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Make room for daddy groups

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Toddler Charlee McNair splashes gleefully through the puddles as she chases her playmates; her grin is endless and her arms are stretching out to catch her friends and shower them with loving kisses. Dad Mike McNair watches the pursuit from his garden with a smile. He is enjoying this idyllic Sunday morning with his daughter.

Becoming a parent is the most profound experience many people will have in their lives. Despite this, the number of fatherless families in Canada has increased over the past four decades, and research shows that father deprivation is a more reliable predictor of criminal activity in youths than race, environment or poverty.

Vancouver has a growing grassroots movement to support new fathers, and Mr. McNair is one of the pioneers.

He's the founder of the Superdads, a neighbourhood group for new fathers and their children. "Dads can hang out, kids can hang out, and moms get a break," Mr. McNair said.

The creation of the Superdads was a reaction to the surprises Mr. McNair found in new fatherhood and his craving for a peer group with which to share his joys, doubts and fears.

His wife was finding a lot of support in a baby group, but Mr. McNair didn't feel comfortable joining in. "Part of me was insecure. I didn't feel welcome or that I could necessarily relate to the moms," he said.

Marcus Mendes, a long-time facilitator for Man in the Moon, a Vancouver Public Library literacy program for dads and their babies, said he understands the need for dad-friendly spaces.

Most such programs at the VPL are attended by mothers, which can be intimidating for men, Mr. Mendes said, adding that dads in the Man and the Moon enjoy the camaraderie and the non-competitive environment. "I think that they feel like they're not experts, it's something new for all of them," he said.

In his years facilitating storytelling programs, Mr. Mendes has noted some distinct differences between moms and dads. "Moms hold their baby inward in a protective and nurturing kind of way, and dads invariably will have their baby facing out," said Mr. Mendes, who thinks this reflects fathers' "go get them" attitude.

He also noted that men are less cautious in the parts of the program that require them to use actions that might surprise the babies. "That's an important part of raising children," Mr. Mendes said. "Life is full of surprises, so you may as well get used to it."

David Hatfield, a men's advocate and founder of the course Manology at Vancouver's Roundhouse Community Centre, said he feels that the father's role in the family unit has long been undervalued.

"People are waking up – that dads have more of a role to play, and we need to build places to support these dads," Mr. Hatfield said. Newborns are pure need and emotion, and those are two things that men are taught not to deal with, he said.

The Superdads and Man in the Moon provide safe spaces for men to explore their role as fathers outside the classic provider, protector, performer paradigm.

Through his experience working in schools, Mr. Hatfield said he has observed a real father hunger. Within 15 minutes of entering a classroom, he would have a child clinging to his legs despite the fact that he was a stranger. "It's beautiful and scary, to see the intrinsic desire to have male energy around, but also how that can be manipulated," he said.

The desire to improve on the previous generation is also natural. A lot of men wish they'd had a better relationship with their fathers, and this is being addressed in how they relate to their children, Mr. Hatfield pointed out.

Mr. McNair said his father left when he was 4, and he doesn't want his daughter to miss that relationship the way he has.

"I really feel like I'm making an effort with Charlee. When she's an adult, it would be cool for her to get what I did for her back then. And that's ultimately what parents want for our kids: for them to know how much we care for them," he said.

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