

Do You Have a “Dad Deficit”?



By Tom Roston

Are you living with a deficit? I know one dad who is grappling with a massive gap this year: President Barack Obama. Our president’s stimulus package, and the economic challenges he inherited, have resulted in the nation’s astounding \$1.75 trillion deficit. That’s quite a hole he’s going to have to fill.

But there’s another deficit President Obama has lived with since he was a small child: I call it the Dad Deficit. His father left him and his mother when he was 2 years old. President Obama has spoken eloquently about how he was raised by his mother and grandparents, and written forcefully in his book, *Dreams from my Father*, about how his father’s absence weighed heavily on him. President Obama went a long way toward combating the shortage by coming to terms with his hurt and sadness through much soul-searching, trips to Africa (where his father was from), and connecting with other family. But I think he found an even more powerful way to get rid of that deficit.

I’ll get to that in a minute, but first let’s try an exercise: Look at the National Fatherhood Initiative’s “Ten Ways to be a Great Dad,” which we at NYC DADS translated into our award-winning subway ad campaign.

1. **Respect Your Children's Mother**
2. **Spend Time with Your Children**
3. **Talk it Out**
4. **Encourage**
5. **Be a Role Model**
6. **Listen**

7. Eat Together as a Family

8. Read to Your Children

9. Kiss and Hug

10. Realize that a Father's Job Is Never Done

Now, let's see if you inherited a Dad Deficit. We can come to this by looking at your relationship with your father. Give your dad a point for every "Way" that applies to him as a father. Give him a half point for the ones that come close. How does he score? I'd give—and I'm being very generous here—Obama's dad a 1 (giving him a half point for being a role model and another half for encouraging his son in their one meeting and in the letters he sent him).

I would say that anyone whose dad scores below a 5 is growing up with a Dad Deficit: anything more than 5, and that's a surplus. (A 5 means you're on the cusp.) I'm going to bet that most of us carry a Dad Deficit. My own workaholic father was away from home a lot. And then he passed away when I was 10. (I want to note here that determining your Dad Deficit is not necessarily about blame or pointing fingers—it is more about what we, as men, carry.) I would give my dad 3 points.

"I came to understand the importance of fatherhood through its absence—both in my life and in the lives of others," President Obama wrote in a letter published in *Parade* magazine last Father's Day. And so did I. My brother and I were raised by a loving mother, but there was always a gap. And I rejected any mentors or role models—it was too painful, and too confusing, to let any father figures in. I preferred to do things my way. It was a way of dealing, of surviving, but it never filled the gap.



But here's the good news. There *is* a way to fill this deficit. And it's pretty simple: by not carrying it on. We can fill the gap through how we raise our children. I have come to this belief through my experience as a dad. I am a very involved father. I eat dinner with my daughter almost every night, almost always give her a nightly bath, get her ready in the morning, and play with her dozens of times a week. She gets a constant barrage of hugs, kisses, conversation and encouragement from me. She is rarely far from my thoughts. And, every day, as I see our relationship maturing and getting stronger, I feel my deficit shrinking.

I agree with something the president said—that fatherhood is not an obligation but a privilege—and that it's one that I am lucky to have, especially considering I have few major obstacles, like a custodial arrangement or a double shift, keeping me away from my kid. Having a daughter has helped me move on from the loss I've felt, and replaced it with something that's more than a reconciliation with my lack of a father—I've replaced loss with fulfillment. I'd say that President Obama's dedicated and loving relationship with his two daughters, Malia and Sasha, has done the same.

It is in the act of not passing it on—of becoming the fathers we never had—that we lose the deficit. And it's essential for our children, but it is also a key to mending our own hearts. This is where our ultimate Dad Deficit is determined: in what we pass on from our fathers to our children.

Here's how I'd score it. This time, the dividing line between deficit and surplus is 10. Look again at the "Ten Ways." Now, give yourself a score. And don't be humble-be truthful. I'd give myself a 9. And 9 plus my dad's score of 3 is 12. I'm in surplus territory. Mr. President: He

may deserve a 9 as well, because he probably doesn't spend as much time with his kids as he'd like to, but, as President, I think it's fair to make an exception and to give him two points for being the ultimate role model. So giving him a 10 would put him at 11.

Of course, by this equation, it's the dads whose fathers were really lacking, who have the most to overcome to climb out of the deficit. And isn't that true in the real world?

Ultimately, it's our children who will decide how we really rank, but I think you can see that this is all an exercise, a way of looking at the lack that most of us dads feel, and how we can move on. The goal is to be a better father than the one we had. For some of us, that's not so hard. And for many of us, even if we are, we may still feel the deficit.

"Just because your own father wasn't there for you, that's not an excuse for you to be absent also. It's all the more reason for you to be present," Obama told a group of young men gathered on the South Lawn of the White House on Father's Day. "You have an obligation to break the cycle and to learn from those mistakes, and to rise up where your own fathers fell short and to do better than they did with your own children. . . That's what I've tried to do in my life."

Although our dads couldn't be there for us, we can be there for our kids. We can stop creating a legacy of loss. It's not like coming up with a loose \$1.75 trillion. In fact, I'd say most dads have an easier job than the President does in his job. He needs all the best advisers, all the most opportune shifts in the global marketplace, all the right stars to align, to put this nation back on course. What it takes us, as fathers who inherit Dad Deficits, is patience, respect, hard work, love and sacrifice.

And those, thankfully, are replenishable resources.

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