

ROADWORTHY · THE STEADY DAD SERIES · No. 01

When the calls get hung up.

Your kids used to answer. Now the phone rings out, or worse — it picks up and goes dead. This guide is about what's likely happening, what not to do with the hurt, and the steady, strategic moves that protect your relationship with your kids over the distance that matters: years, not weeks.

First: you're not crazy, and they're not rejecting you

A child hanging up on a parent they love looks like rejection and lands like rejection. It usually isn't. Kids are wired to stay safe, and for a child, safe means staying close to the parent they depend on most day to day. When warmth toward you carries a cost in that household — spoken or unspoken — kids adapt by pulling back. Psychologists call the position they're caught in a loyalty bind: managing two adult relationships with a nervous system built for exactly none of that. The hang up is your child solving a problem no child should have to solve. That reframe doesn't remove the hurt. It tells you where the anger doesn't belong: on them.

The move that feels right and costs you everything

When you finally have language for what's happening, the urge is overwhelming: send it to the other parent. The research, the article, the message that says look what you're doing to them. Don't. In an active family law matter, assume anything you send will be read by a lawyer and a judge — and a message confronting the other parent with evidence of psychological harm will not read as education. It reads as pressure, and it hands the other side material. It also doesn't work: you can't out argue someone else's nervous system, and a parent driving this dynamic — deliberately or through their own unmanaged distress — responds to confrontation by escalating. The kids feel every degree of that escalation.

The rule: never send the message that makes you feel better tonight. Send the one that makes the record look better in twelve months.

What steady looks like: the playbook

Keep showing up on schedule. Call when you said you'd call, every time, whether it's answered or not. Consistency is the message — to your kids now, and to anyone reviewing the pattern later. A hundred calm attempts tells a story no argument can.

Keep every message brief, warm and child focused. Write every text and voicemail as if a judge will read it, because one day one might. No commentary on the other parent, no guilt, no case talk. Love, interest in their world, and the door left open. That's it.

Document everything, contemporaneously. The contact log on the last page is the single most strategic tool in this guide. A pattern recorded at the time — date, time, what happened, exact words

where possible — carries weight that memory and emotion never will. Fill it in within minutes of each attempt, not at the end of the week.

Raise the pattern through the proper channels only. Your lawyer, supervised contact reports, and where available a family report or child inclusive process. A pattern identified by an independent professional carries the weight you want — and it's admissible. The same words from you, sent directly, are ammunition.

Regulate before you respond to anything. The physiological sigh — two breaths in through the nose, one long slow breath out — three times, before you open any message from the other side. And the 24 hour rule on anything you write when your engine is hot. Your regulation is evidence. Guard it like it.

What to say when the phone goes dead

Short, warm, no pressure, no guilt. These are patterns, not scripts — make them sound like you.

VOICEMAIL AFTER A HANG UP

“Hey mate, sounds like now wasn't a good time. No worries at all. I love you, I'll try again Thursday like always. Hope the game went well.”

TEXT AFTER A MISSED CHANGEOVER

“No stress about today. I'll be there next Saturday, usual spot. Thinking of you both. Love, Dad.”

THE MESSAGE THEY'LL READ ONE DAY

“You never have to pick sides. I'm your dad no matter what, and my door is always open. That's never going to change.”

Notice what's missing: nothing about the other parent, nothing about court, no questions that demand an answer. Every one of these is safe for a child to receive and safe for anyone to read.

The long game

Kids grow up. They look back with adult eyes, and research on parent child relationships after separation consistently finds that children reassess over time. They remember who stayed steady, who kept them out of the middle, and who kept showing up in whatever way the situation allowed. Every logged call, every calm message, every regulated changeover is a line in the story your adult children will one day read back. You're not just managing a process. You're writing that story now.

Roadworthy provides psychoeducation, mentoring and community grounded in positive behaviour support and psychology research on Australian men. This resource is general information, not legal or clinical advice — decisions about your matter belong with your legal representative. If things are heavy right now: MensLine Australia 1300 78 99 78 or Lifeline 13 11 14, any hour. If anyone is in immediate danger, call 000. Support for anyone affected by family violence: 1800RESPECT (1800 737 732).

The contact log.

Fill this in within minutes of every attempt — contemporaneous notes carry far more weight than recollections. Record facts, not feelings: what happened, exact words where possible, duration. Keep it somewhere dated and unedited (a bound notebook or a dated email to yourself works well). Print as many copies of this page as you need.

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One line per attempt, including the ones that go nowhere — the pattern is the point. Note witnesses where relevant (e.g. supervised contact staff). Never record the children covertly; the log is your account, kept properly.