

Dad to Dad



Jo Richie (standing L-R), Jonathan Morrison, Cole Goodey, Les Chitts and Stephen Scott, and John Page (seated L-R) and John Hutchinson at the Daylesford planning weekend workshop.

For many who devote their lives to looking after others, a weekend away can seem a guilty pleasure. But time out can be about developing strength and resilience and connecting with others, writes **Jenan Taylor** of the EW Tipping Foundation.

At a weekend workshop for Dad to Dad coordinators in Daylesford, Victoria, the focus, this time, is on mothers.

Dad to Dad, a program that gives peer support, advice, skills and education to fathers of children with disabilities, is the brainchild of carer John Page and occupational therapist Jo Richie.

The pair trialled it as a series of bi-monthly weekends and workshops at different destinations in Victoria from 2009-10, and since then, they have recruited seven volunteers to help them run the free weekends, which draw men who seek people to whom they can talk, from across the state.

"Shell-shocked" is how volunteer John Hutchinson describes new participants to the group. "They look as if they've come home from a war, as if they're not used to being received as normal men."

It's a feeling Hutchinson used to know well. His wife and three children have conditions that range from Huntington's disease to cerebral palsy. When he decided to devote himself to caring for his family, he had to give up his distribution business. Then he watched his mates drift away.

"When there is disability in the family, social circles dry up. Most women are adept at getting around this, but, traditionally, men clam up because they feel so rejected," Hutchinson says. "When they get to our weekend and realise they're on common ground, it can be life-changing."

At the gatherings, participants swap stories, make friends, and get valuable tips, such as what equipment works

best for certain situations. There's also the chance to unwind – either by having some alone time or by bonding at a Celtic music festival, over fishing or on a winery tour.

But, most importantly, says Jo Richie, the dads are empowered. "We show them how the disability system in Australia works and how to navigate it. We also teach them about strength – what they can give to their families, and also strength for their own well-being. There are many men's respite and leisure programs out there, but they don't include empowerment strategies."

The methods seem to be working. Participant numbers tripled in the first three months of 2011 and John Page says feedback includes reports of the program's knock-on effects. "One participant turned up on a Friday without a job and by Sunday he walked away with an interview opportunity. We've heard of troubled relationships getting back on track, and in the case of at least one person, the program helped save his marriage."

After several hours' planning, the group head outside for fresh air and quad biking. Richie opts to stay out of the activity to finalise a Dad to Dad presentation for a national men's health conference later in the year.

She says that increasing interest from different sections of the community, including from indigenous groups, means the coordinators are looking at establishing local area networks led by their volunteers. As a result, she and Page are busily preparing certification courses for their existing and future facilitators. "But for the immediate future, the focus is to include more women and families in our weekends away," Richie says. "If not for them, after all, some of our dads would simply not be able to get here."

For more on Dad to Dad, visit tipping.org.au/projects/dadtodad. The Dad to Dad program is supported by the Ian Potter Foundation, the Barr Family Foundation and the Cassandra Gantner Foundation. 



Photos L-R: Dads enjoy quad biking – carer John Page leads the dads. Volunteer John Hutchinson and his family.



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