

Free

JUNE 2008

*Metro*  
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*Serving the Families of the Portland Metropolitan Area*

# How Today's Fathers Find Support



## Raising Financially Savvy Kids

## How to Avoid 'Summer Learning Loss'

**Summer Camps  
Section**

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### Raising Financially Savvy Kids

According to the American Bankruptcy Institute, the number of Americans filing for bankruptcy increased by nearly 40 percent in 2007. There is, sadly, little instruction available for young people on how to manage money – and a whole lot of encouragement to spend it. We explore some of the ways that parents can help ensure that their kids become financially responsible.

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Eric Houghton (left, with son Nick) and Stuart Sequeira (right, with daughter Liliana) are both local stay-at-home dads. Houghton has launched a support group for fathers like himself and Sequeira that provides resources, play groups, dads' nights out and more.

PHOTO COURTESY OF ERIC HOUGHTON

PHOTO COURTESY OF STUART SEQUEIRA

# 'Knights of the Changing Table'

## How Today's Fathers Find Support

By Anne Laufe

**E**ric Miller is one of those overeducated guys with lots of letters after his name. He has a Master's Degree in Public Health and a degree in physical therapy, several years of consulting and a successful practice behind him. Even so, when he and his wife moved to Portland a few years ago with their young son, Miller decided to stop working and stay at home full time. Now with two boys, Miller finds he's not the only father in the neighborhood cutting back on paid work to take care of kids.

"One day recently I was at the park at two o'clock on a Wednesday afternoon, and all six of the adults there with their kids were fathers," Miller says.

Miller is just one of the thousands of American men who are spending more time with their children than ever before. According to a survey conducted by the University of Michigan, dads now spend 65 percent as much time as moms do with their kids during the week, and 87 percent as much time on weekends. That's up from just a third as much time as moms in the 1970s.

In addition, more and more men are choosing to work part-time or quit work altogether to stay home with their children. The U.S. Census reports that in 2006, 143,000 married men with children under the age of 15 were stay-at-home dads.

With their increasing involvement in their children's lives, are men developing ways to find support for their new, expanded roles? There are literally dozens of support groups for moms in the metropolitan area. And then there's the tendency (whether natural or learned) that women have for reaching out to others for emotional support and guidance.

What's out there for guys? Do they really want to talk about diapers, sleeping through the night, infant massage and the best daycares? Are they looking for a shoulder to cry on and a sympathetic ear, or would they rather tough it out on their own?

### Going it alone

Thomas Doherty, a clinical psychologist who practices in northeast Portland, says that in general, men still tend to deal with problems on their own, in an individual way, while women tend to be more relational, seeking advice and help from others. Even as men become more active as parents, they are still bound by traditional cultural expectations and roles.

"I think men are somewhat limited by this idea of the silent provider, although I think that's mostly outdated," says Doherty, who used to run a men's group before cutting back his evening hours to spend more time with his young daughter.

David Rebanal of North Portland is a perfect example of a man who is very involved in his children's lives, but who hasn't reached out to other fathers for support. In addition to his daily parenting responsibilities, Rebanal takes care of his daughters when his wife is on one of her frequent business trips. He brings them to school, picks them up, feeds and bathes them, volunteers in their classrooms.

While his wife, Olivia, is one of the founders of UrbanMamas, an online moms' group that features discussions on every parenting issue under the sun, Rebanal says he's been shy about asking other dads for advice.

"I feel like I should for my own sanity," Rebanal says, "for coping and getting through stressful times. I wish I were more comfortable doing that. I feel like I'm at a disadvantage by not using the wisdom of others to help me balance the stress of work and life."

Rebanal thinks his personality as well as his upbringing prevent him from talking more about parenting issues. Although he views his own father as a role model for his work ethic and his emphasis on family, his father was not very communicative, a trait which Rebanal, like many men, shares.

"There's potential to improve as a parent, to help yourself by discussing issues like how to get the kids to bed," he says. "It may appear that (men) are just not thinking about these things, but really

we're just not as vocal. We might think those things are too mundane. As fathers we would benefit from really talking about our trials and triumphs of fatherhood."

Doherty agrees, and thinks the time is ripe for dads' groups led by men, held when working fathers are able to attend. "It is a trend that moms tend to be the ones going to the baby groups. Partly it's an artifact of the culture. Even though we're a little more progressive, especially here in Portland, these groups are primarily run by women and they don't reflect a masculine take on (parenting)," says Doherty.

"I definitely think that men would benefit from sharing their experiences," he adds. "They would feel validated in their experiences and realize that they are more common than they realize. They would also get direct learning and role modeling from people who are a little further along in the process. And there's the group cohesion – being part of a team is very enjoyable and inspiring."

### Informal support

Many fathers in the Portland area find that, rather than joining a group focused specifically on parenting, they get the support and camaraderie they need in other, less formal ways.

Doherty recommends bonding with other dads through outdoor activities. Each week he puts his 9-month-old daughter in a backpack and goes hiking in Forest Park with another soon-to-be dad. During the course of their walk, they talk about parenting and other things. For fathers with older kids, Doherty suggests becoming involved in activities like scouting and camping.

Coaching is another way that dads connect with each other. With all of the hours that kids devote to soccer, basketball and baseball, there's plenty of time for men to get to know each other on the sidelines.

But it isn't just through coaching sports that fathers connect. Ken McGair, a deputy city attorney, has found a community of supportive parents through his work as a coach for the Grant High School Constitution Team.

McGair spends 10 to 12 hours each week, from September through May, working with the team and about a dozen other lawyers, helping the students learn about the constitution and preparing them for the state competition. In addition to spending time with the students, McGair says that the adults "do hang out quite a bit."

At age 35, McGair is the youngest attorney working with the team, and he says the others have become parental mentors for him. His own children are only 2 and 4, but he looks to his colleagues as sounding boards for ideas on public schools and other issues.

"They have raised bright, mature teens who have been on the (constitution) team and gone on to good colleges," McGair says. "I have used them as a model for how I want to raise my kids. If my girls could grow up to be as well-adjusted as most of these kids, I'd be thrilled."

### More formal support

Eric Houghton, founder of a new group for stay-at-home dads called Portland Dads at Home (see "Support Resources for Fathers" on page 24), speculates that men have the same need for emotional and psychological support that women do, but that many men aren't aware of it.

"We're trained much more to be loaners, to be self-sufficient," says the 43-year-old Houghton, who moved to Portland from Boston last

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Eric Miller found support for his role as a new father by starting up a play group for his sons Liam and Kai Miller-Castles.



PHOTO COURTESY OF ERIC MILLER

## Support Resources for Fathers

**www.outdoordads.org.**

OutdoorDads sponsors monthly hikes for parents and children.

**www.PortlandDad.com.**

The Web site of Portland Dads at Home, Eric Houghton's group.

**www.daddyforever.com.**

A humorous blog about being a father, written by a dad who lives in Beaverton.

**www.dadcentric.com and www.rebeldad.com.**

Two other popular blogs fathers might enjoy.

***The Good Father*** by Mark O'Connell (Scribner, 2005)

***Children's Special Places*** by David Sobel (Wayne State University Press, 2001)

*'Knights of the Changing Table' continued from page 23*

fall. "These are gross generalizations, of course, but women are more openly social with one another, women are the ones who set up the dinner parties and the men come along."

To combat this isolation, and to give his now 2-year-old son opportunities to play with other kids, Houghton started Portland Dads at Home, modeled on a Minneapolis-based group he discovered that offers extensive online resources, playgroups and dads' nights out. While the Portland group is just getting off the ground, Houghton anticipates that members will soon start hosting playgroups in their homes.

Stuart Sequeira, another local stay-at-home father, met Houghton through a children's music class; he hopes to participate in more Portland Dad's activities as the weather improves. While Sequeira says that he discusses most childrearing issues with his wife, and he has several friends with whom he swaps childcare, he's still seeking more social interaction for himself and his 15-month-old daughter.

"Getting that adult interaction is key beyond a certain point," says the former mechanical engineer. "I start talking to the walls and making up comments for my daughter. I also think it's good for the children. They learn to interact and practice sharing."

Sequeira notes that it's not necessarily other male parents he feels the need to talk with, but specifically other stay-at-home parents

who are experiencing the same things he is. "It's nice just being able to vent. My wife doesn't remember what it's like not to be able to get anything done," he says.

Eric Miller, whose sons are 2 and 4, started a playgroup in southeast Portland soon after he moved here. Miller says the group was key in helping him establish social connections with other families who live close by and have kids the same age as his. With the kids getting older and going off to preschool and other activities, the playgroup doesn't meet as often, but now the families have a weekly potluck to stay in touch.

"The kids can get to know each other and each other's houses, so they feel comfortable with other adults. We share each other's resources, most specifically time," says Miller. "We can call someone on this list when we need someone to watch our kids. We're evolving out of playgroup mode into a community of families."

Whether through organized playgroups or informal gatherings, dads in Portland are finding ways to connect with each other. As they become more involved with their children, they're also becoming more involved with each other. And as local dad Eric Houghton says, "it wouldn't hurt to have more kinder, gentler men in the world."

*Anne Laufe is a Portland freelance writer and mother.*



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