

FATHER *time*

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It's music to mums' ears. Research shows that more modern fathers are seeing the benefit of spending quality time with their children. It's good for the kids, and for dads' personal happiness

IT IS probably the ultimate Mother's Day present. A quiet revolution is taking place in the family home, with research showing that men are seeking to form stronger emotional connections with their children than those they had with their own fathers.

When the Boston College Centre for Work and Family in the US asked 1000 dads to rate the qualities they believed defined a good father, the top score was given to providing love and emotional support. Financial support appeared at the bottom of the scale.

Experts believe it will be a while before this shift in priorities is reflected in men's workplaces, but they say things are changing. The exciting thing is that it is being driven by men themselves. We spoke with three busy Adelaide dads about the value of plenty of hands-on time with their offspring.

NICHOLAS LEE Ernst and Young Social Entrepreneur of the Year 2013, founder and CEO of the Jodi Lee Foundation

When Nick Lee and his wife Jodi sat down with their two young children to tell them that Jodi was going to die, they expected tears but they did not expect the questions they got. "Who is going to do my hair now?" said then four-year-old Bella. Jack, then 6, started asking about a boat that he saw going out to sea as they walked along the Victor Harbor seafront. The mood of the moment lifted. It was an indicator of how Bella and Jack would deal with the aftermath of Jodi's death in January 2010 and it is what pulled Nick through his personal crisis.

"Just seeing the kids and how resilient they were, how they dusted themselves off, laughing again and bouncing back the way they did, was just incredible," he says.

Seeing the children get on with their lives gave Nick the belief and the energy to pursue what was becoming a burning passion since the death of his wife – to create something good out of a bad situation. It was to be important to all of



1 Nick Lee with children Jack and Bella
2 James Muecke with sons Tom and Nick

them – the creation of the Jodi Lee Foundation later that year, an organisation that raises awareness of bowel cancer, the cause of Jodi's early death. It was important to Nick that the foundation did not serve as a continual reminder to his children of their mother's death but rather had a positive impact on people.

"One of the things I talk to them about is that their happiness in life is really dictated by the relationships they build and the relationships they build is based on how they make people feel," Nick says.

He makes sure Bella, now 11, and Jack, 13, go along to the Foundation Christmas party, where all the talk is about positive things.

As a single dad it is sometimes hard for him to know whether he is doing a good job. Although Bella keeps telling Nick that he's the best dad in the world, Nick reminds her that he's the only dad she's got and he quietly knows that he's not perfect in their eyes.

His baking skills are limited and he's not much good at shopping. Nick's highly competitive nature has meant that his efforts at teaching Jack footy have not ended well. "I don't try with that any more. I'll go and have a kick with him and I won't say anything. If I see something I could improve on, I very rarely talk to him about that," he explains.

"Instead I ask him questions after his match – 'how do you think you went, do you think you could have done better' and all those sorts of questions – which is a way of getting him to see it for himself rather than dad going 'you should have done this or that'. So I've employed a few different tactics on that front."

Although parenting is an on-the-job learning experience, much of what we know about parenting has been learnt from our own parents. The values Nick learnt from his father, a former District Court

judge, were hard-wired into him by watching his father navigate his own life path. He hopes these values will filter down to his own children.

"Dad has a massive sense of integrity and fairness and he is a fantastic role model in relationships," Nick says. "He will pick his battles with mum. If mum won't let go, he backs off. I guess that's part of his judicial training."

Despite the big influence that his father had on him, Nick knows – and his father agrees – that this current generation of fathers is much more hands-on than in his father's time. Although this is a good thing, Nick believes this overly attentive parental approach has added to the pressure of raising children now.

"We are more protective – even Bella walking to school worries me. But in reality my parents had me riding to school every day without a helmet from Medindie to Hackney, and there were no mobile phones in those days."

Nick has had to be more hands-on than most dads, of course, but the one benefit of raising his children alone is that he has forged the closest emotional bond that he could possibly have with his children.

"The depth of love for the kids and the bond I have with them has surprised me. I guess it shouldn't surprise me, but it's just the most amazing thing."

"You would do absolutely anything for them. You can't explain that to someone who isn't a parent. There are so many wonderful moments, but I guess the surprise is in the depth of satisfaction from all of that – it is phenomenal. So, parenting – I've loved it."

One of James's favourite memories with his older child Nick, as a toddler, was going out & discovering things to do in Adelaide together

JAMES MUECKE

Chairman of the Sight For All Foundation, ophthalmologist and humanitarian

Most dads who go out exploring with their children don't sit down and write a book about it, but James Muecke is not most dads. You spend five minutes in James's company and you get excited about life's possibilities, all of which he wants to share. One of his favourite memories with his older child Nick, as a toddler, was going out and discovering things to do in Adelaide together. James had spent his own childhood in Canberra, so Adelaide was an unexplored playground. His book *Adelaide for Kids* is the result of their discoveries and is a bestseller.

James was an explorer from his youngest days. He recalls camping trips as a child when his family lived in the United States for two years. His father took his wife and four boys all over the country in their purpose-bought pop-up campervan. This sense of adventure became the single biggest driving force in James's life.

James now juggles his ophthalmology practice in Adelaide with his humanitarian work in alleviating blindness in developing Asia with the charitable organisation he helped to set up six years ago, Sight For All.

One of James's main priorities in the raising of his boys, Nick, 18, and Tom, 15, is that they, too, gain an understanding of how people live in other parts of the world, in particular the developing world. His sons have done plenty of travelling already and last year his eldest even helped him on one of SFA's projects in Laos, where SFA was

carrying out a childhood blindness study. It was Nick's first time helping on the job and, despite its often confronting moments, he took it all in his stride.

The boys' schooling has generally been his wife Mena's domain, but one of James's key roles is to be around for their sporting activities on the weekend. As a dad who was interested in sport himself as a boy, James taught both his boys to play tennis and swim. "It has been a joy for me to watch the kids develop in their sporting activities," he says. "Both boys are strong sportsmen, and to watch them grow and develop is truly exciting."

James remembers his own dad was very much part of his and his brothers' sporting life at school. "Dad was very hands-on for his generation. He always came to our school sporting matches and played tennis or golf with us. He was always around, always interested in us."

But his father didn't have the time with his children as James has had with his own. The greatest difference is that there were less open displays of affection, a common theme of that generation. James wants to be sure that plenty of attention is lavished on his own boys.

"I give them hugs several times a day. I can't get enough, which, of course, they hate," he laughs. "In this modern age we are living in, it is more acceptable for men to show affection. I never doubted Dad's love – he was always loving, but perhaps not as openly loving as I have been with my kids."

As James was growing up, being one of four boys, and a self-sufficient one at that, he did not feel that he received the one-on-one time from his father that he would have liked. "I wanted to be able to spend more time with my boys," he says. "The opportunity to explore and travel with them from the earliest days has been a brilliant bonding experience and an absolute highlight."

This need to connect with his children, however, presented a surprising emotional challenge for James as the boys began entering their teenage years, the time when most teens go into that tunnel that parents are forbidden to enter.

"When they began to go through puberty, I felt excluded at times. It's like someone flicked a switch. It's not something that they consciously do, it just happens, but can be really hard for a devoted dad."

The fact that James likes to tease his boys and tell bad jokes has not helped his cause. Although James is frustrated with not being able to share the inner workings of their lives at this age, he knows that they will soon emerge from "the tunnel" and can see that there are other benefits to the boys getting older.

Both boys are beginning to find a sense of their own life direction. Nick has a strong passion for film and acting and last year performed in his Year 12 drama production. James was there to see it. »»»



Kane Cornes with children Raphael, Eddy and Sonny, and father Graham

PICTURE calum robertson

"I've never been prouder of him, it was amazing." Nick is this year pursuing his dream, studying a combined law/arts degree at Bond University majoring in film and television.

James's younger son, Tom, has always talked of an interest in studying medicine, just as James did.

"Everyone tells you how beautiful it is to have a child, but when you have one of your own, I think it is the single most extraordinary thing in your life."

KANE CORNES AFL footballer
– Port Adelaide

Kane and his wife Lucy have three boys – Eddy, 8, Raphael, 6, and Sonny, 5. There is a lot of juggling to be done in this family. Lucy started her business, SheShopped, almost three years ago. The online shopping site enjoyed immediate success

and continues to grow. As any football fan knows, Kane re-signed with Port Adelaide and juggles media commitments and a role in property sales with Harris Real Estate. And the kids – well, yes, they're busy too.

Kane was 19 when he and Lucy started living together and he confesses she has been the one to hold the domestic front together. But with Lucy's business demanding more of her time, Kane has had to step up his domestic role.

He has always been a hands-on dad, but lately he has had to learn a few more skills.

"I've had to learn to cook a little bit – not that I'm any good at it at all," he says. "YouTube has been my go-to tool. I watched a video the other day to learn how to mash potatoes."

But how do the kids feel about Kane's cooking? He always asks for a rating out of 10 and mostly it's right up there.

When it isn't, there's always Plan B, the takeaway place down the road.

The challenge is coming home exhausted from a day's training and then turning to bathing and feeding the kids.

"Before I had kids I used to go to training, come home, watch two DVDs on the couch, go back to training and do it all over again," he says. "Now I never get to sit down. With three boys, there's always something happening."

"You never keep all three of them happy – usually two are happy and one is crying, so you have to sort that out and be a sort of full-time psychologist and full-time everything else. It's pretty demanding, but I can't imagine life without them."

Now the boys are getting a bit older, they have inevitably become interested in sport – and yes, footy.

"One of the good things about having sons is that I can share my involvement with footy with them and see their faces in the change-rooms after a game. That has to be right up there as one of the best moments you can have as a dad."

It is important to Kane that the boys feel part of a close-knit family and look out for each other no matter what happens.

"The three boys are really close and it is fantastic to see how their relationship is developing together," he says.

"Just to watch the friendship amongst the three of them grow is something I'm probably most proud of. To see the way they treat each other and the way they treat other people is pretty important, so I'm happy with that."

Kane is often at school collecting the

boys at the end of the school day and he is joined by as many dads as there are mums.

It was different during Kane's childhood. His parents split when he was three and he only saw dad Graham every second weekend. They would do things together like play footy or soccer in the park, but there just wasn't the time together to develop that close bond.

Despite this, Kane, like any son, developed an understanding of what is important about being a father from what he felt about his father as a child.

"I've really looked up to him and wanted to be like him, I guess," Kane recalls. "Although I wouldn't speak to him every day, I always knew that if I was ever in trouble or I needed anything, he would be there. He is great for advice. My relationship with my dad has got better as I've got older. He has his own young children so he has his own parenting challenges at home, but it's great to catch up with him when I can."

And what does Kane want his kids to remember most about him? That they feel he is there for them whenever they need him. Like father, like son.

Kane's vision for his boys?

"I want them to do whatever they're passionate about. In the school system, you can get caught up learning maths and English and it's a pretty narrow view, but I'd encourage the kids to travel and see the world and do what makes them happy."

As the interview comes to an end with Kane doing the school pick-up, his words ring out as he greets his young son, "What's happening, buddy?" ●

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