



# Counter Narratives – Daddies at the Mall

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## Abstract

The participation of Caribbean males in family life has been hotly debated: Researchers who hold the nuclear family to be normative describe male participation as being weak to non-existent, while other scholars who assert that there are varied and valid family formations, not just the nuclear family, have found Caribbean men to be participating in a wider range of familial roles than just “father”. This photo essay relies on the assertions of a convenience sample of 19 men, with their families, at a shopping mall in East Trinidad. Every father, without fail, said that a “real man” must take up his responsibility. Though the brevity of the interviews and the setting did not allow them to elaborate on their conception of responsibility, they all intimated the fulfillment of multiple roles of provider, protector, nurturer, and helpmate to their partner or spouse. The essay thus challenges the mainstream conception that Caribbean males are irresponsible family members and calls for readers to consider how their family participation may be changing with changing times.

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**Keywords:** masculinity; responsibility; fathering; nurturing; photo essay

### **Acknowledgements**





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## Introduction

Barrow (1999) has well documented the history of research on the Caribbean family. Much of the early research focused on the Afro-Caribbean family. It characterized the families, particularly the fathers, from a point of “deficit”. Men were described as being “absent”, “irresponsible”, “itinerant”, “unfaithful”. This negative conception of our men pervades our everyday discourse. Some men undoubtedly fit the descriptors but not all.

We join Barrow (1998) and Hodge (2002) in contesting these narrow and biased analyses of the Caribbean Family. We write in a revisionist tradition, presenting you with the images and narratives of ordinary men who were going about their business. There is no artifice in this simple photo essay. We seek to call your attention to their variety and to their experiences of family life.

We ask you to:

-  consider the now
-  consider the varying and various family forms
-  contemplate the variety in men
-  assess the changing attitudes to family life.

## Our Pledge

If the political is about negotiating power, then our paper is deliberately political in its language and content.

- ✚ We aim to report simply about the men that we interviewed at the mall, with the hope that this photo essay is accessible to an audience beyond the academy
- ✚ We present images of men in the role of male nurturer. We feel this will be of great interest as male participation in nurturing personally affects all people everywhere
- ✚ We seek to reduce our role as interpreters of the images and narratives presented here. Using a series of open-ended prompts presented at the end, we encourage you to draw your conclusions.

## Defining Nurturer

We use “nurturer” to mean more than these alternatives:

- ✚ Father – which may signal a mere biological connection. Father is also closely associated with “providing”, “protecting” and “disciplining (giving licks<sup>1</sup>)”
- ✚ Father-figure – which often means a role-model of sorts, who is sometimes distant with itinerant contact
- ✚ Caregiver – suggests compulsory involvement, without significant emotional attachment, like care-giving in a medical situation.

### **Approach – The Men**

Nineteen men at a mall in Eastern Trinidad agreed to be photographed and to share their experiences of nurturing.

Most of the men were out alone with children in the afternoon on Saturday 10th September 2011. A few were accompanied by female relatives, sometimes the children's mothers.

They were selected on the basis of their accompanying a child or children. In other words, their proximity (standing closely, holding hands, carrying, hugging, etc.) indicated a possible nurturing connection to the child or children.

### **Approach – the Narratives**


The men are the real authors in this study. Their voices and not ours are the ones that matter.


Their lived experiences as nurturers are legitimate and valid. Their explanations and narratives construct what real men do.

### **Approach – the Space**

We chose “the mall” because:

- ✚ it is a reaffirming social space; it creates and strengthens meaningful significant relationships and allows mall patrons to cultivate a sense of self and group identity (Lewis 1990, 133)

 it is public

 it mixes the everyday, for those who run errands there; and the extraordinary, for those who are celebrating special events

 it is a popular family space

 it is an escape from the stressors of life

### **Approach – The Questions**

Ever aware that we were imposing ourselves on the men in their private time with their families, we kept our interview to no more than three minutes.

Besides their name and connection to the child or children in their company, we posed the following open-ended prompts:

 How do you view yourself as a man?

 Who is a real man?

In response to our prompts, the majority of men sought clarification by referring to fatherhood as a marker of their understanding of self. These led invariably to emerging questions from the men, such as:

 Do you mean as a father or a parent?

Not intending to shape or influence their responses, we encouraged them to interpret their sense of “maleness” from their own perspective.



Nurturer and daughter

"Based on how I was brought up men are important in the lives of children, filling roles a mother cannot fill... security... confidence."

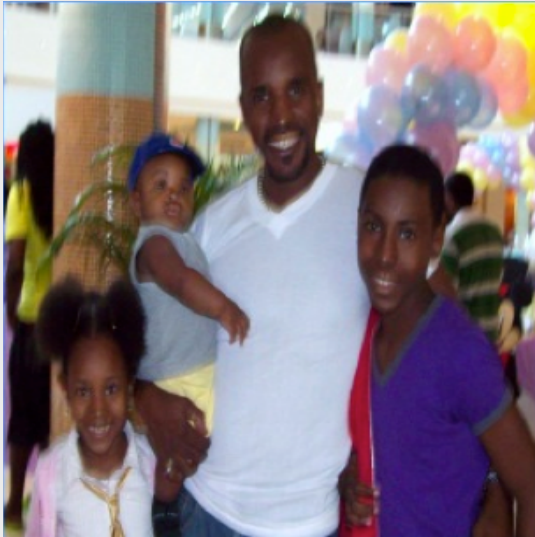
Anton



Nurturer and son

"As a father, I kind of have to be the eyes, the ears... to think, be mature... there is a problem now where parents trying to be their children's friends and causing them to go wayward."

Ronald



Nurturer and three children

"Well...  
am... responsibility.  
I think that its my primary knowledge  
of what a man supposed to be...  
[following] example, it is what I grab  
hold of."

Joseph



Nurturer and grandchildren

"The mistakes I made as a father I  
hope to correct that with my  
grandchildren... the things I was  
supposed to do, but didn't do like  
have more time with them, give  
guidance... A man is the leader of the  
house... does not mean dictatorial...  
to act in collaboration – wash, clean,  
help raise the children, spend time  
helping with the kids, be supportive,  
help them to be what they want."

Solomon





Nurturer and son

"A real man means responsibility right, for all the things he does whether it right or wring, makes decisions... it have no book to tell you how to be a father. Try your best to train your children in the right way... how to be themselves... don't let another person dictate your reality... Know who you are. Never make a child what you want him to be. Let that child be what he wants to be."

Richard



Nurturer and daughter

"Proper care and maintaining of a household... Be the best father you could be. You have to have plenty love."

Shane



Nurturer and newborn

[A man is being] "responsible, hardworking, it is about my wife and my family. It is just the responsibility of a man to take care of his family in their wants, needs, love and affection... every possible way. Have confidence and they will have confidence in you... be prepared, make breakfast, put on pampers... Just be prepared to make things easier for her [referring to wife]."

Al



Nurturer and infant

"Boy, it don't have any words to describe that [referring to being a man]... responsibilities, trying my best... seeing them grow up healthy and strong. That's it."

Vishnu



Nurturer and daughter

"Being a man is being a father... A lot of people depending on you. When I watch my daughter, I see me. I try my best to be there."

Jack



Nurturer and daughter

"A man is family... relationship with kids and parents... there are a lot of challenges in society especially if you have to go to the legal system as a man. The court is basically structured towards the female so whether you are good father or not you go in there for whatever reason, you already have a strike down in a sort of way. There needs to be a restructuring and in-depth investigation before a decision is made. Some women are very unfit mothers, let's be honest, some men too. There are a lot of men that are deadbeat dads out here, but you can't... [have] Peter pay for Paul. Parenting is life-changing... never thought it would have been hard... new respect for my parents... but I want more [children]. It is a wonderful experience, but a lot of challenges."

Sterling

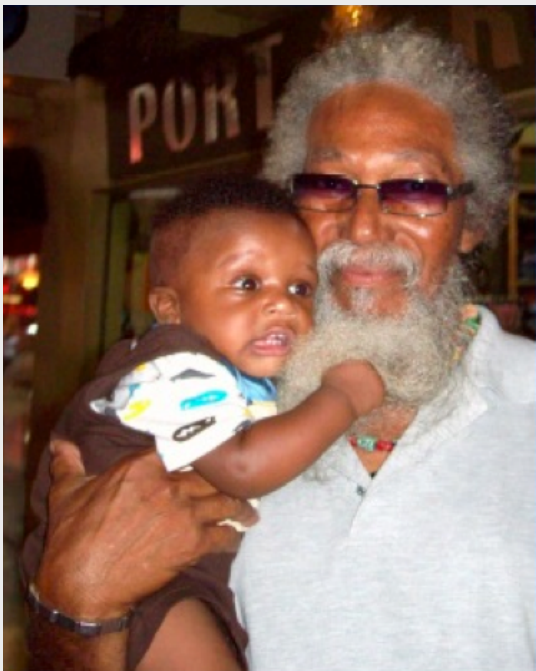


Nurturer, wife and son

[A man is] "Having responsibility and being able to take care if that responsibility... be independent. I believe in Christ. When there are challenges you pray to God for guidance."

Gary

Authors' note: Gary insisted that his wife be included in the photo, since "there could be no family without her."



Nurturer and grandson

[A man is] "Loving, faithful, industrious, happy-go-lucky, kind-hearted, sometime-ish; if we don't have that we are just hypocrites. A leader, a teacher, learn from each other. Some people would say – role model, but I wouldn't say role model, each one must teach one. If you don't have faith, not in yourself alone, in God [too], you cannot stand. A real man is the image of the Creator."

Steve



Nurturer and son

[A man is] "Easy going, understanding... I try to achieve, taking care of my family, being responsible, providing the best for my son – education, what he likes. Live for the simple things in life... we create our problems. Anything I do that is not right, I want my son to correct me. I don't have a servant, I have a wife."

Garnett



Nurturer and grandson

"You have to be responsible. Being a parent and grandparent is very intriguing, sharing whatever experiences they have, spending time with them."

Clarie



Nurturer and niece

"A man is being comfortable with who you are. What I consider myself to be may not be what society considers me to be. It has to deal with stereotypes and I don't follow stereotypes. I need to define myself as an individual. Being responsible in the home whether you are father, uncle or son, taking care of the home, being the breadwinner, playing significant role emotionally, financially, spiritually. [He makes reference to taking his niece to buy a church dress]. Seeing the male person in a positive way and taking away the negative vibe associated with it. [being a parent] requires a measure of patience."

Raymond



Nurturer and grandson

[A man is] "supportive, understanding, trying to understand how a woman is, taking care of the family, bearing the brunt of the family, be a breadwinner, don't spend too much – save. [Referring to the niece, who's dad is away] Yamael's job is to bring something for her to eat, make sure she does not eat too much junk... I whisper in her ears "you will be successful one day". She don't understand it, but I talk to her. Giver her confidence."

Yamael



Nurturer and son

"[A man is] "someone who is responsible at the end of the day; responsible for your own actions for the the younger ones. I wasn't prepared for the little challenges that pop up [as a father], but you have to work around it. I want my son to be an independent thinker."

Devon



Nurturer and twin daughters

[A man is] "basically being responsible... Just responsibility and taking care of your responsibility; like things you used to do before you stop doing – stop smoking; drinking; liming... my family is first."

Dale



Nurturer and sons

[Being a man involves] "family life, responsibility, dealing with the challenges of fatherhood – time management. You want your children to be better than you."

Leslie

## Sharing our Experiences

This exploration of men at the mall has revealed much to us:

- ✚ We encountered a wide variety of men, in terms of age, ethnicity, and class. They were engaged in similar pursuits in the mall, but were each experiencing family life in unique and valid ways.
- ✚ Every father, without fail, said that a real man must take up his responsibility.
- ✚ It would have been useful to probe what they regard as being the responsibilities of men. Those who were more expansive in their response said that their responsibilities included "being there for the family" and "providing".



- ✚ We acknowledge that the simplicity of our method and the brevity of our interview did not allow for much probing, and for the men to reflect on the complexities of “being a man” and “being a nurturer”.
- ✚ We feel however that their visceral responses are nonetheless valid, because it signals what is immediately significant to each of them.
- ✚ Some men were demonstrably guarded in their response in the presence of significant others. We feel that, free of this influence, we may have received either different responses and/or more substantial responses.

### **What do you think?**

- ✚ To what extent do men participate in nurturing?
- ✚ Are men more involved in family life now than before? Or is it the same?
- ✚ Are there barriers to male-nurturing? If, yes what are they?
- ✚ What counts as sufficient, quality and significant male nurturing?
- ✚ How can you encourage male-nurturing in family life?

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<sup>1</sup> Licks refers to floggings

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