

A place for dads to feel safe and ask questions

Daddy's Place in Rotterdam helps new fathers build their own community

Rich Felisia

Project Leader

Daddy's Place
Rotterdam, Netherlands

When I found out I was going to become a father, I was a young man – 24 years old and impulsive, with a lot of things on my plate. We'd just rented a new place, which needed a lot of work. And I had to earn money, of course.

I grew up without a father so I already knew I wanted to be the best father I could be: the father I never had. I've always been full of curiosity about what it would be like to be a dad. I thought, "I'm just going to work really hard to raise my son." And then, in 2017,

my son Mason was born premature, at 28 weeks, and everything changed.

I felt powerless, and it was a lot to cope with. I felt as if I had nobody I could turn to for support. My partner was of course emotional just after delivery, vulnerable and exhausted. I thought that in that period there was only room for one person in the home to show fragility. As the father, you are not going to whine and you feel that you cannot or should not express how you are feeling. My mother was always my shoulder to cry on; I could discuss everything with her until I became a father.

It was especially difficult outside the house because people assumed I was strong and cool because I was a well-known, positive man, but they didn't know what I was going through. Other men around my age didn't have children yet or, if they did, their situation was different. I was in a dark place, a very lonely place, because I didn't know where I could go with my questions or who I could ask for help. So I thought, "I'll figure it out for myself." And I did – but it wasn't always easy.

← Rich Felisia with his son Mason



Photo: Daddy's Place

Then, during the 2020 pandemic, everything changed again. When the economy shut down, my business fell apart. That was obviously hard, but it left me with a lot of time to spend with Mason, who was then 3 years old. I'm very active on social media, with a large number of followers, and I'm a very proud father. So everything I did and everywhere I went with Mason, I posted photos and videos. Through this, I started to get to know other young fathers in person and online.

In January 2022 I was forwarded a job opening – separately, from two people, who don't know each other. The role was to take charge of something called Daddy's Place, a project for new and young fathers in Rotterdam who have questions or need support, as I did. I looked at the required qualifications, and I thought: there's no way, I don't have the right diplomas, or work experience. But both of these people said they knew me and they thought I would do a good job, so I decided, "You know what? Where there's a will, there's a way."

From Mama's Garden to Daddy's Place

Daddy's Place originated from a programme called Mama's Garden, a place where mothers can meet and connect, especially those who are new in the country or have small social networks. After nine years focusing on mothers, Mama's Garden had taken on a male student called Jocelyn as an intern and asked him to look into a research question: how can healthcare professionals and others who work with parents involve fathers more in parenting?

He noticed that during routine check-ups in pregnancy, such as ultrasounds, the healthcare professionals didn't look at the men in the room. They didn't ask the fathers any questions. This was, he observed, part of a larger pattern of isolation and loneliness in the fatherhood experience and so his research became about increasing fathers' involvement. That's where I came in, in my new role as Project Leader at Daddy's Place.

Today, Daddy's Place is a platform, online and offline, where young fathers between 17 and 35 come together and learn from each other. Sometimes

we host free monthly events, such as boxing workshops, father-child photoshoots, and creative crafting sessions. But above all we create space for conversations to happen – organically, in small circles. "I just had a fight with my girlfriend," or "What do you guys do when your baby cries, do you just leave them?" No topics are taboo. We listen without judging the person.

One father asked me a great question: "Hey Rich, can you give what you have never had yourself?" I said no, I don't think so, but why do you ask? "Because I never had a father," the guy said. "How can I be a good father?"

Finding community in a big city

Young dads face a lot of prejudice in their parenthood. They want to be a good dad and do things differently from previous generations, but they are struggling with the "how". Also, there are no safe spaces where they can relate to other young men, and it's very hard for them to share this with young moms because they don't want to show their vulnerability.

So guys like this, who didn't grow up with a father, have to learn in practice how to be a good dad. Maybe to start with he doesn't go with the mother to appointments or playgroups. Then he'll be dismissed as a bad father, but it's only because he hasn't had many opportunities to see what good fathers do. He can become a better father with time, and with good examples and advice.

"For me, finding my place meant finding peace."

Sometimes, a man's ego makes it very difficult to seek help or to ask questions. So we need places like Daddy's Place which invite these questions and offer dads a chance to be motivated and inspired by others. If you see a man you look up to or a man you have a lot in common with seeking support, and speaking about taboo things, you're more likely to do the same.

The men at Daddy's Place become connected to themselves and each other, through their stories, shared learning and support. It's the solidarity and togetherness that encourage fathers to keep showing up, to be better parents and set a positive example for the next generation of dads.

Increasing awareness of how dads feel

Part of our work at Daddy's Place is to raise awareness about what fathers are feeling in the broader public. One good way we do this is by recording podcasts for example, giving fathers a voice and amplifying it online. On Father's Day, one dad talked about getting a set of new tools as a gift, and thinking, "I'm going to be expected to do even more things for other people. How would my girlfriend feel if, on Mother's Day, I got her a new vacuum cleaner?"

By giving a voice to young fathers, we want to make sure they are included in research into what parents need from policies and services. Apart from Daddy's Place, there isn't really anywhere in Rotterdam where fathers can go for support yet – not even magazines or other information that might offer dads some guidance. It's critical for the municipality to take a close look at who people are, where they live and what they need. In Rotterdam South, for example, there is a lot of poverty, unemployment and illiteracy. More than half of residents have a migrant background. It doesn't make sense to try to engage them with flyers using difficult Dutch words.

I always keep my focus on the fathers of Rotterdam, because I am one of them too. Sometimes, this is challenging in the context of Daddy's Place. For one thing, while I appreciate researchers coming to study the dads, I want to make sure that it doesn't ever take away from anyone's comfort. Also, when I apply for grants I am often asked about what I will do with the funds in a way that assumes I have all the answers. I understand why, but I also need support



Photo: Daddy's Place

to figure out what the answers are, and what kind of programmes would serve this community. That happens through trial and error.

As a young man growing up in Rotterdam with a lot of different cultures, it was hard to find my place. For me, finding my place meant finding peace. When my son arrived, I had to do my best to focus on becoming a good father. Fatherhood helped me, saved me even – before I became a father, there was always the question: what is masculinity? The experience and knowledge gained through fatherhood has taught me how to be a good father and a good man; I became the best person I can be. And the beauty of it is that I can pass on my learning from fatherhood to other fathers. That's the best part.

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