



Dads don't always need proximity to be great parents. To celebrate Father's Day, **TONIA ZEMEK** finds out how three fathers who live and work away from their littlies make it work

Not all fathers live with their kids. In fact, about 17 per cent of children under the age of five don't have dad at home with them and in many other families, fathers spend big chunks of time away due to the nature of their jobs. But even when dads don't live under the same roof full-time with their families, they can still have a beautiful and unbreakable bond! We salute three fantastic dads who are proving that distance is no barrier...



"OUR NAVY DAD WAS DEPLOYED OVERSEAS"

BROOKE BARNETT's husband, Michael, dad to Cruz, Chase and Cooper, had to leave to work in Dubai, in the United Arab Emirates, when his youngest son was just three weeks old.

It means the world to me to have my husband, Michael, home this Father's Day. He's just returned from eight-and-a-half months working overseas as a ground movements clerk for the Royal Australian Navy's 'Operation SLIPPER'. He's actually an able seaman in the navy, but this deployment was part of Australia's joint military operations overseas. Michael was based in Dubai and was responsible for coordinating the flight movements of personnel in and out of the Operation SLIPPER headquarters in Dubai.

When Michael left Sydney, our youngest son, Cruz, was only three weeks old. He of course didn't know what was going on, but it was very difficult for Michael to go. Of all the kids, the deployment hit our eldest boy, Cooper, the hardest. Some days he was hysterical and didn't want to go to preschool. He'd get very emotional but refuse to discuss it with me,

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saying he'd prefer to talk to Daddy. He'd often break down in tears on Skype and it was tough for Michael to see him so upset while being so far away.

Our middle son, Chase, acted a bit tougher, but I think that was just his coping mechanism. Sometimes if he'd been a bit naughty, Michael would post an online video telling him to behave.

Although the boys missed him, they were incredibly proud of their dad. Michael sent photos home for ANZAC Day and we surprised Cooper by including them in a slide show at his preschool. He was absolutely thrilled and just bursting with pride.

With 180 days left on Michael's deployment, I made a calendar for the boys to mark off. Every morning Cooper would come running down the stairs and cross out the date.

To be honest, the eight-and-a-half months were very tough. Sometimes the simplest things were exhausting – just imagine doing the groceries on your own with three children under the age of five! Of course it was hard on Michael too. He missed out on so much at home, like Cooper's first day at preschool and Cruz learning to crawl.

When Michael arrived home, he was worried that his baby boy wouldn't feel comfortable around him, but somehow he and Cruz just clicked. It was beautiful to see Cruz's tiny hand reach out to feel his father's face. It was as though Michael had always been with him and in a sense he had.

The different time zones often clashed with Cooper and Chase's bedtime, but Cruz was always up with me when I Skyped with Michael. I guess you could say Cruz got to know his dad online.

It's so special to have the family back as a single unit for Father's Day. I want the boys to really celebrate Michael and thank him for the sacrifices he's made for his family and for our country. >

We
DADS



"MY HUSBAND IS A FLY-IN, FLY-OUT FATHER"

JODIE BOULENAZ's husband, Daniel, works three weeks each month in Western Australia, but still has a strong bond with daughters Genevieve, Sofia and bub Heidi, who live back home in Queensland.

Last Father's Day I was 38 weeks pregnant with my youngest daughter, Heidi. My husband, Daniel, had just started working

as a fly-in, fly-out excavator operator in the Pilbara region of Western Australia with a roster that was four weeks on and one week off, while meanwhile I was home on the Gold Coast with our two toddlers, Genevieve and Sofia.

Fortunately, Daniel's employer was very understanding and gave him a few weeks off so he could be with me for Heidi's birth. We ended up having a quiet Father's Day together and then four days later, Heidi was born. Afterwards Daniel said he was more exhausted than me because he had been running around doing everything!

When Daniel first started fly-in, fly-out work, he made videos of himself singing, reading and telling the girls he loved them. Before he left, we told the girls that Daddy had to fly away for work. Then every time they'd see a plane they'd point and say, "Daddy's up there". I tried to explain that his plane had landed and now Daddy was working on a digger. Daniel took photos of himself on the excavator and sent them back so the girls could understand his job.

Now he's working on a new contract, still based in Western Australia and still working four weeks on, one week off. The fourth

week is usually the hardest. That's when we start to fall apart as we're missing him.

It's great to have the support of friends and family, but I've also just discovered FIFO Families (www.fifofamilies.com.au) where I can connect with other mums in the same situation. It's really encouraging to feel like you're not alone.

It can be difficult though, especially when the girls don't feel like talking on the phone. I get upset, but Daniel is really understanding. He knows it's just a mix of tiredness and sadness.

While he's away, Daniel saves up all his coins for the girls. Then when he's home they each take out their little purses and he fills them up and off they go on their little daddy-daughter outings. The girls just adore spending time with him.

This Father's Day Daniel will be away, so Genevieve and Sofia will send him a little package of home gifts. The girls will also Skype him to tell him how much they "wuv" him. He'll be home 10 days later and we'll all go out for dinner together to celebrate belatedly what a great dad he is. I don't think this fly-in, fly-out situation would work for us if Daniel wasn't such a wonderful father.



"WE'RE SEPARATED, BUT IT WORKS"

SARAH KELLY's ex-partner Milein Schulze keeps up his dotting dad duties by sharing custody of son Phoenix and being an involved and important part of his life.

I separated from my partner, Milein, when our son, Phoenix, was four. During the break-up, our main consideration was how it was going to affect our little boy. We wanted

it to be a smooth transition, so we agreed to live near each other and share custody. After all, Milein and I were still really great friends. There were no courts or paperwork involved, we just decided to each have Phoenix alternate weeks. Our son didn't ask a lot of questions. Actually, I think he benefitted from the split because his mum and dad were getting along better than ever.

The only time Phoenix seemed a bit perplexed was when he lost a tooth at my house and wanted to go and show his dad in the middle of the night. That was more about excitement than anything else. He wanted to be able to alert Daddy about the Tooth Fairy's imminent arrival!

In terms of Phoenix having two homes, Milein really took the initiative to ensure our individual households shared common ground. Thanks to him, bedtime is the same at both houses and we have identical rules and routines. Milein is extremely responsible.

He's a fun father, too. Milein is in a band and he's taught Phoenix to play the drums. In fact, our son had several drum kits before he could even walk! Apart from jamming, they love building Lego, watching movies and going to the park together.

Phoenix idolises his dad. Last Father's Day he made some special artwork from a lengthy piece of paper with a hand attached at either end. When Milein opened it up, inside Phoenix had written 'I love you this much'. And the feeling is mutual. Milein would do anything for Phoenix. I can't fault his parenting. I'm studying and working two jobs, so sometimes Milein is required to mind Phoenix at short notice if I've got an extra night shift. He always steps up.

Our separation seems to have had little psychological effect on Phoenix. He's such a good boy. He's never thrown a tantrum and he's really advanced academically. We joke we've got a young Einstein on our hands.

Together Milein and I are raising an amazing, beautiful and smart kid. We're very lucky. I think the way we've handled our separation, without any negativity, is a good lesson for Phoenix. He's learnt that getting along with people makes life much easier.

This Father's Day he'll head out with his dad and Poppy. He's already busy looking for a suitable gift for Milein. If it's anything like last year, Phoenix will find a Father's Day mug and insist on his dad using it all week! ★