DAD ACADEMY

Young New Yorkers are learning to be good fathers while growing up themselves.
Young men get crash course on fatherhood

The city hopes young men capitalize on a $2.1 million investment in CUNY Fatherhood Academy. "Many of these guys are learning to be adults while they're parents," Brooks said. The program's coordinator. "They're basically learning on the job.”

The free, four-month workshop has participants inside a college classroom three days a week, with each father getting a crash course designed to push their educations and parenting skills. Many of the students are able to pursue their GED, while others get a hand with college applications and financial aid to pursue higher studies. They also learn how to change diapers.

Having dropped out at 17, Reyes-Little did odd jobs to pay for his son's needs. He managed to get a GED on his own, but pursued the academy after he heard one piece of advice. "This whole time I felt like my life is over after having a kid, and that I should just do what I can to take care of him," he said. "But then I realized I can give him a better life and make sure he's okay by also taking care of myself."

Deputy Mayor Richard Buery praised the Fatherhood Academy's work when he joined students to celebrate the city's investment. He told Metro New York that investment and confidence in the program's ability to reach young men of color is reflective of the fathers' own willingness to ask for help. "The normal narrative is that they not show vulnerability, don't ask for help — that's not being a man," Buery said. "These young men are really defining what it means to be a man, to stand up and say, 'I want to be a better father.'"

"It's hard — there's no rubric," he added, "but these young men are getting something really any father can benefit from. They are trying, and we have to meet with them halfway. It's our loss when we don't answer their call."

The de Blasio administration pointed to a series of successes over the year for academy participants, including a 61 percent average pass rate for high school equivalency exams — higher than the statewide 56 percent.

Even so, Brooks readily admits not everyone passes the program, nor is the program necessarily for everyone. After a rigorous screening process and weeks of workshops, some young men come back to retake exams and see gradual improvement. "Each person has their version of success," he said. "Some just want to pass a test, or be a part of a graduation ceremony, or find employment or go to college. You come in here with one goal and often come out with something else."