



Fathers **figure**

There's no such thing as the perfect handbook for new fathers. But there are priceless lessons to learn when these expectant or experienced dads get together

He's worried and tearing up. Kahu Ropata is driving away from the Launceston Hospital where his baby daughter Honi is battling blood poisoning for the second time in her young life. "Hang on a minute," he says, as he describes the angry, red welts all over her six-month-old body and the intravenous drip in her tiny arm, "I'm a bit emotional".

Kenny Smith is frustrated. He's just trying to make himself a simple, Saturday-morning breakfast at his home in Lindisfarne. He's attempting to give his wife a much-deserved sleep-in so he's juggling their almost two-year-old Angus and their lively, puppy pug Otis. "We've had two accidents in half an hour," Kenny says. "Angus just peed through his nappy and it went everywhere, and the dog just did a poop on the carpet."

Tom Docking's day started with vomit. The father of three kids under five has been up with his two-year-old since 4am, but still has energy for joking. "I've done two loads of washing and

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MAIN PORTRAIT MATT THOMPSON

I'm onto the second breakfast," he laughs. "Half the toys have been sterilised, the kids have been showered twice and it's not even 9.30am yet. But I've just had a surf, so I'm OK."

Five years ago Docking was far from OK. He was newly married and, with wife Kate, was only a few months into what was planned to be a two-year, around-the-world adventure when they discovered they were going to have a baby. The self-described gas-bagger who grew up in an Aboriginal community in Arnhem Land says he went into shock and didn't speak for two weeks. "I went walk-about in my mind," Docking says. "I wasn't sure what was going on and I just wasn't really ready for it I guess."

He says he believes men are never 100 per cent prepared for becoming a dad. "The shock will hit them in different ways and that's just the way it is," he says. "It's not a bad thing, it's just a thing." Docking went searching for support programs for expecting and new fathers and came up empty. "There was just nothing nationally," he says. "And I just thought, 'how can there be all this support geared towards new mums but nothing for new dads?'"

So he set up Dads Group Inc before his first child was born. The idea is that once a month young fathers such as Kahu Ropata and Kenny Smith meet with others in the same boat, share experiences in a very casual way, and learn through the ups and downs of fatherhood. The regular social opportunity helps dads who are feeling lonely, anxious or overwhelmed. It helps them bond with their children and improves their confidence.

The first rule of Dads Group is there is "no judging". Mostly they meet over a coffee and they bring the kids and then they go



Clockwise from main: Dads of Hobart members at Kingston Beach, Sam Grachan, Josh Lycett with baby River, 3 months, and Kenny Smith with his son Angus, 1; Kahu Ropata holding his six-month-old baby daughter Honi Ropata; and Tom Docking feeds his three-month-old baby boy Joseph.

for a walk or stop at a park. Expecting dads are curious about the birth and want to know how many nappies newborns go through in 24 hours. Is it more than five? New dads want to know things like when the baby is going to sleep through the night. Does that ever happen?

"There are always little things that might seem like nothing [to some] but they are the things that help make you feel one per cent more confident, and these little things add up, and over time really make a difference when you are struggling," Docking says. "They might be just the thing or the help that's needed to get you through the day."

"For me it was the learning speed I was comfortable with. It was self-led. The outcomes were determined by what I wanted to learn and then I accidentally learned some stuff along the way because someone shared their experience, which was another good outcome. It's a learning environment that doesn't feel like a learning environment."

When TasWeekend calls Docking he's hosting the National Fatherhood Summit on the Sunshine Coast. The summit brought together groups such as The Fathering Project – which runs programs for dads with school-aged children through schools – and charities like Movember. The goal was for these different groups to learn how to better work together. Their collaboration is good news for dads right around the country.

Docking wants a Dad Group in every town in Australia. So far there are 70. In recent months three have started in Tasmania – one in the North-West, one in Launceston and one in Hobart. Around 200 men have joined one of the three groups. Dads Group Inc Tasmanian coordinator Luke Rigby became a father three months ago. He runs the Launceston group, which already has close to 100 dads. "The feedback about the group has been phenomenal," Rigby says.

Docking says the men usually "rock up with their guard up", but then when they realise it's kind of like spending time with their blood brothers their guard drops. "There is a sense that we all understand the challenges," Docking says. "You know it's really special and deep learning about spending time with quality people and talking about life things – things of life that are really important, such as birth and fathering and parenting."

Kenny Smith, who just wants to eat his crunchy nut cereal without having to clean up bodily fluids – says he's keen to soak up the knowledge of more experienced dads at the Hobart group. He and his partner Maddy are thinking about having another baby and this time he wants to be better prepared. He admits he didn't do enough homework about becoming a dad before Angus was born.

"I had no idea what to expect, really," Smith says. "My wife was all over her side of stuff and had everything prepared and I was just going along with it."

His lack of preparation hit him, he says, when they left the hospital. "I thought, 'oh crap, we've got a baby'."



IN THE NAME OF THE DADS

Tom Docking's top five learnings from Dads Group Inc:

- The best thing to do as a dad is to be a good partner to your wife
- Kids don't do what you tell them to do, they do what you do
- Be the person you want them to be in the little things. It's the little things that demonstrate you are listening to them. Look for the moment you can engage with them. It might only take five minutes to connect with them
- What is your child asking for? What's behind their question? Maybe they don't want you to read the book. Maybe they just want to feel loved
- Parenting is better done with mates. Do some parenting with mates and their kids and you are going to enjoy it

Maybe these more experienced dads will be able to tell Smith what to say to his wife when he comes home from a huge day at work and she's curled up on the couch looking forlorn. Maybe he'll pick up some tips on discipline, he says. He's already wondering what the other guys will know about tantrums. But Smith has tips of his own to share – like what to consider when buying a stroller. And will the new dads know about the right bum cream to buy? he wonders. "Scented wipes," Smith laughs. "Hypoallergenic. I didn't even know that word existed before having a child."

Kahu Ropata just wants his baby girl, who is recovering from

blood poisoning, to get better. He wants to love and support his wife who has been through more in six months than either of them ever dreamed possible: an emergency c-section, a staph infection, neo-natal wards, feeding tubes...exhaustion. He wants to open up to other dads. He's curious to know if other dads get anxious when the mum leaves the room and they are alone with their baby. It's something he's been struggling with lately. "I second guess myself when I'm alone with bub," Ropata says. "It's just a weird emotion I'm still trying to process."

Docking says Dads Group Inc is all about nudging men into being better dads. "They are surrounded by positive nudges," Docking says. "Little pushes in the right direction". He says the camaraderie is similar to soldiers who are shell-shocked in war. "There's that sense of camaraderie and support and whatever previous differences they had before becoming a dad is irrelevant because they are pushing through this together."

"They're three months under-slept and they've had all these personal problems at work and at home and, you know, with the baby, and their confidence is not there and they meet this group. And it's like they reconnect with this group of guys they've never met before, but they feel like there's a certain affinity there because they've all gone through that. And it only takes one or two guys to share a few things and all of a sudden everyone resonates with that. We hear comments like 'ah good, thanks for sharing that because I thought I was the only one going through that'."

To find out more about Dads Group Inc contact @dadsgroupinc. This Father's Day Dads Group Inc will run a national fundraiser called Man with a Pram. To find out more visit the website manwithapram.com