra shift so their kids can go to college. They are fulfilling their most fundamental duty as fathers: to

show their children, by example, the kind of people they want them to become.

It is rarely easy. There are plenty of days of struggle and heartache when, despite our best efforts, we fail to live up to our responsibilities. I know I have been an imperfect father. I know I have made mistakes. I have lost count of all the times, over the years, when the demands of work have taken me from the duties of fatherhood. There were many days out on the campaign trail when I felt like my family was a million miles away, and I knew I was missing moments of my daughters' lives that I'd never get back. It is a loss I will never fully accept.

But on this Father's Day, I think back to the day I drove Michelle and a newborn Malia home from the hospital nearly 11 years ago—crawling along, miles under the speed limit, feeling the weight of my daughter's future resting in my hands. I think about the pledge I made to her that day: that I would give her what I never had—that if I could be anything in life, I would be a good father. I knew that day that my own life wouldn't count for much unless she had every opportunity in hers. And I knew I had an obligation, as we all do, to help create those opportunities and leave a better world for her and all our children.

On this Father's Day, I am recommitting myself to that work, to those duties that all parents share: to build a foundation for our children's dreams, to give them the love and support they need to fulfill them, and to stick with them the whole way through, no matter what doubts we may feel or difficulties we may face. That is my prayer for all of us on this Father's Day, and that is my hope for this nation in the months and years ahead.