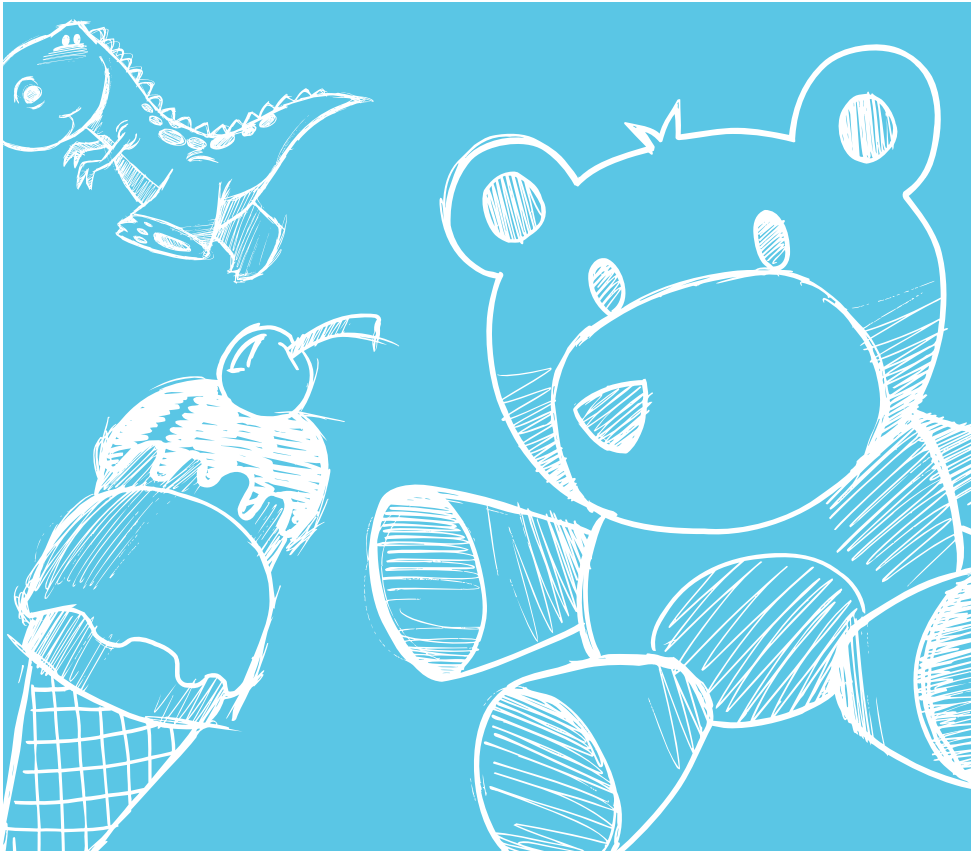


# DAD'S DOMAIN

**NURTURING  
AND SUPPORTING  
FATHERHOOD**



— City of —  
**STONNINGTON**



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# DAD'S DOMAIN

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**THE CITY OF STONNINGTON'S  
GUYS TALK PROGRAM  
PRESENTS ADVICE FROM  
EXPERIENCED RELATIONSHIP  
COUNSELLOR, GUY VICARS.**



## BY GUY VICARS

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# BECOMING A NEW DAD



## CONCEPTION

This book is very different to other parenting books. If you are reading this then no doubt you already have at least one book on parenting and babies from well-meaning family and friends. This book isn't one of those.

This book is about you growing into a new stage of your life: fatherhood.

It's designed to help you develop into the best dad you can be for yourself. Obviously this will benefit your child and your family – no matter what configuration that family takes. But it is about you. It is about how you grow and develop into a parent, specifically a dad.

It is simply laid out with ideas designed to get you thinking, questions to answer and actions to undertake. The questions are just for you. So of course there is no 'right' answer. Maybe not even a quick answer. And maybe multiple answers over time. In other words just start reading and start answering. If your answers change, or you add to them, then that's part of how it works.

You have your hands full: that's a given! So this book can be picked up and thought about at any time or any place. Like when you are bottle-feeding at 3.00am staring at the wall, or you are in the toilet, which has become the only place of quiet refuge. Or when you are at your wits-end and don't know how to handle your endlessly crying baby...or your own desperation/exhaustion/confusion/love...(fill in the blank!)

The point is the book is here to support you. Use it as a tool. It will only become really useful when you apply the questions to your own circumstances and then answer them. Re-read the questions, re-read your answers, and you will continually refine things.

You know your baby is developing and changing. It is obvious. What is less obvious is that you are growing and developing at the same time. Your challenge is increased as you have to keep the rest of your life going as well; attending to your relationship, your partner physically changing through pregnancy, also becoming a parent; paying bills; working; limited sleep etc. So it's a huge challenge but men don't often think about themselves in this way.

This booklet is about supporting this change in you, as you also grow and develop. The way to do this is to answer the questions. Now, I don't know how to motivate you. But what I do know is that the men I meet, no matter what their personal circumstances, regardless of their background, financial situation, or relationship status, all want to be good dads. All of them, without exception, have the desire to do the best they can.

It is my hope that this desire will be the motivation to really think through some of these ideas and, most importantly, that you will take the time for yourself and make the best of these questions to benefit you.

# BECOMING A NEW DAD

## GROWING

This book has been born of the experience of fathers in such settings as groups, workshops, talks and therapy sessions. It's written for you not as advice but to assist you to develop and extend your thinking, ideas, understandings and behaviours as a dad.

As you know by now, parenthood thrusts you into a new role that most of us aren't well prepared for! I know I wasn't. My first son taught me how to be a parent. As he squirmed and shrieked and smiled and laughed his way into the world, so too I fumbled through the steps of parenthood, learning on the job. As I listened to him and began to understand his various signals, then I learnt what was required of me as his father. It's how every parent learns.

In addition, fathering is also about the relationship between you and your child's mother and the relationship the three (and more of you) have as a family.

Of course there are numerous family arrangements, from the traditional nuclear family with mum, dad and child; to gay couples with children; to single parents; separated parents or widowed parents; and to step and blended families. Sometimes it's what we planned for ourselves and sometimes it's not. Irrespective of these, each family has its own challenges.

First of all, we will have a look at things as they are right now. Then we will look to the past and your own experiences of being raised, how this informs you as a parent and do a review. After this we will face forwards and think about how you want things to look from here.

Remember, these questions and answers are for you only. It is important to be as thorough as possible in your answers so you get the greatest self-understanding. Share what you want with your partner but its also OK if you want some things to remain private.

My recommendation is to get a simple exercise book that's just for this purpose. It's very helpful to keep in one place and be able to review what you've written over time.

**Exercise:** So lets start with a personal audit: where are you at right now?

- What feelings are you aware of as you begin i.e. right now?
- What do you think and feel about the process of fatherhood?
- What state and stage is your relationship in right now?
- What are some of your fears? (As you write these out, don't be surprised if you find some you didn't realise were there.)
- How is or isn't work going for you?
- How are you managing all this change?
- What is your immediate experience of having a child? Whatever you say here is fine.
- ...anything else that comes to mind about your life right now?
- Any summary or conclusions or questions you may have once these questions are answered.

Like everyone else, this will include a broad spectrum of your life and a range of feelings.



# BECOMING A NEW DAD

## DEFINE A DAD

Chances are your dad never thought about this question when you were born. It's likely he inherited his ideas about being a dad from his dad, his mum and his family. Truth is that is how we all learn most things. It's a powerful process known as "socialisation". In other words, we learn about how to be in the world, the many attitudes, values and behaviours we take into adult life, from this process.

All of us are born into a family that has existing ideas and notions; about family itself; about work; about money; about relationships about... everything. We are absorbed in this environment and we learn these things from our very earliest days, certainly well before we can speak.

A simple example is table manners. How you hold your knife and fork; how you leave your cutlery on your plate at the end of a meal; what you use to wipe your mouth (a discrete tap with a napkin; a sleeve; the cushion from your chair?). All of these and hundreds of other behaviours are learned purely by being absorbed in your family. This family is known as your 'family of origin'.

We need to think about the parent we are becoming for two main reasons:

1. No matter how good our parents are or were, the truth is you are a unique individual, parenting in a different time from your parents, in a different relationship than they had, with unique conditions and ingredients. So you will be different as a parent.
2. But we also need to think about the parent we are becoming because by becoming conscious what we are doing as well as why we are doing it, we are then in a position to make meaningful change if required, or to press on if not.

In living this way, you model flexibility to your children. This is a great attribute to pass on to your children and to bring into your relationship and family environment.

### Exercise:

- What attributes does a dad have?
- What behaviours should he exhibit in a variety of circumstances?
- How does a good dad exhibit his emotions?
- How does a good dad think?
- Describe why these are important to you.
- What attributes do you admire in other dads you see or know?





# SETTLING INTO FAMILY LIFE

## YOUR MUM AND DAD



The concept of 'family of origin' is so important and influential that it is important to give it greater consideration. If we accept that through the process of socialisation (the nurture part of the nature vs nurture debate) we learn so much about how we are in the world, then it makes sense to look at the people who were most influential in that learning process.

It always surprises me when I ask clients about their families that there are often big gaps in their knowledge. Following are some questions worth asking yourself and your respective family members. They will help you get clearer on the 'why' of some of your family's ideas. As you will see in the section *Culture Clash*, it is also helpful for your partner to do this as well and then share what each of you discover and learn.

As you parent it is inevitable that ideas about your own parents will arise from time to time. How they fulfilled the role will make new sense. Your thoughts about each parent may need revising over time. Again, this is typical and normal for all of us. It is important that you do this thinking so you can develop your own capacity as a father.

### Exercise:

- What messages about fatherhood did you get...
  - From your dad?
  - From your mum?
  - Which of these are helpful for you?
  - Which aren't?
  - How did your dad get these messages? What happened in his early life that made it this way?
- What messages about motherhood did you get...
  - From your dad?
  - From your mum?
  - Which of these are helpful for you?
  - Which aren't?
  - How did your mum get these messages? What happened in her early life that made it this way?



- What messages did your family of origin give you about couples?
  - About marriage?
  - About sex in a long-term relationship?
  - About staying together?
  - About bringing up children?
- What messages did your family of origin have about expression of... fill in any blanks that come to mind, but here are a few to start you off:
  - Negotiating
  - Fair fighting
  - Health and well-being
  - Chores
  - Work
  - Sport
  - Growing up
  - ...?
- Having thought about and answered these questions, very specifically, what message, for what situations, do you want your children to get from you? This is an important list to create. One, so you can review and revise it; and two, so you can keep yourself on track.

**It doesn't matter who my father was.  
It matters who I remember he was.**

– Anne Sexton

The point is being able to separate from your family of origin psychologically and emotionally and learn to become a unique parent, not simply a copy of what has been before. In family therapy terms, this process is known as 'differentiation' and is a significant aspect of personal growth and well-being. It's tough work but it's how we develop genuine autonomy and maturity. And that means living a life you are satisfied with.

It's not about damning your family and cutting all ties. Nor is it about simply accepting everything your family says, doing as they did. It's about learning to be yourself and being comfortable with that. It means being able to hear the advice of others, see what's relevant, cherry-pick what suites you and develop your own ways, without feeling guilt, resentment or having the sense of being obligated. These feelings can be very destructive in the long term.

Times change. Ideas change. You're different. Your relationship is different. Your child is different. Give yourself the time to think these things through, respond to the questions and become the parent you aspire to be.







# SETTLING INTO FAMILY LIFE

## FAMILY RULES

Families shape children in ways unseen. Over a period of years, and especially the first few, messages are given and repeated time and time again to children. This is how the process of socialisation works. Frequently sensible and straight forward, sometimes confusing, sometimes contradictory, mostly good, a child hears these messages over and over. They get messages from watching how their parents live daily life. Thousands of times and in a multitude of ways, messages are repeated to a child.

At a societal level, there are rules that allow the road system to function adequately. When you see a red light whilst driving, you know to stop. You don't think about each one and ask yourself "Here is another red light. Does this one mean stop as well?" It would be impossible to drive at all if we didn't take this information in so that it became second nature.

Families have similar rules that are designed to make it work. Some family rules work better than others.

### Exercise 1.

- Create a list of rules you live out or which influence you that come from your family of origin.
- What rules is your spouse aware of (that you aren't) that come from your family of origin?
- What are your partner's family rules? Are there some you know about that s/he doesn't?

### Exercise 2.

- Create time to discuss your different family rules
- Values
- Expectations
- Place of children in the family
- School preferences
- Manners
- Gender differences
- ...in short, everything

### Exercise 3.

- Which of these rules/values/behaviours do you like?
- What would you like to leave behind?
- What might you do to replace these?
- What others would you like to include?

### Exercise 4.

- How will you and your partner decide who's rule gets used or when a new rule is developed and used?



In terms of negotiating, this is where the rubber hits the road. Do you play fair to get your point heard? Do you validate each other's point of view? This is where the fun starts!

For example, have you discussed whether your baby can use a dummy/pacifier? This seems like such a deceptively simple question! Most couples don't think of this discussion when dating yet it, and similar little, but often loaded situations and meaningful questions, can become serious relationship destabilisers.

Making time to discuss these is vital to future harmony and understanding. Listen fully and without judgment, realising that you both come from different families that have their own set of 'traffic regulations'. We don't judge people who drive on the left-side of the car when in U.S. or Europe. The same applies here. Understand each other's road rules and see where you can work together, realising that it's not about the right or wrong side of the road but rather workable, shared rules that function well.









# SETTLING INTO FAMILY LIFE

## FAMILY RULES AND EMOTIONS

Rules aren't written down in families. Yet, as we've just been discussing, all families have them. All family members know what they are, how flexible some are and some aren't, how they are policed ("just you wait until your father gets home young man"), who administers which rules, which parent is more hard-line on which rule and so on.

Some rules are spoken and some unspoken. They are learned and understood over time through the messages our parents give us mostly by the way they behave.

Rules apply to every aspect of family life but one of the most confusing is around emotions. In our families we learn which emotions we can express and in what ways it's acceptable to express those emotions. The guidelines are clear.

Lets use a very common example. Most people I work with have difficulty expressing anger in a way that I would call 'clean'. In other words, there is a legitimate complaint which gets expressed in a way that the message is clearly stated and understood in a constructive way. From this point, a conversation can take place and the situation is sorted out.

When its 'clean', it's done in a timely way (i.e. they don't fester on it), in an assertive way (i.e. the expression doesn't seek to damage the other person), they are able to also hear a response (i.e. without being defensive), then between them they work out a resolution that fits the situation (i.e. it doesn't seek to punish the other person endlessly or avoid the problem).

**Anybody can become angry – that is easy, but to be angry with the right person and to the right degree and at the right time and for the right purpose, and in the right way – that is not within everybody's power and is not easy**

– Aristotle

Let's consider anger. You might even be surprised to know that anger is a healthy emotion – when expressed correctly – that builds relationships.

Many girls are taught that anger is somehow bad. This may be according to their family of origin as well as in the wider social world of school or peers where it's not considered to be what 'nice girls do'. If this is the case, what are those people supposed to do when they are legitimately angry?

One way such women have learnt to deal with this is to cry rather than express anger directly. Instead of using the power that anger has to bring about positive change, such women may collapse into their partners arms as if they are helpless and weak, for example. (No doubt this makes them seethe even more below the surface!) This family of origin rule is not a helpful one. It ensures those women feel powerless, not powerful. The really important thing to realise here is that the anger doesn't go away, it gets bigger and comes out in other ways.



For boys it's almost the other way around but equally as limiting and unhelpful. Many men learn from their families of origin (be mummy's strong man; daddy's little soldier – however the line went), to society at large (real men don't cry), not to express more vulnerable emotions.

What do these people do when they experience genuine sadness, or loss or grief? They get angry! That's the only emotion they are allowed to show. Most men and boys frequently get taught that showing emotion is weak. This is a tragedy. How can a man be flexible, strong, fun, supportive, loving, and spontaneous if he has learnt that feeling things in response to life is weak?

#### **Exercise:**

- What are your partner's family rules around expressing emotions?
- What are yours?
- What do you typically do with your hurts?
- Think of a time when you hid your pain or fear or hurt from your partner, either by being angry or withdrawing in some way. Exercise the power of vulnerability by telling your partner about this. Don't try and fix it. Don't try and hide from the emotions, just ask them to listen then express what is there.



If you can have the courage to do this you will develop mighty relationships not only with your spouse but your children as well.

We need family rules. Families, like roads, wouldn't work without them. However the rules that feel familiar (even if you think some could do with change) may not be at all familiar to your spouse or partner. Rules that may feel normal to you, could feel very abnormal to someone else.

That you have differing rules does not matter. Recognising and validating them, managing these differences and establishing your own clear rules in the family you are creating is what counts.

And why else is this important? Just as you learned how to behave, through observation and mimicry, so your children, from the very earliest time, are learning from you.







## CULTURE CLASH

When new couples get together, they often love each other because they are different. Lets imagine a couple: "She is so fantastic! I love how she is unrestrained and is so free. My mother was always so uptight and I hated it. I felt hemmed in. She lets me express who I am and encourages me to be myself."

After a while this couple goes on to have children. Problems begin to emerge in the family as kids are eating at all hours; bed times happen where ever a kid falls asleep; there are no clean clothes for school; domestic chores are left undone. For him the family is chaotic, he is stressed and at his wits end. In truth everyone is suffering.

What he loved about her being 'free' has a down side that he just can't reconcile. But here's the kicker: predictably enough, he starts to become controlling, as a way of compensating. Her response? She rails against his heavy-handed rules and acts *more* free – not less. The knot tightens as he tries harder to set more rules and he becomes more rigid. She demands her freedom and complains at his controlling style...etc.

This dynamic is very predictable and very common. It is very understandable to see how this kind of thing can happen between couples. Lots of couples come unstuck at these points.

Having children is stressful. Differences in values, communication styles and family rules will emerge at this time and it becomes clearer why so many marriages and partnerships struggle.

### Exercise 1.

- What struggles have you come up against so far?
- How have you dealt with these?
  - Have they been resolved or do they turn into yelling matches?
  - Does someone receive the silent treatment?
  - Does someone just end up giving in to keep the peace?
  - Do issues just get cold and mouldy, being left on the counter, with no one knowing what to do?
- How do you tend to negotiate and resolve?
- How does your partner tend to negotiate and resolve?

### Exercise 2.

- What things are negotiable about parenting?
- What things aren't?
- What have you done so far to deal with the things that aren't?







## COMMUNICATION

I know, I know, you've heard this before...but have you? Have you really taken this in and done something about it? We all know communication is important. My sense is people tick the box once, then immediately forget about it. But communication skills constantly need honing. Communication is to relationships as fuel is to an engine.

My aim is for us dads to revisit how we communicate.

There is plenty written on communication so I won't be providing a whole lot of skills here. But I teach it everywhere from counsellors in training, to doctors in general practice, to 5 year olds. I spend quite some time with all my couple-clients setting up a framework that is practical, useful, helpful and easy.

One of the things that emerges time after time working with couples and in the dads groups is this: men have a strong tendency to want to fix stuff. When their partners tell them something, men have already strapped on the safety goggles and are about to fire up the arc welder before their partners have even finished speaking.

As one wife said to one husband, 'just wait a little longer'.

Fixing things is a great strength men can bring to families and relationships. Taking appropriate constructive action is one of those things that we can all afford to develop. But before we can be effective [and that's the key word] we need to take just a little longer to listen better.

So, if you are compelled to 'do' something, then think of listening as the doing bit. Sit on your hands if you have to. If you listen well you will find that, other than listening itself, there may not be that much to do.

Someone once said, "we have one mouth and two ears, we need to use them in that ratio". If you make this single contribution to your family alone, it is likely to be a happy environment.

Remember, as you listen this way, you are modelling something wonderful to your child (even to very little babies) which is that you...

- Value the other person;
- Have the capacity to listen;
- Care about the other person's opinion;
- Are mature enough to not be impulsive and immediately reactive

**These skills are beyond value when it comes to raising healthy, robust and fulfilled children...not to mention a strong relationship.**

# LAUNCHING INTO THE FUTURE

## YOUR CHILD

### **Who is this unique human being asking you to be their parent?**

Naturally, when we think of our children, we think of the future. We want to support them to deal with the unknown circumstances they will live in and the challenges they will face. Yet, mostly, we use old, outmoded, self-referential ideas when dealing with this most important task. Typically, as parents, we apply the experiences, learning's and rules from our own childhood to our children. So far in this book you have done a lot of work on exactly these things.

Some of the old thinking says children should be seen and not heard. These days that looks like busy parents answering emails and tapping away on phones whilst their kids watch TV or play electronic games. In some respects, it's an old idea with a modern twist. Whether it was old school or the modern version, there is a disconnect.

To what extent can you focus on your child? How do you give them genuine attention? When do you attune to him or her and listen to the unique needs and personality expressions of your child?

On the flip side, are you able to listen to your child and learn what they have to teach you? Rather than tell them how it's going to be, can you look to what your child communicates as a lead [expressions of personality; preferences about food; where they are in developmental stages; kinds of play; friends; musical interests; specific sleep requirements; natural energy levels; changes, etc.]?

Many parents get angry when their children make what they consider to be too much noise. Who has to learn here, parent or child? It is at this point where you, as a parent, elect to learn a deeper patience than you thought possible? Is this the place where you can dig deeper and extend yourself into becoming a bigger, better you? Can you develop the capacity to be more present with your child rather than answering emails on your smart phone? It's quite challenging.

Can you be open to their change; that they have moved into louder play; that they are learning something; or that they are practicing what they have recently learned; that they are relating in a new way to you; that they may be excited about something that's going on or has happened that you aren't aware of; are they attempting to hold your attention; or that something they think is unfair occurred? When kids behaviour changes, almost invariably there is a reason behind it. Rather than react, find out about it with them.

The possibilities are endless and only limited by your capacity to really be with your child where they are at rather than you forcing them to be where you are at. In short, did you find out why they got loud before you admonished them or restricted them?





### Exercise:

- What do you find really testing when you are with your child?
- What annoys you? At what times? In what situations is your temper short? Create a list.
- How do you manage these demands and frustrations? (Don't worry, *all* parents experience this!)
- Instead, what do you notice when you follow their lead whilst at play instead of your own preconceived ideas?
- What do you struggle with most having had a child? Perhaps its a loss of intimacy or time with your spouse. Perhaps it's quiet or the ability to just do what you want when you want. Perhaps it's being reminded of your own childhood. Extend your list.
- In what ways have you been dealing with this?
- Have you spoken with your mates about how they handle it?
- Have you spoke with your partner about your list?
- Have you spoken with your partner about her list? How is she going being a parent? What does she struggle with? Have you spoken with her about what support she needs in this regard? (I am not talking about practical things but rather more emotional things.)
- What would you like to do as a way of changing that makes you feel better about yourself as a dad?



### It is a wise father who knows his own child

– William Shakespeare

If you answer these questions, you will connect and bond with your child, and they with you, in ways you cannot imagine. Most importantly, it will be preventative in the future. As you establish powerful, respectful bonds now, when your child grows and has to deal with some knocks in life, this will form the basis of their capacity for resilience, for change, for adaptability, for safety, for making their own solid decisions, for relating...for all the things they will need to move through their own life challenges.







# LAUNCHING INTO THE FUTURE

## FOCUS AND ASPIRATIONS

Who is this new father being born? What will your focus be?

### **The future you create is the legacy you leave.**

This is where you get to start afresh. See yourself as a blank sheet that you can put pen to and create what you want. Of course we are who we are and there will be much that you don't want to alter – and there is no need to because you like these aspects and they work well. This is about you thinking and reflecting so that you make good choices as you grow into parenthood, as you grow into the role of being the unique father that only your child or children will have.

If you are emotionally remote, then this will be their father. If you want to be emotionally available, like your child is, then learn from them. Love their spontaneity and ensure there is time that is just about the moment of laughter on a swing. Of course adult life cannot all be like this. But neither should it be all seriousness, warnings, discipline, police-work and paying bills.

You must first see the target in order to know where to shoot the arrow. So...

- Describe in as many words as you need, **the father you aspire to be.**
- Next, plan for some quiet space, even for just a few minutes, and create an image of your aspiration. See yourself in your mind's eye being the father you want to be.

- In silence, understand how you would *feel* as this father. What would you be doing as this father to get and maintain these feelings? In what ways would you think and act differently and with which people?
- Keep focussing on this and clarifying the image you have.
- Revisit this image, this target, often. Become really familiar with this goal. It's about no-one but you...but it will become your lasting contribution.
- If you don't consciously do this, it will happen anyway but you won't have control over it as it will be reactively created by your environment and not proactively created by you. Big difference.
- Next, undertake the thoughts and actions that fulfil the changes you are seeking.
- For this to work, remember the following:
  1. Small changes are usually best
  2. Acknowledge when you achieve changes, even if you 'relapse'!
  3. Recognise that change takes effort and conscious thought



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# LAUNCHING INTO THE FUTURE

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## BEGINNING



This is the conclusion of this book but just the beginning for you.

This has been designed to help you develop the man you are into the father you want to be. It has been designed to give a voice to men who are parents; dads like you and me.

There are a multitude of books and resources available to help you deal with nuts and bolts issues around parenting. However it is hoped that some of these ideas and questions enable you to stamp your own imprint, to bring your own unique 'you-ness' to the lifelong process of being a dad, knowing how impactful this role is; knowing that how you parent will have a ripple effect.

This paradoxical journey which is both universal and unique at the same time, will be testing and rewarding in ways that are just not possible to imagine. And it's different for all of us. So when you see another dad, pushing a pram, looking harried and tired, give him a knowing nod, or a smile, or a hand on the escalator...whether he says he wants it or not.





## CONTACTS

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**MATERNAL AND CHILD HEALTH LINE** 13 22 29

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**SIDS AND KIDS** (03) 9819 4595

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