
THE

CALM DAD

WORKBOOK

A Practical Guide to Managing Your Emotions,
Strengthening Connections,
and Parenting with Intention



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Every individual and family situation is unique. The strategies and reflections included in this workbook may not be appropriate for everyone. Readers are encouraged to use their own judgment and to seek professional support when needed.

If you are experiencing significant emotional distress, mental health concerns, or feel unable to cope, please seek support from a licensed mental health professional in your area. If you are in immediate distress or believe you or someone else may be in danger, contact your local emergency services right away.

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WELCOME

You care about your kids. You want to parent well, and most of the time, you do.

At the same time, there are moments when things escalate quickly, emotions run high, and before you know it, you are responding in ways that do not reflect how you want to show up as a dad. You might find yourself snapping, shutting down, withdrawing, or pushing through. Afterward, there is often a sense of disconnection from your child, your partner, or the kind of parent you want to be.

This workbook was created to help you understand those moments more clearly. The goal is not to eliminate frustration, anger, stress, or overwhelm. Those experiences are part of parenting. Instead, the goal is to help you notice what is happening inside you, recognize the patterns that pull you off course, and develop the ability to respond more intentionally when parenting gets hard.

I encourage you to move through this workbook slowly. You do not need to complete it in order, and you do not need to finish every exercise for it to be useful. Some sections may immediately resonate with you, while others may feel less relevant right now. Take what is useful, stay curious about the rest, and return to the ideas that feel meaningful or challenging.

As you work through the exercises and reflection prompts, pay attention to what stands out. Notice the thoughts, emotions, memories, images, and urges that show up along the way. Use the space throughout the workbook to write down your reflections, observations, and ideas. You may find yourself returning to certain exercises more than once as new experiences bring new insights. The value is not in completing every page; it comes from increasing your awareness and practicing new ways of responding in the moments that matter most.

I am Dr. Maryke van Zyl, a clinical psychologist who has spent years working with fathers, couples, and families. The ideas in this workbook are informed by that work and by evidence-based approaches, including Acceptance and Commitment Therapy (ACT), Dialectical Behavior Therapy (DBT), and Emotionally Focused Therapy (EFT). My hope is that these ideas feel practical, accessible, and relevant to the realities of everyday parenting.

Parenting is a journey of learning, adapting, and reconnecting. I hope this workbook gives you a few useful tools to support you along the way.

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THIS DIDN'T START WITH YOU

The way you react to your kid's behavior didn't come out of nowhere. It was shaped long before you had kids. Research consistently shows that our early experiences with caregivers influence how we understand emotions, relationships, stress, and connection throughout life. These experiences often become automatic patterns that guide how we respond to our own children, especially during emotionally charged moments.

The good news is that parenting is not determined by the past. Increasing awareness of our own experiences can help us respond more intentionally rather than automatically. Understanding where our reactions come from creates opportunities to make different choices and build the kind of relationship we want with our children.

Many men were taught, directly or indirectly, that being a man means:

- Handling things on your own
- Staying in control
- Keeping certain feelings to yourself

Some boys learned this from what was said out loud; others learned it from what was not said. Over time, this creates a kind of internal rulebook:

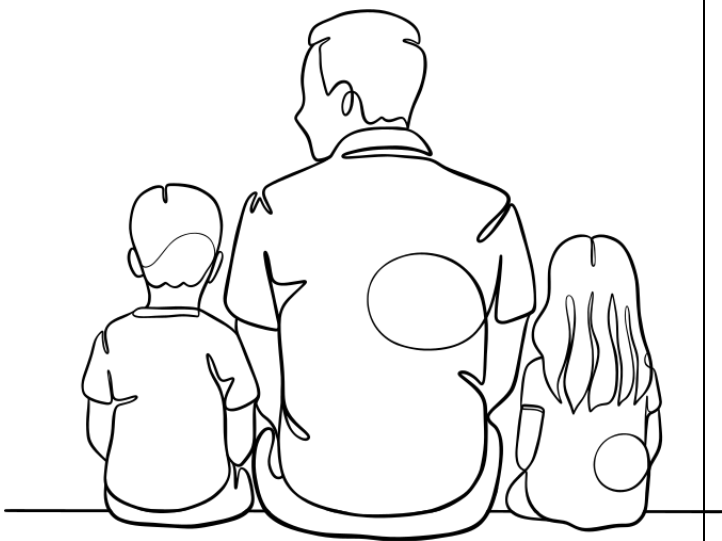
- Stay strong
- Don't need too much
- Don't show too much

These patterns often worked when you were younger. They may have helped you succeed, stay safe, or earn respect. But parenting asks something different. It asks you to:

- Stay present when emotions are intense
- Respond instead of shutting down or reacting
- Stay grounded, even when things feel overwhelming

So, when you find yourself getting impatient, shutting down, or pulling away in difficult moments, it's not random; it's learned. And the important part is this: What was learned can also be understood, updated, and changed.

Sometimes the strongest reactions in parenting are not only about what is happening with your child in the present. They can also reflect old experiences, expectations, or emotional patterns that were never fully understood or worked through. Becoming more aware of your own story helps you respond with greater intention rather than react automatically.



REFLECTION

What did you learn about emotions growing up? Think about both what was said and what was modeled.

- Which emotions felt acceptable to show?
- Which emotions were ignored, discouraged, or punished?
- What happened when you were upset, scared, or overwhelmed?

What were you expected to do when things were hard? Consider the unspoken expectations placed on you.

- Were you expected to handle things on your own?
- Were you expected to “toughen up” or move on quickly?
- What did strength look like in your family?

What felt challenging for you as a child, and how was that handled?

- Were your struggles noticed or overlooked?
- Did someone help you make sense of what you were feeling?
- What did you learn about asking for help?

Who did you turn to, if anyone?

- Was there someone who felt safe, steady, or understanding?
- If not, how did you cope on your own?
- How did that shape the way you handle things now?

How do these patterns show up for you now as a dad?

- When your child is upset, what do you tend to do?
- Do you move toward, shut down, or try to fix quickly?
- What feels hardest for you in difficult moments?

What do you want your child to learn about emotions?

- How do you want them to experience you when they're struggling?
- What do you want them to feel safe expressing?
- What would "doing it differently" look like for you?



You're not starting from scratch. You're building on what you were given and choosing what to carry forward.

The complete e-book can be found here: <https://a.co/d/06bYhLT>