

PARENTING UNFILTERED

# Sharing emotions. Embracing vulnerability. This DCF program helps dads heal their inner child.

By [Kara Baskin](#) Globe Correspondent, Updated June 19, 2026, 2:00 a.m.



A Nurturing Fathers graduation hug at the Greater Haverhill DCF area office. HANDOUT

Across Massachusetts, a network of social workers, community organizations, and fathers is working to strengthen one of the most important relationships in a child's life: the one with their dad.

The Department of Children and Families offers a [Nurturing Father's Program](#), an evidence-based, 13-week parenting curriculum available statewide.

It's open to all dads, not just those involved with DCF. The program provides education, support, and connection, with some participants joining through referrals from social workers or the courts.

They aim to help dads build stronger relationships with their children and families. And they also offer a rare safe space for men to let down their guard to unpack difficult emotions and show vulnerability.

"Fathers need to connect with other fathers: That's one big barrier that we're trying to break down. There's a whole lot of support when it comes from moms out there. There's a little bit of support for dads, and we're trying to increase that, having the space available for a dad to be able to reach out [for help]," says Aaron Tilton, a DCF social worker who focuses on family engagement.

Since 2018, 216 dads have graduated from the program. Many of these dads lacked role models themselves. Some struggled with substance abuse. Others might have sole custody of their kids and need support. But the program is open to all dads, even those who aren't involved with DCF, who crave extra guidance and community.

"Historically, fathers have been viewed as really having two responsibilities: being a provider and a disciplinarian," Tilton says. "Fathers have a whole lot more to offer. They've got the capacity to be nurturers. A lot of the dads come in and say they've got a desire to be good fathers. They want to be present and engaged with their children."

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They just don't know how.

Classes focus on emotions: talking about how proud they are of their kids; processing baggage from their own childhoods out loud.

“They have space to be vulnerable, where it’s OK to ask for help and know they’re not alone,” Tilton says.

The groups offer child care, too: Dads show up with their kids at 5:30 for dinner and then join their group while kids play. The group gets deep, connecting with long-buried childhood memories.

“We ask them to remember what it was like when their father walked into the room: What were their feelings? What was the expression your father had on his face? What was he wearing? How did he talk to you? How did he talk to your mom?” Tilton says.

In this way, the men are asked to nurture their own inner child.

“If they’re able to nurture themselves, they’re going to be able to help nurture their children,” Tilton says. “One thing that men also don’t do very well is take care of ourselves. How can we nurture ourselves?”

They also discuss the normalcy of emotions, even though it might be more socially acceptable to repress them: anger, sorrow, jealousy — feelings that can bubble over when untended.

Classes also discuss role-modeling for their sons, but also for their daughters.

“I always use an example: Imagine a father and a family out, and there’s a female waitress. How is that father talking to that female waitress if she makes an honest mistake about something? This shows a son how to treat a woman, but also to role model to the daughter how to be treated,” Tilton says.

At the end of 13 weeks, men invite their families to a graduation ceremony, where each father reads a vision statement, outlining the father he wishes to be.

Norwood’s [Daniel “Math” Revallion](#) is a graduate who now mentors other fathers. Today, he’s an alumni coordinator at Bedrock Recovery Centers in Canton. He also runs his own company, where he brings workshops to schools, recovery spaces, and prisons.

But Revallion has also spent 15 years in state prison himself. He overdosed seven times. He was in 131 detox facilities. He lived on the streets, mainly Mass Ave. in Boston. He entered the program after leaving prison in 2017, when his relationships with his six children were fractured. He was ready to get sober and to live another way.

“I have experience with making children. I have no experience with raising children,” he says. “I didn’t know how to prioritize my children more than the streets, prison, doing drugs, and dealing drugs. The program gave me a different perspective ... it changed my mind-set from a baby daddy to being a man, and then a man who has the potential to be a father,” he says.

Revallion didn’t meet his own father until he was 11 years old. By the time he was 18, he had a child of his own, and he was spiraling into addiction: crack, methadone, suboxone.

“I saw [fatherhood] as more of an obligation than an opportunity,” he says. “Alcoholism and addiction are a self-centered, egotistical, selfish illness. ... I never knew how to prioritize being a good father until I got into recovery. When you put your recovery first, then you can put your family first,” he says. “Pain is the father of change.”

He practices the 12 steps and has made amends with most of his kids, who range in age from 35 to 6. He is now raising one daughter full time. He is estranged from one grown daughter.

“When she’s ready to forgive me in her time, I’ll be here sober to embrace the relationship,” he says.

Now, at 54, with nearly a decade of sobriety, he has a simple lesson that he teaches other fathers as a facilitator.

“Accountability gives birth to responsibility, so whatever issue you have, you have to take accountability for it. When you take accountability for it, then you can heal from it,” he says. “My motto is: I’m a teacher to my children from zero to seven, I’m a mentor from 7 to 13, I’m a coach from 13 to 21. At 21, I can become your friend,” he says.

He and his daughter, whom he’s raising full time, have a renewed relationship. She’s in the Big Brother/Big Sister program, plays the cello, and takes karate lessons. They maintain a father-daughter journal every day, where they write how they’re feeling — and where she grades him on that day’s success as a dad, and he grades her as a daughter.

“For a while, I was using more intimidation than communication. Intimidation solves a problem for the moment, but communication is how you solve a problem over the long haul,” he says.

Wilmington’s Robert Jones, 46, is a single father of three kids ranging from 7 to 11. He works full time and volunteers at his children’s schools and extracurricular activities. He’s also a Nurturing Father’s Program graduate, and a speaker and presenter on topics related to fatherhood.

But, at first, he was just a scared single dad who wondered how to braid his daughter’s hair. His caseworker recommended the Nurturing Father’s Program.

“I was looking to get help in raising children, but what I got was just so much more: learning about how I was raised, how I grew up, how I want to raise my children,” he says.

At first, he didn't think he belonged — he already had custody and a strong relationship with his kids — but the group helped him process his own childhood.

“I grew up in a different time, when you didn't hear ‘I love you’ from your dad all the time. I knew he did, but it was a different time. Now, I have to be everything to my children: good cop and bad cop. I have to be the one who can be emotional with them, and also be their rock and their shoulder to cry on. It's a completely different way of raising children now than it was when I grew up,” he says.

Today, as a program facilitator, he helps other fathers grapple with complex emotions that they finally feel safe to express.

“A father might show up angry. If you spend some time working with them and talking to them, you can see that they're actually scared, they're confused, they're depressed. These are not emotions that guys are going to sit out there and just openly talk about,” he says.

“I think this is a great program for any father. I wish it could be a requirement in the hospital from birth.”

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**BrownEyedGirl7**

6/19/26 - 6:01AM

What an amazing resource! And a beautiful story. Brought tears to my eyes. Think how many children are getting better, healthier, happier dads because of this. Thanks for your reporting on this, Kara.

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NewsHawk

6/19/26 - 2:53PM

Great article! Love redemption stories. Good fathers make good children.

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