

Dads-to-be learn the drill at boot camps

Programs teach them the basics

By [Thomas Rozwadowski](#)

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Get a dozen or so guys together on a Saturday morning and you'd figure the reason is a leisurely activity like fishing, a Fantasy Football draft or an early Packers tailgate party.

But learning and listening about the challenges facing an expectant father put a different spin on masculinity at Boot Camp for New Dads, a three-hour baby-care workshop hosted by St. Vincent Hospital in Green Bay.

"This isn't the easiest thing for guys to sit around and talk about," said Chris East, Boot Camp coach and a father of three from De Pere. "It doesn't come naturally ... but once they get here, our goal is to get them used to talking with each other. For three hours, it's about family and children."

Saturday was a little bit of been there, done that for Peter Wills of Kaukauna, who traded in his rookie nametag for a veteran one after the birth of his 13-week old daughter, Megan.

Working with other St. Vincent child-care initiatives, new boot camp workshops run once a month so soon-to-be fathers can learn from dads who've recently completed their own form of basic training. That means Wills returned to the session with not only first-hand knowledge about childbirth, but hands-on experience beyond the "pretend" feeding of a Cabbage Patch doll.

"If you think everything is going to be perfect, you're going to be disappointed," Wills said while fixing a bottle for Megan, who was brought to the workshop so rookie dads could build confidence with a real baby.

"The biggest thing is that you have to take one day at a time. You can read all the books you want, but you're not going to have all the answers. You figure it out as you go along and keep working until you get where you need to be."

East, a facilitator with Boot Camp since it began about six years ago, said discussions between rookies and vets cover a variety of topics. While Saturday's focus was on Forming a New Family, The Changing Role of Fathers, and Helping Mom with Breast-feeding, first-timers also have specific questions like, "How should we introduce our baby to the family dog?" or the big one, "How do I deal with the criticism and advice from parents, in-laws and other external sources?"

"Stick to your guns. That's what they've all been sharing," East said. "Everyone has good intentions ... and no one wants to offend grandma or an aunt, but you have to be comfortable with what you want."

With the Sept. 14 due date for his first child approaching, Mike Bethke of De Pere said he's preparing himself as best he can for the big day. Right now, it's a little hard for him to picture being in Wills' shoes.

"Everything is going to be new. New schedule. New routine," Bethke said. "It's pretty much all my wife and I have been talking about."

In the end, East said, today's dad wants an equal role in the household. And there are plenty of rewards for assuming that responsibility.

"It still feels like yesterday," East said of seeing his first child born. "It's life changing. You never forget that first birthday."



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Future father Brian Herrmann of De Pere tries to calm a fussy Megan Wills on Saturday while other participants in a Boot Camp for New Dads watch at St. Vincent Hospital. B.A.

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It's a guy thing

As the Boot Camp for New Dads handbook specifies, "no women over two feet allowed." The national curriculum is designed so that expectant fathers and veteran dads can develop "locker room"-type solidarity while openly discussing the challenges of child rearing. Class size is usually limited to around 12 men. For more information, call St. Vincent Hospital at either (920) 433-8329 or (920) 433-0111.