

Family Lifestyle

Page A12

THE DAILY INTER LAKE

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AS JEFF HAGEN talks, Barry Flannigan, left, and Tracy Lost-Bear listen during the weekly meeting of the Involved Dads support group. The group meets at The Nurturing Center each Monday. "It shouldn't be that you have to have a problem to come together and talk about the issues that fathers have," group facilitator Lost-Bear said. "Everybody needs help. We all have room to become a better parent in one way or another."

Focus on FATHERS

New support group helps dads get involved

"By profession I am a soldier and take pride in that fact. But I am prouder - infinitely prouder - to be a father. A soldier destroys in order to build; the father only builds, never destroys. The one has the potentiality of death; the other embodies creation and life..."
— Douglas MacArthur

Fatherhood is a never-ending journey of highs, lows, joys and frustrations. Tracy Lost-Bear knows it intimately.

"It has to be the greatest adventure and most fulfilling experience anyone could ever have," Lost-Bear said about being a father. "On the flip side, it can also be the most thought-provoking and life-altering thing to every happen to anyone."

A father of 10 — one adopted, seven biological and two stepchildren — Lost-Bear is the facilitator of a new support group called Involved Dads. He's looking for a few other fathers who want to learn how to build and maintain close bonds between them and their children.

The group is sponsored by The Nurturing Center and is made possible by a grant from the Montana Children's Trust Fund. It meets from 5:30 to 7 p.m. every Monday at The Nurturing Center, 146 Third Ave. W., in Kalispell.

And it's not only for new fathers, Lost-Bear stressed. It's for single fathers, stepdads, working dads, stay-at-home dads and expectant fathers, as well as grandfathers, uncles and brothers.

"It's my experience that very few dads are really, truly involved in their children's lives," Lost-Bear observed. "There's that stigma that it's the women who are supposed to be around the kids. I've noticed at school functions, it's always the moms who are there. I'm always the oddball, the token male."

A camaraderie already has developed among the fathers who have attended support-group sessions.

"We feed off each other. It opens up new perspectives," Lost-Bear said.

Part of the grant money will pay for a day-long fatherhood conference in May 2006, said Susan Christofferson, executive director of The Nurturing Center.

"We can't have a fatherhood conference in a vacuum," she said. "We need to know what their issues and concerns are."

The Nurturing Center assisted a support group for new fathers about five years ago, but it eventually disbanded as attendance waned. It's typical for such groups to come and go, Christofferson said.

"We try to respond to community need," she said.

Lately there seems to be renewed interest from fathers who want to know how they can

become more involved with their children.

Lost-Bear said being a parent doesn't "just mean the pleasant things like first word, first step, first bike, birthdays, playing and smiling.

"I'm also talking about the earthy, real aspects of being a parent ... pacing the floors all night, trying to soothe illnesses and teething pains, wiping up 3 a.m. vomit, bath time, changing diapers and the joys of potty training," he said.

The group doesn't focus only on fathers of

young children, though. Fathers of teens, preteens and children of any age also are welcome to attend and talk through their concerns.

"It shouldn't be that you have to have a problem to come together and talk about the issues that fathers have," Lost-Bear said. "Everybody needs help. We all have room to become a better parent in one way or another."

For more information about Involved Dads, call Lost-Bear at 257-5635 or The Nurturing Center at 756-1414.

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■ **Tracy Lost-Bear**
facilitator
Involved Dads