

BETTERDADS

ALL FIVE GUIDES · THE COMPLETE EDITION

The *separation* series.

Five short guides for men going through separation —
from the first night to the new chapter.



Alex Laguna
betterdads.com

A 40-minute read.
Pass it on.

Why I wrote these.

In 2009 my marriage ended. I had two young kids, and within weeks I was renting a place nearby on Sydney's Northern Beaches so I could stay close to them. I remember waking up on a foam mattress in an empty rental, wondering how my life had ended up there.

I won't pretend I handled it well. I didn't. Some nights were very dark.

What got me through wasn't one big thing. It was counselling — which I resisted, and which changed my life. It was training: push-ups, runs, chin-ups, anything that burned it off. It was learning to sit still. And it was one rule I tried to hold, even on the days I didn't manage it: the kids come first, and I don't make it harder for them.

Afterwards I spent two years reading everything I could find about fatherhood, relationships and what it means to be a man. BetterDads came out of that. These five guides are the short version of what I wish someone had handed me in that first week.

Today I'm a father of five. It does get better — but you never stop learning. It's a lifetime of it.

Like I've always said, I've probably made, and still make, some huge mistakes. But I'm learning — or trying to, anyway. I'm here to learn from you, and I'll pass on anything good I come across.



Alex Laguna

Founder, BetterDads

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IF TONIGHT IS BAD

Call Lifeline on **13 11 14** or MensLine on **1300 78 99 78**. Both are free and there 24/7. If you or anyone else is in danger, call **000**.

When it *first* happens.

The first weeks of separation — what to do when nothing makes sense.

If you're reading this, the floor has just dropped out.

Maybe she told you last night. Maybe you told her. Maybe it's been coming for a year and it finally became real. Either way, everything you counted on — your home, your routine, your picture of the next twenty years — has shifted at once.

This guide won't fix that. It's here to get you through the next few weeks without adding damage you'll spend years undoing — because the first month is when the worst decisions get made. The angry texts. The 2am phone calls. The conversations with your kids you can't take back. Read it tonight. Read it again in a week.

INSIDE THIS GUIDE

- 1 The first 72 hours
- 2 What to say to your kids — and what not to
- 3 The four mistakes most men make in the first month
- 4 The grief nobody names
- 5 How to ask for help — the way men actually can

WHERE THIS GUIDE FITS

				
WEEKS 1–4	MONTHS 2–3	MONTHS 4–9	MONTHS 10–18	YEAR 2
Shock	Function returns	The middle	The rebuild starts	The new chapter

The first weeks and months.

IF TONIGHT IS BAD

Call Lifeline on **13 11 14** or MensLine on **1300 78 99 78**. Both are free and there 24/7. If you or anyone else is in danger, call **000**.

The first 72 hours

Your body is in shock, even if you look fine from the outside. Adrenaline is running the show. Sleep breaks up, your appetite disappears, and your mind runs the same loop at 3am. None of that is weakness. It's what a nervous system does when the ground moves.

So the first three days aren't for fixing anything. They're for getting steady enough to think.

● TONIGHT

Drink water. Eat something, even if it's toast.

Stay sober. Alcohol turns up the volume on everything you're feeling. You don't need it louder.

Text three people who love you: *"Something big has happened. I'll fill you in soon — can you check on me this week?"* You don't have to explain yet.

Don't post anything. Don't send the long message. What feels urgent at 11pm reads very differently at 9am.

Sit somewhere quiet for ten minutes. No phone. Let your body catch up with what's happened.

Lie down, even if sleep doesn't come.

If your thoughts turn to not wanting to be here, call Lifeline on **13 11 14** or the Suicide Call Back Service on **1300 659 467** now, not later. If you're in danger, call **000**.

● TOMORROW

Move your body. A walk around the block counts.

Tell work only what they need to know: *"I've got a family matter. I might need some flexibility this week."*

Book a GP appointment for this week — your usual GP if you have one — and tell them what's happened. They can help with sleep, and if you need more support, refer you to a psychologist with a Medicare rebate.

Tell one person the whole story. A mate, a brother, your father — someone who won't judge.

If you have kids, be where you said you'd be. On time.

● DAY THREE

Get the map. Call the Family Relationship Advice Line on **1800 050 321**. It's free. They'll explain how arrangements for kids and money usually get worked out. You don't have to decide anything yet.

Write two lists: what's genuinely urgent (money this week, where you're sleeping, the kids' routine) and everything else. Most of it belongs on the second list.

Pick one thing for tomorrow you know you can do. Then do it.

DO THIS

The 24-hour rule

For anything that isn't genuinely urgent — a heated text, a money move, a big announcement, an agreement about the kids — wait 24 hours before you act.

If it still makes sense tomorrow, do it then. Most of the time, it won't.

What to say to your kids — and what not to

Your kids don't need the full story. They need to feel that you're still here and still steady. The way you handle yourself will tell them more than anything you say.

When you do talk to them, three messages cover most of it. Say them simply, and say them often.

-
- 1 “This isn't your fault.”
 - 2 “We both still love you, and that's not changing.”
 - 3 “You'll still see both of us.”
-

If you and their mum can tell them together, calmly, do. If you can't, try to agree on the same basic words, so they're not left holding two different stories.

WHEN YOU TELL THEM

“Mum and I have decided we're going to live in different houses. We both still love you. This isn't your fault, and there's nothing you did to cause it. We're both still your parents, and we're both going to keep showing up for you.”

WHEN THEY ASK WHY

“That's a fair question. Sometimes grown-up relationships change in ways kids don't need to carry. What you need to know is that we both love you, and neither of us is going anywhere.”

What not to say. Nothing about who's to blame — and “ask your mother” is blame in a different coat. No adult details: money, lawyers, new partners, who did what. No promises you can't keep, like “nothing's going to change.” And never “you're the man of the house now.” No child should carry that.

If they ask how you're doing, don't pretend. Try: *“I'm sad about it, and I'm going to be okay. Looking after you is my job, not yours.”*

Then do the thing that matters most: keep their world as normal as you can. Same bedtime. Same school run. Same Saturday sport. Routine tells a child the world still works. Guide 5 goes deeper, with scripts by age.

03

The four mistakes most men make in the first month

None of these feel like mistakes at the time. They feel justified, or urgent, or like the only option. That's what makes them dangerous.

1 Deciding big things in the storm

Moving out overnight. Agreeing to a schedule for the kids. Signing something. Quitting the job, selling the car, making the grand gesture. Decisions made on adrenaline are the ones men spend years undoing.

Use the 24-hour rule. And before you agree to where the kids will live or how their time is split, have one conversation with the Advice Line or a family lawyer. Arrangements made in the first weeks have a way of becoming the pattern. (Moving out doesn't mean giving up your share of the house — but it's worth knowing where you stand before you go.)

If anyone's safety is at risk, that comes first. Call **000**. And if your own anger is scaring you or anyone around you, the Men's Referral Service (**1300 766 491**) is free, confidential and there 24/7.

2 The midnight message

The long text at 1am. The voice message you record four times. The email to her family. Pleading or raging, it doesn't matter which — both make things harder, and both get screenshotted.

Write it in your notes app instead. Read it in the morning. Most of them never need to be sent. And assume anything you do send could one day be read by a mediator or a judge.

3 Numbing it

A few drinks to get to sleep. The phone till 2am. Working till midnight so you don't have to go home. Numbing works for about an hour, then sends you the bill the next day.

Keep the basics instead: eat, move, sleep. Stay sober on the nights you have the kids, and on the nights you're struggling most.

4 Going it alone

Most men tell nobody — or tell one person a cleaned-up version. It feels like protecting people. What it actually does is put the full weight on one set of shoulders, at the worst possible time. Which is why the last section of this guide matters.

The grief nobody names

Nobody's died. There's no funeral, no week off work, no one dropping round with a casserole. So most men don't call it grief. They call it stress, or anger, or a rough patch.

But it is grief. You're losing a partner, a home, a daily life with your kids, and a future you'd already pictured — the Christmases, the holidays, the growing old. Psychologists even have a name for loss the world doesn't recognise: *disenfranchised grief*. Real grief, with no permission to feel it.

It won't move in a straight line. A good morning, a terrible afternoon. Relief, then guilt about the relief. Anger at her, then missing her, sometimes in the same hour. A song in the supermarket can flatten you. All of that is normal.

It tends to hit hardest in the same places: the first night in a new place. The quiet drive home after handing the kids over. Sunday nights. Birthdays. The first Christmas.

WHAT HELPS

- **Call it what it is.** Say it to yourself: *this is grief*. It takes some of the confusion out.
- **Give it somewhere to go.** A hard walk, a run, the gym, the surf. Or write it down at night so it isn't circling at 3am.
- **Let it come in waves.** You don't have to feel all of it today.
- **Don't try to skip it.** Grief you fast-forward through tends to turn up again later — often in your next relationship.

How to ask for help — the way men actually can

Most men will never say, “I’m struggling. Can we talk about my feelings?” That’s fine. There are other ways in.

- **Side by side, not face to face.** Ask a mate for a walk, a surf, a drive, a job in the shed. Men talk more easily shoulder to shoulder. Say one true thing on the way.
- **Make the ask small and specific.** “Can you ring me Thursday night?” is easier to say yes to than “I need support.”
- **Text it if saying it is too hard.** There’s one below you can send tonight.
- **Pay someone to listen — or use the free ones.** A counsellor isn’t a last resort. It’s a tool. Your usual GP can refer you to a psychologist with a Medicare rebate if it’s right for you. MensLine (**1300 78 99 78**) offers free counselling for men by phone, video or online chat, 24/7. Medicare Mental Health Check In (**1800 595 212**) is free on weekdays, with no referral needed.
- **Talk to men who’ve been there.** Dads in Distress (**1300 853 437**) is free peer support run by separated fathers — a phone line, meetings and online groups.

A TEXT YOU CAN SEND TONIGHT

“Mate — we’ve split up. I’m not great. Up for a walk this week?”

Nobody should do this part alone — and you don’t have to.

You're not meant to have this figured out. Nobody does at this point. The job right now is simple: stay steady, protect your judgement, and don't add damage you'll have to repair later.

Clarity comes later. First, you get through the week.

WHERE THIS COMES FROM

Doka, K. J. (Ed.) (1989). *Disenfranchised Grief: Recognizing Hidden Sorrow*. Lexington Books.

Keep this page.

Screenshot it. Stick it on the fridge. Come back to it on the hard days.

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- Don't decide big things in the storm. Use the **24-hour rule**.
 - Water, food, sleep, sober. That's maintenance, not weakness.
 - Text three people. Tell one of them the whole story.
 - Tell the kids: **not your fault, still loved, still see both of us**. Keep their routine.
 - Write the midnight message in your notes app. Don't send it.
 - Call it what it is: grief. Let it come in waves.
 - Book the GP this week. Get the map: **1800 050 321**.
 - Be where you said you'd be.
-

Tonight, any time: Lifeline **13 11 14** · MensLine **1300 78 99 78** · Emergency **000**

The *middle* stage.

Months three to twelve. The shock is gone. The work is just starting.

The shock has worn off. Now the long middle starts.

People have stopped asking how you're going. The practical stuff is landing — money, where everyone lives, time with the kids — at the same time as the loneliness sets in like weather.

This is the stage most men underestimate. It's quieter than the start, so it looks easier. It isn't. It's where the habits form — good or bad — that decide what the next five years look like.

INSIDE THIS GUIDE

- 1 The loneliness map — what's normal, what's a warning
- 2 What to do with the time you suddenly have
- 3 Performing recovery before you've done any
- 4 The rebound trap
- 5 Settling it without going to war
- 6 The bigger question — what do you want the next chapter to be?

WHERE THIS GUIDE FITS

WEEKS 1–4	MONTHS 2–3	MONTHS 4–9	MONTHS 10–18	YEAR 2
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Months three to twelve.

IF TONIGHT IS BAD

Call Lifeline on **13 11 14** or MensLine on **1300 78 99 78**. Both are free and there 24/7. If you or anyone else is in danger, call **000**.

The loneliness map

Loneliness in the middle stage has a pattern. Knowing the pattern takes some of the sting out — and it helps you spot when it's turning into something more serious.

WHAT'S NORMAL

- **The handover hangover.** You drop the kids off, drive home, and the house is too quiet. For a lot of men, the hour after handover is the worst of the week.
- **Sunday nights.** And Friday nights, when everyone else seems to have somewhere to be.
- **The firsts.** The first birthday apart. The first Christmas. The first school event where you stand on the other side of the oval.
- **Missing her — even if you don't want her back.** You can miss the life, the routine and the man you were in it, without wanting to go back.
- **Envy.** Watching families at the park and feeling something sharp.
- **Losing mates.** Couple friends take sides, or drift off. Some of your social life ran through her. That loss is real too.

WHAT'S A WARNING

- Drinking most nights, or needing more to get the same effect.
- Sleep broken most nights, for weeks.
- No real contact with anyone outside work for a couple of weeks.
- Work slipping, or you've stopped caring about it.
- You've dropped the things that used to steady you — training, the surf, the shed.
- Feeling hopeless, or like people would be better off without you.
- Thoughts of ending your life.

If you recognise the first few warnings, act now, while it's easier. Book the GP. Call MensLine on **1300 78 99 78**. Tell a mate the truth.

If you recognise the last two, please call Lifeline on **13 11 14** or the Suicide Call Back Service on **1300 659 467** tonight. If you're in immediate danger, call **000**. These feelings can be treated, and with help they pass. You don't have to hold them on your own.

02

The time you suddenly have

If you share care, you'll suddenly have nights — maybe whole weeks — when nobody needs you. At first that can feel like a punishment. It's also the biggest resource you've got right now.

Most men fill it with one of three things: work, the pub or the couch. None of them build anything. Use the time on purpose instead.

- **Body.** Train three times a week. Exercise is one of the most reliable ways there is to lift your mood and fix your sleep.
- **People.** One social thing a week that isn't built around drinking. A mate, a club, a team, a Men's Shed, a peer-support group.
- **Home.** Make your place work for your kids: their beds, their stuff, something of theirs on the walls. It should feel like their home too — not somewhere you're camping.
- **Something that's yours.** Learn a thing, fix a thing, finish a thing. A reminder that you're more than what's happening to you.
- **Rest.** Some of the time is for doing nothing. That's allowed.

DO THIS

Plan the hour after handover

Before each handover, decide what you'll do in the hour after it. A walk, a session at the gym, a call with a mate, dinner somewhere with people around. Don't drive home to a silent house with nothing planned. That hour is where most of the bad spirals start.

03

Performing recovery

There's a trap in this stage that catches a lot of good men: acting recovered before you've done any recovering.

It looks like the new car. The gym selfies. The “never been better” posts. Saying yes to every night out. Telling everyone you’re fine, with a bit too much energy.

Some of that is healthy. Getting fit is good. Getting out is good. The question is who it’s for.

Are you doing it because it helps — or because you want her, or everyone, to see you’re fine?

If it’s the second, you’re performing. Performing is exhausting, it doesn’t heal anything, and the grief just waits for you underneath it.

Real recovery is quieter, and more boring. Sleeping properly. Training. A counsellor’s chair. Honest conversations with one or two mates. Sitting through a hard evening instead of escaping it. Nobody posts about that stuff. That’s how you know it’s real.

04

The rebound trap

Months three to twelve are prime rebound territory. You’re lonely, your confidence has taken a hit, and someone new paying you attention feels like oxygen.

The problem isn’t that it happens. It’s what it’s usually for. A rebound is mostly a painkiller: relief, not connection. It numbs the grief for a while.

Then the grief comes back — and now there's another person, and sometimes your kids, caught up in it.

- **Ask what you're looking for.** If you want someone to fill the hole, you're not ready. If you want someone to share a life that already works, you might be. Guide 3 has the full test.
- **Keep new people well away from your kids for now.** They're still adjusting to one huge change. Months, not weeks.
- **Don't use it as a message.** Posting it, parading it, making sure she hears about it — that's a message to your ex, not a relationship.
- **Be straight with whoever you're seeing** about where you're really at.

05

Settling it without going to war

This is also the stage where the practical stuff gets sorted: money, the house, the arrangements for your kids. It has to be done while there's still emotion in the room. That combination is what makes it dangerous.

How a war starts. It's never one big blow-up. It's a reply sharper than it needed to be. A text fired off angry. Refusing to give ground on something small so you don't feel like you're losing. Those moments stack up, and once both sides are dug in, every conversation becomes a fight. You can't control her. You can control whether you add fuel.

Start with mediation, not letters. The Australian system is built to keep families out of court. Before either of you can apply to a court for parenting orders, you generally have to try Family Dispute Resolution — mediation with an accredited practitioner. (There are exceptions, mainly where there's family violence or urgency.) Family Relationship Centres offer it free or at low cost. Mediation keeps the decisions in

your hands. It doesn't mean rolling over. It means going in to find something that works, rather than something that wins.

Get advice, not a war. It's smart to get some legal advice early, so you know your rights and your obligations. That's different from making a lawyer your main line of communication. Once the letters start, the goal quietly shifts from resolving to winning — and winning is slow, expensive and hardest on the kids.

DO THIS

Run hot messages through BIFF

Before you send anything heated, make it **Brief, Informative, Friendly, Firm**.

Instead of: "You can't just change the days whenever it suits you. This is exactly like you."

Send: "Thursday doesn't work for me this week. I can do Friday or Saturday — which suits?"

Same point. No fight.

The BIFF method was developed by Bill Eddy of the High Conflict Institute.

Treat it like business — for now. You don't have to like each other to run a handover. Keep messages short and about logistics. Don't reply while you're angry: draft it, leave it, come back later. Every calm exchange makes the next one easier. Every blow-up makes the next one harder.

KNOW THE BASICS

- If there's a protection order in place (an AVO, DVO or intervention order, depending on your state), follow it to the letter — even if she contacts you. Get legal advice on how time with the kids can work.
- Arrangements for kids are based on what's best for them. There's no automatic 50/50, either way.
- Child support and time with your kids can't be traded. Neither can be held back to force the other.
- You can apply for a divorce once you've been separated for 12 months.
- Property claims have time limits: generally within 12 months of a divorce becoming final, or within two years of separating if you were in a de facto relationship.

General information only — not legal advice. The peaceful path through, in plain English: betterdads.com/separation/legal.

How you handle this stage sets the tone for everything after it. Go adversarial, and it follows you for years. Stay focused on resolution, and you build a foundation you can actually live on. This isn't about winning. It's about getting through it as a man you'll respect later.

06

The bigger question

Somewhere in these months, usually on a quiet night, a different question turns up: what do I actually want the next chapter to be?

You don't need the answer yet. But start asking it on purpose, instead of letting the separation answer it for you.

DO THIS

Three questions for a quiet night

Write your answers down. Don't polish them.

- 1 When this is behind me, what do I want my kids to say about how I handled it?
- 2 What did I stop doing — or stop being — in the last few years that I want back?
- 3 If the next five years went well, what would an ordinary Tuesday look like?

Those answers are the start of the rebuild. That's the next guide.

Keep this page.

Screenshot it. Stick it on the fridge. Come back to it on the hard days.

-
- The quiet after handover is normal. **Plan the hour after it.**
 - Know the warning signs. Act early: GP, MensLine, a mate.
 - Use the time on purpose: body, people, home, something that's yours, rest.
 - Recover, don't perform. Ask who it's for.
 - A rebound is a painkiller. Keep new people away from the kids for now.
 - Mediation before letters. Get advice, not a war.
 - Run hot messages through **BIFF**: Brief, Informative, Friendly, Firm.
 - Start asking: what do I want the next chapter to be?
-

Tonight, any time: Lifeline **13 11 14** · MensLine **1300 78 99 78** · Emergency **000**

The *rebuild*.

Year two. Becoming the man this version of your life actually needs.

At some point, the intensity drops.

The fights are fewer, the arrangements settle, and you look up to find a strange kind of space in front of you. The old life is gone. The new one hasn't taken shape yet.

This is the most important stage — and the one most men waste. Because this is where you stop surviving and start building.

INSIDE THIS GUIDE

- 1 Recovery isn't rebuilding
- 2 The four pillars: calm, body, focus, standards
- 3 Pick three — the anchors for your week
- 4 Ready for someone new? The test that says you're not
- 5 Your ex, five years from now — and how to start that relationship today
- 6 The fatherhood on the other side

WHERE THIS GUIDE FITS

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From around the end of year one, into year two.

IF TONIGHT IS BAD

Call Lifeline on **13 11 14** or MensLine on **1300 78 99 78**. Both are free and there 24/7. If you or anyone else is in danger, call **000**.

01

Recovery isn't rebuilding

Recovery is getting through what happened. Rebuilding is deciding what comes next. They're not the same thing, and you can get stuck in the first one for years — letting the separation keep defining your life long after it's over.

You might be stuck in recovery if:

- every story you tell still ends with her;
- you're still arguing with her in your head in the shower;
- your week is built around what's happening to you, not what you're building.

Rebuilding means taking the wheel again. Not forcing it. Just choosing a direction and starting to move.

02

The four pillars

BetterDads is built on five pillars: calm, body, focus, standards — and fatherhood. The first four are the load-bearing walls of a rebuilt life. When one is weak, the others carry extra weight. When all four are solid, you can take a hit without the whole house coming down. (The fifth gets its own section, at the end of this guide.)

Calm

Staying steady when things push you. Not bottling it up — choosing your response. **Build it:** ten minutes of stillness a day (breathing,

meditation, a walk without your phone), and a pause before you reply to anything that stings.

Body

Sleep, training, food, alcohol. Your body is the platform everything else runs on. **Build it:** train three times a week, keep a regular bedtime, and have a clear rule about drinking.

Focus

Where your attention goes. Work you actually engage with. Time with your kids with the phone away. Fewer hours lost to the scroll. **Build it:** each Sunday, decide what matters this week — and protect it.

Standards

The lines you hold for yourself. How you speak about your ex. Keeping your word. Turning up on time. How you treat people who can't do anything for you. **Build it:** pick a few, write them down, and keep them when nobody's watching.

More on each pillar at betterdads.com/pillars.

03

Pick three

Confidence doesn't come back through big, dramatic moves. It comes back through small ones, repeated. A routine. Regular sleep and training. Work you actually engage with. A home — even a small one — that feels like yours and has a proper space for your kids.

This sounds basic because it is. Basic is what holds. Structure is the floor you rebuild everything else on.

DO THIS

Pick three

Choose three things to anchor your week. For example: train Monday, Wednesday and Friday. Dinner with the kids every Tuesday — or a call on the nights they're not with you. One evening that's just yours.

Do them no matter what. Three reliable things create more stability than ten good intentions.

04

Ready for someone new?

At some point you'll meet someone. Good. Connection is part of a good life. The question isn't whether. It's when, and why.

THE TEST THAT SAYS YOU'RE NOT READY

If any of these are true, wait.

- You want someone to make the loneliness stop.
- You can't talk about your ex without heat — anger, bitterness or longing.
- Part of you wants her to find out.
- You'd bring them around the kids to make the house feel full again.
- A Saturday night on your own still feels like an emergency.

SIGNS YOU MIGHT BE

- Your life works on its own: routines, mates, health, your time with the kids.
- You can tell the story of the separation — including your part in it — without blaming.
- You want someone to share a life with, not rescue you from one.
- You'd be okay if it didn't work out.

When it does get serious, go slowly with the kids. Wait until the relationship is stable — months, not weeks. Start with short, low-key meetings on neutral ground. And give their mum a heads-up before they meet anyone (unless a protection order says otherwise). She'll hear about it anyway. It should come from you.

05

Your ex, five years from now

Here's something almost nobody thinks about in year one: you'll probably know your ex for the rest of your life. Birthdays. School concerts. Graduations. Maybe one day a wedding, and grandkids.

So ask yourself: what relationship do I want with her in five years? For most men, the honest answer is something like civil, reliable, and able to stand on the same sideline without the kids feeling it. Anything warmer is a bonus.

That relationship gets built now — not with big gestures, but with a track record.

- **Be reliable.** On time, every time. Do what you said you'd do.
- **Keep it about the kids.** Logistics, not litigation.

- **Be generous with the small stuff.** Swap a weekend when she asks, if you can. It comes back.
- **Say thank you.** “Thanks for sorting the school form.” It costs nothing.
- **Never renegotiate at the front door.** Handovers aren’t the place.
- **If it’s high-conflict, go parallel.** Less contact, clearer rules, messages through a co-parenting app. You don’t have to be friends to co-parent well.

The research on children of separated parents keeps landing in the same place: it’s the conflict between parents, more than the separation itself, that does the lasting harm. Every calm year you put together is protecting your kids.

06

The fatherhood on the other side

There’s a version of fatherhood that only becomes available after you’ve been broken.

Before, a lot of fathering can happen on autopilot. The house runs, someone else holds the details, and you’re there — but you don’t always have to choose to be. After a separation, every hour with your kids is chosen. That hurts. It’s also an opportunity, if you take it. Plenty of men come out of this closer to their kids than they were before, because they had to learn to show up on purpose.

You also have something to teach now that you couldn’t teach before: how a man falls apart and puts himself back together. Your kids are watching you rebuild. They’re learning that hard things can be survived, that mistakes can be repaired, and that a man can admit he’s struggling and still be strong.

If you got things wrong on the way through — and most of us did — go back and repair it.

A REPAIR, IN A FEW WORDS

“I wasn’t at my best last year. That wasn’t your fault, and I’m sorry. I’m working on it.”

Kids don’t need a perfect father. They need one who owns what he does.

There’ll still be uncertain days. As long as the direction is forward, they don’t stop the progress. Keep your three anchors. Hold your standards when nobody’s watching. Keep turning up for your kids.

The energy comes back. The confidence returns — not because everything’s perfect, but because you’re moving with purpose. This is where you stop being someone things happened to, and start being someone with a life that’s his.

WHERE THIS COMES FROM

Kelly, J. B., & Emery, R. E. (2003). Children’s adjustment following divorce: Risk and resilience perspectives. *Family Relations*, 52(4), 352–362.

Keep this page.

Screenshot it. Stick it on the fridge. Come back to it on the hard days.

-
- Recovery gets you through. **Rebuilding is choosing what's next.**
 - Four pillars to build on: calm, body, focus, standards.
 - Pick three weekly anchors. Hold them no matter what.
 - You're not ready if you want someone to make the loneliness stop.
 - New partners meet the kids slowly: months, not weeks.
 - Build the five-year relationship with your ex now: reliable, about the kids, generous.
 - Your kids are watching you rebuild. Repair what you got wrong.
-

Tonight, any time: Lifeline **13 11 14** · MensLine **1300 78 99 78** · Emergency **000**

What *not* to do.

The mistakes most separated fathers make — and how to avoid the ones that do permanent damage.

Almost every man going through a separation does things he wouldn't do at his best.

He reacts badly. Says something he regrets. Handles a moment in a way that, looking back, makes him wince. That doesn't make you the villain. It makes you human under pressure. What matters isn't a clean record — it's what you do from here.

Most of these mistakes don't feel like mistakes while you're making them. That's exactly why they're worth naming before you're in one. If you spot yourself in any of them — good. Noticing is how you climb out.

INSIDE THIS GUIDE

Each one named, explained and paired with what to do instead.

- 1 Using your kids as messengers
- 2 Weaponising time with the kids
- 3 Badmouthing their mother
- 4 Drinking through the worst of it
- 5 The social-media rant
- 6 The rebound that hurts everyone
- 7 The slow disappearance, dressed up as keeping the peace

WHERE THIS GUIDE FITS Every stage. They're there the whole way.

IF TONIGHT IS BAD

Call Lifeline on **13 11 14** or MensLine on **1300 78 99 78**. Both are free and there 24/7. If you or anyone else is in danger, call **000**.

01

Using your kids as messengers

What it looks like. “Tell your mum the money’s gone in.” “Ask her why you can’t come on Saturday.” Notes in the school bag. Quizzing the kids about what’s going on at her place.

Why it does damage. It puts a child in the middle of the adult conflict — something research consistently links to worse outcomes for kids. Children who feel caught between their parents are more anxious and more depressed, and it strains their relationship with both of you. They also learn to edit what they tell each of you, just to keep the peace.

Do this instead. Talk to their mum directly — text, email or a co-parenting app. Keep it brief and businesslike (BIFF, from Guide 2). Kids carry school bags, not messages. And after a weekend at her place, ask about their weekend — not about her. (If there’s a protection order in place, follow it exactly, even if she contacts you, and get legal advice on how to communicate about the kids.)

02

Weaponising time with the kids

What it looks like. Holding back time with the kids because the child support is late. Turning up late on purpose. “Forgetting” the swap. Refusing any flexibility just to make a point. Or the flip side: stopping payments because you’re not getting enough time.

Why it does damage. The kids are the ones who miss out, every time. And it isn’t how the law works: child support and time with your kids are

separate, and neither can be held hostage for the other. Mediators and courts notice these patterns quickly.

Do this instead. Keep to the arrangement — every time, on time. If there's a genuine problem with money, deal with it through Services Australia. If there's a problem with the arrangement, take it to mediation. And be as flexible as you'd want her to be.

03

Badmouthing their mother

What it looks like. The eye-roll when her name comes up. "Typical." A sarcastic comment in the car. A phone call to a mate that the kids can hear from the next room.

Why it does damage. Your kids are half her. When they hear you run her down, part of them hears it about themselves. It pushes them to pick a side — something no child should have to do. And it tends to backfire: in research with young adults, the parent who did the badmouthing ended up less close to their kids, not more.

Do this instead. Keep adult feelings with adults — a mate, a counsellor, a support group, well out of earshot. With the kids, stay neutral, or find something genuinely positive: "Your mum's really good at that." If they repeat something she's said about you, don't hit back: "Mum and I see some things differently. That's for us to sort out, not you."

Drinking through the worst of it

What it looks like. A few beers to get to sleep turns into a few every night. Bigger weekends when the kids aren't with you. Drinking alone.

Why it does damage. Alcohol is a depressant. It deepens low moods and wrecks the quality of your sleep, which makes the next day harder — which makes the next drink easier. It also sharpens anger and loosens the filter. The message you shouldn't send usually gets sent after a few.

Do this instead. Set your rules before you need them. No drinking on nights you have the kids, or before a handover. A few alcohol-free days every week. Never drinking to get to sleep. If it's getting away from you, tell your GP, or call the National Alcohol and Other Drug Hotline on **1800 250 015** — free, confidential, 24/7.

The social-media rant

What it looks like. The cryptic post. The “some people” quote. The story about what she did. The photo with someone new, posted so she'll see it.

Why it does damage. It's public and it's permanent, and one day your kids — and their friends — will read it. Screenshots of posts turn up in family law disputes all the time. And if your matter ever goes to court, publishing an account of the proceedings that identifies the people involved can be a criminal offence in Australia.

Do this instead. Post nothing about the separation. Nothing. If you need to get it out, write it in your notes app, then delete it. Tell your story to people who love you, not to an audience.

06

The rebound that hurts everyone

What it looks like. A new relationship within weeks. Moving someone in fast. Introducing the kids early, because “they all get on great.”

Why it does damage. A rebound is usually a painkiller, not a partner. It numbs the grief instead of dealing with it, and when it ends — most do — the grief comes back with interest. Kids who’ve just lost one version of home can get attached to someone who then disappears: another loss. And it can blow up co-parenting at the worst possible time.

Do this instead. Give yourself time to be okay on your own. If you do meet someone, keep it separate from the kids until it’s serious and stable — months, not weeks. The readiness test is in Guide 3.

07

The slow disappearance, dressed up as keeping the peace

What it looks like. Missing one weekend, then two. Calls getting shorter, then fewer. Telling yourself, “It’s easier for everyone if I step back,” or “They’re better off without the back-and-forth.”

Why it does damage. This is the one that does the most lasting damage — and it's the one men most often mistake for doing the right thing. Kids don't read your absence as keeping the peace. They read it as: *I'm not worth turning up for*. What protects children through a separation is feeling close to their father, and knowing he's reliably there. You can't build that from a distance you chose.

Do this instead. Stay in — even when it's hard, even when handovers are awful. Be where you said you'd be. When you can't be there in person, be there reliably another way: the same call, the same night, every week. If handovers are the problem, move them to a neutral spot, or use a children's contact service. If the arrangement isn't working, fix it through mediation. Don't fade out of it.

The pattern underneath

Look back over the seven and you'll see the same few things feeding almost all of them.

- **Reacting on impulse.** Almost nothing needs an instant response. Pause first.
- **Trying to control what isn't yours.** The tighter you grip what isn't yours to control, the more conflict you create. Spend your energy on what you can actually move: your behaviour, your health, your time with your kids.
- **Running on empty.** Skipped sleep, food and training wreck your judgement right when you need it most. Protect the basics like they matter — because they do.

- **Letting bitterness set in.** Resentment makes every one of the seven easier. Talk it out with an adult who can take it — a mate, a counsellor, or Dads in Distress on **1300 853 437**.

If anger is getting the better of you — shouting, breaking things, scaring the people around you — the Men's Referral Service on **1300 766 491** is free, confidential and there to help men change it.

If you've done some of these — and most men have — it doesn't mean you've blown it. It means you've been under real pressure and didn't always handle it well. Nobody does. You can steady it. You can show up better, starting now. That's the only thing that actually counts.

WHERE THIS COMES FROM

Buchanan, C. M., Maccoby, E. E., & Dornbusch, S. M. (1991). Caught between parents: Adolescents' experience in divorced homes. *Child Development*, 62(5), 1008–1029.

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Seven things that do lasting damage — and what to do instead.

-
- **Kids as messengers** → Talk to her directly. Kids carry school bags, not messages.
-
- **Weaponising time** → Keep the arrangement, on time. Never hold back one to get the other.
-
- **Badmouthing their mum** → Adult feelings go to adults.
-
- **Drinking through it** → Set your rules before you need them.
-
- **The social-media rant** → Post nothing about the separation.
-
- **The rebound** → Months, not weeks, before the kids meet anyone.
-
- **The slow disappearance** → Stay in. Be where you said you'd be.
-

Done some of this already? Fine. Start again from here.

Tonight, any time: Lifeline **13 11 14** · MensLine **1300 78 99 78** · Emergency **000**

What your children need *right now*.

Five things kids actually need from a father going through separation.

Your kids don't need you to have it all figured out.

They don't need you to fix everything, or explain everything. They need you steady, present and safe to be around. That's most of the job.

And the good news, backed by decades of research: most children of separated parents do well in the long run. How they do has less to do with the separation itself than with how much conflict they live with afterwards, and whether they stay close to parents who are warm and steady. Both are things you can influence — starting today.

INSIDE THIS GUIDE

The five things kids need from their father, the small daily moves that deliver each one — and what to say to them, by age.

- 1 Stability
- 2 Honesty — the right kind
- 3 Permission
- 4 Presence
- 5 Patience

WHERE THIS GUIDE FITS Every stage. Come back to this one often.

IF TONIGHT IS BAD

Call Lifeline on **13 11 14** or MensLine on **1300 78 99 78**. Both are free and there 24/7. If you or anyone else is in danger, call **000**.

They read you, not the situation

Kids don't follow the legal and financial detail. They read the room. They pick up your tone, your tension, whether you seem okay. How you carry yourself tells them more than anything you say. You don't have to be perfect. You do have to be aware that they're watching.

01

Stability

What it means. Their world still works. Same bed, same school run, same rules, same you.

Why it matters. For children, predictability is safety. When the big things are changing, the small things they can count on carry a lot of weight.

DAILY MOVES

- ☐ Keep routines similar across both homes where you can — bedtime, screens, homework. Agree the big ones with their mum if possible.
- ☐ Give them their own space at your place: a bed, a drawer, their things on the wall.
- ☐ Make handovers on time, calm and short. No arguments at the door.
- ☐ Keep your promises small, and keep every one of them.

Honesty — the right kind

What it means. The truth they need, at a level they can hold. Not the adult story.

Why it matters. Children know when something's wrong. Silence and cover stories leave them to fill in the gaps — usually with something worse, and often with “it's my fault.” But adult detail — money, blame, new partners, lawyers — is more than they can hold at their age.

Three messages cover most of it. Say them simply, and say them often.

1 “This isn't your fault.”

2 “We both still love you, and that's not changing.”

3 “You'll still see both of us.”

MATCH IT TO THEIR AGE

Under five

Short and concrete — and expect to repeat it many times. *"Mum and Dad are going to live in different houses. You'll have your own bed at both."* Clinginess, tantrums and sleep changes are common for a while.

Primary school

Simple reasons, lots of reassurance. *"Mum and I couldn't fix our grown-up problems, so we've decided to live apart. It's not because of anything you did, and nothing you could do would change it."* Expect practical questions — where the dog will live, whether they'll change schools. Answer them straight.

Teenagers

Honest and respectful, without offloading. *"This is a tough change, and it's okay to feel however you feel. You can ask me anything — and some answers might be 'that's between your mum and me.'"* Then let them come to you in their own time.

DAILY MOVES

- ☐ Say the three messages often — at bedtime, in the car, when they go quiet.
- ☐ Answer the question they actually asked, simply. Then stop.
- ☐ If you don't know yet, say so: *"I don't know yet. I'll tell you when I do."*
- ☐ Keep adult conversations out of earshot — phone calls included.

Whatever their age: don't lie to them, don't blame their mum, don't overshare, and never ask them to keep secrets from her.

Permission

What it means. Permission to love their mum. Permission to feel whatever they feel. Permission not to take sides — and not to take care of you.

Why it matters. Your relationship with her has changed. Theirs hasn't. When a child hears one parent run down the other, they feel they have to pick a side — and that's a weight no kid should carry. Children who feel caught between their parents show more anxiety and depression, and it strains their relationship with both parents.

DAILY MOVES

- ☐ Say it out loud: *"It's good that you love your mum. You never have to choose."*
- ☐ Let them talk about their time at her place — the good bits too — without flinching.
- ☐ Help them make her a birthday card, or pick a Mother's Day present.
- ☐ Welcome every feeling: *"You're allowed to be angry about this. Even at me."*
- ☐ Never ask them to pass on messages, or to report back.

Presence

What it means. Not time. Attention.

Why it matters. A major review of the research on fathers who live apart from their children found that how *often* kids saw their father mattered less than the quality of the relationship — feeling close to him, and a father who was warm while still setting limits. Your hours with them may be fewer now. What you do with those hours matters more.

DAILY MOVES

- ☐ When they're with you, put the phone away. Properly away.
- ☐ Ten minutes a day that they lead: their game, their topic, their pace.
- ☐ Let ordinary moments do the work — a shared meal, a bedtime chat, the same routine.
- ☐ On nights apart, a short, predictable call or message. Same time, low pressure. Let them lead it.
- ☐ Stay their parent: rules, homework, bedtime. Warm and firm beats the fun-weekend parent.

05

Patience

What it means. Letting them work through it in their own time, and their own way.

Why it matters. Kids don't grieve in a straight line either. Some ask a hundred questions; some ask none. Some seem fine for months, then fall apart over something small. Younger children may go backwards for a while. Teenagers may go quiet, or get angry. Most of that settles as life becomes predictable again. The research is clear that most children adjust well over time — especially when the conflict around them is low.

DAILY MOVES

- ☐ Don't force the big conversation. Be available — in the car, at bedtime, side by side.
- ☐ When they're upset, don't fix it. Stay with it: *"Yeah. This is hard. I'm here. You don't have to be okay right now."*
- ☐ Expect waves around birthdays, holidays and handovers.
- ☐ If they're still really struggling after a few months — not sleeping, withdrawn, changes at school — talk to your GP or their school counsellor.

If your child ever talks about hurting themselves or not wanting to be alive, take it seriously and ask them about it directly. If they're unsafe, stay with them and call **000** or go to the nearest emergency department. Kids Helpline (**1800 55 1800**) is free and 24/7 for young people aged 5 to 25 — you can call it together.

You're the parent — not the other way round

It's natural to want support, and your kids are right there. But they can't be the ones holding you up. Take the heavy stuff to an adult — a mate, a counsellor, a support line. With your kids, your job is to be the steady one.

And being steady comes back to you. When you're looking after yourself, they feel it. That's not separate from being a good father. It's the engine of it.

Kids are more resilient than we give them credit for, when they feel secure. You give them that through consistency, calm and showing up. Ordinary moments do most of the work. You don't need all the answers. You need to be there, steady, while their world resettles.

That you can do.

WHERE THIS COMES FROM

Amato, P. R., & Gilbreth, J. G. (1999). Nonresident fathers and children's well-being: A meta-analysis. *Journal of Marriage and the Family*, 61(3), 557–573.

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Keep this page.

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Five things your kids need — and a daily move for each.

-
- **Stability** → Same routines. On-time handovers. A real space at yours.
 - **Honesty, the right kind** → Not your fault. Still loved. Still see both of us.
 - **Permission** → “You never have to choose.”
 - **Presence** → Phone away. Ten minutes a day that they lead.
 - **Patience** → Don’t fix it. “I’m here. You don’t have to be okay right now.”
-

Lean on adults, not your kids.

Tonight, any time: Lifeline **13 11 14** · MensLine **1300 78 99 78** · Emergency **000**

SUPPORT · SAVE THESE NUMBERS

Someone to call.

Free, confidential, and there for exactly this. You don't need to be in crisis to call. On your phone, tap a number to dial. **If you or anyone else is in danger right now, call 000.**

ANY TIME, DAY OR NIGHT

Lifeline Crisis support, 24/7. Or text 0477 13 1114 .	13 11 14
Suicide Call Back Service If you're having thoughts of suicide, 24/7.	1300 659 467
MensLine Australia Counselling for men: phone, video or chat, 24/7.	1300 78 99 78
Beyond Blue Anxiety, depression and feeling low, 24/7.	1300 22 4636
Medicare Mental Health Check In Free support for stress, low mood and sleep. No referral. Weekdays.	1800 595 212
13YARN For Aboriginal and Torres Strait Islander people, 24/7.	13 92 76

THE SEPARATION ITSELF

Family Relationship Advice Line Kids' arrangements, mediation, where to start. Mon–Sat.	1800 050 321
Dads in Distress (Parents Beyond Breakup) Free peer support run by separated fathers. Daytime, 7 days.	1300 853 437
Relationships Australia Counselling and family dispute resolution.	1300 364 277

ANGER, ALCOHOL, SAFETY AT HOME

Men's Referral Service If you're worried about your own anger or behaviour, 24/7.	1300 766 491
1800RESPECT For anyone affected by family or domestic violence, 24/7.	1800 737 732
National Alcohol and Other Drug Hotline Free, confidential advice, 24/7.	1800 250 015

FOR YOUR KIDS

Kids Helpline For young people aged 5 to 25, 24/7.	1800 55 1800
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Your usual GP is a good first stop too. They can help with sleep and stress, and refer you to a psychologist with a Medicare rebate if it's right for you. Numbers checked September 2026. This guide is general information, not legal, medical or financial advice.

Where to from here.

1 When it first happens

The first weeks. How to hold yourself together — and not make it worse.

2 The middle stage

Months three to twelve. The loneliness, the rebound trap, and settling it without a war.

3 The rebuild

Year two. The four pillars, and the man this version of your life needs.

4 What not to do

The seven mistakes that do the most lasting damage — and what to do instead.

5 What your children need right now

The five things kids need from their father through a separation.

WHEN YOU'RE READY

Rebuild — a 28-day reset.

Built for men going through separation. Twenty to thirty minutes a day for four weeks: stabilise, regain direction, build momentum, own it.

betterdads.com/programs/rebuild

Know a man going through this? Send him betterdads.com/separation/series.

Nobody should do this part alone.

Know yourself.
Show up.
Keep going.

For men who give a damn about who they're becoming.

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