

HEALTH HEROES



DIY dads: From left is Stefan Korn and son Noah, Eric Mooij with daughter Ava and Scott Lancaster and daughter Pyper



& Paternal & PROUD

A trio of fathers are putting in words what men have been trying to express for ages: fathers can make great parents, too

BY SARAH LANG
PHOTOGRAPHED BY MARK COOTE

THE FIRST THING I notice in Scott Lancaster's fire-warmed Wellington home is the constant flurry of children. Scott's pretty-in-pink daughter Pyper, and Stefan Korn's son Noah (both two), totter around, eyeballing the visitor and tugging at their mums: Scott's wife Renee Heatherwick and Stefan's wife Raquel Roncero Rodriguez. Sixteen-month-old Ava sits snugly on dad Eric Mooij's lap.

The second thing I notice is the childproofing: a fireplace shield, a purpose-built stair-blocking gate, breakables out of reach on high shelves. A tape recorder initially left within a child's reach is soon moved.

These folk are masters of the childproofing art. Indeed, how to childproof your home is one of hundreds of tips on the trio's international-hit website, www.DIYFather.com, and is Dad Tip No. 54 in their book, *Call Me Dad!* Snapped up by Kiwi dads since February, the frank, funny, fact-filled handbook for first-time fathers comes out in Australia this month (New Holland, \$29.95).

Scott, 34, is a wisecracking restaurant owner turned stay-at-home dad. IT manager Eric, 37, is more reserved. He's a second-time-round dad – his first three children with his former partner are aged 16, 15 and 14. Outspoken Stefan, 39, runs a web-investment company.

So how did it all happen? On finding out they were going to be fathers, all three struggled to find any practical, >>



A particular focus of www.DIYFather.com is childproofing play spaces and removing breakable things

supportive information targeted at first-time dads. Says Stefan, "What was out there was very tired and condescending, targeted to angry dads or stupid dads." So Scott, who knew Stefan through a colleague and Eric through their wives, asked them to join him in conceiving a new baby – the DIYFather website – to fill the information gap. The "global online interactive forum" was launched on Father's Day in 2007.

Spanning from podcasts to product reviews to dads' coffee-group directories, the site grew from a sideline to a sizeable business in just two years, with 120,000-plus hits (around 1000 a day) from America to Australia, Indonesia to India.

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Approached by an impressed New Holland Publishers, the men agreed that some dads prefer hard copy to online text. The ensuing manual *Call Me Dad!* covers all the need-to-know stuff in logical order: how to deal with your partner's pregnancy, birth preparation and etiquette, and getting through those tough first weeks, ending in a review of that whirlwind first year.

Call the authors translators, mediators or even (as Stefan puts it) "piggy-in-the-middle", but not advisers or experts. Given that they're not child-health professionals, that most baby-raising topics are controversial and that different approaches work for different people, the trio decided from the outset to avoid telling dads what to do. Rather, the book outlines viewpoints, ideas and options to help fathers make informed choices on everything from home

birth vs hospital to breast vs bottle; midwife vs obstetrician to cloth vs disposable nappies.

Peppered throughout the book are their own anecdotes and family snaps, as well as distilled wisdom and direct quotes from other dads met through the website. For dads in a hurry, there are a handy glossary, index and bullet-pointed lists. The most amusing is a Top 20 list of what not to say during labour, including "hell I'm tired", "I'm not sure I can go through with this" and "the nurses are hot".

Incorporating a strong vein of humour was important, says Stefan. "Being a dad is hilarious, so why make it dead serious?"

But they are serious about involved fatherhood, talking with evident passion of tapping into a quiet revolution begun in the '90s and gaining momentum. Once relegated to pacing the corridor during birth, generations of fathers missed out on the birth experience and headed home while mum and child bonded in hospital.

Today, enabled by the internet, a new generation of dads is questioning their traditional contribution to their children's upbringing and becoming far more deeply involved in everything from napping to nappy-changing. The book dubs this "the coming-out of dads", with "dad" becoming less a label and more of a mindset.

A benchmark of the movement's momentum, says Stefan, was US president Barack Obama's Father's Day speech in June. "He said fathers need to step up, man up, be involved." And if one of the world's busiest men makes time to tuck up his kids at night, that's a powerful precedent.

"Dads are saying, 'Right, my father wasn't present; I want to be present,'" says Scott, who was two when his father left home and cut contact. Eric was brought up by his father after his parents split, while Stefan (whose parents are

still together) says his father was a good but traditional dad, who never changed a nappy.

When their turns at fatherhood rolled around, each of the authors got the jitters; particularly given that Noah and Pyper weren't planned (Ava was, but Eric's first three weren't). Scott admits he was worried the child would be "ugly and weird", while Stefan was freaked out when he felt the baby move in his wife's stomach.

The book reassures first-time dads that feeling overwhelmed and clueless are quite normal. "Ninety-nine per cent of men say they don't feel prepared," says Stefan.

Tips for new dads? Don't panic, or panic later, roll with the punches, patience, persistence, humour, a strict routine, fake it until you make it... The message for 21st-century fathers is that you'll get over the hurdles, and that an involved father is crucial to a child's life, right from the start.

"There's this myth out there that 'mums just know' [how to parent]", says Stefan. He reckons that's down to mothers having better access to quality information – and social approval to seek it. "Whereas with dads it's been like, Oh, we'll be all right."

The trio agree that, in general, men and women parent differently. Mothers tend towards a nurturing style, while dads add a physical, challenging, risk-taking and – often – a more relaxed approach, says Stefan. "You need a balance of both." This isn't anti-mum rhetoric, but about fathers filling a role for which a mother cannot provide a total substitute.

Importantly, rather than sidestepping a child's impact on the parents' relationship, the book tackles the tricky subject head-on. Among the relationship-nurturing anecdotes are heads-up pointers such as, "Some women get really horny during the second trimester so watch out!"

How do the trio's wives feel about having boobs, birth and bellies dissected in text and depicted by photos in such a public forum? "Ignorance is bliss," pipes up Scott, as Renee admits she's never read the book. Raquel, on the other hand, loved reading it.

Almost as many mums as dads post comments on the website. "It's interesting for mums to consider the issue from a dad's point of view," says Scott, who argues that Dad stepping up can require Mum to step back just a little.

So how do they think their kids will feel when they're old enough to read the book (or books, given they don't deny rumours of a sequel)?

"I think some counselling will be needed," laughs Scott. "Actually I think they'll feel honoured in some weird way." After all, kids usually

OLD DAD

Bring home the bacon *
Don't disturb your father *
Mum does the housework *
I want my son to be *
a successful lawyer
Smacking as discipline *

NEW DAD

* Cooking the bacon
* Hang out with your father
* We all do the housework
* I want to help my son be
whatever he wants to be
* Time out on the naughty spot



get photos of only the babyhood, not a written record. "When Noah's looking back at this it'll reveal a lot about me and about how I fathered him," says Stefan.

Meeting at least once a week, and in daily contact, the threesome run the business according to a division-of-labour, play-to-strengths ethos. People-person Scott (who puts in a minimum 40 hours a week) is a natural at phone duties and relationship building, while (over 20 hours per week) Eric covers off IT and community management (such as updating Twitter), and Stefan gets much of the credit for the book's polished prose, and for new initiatives. These include a partnership with Plunket, New Zealand's chief development, health and wellbeing service provider for children, delivering "no-mums-in-the-room" courses for new fathers, piloted last year in Wellington and currently being rolled out nationwide.

All DIYFather proceeds are pumped straight back into the business. "We've worked our arses off to get where we have," remarks Scott. Preparing for major international expansion, they hope the business will eventually become an almost self-sustaining beast. But there's still a long way to go, Scott says, to fulfil DIYFather's mission: "To help fathers be the best they can be."

"The involved-father movement is now where Henry Ford was at when he thought about creating a car. But there's no stopping it." ♦



The trio's website is a place fathers can chat about their experiences, and inabilities, of being a dad