

Jonny Holtom:

Building blocks with blokes



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Late last year a group of local fathers including Robin Christie and myself had the exciting opportunity to be involved in the S.K.I.P initiative “Building Blocks with Blokes” at the Childspace Ohariu Valley workshop. Some of this excitement was born from the challenge involved in what has historically been a difficult scenario to create: that being a group of fathers gathering to share experiences of fatherhood.

Initiatives involving new mothers and couples have been well populated, it’s the dads that have been hardest to reach. A combination of a lack of appropriate settings and the lack of a strong discourse has meant many fathers miss out on the sharing and solidarity that exists between mothers. This is the challenge that our dad’s workshop, the workshop in a workshop, sought to overcome. I use the term ‘workshop’ rather than ‘course’ as S.K.I.P is very aware that each group has its own needs and therefore a prescribed ‘course’ is potentially limiting in catering to those needs.

The Childspace Workshop provided us with a wonderfully ‘blokey’, socially levelling setting for our eight sessions. The building aspect of the evenings involved the collective design and build of a set of robust blocks designed to complement the play of pre-school aged tamariki, and to be donated to an appropriate charity chosen by the group.

Our first evening consisted of acquainting the group with each other, our families, our environment, and our objectives. Robin had a great icebreaker that was asked of each member in turn and became the source of much fruitful discussion over the weeks: name one positive and one challenging experience you have shared with your child/children in the last week. From the outset a healthy discourse was evolving and with the addition of power-tools to the recipe I think we all felt we had the makings of a fun, unique and enriching atmosphere.

As a first-time facilitator of a workshop such as this I was a little concerned as to how we would fill the eight two hour sessions, especially having seen how well the group was working together on the building of the blocks. I need not have worried however as every session ran 30 mins to an hour overtime with members of the group wanting to either keep building or just stay on and talk dad stuff.

Each night we would gather at 6.30pm have a cup of tea or coffee and bounce around our experiences of the week as fathers. Bedtime for our tamariki began emerging as a universal challenge and the comforting nods of empathy evolved into the sharing of many a tried and tested strategy as we realised we were all there to learn from each other. Each night before we fired up the power-tools we would cover an appropriate facet of the S.K.I.P literature such as ‘Staying Calm’ or the ‘Parenting Styles Quiz’. As the hum of power-tools took over the room more one on one communication was entered into. A Brain-Storm whiteboard was also added to with ideas for the words we wanted to see represented in the Perspex inserts at the centre of the blocks.

Robin donned his Dr Bob hat, well at least metaphorically, and taught the group a few handy tricks for us to share with our children, be it to turn a frown upside down or just prove that we do actually have super powers. He also shared as the most experienced father in the group (sorry Robbie!) some effective behaviour management strategies.

We wrapped up on the last night with a reflection on the eight weeks and what we had gained and experienced. We built a small set of planks to compliment the beautiful blocks we created together. We then fired up the barbie and proceeded to stand around it as mates in true Dad style.

Our blocks were donated and gratefully received by the Wellington Woman’s Refuge.



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Jonny Holtom is a lover of nature and art in all their forms. His versatility finds him involved in almost every manifestation of Childspace's pursuits in ECE and beyond. His main passions lie in connecting children with the natural world and expressing the importance of this, and being a good father and expressing the importance of that.