



 Kindred spirits: The Cooloom chapter of Dads Group Inc, at Mount Cooloom. Picture Lachie Millard

How to be the best dad you can be

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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.



📍 Helping hand: The Coolooloo chapter of Dads Group Inc at Mount Coolooloo. Picture: Lachie Millard

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 Coolooloo 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.

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.



📍 Innovation: Dads Group Inc leaders Nic Bonastre and CEO Thoms Docking. Picture Lachie Millard

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 project 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 academic 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.