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Lizzy: Hi, I'm Lizzy Ghedi-Ehrlich, one of the hosts of the Scholars Strategy Network's No Jargon. Each month we'll discuss an American policy problem with one of the nation's top researchers —without jargon. The holiday season is upon us. That means many Americans are spending time with their families, reconnecting, sharing traditions, arguing, reflecting on what really matters here at the end of the year/ And that means a lot of us are thinking about that all important family figure, dads. These are folks whose contributions sometimes go unnoticed. Sometimes folks would argue that they have too much attention on them. No matter what you think, fathers definitely play a huge role in children's growth and development and have been truly a topic of research and public interest.

And so today we're excited to dive into how fatherhood is changing, especially in American black families, how things like culture, resilience, and challenges that dads are facing shape the way they raise their children. With everything

happening in the world right now, all the political changes we're talking about, folks discussing paternity leave, work, life balance, mental health, the plight of children, the plight of men and boys, there's no better time to have important conversations like these.

So for this month's episode, I spoke to Dr. Alvin Thomas. He's an associate professor of human development and family studies at the University of Wisconsin Madison, and the director of the Thomas Resilient Youth Lab at the university. Dr. Thomas is a clinical psychologist whose research focuses on the intersection of fatherhood, positive youth development, and the well-being of Black families and communities. He hosts the multi-award winning *Black Fatherhood Podcast*, which was recently rebranded as *The Black Father's Pulse*, so you can still find all his previous content at that location, and that's where he discusses the joys, challenges, and triumphs of Black fathers. He's an independent consultant at Thriving Lives Consulting, which focuses on empowering resilience, growth, and positive parenting within families.

Here's our conversation, Dr. Thomas. Thanks so much for joining us today.

Alvin: Thank you so much for inviting me. It's a pleasure to be here.

Lizzy: So you've been focusing on studying fatherhood for quite a while. That's been a real through-line interest for you. You're also a clinical psychologist. You've seen patients in practice. What overlap are you seeing between your two roles as a researcher and a practitioner? And how does your clinical experience inform the research questions you're asking?

Alvin: That's a mouthful. In my previous role where I was seeing clients, what I often would notice would be that when kids were being brought in for therapy, 99% of the time, it was a grandma, aunt, older sister, or some female relative. Towards the end of my post-doc years, I began asking, where are the fathers in this space and why is dad not present? And all I had to do was look back and kind of critique our own practices in that space and realize that we never did ask for dad. The default was always whoever brought the kid in. The additional underlying default was “ask mom.” And even when we did finally ask about dad it was always seeing mom as the gatekeeper. So asking mom to ask dad to come in or asking mom what dad might want. And I thought, we have this excellent family resource that's going unused. Without that full family system being implicated in treatment, we were not seeing the best of outcomes. And so I wanted to try to make space for normalizing conversations about fathers, but also normalizing the inclusion. Fathers, across services, whether that be, education services, mental health, physical health, whatever space, families and

children and mothers were engaging, we want fathers to be in those spaces as well. That kind of influenced both my research as well as my practice. And now of course, my podcasting.

Lizzy: And so what direction has that taken then, since you had that realization? What does it look like to recognize fathers in that way?

Alvin: I was realizing that it seemed like you needed to reinvent the wheel around fatherhood and father engagement all over again. So if I was speaking at the mental health spaces, I would have to do this fatherhood spiel as if it were brand new. If I was speaking with physical health. Again, brand new academic brand, new policy, brand new. Every space you went to, it felt like it was almost brand new every time. And so I wanted to, one, bring that conversation to all of these spaces, but two, try to understand the underpinning. what was at the core of making these conversations seem so brand new every time and it was that society has particular expectations of men and men are allowed to only play within those small parameters. So, provider-protector roles, that's where you sit. And nurturing, well, that's not for men. Vulnerability, well, that's not for men. Emotionality, well, that's not for men. Caring, well, that's not for men. Provide and protect and leave everything about your humanity and connection outside of that space.

And so how do we engage society in a conversation that is as perennial as motherhood, as childhood, as maternal care, as childcare. How do we make the conversation about men's health and about father engagement as normal? As any one of those conversations. And, if we can get to that point, then every one of these other layers in our society would be influenced by the new paradigm shift.

Lizzy: And hearing this as a mom, I suppose that's my positionality in all of this. And, strikes me again and again, that box that you described, the role that we've sort of carved out for fathers is so small, it seems like such a disaster waiting to happen because if your only job is to protect and provide, and then if you lose your job, or if there is some sort of incursion into your family safety that you couldn't control, then you've failed and there's nothing else. There's nowhere else for you to go. It seems so incredibly unwelcoming. The real million-dollar question, of course, is what do we do to expand that box? It is so pernicious and all these different areas you've already described. But before that, maybe let's look at what you know as a researcher who's actually studying empirical evidence right now. Are there trends you are seeing?

Alvin: So thankfully there have been changes and there seems to be a steady, uptick in some of those changes. You ask younger fathers, and by younger I mean between, 20-something and 40 years old. You ask men about their own personal identity, you ask men about their fathering experiences, and one of the things that we're noticing is that how men des men today describe fatherhood looks very different from how men in my father's generation and his father's generation described fatherhood. How men engage in fatherhood also looks different, how men engage in emotionality and health looks different.

Still troubling, but it does give hope because the concept of fatherhood has become one that has become a little bit more deeply ingrained in identity for men. So men see their ability to care for not just provide and protect, but to also care for and to pour into their children and their families. They see that as critical to their masculine roles, but also to their roles in general, their sense of purpose. Whereas before my father's generation would be if I provide a roof over your head, a hot meal, and a bed to sleep in, and you can go to school, you are good. That's all you need from me.

Now we're hearing fathers are engaging in floor play with their babies. Fathers are feeding, changing diapers, doing dishes, doing what we often would think of as quote unquote mom duties. fathers, carrying their babies in Bjorns and walking to the park and pushing strollers. Those are things that we did not see until the last maybe 10 or so years. We're seeing that significant change in how fathers are conceptualizing. It's almost as if fathers are beginning to colonize the, uh, parenting speech and saying, I am a parent. I am expected to play these roles. I do have a right to play these roles in my children's lives,

Lizzy: Do you have any ideas about what's the main drivers of that shift?

Alvin: We are not sure. maybe I could do some research on it, but I'm not quite sure. I mean, I have some thoughts, about what could be potential drivers. More women are going into the workforce, so there's a greater need for sharing household tasks, domestic tasks. So fathers by default, have to be more engaged. So moms are also stepping back and saying, I can't do all of this. I have to give space for my spouse to do some of that work. So we're seeing a little bit of a backtrack in what used to be maternal gatekeeping, uh, not just with the child, but with household tasks. So women are stepping back and allowing space. And thankfully men are stepping into that space. I think there's still a lot of work that has to be done for women allowing more space, for fathers to step into.

The economic landscape has changed. So more women are going into the workplace. More women are highly educated, so the market is a little bit more competitive. Uh, families need multiple incomes. Families need as much income as possible. Both fathers and mothers, especially those who are more highly educated, are a little bit more savvy, a little bit more aware of the positive outcomes for having both parents involved in the child's life. Men are also beginning to challenge these narrow narratives, and are finding other ways to engage, with their families, with their children, but also finding ways to engage themselves and engage purpose. So there's more conversation that's happening around that.

Lizzy: Yeah, definitely an area. I'd love to know what maybe future research has to say when we're thinking about, you know, what are the different drivers of changes like that and how do we explore the roles of mothers and how we do or do not make that space. I thought that first point was particularly interesting.

But I also wanna talk specifically now to take a narrower focus and talk about Black fathers. We know this is a focus of your research, of your podcast, and of a lot of your clinical work as well. I imagine there's, there has to be tension there because this is an important research subject and we also know that that's the site of very pernicious stereotypes in the US about who Black fathers are or are not. And so I imagine that you have plenty to uncover and also to sort of work against as you are even trying to treat those research subjects as full humans and participants in families as well.

Alvin: That is very true. The thing I like to see at the beginning of any conversation regarding that is that we're not thinking of Black fathers as a monolith. There are wealthy black fathers, there are super wealthy Black fathers. There are extremely poor Black fathers. There are very well-educated Black fathers, very undereducated Black fathers. So much like any other racial ethnic demographic, you cannot treat it as a monolith. There's lots of variability in what the experiences of humanity, what the experiences of race, and what the experiences of socioeconomic status or financial status or economic status would look like.

Having said that, especially for poorer Black fathers, they are probably at the worst end, as far as the narrative, but the narrative does paint every Black father, regardless of what your economic status looks like or what your education status looks like. The default assumption is that if you're black and a father, then you're not involved. If people see me in my department or see me on TV or hear me on this podcast, hear the voice and think, oh, this guy must be educated or see me, and oh, this guy, he's dressed in a suit or he's dressed in a

blazer and he has a lapel pin and he looks smart, he's at a university. The assumption of deficit that often would accompany my Blackness or my race diminishes because of the positive assumptions that are made based on perceptions of my SES. But if I were to take off the trappings of academia and walk out with just my cornrows, t-shirt, a pair of jeans, a hoodie, and my busted-out sneakers, suddenly every assumption that is applied to low-income Black fathers is now available to me. And what that means about my experience with children, my experience with my family, my experience with others, that is gonna start to look very different.

Lizzy: And SES of course, that's socioeconomic status, correct.

Alvin: Yes. Oh my God.

Lizzy: Oh.

Alvin: Thank you for, you caught my jargon.

Lizzy: Yes, yes. So that socioeconomic status markers shape so much of how the world treats all of us, not just Black fathers. What are you seeing in the research that you have conducted on this group about what that input has meant for different Black fathers that we know are all these individual people working within their individual family units who may have all or nothing in common with the next person who's one of your subjects?

Alvin: It'll be great to have one of my colleagues come in and talk with you about policy and how policy and engagement with American systems affect the most marginalized in our society. We think of persons who have the lowest access to economic resources. So I'm thinking of Dr. David Pate, a professor in the School of Human Ecology as well, across the hall from me, who's been doing work on low-income, marginalized Black men. By low income, he means people making $20,000 or less a year, and what that reality means for them and how their interactions with different policy species plays out in their daily life and is responsible for a number of different outcomes for them.

So I think of the child support, um, spaces, I think of, child welfare, I think of other governmental support services, which sound really great on the face of it until you start digging into the underlying practices and policies and what they mean for individuals. So I think for example, of some research that we were doing in Flint, Michigan and in Chicago, and this was with my research advisor in grad school, Dr. Cleopatra Caldwell. She has a program called The Fathers

and Sons Program. They were going to these much poorer counties, doing work specifically with Black non-resident fathers.

So Black fathers who didn't share the home with their children. These kids were between eight and 12 years old. And the idea was to try to engage both parties with a mission to draw the family system together more closely with the expectation that strengthened bond between father and son will lead to lower smoking, lower risk for substance use, alcohol use, early sexual initiation, all of the horrible CDC type health-risk behaviors.

And one of the challenges that we were having when we were trying to recruit fathers was that we were hearing of moms who were concerned about how often the dad would have to come pick up the child from her house to take him to our intervention. The concern was if the dad is seen or has to be reported as visiting the house as often as we were expecting and potentially spending time over at the house, the policy stated that that practice of bringing the family closer together, bringing the non-resident dad closer to his family, they could lose their housing allowance if the dad was seen as being too closely involved with the family.

Lizzy: To clarify that for folks who I think, uh, you know, on the policy side might be going, wait, what? For folks who need a little bit of grounding because I think that can be so shocking for people who aren't thinking of the policy end of things, benefits like housing support are so often tied to household size and to household earnings, and so there is this very delicate math sometimes that ends up with families having to say, us being a part is the only route for us to achieve a type of economic stability. We see that a lot and that's something that certainly people who craft policies think about, but it's particularly pernicious for certain demographics. It's very interesting that this was one project you had where that was, you know, a concern that came out loud and clear at the beginning. What an underlining of how much this matters to people and how much it then shapes people's actual relationships that feed into. Public perceptions about what all relationships are like. It's just this very vicious cycle.

Alvin: Exactly, and, and I mean even the reporting. So we often hear about the percentage of fathers, Black fathers included, who are not living in the home That is the reason. Because the family does much better economically if the father does not live in the home. And so that father who is fully involved would still show up under the statistics as a father who is absent.

Lizzy: Right. So it's even affecting the research which is supposed to provide us with the truth that we would use to adjust the policy or the public perception. It's

all caught up in this real tangle. Um, which I also, I think an interesting part of that tangle as well is just examining the assumption that I think we start from in these conversations that fathers have a uniquely important role to play in child's health, wellbeing, and development. And I'm not going to come out and say that I don't believe that, but I am sometimes troubled by the very American idea of a family unit and its supposed need for self-sufficiency and how sometimes what really looks like economic sufficiency could be supplied by any combination of working adults in a home as opposed to simply a mother and a father, or the biological parents of children, how that can sometimes be manipulated to advance the cause of certain policies about marriage, about the need for heterosexual unions that can sometimes maybe be, you know, have a negative impact on single mother or single father households on mixed families. I am interested in what your research shows. Is the actual impact of fathers specifically, and is there a way to tease that out from the impact of involved parents and guardians of any gender or of any type?

Alvin: So my research has not gone that far yet. It is something that we're looking at, the impact of different figures in a child's life. So the impact of the mom, the impact of the dad, but the impact of other figures, not just in the home, but in the immediate environment. So in the neighborhood, what is the potential benefit for certain kinds of representation? In that neighborhood, what is the benefit, uh, for the child and for the family system? That's something that we're starting to tease out. But there is quite a bit of research that says that, throughout child development, the involvement of fathers, the engagement of fathers does have significant psychological, neurological and social benefits for the child.

When fathers are engaged, especially involved in floor play and talking and conversation with babies and young children, fathers reading to children has shown significant benefits for academic readiness for school. And for the fathers engaging in rough and tumble play. usually leads to kids who are a little bit more confident, more risk taking, positive risk taking, that is. So there are a number of excellent benefits for having fathers involved.

One study I always think about, uh, I can't remember, the authors, but they were testing out a specific intervention that was meant to treat, oppositional defiance disorder. I think it was one of the externalizing problems and they were finding that if the child alone was engaged in therapy, there was very little benefit. If the mom and the child engaged in therapy, they saw significant improvement in the child's externalizing behaviors.

So, and when we say externalizing behaviors, we mean acting out, shouting, fighting, aggression, violence. They saw significant reductions when mother and child were both involved in the intervention and when they involved the father. The additional benefit for when the father was involved was the longevity of that improvement. So when just the mother was involved, the child improved, but after a period of time, three to six months, we saw a return of some of those behaviors. When the father was involved, the improvement was similar, but three to six months outside of therapy, the improvement was maintained.

Lizzy: So there's empirical evidence about how fathers support those better outcomes in various ways. There's plenty of evidence of how certain policy levers are breaking what might otherwise be better connections between fathers and children. And we know that those are visited more squarely on lower-income families and then Black families especially. And we know that Black men as fathers are in this very particular crucible of being at the center of policy and overly negative or overly monolithic public perceptions. What do you think about potential interventions that could be solving some of those pressure points that your research uncover? How do we actually help fathers be the best fathers that they truly otherwise would be if we gave them the supports they needed and trusted them to be able to do that.

Alvin: The first thing that has to happen is that fathers have to be allowed to be human beings. They have to be people first, and address them as people first, as opposed to addressing them through their role. So what are some of the support services that men need? Healthier men. Balanced men. Men who have a sense of purpose, who feel a sense of belonging, who feel grounded and wanted. Those are the men who are going to be better fathers, better husbands, who are going to be better teachers, better professors, better doctors, better. Whatever other role they may decide to pick up. That is the same for every other human being.

This is a thing that I say to all of my students at the beginning of every class that I teach. The role of this class is not just to teach you facts and to help you think. If this class does not help you become a better person, if this class does not help you think about others in a different way than you'd thought about them before, than we have failed in what we intended to do. The role of education, the role of governmental services, the role of policy is to make people, to make human beings the best that they can be, so that when they pick up other roles. When they step into interactions with others, they are already good people. It's a good person doing a job that they love. It's a good person finding space and purpose in a thing that they love doing or that they would like to try.

Lizzy: I think we've certainly seen plenty of evidence of what happens to people when there is that lack of a sense of purpose and of their importance. Discourse like this maybe falls under the title of the crisis of masculinity. As hard as it is to go from what I thought was just now a very, you know, potentially inspiring and uplifting and hopeful answer, we have to acknowledge that we're in this moment when that small definition of what men's roles are in regards to their families. I fear that we're in a moment where that box seems to be tightening. We know that plenty of men here in this country across race and across class even, you know, self-reported some of those feelings of purposelessness. And we saw how it was transmuted through spaces where purposes were served to them from a policy perspective, when I think about ways to increase equality, increase positive outcomes, whether they're for health or education or whatever, across all the different demographic groups in America, you know, it troubles me that purpose being handed over to people does not seem aligned with some of those types of policy changes and interventions that I think would be most helpful.

What do you see in this coming moment when masculinity is going to be a thread among so many conversations? Knowing what you know about how we need to give men, those spaces where they can simply be good and that that is that step one to being a good father as opposed to seeing once, you know, being only treated as a father first. What do you think this moment of discourse means for some of those things that you know, need to happen to create more fertile ground?

Alvin: So last month on the 11th, myself and Dr. Danielle Hairston Green hosted the first ever Fathers in Focus Conference and we saw 250 men, not counting volunteers and others, just attendees for this conference. The expectation was that all of the presenters were going to be men. All of the keynotes were going to be men, and this was going to be a specific space for men, for fathers to show up and engage in conversation to raise issues. Overwhelmingly, what we've heard from fathers is, wow, I did not know I needed this so much. It's so great to have a space to talk about these things. We never talk about this anywhere else. Wow, I hope we do this more often. Men have to be allowed to create more of that space for themselves, to claim some of that space and to themselves have and direct that conversation. If the conversation is had by somebody else and the underlying outcomes, are laid out in guidelines for what men should and shouldn't be, then they're less likely to follow them.

We can expect that the status quo is going to try to assert itself because it's been around for centuries. It is what is normal for lots of people, and some people

will fight against it because it is not, it does not feel comfortable. It does not feel normal, and that's fine. Some people you will never be able, you'll never change, you will never convince no matter how much evidence you have, because it's too scary, too different, too new to latch onto. But you hope that the overwhelming majority of men are going to step forward and say, we have the space to think about what it looks like as men, what we think men should be, the spaces that men can engage. This is not saying that men should not be or could not be providers and protectors, but we're seeing there's a need for expanding the role for men to include not just those two very narrow spaces.

And so what does that look like for men? What do fathers want for their children? What kind of world do they want for their children? And so inviting fathers into the space where they can talk openly, not just holding their own values and hopes and dreams for their children in their minds and in their hearts, but talking with other men, to see where some of the fault lines lie, but also where some of the overlap lies and realize that we're not so different. We all want our children to be happy. We all want our children to be healthy. We all want our children to be free. We all want our children to have the best chance of social mobility, to be able to fulfill their God-given potential to be able to fully live out their potential across the board.

Lizzy: That's what fathers want the conversation then is what would best meet those objectives for me and my child? What would help me get to those objectives and how do we drive towards the things that will get me towards those objectives? I mean, getting men to raise their hand, and try to create those spaces, I understand why that is such a high-risk proposition. It sort of flies in the face of what that masculinity box expects. And so I understand that there's so much to risk there. I wanna take a moment just to discuss, a resource for folks who maybe need a bit of more of these conversations, um, to rest on and to hear these messages that you're giving that I think would do so much to empower men and make them start thinking more about what they can do and what the value of trying to have those kinds of conversations might be.

And that's, of course, Black Fathers Pulse, a space where I really wanna direct people and give you a moment to talk about some of the content, the award-winning content that you are producing, because it really sounds like this Thanksgiving and the end of the year holiday season, this sounds like a good one to maybe be putting on in the car and giving people a little pep in their step before they talk to their dad, be the dad that they wanna be.

Alvin: I know some people are dreading the holiday conversations to come. I would say you could pivot that conversation. Instead of talking about the

dreaded topic of politics, pivot to fatherhood because it's a thing that your father, your brothers, your mom, everybody could connect to. So listen to the Black Father's Pulse. You'll get all of the conversations on there. As you're driving to mom's house or dad's house, or wherever you're having dinner. Use that time to listen to a couple of episodes and use the content of those episodes to talk about what your dad wanted for you. Ask your dad, what did you hope for me and how do you think you've achieved it? And then give your dad some feedback about what you thought he did very well, how thankful you are for what he was able to accomplish. And then talk to him about how you are thinking about your kids and how you are thinking about raising his grandchildren, your children, and the kind of world that you want for them, and the values that you want for them.

The podcast does an excellent job of pulling in conversations and putting them in a way that are very easy to absorb, but very easy to also engage in conversation with somebody else. I just wanted to point out that over the last three months, we just received another three awards from the signal award ceremony, and one from Anthem, and we're waiting for a fourth. About seven awards so far in the last two years. What it's telling us is that the conversations are mattering. It's telling us that there is space for those conversations.

In my consultancy, that's the kind of work I'm also doing. It's engaging fathers, engaging communities in those conversations and talking as well with organizations about how to engage fathers. So hopefully people will find the podcast very useful for themselves, but also thinking about how they can engage others. This season of the podcast, we're exploring an area that we have not done before and an area that most people don't think about, actually think is almost absent. And that is fathers raising young children. And that's from babies to toddlerhood. We usually think that fathers show up when the child starts going to school. That the changing of the diapers and having difficult, conversations with a 1-year-old or a 2-year-old, that’s a thing that mom does and dad shows up, just shows up as the provider and protector.

Instead, we're showing up now with a number of guests, telling us about their challenges, their struggles, the ways that they're doing it, the kinds of, uh, philosophical stances that they're taking for raising their children and how that's gonna look in the next five years, the next 10 years as their toddlers become school-aged and adolescents, thinking about where fathers are setting up the tent poles for security and health in their children during the toddler years.

Lizzy: I am genuinely so excited for the opportunity to promote that and have that be something that we share with our listeners. You heard it here, everyone.

You've got your homework assignment. For the holidays, but it sounds like a really worthy one. I'd love to know that we're helping you promote those kinds of conversations because they do seem so healthful and important, especially right now. And so we hope that resonates with our listeners today. Thank you so much for sharing your insights, Dr. Thomas. It's been an absolute pleasure.

Alvin: I will send that to you and thank you very much for having me.

Lizzy: Thank you everyone for listening. For more on Dr. Thomas' work, check out our show notes at scholars.org/no jargon. No Jargon is the podcast of the Scholars Strategy Network, a nationwide organization connecting journalists, policymakers, and civic leaders with America's top researchers to improve policy and strengthen democracy. The producers of our show are Dominik Doemer and Wendy Chow. Our audio engineer is Peter Linnane. If you liked the show, please subscribe and rate us on Apple Podcasts or wherever you get your shows. You can give us feedback on X, formerly known as Twitter @NoJargonPodcast or at our email address nojargon@scholars.org.

And please do check out Black Fathers Pulse this season.