

Parents and parenting

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Dads need love, too: the men creating 'a vulnerable space' to be with their kids, and each other

From a coffee club to a meditation group with self-affirmations, brothers are doing it for themselves



📷 Ron Holden Jr (right) during a bimonthly meetup of dads and their kids called Dads Coffee Club. Photograph: Sara Sanei

Aaricka Washington in Los Angeles, California

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 Prefer the Guardian on Google

on Holden Jr had one big question on his mind as a coffee shop-loving father of two daughters, two-year-old Layla and one-month-old Nari: there is a lot

Rof necessary outreach, resources and activities like “Mommy and me” yoga classes for mothers. But what kind of support do dads have?

“You go to doctor visits and quite literally, no one asks the dads: ‘How are you feeling? You all right, today? You good?’ It’s like: ‘Mom, you’re good. The baby is good,’” Holden Jr said.

Earlier this year, Holden Jr decided to start his own group of fathers and their kids that meets bimonthly at different coffee shops around Los Angeles for about 90 minutes. He calls it Dads Coffee Club.



📷 Ron Holden Jr and one of his daughters in a photograph taken by fiancée Sara Sanei.
Photograph: Sara Sanei

There’s no agenda. Fathers and their children can come whenever they want. The men usually feel more comfortable in group settings with their children than by themselves, he said. Usually 25 to 30 dads show up with their little ones, and there’s a range. Some are new fathers. Others have kids in college, and all are of various races and ethnicities, experiencing fatherhood and their own children’s lives differently.

“It’s a safe space for you to just embrace your child being your child, exuding their energy and all that in the coffee shop and experiencing it,” Holden Jr said.

Holden Jr said it’s important to have safe spaces like this because so often men may feel tons of pressure when it comes to providing for their families and societal stress to fit the

image of masculinity, so they won’t be vulnerable with sharing their personal lives.

“Maybe they feel like they’re losing their masculinity or the lifestyle they used to live or the friends they used to hang out with, because now they’re a father and they have a child who they love, adore and appreciate being a father,” he said. “But then there’s still these small moments of their life before that they may miss and not be connected to anymore.”

Holden Jr said he is looking forward to expanding his group by getting out of the coffee shop environment and encouraging fathers to be more present with their kids. Last month's outing was to the Broad Museum, where [Antoine J Girard](#), a Black art curator, led a tour and hopefully inspired some kids to be artists. Their next group outing will be 4 October at the David Kordansky Gallery in Los Angeles.

"It's just a wild world," Holden Jr said. "I really enjoy being a dad. It's so fun, it's rewarding. It's the best thing I've ever done. There's the full spectrum of dads who feel that way, and then there's dads who are quite literally scared or worried, and we can hopefully help everybody get into a space where they feel comfortable and supported. We can make being a father look and feel natural, fun and cool."

For Desmond Carter, having a safe space for mental health for Black men is why he started Mental Health Is Real Wealth. Carter, who began the organization to honor a friend who died by suicide, said that he also struggled with his mental health and credits being a father to his seven-year-old daughter as what saved him.

"If I'm being honest, she's in some cases, kept me alive," he said. "I look at her and I think about her. I can't be the one who crashes out. She keeps me grounded, she keeps me on my toes. She surprises me often with just like her growing, and it's just her growing into herself or the energy she has. I would never change anything about it at all."



📷 Desmond Carter, who started Mental Health Is Real Wealth, and his daughter in a 2021 photograph. He credits being a father with keeping him grounded. Photograph: Courtesy of Desmond Carter

Like Dads Coffee Club, Mental Health Is Real Wealth has safe space for not only Black men, but also Black fathers who may have the additional pressures of raising kids.

Ian Davis is a creative consultant from New York who has a three-year-old son, Ace, and a two-year-old daughter, named Love. He is also a mental

health facilitator for [WalkGood LA's YouGood?](#), which is another space for men to practice self-care, fathers included. The monthly healing circles include meditation, yoga, a sound bath, journaling and group discussions.

"I think a lot of the time, we get asked the question: 'How are you?'" Davis said. "That's just a filler to get to the next thing, versus really being like: 'Yo, how are you *actually* and: 'How's your vibe, how's your energy?'"

Davis often leads the men in a series of body-movement exercises and empowering words or affirmations.

"It's powerful because it's a vulnerable space," he said. One of his affirmations that he leads with the men is something that he actually does with his children.

"I make them repeat: 'I'm whole. I'm complete. I'm lacking nothing. I'm the embodiment of infinite possibilities. Anything and everything is possible. All things are working for my good,'" he said.

Davis added that he has cultivated his own space with a dad chat with his friends: "We have to do more of that for the people we care about, the people we love, and even those we don't know. But I also think it's paramount to do that for the Black men, other Black fathers, etc.

 Ian Davis, a mental health facilitator, leads a healing circle for WalkGood LA's You Good?. Photograph: Kavi Peshawaria/Courtesy of WalkGood

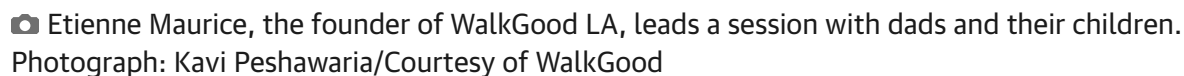
"It's something that can only be understood once you're into it. It's different once you actually not only are responsible for somebody, but are there through the process and the formation of that life coming to be."

He also has a golfing club called [Dads Link and Golf](#) that meets regularly.

Donnie Scantz, 49, from Houston, Texas, has two sons, Noah, 25 and seven-year-old Asa, and a three-year-old daughter, Ava. He considers YouGood? a space where men can come out of their shells and be vulnerable about how things make them feel. He remembers attending a YouGood? session on Father's Day that really stood out to him; he'd taken his seven-year-old son.

Etienne Maurice, the founder of WalkGood LA, was leading the session. He put the dads and their children in groups during a journal-writing session after a meditation. The question that was posed to the fathers was: What is something that you would tell your younger self?

He remembers reading his letter to his child about not caring what other people think, speaking up and using your voice, and his son having a glow in his eye.

 Etienne Maurice, the founder of WalkGood LA, leads a session with dads and their children. Photograph: Kavi Peshawaria/Courtesy of WalkGood

“It created a space for our kids to see us in a different way,” Scantz said. “My son looked at me and said: ‘Dad, you should try to be a counselor.’ I’m like: ‘Why did you say that?’ He was like: ‘You should do this for a lot of other kids because your words are powerful.’ And that just floored me. Where can we find somewhere that has the tools and resources to unlock certain things that Black men are specifically dealing with as fathers that we might not be able to unlock themselves?”

“It’s a comforting space, because Black men, we have walls that are maybe even unintentionally put up,” Scantz said. “Society has created our defense system to put up these walls in ways in which we don’t even know.”

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