

ROADWORTHY · THE STEADY DAD SERIES · No. 05

Keeping kids off the battlefield.

Here's the finding that should change how you think about this whole process: the research on separated families is clear that much of the damage conflict does to kids travels through parenting — through what the adults do around them and to them while the fight is on. You can't control the conflict coming at you. You have enormous control over how much of it reaches your kids on your watch. This guide is that job, spelled out.

What the research actually says

Meta analytic work on post separation families shows that ongoing conflict between parents harms children's adjustment substantially through its effect on the quality of each parent's own parenting — and, critically, that the presence of negative parenting behaviours does more damage than any shortfall in positive ones. Read that again, because it's the most hopeful sentence in this series: you don't have to be a perfect dad in impossible circumstances. You have to reliably not do a short list of harmful things, and be warm and steady in the time you have. That's the job. It's completely learnable, and it's entirely inside your control.

The six don'ts

Each of these puts a child on the battlefield. Most dads have done at least one under pressure — that makes you human, not a failure. The skill is catching them early and repairing fast.

- 01 The messenger. “Tell your mum the payment's late.” Every message carried is a child forced to hold both ends of an adult conflict. Anything that needs saying goes parent to parent, in writing, or not at all.
- 02 The interrogator. “Who was at the house? What did she say about me?” Questioning kids about the other household teaches them that information is dangerous — and that time with you comes with a debrief. Curiosity about their life, never surveillance of hers.
- 03 The badmouth. Direct insults, sure — but also the subtle versions: the eye roll, the “well, that's your mother for you.” Kids experience attacks on a parent as attacks on half of themselves. Every time, no exceptions, including when it's deserved.
- 04 The court talk. Hearings, lawyers, affidavits, money — none of it belongs in a child's ears, not even the reassuring versions. “The adults are sorting out the grown up stuff, and you never have to worry about it” is the whole script.
- 05 The guilt. “I miss you so much I can't stand it. It's so quiet here without you.” It feels like love, but it hands a child responsibility for your emotional state. They should leave you feeling loved, not worried about you.
- 06 The sigh. The heaviness, the tension in the car, the mood they can read off you like a dashboard. Kids monitor their parents constantly — regulating yourself around them isn't fake, it's the realest protection you can offer.

The standard isn't perfection — it's repair. When you slip (you will), name it simply and fix it fast: “Mate, I shouldn't have asked you that. That's adult stuff and it's not your job. My mistake.” A child who watches a parent own a wobble and repair it is learning the single most valuable relationship skill there is.

What steady looks like in limited time

If your hours with your kids are limited, here's the reframe the evidence supports: what kids absorb from a parent runs on quality of presence far more than quantity of hours. Children co regulate — their nervous systems borrow calm from the adults around them — and they are expert at detecting which adult is genuinely steady. Two calm, warm, undistracted hours where a child never has to manage your emotions can do more than a full week of tense ones.

Practically, that means arriving regulated (the changeover routine from Guide 04 exists for exactly this), phones away, following their agenda rather than an itinerary you need to be perfect, and holding one steady message underneath everything: you never have to pick sides — I'm your dad no matter what. Plant it, don't push it. Then let the ordinary stuff — the kicking of the footy, the dumb jokes, the servo snacks — do what ordinary stuff does: prove that you're a safe, predictable, enjoyable place to be.

When the other house doesn't play by these rules

Maybe the messages still get carried, the questions still get asked, the badmouthing still happens — just not at your end. Hold your standard anyway. Not because it's fair (it isn't), but because kids eventually compare, and the comparison compounds in your favour every single visit. One battlefield free household is a refuge; you can't make the other house one, but you can make yours one. And every steady visit is also, quietly, the pattern of conduct that speaks for itself wherever it needs to.

Roadworthy provides psychoeducation, mentoring and community grounded in positive behaviour support and psychology research on Australian men. This resource is general information, not clinical treatment or legal advice. 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).

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The after visit reflection card.

Five minutes after every visit or call, once you're on your own. Not a scorecard — a service log. It keeps you honest about the six don'ts, catches wobbles while repair is still easy, and builds your own record of the pattern you're living: steady, visit after visit. Print a stack; one card per visit.

THE SIX DON'TS — QUICK CHECK		
Did anything get carried through the kids (messages, money talk)?	YES	NO
Did I ask about the other household beyond friendly interest in their life?	YES	NO
Any badmouthing — including the subtle versions (tone, eye roll, sighs)?	YES	NO
Did court, lawyers or the matter come up in front of them?	YES	NO
Did they leave carrying my feelings (guilt, worry about me)?	YES	NO
Could they read tension off me for much of the visit?	YES	NO

The good stuff

One moment that went well (however small): _____

One thing they said or did I want to remember: _____

If I ticked YES above — my repair plan

What I'll say, next contact, in one sentence: _____

My state going in

Arrived regulated? YES / MOSTLY / NO Warning lights before the visit: SHORT FUSE / EMPTY /

OVERHEATING / SLEEP / WITHDRAWN / NONE

Date: _____ Visit type: TIME TOGETHER / CALL / VIDEO / CHANGEOVER ONLY

Read your pattern monthly. Mostly NOs with the occasional repaired YES is what steady looks like — nobody runs a perfect log. If the same YES keeps appearing, that's not a character verdict, it's a trigger to map: take it to Guide 03, the Workshop, or a session. And if the “my state going in” line keeps reading rough, service the engine first — the visits will follow.

This card is for your own reflection and growth. It is not a legal document and is not designed for use in proceedings.