

daddy

By Austin Murphy • Photography by Trujillo-Paumier

BOOT CAMP

How an increasingly popular program prepares rookie fathers to hit the ground crawling.

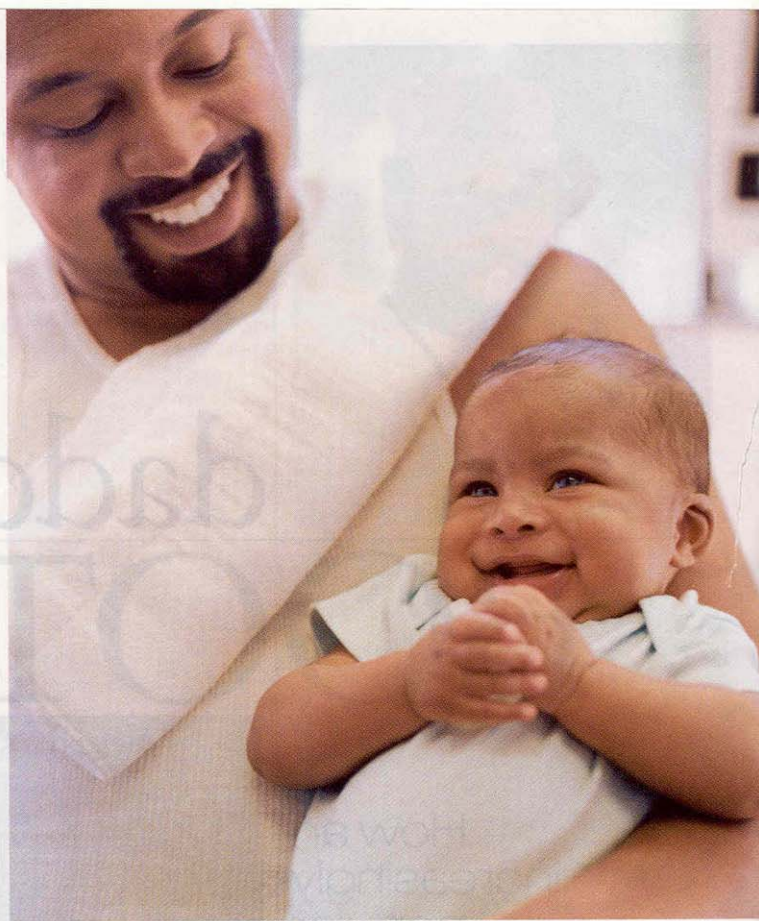
THE HAND-OFF At Boot Camp, expectant dads participate in various confidence-building exercises, such as learning to hold an infant while sitting knee-to-knee with another participant.



Halfway through Boot Camp for New Dads, following a primer on the dangers posed to babies by such random household items as buckets and bottlecaps, the coaches (aka “Drool Sergeants”) sent the rookies to the lavatory to wash their hands. Next up: a tutorial on how to hold an infant, complete with instructions on the importance of providing neck support and minding little fontanels. The four expectant dads in Annex B at the Alta Bates Summit Medical Center in Oakland did as they were told.

At Boot Camp, a program designed to prepare fathers-to-be for the challenges and joys awaiting them, everyone has a job to do. Rookies are the apprehensive students, coaches are the class facilitators, and veterans are the camp graduates who bring their babies to the workshops to provide dads-to-be with hands-on experience. Much of the program’s appeal to men who never quite got comfortable with the jargon of childbirth classes—enough about the mucous plug, already!—is that it imparts its lessons in a locker-room environment designed to make guys feel comfortable sharing their opinions and concerns—and, for that matter, chewing sunflower seeds and scratching themselves. The approach works: Boot Camp has grown into the country’s largest program for new fathers, enlightening and reassuring more than 100,000 of them since 1990.

Despite its “No Girls Allowed” shtick, the camp can be a new mother’s best friend. It represents the latest (and most admirable) stage in Dad’s evolution from cigar-dispensing buffoon to pediatric pulling guard, leading interference for Mom in the hospital and at home. “We’re here to make a new template,” says Oakland Boot Camp coach Phill Palmer, 48. “We want to be there from the start, sharing the joys, the responsibilities—everything. Boot Camp gets us involved in the process. It’s up to us to keep ourselves there.”



FEARLESS LEADERS Coaches Phill Palmer and Reggie Bridges (left) typically teach between 10 and 15 students per session. In class, they rely on assistance from veterans like Todd Lawrence (above), a Boot Camp graduate who volunteers his time—and tots—to show rookie dads the ropes.

BOOT CAMP BEGINNINGS

“Whereas women tend to network when they get pregnant,” says 52-year-old Greg Bishop, Boot Camp founder and father of four, “guys tend to become a little isolated.” At the workshops, they can spill their guts with kindred spirits. “Rookies come in looking anxious; you can tell they don’t have a lot of confidence,” says Bishop, of Irvine, CA. “After three hours”—the average length of a Boot Camp class—“they walk out and you can tell by the look on their faces they’re thinking, ‘I can do this.’”

Bishop has been a hands-on dad since 1981, when his first child was born. At that time, he was saddened to observe that many of his friends who were new fathers weren’t as dialed in to the experience as he was. “They lacked the self-assurance to step in and share the load,” he explains. “They weren’t enjoying their babies as well as they could have, and should have.”

He talked his local hospital, the Irvine Regional Medical Center in California, into allowing him to teach a course on Saturday mornings, and Boot Camp was born. Over time, Bishop developed a specific curriculum, ranging from “Troubleshooter’s Guide to Crying Babies” to “Caring for Your New Mom.” Slowly but steadily, his brainchild grew. Drool sergeants and veterans now impart advice at more than 200 sites—hospitals, healthcare centers, and churches—in 40 states and Japan. Because Boot Camp is a nonprofit, expenses are typically defrayed by the host site. The fee to rookies is reasonable: anywhere from gratis to \$50.

One of four national trainers flies out for on-site education of the local coaches, who are briefed on the curriculum. “The coaches aren’t Ph.D.s in early childhood education,” says Steve Dubin, a Norwell, MA-based spokesman for the organization. “They’re regular guys—dads with young kids who very much appreciate the challenge and are good communicators.” ➤

CLASS IS IN SESSION

While most workshops draw 10 to 15 expectant dads, the Oakland camp had just four. That was fine with coach Palmer, who was sharing teaching duties that day with Reggie Bridges, a gregarious father of five. It meant the rookies could spend more time handling the "stunt babies," provided courtesy of veteran and workshop MVP Todd Lawrence. He showed up bearing his 4-month-old twins, Adrien and Tajah, in car seats.

Lawrence kicked (and wiped) butt. It was one thing to listen to Palmer or Bridges talk about how to bond with your baby or recognize the baby blues in your partner. It was quite another for the expectant fathers in the group to observe and listen as Lawrence fed, burped, and changed the twins. This was about to become their world, and they hung on his every syllable.

Asked about the contents of his backpack, Lawrence ran down the list: "Let's see. I have a burp cloth, bottled water for moistening towels and cleaning up messes, formula, and a few

"We're here to make a new template," says coach Palmer. "We want to be there from the start, sharing everything."

Zip-Locs for soiled diapers." If your kid drops a deuce at a friend's house, he explained, you need to pack it up, rather than, say, leaving it in the powder room wastebasket. The expectant fathers digested this in grim silence, reflecting, perhaps, on how fundamentally their lives were about to change.

The class discussion continued apace, as the coaches ran down their checklist of what to do when a baby is crying. Is he wet? Hungry? Gassy? The importance of burping was emphasized. Techniques for releasing gas were discussed in detail. Lawrence demonstrated bicycling Tajah's little legs, but alas, no wind was forthcoming.

When it was time to learn how to hold an infant, coach Bridges told the rookies to sit facing one another in chairs. "I want your knees to touch," he said. "That will be your bridge, in case something should happen and the baby falls."

Fortunately, no infants were dropped, which is not to say that rookie Greg Dowd, 31, from Alameda, CA, inspired confidence as he clutched Adrien with trembling hands, then held on as if the child were a Ming vase. Dowd's anxieties were not allayed by a bystander's keen observation: "See how he's stretching out? Look's like he's about to drop a load."

ATTENTION! The class watches eagerly as Lawrence demonstrates the proper techniques in diaper changing and baby handling.

BEYOND BABY TALK

"I'm scoring big points with my wife by being here," said Dowd, to sympathetic laughter. The majority of expectant dads attend Boot Camp because their wives heard about it during baby care classes or happened to see a pamphlet in the hospital or obstetrician's office, says spokesman Dubin. "But the men quickly realize this is guy-to-guy talk," he explains. "It's very different from the birthing classes where they sit in the back of the room, trying not to nod off."

Only the stunt babies fell asleep at the Oakland Boot Camp. Guys were baring their souls in there. Coach Palmer asked them to talk about their fathers. Jerome Davis, a soft-spoken participant, told a sad story. His father beat him when he was small and abandoned the family when he was 7. "He would say, 'I brought you into this world, and I can take you out of it,'" said Davis mournfully. "I don't want to be like him. He was not a role model." When he stopped talking, there was dead silence.

Asked to discuss his concerns about fatherhood, the oldest rookie in the room, a local musician named T.J. who asked that his last name not be used, said, "I'm 47. I have an illness that makes me very tired at times. I don't make much money at all." He paused, then added, "Another concern is that I pass along my better traits and skip the negative ones."

Not all the issues were so serious. Rookie Jeadi Vilchis, who conceived a child with his wife after doctors had told them they probably wouldn't be able to have a baby, could muster





TAKE TWO Each workshop features "stunt babies" (above)—in this case, Lawrence's 4-month-old twins, Adrien and Tajah—so the expectant fathers can get hands-on experience. Upon graduating from Boot Camp, rookies receive a baby tee (right), along with a daddy burp cloth.

only this: "Ever since my wife got pregnant, I haven't been able to get the smile off my face. I think I may be too excited."

For his part, Dowd fretted over the knowledge gap between him and his wife: "She's read about 200 books, I've read about a chapter." The books he tried to get into, he said, seemed written for women, so he put them down. "But I want to be as prepared as possible because if I hear, 'You're doing this wrong, you're doing that wrong,' I probably won't react to it very well."

In fact, fathers who make an effort to get involved with their new babies but are criticized or otherwise nudged to the sidelines typically back away for good, says Kyle Pruett, M.D., clinical professor of psychiatry at the Yale Child Study Center in New Haven, CT. This banishment of Dad to "the cheap seats," says Dr. Pruett, is "a great loss to both the child and the mother, who could use a competent pair of hands." Which is why Boot Camp teaches rookies to stake out their position, in the delivery room, in the nursery, in their baby's life, the way a power forward positions himself for a rebound.

Dr. Pruett admires Boot Camp's timeliness. Dads-to-be are encouraged to attend in the third trimester of their partner's pregnancies. This is the period, according to some experts, when expectant fathers are most receptive to such instruction.

Dr. Pruett points to Canadian studies showing that in the month before and month after a man becomes a father, his testosterone drops as much as 30%. For three months after the birth of his child, his estrogen increases, possibly delivering additional tenderness just as it's needed. His body's production of a hormone called prolactin goes up too. "The only other time you are awash in prolactin is the first time you fall head over heels in love," says Dr. Pruett, who speculates that this surge in what endocrinologists call "The Relationship Hormone" could be nature's way of preparing men to be smitten all over again. "It's as if your body is saying, 'You weren't interested before, but you're interested now, aren't you?'"

IT'S A WRAP

The coaches ran out of time before they ran out of topics, and that was okay. "Diaper changing, baby holding, putting a burp cloth on your shoulder for the baby—I've learned a lot," said T.J. "There are so many unknowns that it's just nice to now have a better idea of what to expect."

Dowd particularly appreciated the opportunity to improve his baby-holding skills: "Dog, cat, kid—I didn't have much experience holding anything that young."


Vilchis said he was glad he'd been through Boot Camp.

"My wife likes that I'm trying my hardest to be involved," he said, "and I've picked up a lot of important details here."

Well into Hour Three, Lawrence was kneeling in a circle of onlookers, changing Tajah, who waited until her diaper was off to project a robust stream of urine beyond the changing pad and onto the floor of Annex B. Lawrence took it in stride, but some of the rookies reacted as if the child had



expectorated green vomit while rotating her head 360 degrees.

The men had paid close attention and learned much all morning. But they were reminded, as Lawrence calmly wiped up his daughter's accident, that while Boot Camp is all well and good, there is never a substitute for live action. 



For more information on Boot Camp for New Dads and to find a location near you, go to www.newdads.com.

AUSTIN MURPHY is a *Sports Illustrated* senior writer and a stay-at-home dad living in San Anselmo, CA, with his wife and two children.