

A man with a blue baseball cap and a grey polo shirt is sitting on a grassy area. He is smiling and looking towards the camera. A young child with curly hair, wearing a yellow shirt, is sitting on his shoulders. Another young child with blonde hair, wearing a blue dress, is sitting on his lap. The background is a dense green hedge.

VILLAGE OF THE DADS

When these Queensland men discovered the dearth of advice available for fathers, they decided to do something about it

TRACY RENKIN

FATHER OF INVENTION:
Dads Group Inc
Queensland co-ordinator
Nicolas Bonastre with
daughters Eloise 4, and
Thea, 14 months.
Picture: Lachie Millard

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DAD'S THE WORD: Dads Group Inc founder Tom Docking with children Annabelle, 2, Joseph, 8 months, and Evelyn, 4.

Tom Docking's day started with vomit. The Mount Cooloom father of three, all under five, has been up with his two-year-old since 4am but he's still smiling. "I've done two loads of washing and I'm on to the second breakfast," he says laughing. "Half the toys have been sterilised, the kids have been showered twice and it's not even 9.30 yet. But I've just had a surf, so I'm OK."

A month ago, Nathan Baird, 33, was puzzled. When the self-employed carpenter headed off for a regular Saturday morning surf on the Sunshine Coast, it only took a few minutes to get ready.

But Baird, whose wife Mel Baird, 37, gave birth to their son Malakai this month, says it now makes sense what a mate told him. The mate, an experienced father of three, revealed it takes him at least one hour to prepare to leave the house whenever he's taking his children with him. "That really surprised me," says Baird. He had thought, "how could it take that long?"

Docking and Baird, along with a group of other dads, regularly get together on the Sunshine Coast to surf and hang out. But rather than the usual banter about swell size and who has caught the best barrel this week, they open up about what's going on at home. The man leading the chat is 36-year-old Docking, who is being intentional about enjoying fatherhood and encouraging other dads to do the same.

Five years ago Docking was far from all right. He was newly married to Kate, 28, and they were only a few months into a two-year, around-the-world adventure when they discovered they were going to have a baby. Docking, who grew up in an Aboriginal community in Arnhem Land where his mother worked as a nurse, says he went into shock and didn't speak for two weeks. "I went walkabout in my mind," Docking says. "I wasn't sure what was going on and I just wasn't really ready for it." He says he believes men are never 100 per cent prepared for becoming dads.

Docking, who runs Corporate Services Group – a strategy consulting firm – went searching for support programs for expecting and new fathers and came up empty. "There was just nothing nationally," he says. "And I thought, 'How can there be all this support geared towards new mums but nothing for new dads?'" So, he set up Dads Group Inc (DGI) with Kate before their first child was born. The couple now has Evelyn, 4, Annabelle, 2 and baby Joseph who was born on Christmas Eve.

NO JUDGING AT DADS GROUP

The idea is that once a month, new fathers meet with other dads to share experiences in a very casual way and learn through the ups and downs of fatherhood. The regular social opportunity helps men who are feeling lonely, anxious or overwhelmed. It helps them bond with their young children and improves their confidence in taking the kids out on their own.

The first rule of Dads Group: "No judging".

Docking's Cooloom group usually goes for a surf first then they head home to scoop up the kids, pick up a coffee and take a walk along the beach. The catch ups usually end with a play in a park.

Expectant dads are curious about the birth and want to know exactly how many nappies newborns go through in 24 hours. 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 but they are the things that help make you feel one per cent more confident," Docking says.



WAYS OF SUNSHINE: Docking and other members of the Coolum chapter of Dads Group Inc meet for one of their weekly get-togethers at Mt Coolum on the Sunshine Coast; and (below) Nathan Baird and his son, Malakai. **Pictures:** Lachie Millard

Construction foreman supervisor Nicolas Bonastre, 31, helps Docking run Dads Group Inc as the Queensland manager. Bonastre became a dad three months into his relationship with Dani, 31, who is a midwife. His daughter Eloise is now 4 and he and Dani also have Thea, 1. He runs the Dads of Redlands group and previously ran the Wynnum Manly group, which has quadrupled in size in less than a year. “The dads keep coming back,” Bonastre says. “Having something outside of work and home that still involves the kids just works so well.”

Bonastre says since starting his Dads Group he and his daughters are bonding better than ever.

“I’ve just got such a real confidence boost in taking the girls out on my own now,” Bonastre says. “I used to think I needed their mum close by in case one of them started losing it and I didn’t know what to do. But now I take them out on my own once a week.” He says information sharing is one of the biggest perks of his group.

RECOGNISING DADS NEED HELP

In March, Docking hosted the National Fatherhood Summit on the Sunshine Coast, which brought together groups such as The Fathering Project, which runs programs through schools for dads with school-aged children, and charities such as Movember.

The goal was for these different groups to learn how to better work together. In January DGI started a partnership with the University of the Sunshine Coast to investigate the significance fathers have in their young child’s life. Docking says he hopes the research will validate the benefits of programs like his in improving links with other new dads, which lead to better connected, but also more confident and competent fathers.

Recently Docking was in Melbourne for Movember’s Social Innovation Challenge. He’s crossing his fingers that Dads Group Inc is picked as an official Movember-supported pro-

ject because the funding that comes with it will enable him to set up more Dads Groups around the country. Docking wants a Dads Group in every town in Australia. So far 100 have been set up since 2014, with more than 10 in Queensland.

There’s growing evidence to show dads need the kind of help Docking is offering.

Research released by Flinders University in July found first-time fathers felt “belittled”, and needed more support to feel comfortable and confident in their role. One key finding of the analysis of 68 academics studies of thousands of fathers, was that dads needed more social support networks and “baby-friendly communities” to facilitate the fathers’ role, particularly for stay-at-home-dads.

Dr Bruce Robinson, 68, a respiratory physician specialising in mesothelioma, started The Fathering Project in Perth after having to tell too many fathers that lung cancer was killing them. The father-of-three said the men usually said two things after hearing their bad news: “Work wasn’t as important as I thought” and “I wish I had spent more time with my kids”.

The Fathering Project will roll out its school-based program nationally this month after receiving funding from the Federal Government. The groups are designed for dads to meet other dads and to help them better connect with their school-aged children. Sometimes it is a paper plane and pizza night or something as simple as bangers and bingo. But the goal is to get dads to step into the primary school space and learn from each other how to be better dads.

So far, they have about 230 groups but by the end of the year the plan is to have 500. Most groups have about 70 fathers so their end-of-year goal is to have about 35,000 better-connected fathers. In Queensland it means a state manager will be in charge of the dozens of groups that will start up in coming months. The first Fathering Project in Queensland is a group of dads who

call themselves the Mountain Goats, run out of Buderim Mountain State School.

“Everyone has an experience with a dad,” says The Fathering Project “chief of everything officer”, father-of-two Wayne Bradshaw, 60. “They could have an absent or ineffective dad or a great one but I think every dad should understand just how crucial the fathering role is. The essence of our program is that we want to help children thrive. And the best way we do that is to help dads to be the best they can be. Research shows children with an effective father figure have better mental health and learning outcomes and are less likely to dabble in drugs and crime.”

Bradshaw believes if he can convince more Aussie dads to put their fathering first instead of their work and be intentional fathers it will bring families and communities together. “Great fathers can change the future of Australia,” he says. He says the group advocates dads being there for their children, which means being present and giving them attention and unconditional love as well as encouraging dads to find what makes each of their children special and to nurture that to improve their self-worth. He says the best way to do that is with regular one-on-one dad dates.

GROWING NEED

Docking’s group at Coolum has about 120 members. He says at first the men usually arrive with their guard up. “But then they realise it is kind of like spending time with their blood brothers,” Docking says. “There is a sense that we all understand the challenges. It’s about spending time with quality people and talking about life things – things that are really important like birth and fathering and parenting.”

Baird, from Yaroomba on the Sunshine Coast, joined the DGI before his son Malakai was born, after waking up in the night worrying about money. Asking himself: how much would he and his wife really need to raise Malakai? Another worry keeping him up at night is the fear of losing the special bond he has with his wife Mel, 37.

They’ve only been married for nine months after dating for just over a year and Mel works as a fly-in fly-out team leader at a mine at Glencore near Emerald. He’s already thinking about what he can he do to ensure they remain close in the madness of first-time parenting. Some dads in his group have said losing the connection with their wife was their biggest adjustment to becoming a dad. “It will take a toll on our relationship so that is something we’ve got to mentally prepare for,” Baird says. “But how do you do that?” He’s hoping someone else will be able to tell him.

Bonastre says one of the great advantages about the DGI is that experienced dads have “great ideas that the younger dads can tap into”.

“Sharing ideas and experiences and different ways of doing things can be a real help when a young dad is struggling with something new,” Bonastre says.

Docking says Dads Group Inc is all about nudging men into being better dads. “At Dads Group they are surrounded by positive nudges,” Docking says. “They may not have slept well for months and they’ve had all these personal problems at work, at home and with the baby, and their confidence is not there. Then they meet this group and they connect with guys they’ve never met before but they share a common bond. And it only takes one or two guys to share a few things and all of a sudden everyone resonates with that.”

Next Sunday DGI hosts the “Man with a Pram” fundraiser in all capital cities, manwithapram.com

DOCKING’S TOP 5 TIPS FROM DADS GROUP

- The best thing to do as a dad is to be a good partner.
- 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.
- What is your child asking for? What’s behind their question?
- Parenting is better done with mates. Do some parenting with mates and their kids and you will enjoy it.

