

# Health & Fitness

The Observer

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PC Mike's Internet column

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## New dads boot camp

### St. Joe's program gives fathers hands-on experience

BY KURT KUBAN  
SPECIAL WRITER

Several long, brown conference tables ran along the walls of the tidy room, giving it a distinguished appearance befitting an executive board meeting. Yet, the sight and sounds of 15-month-old Andrew O'Doherty frolicking around, as well as the infantile cries of his cousin Carleigh, were proof enough that normal business dealings were not going to take place at this meeting.

No, the agenda here consisted of, among other things, feeding, burping, and changing diapers.

The recent gathering of about two-dozen men and the two children in an instruction room at St. Joseph-Mercy Hospital in Ann Arbor was held for "Boot Camp for New Dads," a national program designed to help prepare men who are expecting their first children.

"What do you do if your baby starts screaming and crying when you are trying to change a diaper?" asked Michael Fuller, meeting a roomful of blank stares from the apprehensive and dumfounded "recruits."

Fuller, the facilitator of the program and father of three, and his team of "veterans," which on this night consisted of brothers Gil and Kevin O'Doherty, doled out advice on a host of topics relevant to fatherhood.

Relating the necessary skills to cope with a crying infant was just some of the advice they provided.

vided.

"If there is one piece of advice I can give all of you — something to keep in the back of your mind and remember — just be flexible. Be willing to go with the flow. Understand that there are going to be some big changes in your lives. Be prepared to accept and do whatever is necessary to deal with them," Fuller told his recruits.

The veterans are particularly instrumental to the success of the program. Not only do they furnish valuable parenting know-how, but they also bring along their children so the recruits can get some hands-on experience of holding and caring for the youngsters.

In other words, stuff that can't be learned from reading a book. At this meeting, recruits were able to play with Kevin's son Andrew, as well as learn holding techniques with Gil's three-month-old daughter, Carleigh. One lucky recruit even got to change her diaper, while the rest attentively watched.

"The hospital doesn't send you home with a manual," Kevin told the group. "To be a dad might be natural, but to be a good dad takes work. Learn all the information you can that will help you cope."

The one-time, three-hour course brings into focus that the nature of parenting has evolved over the course of the last generation. Traditionally, women who stayed home were largely responsible for raising children,



PHOTO BY KURT KUBAN

Gently: Alan Ribant feeds 3-month-old Carleigh O'Doherty a bottle while "Boot Camp" instructor and Carleigh's dad, Gil O'Doherty, helps him support her head during the Boot Camp for New Dads program at St. Joseph Mercy Hospital in Ann Arbor.

while the father was off at work providing the family income. Because of this, children often had a more distant relationship with their father.

Fuller believes this structure has changed, which is why there is a need for a program like Boot Camp for New Dads, which helps men learn how to bond with their infant children.

"As times are progressing, we are finding out that dad can be

just as good a parent as mom. And dads can be, and should be, just as involved with the raising of the children," Fuller said.

#### Relaxed environment

One of the unique aspects of the program is that it is designed to provide an environment where there can be a free flow of ideas, where the men can express their concerns and discuss their experiences without

fear of retribution from spouses, partners or of being politically incorrect.

"The only females allowed in here are under the age of three," Fuller joked.

At this particular meeting, the ages of the recruits varied greatly, though most were in their thirties. They also came from different walks of life, with occupations ranging from engineers and educators to construction workers and salesmen.

While some came seeking specific knowledge, such as how to calm a crying baby or change a diaper, most were there to learn anything and everything they could. The common denominator among them seemed to be inexperience and concern over being a good father.

"When I saw the ad for the class, what caught my eye was the fact that it would be first-time dads discussing the issues. I don't have that much time for reading up on these topics, so I thought to myself, 'I'm going to pick up a lot from what these guys are saying to each other.' That is why I'm here," said Alan Ribant, manager of Chelsea's Purple Rose Theater Company, who is expecting his first child on March 9.

"I have all kinds of fears. In three months, I'm going to be doing this [fatherhood]. Just sitting here listening to the other fears, I realize I'm not alone."

By the end of the class, most of the recruits were laughing and had gained confidence just by

knowing they were not alone in the forthcoming jump into fatherhood.

"By being here you have taken the first step of being the best father you can be," Fuller told them.

The Boot Camp for New Dads program is held at different hospitals throughout the nation. St. Joseph-Mercy Hospital in Ann Arbor is the local sponsor, and holds a number of meetings during the course of the year. To find out more information, contact the hospital, or look up the program's Web site at [www.newdads.com](http://www.newdads.com).



PHOTO BY KURT KUBAN

Helping hand: O'Doherty talks a boot camper through a diaper change.

## FARMINGTON MEDICAL DATEBOOK

**Items for Medical Datebook** are welcome from all hospitals, physicians' companies and residents active in the Observer-area medical community. Items should be sent to: Medical Datebook, c/o The Observer Newspapers, 36251 Schoolcraft, Livonia 48150, e-mail [kmottison@oe.homecomm.net](mailto:kmottison@oe.homecomm.net) or faxed to (734) 591-7275.

**ADULT CHILDREN OF ALCOHOLICS**  
Adult Children of Alcoholics and dysfunctional families gather everyday for 12 step support group meetings in the metro area. To find a meeting near you call (248) 988-0973 or write: ACA, P.O. Box 401483, Redford, MI 48240-9489, for information.

**MON, JAN. 3**

**BREASTFEEDING**  
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class on breastfeeding techniques and issues for expectant mothers and fathers. The class is offered from 7-10 p.m. at William Beaumont Hospital, Classroom F, 44201 Dequindre, Troy. Cost is \$20. Call (800) 633-7377.

**ANOREXIA/BULIMIA**  
Support groups led by recovering or recovered anorexics and/or bulimics to discuss strategies for recovery. Meets Jan. 3, 10, 17, 24 and 31 from 7-8:30 p.m. William Beaumont Hospital,

10th Floor, classrooms A & B, 3601 W. Thirteenth Mile Road, Royal Oak. Call (248) 551-9200.

**TUESDAYS, JAN. 4**

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An educational program for expectant parents is offered Tuesdays, Jan. 4, 11, 18, 25 and Feb. 1 from 7-9:30 p.m. at William Beaumont Hospital, 44201 Dequindre Road, Troy. Cost is \$60 per couple. Call toll free (800) 633-7377.

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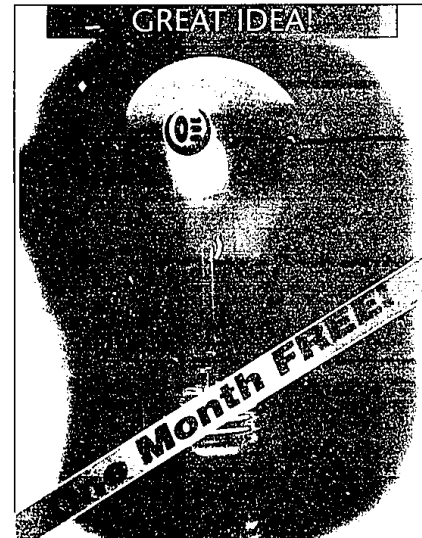
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