

FELIZ
FATHER'S
DAY!

Power to the Papis

Mami isn't the only one who needs pals. Here's how three dads are navigating fatherhood with a little help from their friends.

BY HOLLY PEVZNER



VIRTUALLY ALL *mamis* know that finding friends deep in the trenches of parenthood is essential for survival. Fathers, on the other hand? Not so much. In fact, according to a 2019 study, 20 percent of dads experienced a drop in their number of close friends within the first year of having a baby. Not only is it harder to make amigos as an

adult, but reaching out for help can be especially hard for Latino men, many of whom grew up in homes where machismo ruled. “The traditional model for Latino fathers is a strong head of the household who commands respect but doesn’t really open up or tend to the kids,” says Cristina Mogro-Wilson, an associate professor of social work in the Puerto

Rican and Latino Studies Project at the University of Connecticut–Hartford.

But today’s generation wants to be more involved in child rearing, Mogro-Wilson says. With that comes a need for support—even if it’s online these days. Here’s how three dads found their inner circles before the world changed, and what they’re longing to get back to.

SOLO BUT NOT ALONE

Flor Mercado, a Puerto Rican dad of a 7-year-old daughter, Nysha, in Orlando, bonded with his buddies after his divorce.

● **Sense of community:**

When Mercado and his ex-wife split four years ago and had to share custody, he was determined not to be a part-time dad. His family didn’t live nearby, and his married friends couldn’t always relate well to his coparenting struggles. “I have Nysha every other week, and she’s an only child, so I wanted to give us both a wider social network,” says Mercado. After researching online, he came across the Orlando Dads Group, which organizes meetups across the city, and signed up for one of their events at a pizzeria. “We got there, the kids started playing, and I had no idea what to say to the other fathers,” Mercado recalls. “Finally I blurted out, ‘How does this work? What do we do?’” He was met with several reassuring smiles and a simple explanation: “We just hang out!” Before Mercado knew it, about two hours had passed. “It was so liberating to connect with others who’d been through hardship and had the same passion to be the greatest dad possible,” he says.

● **Team mentality:**

Mercado’s group, which includes fellow Latinos and single parents, would get together two or three times a month for playdates and dad-only outings to car shows or video-game bars. They also swap advice via text or social media, sharing parenting wins and fails. “I chat with

the guys about work stuff or how to maximize the time I have with Nysha,” Mercado says. “It’s like I always have a sideline cheering me on.”

● **Role models:** “Everything I do is an example for my daughter, even how I handle friendships,” Mercado says. “I’m trying to show Nysha that you should always feel comfortable and confident reaching out to those around you for help.”



WHETHER WE'D LIKE TO ADMIT IT OR NOT, DADS NEED SUPPORT AS MUCH AS EVERYONE ELSE.

—FLOR MERCADO

ALL IN THE FAMILIA

Anthony Aguilar, a dad of two girls, Maxine, 6, and Hayley, 5, didn't look far for his tribe. He lives about five miles from his father, brother, and brother-in-law in Bell, California.

● **Breaking with tradition:** When Aguilar was a kid, his dad never really showed it if something was bothering him. “My father left Mexico as a teen and worked long, grueling hours,” Aguilar says. “But he always put on a brave face.” Aguilar was similarly guarded. Then, three years ago, when his eldest, Maxine, was diagnosed with autism, he just couldn’t hide his feelings of despair. “It was hard for me to accept the news from the doctor,” he says. He found himself leaning on the men in his family, taking them up on their offers to babysit or

to talk about it. “They’re all dads, so they understand the struggle of trying to keep it together for the sake of your wife and children,” Aguilar says. “They kept me strong when I couldn’t be.”

● **Open communication:** The Aguilar men would meet for barbecues, watch boxing matches together, and tackle weekend fixer-upper projects. “We text daily, sharing cute photos of the kids or funny memes,” Aguilar says. “Being a dad has brought me so much closer to them.”



● **Like father, like son:** Despite his tough-guy exterior, Aguilar’s dad has opened up since becoming an *abuelo*, stepping in to calm Maxine when she has a meltdown or giving Aguilar pep talks. “Now when life gets stressful, I call him,” Aguilar says. “He always reminds me to take things one step at a time.”

AMIGOS FOR LIFE

Blogger Ozzy Rosenberg, a Peruvian-American father of two sons, Abraham, 5, and Benjamin, 6 months, got to know his papi pals by organizing movie screenings in Miami.



● **Real talk:** After the birth of his firstborn, Rosenberg’s wife experienced postpartum depression, leaving him feeling overwhelmed and with no one to turn to. “I realized I was pretty much alone,” he says. Seeking a solution, Rosenberg took to Facebook and discovered a number of parenting groups discussing depression and anxiety. He was comforted by the common ground, but it couldn’t replace the face-to-face connection he wanted. “Mothers have their own support systems, so why not fathers?” Rosenberg says. That’s when he came up with an idea inspired by his hobby of reviewing films online. He would plan dad-and-kid movie screenings, advertised on Facebook. Immediately, ten fathers signed up.

● **Film crew:** The group, which now includes six

regulars, would meet monthly at theaters throughout Miami, and sometimes without their children to watch the latest action flicks. “Talking about the movies helps us segue into conversations about deeper stuff, whether it’s our worries about the kids or stress over finances,” says Rosenberg.

● **Listening 101:** “To be able to say, ‘I feel lonely’ or ‘I’m not doing so good today’ without someone telling you to ‘man up’ is life changing,” Rosenberg says. “These guys have made me a much better listener, not just with other people, but with my wife and children too.”



Hover your phone’s camera, papis, and tell us what you’re most proud of as a dad.