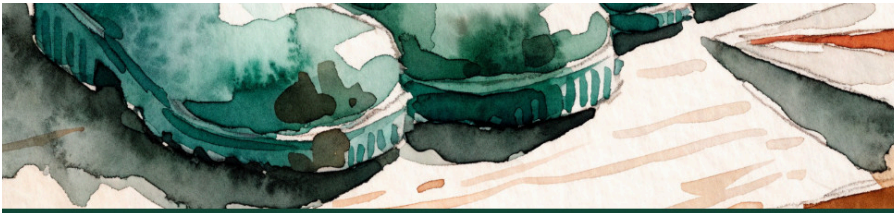
# Dad On

*Small ways to be*
*a big presence*





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# A letter, before anything else

Nobody trained you for this.

There was no induction. One day there was a baby, or a toddler, or a ready-made stepchild looking at you over the breakfast table, and you were a father, and everyone assumed you knew what that meant. You'd had one main source to learn from — your own dad — and whatever he was, brilliant or absent or somewhere complicated in between, his playbook was written for a different job in a different decade. Some pages of it you'll want to keep. Some you've already decided, quietly, to burn. Either way, it doesn't cover what's in front of you.

So this book is a playbook that does. Not a lecture — you'd have put it down already, and fair enough. Not a pep talk either. You will find no jokes here about dads who can't work a washing machine, because those jokes are about somebody else, and no rounds of applause for turning up to your own life, because you're not after applause. You're after the thing behind the applause: kids who are glad it's you.

Here is the whole book in one paragraph, so you can decide now whether it's for you. Being a good dad is not a personality type. It is not a schedule only other men can afford, and it is not a feeling you wait to be sure of. It is a small set of moves — learnable, repeatable, most of them under two minutes — done often enough that your kids come to rely on them. Ten of those moves are in this book. Any man can run them. Including the man whose work eats his weekdays. Including the man doing this on his own. Including the man whose kids live at another address, who loves them no less from there.

You will not be asked to become someone softer, louder, or more like anyone else. You'll be asked to do small things deliberately instead of leaving them to chance. That's the entire method.

Your kids are not keeping score the way you fear. They are noticing something much simpler: whether you show up, in small ways, again and again. That is a game you can win starting tonight.

## How to read this

Short chapters. One move each. Read them in order if you can — the later ones lean on the earlier ones — but skimming is tolerated; this book assumes you're reading it in fragments of a full life.

What it does expect is practice. Each chapter ends with **the move**: one concrete thing to actually do. Reading about the move does nothing. Running it, imperfectly, this week, does everything. If you only have the patience for one chapter, make it chapter 1 — the rest of the book stands on it.

# 1 · Show up small

Ask a man what his kids need from him and he'll usually answer in totals. Total hours. Total income. Total attendance at matches, plays, parents' evenings. He audits himself the way work audits him, adds up the columns, and depending on the week concludes he's doing fine or falling short.

Here's the problem with the audit: your kids can't see it. There is no version of your child that experiences your love as a total.

What a child experiences is samples. Small slices of you, maybe ninety seconds long, scattered through a day. The two minutes in the car when you asked about the friend drama and actually listened to the answer. The terrible joke at the school gate. Whether you looked up when she walked into the room, or kept looking at the phone. Whether "not now" had a "but later" attached, and whether later ever came.

That's the data they've got. That's all the data they've got. And from those samples, without ever deciding to, they assemble the answer to the only question that really matters to a child: *is he glad I'm here?*

## The unsettling maths

This cuts two ways, so let's take the uncomfortable one first.

You can be doing enormous things for your children — working brutal hours to keep the house, holding a business together, commuting through the dark in both directions — and generate almost no samples at all. Not because the work doesn't count. It counts; it's real love in a form a mortgage lender accepts. But a six-year-old can't read a payslip. A fourteen-year-old doesn't experience your pension contributions. If the visible slices of you are mostly tiredness, distraction and the back of a laptop, that — through no fault of your intentions — is the sample set. The big invisible things you do are the frame of the house. Samples are the rooms your kids actually live in.

Now the other way, because it's the whole reason this book exists: the maths runs in your favour the moment you know it's being done. Ninety good seconds is a fully valid sample. It counts the same whether it happened inside a perfect Saturday or a chaotic Tuesday. Which means the dad with almost no spare time and the dad with acres of it are far closer than either of them thinks. Presence, as a child measures it, was never a volume question. It's a frequency question. Small, often, reliably — that's the signal. And small-often-reliably is achievable by basically every father alive, in almost any circumstances, starting today.

## What a sample is made of

Not much, which is the point. A real sample has three parts.

**Your attention lands.** Eyes on them, or genuinely on the conversation — not the half-listen you do while reading the news. Kids are ruthless detectors of the half-listen. Ninety seconds of the real thing beats an hour of the fake.

**It's about them, not their performance.** "How was the maths test?" is monitoring — sometimes necessary, never warm. "Show me that thing you were building" or a daft observation about the dog is a sample. The difference is whether the child leaves the exchange feeling checked on or enjoyed. Kids can tell when they're being *enjoyed*, and it is close to the best feeling childhood offers.

**It costs them nothing.** No lesson folded in, no "while I've got you" about the state of their room. The moment a sample smuggles in an agenda, it stops being one. There are times for lessons. This isn't one; this is deposit-making, and deposits are what make the lessons survivable later.

That's it. A wander to the corner shop with one kid. Doing the voices when you read the same book for the ninth time. A message to your teenager that's a link and nothing else — no question attached, no reply required. Looking up, fully, when they come home, so that the first thing their arrival gets from you is your face changing because it's them.

That last one is worth underlining, because it's the cheapest sample on the list and possibly the strongest. Kids run a quiet experiment every time they enter a room you're in: *what happens to him when I appear?* The answer they collect, hundreds of times a

year, becomes their working theory of what they're worth walking towards. It costs you three seconds to rig that experiment in their favour. Rig it.

## If you don't wake up where they do

A word for the dad whose kids live at another address — because he's reading this chapter with a specific ache, and he deserves a straight answer, not sympathy.

The straight answer is that the samples framework is better news for you than any other framing on offer. If the measure of a father were totals, you'd be beaten before breakfast, and plenty of voices are happy to imply exactly that. But it isn't totals. It's samples, and samples travel. The goodnight call that happens *every* night it's supposed to. The message after the match — you knew there was a match, that's half the sample right there. The daft running joke that lives in a chat thread and never dies. A child who can rely on small, regular slices of a dad across two postcodes is a child with a present father. The one thing samples can't survive is randomness — five calls one week and silence for three. It's the reliability that carries the love. Guard that and you're in the game as fully as any man on this page.

## Why small is a feature, not a compromise

It would be easy to hear all this as settling — the participation-medal version of fatherhood for men who can't manage the real thing. So let's be precise about why it's the opposite.

A child's sense of being loved is built less like a wall and more like a habit of expectation: *when I go to him, something good usually happens*. Expectations are built by repetition, and repetition is only sustainable when the unit is small. The grand gesture — the surprise trip, the big day out — is lovely and does almost nothing to the expectation, because the child correctly files it as an event, not a pattern. Ninety seconds, twice a day, every day, is a pattern within a fortnight. It changes what your child believes about you, which is a different order of thing from a memory of a nice day.

There's a version of this that outlives you, and chapter 10 will make you look at it. For now, just this: nobody describes their father, years on, by his totals. They describe the

samples. You're choosing them now, whether or not you're choosing them deliberately.

So choose them deliberately.

## The move

**Two deliberate 90-second samples a day.** Not "be more present" — that's a mood, and moods lose to tiredness every time. Two specific slots, picked in advance, because what's decided in advance actually happens.

Tonight, choose your two. Anchor each one to something that already occurs daily so it can't drift: the school run, the walk from the car, the first five minutes after you're through the door, the goodnight round, the regular call if you're parenting from another address. Then, in that slot: attention lands, it's about them, it costs them nothing. Ninety seconds. You're allowed to run over.

Two rules. First, phone out of your hand — not face-down near you, elsewhere. Second, no agenda, even a good one. If it goes nowhere — a shrug, a grunt, a toddler more interested in the drain cover — it still counted. You showed up; the sample logged. With teenagers especially, expect twenty flat samples before you see a flicker. The flicker comes.

That's the whole move. It will feel almost insultingly small for about a week. Somewhere in week two, a kid who didn't used to start conversations with you will start one. That's the audit that matters, reporting in.

# 2 · Play is your superpower

There's a decent chance you already do the thing in this chapter. Chasing a shrieking four-year-old around the garden. Being the monster, the horse, the climbing frame. The nonsense voice that makes the baby lose it laughing. Kitchen football with a balled-up pair of socks.

And there's a decent chance that somewhere in your head, a small voice files all of it under *mucking about* — the fun stuff you do while the real parenting happens elsewhere. Enjoyable, sure. But not the serious work. The consolation prize for the parent who isn't across the shoe sizes.

That voice is wrong, and this chapter exists to retire it. The wrestling, the daft voices, the garden football — that's not the break from your children's development. For a lot of it, that *is* the development, and you may already be the one delivering it.

## What's actually happening in the pile-on

Watch a proper bout of rough-and-tumble — real chasing, wrestling, aeroplane-spinning, the stuff that makes onlookers nervous — and you're watching a child run a workout you couldn't design better on purpose.

They're practising **regulation**: winding up towards the edge of too-much and coming back down, over and over. Excitement that nearly tips into tears, then doesn't. That climb-and-recover loop is the raw skill under every calm-down a child will ever manage, and play is where it gets its repetitions — hundreds of them, all voluntary, all fun.

They're practising **signals and limits**. Wrestling with a dad who's clearly stronger and clearly holding back teaches a child, in their muscles rather than in words, how big is too big, what "stop" feels like to say and to hear, how to lose without falling apart and win without gloating. When you pin them and let them fight out, when you take the hit and dramatically collapse, when you stop dead the instant the giggling turns to real

protest — you're running a seminar on boundaries, force and consent, and everyone's laughing all the way through it.

And they're practising **courage in small doses**. Being thrown and caught. Going a bit higher. The safe scare, with the safest adult they know. Children who get to touch the edge of risk in play, with someone holding the rope, get to build their own judgement about it — which is what you actually want them carrying into the skate park and, eventually, the world.

None of this requires you to know any of it. Kids don't need the theory and neither, honestly, do you. It only matters because of what it does to that voice in your head: the mucking about is load-bearing. Do it on purpose, without apology, and don't let it be filed — by you or anyone else — as the lightweight shift.

Two rules keep the rough stuff good, and they're both about power. *Stop means stop, instantly, every time* — that's the whole lesson, and you teach it by obeying it. And *they get to win a fair share* — a child who can never, ever beat you stops playing; a child who sometimes brings you crashing down learns what their own strength is for.

## "I'm not really the playful type"

Some men read the last page and recognise themselves. Others feel a door closing — because they're not the wrestling sort, or their knees aren't, or they stand in the middle of a pretend tea party feeling like a man awaiting instructions in a foreign airport.

So, two reassurances, both practical.

First: play is anything done for its own sake, together. Building a dam in a stream. Cooking with a kid who mostly gets in the way, where the getting-in-the-way is allowed to be the point. A drawing game, a card game, an invented commentary on the birds out the window. If nobody's achieving anything and both of you are into it, it's play, and it's doing the job. The pile-on is one dialect. You only need one dialect — yours.

Second: the boredom is normal and doesn't disqualify you. Adult brains find the fourteenth lap of the same pretend game genuinely hard, and pretending otherwise isn't required. What a child needs isn't an entertainer having the time of his life. It's a partner who's *actually in the game* — taking it seriously on its own terms, following

where it goes, not steering it towards something more efficient. Ten minutes of really being in it beats an afternoon of distracted supervision, and ten minutes is survivable for even the least whimsical man alive.

The trap to watch for isn't boredom. It's takeover. Dads have a strong pull towards upgrading the game — making the tower structurally sound, adding rules, turning fun into coaching. Resist it. In this arena, and almost nowhere else in their life, the child is the boss. That's what makes it magic for them: the one place the smallest person in the house gets to run the show and have a large adult genuinely follow. You'll feel the upgrade urge within the first two minutes — it arrives as a helpful suggestion in your own voice. Notice it, smile at it, and let the wonky tower fall the way the boss intended. Save the coaching; it has its own value and its own time. This isn't it.

## Playing with people who'd die if you called it playing

Play doesn't stop at eleven. It goes underground and changes its name.

With teenagers, it's called banter — the running joke that's been going for three years, the mock-outrage, the meme sent at 11pm with no comment. It's called gaming: sitting down next to them with a controller, being reliably terrible, letting them coach you. It's called the shared project — the doomed old bike you're fixing up together, the thing in the garden, the cooking experiment. It looks nothing like the tea party. It is the same thing wearing a hoodie: time together with no agenda, where the point is the doing and the doing is jointly owned.

And it matters more than it looks, because with a teenager, play is often the last open channel. A fifteen-year-old who won't answer "how are you doing, really?" will talk sideways at you for an hour over a game or a gearbox. Keep one strand of play alive through the teenage years — one game, one joke, one project — and you keep a channel that the big conversations can use later. Chapter 8 is about those. This is the groundwork for it.

If the channel's gone quiet already, reopen it without ceremony. Not "we should spend more time together" — that's a meeting request, and they'll decline it. Just sit down next to the game they're playing and ask what's going on in it. Show up small; you know this move.

## The move

**Ten minutes where they pick the game — and you actually play.**

This week, at least once (daily if you can stand it): ten minutes, their choice, you all-in. The rules are the chapter in miniature:

They pick. Wrestling, floor is lava, the tea party, FIFA, a walk to nowhere — whatever it is, that's the game, and you don't upgrade it.

You play. Phone in another room. In the game, taking it seriously on its own terms, being the horse like you mean it. Losing sometimes, properly.

You don't steer. No sneaking in learning, no improving their technique, no "shall we tidy up while we're here". Ten minutes where the whole message is: *I like being where you are, doing what you love*.

For a teenager, translate: ten minutes on their turf — their game, their music, their project — where you're the guest and act like a good one.

That's it. It will be the least productive ten minutes of your day, and for one person in the room it will be the best ten. Some days, both of you.

# 3 · The calm in their storm

It's 5.40pm in a supermarket, or the hallway, or the car park after training, and your child has gone. Not misbehaving — *gone*. The three-year-old is on the floor, rigid and screaming, over a banana broken in half. The nine-year-old has slammed a door so hard the house rang. The fifteen-year-old is telling you, at volume and with impressive vocabulary, that you have ruined their life.

Every instinct you have is now giving you bad advice. Match the volume. Assert control. Fix it fast, because the noise is unbearable and people are looking. And under those instincts, quieter, something older: *in my day this would never have been allowed.*

Hold on. This chapter is one skill, and it may be the highest-value skill in the book: being the calm in their storm. Not because calm is polite. Because of how young nervous systems actually work — and because the dad who can stand steady in a force-ten meltdown is giving his child something no amount of good behaviour ever teaches.

## What a storm is (and isn't)

Start with what's happening mechanically, because it changes everything about your job.

A child mid-meltdown is not choosing much. The reasoning part of their brain — the part that processes "that's enough", weighs consequences, does perspective — has been knocked briefly offline by a flood of alarm. What's left is the oldest machinery: fight, flight, scream. This is why the meltdown is so disproportionate, and why your excellent points are landing on nobody. You are presenting arguments to a smoke alarm.

Children aren't born able to shut that alarm off. The off-switch gets built slowly, across years — and it gets built one way: by borrowing. A child's system settles by syncing with a settled system nearby. Calm is contagious, from the bigger body to the smaller one; so is panic and so is rage. That borrowing has a technical name, co-regulation, but you don't need the name. You need the implication:

**In a storm, you are not the referee. You are the anchor.** The job is not to win, teach, or end the noise quickly. The job is to be the steadiest object in the room and lend them a nervous system while theirs reboots. Every borrowed landing builds a bit more of their own off-switch. That's the long game you're playing on the supermarket floor, and it's why "he just sat with me" turns out, years later, to be the thing they remember.

This is also why "calm down" has never once worked in the history of children. It's an instruction aimed at machinery that's offline — like shouting "be less on fire" at a chip pan. They can't comply, now they've also failed you, and the alarm gets louder.

## Fewer words, lower voice, stay

The practical method is three habits, and they run against instinct, which is why they need deciding in advance.

**Fewer words.** A flooded brain can process almost no language. Everything you say past a short sentence is noise, and reasoning is fuel. Save the debrief — there's real teaching to do, *later*, once they're back. In the storm: short, warm, done.

**Lower voice.** Volume is the one dial you fully control, and their system reads yours before it hears a word. Going quieter and slower — deliberately, even a bit theatrically at first — tells the alarm what no argument can: *no threat here.* If you can drop your body too, do it: sit on the floor near the toddler, lean on the counter instead of squaring up to the teen. Smaller and lower reads as safe.

**Stay.** This is the one that does the heavy lifting. Not hovering, not crowding — for a teenager especially, staying might mean the next room and the door open. But present, findable, and unflustered. The message underneath, the one that outlasts childhood: *nothing you feel is too big for me. You can't storm hard enough to make me leave.* A child who learns that in the small storms at four will bring you the big ones at fifteen. That's the same dad, built early, that chapter 8 banks on.

And here is the script — the one from the cover of this chapter. Three lines, low and slow, with silence in between. Not a magic spell; an anchor line you don't have to compose while the smoke alarm's going:

> **I'm here. You're not in trouble.**
>
> **I'm not going anywhere.**
>
> **When it passes, we'll sort it out together.**

That's the whole speech. If they scream "go away!", you can honour the space and keep the promise: "Okay. I'll be just there." Then be just there. The third line matters as much as the first two — it isn't surrender, it's a receipt: there *is* something to sort out, and it will get sorted, by the two of you, on the other side.

## Firm is fine; scary is not

Now the objection some men have been holding since the first paragraph, and it deserves better than being talked past. *Doesn't all this reward the screaming? Where's the line? My dad would have ended that nonsense with one look.*

Take it seriously, because half of it is right. Kids do need the line. Calm is not the same as permissive, and this chapter has not asked you to grant the banana-based demands or accept the doorslam as fair comment. Anchoring and boundaries aren't rivals; they're a sequence. Storm first — you anchor. Calm second — you hold the line, fully: the thing they screamed for still isn't happening, the words said in the hallway still get addressed. "You were furious. Being furious is allowed. Screaming at your mum is not, and we're going to fix it." A dad who does both is not soft. He's something better than soft or hard: he's *predictable*. If firm and consistent is your style, keep it — chapter 6 will back you all the way.

But the look — the fear — costs more than it appears to. Scaring a child out of a meltdown does stop the noise; that's why the method survives. What it can't do is build the off-switch. The storm doesn't resolve, it goes underground, and the child learns the alarm lesson instead: *my biggest feelings make me unsafe with him*. That lesson compounds quietly for years and sends its invoice in adolescence, when the storms get real stakes and they take them anywhere but you.

So the line, drawn plainly: **firm is fine; scary is not.** Firm is steady voice, held boundary, follow-through in daylight. Scary is looming, roaring, unpredictability —

force where authority should be. Chapter 6 takes this distinction and builds your whole discipline approach on it.

And when you get it wrong — you will; every dad has met his own storm in the hallway mirror — the repair is chapter 5's territory, but the short version fits here: come back, own it out loud, no "but". A dad who repairs teaches more in two sentences than a dad who was never wrong teaches in a childhood.

## The move

### The 3-line storm script, used once for real.

Learn it now — it's three lines; you already nearly know it. Say it out loud once in the car, alone, so it's in your mouth and not just your eyes.

Then wait for weather. It won't be long. And when the storm lands — floor, doorslam, car-park fury — run the whole drill once, deliberately: fewer words, lower voice, stay. The three lines, slow, with gaps. Nothing else: no reasoning, no verdicts, no fixing. Then, afterwards — properly afterwards, once they're back and breathing — the third line's promise gets kept, and anything that needs addressing gets addressed.

One honest go is enough for the move, because one honest go is enough to show you the strange thing about it: the storm you don't fight ends sooner, and it ends *towards* you. Toddlers finish it in your lap. Teenagers finish it in the doorway, not looking at you, saying something almost inaudible that means thanks.

# 4 · Half the noticing

There's a kind of tired that sleep doesn't fix, and if you share your kids with a partner, there's a fair chance she's carrying it right now.

Not the tiredness of doing too much — though there's probably that too. The tiredness of *tracking* too much. Somebody in most households is running a programme that never closes: current shoe size and the next one, which day is PE kit, when the dentist is due, which friend fell out with which, what the costume deadline is, who's been quiet since Tuesday. In most households — not all, and we'll get to the not-all — that somebody is the mother. The programme is called the mental load, and this chapter is about your half of it.

One thing before anything else: this chapter contains no accusation. It's written to a man who, in my experience, mostly *hasn't* refused this work — he's never actually seen it. It's invisible by design: the whole job is noticing things before they become problems, which means when it's done well, there's nothing to see. So look at it once, properly, here. What you do next will follow on its own.

## Tasks are not the job

Here's the trap even genuinely fair-minded men fall into: counting tasks.

You do bath time, the bins, the big shop, half the bedtimes, all the driving. Tallied up, it might even be an even split — and she's still running on fumes, and neither of you can quite say why, and the conversation about it keeps going wrong.

It goes wrong because tasks were never the heavy half. The heavy half is the **noticing**: knowing the task exists, that it's due, what it depends on, what happens if it's missed — and carrying all of that *before* anyone does anything. The person who takes the kids to the dentist has done a task. The person who knew a check-up was due, booked it around swimming, remembered the form, and rebooked when it clashed has done the

job. If she has to ask you to do it, remind you it's coming, or check it happened — the noticing never moved. You did labour; she kept the job.

Which explains the phrase that has started a thousand quiet kitchen arguments: *"Just tell me what needs doing and I'll do it."* It's offered sincerely. It lands like a resignation letter — because it says, in kindly words, *I'll take tasks, you keep the tracking, forever*. Being the one who has to ask *is* the load.

## Own domains, not tasks

So here's the model that actually moves weight, and it will feel familiar from work, because it's how any functioning team runs: **ownership**.

Not "help more". Helping is doing tasks inside somebody else's noticing — it makes you a good assistant and changes nothing structural. Instead, take entire *domains*, whole: dentist and optician. Kids' clothes and shoes, including noticing the trousers are short. Birthdays — presents, cards, the diary, RSVPs. School admin. Swimming kit, all of it, always.

Owning a domain means the noticing moves house. You track it, you decide, you action it, you catch it when it wobbles — and she gets to *fully stop thinking about it*. That last part is the actual product. Which gives you the two rules of real ownership:

**No reminders.** If she has to remember that you're remembering, the load never moved; it gained a supervisor. Set your own systems — calendar, alarms, a note on the fridge, whatever you use for work commitments, because that's what this is now.

**Dropped balls are yours.** You'll miss something in the first month. When you do, the answer isn't "you should have said" — nobody says that to you at work when you own a project. You fix it, you patch the system, you carry on. Being ownable-at is the whole point of ownership.

Do it right and the payoff is bigger than fairness, though fairness would be enough. You get a partner with actual spare attention — for the kids, for herself, for you; the version of her that's been getting displaced by the tracking. You get the competence and the closeness that live inside these domains — the dentist-run chats, being the dad who *knows* the shoe size. And your kids get to grow up watching two adults run a family as

partners, which quietly writes the job description their own homes will use one day. Sons and daughters both.

And the conversation itself — word for word, because vague intentions evaporate and "I'll try to do more" is a vague intention:

> **You:** I want to take some of the tracking off you, properly — not "tell me what to do", actually take it. I'm starting with [the dentist]. Booking, remembering, forms, rebooking — all of it, from now on, permanently.
>
> **Her:** You'll need reminding.
>
> **You:** Don't remind me. That's the point — if you're reminding me, you're still carrying it. If I drop it, I'll be the one who deals with that, and I'll fix whatever I broke. Just give me a handover: what's due, what's booked, what do I need to know?

Then take notes like it's a job handover, because it is one. Expect her to be sceptical — she may have seen initiatives before. Don't argue with the scepticism. Outlast it.

## The dad already carrying it

Now the not-all, said plainly and without a ribbon on it.

Some men reading this are the noticing parent. The primary carer. The dad at home while she works away; the widowed dad; the dad who just ended up, by temperament or circumstance, running the programme. If that's you, you read this chapter recognising your own days — and you know its other truth first-hand: doing this job while it's invisible, and while every form, group chat and school gate quietly assumes you're the backup parent, is its own extra load. No pity here — you don't need it; you're doing the job. Just the same medicine, reversed: this work is real, it's heavy, it deserves to be *seen* in your house, and if you have a partner, the handover conversation above is yours to initiate from the other side. Name a domain, hand it over whole, and let go of it

properly — no checking, no hovering. Handing over is a skill too, and the noticing parent is often worse at it than he thinks.

And the single dad, running every domain with no one to hand anything to: your version of this chapter is smaller but real. Get the load out of your head and into systems — calendars, alarms, standing orders, lists — because a programme that runs on paper doesn't have to run on you. If you co-parent across households, domains still work: better one parent who fully owns dentists in both postcodes than two half-tracking it. And where a grandparent, a mate, another school parent offers real help — the lift, the pickup, the standing Tuesday — take it as infrastructure, not favour. Chapter 9 has more to say about that.

## The move

**Take one domain whole. This week. Permanently.**

One, not four — this is a change of structure, not a fortnight of enthusiasm, and it has to survive your busiest week to count. Pick a real one: something with recurring noticing in it, not a chore with a task attached. Dentist. Clothes and shoes. Birthdays. School admin.

Have the conversation above, or your version of it. Do the handover properly. Build the system the same day — bookings in your calendar, recurring reminders set, before the momentum fades.

Then run it. No reminders, no check-ups, dropped balls yours. In a month it won't feel like a move; it'll just be one of the things you carry — which is exactly the point. That's one programme closed on her side, and the first one is the hardest to hand over. The second is a fortnight away, whenever you're ready.

# 5 · Say the actual words

Here's a sentence a lot of men can say about their own fathers: *I knew he loved me.* Followed, after a pause, by the other one: *He never actually said it.*

Maybe that's your dad. He showed it — the lifts at all hours, the fixed bike chain, standing in the rain at every match, working himself grey for the family. Love as logistics. Love as presence at a distance of two metres. And you learned to read it, the way you learn any language you're raised in. You knew.

But notice what that sentence costs to say. *I knew he loved me* is a conclusion — something you worked out, assembled from evidence, maybe finished assembling as an adult. It's not the same as remembering the words in his voice. Plenty of men carry that gap their whole lives: not a wound exactly, more a room in the house that was never opened. And plenty of those men, without ever deciding to, are now keeping the same room shut with their own kids.

This chapter is about opening it. It's the simplest chapter in the book and, for some readers, the hardest: saying the actual words, out loud, to your children — while they're children, while it can become the water they swim in rather than a conclusion they reach at your funeral.

## The silence is inherited, not chosen

Start by being fair to your dad, and to yourself, because shame won't get these words said and fairness might.

The silence wasn't invented by him. It was handed to him — by his own father, and around them both, a whole culture with firm views on what men do with feelings. Saying it might have been, for him, a physical impossibility, the way singing in public is for some people. He did love in the dialect he had.

So this isn't a chapter about what he got wrong. It's about noticing that the silence is an heirloom — and that heirlooms are optional. You've already broken parts of the old

playbook; every chapter of this book is you doing that. This is the same move applied to language. And unlike most inheritance decisions, this one has a deadline of sorts: kids build their sense of what's normal early. A house where "I'm proud of you" is said plainly produces adults who can say it. You're not just talking to your kids when you say these words. You're stocking the language their own kitchens will run on, decades from now.

One more honesty: the first few times may feel unnatural — throat-clearing, looking at the middle distance, the lot. That's not a sign it's wrong. That's just what an unopened door sounds like. It gets easier at a speed that will surprise you, mostly because of how they respond.

## The words, and how to land them

Not a speech. Speeches are easy to deflect and slightly embarrassing for everyone. These are single sentences, said in passing, at normal volume, and then *left alone* — no follow-up, no "come here", no turning it into a moment. The power is in the plainness.

> **"I'm proud of you."**

Attach it to something true and specific, and — this matters — not only to achievement. "I'm proud of how you looked after your sister today" reaches deeper than "proud of the trophy", because it tells them what you actually value. A kid who only hears it after wins learns the words have an entry fee.

> **"I love watching you do that."**

The most underrated sentence a parent has. No grade in it, no coaching, nothing to live up to — just delight, witnessed and reported. Say it about the drawing, the daft dance, the way they read to the dog. This is the verbal form of chapter 1's samples: proof they're *enjoyed*.

> **"I love you."**

Unadorned. Not "love you, bye" swallowed into a phone sign-off — that counts, keep it — but occasionally the full sentence, in the middle of nothing, because it's true rather than because someone's leaving. To sons as much as daughters, and keep saying it through the eye-rolling years; the eye-roll is the receipt, not the refusal.

A note on frequency, because men who open this door sometimes worry about wearing the words out. You won't. Said truthfully, they don't devalue with repetition — they do the opposite, compounding into something a kid stops having to check: background certainty, the kind you don't notice until you meet an adult who grew up without it. The words only go thin when they're deployed as tools — praise as steering, affection as reward for behaviour. Said because they're true, they can be said for fifty years and land every time.

And then the fourth sentence, which deserves its own section.

## The apology

> **"I'm sorry. I got that wrong — you didn't deserve to be shouted at
>
> like that. That was about my day, not about you."**

Somewhere in your childhood there may sit a memory of an adult who was plainly in the wrong and never said so. You know exactly what that non-apology taught you. Now cross-examine what you learned: not respect — just a rule: *being wrong is unsurvivable, so never admit it*. Plenty of grown men are still living by that rule, in marriages and jobs where it costs them daily.

Here's the reframe this chapter wants you to keep: **apologising to your child is not a loss of authority. It's a demonstration of strength.** It takes visible nerve to stand in front of someone smaller than you and own a mistake without flinching. Kids register exactly that — not weakness, *sturdiness*: he's big enough to be wrong and still be the dad. And your authority survives entirely intact, because it was never built on infallibility; chapter 6 will show it's built on predictability.

The mechanics matter, so, briefly. Own the thing, specifically — "I shouted", not "things got heated". No *but*: "I'm sorry, but you were winding me up" is not an apology, it's a

verdict with packaging, and kids clock the difference instantly. Don't over-confess either — a paragraph of self-criticism turns the repair into a thing *they* now have to manage ("it's okay, Dad, honestly"). One clean sentence or three, the boundary still standing if there was one ("the answer's still no — but the shouting was wrong"), done.

This is the repair that chapter 3 promised, and it's the mechanism behind this book's deepest rule: you don't have to get it right every time, because rupture-plus-repair doesn't just undo damage — it *teaches*. A childhood with zero conflict isn't on offer. A childhood where conflict reliably ends in honest repair is, and it may be the single most useful thing a father can model.

## The move

**One sentence you mean, said out loud, this week.**

Pick it now, while the chapter's still open. The one that made something in your chest shift as you read it — that's yours. Proud-of-you. Love-watching-you. The unadorned I-love-you. Or, if there's a shout from last Tuesday still hanging in the house, the apology; overdue is far better than never, and "this is about last week" lands fine.

Then the delivery rules. Out loud — not a text, not a note in the lunchbox; those are lovely extras, but this move is about your voice. In passing — driving, washing up, goodnight, doorway — so nobody has to survive a Moment. Specific and true. Then leave it alone: no waiting for a response, no checking it landed. It landed. With teenagers, the more casual the delivery, the deeper it goes; a "proud of you, you know" fired at a windscreen can hold a boy together for a month.

One sentence. You've built things that took years. This one takes four seconds, and they'll still have it when they're fifty.

# 6 · Discipline that builds

Somewhere between your father's generation and now, discipline became an awkward subject. A lot of modern parenting writing treats it like a regrettable necessity, or something to be dissolved entirely into understanding and connection. Meanwhile, plenty of dads privately suspect the pendulum has swung into softness, watch a child ignore a fifth gentle request, and wonder whether the older ways had a point.

So let's be direct, because this book promised to be. Kids need boundaries — real ones, held by an adult who means it. A child with no walls to push against doesn't feel free; they feel unsafe, the way you'd feel driving a car where the brakes might or might not work. If your instinct is that children need a dad who says no and means it, this chapter is not going to talk you out of it. Your instinct is right.

What this chapter *is* going to do is make one distinction, as clean as possible, because everything about discipline hangs on it: the difference between **authority** and **intimidation**. They're routinely confused — they can look similar from across a room — and they build opposite things.

## Authority is cheap to run; fear is expensive

Authority is a child's certainty that the wall is a wall. When Dad says bedtime, bedtime happens — tonight, tomorrow, and on the night he's exhausted. When Dad says "if it happens again, the tablet goes away", the tablet actually goes away, calmly, without a scene, because it was never a threat; it was a forecast. Authority is built out of exactly one material: **follow-through**. Not volume, not size, not the capacity to frighten. Predictability. A dad with real authority rarely needs to raise his voice, for the same reason gravity doesn't need to shout.

Intimidation is compliance bought with fear — the roar, the looming, the slammed hand on the table, the silence that everyone in the house has learned to read. And the honest thing must be said about it: *it works*, tonight. The room goes quiet. That's

exactly why it survives from generation to generation, and why it deserves a fair hearing before this chapter shows you the bill.

The bill, then. Fear doesn't teach the lesson you're holding the boundary for; it teaches *avoid the man*. The child complies while watched and learns concealment for when they're not — you're training better hiding, not better judgement. It escalates by design: fear habituates, so the roar that worked at six needs to be bigger at nine, and somewhere around fourteen you meet a person your own size who's stopped being afraid, and there's nothing behind the roar because the roar was the whole system. And it quietly closes the doors this book has been opening: nobody brings their storm (chapter 3) or their 2am disaster (chapter 8) to a man who might go off. Intimidation isn't strong discipline. It's authority's payday loan — instant, and ruinous.

Hence the line, the same one from chapter 3, now load-bearing for everything: **firm is fine; scary is not.** Firm at full strength — immovable, even — with warmth intact. Kids thrive on that combination. It has a name in the research world, but you don't need the name. You've met the man: calm, means what he says, safe to be around. Be him.

## The mechanics of a boundary that holds

Four working parts. None of them require anger; anger is what boundaries run on when these are missing.

**Fewer rules, held completely.** Twenty rules held sometimes teaches kids that rules are weather — sometimes it rains, wait it out. Five rules that *never* move teaches them the walls are real. Pick what actually matters in your house — how we speak to each other, screens, bedtime, seatbelts, whatever your genuine non-negotiables are — and hold those absolutely. Let the small stuff be small.

**Consequences that are forecasts, not eruptions.** Stated once, in advance, in a level voice, then applied exactly as stated: "If the ball hits the window again, the game moves to the park." No second warning that becomes a fifth. The consequence should be boring — related, short, proportionate — because the drama isn't the deterrent; the *certainty* is. A child who knows precisely what happens next lives in a predictable world, and predictable worlds are what secure kids are made of.

**The boundary survives the feelings — theirs and yours.** They will be furious at the wall; that's allowed, and chapter 3 told you what to do with it: anchor the child, keep the wall. "You're allowed to hate bedtime. It's still bedtime." Both halves at full strength. And your feelings don't get to move the wall either — the boundary shouldn't tighten because your day was bad any more than it should slacken because you're tired. When you blow it — you will — chapter 5's apology repairs the shouting *without* surrendering the rule: "the shouting was wrong; the answer's still no."

**One wall, two builders.** If you parent with a partner, the boundary is only as strong as your weakest disagreement. Kids discover splits with sonar-like accuracy — not because they're devious, but because testing walls is their job. So: back each other in the moment, even when you'd have called it differently. "Mum said no, so it's no" — full stop, no eyebrow, no "we'll see". Disagree later, privately, and genuinely hash it out; she may be right, you may be. What you're refusing isn't debate — it's the good-cop/bad-cop theatre where one parent is forever the fun one and the other forever the enforcer. That script slowly poisons both roles, and one day you realise the enforcer hasn't been hugged in a month. One wall. Two builders. And across two households, the same principle at whatever level you can honestly manage: even agreement on just bedtime and screens beats two competing rulebooks — kids don't need identical houses, they need each house to be predictable.

## Style is yours; the spine isn't

A last word on the range of dads reading this, because parenting books have a bad habit of writing to only one of you.

Some of you run relaxed households — few rules, lots of latitude, big on natural consequences. Some of you are structured and strict — early bedtimes, clear jobs, high standards, no negotiation on manners. This book takes no side, and means it: **both are legitimate homes for a child**, and nobody gets to tell you that firm parenting done warmly is a character flaw. The evidence-informed truth that actually matters cuts across style entirely: kids do well in strict-and-warm houses and in relaxed-and-warm houses, and struggle in *unpredictable* ones — where the rules depend on Dad's mood, where warmth is rationed as a control system, where nobody knows which father is coming home. Consistency is the spine; style is the clothing. Wear what fits you.

So the only test worth running on your discipline isn't "is it modern?" or "is it what my dad did?" It's this: *does my child know exactly where the walls are, and is my child unafraid of the man holding them?* Two yeses and you're doing it — whatever the style. That's discipline that builds: walls they'll push against for years and stand on eventually.

## The move

**Pick your one non-negotiable and hold it kindly for a week.**

One rule. Ideally the one currently held at 70 per cent — enforced when you have the energy, waved through when you don't — because that's the one teaching your kids that walls are weather. Bedtime's actual time. Screens off at the agreed hour. How people get spoken to in your house.

Announce it once, in daylight, not mid-battle: level voice, the rule and the consequence, no lecture attached. If there's a co-parent, agree it with her first — one wall, two builders.

Then, for seven days, hold it at 100 per cent, *kindly*. Every night, including the tired ones — especially the tired ones; that's where authority is actually minted. Storms about it get chapter 3. Your own blown fuse gets chapter 5. The rule doesn't move.

Expect days two to four to be the worst — a boundary that's suddenly real gets tested hardest right before it gets believed. Hold. By day seven you'll notice what every dad who runs this move notices: less arguing, not more. Kids don't keep pushing walls that don't move. They lean on them.

# 7 · A different kind of kid

Long before your child arrived, you'd met them. Most parents have — a child assembled quietly in the imagination over years, without ever deciding to build one. Yours maybe kicked a ball back to you. Sat through films you loved. Followed you round the garage handing you the wrong spanner until, one day, the right one.

Then the actual child arrived. And if you're reading this chapter with intent, your actual child may be autistic, or an ADHDer, or wired some other way that nobody in the imagined version prepared you for. The football is uninteresting or unbearable. The party you organised was survived, not enjoyed. The spanner-handing kid turns out to narrate Minecraft redstone circuitry at you for forty unbroken minutes, or to know every bus route in the county, or to feel the label in a shirt like a wasp.

Say the quiet part once, plainly, and then we can get to work: there may be a gap between the child you imagined and the child you have, and noticing that gap doesn't make you a bad father. It makes you a man who had a script. Every parent had one. Yours just got contradicted more visibly than most.

Here's the thing about the script, though — and this is the hinge of the whole chapter. The imagined child was never real. Nothing has been taken from you; a fiction has been corrected. What's standing in front of you, stimming or monologuing or lining up the dinosaurs with terrifying precision, is not the wrong child. It's the *actual* one — a real, particular, frequently brilliant person whose operating system you haven't finished learning yet. This chapter is about learning it. Not fixing them. Not grieving anyone, because nobody died. Learning the actual kid, and building them a world that fits.

## Engineering, not repair

Here's a framing that tends to land with men who like knowing how things work, because it's the true one.

When a bridge develops problems under load, a decent engineer doesn't stand there blaming the bridge. He looks at the *system* — the load, the environment, the design assumptions — and changes it. Nobody calls that giving up on the bridge. It's called competence.

Your child's brain is not a broken version of a standard brain. It's a different build — different sensory intake, different attention system, different fuel economy. Genuinely different hardware, with its own strengths, running in environments designed, top to bottom, for the other build. The supermarket's lighting and noise, the birthday party's chaos, the school day's demands on sitting still — none of it was load-tested for your kid. So when your child melts down in the big shop, the engineering read isn't "this child needs to toughen up". It's "this environment exceeds this system's rated load". And the engineering response isn't to redesign the child — you can't, and the attempt only teaches them they're a problem. It's to redesign the *conditions*:

The ear defenders in the supermarket. The exit plan agreed before the party — a signal, a quiet room, permission to leave early with no post-match analysis. The warning before plans change, because transitions are expensive on this hardware. The one scratchy label cut out of every shirt. The homework done in three ten-minute bursts with movement between, because that's how this attention system actually refuels. Instructions one at a time, because "shoes, teeth, bag, car" is four instructions and only the last one survived.

None of this is surrender, softness, or special treatment. It's what you do at work every day: fit the setup to the system's real spec instead of the spec you wish it had. You wear glasses without calling them defeat. Same principle. And notice what changes when Dad becomes the engineer — the man studying what works, spotting overload before it hits, adjusting the design: your child gets something rarer than acceptance. They get *competence on their side*. A dad who treats their needs as design inputs, not defects. Kids can feel the difference between being accommodated and being endured, and it shapes what they believe about themselves for life.

A boundary on this chapter's remit, kept deliberately: none of this is medical advice, and this book has no view on assessment, diagnosis or treatment — that's between your family and qualified professionals, and the back of this book says where to start. This

chapter needs only the part that was always yours anyway: how a father meets the child he actually has. That part doesn't wait for anyone's paperwork.

## The uncles, and the other script

At some point — a barbecue, a Christmas — a relative will watch your child eat their separate meal or leave the table with their tablet, and deliver it: *"In my day we didn't have all this. He just needs firmer handling."* Sometimes it's your own father. Sometimes it's the voice in your head, wearing his accent.

Have your answer ready, because unprepared dads default to either an argument or a silent agreement, and both cost your kid. It doesn't need to be long. Calm, once, with the full weight of chapter 6's authority behind it:

> "We know what works for him, and this is it. Not up for debate — pass the potatoes."

That's it. You're not obliged to run a seminar, and refusing the debate *is* the message. Because here's what's actually at stake at that table: your child is watching. Possibly not looking — watching. Whether Dad defends the ear defenders or apologises for them tells your kid, more loudly than anything said directly, whether their way of being is defensible. Be the dad whose kid never has to wonder.

And the harder audience: the script in your own head, the one that occasionally grieves the football. Two honest things about it. First, scripts fade with use — the more real interest you invest in the actual child, the quieter the imagined one gets; men who've walked this a few years will tell you they can barely remember what the fictional kid was supposed to be like. Second, check the assumption hiding in the grief: that the shared life you wanted isn't available. It is. Different channel. Which brings us to the good part.

## The way in is already there

Here's the open secret about many autistic kids and ADHDers: they come with the door *pre-installed*. The special interest. The thing they know bottomlessly — trains,

tornadoes, a game, dinosaurs, flags, a franchise — the subject on which they will talk, fluently and with light in their face, to anyone who genuinely engages.

Plenty of adults treat the interest as a quirk to be rationed. Notice what it actually is: **the channel on which this particular child does connection.** The shared-project fathering you imagined — the garage, the touchline — was always really about this: standing shoulder to shoulder inside a thing you both care about. Your kid has built the thing already. The project is live, fully funded, waiting for staff.

The only entry requirement is the one chapter 2 set for all play: come in as a guest, on their turf, taking it seriously on its own terms. Not quizzing, not managing, not steering it somewhere more useful. Interest, real, offered plainly — the same move as every chapter in this book, pointed at the child you actually have.

## The move

**Learn one of their special interests well enough to ask a real question about it.**

A real question — that's the bar, and it's higher than it sounds. Not "you like trains, don't you?" — that's a pat on the head, and your kid has heard a hundred of them and knows exactly what they mean. A real question is one that could only be asked by someone who's actually been paying attention, and that you genuinely want the answer to. *Which Pokémon is the most underrated, and what's everyone missing? If two tornadoes merge, what happens? What's the actual best route from ours to the coast, and where does the timetable lie?*

So: this week, put in the hours quietly. Watch one of their videos. Read the wiki. Learn the vocabulary — knowing it's a *consist*, not a line of trains, is the kind of detail that tells a kid you were serious. Then, sideways — in the car, over the Lego, no eye contact required — ask.

And when the answer comes — the full forty minutes, the light on — your job is the easiest in this book: stay in it. Follow up. Be the guest who wants the tour. Somewhere in that monologue, listen for what's underneath, because it's the whole chapter in one feeling: *my dad is interested in the thing I am.* Which, on any hardware ever built, decodes as: *my dad is interested in me — as I actually am.*

That's the fathering you imagined. Different channel. Same love.

# 8 · The long game with teens

It happens gradually, then suddenly. The kid who narrated every thought in their head, who followed you to the shed just to be where you were, starts answering in single syllables. The bedroom door closes. "How was school?" — "Fine." You've become, apparently overnight, a landlord with opinions.

The standard dad responses are all understandable and all wrong. Take it personally and withdraw — *fine, suit yourself* — matching their distance with yours until the silence sets like concrete. Or force the door: scheduled Big Talks, interrogations over dinner, "you used to tell me everything", which reliably produce the opposite of talking. Or conclude, with a shrug that's half relief, that teenagers just don't need their dads much — the tank's full, job's mostly done, see you at graduation.

That last one deserves a moment, because it's the most dangerous precisely because it's half true. They don't need you *the same way*. Nobody needs help with their shoes anymore. But the teenage years are when the stakes of their decisions go from scraped knees to things with real consequences — and the research-adjacent truth every youth organisation on earth keeps restating in different words is that teenagers with a parent they can actually talk to navigate those years measurably better. The demand didn't fall. It went quiet. Your job changed from being the show to being the infrastructure: unglamorous, mostly invisible, and absolutely load-bearing when the weight lands.

The closed door isn't rejection, either — that's the reframe to hold on to. Pulling away from you is the actual developmental task; a sixteen-year-old with no more privacy from his parents than a six-year-old would be the worrying one. Your teenager is doing it right. The question is whether you can stay *reachable* while being, correctly and healthily, left.

## Talk sideways

Start with the highest-value tactical fact in this chapter: teenagers talk sideways.

Face-to-face conversation — sat down, eye contact, "I want to talk to you" — reads to a teenager like an interview under caution. Everything in the staging says *your answers are being assessed*, and the shutters come down before you've finished the first question. But put the same two people side by side, eyes on something else, hands busy — a car, a walk, the washing-up, a game — and the shutters lift. Something about no eye contact, no fixed end time, and an obvious exit makes disclosure cheap. Every experienced youth worker knows it; most dads discover it by accident on the M6 and wonder why the motorway made their son talkative.

It didn't. The *sideways* did. So build sideways time on purpose — and then, the discipline that separates the naturals from the strugglers: **arrive without an agenda.** The lift to training that's just a lift. The walk that's about nothing. Chapter 1 called this a sample and chapter 2 kept the channel open through play; this is the same move at teen scale — ninety seconds is now forty quiet minutes, and the silence is fine. An agenda-free hour in which nothing gets said is not a failure; it's a deposit. You're teaching the pattern *time with Dad is safe — no ambush coming*, and pattern is everything, because the day they have something to say, they'll say it in the slot they trust. Usually at the worst possible moment, apropos of nothing, one junction from home. That's not bad timing. That's the system working.

For the non-resident dad: you may have the best sideways slot in the family and not know it — the drive between houses, built into the schedule, no eye contact, guaranteed recurrence. Handovers can carry tension; resist letting that slot become admin or, worse, a debrief on their mother. Keep it agenda-free and yours.

## React small

Everything above gets you the moment. What happens next decides if there's ever another one.

Because eventually the sideways slot delivers: a thing that actually frightens you. There's a party and there'll be drinking. Someone sent someone a photo. A mate is in trouble in a way that has police in it somewhere. I've been feeling really low. And here is where dads fail with the best intentions in the world — because the protective surge is real, and it arrives as volume: the interrogation, the verdict, the lecture, the immediate confiscation of something.

Understand what your teenager is doing in that moment: **testing the line before trusting it with weight.** The first disclosure is rarely the whole thing — it's a sample, tossed out sideways, to see what you do. React big and you've answered the real question — *no, it's not safe* — and the next one goes to the group chat, which loves them but is seventeen and knows nothing.

So the skill is reacting small. Outside: flat, warm, unhurried. Inside: whatever's actually happening in there, on a delay. Some lines that hold the door open, for the moment your mind's gone white:

> "Okay. Tell me a bit more."
>
> "That sounds genuinely hard. What are you thinking of doing?"
>
> "I'm really glad you told me."

Note what reacting small is not: it's not having no rules and no views. The wall from chapter 6 still stands; there may be real things to do about what you've just heard. But sequencing is everything — chapter 3 taught you storm first, boundary second, and this is the same shape: *receive first, respond later*. Hours later, even: "I've been thinking about what you said in the car. Let's figure out what happens next." Steadiness under load is the whole product. They're not looking for a dad with no reaction; they're looking for a dad whose reaction they can afford.

## The 2am dad

Now the destination all of this has been building — the title this chapter is actually about.

Somewhere years from now, if things go roughly to plan, your kid will be somewhere they shouldn't be, at an hour they shouldn't be there, with a situation coming apart around them. Stranded, or scared, or in over their head — details unknowable from here. In that moment they will run a calculation, fast and mostly unconscious: *if I call Dad, what happens?*

You want to be the dad who wins that calculation. The one they call — not because you'll pretend it's fine, but because every year of samples, sideways miles and small

reactions has taught them the terms: *he'll come. He'll deal with now first. The conversation about how I got here will happen, and it'll be survivable.* If that's the reputation, say the policy out loud once, plainly, and well before it's needed: "If you're ever stuck — wherever, whenever, whatever's happened — call me. I'll come. Sorting it out comes later, and calling me will never make it worse."

Then remember what this chapter has really been saying: the 2am phone call is not built at 2am. It's built at 4pm on a Tuesday, in a car, over years, in conversations that were about nothing. There is no version of becoming the 2am dad in the moment. There's only having been him, in small ways, all along.

## The move

**One sideways conversation a week, agenda-free.**

Find your slot — one that recurs on its own, so it doesn't need weekly heroics: the lift to training, a standing chippy run, the dog's long walk, twenty minutes of their game. Side by side, hands or eyes busy, phone away (yours; leave theirs alone — the confiscated-phone chat is an interview under caution with extra resentment).

The rules are short and the last one is the hard one. It recurs weekly. It carries no agenda — not school, not the state of the room, not the thing from Tuesday; if you must raise those, book a different slot. And you let silence be fine. You're not there to extract conversation; you're there to be reliably, unthreateningly *around*.

Run it for a couple of months before you judge it. This is the slowest move in the book and the one with the longest reach — you're not trying to make Thursday's drive go well. You're building the number they dial at 2am.

# 9 · Your own tank

Nine chapters in, an honest audit of what's been asked of you. Steady in their storms. Consistent on the boundaries. Present in samples, generous in play, carrying half the noticing, saying words your own father couldn't. All real, all doable — and every single one of them runs on the same fuel: your patience, your attention, your steadiness.

So here's the chapter this book owes you, and the one most dads skip in every book that has one, which is precisely why it's been put here at the end, after you've seen what the fuel is *for*: the tank those moves draw from is yours, it is finite, and the way most men run it is on empty, on principle, as if running on empty were the job.

It isn't the job. It's the thing quietly wrecking the job.

## "Fine" is a warning light

Ask a man how he's doing and you'll get the full diagnostic readout: "fine". Fine at work, fine at home, fine for the eighteenth month running. Somewhere along the line most of us learned that "fine" is what a reliable man reports, the way you'd want your car to just start every morning without commentary.

But you wouldn't run a car the way most dads run themselves, and the comparison is worth taking seriously because it's the language many of us actually think in. No servicing, mounting mileage, warning lights taped over — you know exactly what that ends in, and it's never a convenient breakdown. It's the hard shoulder, at night, with the family in the car.

Here's what the taped-over light actually looks like at home, and every line of this list will be familiar to someone reading this page. The fuse gets shorter — the same spilled drink that got a shrug in June gets a bark in November. The kids go slightly careful around you, and they're reading the room correctly; children are precision instruments for parental state. Play stops appealing — chapter 2 becomes a chore. The sideways conversations stop happening because you can't face the lift to training. The evenings

become a screen and a drink and nothing, because nothing is all there's fuel for. None of this arrives announced as exhaustion. It arrives disguised as *everyone else being more annoying* — which is why the last person to diagnose an empty tank is usually the man carrying it, and the first casualties are usually the smallest people in the house.

Read that list again and mark the ones running in your house this month. That's not an accusation; it's a dashboard. Two or more lit and this chapter stops being optional reading.

And the part that makes this a fathering chapter and not a wellness detour: **your state is the weather your kids live in.** Chapter 3 showed you calm is contagious. So is depletion. You cannot lend a nervous system you don't currently have. Every move in this book degrades gracefully when you're tired and fails completely when you're empty. Looking after your tank isn't time stolen from your family. It's the supply line that everything you've built in eight chapters runs on.

## The four cheap fuels

No overhaul here — overhauls fail by February. Four fuels, all boring, all cheap, all proven by every dad who's ever come back from the edge of the short-fuse years.

**Sleep.** The least glamorous and the highest-yield. Most of what gets called stress, temper or "just how I am now" is sleep debt wearing a disguise. The revenge-scrolling hour at midnight — the one that feels like the only time that's yours — is a payday loan against tomorrow's patience, and chapter 6 told you what payday loans cost. You don't need a sleep programme; you need a bedtime you actually keep, like the one you enforce for people whose brains you care about.

**Movement.** Not a transformation, not a race. A run, a swim, the five-a-side, a hard walk — anything that reminds your body it's a body. Man after man discovers the same embarrassing truth: thirty minutes of movement does more for his parenting than thirty minutes of parenting advice. It's the fastest lever on the panel for mood, sleep and fuse length.

**Mates.** The one men quietly delete first, and the one with the longest consequences. Fatherhood shrinks a lot of men's worlds to work and home, and a man with no third place is a man with no pressure-release except the people he lives with. The friendships

don't need to be deep and meaningful on paper — the five-a-side, the project, the standing pint *are* the deep and meaningful, in the dialect men actually speak. Keep two or three alive on purpose. Message the mate you've been meaning to. It's infrastructure.

**Margin.** The most ignored: a small, regular slot that belongs to you, that isn't work, family or a screen. An hour in the garage. The long run on Sunday. The thing you did before the kids that you've been meaning to get back to. Not much — but *scheduled*, because margin that isn't scheduled is margin that doesn't happen.

And a fifth thing that isn't fuel but decides whether the fuel flows: **asking counts as maintenance.** The tank chapter has to say this straight, dad to dad. Booking the check-up you've been ignoring. Telling your partner the honest number instead of "fine" — she's reading the dashboard anyway; chapter 4 taught you what carrying things invisibly costs, and the lesson didn't only apply to her. Taking the offered help — the grandparent hour, the mate's "let me take the kids with mine". Every trade you respect has a version of the same rule: the man who flags the fault early is the professional; the man who runs the machine to destruction is the liability. It's the same rule here. Asking early isn't weakness. It's exactly what you'd tell your own son, and he's watching how you do it — how you treat your tank is the manual he'll inherit for his.

If the tank stays empty no matter what goes in — if the flatness has been months rather than weeks, or the fuse never lengthens — that's past this book's pay grade, and pretending otherwise would be a disservice. The back of this book has a short page on when and where to take it. Read it. Going is maintenance too, and the strongest move in it.

## The move

**Book the thing that refills you — and treat it like a work meeting.**

You already know what the thing is. It surfaced somewhere in the last page — the five-a-side you drifted out of, the run, the mate, the garage hour, the actual bedtime. That reflex answer is the right one.

Now the operative word: *book* it. Not "try to get back into" — book. In the calendar, recurring, this week's slot chosen tonight. Squared with your partner like any fixture,

and hers protected with equal force in the same conversation, because this chapter cuts both ways in a two-parent house and the kids benefit from two full tanks.

Then treat it like a work meeting, with everything that implies. It doesn't get cancelled because you're tired — tired is the reason it exists. It doesn't get guilt-trimmed to a token. It survives busy weeks, because it's not a reward for coping; it's part of how you cope. You'd no more skip it than you'd skip the thing your salary depends on — and more depends on this one.

One recurring slot. That's the whole move — and probably the one your kids will thank you for without ever knowing it existed. The dad who walks back in from it — looser, funnier, longer of fuse — is the one all nine previous chapters were counting on.

# 10 · The dad they'll describe

One day — decades from now, in a kitchen you'll never stand in — someone who loves your child is going to ask about you. A partner, a friend, one day maybe a grandchild you haven't met. *What was your dad like?*

And your kid will answer in about a sentence. Everyone does. A whole fatherhood, compressed to a line, delivered without preparation — which is exactly why it's the truest audit you'll ever get. Nobody drafts that sentence. It just comes out, assembled from whatever's actually in there.

You already know this, because you have one about your own dad. Say it to yourself now, whatever it is — the warm one, the complicated one, the one that still catches. Notice what it's made of. It isn't made of his salary, his hours, or any total from chapter 1's audit. It's made of samples. *He always looked up when I came in. He came to everything. He had this terrible joke he told for thirty years. You could tell him anything.* Or the other kind — also samples: *You never knew which version you'd get.*

That's the whole mechanism of this book, laid bare one last time. The sentence your kids will say is being written now — not by your intentions, which they can't see, but by the small repeated moves they can. The ninety seconds, twice a day. The ten minutes in their game. The low voice in the storm. The dentist quietly handled. The words said out loud. The wall that never moved and never frightened anyone. The real question about the trains. The lift that was just a lift. Every one of them a line of ink in a sentence you'll never hear.

Which sounds like pressure, and is actually the opposite. Here is why.

If the sentence were written by totals, you'd need to be a great dad — whatever that is — continuously, for eighteen years, and every failure would be subtraction. But sentences built from samples work like the people building them: they forgive. A blown Tuesday doesn't make the line. *What he reliably did* makes the line — and repair is one of the things a dad can reliably do. The father who shouted and came back with chapter 5's apology hasn't weakened his sentence; he's very likely written the best clause in it. Ask

around: *he always came and said sorry — I never once doubted where I stood with him* is the kind of line grown children say with their voice going. Perfect was never on the menu, for you or any man who ever did this. Good-enough, repaired, repeated — that's what the great sentences are made of.

So this last chapter has no new move, and that's not a loose end; it's the point of the book. You have ten. Show up small. Play like you mean it. Be the calm. Carry half the noticing. Say the actual words. Hold the wall kindly. Meet the actual kid. Talk sideways. Fill your own tank. That's the playbook the letter promised — the one your dad couldn't hand you, now yours to hand on, mostly by being watched running it.

Some of it you're doing already. Some of it will take practice, and you'll fumble it, and fumbling it while staying in the game is — one last time — exactly how this works.

They're not waiting for a better man. They're building a sentence about this one, out of samples, starting with the next ninety seconds after you put this book down.

Go and give them a good one.

## The move

None. Keep showing up.

## When it's more than a rough patch

This book is written for ordinary weather — the storms, slammed doors and flat patches that come with real family life. But sometimes what's happening in a house is more than a rough patch, and the strongest thing in this book is knowing the difference and acting on it.

Some honest markers. A child whose distress is intense, most days, for weeks — or who has stopped doing the things they loved, stopped eating or sleeping normally, or seems frightened, withdrawn or hopeless rather than just stroppy. A family situation that feels unsafe for anyone in it. Or you: a tank that stays empty no matter what goes in, a flatness or a fury that's been months rather than weeks, or thoughts that frighten you.

None of those are failures of fathering, and none of them are jobs for a paperback. They're jobs for professionals — and going to one is the same move this book has taught ten times over: seeing clearly and acting early, for people you love. Start with your GP, for your child or for yourself; they are the front door to everything else, and they have heard all of it before. Your child's school or nursery can help too — they see your kid daily and know the support routes. If anyone is in immediate danger, use the emergency services, now, without weighing it.

Make the appointment the way you'd book chapter 9's slot: this week, in the calendar, treated like it matters. Because it does, and so do you.

## Where this comes from

Dad On wears its evidence lightly, on purpose — you came here for moves, not footnotes. But the moves aren't opinions. The ideas underneath this book — that children build regulation by borrowing calm from steady adults; that warmth and consistent boundaries together beat fear; that play carries serious developmental freight; that small, reliable connection outweighs grand gestures; that neurodivergent

children are best supported by adapting the environment rather than the child — reflect long-standing guidance from world-renowned organisations that study child development and family life: the World Health Organization, UNICEF, and the Anna Freud Centre, among their peers.

Where this book has translated that guidance into a dad-shaped move — a 90-second sample, a 3-line script, a domain owned whole — the translation is ours, and so is any clumsiness in it. Nothing here is medical, diagnostic or therapeutic advice, and no statistic or study has been invented to lean on: where we couldn't say it plainly and stand behind it, we left it out.

## About ParentUp

This book comes from ParentUp, a small team building calm, practical support for parents — the same voice you've read here, in an app built around word-for-word scripts for hard moments, tiny daily practices, and zero shame about being a real parent in a real house.

We'll keep this brief, because the whole point of this book is that the answers live in your kitchen, not in your phone. But if the moves here worked for you and you'd like them in your pocket — including more for the storms, the sideways conversations, and the different kinds of kids — you can find us at **parentup.co**.

Whether or not you do: thank you for reading, and for the samples you're about to go and give. Dad on.