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Life
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Reporting for diaper drill, sir!

At these boot camps, nervous new dads learn from male 'veterans'

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When we learned last fall that she was pregnant, my wife and I found ourselves tossed on the sea of emotions common to prospective parents. There was joy, underlaid by roiling insecurities about the impending changes to our lives. My own fears were fuelled by truths too embarrassing to admit: I had never changed a diaper, never bottle-fed an infant, hardly even *held* a baby. As a journalist criss-crossing the country and occasionally the globe, I had left infant care to others, figuring I could learn it all later by trial and error. Judging from the obvious anxiety in the eyes of the few parents who left their youngsters in my hands, this was poor reasoning. When babies made their way around rooms full of gleeful relatives, I was deemed most likely to fumble.

Which is how I found myself recently in a low-rise hospital annex in Orange County, California, one of 10 first-time fathers who, like alcoholics hitting rock bottom, had suddenly realized they desperately needed help. The workshop was one of hundreds run each year under the heading, "Boot Camp for New Dads," a fast-growing U.S. movement that puts jittery pops-to-be together with "veteran" fathers and their infants -- all in the name of hands-on experience. Two previous Boot Camp attendees, Jamie and Joe, were waiting in my class with their six-month-old children, Sarah and Patrick, so we rookies could handle a baby far from the judgmental gaze of female onlookers. The old hands, presumably, would reassure us with tales of how they conquered diaper rash and late-night feedings.

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Peer instruction for inexperienced fathers is an idea that seems long overdue -- retarded, one assumes, by the same inertia that keeps men from asking for directions when driving in a strange town. With women firmly ensconced in the workforce, men whose fathers scarcely picked them up when they were infants are now expected -- and in most cases wish -- to approach child-rearing as a partnership. Yet many have put off actually learning the ropes of soothing, bathing, changing, and we are gripped by our own ignorance as the big day approaches. And it's not like there's much in the way of guidance. Prenatal programs in Canada tend to focus on mothers and the mechanics of childbirth, while much of the authoritative chatter directed at young parents manages to reinforce male anxiety. "It's one thing to say your marriage is going to 'change,' " griped one new father I met recently. "But what the hell does that mean? Change into what?"

For Greg Bishop, founder and "head coach" of the Boot Camps across the U.S., the knowledge gap cried out for an organized response. "I have 12 brothers and sisters," he said during an interview in his cluttered headquarters in Irvine, Calif. "I took care of lots of babies and changed lots of diapers, and after four of my own, I felt a lot of men would enjoy their babies more if they had a basic orientation." Bishop had also seen first-hand the grim consequences of male ineptitude: a trauma care consultant by trade, he had been in emergency rooms as staff treated babies who hadn't been fed, or had been accidentally dropped or shaken by frantic fathers who simply lacked the skills to quiet their crying.

His concept was brilliant in its simplicity. Bring in a few dads with their babies so men could actually watch a guy changing diapers and mixing up formula. Let the newbies ask all the stupid questions they're afraid to utter with their wives around. "Women have instant networks for stuff," he says. "Men don't."

The first few sessions were held at the Irvine Medical Center and advertised as "Bootee Camps," a reference to infant footwear that meshed poorly with masculine sensibility (not to mention hip-hop slang). "Boot Camp" resonated better, and since the first one back in June 1990, fully 150,000 have attended the workshops in 250 locations across the States. A group in London, Ont., is looking at being the first to offer the program in Canada.

Contrary to their moniker, the workshops themselves strike a nice balance of therapy and male camaraderie. The one I attended in Orange County was led by Robert Grand, a 39-year-old schoolteacher in cargo shorts, his head shaved to the wood. Scrubbing a whiteboard at the back of the room, he seemed oblivious to the din of a gas-powered pressure washer operating outside, which was oddly reassuring (crying babies might strike fear in a lot of men; we could sleep to the sound of a motorized jet-sprayer). "We're gonna talk about caring for infants," he half-shouted. "We're going to do a bit of baby handling and then we're going to talk about caring for mothers. One of your most important roles as dad is being there for mom."

The latter point is something Grand returned to throughout the half-day session. Friction between spouses can be one of the most disorienting after-effects of childbirth, and teaching men the causes of female volatility (hormonal imbalance, sleep deprivation) can help everyone keep their heads. But Grand also urges men to do their part by embracing their new roles as teammates, peacemakers, protectors in the family setting. "Relatives will want to crowd in and see the newborn baby," he explained. "You might have in-laws telling you you're doing everything wrong. But this is your family. Take command of it, and don't feel bad about doing that."

Two of the participants, John and Duane, were in their mid-50s and, for me, they were the measure of why we were there. They'd both watched notions of fatherhood evolve from Ward Cleaver to a creature unknown in their youths: the stay-at-home dad. Now they were having children for the first time. "I do all the cooking, cleaning and shopping," mused Duane, who has also spent the past few months overseeing construction of a new home in Yosemite. "We're having twins," he added, sounding shell-shocked. "The amount of stuff that's been going on in my life is just amazing. I've only recently felt like we have it under control."

That sense of panic is exactly the stuff that tends to scare off prospective dads. But Bishop believes it wouldn't be nearly so acute if men knew how gratifying it can be to spend time with an infant. In his written material and in his classes, he riffs off the lighter side of being a dad, encouraging fathers to involve their children in their hobbies and pastimes as soon as the kids are old enough (the cover of his newly published book, *Hit the Ground Crawling*, shows a man repairing a race-car engine with the assistance of his toddler). Others have turned fatherhood itself into a kind of sport. Last year, a cord-blood clinic in California sponsored a "Daddy Olympics," in which men competed to change diapers, paint nursery walls and install infant car seats. Not everyone's cup of tea, but the organizer, Gary Weinhouse, was named *iParenting.com*'s "dad of the month" for his efforts.

Boot Camp is where these theories come to life. What if my baby won't stop crying? Well, chances are she will -- if I treat soothing as a pleasure rather than a task. In our session, Jamie's daughter Sarah fussed a bit as the morning went on. But her dad, a chatty software writer who moonlights as a general contractor, magically quieted her with rocking and formula. When the time came to change her diaper, we crowded around. "Always wipe down, never up," he said matter-of-factly, demonstrating. The rest of us looked on in awe.

Our other veteran father, Joe, placed young Patrick on the knee of a neighbouring dad, who then passed him to me. The child was unbearably cute. Kitted out in a New York Yankees outfit, he grinned maniacally while pulling on my ear. Suddenly, fatherhood seemed both non-threatening and attractive -- so close to the stuff of investment ads I didn't quite trust my sentimentality. Before the workshop, Bishop had told me that men's emotional link with their babies tends to lag behind that of their wives. "Mothers are hard-wired to make that connection through nine months of pregnancy," he said, "but men do catch up." I could see what he meant.

The baby-handling primer, meanwhile, could not have been more timely. Days after I returned home, my wife went into early labour, and six hours later, I was gazing into the eyes of our baby girl. Boot Camp hadn't quite transformed me: for days, I fumbled hopelessly with diaper tabs and infant wear; swaddling might as well have been origami. But I'm surviving, as a tenderfoot survives his first night in the woods. No fathering lesson will make you the model of the modern male parent, but this one at least teaches you how to soldier on. And who knew soldiering could be so much fun?

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