

TODAY'S LocalNews

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Raising good fathers

Vista's Dad's Club helps steer men through the challenges of parenting

By Triveni Sheshadri
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In the past year, Enrique Hernandez has seen his full-time work in construction whittled down to a part-time job. At times, the task of providing for his wife and two sons, ages 9 and 5, has overwhelmed the Vista father.

"Not having enough work, the economy — I was tired. I had explosions in my mind," Hernandez said.

Dad's Club

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(760) 407-1220, ext. 130

He found help at Vista Community Clinic's Dad's Club, a program that helps fathers deal with every aspect of family life.

Hernandez received information and resources. He found a supportive group of men who listened to each other and offered solutions.

Dads A5 >



Gregory Mendez, shown here with his daughter Rose, was one of the participants in a recent Dad's Club program. The club, which is run through the Vista Community Clinic, helps men cope with the issues of parenthood. Courtesy photo

Index >

SPORTS [A9]

BUSINESS [A12]

PUZZLES

[A13]

LIV

Dads

>From A1

He learned a new appreciation for his wife and began to carve out more time to spend with his children.

"I see that everybody has problems," Hernandez said.

Now in its third year, the year-long program helps fathers cope with issues such as anger management, communication with spouses, getting involved in their children's schools, health and nutrition, and balancing work and family life.

The fathers' initial shyness melts away after the first one or two class sessions, said Silvia Alcantar of Vista Community Clinic.

"They joke around. They tell their personal stories and counsel each other," she said. "It becomes a safe haven to ask for help."

As part of the program, each dad is paired with a case manager who visits the home once a month.

"We call it the family care plan," Alcantar said. "The coach will assess the areas of need, whether it's food, clothing, job or education. Are you struggling with your job? Are the kids doing OK in school?"

Before she launched Dad's Club in 2007, Alcantar met with a group of 10 fathers to find out what weighed on their minds. One of the biggest concerns was not knowing if they had all the tools they needed to be successful parents.

"One of them said, 'As the father, you are the head of the household. You are supposed to know everything. What if I don't?'" Alcantar said.

The fathers, all Mexican immigrants, were worried about navigating an unfamiliar school system. They were concerned that their children would get ensnared in drugs and gangs. The single fathers in the group had questions about child support.

Alcantar focused on addressing these concerns when she launched Dad's Club in 2007.

In the first year, she struggled to meet enrollment goals. She reached out to churches, schools and pediatricians.

As the word spread, dads began to sign up. They told their neighbors, brothers and cousins. Now in its third year, Dad's Club has 88 members and a waiting list for the next session that begins in October.

Alcantar said the impetus for the club came from the wives who were in parenting classes during the day at Vista Community Clinic. The classes had helped the women become better informed about family and health issues, schools, libraries and other resources in the community. Friendships had blossomed in the group.

"They were so pleased with the program that they began to ask if their husbands could attend something similar," Alcantar said.

Dad's Club has become so popular that it has spawned a support group for those who have completed the one-year program.

"They didn't want to stop coming," Alcantar said. "We couldn't turn them away. We started a support group that we call Dads in Action. They still have an outlet to share their problems and support each other."

In recent months, the clinic has added a teen dad's group geared toward the needs of young fathers. Among the members of this group is Sergio Saldana, who is expecting his first child, a son.

Sergio, 16, said he joined the program because he wants to

be a responsible dad.

"I have learned how to control myself, what to do when I am angry or frustrated," he said.

Along with finding the tool to manage his anger, Sergi said he had picked up other helpful information.

"I have learned how to be a responsible dad — how to communicate in relationships, how to handle your frustration and how to guide your child to manhood," he said. "I want to be a good father, raise a good son and help him succeed."

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