

Joel Henriques

MADE BY JOEL  
PORTLAND, OR

**A PAINTER AND MUSICIAN**, Joel Henriques was waiting tables and bartending at Portland restaurants to supplement his and his wife's income. When their twins (a boy and girl) were born, he quit his restaurant duties and found he had less time to pursue his musical and artistic hobbies once he transitioned into full-time dad mode. Yet he became increasingly fascinated with watching his kids play. Despite the fancy wooden teething rings and toys that he and his wife had purchased, the babies were surprisingly drawn to their drool bibs. Their love of the texture and material in these simple objects inspired Joel to start making his own toys for them. These toys, including modern stuffed animals and a wooden elephant puzzle, sparked the interest of his art buyers and family members, so he began a blog, *Made by Joel*, to keep track of his creations. *Made by Joel* includes craft projects that parents, educators, and children can make, encouraging creativity and play and inspiring families to spend more quality time together. Joel has since collaborated with Disney, published a book based on his blog, and entered into a toy licensing partnership.

**Who reads your blog, and why do you think they enjoy it?**

I have a lot of parents, caregivers, teachers, and libraries that want to find something fun to do with their kids or the kids they teach. My readers are worldwide, from parents in the United States to preschool teachers in France. People love that the projects are modern and kid-friendly yet very easy for an adult without any craft skills to do with the children.

Another type of reader I didn't expect, but am thrilled to have, includes charity organizations, which ask if they can use my stuffed toy patterns to make toys and donate to children in need. Also, I always grant permission to use our projects as a learning aid. I want to make it easy for people or schools to find simple ways to enrich their children's art education. I'm able to provide

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a lot of free resources—making it easier for people to find creative projects, thereby filling the need for art that isn't supported in all schools. I have such a loyal following because of this, and I think people see that I'm not in it just for the money, but that I truly love helping kids foster their creativity.

**What types of projects do you feature?**

A lot of the projects I feature are based on things I think my kids will like or things that they thought of and I expanded on. For example, one day they were in the yard playing with flowers, and my son stacked a bunch of azaleas together in such a way that it looked like a flamenco dress. So we put it on a stand and turned it into a doll. I turned that into a project on my blog, which readers loved because they could easily duplicate it with materials they had at home or in their backyard. I always think about how I can make it easy for others to create the projects, too. Once I realized that I could upload higher-resolution pieces, like PDF templates, that opened up a whole other world of sharing, including coloring sheets and play sets. In addition to the projects, I also feature kids' music, other artists, the charities that are using our kits to help others, and moments from our lives with our kids. In the end, all the content is centered on the art and giving kids projects to play with.

**What types of projects or opportunities have come from your blog?**

My blog got its first big boost in traffic after BloesemKids posted about me. She has this "Mommy Stories" column, and I was the first daddy story featured in it. After that, I started getting more traffic and was approached by companies to work on projects together. I had said in an interview that someday I'd like to make my own book about crafts with simple, modern designs, and a couple of weeks later, I got approached by Shambala Books (distributed by Random House) to see if I'd want to publish my book with them. I wrote the book *Made to Play!* over the course of six months, and it was released in 2011. I now produce my elephant puzzle and other wooden toys with a company in London that approached me with the idea of licensing my toys under the Made by Joel brand. Finally, I've created a bunch of craft projects for various magazines in Europe, for Cheerios, and for Disney's *FamilyFun*

magazine and have started a company to produce some of my own toys. I also got to fly to New York to be a guest on *The Martha Stewart Show*, which was an amazing experience.

**Do you use any other social media tools to interact with your readers?**

Yes, I have a lot of community interaction and feedback on my Facebook fan page. I think of the Web site as the "glossy magazine" and Facebook as a more personal part of the site. There's quite an active community there. I ask questions like "What do your kids like to play with in the backyard?" and I learn a lot from readers' suggestions. Not only are they giving me great ideas for other activities with kids, but they are also giving me feedback on the projects I provide and how they've changed them to suit their needs. It's like having a virtual playdate!

**Do you have any concerns about featuring your kids on your blog?**

Everyone in my family is really into art and really excited about the growth of the blog. My wife and I never had any concerns about featuring our kids, but we'll have certain limitations, like we don't use their names very often, or we don't put them in some of the YouTube videos I'll make. We do what feels comfortable.

**How has your role as a daddy blogger helped encourage other dads to play a more active part in their children's learning and play?**

I get a lot of e-mails from other dads who are happy to have found my site and enjoy the types of projects I provide. But most of my e-mails are from moms, who tell me about the projects their husbands did and how they are using my ideas to play with their kids more. Even if the projects aren't things they've done before, they are easy to do. Also, the projects I devise are a bit on the masculine side for the crafting world, in that they might require parents to break out their tool kit or use wire or wood, which are materials that dads usually like. It's fun to hear how everyone in the family bonds over the creation of these toys and projects. It's really fun to have a job that involves my kids and my family. I feel really lucky to be doing this as my job.

