

Good to be dad

Men participate more than ever in their kids' lives, and groups have sprung up to offer guidance.

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Fatherhood has evolved considerably since the days when 85-year-old Bill Stoner was raising his five children.

Like most men of his generation, Stoner worked full time and left the bulk of child care to his wife, a stay-at-home mom in an era when staying home was considered the only option.

"I washed diapers and helped out as I could when I was home, but I was gone a lot for work, so my wife did most of it," said Stoner, a retired railroad engineer who lives on the Westside.

Back then, Stoner never would have dreamed he'd one day know a stay-at-home dad, or babysit regularly for 5- and 2-year-old granddaughters. But he does.

"Times have changed," he said. "It's good, I guess."

Good, indeed.

A wealth of research has concluded that children with attentive fathers are generally healthier and better educated than those whose fathers are absent or emotionally distant. That's validation for men who came of age during or after the women's movement and want more involvement in their children's lives.

Men still haven't reached child-care parity with women, but they're getting closer.

Fathers spend 66 percent as much time with children as mothers, up from 50 percent in 1981, according to Joseph Pleck, a professor in the Department of Human and Community Development at the University of Illinois.

What these fathers don't have, often, is role models to teach them how to be the kind of father they want to be. These are not, after all, men who want to emulate their fathers and grandfathers.

Such fathers employ a variety of strategies for navigating this uncharted territory. Some pursue formal training programs. Others seek advice from young fathers they admire. But most just learn as they go.

Joe Meares, 42, who lives in the Geist area, is the father of four girls, including a 6-year-old with Down syndrome. When he accompanied his wife to Down syndrome support group events, he was often the only man or one of just a few, so the male perspective on having a special-needs child was unrepresented.

This wasn't something Meares could talk to his father about.

"My father was involved in parenting in the typical '60s fashion," he said. "He could tell you he loved you, but he wasn't going to go to a school function or PTA meeting or anything like that."



Ed Frederici (left) and Scott Nelsen, participants in St. Vincent Women's Hospital's Boot Camp for New Dads, hear from Dustin Sullivan about the proper way to hold babies. The idea is to help men become better husbands and fathers. -- Matt Detrich / The Star

Meares founded Dads Appreciating Down Syndrome, or D.A.D.S., in 2002. Eight men attended the first meeting. Today, there are 170 members.

"Dads definitely want to be more involved," he said. "They just don't always have a place where they can go to network and get that support."

Fortunately, just being there and keeping your eyes and ears open is on-the-job training, Meares said. "There's an awful lot of trial and error. You just take the lead from your children. I watch and see what support they need, and where they need to plug me in."

Allan Shedlin is a researcher and founder of Dads Unlimited, a parenting consulting firm in Cabin John, Md. Women are always talking about the maternal instinct, but Shedlin thinks there's also a strong paternal instinct for "daddyding as opposed to fathering, which is a one-time biological act."

Shedlin asks men if they'd instinctively push out of harm's way a child who was about to be struck by a car. They always say yes.

"That's a protective instinct," Shedlin said. "They'll say no, that's different. But it's not, really. Protecting isn't that different from nurturing."

Shedlin says men generally know what it takes to be a good father, but they can learn from teachers, other men and their own children if they want more guidance.

Formal instruction is available, too.

One training option is Boot Camp for New Dads, a national program offered locally at St. Vincent Women's Hospital.

In that program, "veteran" dads (graduates of the program with babies at home) back up a teacher who spends two hours with expectant fathers covering such topics as how to burp and change a newborn.

The "veterans" bring their babies along and use them as props and guinea pigs for practice.

In a class earlier this week, Rob Carlson, a 33-year-old systems analyst who lives on the Northeastside, confessed to being a little "baby phobic" before four newborns were passed around for participants to practice holding.

"I like playing with toddlers and older kids, but babies are, whoa, small, little, tiny, breakable objects," he said.

After the class ended, though, Carlson said he felt more confident.

Dustin Sullivan, 33, is the devoted father of 3-month-old son, Jonah. Earlier this week, he served as a veteran dad, but he's been a teacher, too.

Classes like St. Vincent's are a helpful resource for the growing number of fathers who aren't content to be passive observers in their children's lives, Sullivan said.

"Of the friends I know, everyone wants to be more hands-on," he said, even if it means enduring diaper leaks and sleepless nights.

"Forty years ago, if mom was sick and dad had to step in, the baby wasn't used to him, and dad didn't know what he was doing, and everyone was unhappy.

"It makes it easier on the whole family if dad is involved from the beginning. And besides, it's pretty darn fun to do. It's enjoyable to be a dad. I love it."

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