Building Brighter Futures Helps Parents Meet Child Support Obligations

No one would drive in Los Angeles rush hour traffic wearing a blindfold. Yet, many people drive blindly into parenting. Unstable families, custody battles, and child support problems result.

Non-custodial parents who do not fulfill their child support payments often become stuck with a suspended driver’s license, garnished wages, and revoked professional licenses. They show up at the Los Angeles County Child Support Services Department (CSSD) desperate to resolve their problems.

A conversation with CSSD Director Steven Golightly inspired The Dibble Institute to create Building Brighter Futures (BBF), a new approach that teaches adults relationship and parenting skills while encouraging them to meet their child support obligations. Since it was initiated in 2013, BBF has yielded a 24 percent increase in child support compliance within those piloted cases.

“When The Dibble Institute approached Dr. Golightly offering relationship education classes to our non-custodial parents as a strategy to decrease parenting disengagement, increase co-parenting skills, increase economic stability and improve child support compliance, we were eager to collaborate,” said Kimberly Britt, special assistant overseeing CSSD Fatherhood initiatives. “The Building Brighter Futures program aligns with our efforts to provide a holistic service approach to families.”

A Productive Child Support Services Partnership

No one going to CSSD is expecting a helping hand like Building Brighter Futures. For stressed parents, the smallest acts of kindness have enormous consequences; BBF, with its encouraging environment, works powerfully. Co-parenting, relationship communication skills, and understanding what children need to thrive are just some of the topics covered by BBF over eight weeks.

The Dibble Institute’s relationship curriculum “Love Notes” by Marlene Pearson is the key intervention used in BBF. It has proven to be successful as a new approach for non-custodial parents stuck in negative relationship patterns. Designed to increase parental involvement (financial and emotional) with their children and increase payment compliance, it has garnered significant traction and notable increases in child support payments.

BBF participants are engaged in a variety of ways, including videos, personality assessments, discussions, lectures, and training that qualifies them for ServSafe®—a food handler’s license. They also receive a meal, gift cards when they come to class, and reinstatement of their driver’s license for up to six months. For many, these incentives are crucial to paying for gas or food while they job-hunt, and for getting caught up on support payments.

Building Brighter Futures Works

For a non-custodial parent earning $1,200 a month, $172 is the minimum

This is the final article in the 2015 Partnering For Impact series.
BRIGHTER FUTURES continued from page 6

child support payment in the state of California. And, when you are unemployed, it’s almost impossible to stay current. That’s Leo’s situation. A proud dad of three, Leo’s oldest son’s handprint is tattooed on his forearm, evidence of his love for his children. But Leo wasn’t always so sure of his worth.

“I came in not knowing, am I a good person or a bad person,” Leo said. For these [mostly] young adults with no previous concept of—or access to—objective emotional support, BBF was an eye-opener. Leo really responded to the self-awareness exercises. “I was surprised at how caring I am, I have this heart,” he said. He left the class with a plan to do better by his children.

Tested in a pilot funded by the Office of Family Assistance since 2013, BFF’s two expert instructors, Maria Ricarte and Van Ray Murphy, and host/recruiter José Valencia build strong rapport with participants.

Educator Maria Ricarte’s thought-provoking Q&A and solid facts covering parenting, relationship realities, domestic violence, and societal labels stir engaged discussions. Maria’s focus is clear: “This is a preventative curriculum. You have to be willing to put your own personal life and blunders out there.”

Host and recruiter José Valencia came to the classes initially as a dad with intense child support and relationship issues.

“I was dying inside,” he said.

Completing BBF, Jose became the paradigm for the program’s potential. “I’m going to change everything!” As the BBF recruiter, José has a table right in the Child Support offices. He shines in that role, guiding distressed parents to learn the skills needed to become better parents and partners. The department’s Vera Ashley-Potter concurs. “José is the epitome of the desired BBF outcome.”

Building Brighter Futures works.

Pain, frustration, and confusion give way to clarity, understanding, and enthusiasm to apply BBF tools in real life. Program participants experience improved parenting confidence, enhanced communication skills, and greater relationship competency to help them take their blindfolds off and navigate the challenging roadways of the parenting journey.

Judi Jordan is a freelance writer.

Kay Reed is the executive director of the Dibble Institute.