

## IN THIS CHAPTER

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# Chapter **1**

# Fatherhood

**R**ight now, somewhere across the globe, someone is becoming a father. He may be suited up in scrubs as his child is delivered by caesarean in a high-tech delivery suite, or holding his partner's hand as she gives birth in a pool at home. He may be pacing at the neighbours' hut in a village somewhere in the developing world as his wife gives birth surrounded only by women, or heading through rush hour traffic to get to the hospital on time. Wherever these dads-to-be are, they all have one thing in common. When they clap eyes on their new little baby, they know life will never be the same.

Well, that's the story the movies tell us. It's a romantic narrative that's completely true for some of us, but doesn't resonate with many. When I became a dad for the first time, I was moved. I cried. I loved my wife more than I'd ever thought possible. And then . . . I really just wanted to get back to the office. I didn't think I could contribute anything further. I felt kind of like the adventure (birth) was over, and now it was time to get back to work — to providing. I had to *learn* to love this new human that I'd helped to create, and that was going to take time.

Regardless of where you fall on the continuum, from awestruck through to blasé, one thing is certain. Change is coming at you faster than an F1 supercar down the straight. For ages, you've been focused on yourself — well, hopefully you *and* your partner: building a career, buying a house, perhaps travelling and seeing the world. You've concentrated on becoming a person and a couple in your own right. But when you have a child, you begin a whole new adventure — one that doesn't end when your visa runs out or the bar closes. And you become a whole new person.

In this chapter, I explore what it means to be a father and talk about the reality of being a dad. The role of fathers has changed a lot in just the generation between our fathers and us. We're more involved, but it feels as though we also have a lot more stress on us. The cost of keeping up means more of us feel overwhelmed with work commitments and financial pressure than any previous generation. Burnout among Western parents is at all-time highs. Becoming a father is associated with increased relationship stress between a man and his partner. It's a tricky time. And we have to contend with information overload, with so many people having so many opinions on how to dad just right.

But fear not — in this chapter and in the rest of the book I keep fatherhood real with practical information, useful explanations and the occasional high-quality dad joke. (Is that an oxymoron?) After all, children are lots and lots of fun, so why make the journey to fatherhood more serious than it needs to be?

## Imagining the Dad You Want to Be

I'm going to use a fancy phrase here to set up a bit of a thought experiment. The phrase is 'temporal distancing', which means I'd like you to do a mental time-travel exercise. Psychologists highlight how temporal distancing (imagining a future state) helps us to get clear on who we really are and what we really value. So here goes. Insert your relevant time-travel pop-culture reference (for me it's *Back to the Future* and the flux capacitor), and let's pay a visit to your future.

Imagine yourself 20 to 30 years from now. You're sitting around the outdoor table. You've just enjoyed a tasty BBQ (rib-eye cooked medium rare — or for the environmentally conscious, some tofu cooked however you like it) and the grandkids are playing with some LEGO and other blocks on the floor. (Of course LEGO's are still around!) You're watching *your grandkids* with awe while you listen to your *adult children* chatting about how you were as a dad and how you raised them.

How would you like your children to remember you? What stories are they telling? What do they remember about the way you responded when they made mistakes,

got it wrong, laid into each other as only siblings can, and refused to do as they were told (as all kids will from time to time)?

Do they remember you being on the sidelines of their games? Were you in the audience at their recitals or assemblies? Did your face light up when they walked into the room? Did you listen? Were you patient, forgiving and compassionate? Did you take them to the video game arcade? Or to the opera? Surfing? Or to the art gallery? Did you instill values that they appreciate now they're wrangling their own little kids? Did you hold them to a high standard but remain gentle when they failed? And are they grateful that you taught them about the very best music on the planet (yours) even when they wanted to listen to all that modern junk?

I know imagining life as a grandparent when you're in the very earliest stages of dadhood may seem a bit of a stretch. But this activity taps into your deepest desires around what kind of a father you'd like to be. It's about understanding your values. My guess: you'd like to be a deeply engaged and active dad. And while you'd probably like to goof off and get a bit rough-and-tumble at times, I suspect you're also looking forward to those sacred, tender moments where you see the miracle your child is and your heart just about explodes with wonder and gratitude. How good does this sound? A lot of water is still to go under the bridge before you get there, but I highly recommend this approach, and so does so much of the scientific evidence that shows children of involved dads do better in life.



REMEMBER

Fatherhood can make you a better version of you than you ever thought possible. (And it will also show you every one of your failings in glaring detail.) Not all at once. The process takes a while. But if you let it, you'll be refined.

When we refine oil (or water or sugar), we remove impurities and other unwanted material. This might seem a heavy way to start a book about becoming a father, but you should know that fatherhood is life's ultimate course in character development and refinement. If you allow it and seek it, being a dad will change you for the better. You'll learn to be more patient, kind, long-suffering, gentle, supportive, generous — unconditional — than you ever thought possible. (Some dads don't allow it . . . but you're reading this, so that's not you.) You'll learn to be the kind of dad that your child believes really does deserve that coffee mug for Father's Day that says *Best Dad Ever*.



REMEMBER

At the office or in your employment, you're replaceable. The machine keeps churning whether you're there or not. In your child's life, however, no-one can take your place. So long as you can be a safe, positive presence, *you are irreplaceable*. Your child needs you. So does your partner. You make a difference.

So no real downside exists to being an involved dad — and your involvement starts right from the beginning, with taking a keen interest in your partner's

pregnancy, participating in the birth of your little one however you can, being a support in the early years, and getting involved as your child grows. That's what this book is all about — enjoying the journey!

## Dispelling Common Myths about Fatherhood

In the past, fathers were often effectively cut off from being involved in childbirth and parenting through preconceived ideas, peer pressure or the demands of the modern workplace. Towards the end of the 20th century, however, we experienced a revival of fatherhood and the dawn of a new generation of dads — a generation of dads who were no longer content just bringing home the bacon and playing a supporting role in the rearing of their children.

Dads in the 21st century now have the option to do things differently and show the world they make fantastic caregivers. They want to be up to their elbows in parenting. Some dads are even taking over and sending mum back to the workforce. Something fundamental is changing about how we bring up our children and organise our lives.

However, despite the generation of new dads, many dads are still faced with a few persistent stereotypes that are taking way too long to die a slow death.

These stereotypes include some of the following:

» **Fathers are completely useless when it comes to looking after babies and children.** I want to say that this suggestion is garbage. But at the start, it's probably true for many of us men. Rarely have we grown up helping our parents raise our little siblings. And teen boys and men in their 20s don't tend to pick up the cute baby at family gatherings, sporting events, church or down at the pub on Saturday arvo so they can have a cuddle or to help burp the kiddo. Men aren't generally recognised for their proactively nurturing natures. This means our experience and skills are often limited at first. But practice — time on the field — is how we get better.

Research shows that fathers are just as good as mothers at caring for babies once they've had a bit of practice and training. They're great with responding to their baby's needs and temperaments, and learning how to read baby's cues. And getting involved is worth it. Research also shows that children with involved dads do better in school, and are more confident and independent later in life. Yes, dads may parent differently from mums, but male ways of doing things are just as important.



REMEMBER



REMEMBER

» **Fathers don't have to do any of the day-to-day care that babies and children require.** This may be true if you want to remain in the dark ages of fatherhood. Twenty-first century dads do care-giving for one important reason: the best way to bond with your newborn child is by taking part in all that day-to-day stuff. Changing a nappy, trimming nails and bathing baby aren't just jobs that need to be completed; they're an ideal way for your baby to spend time with you and get to know you — and for you to get to know your baby. Your child learns that in times of need, you're there to offer safety, help her feel better, and comfort her when she's unwell or just needs a cuddle. Your baby learns words from you as you chat to her while she's in the bath, learns how to put clothes on from the way you dress her each morning, and adopts all sorts of other good qualities simply from the way you are.

What builds your relationship with your baby aren't the big things, but the countless minor moments you have together. Consistency in the seemingly insignificant but important stuff is what makes you a great dad. Every single one of those 'insignificant' interactions counts.

» **Mums think dads are incompetent.** This one may be true from time to time. But most mums really want to see dads step up and get involved. And, at the risk of falling back onto stereotypes, women may admire you just a little when you walk into that playgroup with bub on your shoulder. If you get the occasional overly 'helpful' mum in the supermarket who doesn't think you quite know how to handle a crying baby, be confident that you can demonstrate who's daddy by settling your little one with calm and competent compassion. Don't worry — I get to how you do that later.

» **Fathers don't have a social life.** Wrong — fathers (and all parents) have a *different* social life. You may have to invest a bit of time and thought into how you manage going out or taking part in sports or your other hobbies once you're a dad. Having an extra person in your life takes a bit of getting used to, but that doesn't mean you'll never be able to go out again. Working with your partner as a team and exercising a little creativity — while remaining mindful that your partner likely also wants to have a social life and needs your support to do it — is usually all it takes.

» **Dads don't have a sex life.** Actually that one is kind of true, but only temporarily. The birthing experience, sheer exhaustion, and practicalities of looking after a newborn can make getting back to your pre-baby sex life with your partner somewhat tricky. And, for the safety of your partner, waiting several weeks (or more — check with your doctor) to help her recover from the birth is essential. The word here is patience. Rest assured: your sex life does return (check out Chapters 6 and 8 for more on this subject), and it will get better and better, even after kids. But you might just have to be a bit more creative now that your little one is in the house.

# Knowing What Really to Expect

Asking someone to tell you what being a father is like is a bit like asking ‘What does salt taste like?’ Simply answering ‘salty’ may be true, but is unhelpful to anyone who hasn’t tasted salt. How do you explain what being a father is like? The only answer is that it’s like nothing you can explain — except, just like anyone who has tasted salt knows the taste, anyone who has been a father knows the feeling.



TIP

A good way to get an idea of what fatherhood is like is to spend some time with friends who have recently had a baby. And here’s a novel idea for a lot of us men: talk to your parents and in-laws about it. They’ve been there. Their experience won’t be the same as yours, but this can be an incredible opportunity to grow your relationship with them.

Similar to the uniqueness of your child’s DNA, every father’s experience is different. However, in the following sections, I run through some of the common factors of being a dad, the pros and cons you’re likely to face, and some of the lifestyle changes you may consider making.

## Understanding the dad experience

Here are some common factors that most fathers face:

- » **At first, you may feel like nothing has changed at all.** Many new dads feel like this. And they can sometimes be really troubled by the fact that they’ve just held their new baby and now they’re thinking about that ‘thing’ at work that needs attention. Bonding, adjusting and really experiencing the change that fatherhood brings takes time. Truth be told, in the first hours and days after birth, many dads feel overwhelming love for their partner but very little for their baby. It takes time for the relationship to develop. But once it does — and it could take a few months — you can’t be who you used to be. You’ve *become* a dad.
- » **You often feel frightened, scared, overwhelmed and sometimes lost.** Again, this is normal. The emotional change some dads feel as they consider the reality of their new circumstances can really hit them for six. And the practical stuff knocks some dads around too. Just changing a nappy for the first time or getting clothes on a newborn feels awkward and wrong when you’re new at it. But that’s life, right? We’re always stepping into something new, taking on a challenge and trying something we’re not ready for. It’s what life is about!

- » **Sleep becomes a big issue.** Babies don't understand that day is for being awake and night is for being asleep. Over time, your baby adjusts to what's known as a 'circadian rhythm' and eventually 'sleeps through the night' — the Holy Grail for most parents. But a baby who makes this adjustment before six months of age is rare (and even then, it's typically only about six hours before they need another feed). Babies also need nutrition every few hours to grow, so if your baby is waking up in the night for feeds, consider that she's thriving and growing is a good thing. Chapter 6 discusses feeding your baby and getting her to sleep.
- » **You do things that you never thought you'd do.** You laugh at things that you might have mocked a few years ago. Your less-sensitive and compassionate teenage self would be rolling his eyes at you! And you will almost certainly cry at times that you least expect. You also learn lots about yourself and experience things that you can't experience any other way. Fatherhood is truly an adventure.
- » **Sharing your partner's body with your child before and after birth can feel a bit weird.** Sex during pregnancy can be both brilliant and a bit challenging, depending on how your partner is feeling and how willing she is to get involved with you. Sex after birth can involve tackling some new challenges. See Chapter 3 for more about sex during pregnancy, and Chapters 6 and 8 for more on sex following birth.



REMEMBER

Being a father is a lot about acceptance and going with the flow. A useful mantra to remember is 'This too *will* pass', because every illness, teething episode, period of sleep deprivation or colic will pass. I consistently reminded myself that 'pain is temporary but joy lasts forever'. In the moment, when you're weighed down with exhaustion, worry or fear, you might wonder if that's true. But as a guy who's been there with six kids, and who is now a grandfather, I can promise you: it's true. Every word of it.

## The pros and cons of fatherhood

As with every life decision or change, good things and challenges exist. If you want to take a rational approach to fatherhood, consider the following.

On the plus side:

- » Fathers report their lives are more meaningful than before they had a child.
- » Fatherhood can make you a more compassionate, mature and confident person.

- » You get to be a child all over again. (Yes, you get to goof off, roll around on the floor, wrestle, play with cool toys and teach your child lots of silly tricks.)
- » You can hand down skills and values from your family.
- » You may for the first time in your life truly understand your own father.
- » You get a real kick out of raising a child well and seeing her achieve lots of things.

#### The challenges:

- » Until around three months of age, newborn babies are full on. They cry, sometimes for no apparent reason at all, and you feel like the sound is piercing your brain. Chapter 6 provides helpful hints about settling a newborn and coping with crying.
- » Sleep deprivation is common for all new parents. Fathers of babies under a year old typically have 42 minutes less sleep each night than other men. Doesn't sound like much, but it adds up. For ways to deal with sleep deprivation, see Chapter 8.
- » You have less time for yourself and making plans really does mean making plans — spontaneity goes out the window a bit at the beginning.

The upsides of fatherhood far outweigh the downsides, especially because most of the really annoying aspects (such as sleep deprivation) get much easier the older your children get.



REMEMBER

A sad reality for a small percentage of Australian fathers is that they may not get the chance to experience all the joys that fatherhood has to offer. Though we don't often talk about miscarriage, stillbirth, premature birth and death in infancy in our society, these are terrible losses for some fathers to bear. Others have to deal with the fact that their child, so full of promise and hope, has a serious illness or disability that forces them to shift expectations of what being a father is all about and what their future brings. This grief can be overcome, and life can still be wonderful — and profoundly meaningful. And other fathers have to deal with relationship breakdown with their partners, which can sometimes result in lack of time with their children. I talk more about these issues in Chapters 17, 18 and 19, and provide information and support for parents.

## Letting go of best laid plans

Parenting, for both fathers and mothers, requires a certain amount of letting go. When a baby is born, you no doubt want things for your child — the best of everything, and every opportunity and good thing in life that may come her way. But

birth plans don't come to fruition, family holidays turn into exhausting experiences where you just do all the hard parenting stuff at a new location, and you wonder what happened?

Many years ago, a taxi driver started chatting with me about parenting. When he found out that I write books for parents, he asked me, 'How do I make sure my son becomes a pilot?' I was intrigued. 'Does your son *want* to be a pilot?' I asked. He replied, 'I am not sure.' I paused as I considered where to take this conversation, and then questioned, 'How old is your son?' The response came: 'About six weeks.'

Making plans to try to set up your child for success is tempting. But more than anything, particularly in these early stages of your child's life, focus on the here and now. Be in the moment. Stay where your feet — and your child's feet — are. The nights may feel long as you battle sleep deprivation, but be assured, they fly by, and you will miss the laughter that makes your face crack no matter how hard you try to keep it straight, the cheeky smiles that light up your baby's eyes, and the joy that comes from being a dad to a newborn. More good things are coming. What matters here and now is soaking up what's right in front of you.

## Trading in your lifestyle (but not the sports gear)

Being a great dad will likely involve some sacrifice — and if it doesn't, check how equal your relationship feels. For most dads, becoming a father is about changing your state of mind and changing your ideas of what's important to you. If you want a baby but don't want to change the way you live your life, you're probably better off waiting for a while to have children (keeping in mind that biology will have something to say if you wait too long).

Once you become a dad, some things inevitably change:

- » **Your work:** If you want to spend time with your family, you may consider working fewer hours, or changing to a flexible working arrangement that you can negotiate with your employer. Most dads don't make big changes, although a trend is forming around this. It's not always possible, but it's worth considering, particularly if you want to be a hands-on dad. See Chapter 6 for more about finding a work-life balance.
- » **Your freedom:** Doing things when and where you want doesn't work when you've got a baby. If the swell is perfect and you feel like going out for a surf, you may have to wait until your baby is asleep, or take her and mum along with you. Cycling with the guys in the bunch becomes trickier. And if you and your partner love the outdoors, that camping trip with the hiking or

mountain biking might have to be postponed a year or two (or ten). Spending time out and about with your partner changes. Going out to dinner and a movie is no longer a spontaneous activity, but one requiring planning. Finding time for yourself alongside work and family commitments is one of the biggest challenges fathers face. Chapter 6 provides ideas for juggling other priorities after your baby arrives.

- » **Your finances:** If you and your partner both had an income before your child came along, you're likely to be down to one income for a while. If you lived in a one-bedroom flat, you likely need to find somewhere bigger, and a way to pay for it. Some careful conversations might be necessary as you determine how to enjoy your new life with a baby without breaking the bank.
- » **Your friends and family:** Your relationships with friends and family change. If you live away from your parents, you're likely to find yourself having to spend a lot more time travelling to visit them so your baby can see her grandparents (and you get a few hours of free babysitting). Your partner may have a deeper desire to be close to her mum. This is important. If you can assist in making this happen, do it. Your partner's sense of support is crucial to your family functioning well. Some of your childless friends really embrace you having a child and become the fun aunt or uncle your child gets excited about seeing. Others aren't so keen and you see them less as a result.
- » **Your holidays:** Going on holiday takes on a whole new meaning. You definitely have to postpone that backpacking trip around South America for a few years, at least until your kids are big enough to trudge alongside you. Family holidays are different — great fun, but unlike any holiday you've had since you were a child. And, ironically, they tend to be a lot of work — which makes them feel less like a holiday.
- » **Your lifestyle:** Risky lifestyle or sporting activities such as big wave surfing, remote cycling, base jumping and free climbing are no longer just about risking your own life. You now have to consider the future of your child and family. Some dads won't change a thing. Others will start to think again, and find new ways to get their thrills or stay fit.
- » **Your health and behaviour:** A child is one of the ultimate reasons to change unhealthy habits such as smoking, heavy drinking, using recreational drugs, eating junk food and being a slob. Children need a smoke-free environment to breathe in, good healthy food, clean clothes and nappies, and good hygiene to prevent illness. And watch your words too. Coarse language from a toddler might be funny the first time, but can be pretty awkward if it happens repeatedly. With babies and kids the process is pretty much 'monkey see, monkey do' — eventually all your behaviour comes back to you through your children.

# Only Fools Rush In

Sometimes you can plan when you have a child, and sometimes nature has her own ideas. Either way, fatherhood is a big deal — fatherhood's not like buying a new pair of shoes or potting a plant. Your child, if you decide to have one, has only one shot at life and she deserves the best start you can give her. A positive, healthy, involved and reliable father is a big part of that. If you're being pushed into having a child by your partner or family members, talk it through with your partner. Don't just go along with it because you're afraid of the discussion. Becoming a dad is an important step in life, so take some time to figure out how you feel about it and share your thoughts with your partner.

## Hey, I'm not ready for this

How often in your life can you say you're really ready for something? Not often. Fatherhood, of all things, is probably the most difficult to feel truly ready for. Even if you've been planning to have a child, spent months going through IVF (see Chapter 2 for more about this) and been dreaming of the day you hold your child in your arms, the sledgehammer of reality is likely to whack you over the head when your partner goes into labour and you realise how not-ready you are.

If your partner is already pregnant but you don't feel ready for fatherhood, you've got time on your side. In the coming months, as your baby grows and gets ready for birth, read up on what's happening and what your partner's going through. (Chapter 3 runs you through all the changes occurring for mum and bub in each trimester of pregnancy.) Find out more about the reality of labour, the interventions that might be required and what happens in the first few hours after birth. (Chapter 5 provides some great help here.)

If you're really, truly not ready for fatherhood as the birth approaches, it may help if you talk to someone about your fears. Your midwife or GP can put you in touch with a counsellor.



CHECK  
THE NET

You can find a counsellor yourself through these organisations:

- » Family Relationship Services Australia, [frsa.org.au](http://frsa.org.au)
- » Relationships Australia, [relationships.org.au](http://relationships.org.au)



TIP

Don't forget to talk to your partner about what you're feeling. After all, you are in this together, so it helps to share your feelings and thoughts with her.



WARNING

Although having children can be the most amazing and joyous adventure, the strains of work, family and other commitments can put a lot of pressure on a relationship. Unfortunately, many relationships don't survive this extra pressure. In Chapter 19, I talk about how fathers can cope with divorce and separation and still continue to be great dads.

## My partner wants a baby

You're faced with a sticky situation — your partner is ready to have a baby, her biological clock is ticking, all her friends have babies and she's eager to join the club. But you're not.

Here's my advice: Rather than fight the idea of becoming a parent, talk about it together with your partner. Explain why you're not ready but, equally, listen to her point of view. Imagine yourself as a dad — how does that feel?

Mull it over. Where do you want to be in ten years? Dad to a litter of children with the rewards that brings? Or still living a childless life with the freedoms that brings? When you look back on your life in your old age, do you want children and family to be part of it?

You may feel like there's never a good time to have children or you just don't feel ready. Perhaps you're quite clear that you definitely don't want children. Cool, but then you also owe it to your partner to let her know.

## Timing isn't always everything

Sometimes, despite thinking that you'll wait to have a family until after a big project is completed, you've found a bigger house, or you've been on that trek to Base Camp, nature jumps the gun. Your partner brings home a pregnancy test and you both find out she's likely pregnant. That home pregnancy test needs to be confirmed, but once it has been — you're going to be a dad.

The possible reactions you might exhibit are as varied as the number of men on earth! But . . . think about how you might react ahead of time and how your reaction might be perceived by your partner. If you respond with shock, panic, frustration or any negative emotion, what foundation does that set for discussions moving forward? How does it establish your attitude towards your relationship with your partner? And with your child?

Your response matters. If you're unsettled, pause. Ask for her reaction (remembering she might be wanting to take her cue from you). And, if you can, be excited — or at least upbeat. If the pregnancy is unexpected, let her know that you think it might take a day or two to sink in . . . but you're totally there for her,

and for the bub. (Most men I speak to were stoked to know they'd be a dad, although more than a few started to experience nerves and stress a few days later as it began to sink in.)

As for timing, the truth is there's probably never a good time to do something that requires enormous sacrifice or change. But there's always a good time for kindness and empathy — and excitement.

## Introducing the New-Generation Dad

Fathers today are a quantum leap from the previous generation of fathers. Twenty-first century dads push prams, get up for night feeds, change nappies, and have tried and tested burping techniques. We do everything — except for being pregnant, giving birth and breastfeeding. As for the rest of it, we can tackle anything. Dare I say it, dads can even do some things better than mums.

### Dadhood: A good time to man up

All your life you've had just one person to take care of — yourself. You've made choices, taken risks and shouldered the consequences. But becoming a father is 'the big stuff'. You have a vulnerable, dependent, helpless child on your hands who needs you for the most basic aspects of her survival, such as food, warmth and love. And if everything's gone well, you also have a partner who needs you in a way you've never been needed before. To raise the stakes just a little further, your baby is also watching how you treat your partner — their mum — and the way you do sets the stage for what your child will expect from their partner. A lot is riding on how you do this stuff. Now's the time to stand tall, let go of your stuff, and be there for them — your family. (Does that sound weird? It's actually *your family!*) A real man makes the people around him feel stronger and safer. Fatherhood gives you the opportunity to do this in a way nothing else ever can or will.

Becoming a dad can add a profound sense of meaning to your life. Your views on life, priorities in the world and aspirations for your own future are forever altered. This is a good thing. By becoming a dad, you become part of the circle of life that has been going for eons. You're passing on the baton to your child, packed with all your wisdom and skills, to send your little one off on her own journey. You've got so much you can share with your offspring.



REMEMBER

Children need dads. A Canadian study showed that having a father in a child's life helps her develop empathy. Another long-term study showed that a father's involvement with his child from birth to adolescence helps build emotional stability, curiosity and self-esteem. If you're going to have a child, it will be better for

you and for your family if you can be involved, committed and passionate about your new role. Your child deserves nothing less. She will feel stronger and safer if you're in her life in a positive, involved way.

Our children need involved fathers in their lives and, frankly, you owe it to yourself too. If you're going to be a dad, be a 100 per cent dad and experience it all. You wouldn't do other things in your life half-hearted, so get with it and give parenting your best shot. Make an effort, skill up and spend as much time as possible with your child. Doing so with all your heart makes you a better man.



WARNING

Being a 100 per cent dad makes you a better man because it will stretch you and challenge you in ways you can't imagine. That's how we grow — through challenge, trial and adversity. As daunting as that sounds, it's worth it. After all, who doesn't want to make more of themselves than they are now? Being a dad will do that for you.

## Exploring care routine strategies

The question of how best to raise a baby is one of the most hotly contested subjects today. The rows of parenting psychology books on bookshop shelves attest to that. Some researchers have made the argument that over the last several centuries we've become disengaged from listening to our instincts. We've medicalised natural processes (such as birth and bonding) and slavishly followed rigid routines and overbearing doctor's orders that demanded that mother's (and even doctor's) convenience came first and baby's needs came second. We've joined the rat race and let work dictate our daily and weekly schedules. And we have sometimes looked beyond the mark in our quest to find happiness and create a healthy family.

If you think all the available parenting information is a bit too much, you're probably right. It's easy to feel overwhelmed by the vast amount of 'expert' advice that everyone is trying to give you about how to raise your child. Reading up on this material can be useful, but choose carefully. And remember, you and your partner are in charge of your child — and you decide how you want to bring her up.

Here are some common care routine strategies you may have heard of as you contemplate fatherhood:

- » **Strict routine.** In our parents' day, a strict routine with feeding and sleeping by the clock was promoted as being the best way to bring up a baby. Today, advocates of this method claim that having a strict routine or schedule establishes good habits early so you can minimise sleepless nights and excessive crying. For some parents, routines work a treat and their baby easily

slips into line. For others, their baby resists and parents end up even more stressed out that their little one won't play by the book. My tip: a strict routine is typically best for parents with twins or triplets.

- » **A routine, but not by the clock.** More common today, a flexible routine recognises that babies need to feed and sleep at regular intervals but, rather than let the clock determine when that might be, in this strategy reading your child's cues is the key to making the routine work. A pattern or routine of waking for a feed, feeding, having a nappy change, some play or awake time, and then back down for a sleep does occur. This pattern continues throughout the day, with no play or awake time at night. Chapter 7 has more about establishing a routine, and this is what I'd recommend for most families (with some exceptions for multiple children or parents with mental health challenges).
- » **Attachment parenting.** This form of parenting mimics parenting styles found in developing countries, where cots, bassinets and strollers are rare. Your child is in contact with you at all times of the day, is carried around in a sling or baby carrier, and sleeps with you at night, so she builds a strong bond and attachment with you. It's built around something called 'attachment theory' — a scientifically based description of how to create connection with your child that leads to positive outcomes. But much of attachment parenting in practice goes well beyond what research suggests, and devotees can become a little extreme.



REMEMBER

Many other strategies for raising a newborn exist. Do you leave her to cry when you put her down in order to teach her to fall asleep on her own (hint . . . definitely not in the first six months, and cautiously after that time), or rock her to sleep in your arms every nap time — which isn't practical either? Do you have the baby sleep in your bed, or have her in a bassinet in her own room? These are questions that you and your partner have to ponder and come up with your own answers to. And remember, there are the perfect 'text book' answers, and then there's the reality. You have to live with whichever strategy you come up with, so the strategy has to work for *you*. Chapter 6 gives you lots of ideas for raising a newborn with answers to these questions and many more.



TIP

Keep in mind that the way you want to run things in your family is up to you and your partner. Whether you adhere to a strict routine, or are a bit more laid back about it, as long as your little one is clean, fed and thriving, happy and cheerful, gets enough sleep, and is shown love and affection, she's going to be okay. Don't get caught in a trap of constantly comparing your baby to other babies; doing so generally leads to insecurity and stress and doesn't help you be a better dad. But ask questions of people who have been there, who have done it well, and who model great dadding. You need great guides. This book is one. They can be another.



REMEMBER

Another minefield you're going to have to get your head around is your child's education. Private, public, Steiner, Montessori, homeschool — these are all terms you're going to hear bandied about as your child gets older. Luckily for you, I've done some of the hard yards in Chapter 15 so you can figure out the educational maze for yourself.



TIP

As your baby turns into a toddler, you'll have to start thinking about discipline. People often think of discipline as the way you punish your child for being naughty. But that's not what discipline is about. Discipline is about creating an environment where your child can learn to adjust her behaviour and understand what's okay and what's not. The process involves teaching, guiding and instructing. Discipline's about clear boundaries, consistency and consequences. I talk more in depth about discipline in the Part 3 chapters.

## The Seven Habits of Highly Successful Dads

I've observed certain habits and attributes in amazing dads — and these are traits that each and every man can develop on his journey to becoming a father.

Here are my top seven habits and attributes:

» **Willingness to have a go:** Feeling truly confident about handling a newborn takes time, but think about it. If you want to learn a musical instrument or a new language, you're going to make a lot of mistakes. Maybe a million! Want to learn to be a great dad? Get your hands dirty (literally, in some cases), knowing you may get it wrong. That's how you learn. And it's also how you build that relationship. Don't feign incompetence and leave it to your partner. Have a crack. Show up. Get it done.



TIP

Can't get the nappy on properly? Have your partner, midwife or child health nurse show you. Then practice it ten times. You'll get it. If it's worth doing, it's worth doing badly until you can do it well.

» **Selflessness:** After a life of doing the stuff you want to do, letting go of your agenda can be hard. The very best dads don't think less of themselves — but they do think of themselves less. While they are attentive to the needs of their little one, the most selfless thing they do is try to make life better for their partner. They find ways to serve and assist her, and lighten her load. They don't demand she think for the whole family. If you want to be an amazing dad, do stuff without being asked (such as cleaning the kitchen, making the bed, or running the bins to the bottom of the driveway). When she's overwhelmed, take the baby for a walk. This makes your relationship better and helps you be the best dad ever.

» **They are comfortable in their masculine skin:** The best dads know who they want to be, and how they want to be. They know that real men make the people around them — especially those weaker than them — safer and stronger. This matters, because when your baby is colicky, or wakes every few hours at night, or is teething and cries constantly, you may be at the end of your tether trying to work out how to put a stop to that noise. And without a healthy view of masculinity, being less than your best is tempting. The truth is that often no solution is possible as you endure these challenges. You can't do anything to fix the problem or make a difference. It's just the way it is and you're going to have to deal with it. But understanding that everything in parenting comes and goes — that one day, your little one will sleep through, one day, your child will have all her teeth, and one day, she will grow out of colic — helps you endure the bad times while they last. And it's easier to do this well when you know who and how you want to be as a man, and as a dad.



REMEMBER

The early weeks of a baby's life are a little like one of those *Survivor*-type reality TV shows — except harder because you're dealing with a baby. Just surviving the sleep deprivation, the crying that grips your brain and shakes it about, and the never-ending rounds of feeding, burping, changing and settling can seem impossible. It feels like a marathon. But even marathons end sooner or later. The marathon runner has a vision for getting to the finish line and takes the steps to get there. It's the same with us as dads. You know you want to see that kiddo riding a bike, graduating school, finding a partner and living a good life. You've just signed up for a two-decade marathon . . . so see the finish line and take the steps to get there.

» **Perspective:** When your child is upset, it's easy to see things from your perspective. You're tired. You're stressed. Mum's falling apart. It's all too much. Why won't the baby just eat, sleep, poo and leave you to live your life? Stepping back and seeing the world from your child's perspective — getting curious, not furious — will be your life saver.



TIP

Something happens when you pause and imagine life through your baby's eyes. Here's this kid . . . your kid. Non-verbal. Can't move. Needs something. Only one way to get it: scream. And while you're complaining, the gas in her tummy is building. Or the poo in her nappy has crawled up her back and it's burning her skin and stinking her out and feeling gross. Or she's got a pain but can't tell you where. And you're upset because you were halfway through that thing that matters to you? You're only human. But remember, now she's getting your negative vibe and starting to feel insecure about herself. A shift in perspective where you imagine — with real empathy — what she must be feeling, is an attribute of the very best dads.

» **Playfulness:** Immerse yourself in all the tasks that need doing around your baby, toddler and child and make it fun (so long as it doesn't upset bubba). Adding some playfulness means you're likely to develop a passion for being a

dad. Your child picks up on your passion and is inspired to learn, develop and grow with you at an amazing pace. Play is one of the best ways for kids to develop and grow, and research shows dads can do playtime like a pro.

- » **Patience:** Patience is a virtue — especially for dads. Patience is your friend and makes things a lot easier when you've got kids around. Without patience, you can just pop with anger — often leading to tears all round, even for you. Most of the learning in the early years (and perhaps even throughout life) is achieved through constant and frequent repetition. As a father, you're in the business of facilitating that learning, which means repeating yourself a lot, such as reading *Where the Wild Things Are* for the 53rd time, or telling your little one not to pour her milk in the fish tank for the 17th time. You can literally play peek-a-boo 400 times and your baby will still want more! As adults, we're often not great at dealing with constant repetition because it feels boring or frustrating, but repetition is just about the only way children can learn. By fostering your own patience you're able to elegantly deal with constant repetition and keep your calm. As a result, your child gets the support and encouragement she needs to learn. By being patient, you also avoid putting unnecessary pressure on your child to achieve something, which helps reduce frustration or feelings of inadequacy on her part.
- » **Presence:** Taking time to be with your child and partner as a family is important. How you spend that time with your family is also important. Children have a finely tuned awareness of your attention. They can tell right away if you're actually engaging with them or merely present physically, with your mind miles away. Being present means you devote 100 per cent of your attention to your child and you focus on what she's doing. You don't watch movies online, scroll your social media video feed, or respond to emails at the same time as playing with your child. If you're hanging out with your child, be fully present and 'in the moment'.



REMEMBER

To a child LOVE is spelled T-I-M-E. The best dads know this, and find a way to give it freely.

## Help, I'm a Dad!

I wrote this book because I was once a new dad like you, starting out with mysterious new babies, literally wondering which way the nappy went on. It is tough at the start. Six kids later and grandbabies on the way, and all of that experience has become pretty handy. But starting out . . . whoa! I was clueless, and I needed a guide.

Being a dad can be scary. But it is more likely to be wonderful, and even awesome. Being a dad will leave you in awe. Your kids will have friends come and go. Even partners will come and go — hopefully the good ones will stay. But they'll only ever have one dad. You.

And for you, this role will become a vital part of your identity. Dadhood is the kind of role that many of us dads will judge our lives on. They say that no other success can compensate for failure in the home. This may seem like tough talk, but something inside us already kind of knows it.

If it matters that much, chances are, you want a guide on the side to help you out of some tough spots here and there.

## Asking for directions

Unfortunately, most men don't do vulnerability that well. The stereotype remains mostly true: many men don't like asking for directions. That said, having a map or cool navigation gadgets often helps. That's why I worked with Beyond Blue to create Dadvice — to provide helpful advice for brand new dads.



TIP

You can find Dadvice at [healthyfamilies.beyondblue.org.au/pregnancy-and-new-parents/dadvice-for-new-dads](https://healthyfamilies.beyondblue.org.au/pregnancy-and-new-parents/dadvice-for-new-dads). Think of Dadvice as your map to fatherhood and this book as your journey planner. So you're off to a good start.

## Finding trusted organisations and sources of information

In many ways, the people who know your baby best are you and your partner. You know what she likes and dislikes, what her little quirks are and when something doesn't seem right with her. The thing is that if we feel like we have all the answers, we might miss something important that can really make a big difference. And as hard as it can be to look elsewhere for answers, sometimes someone else may know what your baby needs more than you do. You can find great advice out there. Reading it, ingesting it, and growing with it are worthwhile.



REMEMBER

As adults, we're used to feeling like we're on top of most things; like we're pretty competent and capable. We know how to fix stuff. With babies and children, the situation is different. Many aspects of babyhood and childhood can't just be fixed. Things take time, expertise (sometimes not our own), and a truckload of compassion and humility — compassion for your baby and your partner, and humility for you because maybe you don't know as much as you thought you did. To overcome a particular issue, you may have to try lots of different approaches until you find one that fits.



TIP

Your first stop to finding these different approaches will probably be Google. But stick with this book for trusted, empirically sound ideas. You've also got friends and parents (although this can be tricky). And many people find their child health nurse to be a godsend. They have experience with all kinds of children, and can spend some time with your little one getting to know her and finding out what's going on. Another good place for information is the booklets and information you were given when your baby was born. Depending on where you live, your health service gives you a guide for basic baby and toddler care. These booklets often have good strategies for aspects such as starting to feed your baby solid food, coping with crying and dealing with nappy rash, along with local services you can call in times of need. Throwing them away as unnecessary may be tempting, but some can be valuable. Hold onto them . . . just in case.

## Internet research

The internet's a pretty handy thing. With just a few keystrokes, you can search for anything your heart desires.



WARNING

Anyone can build a webpage, run a blog or comment in a forum, but that doesn't mean they have the expertise you're looking for. Gauge the quality of the information provided on websites by checking the organisation or individual who's responsible for it, their credentials, affiliation with recognised authorities and any ulterior motives they may have, such as financial, political or religious reasons.

Once you're happy with the person or people providing the information and opinions, checking out forums where other dads are sharing their problems and offering solutions can be handy. Just don't take as gospel that everything they say is authoritative. And keep in mind that what works for one baby may not work for yours, and vice versa.



CHECK  
THE NET

As a starting point, you can check the following sites for useful and trustworthy information:

- » **Dadvice** (search for it via Beyond Blue website, [www.beyondblue.org.au](http://www.beyondblue.org.au), or go to [healthyfamilies.beyondblue.org.au/pregnancy-and-new-parents/dadvice-for-new-dads](http://healthyfamilies.beyondblue.org.au/pregnancy-and-new-parents/dadvice-for-new-dads)): Written by dads for dads, the site contains information about all aspects of fatherhood from newborns to supporting your partner and looking after yourself.
- » **Raising Children Network** ([raisingchildren.net.au](http://raisingchildren.net.au)): This non-profit site is supported by the Australian Government, the Royal Children's Hospital in Melbourne and the Parenting Research Centre. The site has articles on all aspects of looking after kids, from changing a nappy to the tricky questions of spoiling a baby and spotting allergies. The site also offers a special section for dads.

» **Happy Families** ([www.happyfamilies.com.au](http://www.happyfamilies.com.au)): Okay, maybe I'm taking advantage of the fact that I've written this book . . . but my website is full of articles, videos and other resources to help dads navigate the challenges parenting throws our way.



WARNING

If your baby or child is sick, avoid diagnosing her by searching the internet. After phoning a health service, a real live GP is your first port of call should you be concerned about your baby's health. For more about common health problems, check out Chapter 14.

## Turning to friends, colleagues and family

When you're a new father, people are excited for you, and some may get a bit nostalgic for when their own children were little. They want to share with you their hard-won pieces of advice and may have an opinion on just about every aspect of looking after junior. Some of the advice may make sense to you; other gems are likely to seem bizarre. You just have to add each pearl of wisdom to your pile of approaches to try should you need to. Ultimately, you find out yourself whether or not something makes sense for your situation.

Turning to people who are close to you is an invaluable way to stay sane. If you're struggling, go hang out with a dad who's been through this experience. Looking at dads who've been through the crazy first weeks and months, and then come out the other side and want to have more kids, is a great way to get inspired and motivated for your own journey. You may at first think they've lost the plot but, really, these dads are no different from you. They've survived and, as many dads say, 'every day just gets better'. And, no, they haven't joined some terrible cult and become brainwashed — they've just had children and, one way or another, that tends to have a big impact on everyone.

Not long from now, you may be the one sitting down with a new dad, hearing tips and advice flow forth from your own mouth!



TIP

Don't overlook the power of your own dad. If he was a positive influence in your life, go to him, tell him you want to go a great job, and listen. Learn. Ask him what he wishes he'd known, what he would do differently if it all started again, and what he thinks he completely nailed. If he was a lousy influence and completely blew it, consider what talking to him about your experiences might do. The conversation could blow up and go nowhere. If that happens, though, you haven't lost anything because the relationship was a mess already. But what if you went to him and gently said something like, 'Things didn't work out so well for us. I'd like to talk with you about what you'd do differently, what you've learned, and what I can do so I can break the cycle for me and my little one.' Perhaps closure, forgiveness

and new relationships might be possible. (But please enter a situation like this carefully. A wounded or manipulative, hurtful dad may not be good for anyone in your family.)

## Starting a dad group

We all know a new dad or someone who's about to enter into the realm of fatherhood. Lots of dads meet at antenatal classes and keep in touch after that. Getting together to talk and share your experiences doesn't need to be a formal affair, with chairs in a circle and 'feelings'. It can be meeting for a beer while junior snoozes in her stroller, or a coffee at a cafe with the little ones clamouring over each other on the floor. Getting together can be as simple as a gathering at the park. Finding new dads to join you should be easy, but if you're feeling a bit isolated, give your midwife or child health nurse a call to see if your carer has any dads living nearby on the books you could catch up with.



TIP

An easy way to get together with other dads is to use the mum networks. Ask your partner about speaking to other mums about a dad get-together. Before you know it, a BBQ, picnic or stroller walk has been magically arranged and you can take it from there.

## Savouring dadhood

Numerous studies have shown that if we truly want to be happy, we need to savour the great stuff in our lives. To savour means we amplify or extend a positive experience. How?

A great steak (or terrific seared tofu if you're a vegan) tastes so much better when you breathe in the aroma of that char-grilled finish, and when you then slowly place it on your tongue, close your eyes, and feel those juices flow through your mouth. Slowing the experience right down and concentrating on every smell and every flavour magnifies the taste. If we're really, truly savouring that piece of food, we often groan in the bliss of the moment.

As a dad, you experience plenty of times when you don't feel like you have anything to savour. Being a dad is hard work. And it will stretch you in ways you didn't know you could be stretched.

But being a dad is something you'll want to savour, especially while you have a newborn. When it comes to being a dad, the scariest part has nothing to do with poo explosions or having vomit on your shoulder — it's that it goes so fast. You may not feel like the hours and days are moving fast when your baby isn't sleeping, your partner is exhausted, everyone's sick, and you wonder why you ever

thought it was a good idea to have this kid. But time really races by. Before you know it, your baby is crawling, then walking, then heading off to day care, and then big school. You'll look at your partner and say, 'Where did that time go?' So savour those moments. Take lots of photos. And relish every part of the breathtaking cuteness of your newborn baby.

Research shows that when children have an actively engaged dad, they do better. At every level. Your little one needs you. But studies also show that dads who spend more time with their children also do better. It seems you need your little one just as much.

## BECOMING A GREAT DAD

In 2002 I was a young dad with a three-year-old and a newborn. And I was failing. I had no idea how to get it right. My temper was worse than my toddler's. My children had exposed some anger issues that I'd never known about before. And my marriage was looking shaky.

With the desire to save my family, I quit my job as a capital city radio announcer and returned to school for what would end up being nearly nine years of full-time study in psychology so I could learn to be a better dad and husband.

That decision changed my life. It helped me to learn how to support my family emotionally and psychologically — not just financially. And it's the reason I do what I do now.

While it involves a lot more, ultimately if we drill right down to the core, being a great dad means you have to be good at just a couple of jobs:

- **Love your kids and partner — and show it consistently.** You won't get it right all the time. No-one can. We're not perfect. But this has to be your number one priority. Do this through powerful connection, where your family feels consistently heard, seen and valued. When you do this, you build trust. They know you're acting in their best interest. And you connect and build trust most effectively when you stay positively, healthily and safely involved in their lives.
- **Work on boundaries together.** This means you act in a way that ensures your kids know you're there to provide protection (and to teach them to protect themselves), and to provide structure. The structure and boundaries you develop with them will make life feel predictable and safe. Focus on working with them when they need guidance, discipline and structure, rather than doing things to them.

*(continued)*

*(continued)*

If you can create an environment where you meet these needs, and support them to work things out for themselves (with your gentle input and encouragement), you'll be doing fine. Actually, you'll be doing better than fine. You'll be nailing it!

Unfortunately, you're going to make mistakes. Hey, you're only human. You can bet that, at times, you'll blow up, freak out, and not be the cool dad at all. Sometimes you might reckon it's justified. But remember — the best dads help their kids feel stronger and safer. If you're undermining how strong and safe they feel, you still have work to do.

When you get it wrong — and you will — say sorry. Repair things. Try again. And earn that 'world's best dad' coffee mug you know you're getting from the Father's Day stall at school a few years from now.

Also remember you have as many ways to be a good dad as there are dads in the world. Not all of them are good. But they can be. And so can you.

A good dad loves his kids, helps them feel safe and strong, and gives them the support and guidance they need as they have their hiccups, mistakes, setbacks and difficulties — whether they're emotional, behavioural, neurological, physical, spiritual, social or parental. A good dad is 'there'.

So as you embark on this parenting journey, prepare for the most challenging and frightful journey of your life. It's tough going. But keep your eyes out for the joy, because if you're 'there', you'll see a never-ending stream of tiny joyful glimmers that make it all worth the price of admission.