

Daddy & Me!

Newly jobless fathers discover ups and downs of stay-at-home life

BONDING: Lance Somerfeld (left, with son, Jake) and Matt Schneider (with Sam) are part of a weekly full-time-fathers' group started by Mr. Somerfeld. "I felt isolated."



BY HILARY POTKEWITZ

AT FIRST, SCOTT JENSEN joked that he was the new “manny” (that is, male nanny) and said he was only “baby-sitting” his 3-year-old daughter, Heather.

The former telecom chief executive lost his job in November, when the company he worked for closed its U.S. offices. So his wife, Becky, took on more hours at her physical therapy and yoga practice, and he became a stay-at-home dad.

“My wife quickly made it clear that I am not to refer to myself as ‘just the baby-sitter,’” Mr. Jensen says, “and under no circumstances am I to act like one.”

Mr. Jensen is hardly alone. The New York industries churning out the most layoffs so far in this recession tend to be male-dominated—Wall Street, law, technology—and that has left hundreds, if not thousands, of city and suburban dads both jobless and taking on a growing share of child-care duties.

The task can be daunting for new dads, especially since so much of the child-activity network is female-focused. In a

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world of Mommy & Me groups, breast-feeding workshops and ballet classes where the aesthetic is overwhelmingly pink, there are few programs that reach out to fathers.

"When my wife went back to work after her maternity leave ended, I felt isolated and was not meeting any other dads," says Lance Somerfeld, a teacher who took this year off to spend more time with their 7-month-old, Jake. "I know there are hundreds of stay-at-home dads in New York, but I couldn't find any dads' groups. Most guys just don't like to 'ask for directions.'"

So in November, Mr. Somerfeld started an online Meetup group for stay-at-home dads who were climbing the walls of their Manhattan apartments as winter approached. Within a month, 45 dads had joined. The group now meets for weekly events, drawing a core of eight or so fathers with munchkins in tow.

A pack of Baby Björns

ONE DAY, five dads spent time together walking around the Metropolitan Museum of Art, toting their progeny in Baby Björns.

"At one point," Mr. Somerfeld recalls, "I was furiously doing laps around the Temple of Dendur trying to get Jake to go to sleep, and the other guys were just standing there."

A casual weekday stroll in certain neighborhoods—especially Battery Park City, the Upper East Side, Park Slope and Brooklyn Heights—can yield all kinds of dad sightings. The newbies are especially easy to spot as they bump into café tables with strollers, not yet able to parallel-park the things with ease.

It's easy to spot new dads, hitting café tables with their strollers

"I've definitely seen a lot more dads out and about over the past few months," says Lee Stern, director of Music Together Brooklyn Heights, a children's program. "I'd say one-third to half the people walking down Henry Street tend to be guys, not women, picking up kids after school, and that's new."

Mr. Stern hasn't yet figured out how to tap into the influx of daytime dads—though he notes that one of his infant music classes, usually attended exclusively by mothers with children, now has two fathers in it.

David Weinstone, president of Music for Aardvarks, a nationwide kids program, reports seeing an increase in the number of fathers at his weekday classes in Manhattan.

"It's primarily at our SoHo and Battery Park locations," he says. "Those are the places where a lot of the families probably had one parent working in the hedge fund and finance industry."

Child care with a CEO's fervor

MANY OF THE NEWLY unemployed fathers think of this time as a temporary spell. The current flock of young parents, mostly Generation Xers, "still retain some of that value set where men feel they need to be the providers," notes Hilary Eaton Pearl of human resources consultancy Pearl Associates. "But they also want to maximize every experience."

Luckily, that same determination can be harnessed on the home front. Though the first couple of weeks are often touch-and-go—Mr. Jensen's wife left Post-it notes for him all over their Chappaqua house—some former execs find themselves channeling their management skills and attention to detail toward the task at hand.

Take Mr. Jensen.

"At first, I had to keep reminding myself that I'm not just watching my daughter for the day," he says.

But once he changed his mindset, he tackled the job with a CEO's fervor. "I set up a whiteboard and a monthly planner, and made a color-

coded chart with everyone's daily activities for the next two months."

Indeed, he and his wife just had a "60-day planning session."

Mr. Jensen says he still fields 10 to 20 phone calls per day related to his job search. But the past few months with his toddler have changed his goals. He can't imagine going back to the old routine of making it home barely in time for a kiss goodnight.

For his next job, he's looking for a short commute. And he's seriously considering the idea of working from home one day a week.

Until that happens, it helps that he's found a group of fellow telecom workers, also unemployed, also fathers of baby girls, also living in the suburbs. "You have a certain commiseration process," Mr. Jensen says.

It may seem like a frivolous com-

plaint, but some dads feel they're being shunned by mothers and nannies in child-activity classes.

"They treat my husband like he's invisible," posts one user on UrbanBaby.com, a city parenting site—a sentiment echoed by others.

Even for dads who socialize across gender lines, it's just not the same. "You have a different kind of discussion with guys than you do with moms," Mr. Somerfeld says. "Things like, 'Does it feel weird to have a baby girl?' or who's sharing their bed with the baby, and how you handle the whole intimacy thing."

Those are topics that many men might feel uncomfortable discussing with a woman other than his wife, let alone a group of women.

"And sometimes," Mr. Somerfeld adds sheepishly, "you just want to talk sports." ■

DAD-FRIENDLY CLASSES AND GROUPS

THE 92ND STREET Y offers a five-week class, "New Dads—Dads and Babies," for fathers and infants, newborn to 12 months. The class meets Sunday mornings, so it doesn't interfere with Sunday-afternoon sports. Go to www.92y.org for details.

NEW YORK CITY DADS MEETUP GROUP is a casual social network "to meet other local stay-at-home dads in and around NYC, to arrange play dates with kids and interact with other guys in the same situation." Meetings are usually midweek; six to eight dads and their babies attended the 10 events held so far. Go to www.meetup.com/new-york-city-dads-meetup-group.

MUSIC SCHOOLS with dads on the scene include Music Together Brooklyn Heights (www.musictogetherbrooklynheights.com) and Music for Aardvarks (www.musicforaardvarks.com).