

CONTRA COSTA TIMES

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## Fathers blaze trails in parenting

By Jackie Burrell  
CONTRA COSTA TIMES

Fog drifts across the surface of the Lafayette Reservoir and drips from the trees on this wintry weekend morning, but the Grateful Dads are well-bundled and eager to hit the trail. They strap on baby backpacks and adjust fleece hats on the rosy-cheeked occupants-to-be -- the toddler members of this eclectic hiking group.

For the last eight years, the Grateful Dads and their kids have hiked the trails of Marin County, surging up and down Mt. Tamalpais and across the Marin Headlands as they combine cardio workouts with some serious baby bonding.

This side of the Bay got its own chapter three years ago, after Castro Valley real estate consultant Allen Mueller got tired of schlepping across the Richmond bridge for outdoor adventure and remembered that the East Bay has amazing trails of its own.

"There are so many neat places in the Bay Area that you just don't see if you're just going to work every day," Mueller says, "and I was looking for something to get back in shape and do something with my daughter."

The way things are going, the Grateful Dads may go worldwide.

The concept is irresistible -- dads and tots hiking together, aerobic workout, beautiful surroundings, fathers bonding while moms sleep in. And the name? That's a nod to the legendary band, of course.

Before the birth of his daughter Maddie in 1998, founder Jonathan Marks had worked for the Grateful Dead, trekked the Himalayas and hiked the Alps. So it's no surprise that impending life changes were on the San Anselmo real estate agent's mind the morning he went for a hike with his then-pregnant wife, Paula.

"Everyone says, 'Your life changes, your life changes,' but I enjoyed my life too much," says Marks. "This idea came to me that would incorporate my love for the outdoors and hiking with a new child. The Grateful Dads was born."

What began with eight dads and seven babies -- one nervous new mother didn't want to let her infant go hiking the first time out -- now has 300, including 90 in the East Bay. But the premise is still the same. There are no fees, no R.S.V.P.s and no one takes roll. You just show up.

On any given weekend, six to 20 dads show up with babes in tow. They tote them in slings or backpacks, slather on the sunscreen and tramp the trails with water bottles and tied-on baby toys flapping against the pack frames.

The East Bay group mixes the pace, opting for the paved path around the Lafayette Reservoir one month and the steeper trails of Joaquin Miller Regional Park the next.

As they hike, they talk -- not just about life, work and sports, says Marks, but about "the more critical aspects of life, from 'How do I still remain a cool husband, a cool guy?' to 'How do I deal with lack of sleep?' It's a casual, easygoing forum."

And it's a lovely, free morning for the mothers.

"There are many in the group who say it should be called the Grateful Moms," Marks says with a laugh.

The benefits go beyond a weekend walk. Dads bond with their kids on the trails, he says, and they learn paternal self-sufficiency.

"Dad's on a hike in the middle of Mt. Tam, and your kid starts to cry for no discernible reason?" says Marks. "You have to figure it out."

Marks' daughter Maddie was just a few months old when the Grateful Dads debuted. Now, he totes his youngest, Gabriel, in the backpack, while his daughters hike alongside. There are fathers with infants and toddlers, single dads, and men with a 10-year-old by the first wife and a 1-year-old by the second. There are poets, engineers and Realtors ... and then, there are friends.

Mueller's daughter Cassidy was just 2 when she started hiking with her dad. She'd ride in a backpack or traipse the trails with her stick pony, Blackie #1. Now 5, Cassidy gallops along the Lafayette Reservoir path on Pinky, the newest member of the Mueller's stick pony stable. Little brother Evan -- age 2 and pink-cheeked with excitement -- trades rides on Blackie #2 with his buddy, Sean Pletcher.

"We've always been hikers," says his father, Castro Valley attorney Brett Pletcher. "But it was harder after we had Sean. They're heavy to carry, but the dad's group goes slow enough. It makes it easy."

Mueller dragged Pletcher along on the Grateful Dads' first East Bay hike, a trek at Del Valle Regional Park. A month later, the new chapter had 30 members, and the numbers just grew from there. They added a "friends and family hike" at Tilden Park, then an annual family campout at Chabot. Now they're thinking bikes -- an Iron Horse trail ride is scheduled for April.

And the Grateful Dads are spreading, Marks says with delight. Chapter-launching inquiries have come in from fathers across the country. One of the original Dads moved to Spain and started a chapter there. The possibilities are limitless, Marks muses: global Grateful Dads, a worldwide network of dads and kids in the great outdoors.

#### **GRATEFUL DADS HIT THE TRAILS**

#### **EAST BAY MOMS**

#### **TIPS FOR HIKING WITH TODDLERS**

East Bay hikes start at 9 a.m. sharp. Maps and details at [www.gratefuldads.com](http://www.gratefuldads.com)

- Feb. 25 -- Joaquin Miller Regional Park, Oakland
- March 18 -- Garin Regional Park, Hayward
- April 15 -- Sunol Wilderness, Sunol
- April 29 -- Iron Horse Trail, Danville, Family/Friends Bike Outing
- May 20 -- Mt. Diablo, Danville

#### **GRATEFUL DADS HIT THE TRAILS**

#### **EAST BAY MOMS**

#### **TIPS FOR HIKING WITH TODDLERS**

Dads aren't the only ones. East Bay Moms and their tykes take hikes and stroller walks every Friday at 10 a.m. Directions and details at [www.eastbaymoms.com](http://www.eastbaymoms.com)

Feb. 17 -- Hike at Redwood Bowl, Redwood Regional Park, Oakland

Feb. 24 -- Stroller Walk at Marina Bay, Richmond

#### **GRATEFUL DADS HIT THE TRAILS**

**EAST BAY MOMS****TIPS FOR HIKING WITH TODDLERS**

- Bring a Snuggli-type front pack for babies up to six months, or a backpack for carrying older tots. Have an experienced person adjust the fit to make sure your child is safely strapped in.
- Pack a mini first-aid kit, emergency whistle, map of the area being hiked and a compass. If your child walks, give him an emergency whistle and stay close.
- Exposure is the No. 1 concern in the backcountry. Bring wide-brimmed hats, fleece jackets, sunscreen and rain gear for both of you. Make sure you both drink plenty of water.
- Don't forget the diapers, wipes and small plastic trash bags.
- Bring snacks (better to have too much than not enough), drinks and a lightweight picnic blanket.
- Also handy: a small mirror, so you can check the baby on your back; string to tie toys and water bottles onto the pack frame; and a ready supply of stories and songs to liven up the trail experience.

-- Source: [www.gratefuldads.com](http://www.gratefuldads.com)

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Dan Rosenstrauch/Times

Allen Mueller of Castro Valley, left, walks with son Evan, 21 months, behind his back and daughter Cassidy, 6. Sean Pletcher, 4, of Castro Valley walks with his father Brett Pletcher, and Chris Pagel of Castro Valley, right, walks with his son Dylan in the carriage as they hike around the Lafayette Reservoir. The dads are part of a group called Grateful Dads that hit the trails in Marin County and the East Bay.



Dan Rosenstrauch/Times

Allen Mueller of Castro Valley throws his son Evan, 21 months, over his shoulder as they prepare to hike around the Lafayette Reservoir with other dads and their kids. The group Grateful Dads of 200 members strong combine cardio workouts with baby bonding.