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By [Ed Stannard](#)

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If you're looking for someone to help involve fathers in their children's lives, Anthony Gay is your man.



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Maritza Acosta-Gay, Noah Gay and Anthony Gay at the beach.
Contributed Photo

A social work supervisor for the state [Department of Children and Families](#), Gay knows how difficult, and how vital, it is to be a father who will have a lasting, positive impact on his children.

Gay, who grew up in New Haven and is based in DCF's Torrington office, is leading the agency's fatherhood engagement efforts, closing the gap between services offered to fathers and those given to mothers and children.

Gay knows the importance of fatherhood from both sides. He knows what he missed out on because his father had to work two and three jobs to keep his family fed and clothed. He knows his son also didn't get the benefit of his parenting because he was working to provide what his father could not. And, devastated by the loss of that son in a car crash, Gay has changed his outlook when it comes to his second son. He knows spending time with him is the most important thing there is.



Ossie Gay Sr., Anthony Gay's father, with Anthony's son, Damion.
Contributed Photo

Having a father who is involved with his children is hugely important to their development, no matter what background the dad comes from. "If a father is illiterate, if a father has no math skills, if they show an interest, the child does better academically," said Gay.

The numbers bear that out. According to statistics from DCF, children whose fathers are involved in their lives are 43 percent more likely to earn A's in school, a third less likely to repeat a grade and twice as likely to go to college or get a job

after high school. They are 75 percent less likely to become a father themselves during their teen years and 80 percent less likely to spend time in jail.

It's been only in the last decade that DCF has put its efforts into involving fathers in their families' lives. A 2008 review by the [U.S. Department of Health and Human Services](#) found that the agency was coming up short, he said.

"Our agency does a relatively good job in engaging mothers across the board," Gay said. "We do very well in engaging children. ... But in the report, they found we're still below their threshold" in engaging fathers. "We just were not making those efforts to engage fathers in the way that we engage children and mothers."

While Gay said DCF still has a ways to go in its efforts, it is a priority for the department. Its Fatherhood Engagement Leadership Teams seek out fathers who are not present in their children's lives and helps them fulfill their role.

'He just wasn't there'

For Gay, it's personal. His own father, Ossie Gay Sr., while devoted to his family, wasn't able to be there for his son.

"We actually had a good relationship," Gay said. "In hindsight it wasn't what I would have liked for it to be, but when I was younger, I didn't know any different. He just wasn't there because he worked two full-time jobs and a part-time job. It wasn't that he didn't love me."

Ossie Gay, born in Georgia and with only a third-grade education, worked with his hands at low-wage jobs, so he wasn't home much. "I literally saw my father when it was time to go to school or it was time to go to bed," Anthony Gay said.

Ossie Gay was a chauffeur for the Veterans Administration, cleaned banks and was a maintenance man at church. "He was a real handyman, so he would pick up jobs whenever he could to make money," Gay said.

Even though his father worked so hard, the family had barely enough to get by. There wasn't always enough to adequately support Anthony, his two brothers and sister and their mother. "Pretty much everything I got was hand-me-downs," said Gay, "I don't remember getting a new coat until high school."

But while he was almost always at work, Ossie Gay "was the only father on the block" in their Edgewood neighborhood. "So when he was around it was a major thing, not only for me but [for] the other kids in the neighborhood," Gay said.

Anthony Gay was a basketball star at what is now Gateway Community College, scoring more than 40 points a game. "My father had always heard how good I was as a basketball player, but because of work he never saw it," he said.

On senior night, Ossie Gay finally was able to get to his game, but Anthony felt so much pressure he scored fewer than 20 points. "I was trying so hard. I just wanted to prove to him what everyone said about me, and it was so overwhelming for him to be there that I underperformed."

Gay began to tear up as he said, "Seeing him smile just made me so happy that I just couldn't focus."

Gay determined that his children, Damion and Praycious Gay, would not go without as he had, so he followed his father's example and worked so hard he missed out on his own children's lives. Damion was a dancer and basketball player, but "as a result of me chasing money, I missed so much of that."

Gay wasn't away from home quite as much as his father was. He said he didn't miss his son's college basketball games, "but in middle school I missed everything. I just wanted him to be secure because I knew that's what my father did for me. I missed so much. ... It's one of my biggest regrets as to my relationship with him. ... I just missed out on so much of his milestones." Then, on Jan. 8, 2014, his world collapsed.



Anthony Gay, left, with his son Damion Gay. It was the last photo of the two together before Damion died in a car crash in 2014.
Contributed Photo

"I had just gotten home, and I got a call that I needed to come to the hospital." Damion Gay, 23, and a friend were leaving work and "driving a little faster than they should have been," police told Anthony. It's possible they were racing. "His friend cut lanes and clipped his car."

"I just had a feeling that he was gone, and I remember just sitting down on the bed and my wife telling me, 'We gotta go. We gotta go.' ... My body got cold and it felt like everything inside of me was shaking."

When they got to the hospital, Damion’s mother’s partner hugged Gay and said, “We lost our boy.” But Gay wouldn’t believe it until the doctor said, “I’m sorry, sir, he didn’t make it.”

“I started kicking myself at that moment, saying, ‘I missed so much,’” Gay said. Later, “It was so fulfilling to hear people speak about him ... and everybody just talked about how great a father he was” to his 5-year-old daughter, Damani. “He was breaking the chain.”

Anthony Gay decided he would too. When on Oct. 14, 2014, he and his wife, Maritza Acosta-Gay, had a son, Noah, it gave him a new chance.

“Internally, I felt isolated and alone,” Gay said. “I felt flooded and way down and that’s where his name came from, because when he was born I thought, ‘Here’s a new beginning.’”



Anthony Gay with his son Noah Gay at Noah's pre-kindergarten class.
Contributed Photo /

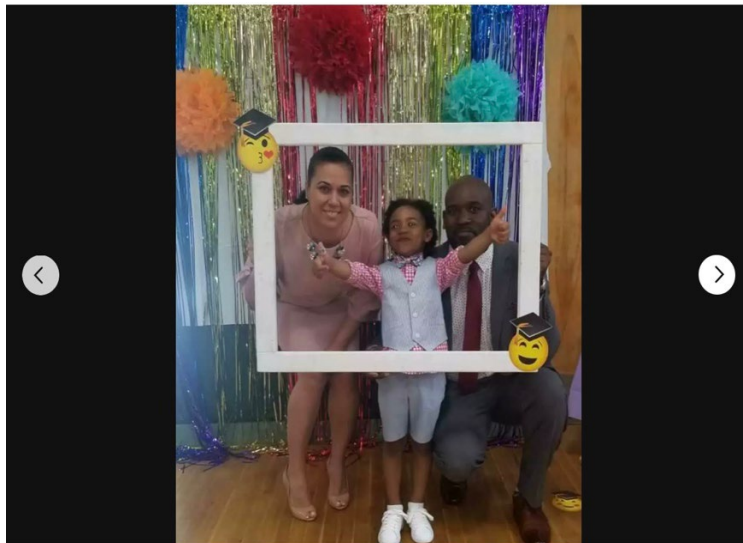
Gay vowed to give Noah “everything a child should have from a father. Some of the hurt day by day started to go away. ... When he was born, I was able to set my

feet on solid ground and was able to find new direction, a greater purpose as it relates to being a father.”

Gay had begun his work engaging with fathers in 2013, and his experience losing one son and gaining another enabled him to relate to the fathers whose families were in DCF care. He was able to say, “I was in your shoes. I had all these reasons that I thought were more important than spending time with my son.”

And he was able to tell them that those reasons weren’t good ones. That there was nothing more important than being a father.

Gay has become dedicated to Noah, “I won’t say to a fault, but I spend the majority of my time with him. To this date, he’s in kindergarten, so this is his second year of being in school. I haven’t missed anything.”



Noah Gay, center, with his parents, Maritza Acosta-Gay and Anthony Gay, at his pre-kindergarten graduation.
Contributed Photo

Noah plays T-ball, soccer, basketball, and Gay is there. He’s volunteered to coach basketball in Noah’s 4- to 6-year-old Police Athletic League.

While DCF is working to improve its engagement with fathers, the state Department of Social Services launched its [fatherhood initiative](#), later named for the late state Rep. John S. Martinez of New Haven, in 2000. Numerous state

agencies and community partners are involved and Gay is DCF's designee on the statewide panel.



Anthony Gay and his son Noah at Noah's graduation from his 4- to 6-year-old basketball league on Dec. 14, 2019.
Contributed Photo /

For its part, DCF has developed Fatherhood Engagement Leadership Teams through six social service agencies such as [Clifford Beers](#) in New Haven and [Family ReEntry](#) in Bridgeport and Norwalk. "The benefit of this service is that the folks who do this don't work for DCF. It's not the big bad wolf knocking on your door," Gay said.

Fathers are encouraged to enroll in 24/7 Dads groups, which use a 12-week curriculum. "Each week they talk about different items," such as stable employment and being a noncustodial parent, Gay said.

"You get guys who come in and don't want to take any accountability. Everything is everyone else's fault," Gay said. In the group, other fathers will challenge them to take action to become more involved with their children. They might be asked, "Did you go down to family court and file a motion" for visitation?

“We’re trying to engage extended family as a resource for the child in the nuclear family, so if we don’t do a good job with the father, we’re making it difficult to do a good job with the father’s side of the family,” said Gary Kleeblatt, DCF’s spokesman.

“This is not the Immaculate Conception here,” Gay said. “Somebody helped this baby come to Earth ... and it’s incumbent on the agency to identify with dads.”

DCF workers now put extra effort into finding fathers. “You have workers who will not give up until they find a father,” Gay said, using social media and other ways to locate them, sometimes even when the mother has said the father is deceased.

Gay also has created a program called [Dads Matter Too](#), which put on a family day and has held road races and conferences. “Other fathers who came could see other fathers interact with their children and it could encourage them to maybe do the same thing,” he said.



Anthony Gay and his son, Noah, at the beach this summer.
Contributed Photo

The agency doesn’t see fatherhood as limited to the biological father. “It’s biological, foster, psychological, grandfather, you name it,” Gay said.

Tirzah Kemp leads the Fatherhood Engagement Leadership Team at Clifford Beers. “I have two fatherhood engagement specialists. ... They will take the case and they meet with the dad and the social worker to make sure everyone is on the same page,” she said.

Kemp said the work is correcting a longstanding bias in social services toward mothers. “The system has been designed really to help the moms. Unfortunately, that has left the dad out of the narrative when it comes to parenting,” she said. “Fathers need just as much if not more parenting support as mothers do,” she said. “When there are both parents in a child’s life the child developmentally is better off.” She said 87 percent of fathers referred to DCF became engaged. “Fathers want to be involved. Unfortunately, women are the gatekeepers,” Kemp said. “There’s an ideology that women are the nurturers and shut men out. ... This is why the fatherhood program is so critical to ensure that we as providers are making sure the fathers are engaged.”

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