

Men, babies and books

Vancouver Public Library program gets
dads involved from the start

BY KIMBERLEY FEHR

PHOTOS: TIFFANY BROWN COOPER



Eighteen-month-old Solana takes a break from teaching dad how to sing nursery rhymes.

The atmosphere verges on tribal. A group of 30-something men walk in a small circle swinging their babies gently as they sing softly, “Zoom, zoom, zoom, we’re going to the moon.” Then there’s a countdown: “Five, four, three, two, one – blast off!” The men lift the babies to the ceiling and there are smiles all around. It’s so much fun they decide to do it all over again.

Welcome to Man in the Moon, a baby-dad bonding program run by Vancouver Public Library and sponsored by Vancouver Foundation. Named after a nursery rhyme, the program offers songs and stories for the very young and the men who love them. The class gathers for an hour once a week in the children’s section of the Marpole Branch to hone rhymes, sing songs and bond. The benefits go far beyond the joy of rhyming: strong parental bonds, seeds of literacy that last a lifetime and a chance

for new dads to swap child-rearing strategies.

Program leader Jon Scop, a children’s librarian, whispers conspiratorially, “Believe it or not, it’s still viewed as sort of strange for dads to be involved. It’s a good thing, but it’s still a new thing. These guys, I don’t want to tell them this, but they’re pioneers.... Hopefully it gets to the point where it’s not looked at as an oddity.”

A discussion during a break in the program laments the lack of positive father role models in our society.

“Society and the media don’t really portray the father well,” says Andrew, here today with his daughter Justine. “There’s Homer Simpson. The dad’s the butt of the joke or the bumbling idiot waiting for mom to swoop in and fix things. I think it’s positive that there are other fathers being involved in their kids’ lives. It’s very different from the previous generation, where it



Solana and dad David enjoy a Man in the Moon moment.

was a lot more hands-off and the expectation was the women would be responsible for taking care of all things household and family.”

Vancouver Public Library launched Man in the Moon to fill a vital niche. In regular parent-child programs, dads are often the odd man out in a room full of moms. Man in the Moon provides a place just for them, where it’s safe to be silly.

David, here today with his one-and-a-half-year-old daughter Solana, says, “If you miss a week, it feels like you’ve missed out on something. We get together in a circle, we share stories, we talk about things in the break. We get to see the other kids grow. When dads come with their baby for the first session, they’re scared. They don’t even know how to calm the baby down without mom; you see fear on their faces; ‘I’m alone with this child.’ And you see how far they’ve come at the end of the session and it’s great.”

He admits he didn’t have a choice when he first came – Man in the Moon was legislated by his wife. The first day he was a little apprehensive about chiming in, but then he became an addict. Expanding his limited repertoire of nursery rhymes doesn’t hurt either, especially when it comes time to put Solana to bed.

“The little rhymes we can sing with her and finger-plays are great,” says David. “It’s good for me because I was kind of lost when it came to what to do next. There’s methodology behind it. It’s a lot more than just reading words out of the book. You’re using voices; you’re actually getting them involved.”

And the tips he has learned from the other dads have been helpful in getting Solana to sleep through the night without her wanting to feed three or four times, and getting her out of mom and dad’s bedroom.

Man in the Moon is offered in 10

locations, including eight Vancouver Public Library branches and two community neighbourhood houses. Program sessions run from eight to 10 weeks. Last year Vancouver Foundation awarded the Vancouver Public Library Foundation a \$50,000 grant to expand the program and to research offering it in other languages, such as Cantonese.

Children absorb so much in the first few months and years, says Brenda van Engelen, executive director of the library’s foundation. “Speaking and singing and talking to your baby is so important,” she says. “Oral literacy is the first step towards literacy. And Man in the Moon is a conscious effort to connect the male caregiver with the important role of being a teacher and role model in their child’s life.” **VF**

To find out more about Man in the Moon, call 604-331-3740 or visit: www.vpl.ca.