

PHIL YOAKUM, a MAD DADS volunteer, has a "serious" discussion with Michael Lott, 4, about what Michael can play next at the MAD DADS safe night. SANDY SUMMERS/DN

# Safe at Home

## MAD DADS rebel against youth violence

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When Foster learned what had happened to his son, he loaded two guns – a .357- and .44-caliber Magnum – and went looking for the men responsible.

Foster wandered the streets for hours without finding the gang.

At home his rage cooled, and Foster called together several other strong, drug-free fathers from the neighborhood.

The men discussed some of the problems facing youths today – drugs, violence and gangs – and then they decided to act.

In October 1989, Foster and 17 other men formed MAD DADS, Men Against Destruction – Defending Against Drugs and Social disorder, to be a proactive force in the community.

"We started out of pain – the pain of our children dying in the streets of their communities," according to the group's Web page.

"We were – and still are – tired of looking into the eyes of hollow youth who lacked hope and who had ceased to dream."

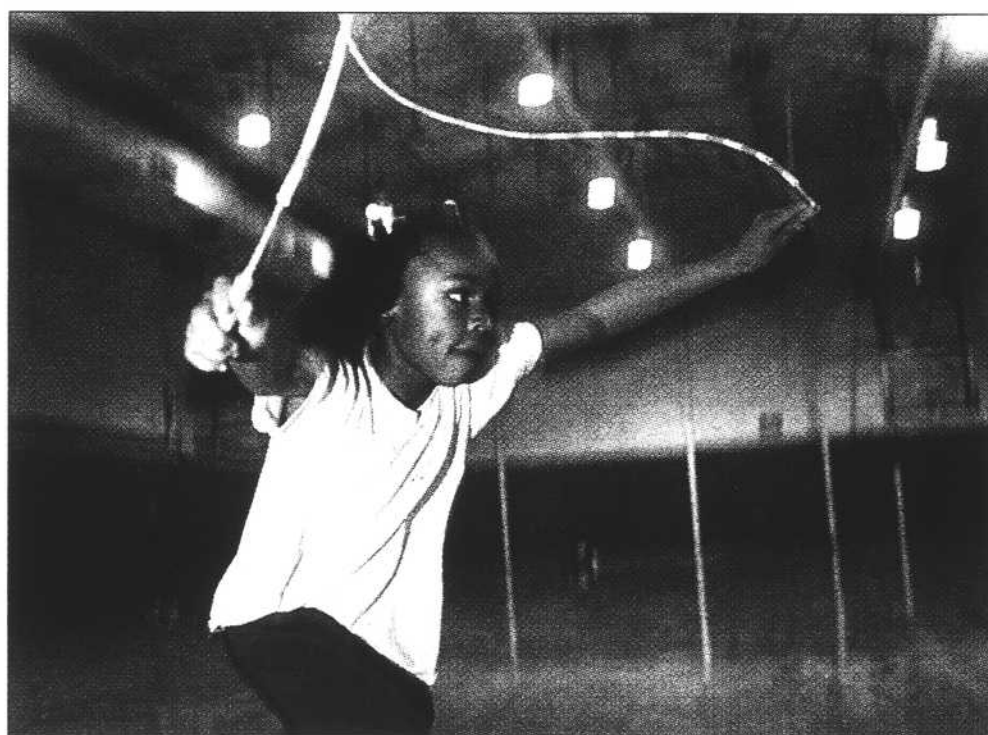
National President Eddie Staton said that after Foster's experience, he and the other fathers finally got mad enough to do something about the problem.

"There are a lot of good kids stuck in bad situations," Staton said.

MAD DADS was created to reach out to such children and teen-agers and guide them down the right path with strong male role models. "We are about building America's families," Staton said, "but unlike politicians, we turn rhetoric into reality."

In 1990, Staton approached the Rev. Don Coleman about starting a MAD DADS chapter in Lincoln.

"We try to find someone who is already a



SHAKELIA HOLMES, 7, jumps rope in the Air Park Recreation Center gymnasium. Children played other games including pool, ping pong and basketball Saturday night. SANDY SUMMERS/DN

leader in the community to start a chapter," Staton said, "someone God has given a heart for children, and Don is that."

When Coleman started the Lincoln MAD DADS, he opened up his heart for children and started to give.

Staton said that Coleman quickly demonstrated he was an effective leader with the chapter's organization. Then he started to take on multiple projects in the community.

One of Coleman's first major projects was to get the Air Park West Recreation Center reopened.

The Lincoln Parks and Recreation department told Coleman it had closed the center because there weren't enough children using it to keep it open.

But Coleman proved them wrong.

At first the city charged Coleman rent and required him to hire an off-duty police officer for security.

So Coleman began having children sign in every Saturday night, and he made sure that those 75 to 100 signatures were on the desks of City Councilwomen Colleen Seng and Cindy Wilson and the mayor.

Before long, the city government took notice, and Coleman persuaded then-Mayor Mike Johanns to put Air Park back into the budget.

Now the recreation center is open full time, and MAD DADS' Saturday night activities attract a crowd of 80 to 125.

Coleman said the recreation center is a safe place for children to hang out, and have fun where

they know "they're all part of a family."

"We want them all to know that everybody is somebody here," Coleman said. "They don't all get that at home."

While they are at the recreation center, the children and teens, ranging in age from 5 to 18, know that violence, drugs and alcohol are not allowed.

"With a lot of the kids, I just give them a look,

and they know (to behave)," Coleman said.

Phil Yoakum, one of the five regular MAD DADS volunteers watching the more than 100 children each week, said "whenever kids get unruly, Coleman takes care of it."

"We don't rule with a heavy hand," Coleman said. "We rule with the hand of love."

While the children are there, the MAD DADS also work in classes to teach responsibility, trustworthiness and basic values.

The classes are usually targeted at different age groups so relevant issues can be addressed.

MAD DADS offers the children support to make the right decisions in their lives and strive for something better, Coleman's 27-year-old son, Tim, said.

"I had a lot of support growing up," said Tim Coleman, now a successful Broadway performer. "That's what these kids don't have."

As part of the weekly Air Park activities, Coleman tries to incorporate community policing by inviting Lincoln police officers to interact with the children on a positive basis.

Lincoln Police Chief Tom Casady said he supports MAD DADS, but he wishes that the program could be bigger and do more.

"Week in and week out, these kids have contact with good solid adults – someone who cares," Casady said.

But to the children, it's just fun. "I come here because it's open at night, and I don't get bored," 14-year-old Justin Gallat said.

For Coleman, it is about giving them something they might not get at home.

"I hate to think what these kids go through at home," he said reflectively. "There are so many stories there."

"So we spoil them while they're here, but they leave with something: They know somebody cares, and they have fun."

## Local groups hold safe nights for youth

By JOSH FUNK  
Senior staff writer

MAD DADS aren't the only ones working to keep Lincoln's children safe.

Three other community groups also sponsor safe night activities similar to MAD DADS' Saturday nights at the Air Park West Recreation Center.

A safe night activity is a fun event for children, usually at a recreation center, that includes some education about responsibility and basic values.

Locally, safe nights sponsored by MAD DADS, the F Street Recreation Center, the Salvation Army and the YWCA are coordinated by the Lincoln/Lancaster County Health Department, Injury Prevention Program Coordinator Brian Baker said.

"Safe nights are a proactive measure to prevent some of the problems larger cities experience," Baker said.

"People realize we have it pretty good here in Lincoln, and they want to keep it that way."

The idea originated in Milwaukee, where the program has had tremendous success.

"Safe nights are held for high-risk youth in specific neighborhoods," Baker said.

Safe nights can be a one-time or regular event, but they all have three simple rules: no drugs, no weapons and no arguing.

"Each night is different to reach different kids," Baker said. "We focus on certain issues with different groups."

For June 5, 1999, organizers are planning Safe Night USA with thousands of events nationwide, Baker said.

"In Lincoln, we want to build the program over time and prevent youth violence."