

Good News

for

New Dads

Tips for Fathers-To-Be

By Loureen Giordano

Darren was sweating in a Santa Clara hospital. His wife Julia was in labor. Even though all was going well, his nerves were on edge. Why? He really wanted to be a good dad, but he'd never even held an infant before. His fears rose. What if he dropped him? What if the baby didn't like him? Could he relate with a little person who couldn't even talk?

Jay Harnden was different. He felt ready to be a parent. His own dad had been the kind of father to wake up early to have breakfast with his kids though his shift ended at midnight. Jay's wife ran two child development centers in San Jose. So when she suggested they take a parenting class, he just asked, "Why?"

Darren's fears dissolved "about five seconds after I held my son" for the first time, he says. But he still had a lot to learn. So did Jay, who is now committed to being a lifelong learner as a father.

The Worries and Myths

Clinical psychologist and Santa Clara University professor Jerrold Lee Shapiro, Ph.D., says that expectant dads often experience an upsurge of worry. In his article, "How to Help a New Dad Worry Less," he attributes the worry to the emotional and physical changes in his partner during pregnancy, along with concerns about the future. Harnden, who has run workshops and support groups for fathers for more than 10 years,

says that it's not uncommon for men to get very apprehensive during their partner's pregnancy. "They don't know what to do. They're scared of the unknown." Jim Rossi, founder and executive director of the Foundation of Family Values (FOFV), a local provider of parent support, agrees that the weight of obligation hits men hard after the child is born. "Wow, I'm responsible for somebody else."

Men's concerns are compounded by assumptions. Researchers Jeffrey Rosenberg and W. Bradford Wilcox, who wrote "The Importance of Fathers in the Healthy Development of Children," say that new dads often think that new moms magically know everything about childcare – while they're left in the dark and have to wing it the best they can.

The good news is that dads new to parenting really can connect with their kids. More news – moms are learning too. They're not born knowing how to diaper, feed and burp infants. Dads and moms can acquire these skills together. While there's no single formula for being a great dad, experienced fathers offer some steps to get your relationship with baby off to a great start.

Pointers for Poppa

- Talk to your partner about your worries. Voice them among other new and expectant dads as well, urges Shapiro.
- Take a baby care class together. If that's not your thing, find a class like "Boot Camp for New Dads" that offers the

Marks of a Solid Dads' Group

Becoming part of a dads' group can help you prepare for what lies ahead. It can also help you process what's happening in your mind and home once the baby arrives. A good fathers' group:

- Is led by men you respect and can relate to.
- Fits your culture and budget – it feels right to you.
- Is fun.
- Gives dads time to brag about their kids and their victories as fathers.
- Lets you learn from the other dads.

– Loureen Giordano

same information in a man-friendly style. You'll learn to diaper and feed like a veteran dad and develop skill and confidence before baby arrives.

- Learn how to “troubleshoot” a baby. Get to know your baby and why she cries. Create a mental list of these things and what you can do about them.

- Talk and sing to your baby while he's still in utero. As soon as he's born, look into his eyes. If you talked to the baby before birth, he or she will probably recognize your voice, say Rosenberg and Wilcox.

- Love and respect the child's mother, even if you're divorced or no longer together. “It speaks volumes to the

child,” says Harnden. “It's just healthier emotionally.”

- Find practical ways to provide support for your baby's mother. Is cooking too much for her? Try your hand at it, order in or coordinate getting some meals from friends and family.
- Pitch in with housework and especially with baby care.
- Find a dads' group where you can share your experiences, get support and have your questions answered.

Joining a “Team” of Dads

Harnden, who took a parenting class when he thought he knew it all, was surprised how much he learned about the consistency in care that children need. After presenting fatherhood workshops with “Father Matters,” and facilitating a fathers' support group with FOFV, he says, “I learn as much as the other men” in each session. “It's really healthy for a man who is doing well [as a father] to get plugged in,” he says, “and to support other men.”

Jim Rossi came to fatherhood without knowing how to acknowledge or express his emotions. Learning to change some of the negative patterns that had been in his family for generations, “helped me be a better father.” Rossi looked in vain for a father support group. When he founded FOFV, he made sure that fathers had a strong place there. Going to someone else for help is still counter-culture, he notes. Men need to be able to admit they don't know everything, agrees Harnden. Once they do, the benefits are great.

Both Rossi and Harnden say that when men start to connect, powerful things happen. They discover their own


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strength to break old patterns and set new ones for their kids, grandkids and beyond. "Part of our job as fathers is to lead by example," Harnden explains. Making needed changes is totally possible, partly because men can be themselves in these groups. "There's no judgment there."

The End Results

The connection fathers make with their children is vital in the long run. According to 2006 research by the Department of Health and Human Services, kids "with involved, loving fathers

are significantly more likely to do well in school, have healthy self-esteem, exhibit empathy and pro-social behavior, compared to children with uninvolved fathers." A dad's "committed and responsible fathering during infancy and early childhood contributes emotional security, curiosity, and math and verbal skills." In short, a father who sets his mind to keep learning how to be a better dad opens a world of possibilities to himself and his children. ♦

Loureen Giordano is a special sections editor for *Bay Area Parent*.

RESOURCES

Books

- ***Becoming a Father***, by Jerrold Lee Shapiro, PhD. Springer
- ***The Measure of a Man: Becoming the Father You Wish Your Father Had Been***, by Jerrold Lee Shapiro, PhD. Perigree, 1995
- ***The Expectant Father: Facts, Tips and Advice for Dads-to-Be***, by Armin Brott and Jennifer Ash. Abbeville Press, 2001.
- ***When Men are Pregnant***, by Jerrold Lee Shapiro, PhD. Delta.

DVD

- **"Toolbox for New Dads: Because Babies Don't Come with Instructions,"** with Armin Brott. 2006.

Online Sources

- **Boot Camp for New Dads** – Hands-on training, plus online advice for fathers-to-be and new dads – www.newdads.com
- **Brand New Dad** – Offering ways to connect to other dads and find resources - www.brandnewdad.com
- **A Dad's Guide** – What to expect month by month in your partner's pregnancy and after the baby is born. Includes "What to Do," "What to Talk About," and "This Month's Survival Tactic." www.whattoexpect.com.
- **Fathers' Forum Online** – Offers resources for expectant and new fathers, including books, classes, Expectant and New Dads Club, "Pregnant Dads" information and much more, by East Bay-based Dr. Bruce Linton, Ph.D.
- **The Fathers Network** – Provides support for fathers and families raising children with special health care needs and developmental disabilities - www.fathersnetwork.org
- **The Importance of Fathers in the Healthy Development of Children**, by Jeffrey Rosenberg and W. Bradford Wilcox. 127-page resource. www.childwelfare.gov/pubs/usermanuals/fatherhood/fatherhood.pdf
- **Mr. Dad** – Advice, books, classes, coaching, gear and resources by Oakland-based Armin Brott, "America's most trusted Dad™" – www.mrdad.com.
- **National Center for Fathering** – www.fathers.com
- **National Fatherhood Initiative** – www.fatherhood.org
- **"Promoting Responsible Fatherhood,"** sponsored by the Department of Health and Human Services. <http://fatherhood.hhs.gov/index.shtml>

Local Support Groups and Classes

- **Becoming A Father.** This class is for prospective fathers - new and not-so-new. Discussion includes preparing for fatherhood and learning how to balance family, work, and personal needs. Saturday, Sept. 22, 1-3:30pm. \$25. For more information and to register, please call Bruce Linton, Ph.D., at 510-644-0300. Alta Bates Summit Medical Center, Berkeley. www.altabatessummit.org.
- **Dad's Labor Support Class.** Addresses the labor and birth process from the dad's perspective. Discussions will focus on comfort measures, "guarding the space," pain management and more. Taught by a father of two. 10am-noon, Sept. 29, also Nov. 17. \$40. Parenting and Breastfeeding Services, 2425 Samaritan Dr., San Jose. 408-559-2229. www.parentingandbreastfeeding.com.
- **East Bay Dads** – This group of fathers with babies, toddlers and preschoolers meets almost every Monday at 10:30am at a local park, museum, or other fun place. Most Thursday mornings at 10am they take a hike for dads with kids still young enough to go in a front- or backpack or jog stroller. The standing Friday afternoon playdate is at 1:30pm at Civic Park in Walnut Creek, followed by coffee and snacks. www.eastbaydads.com.
- **FOFV Fathers' Support Group** – Meets Tuesdays on an ongoing basis, 7-9pm. Drop in. Free. Campbell Community Center, 1 W. Campbell Ave., Campbell. Contact Jay Harnden, fatherssupport@fofv.org. www.fofv.org.
- **Foundation of Family Values** – Supports families of all political, religious, sexual preferences, economic and racial categories. Provides parenting classes, support groups, individual counseling and more. Campbell Community Center, 1 W. Campbell Ave., Campbell. 408-866-6686. www.fofv.org.
- **Men's Group for Fathers.** The focus of the Fathers' Forum Men's Group for new fathers is to share and explore with a small group of men their hopes, aspirations and challenges of being fathers. (Group limited to seven men) Meets every other Wednesday 7:45-9:30pm in the East Bay. \$60 per month. 510-644-0300. www.fathersforum.com/group.html.
- **Parents Place** – Offers parenting classes and workshops. Three locations: 200 Channing Ave., Palo Alto, 650-688-3040. 2001 Winward Wy., San Mateo, 650-931-1840. 1710 Scott St., San Francisco, 415-359-2454. www.ParentsPlaceOnline.org.
- **The San Francisco Dads Meet Up Group** – Gather with other dads, go on outings and discuss aspects of fatherhood. <http://dads.meetup.com/75/?gjs=5j6>.
- **The San Francisco Peninsula Dads Meetup Group** – Dad's Night Out takes place the second Tuesday of each month. <http://dads.meetup.com/75/?gjs=5j6>.