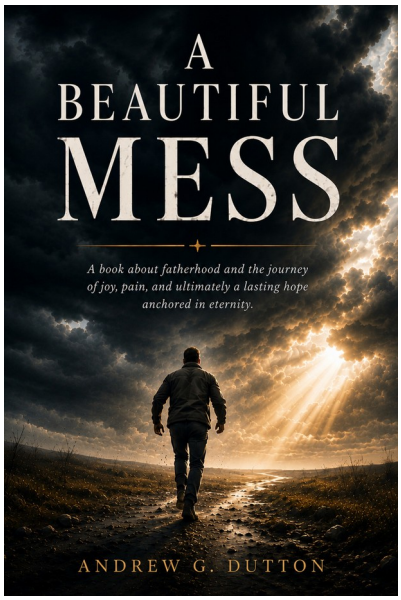
Run Towards the Mess

Five Simple Ways to Build a Stronger Connection With Your Children

By Andrew G. Dutton



Before the Mess

Being a dad is one of the greatest privileges of my life. It has also challenged me in ways I never imagined. I wanted to protect my children, guide them and see them thrive. I didn't always understand what they needed from me.

In the Brisbane Children's Court, sitting beside my son Michael, I made a commitment to keep walking towards him. I couldn't control every outcome. I could choose how I showed up.

But you don't have to wait for a crisis to build connection. It grows in ordinary moments: listening to a small child's story, taking an interest in a teenager's world, or making time for an adult child without taking over.

These are five reflections from my own beautiful mess, not a formula for getting fatherhood right. Read them, think about your own family, then choose one small thing to try this week.

From A Beautiful Mess: Introduction, Connection is the Goal

1 Choose connection over control

During Multi Systemic Therapy, Faith and I were challenged to enter Michael's world. He was spending less time at home, and we were frightened about where his life was heading. We had to learn a different way of being present.

That particular support programme asked a great deal of us. The lesson I carry is that connection begins with taking an interest in the world our child actually lives in. With adult children, that includes respecting their choices and their space.

Ask yourself Where am I putting more energy into directing my child than getting to know them?

One thing to try Offer 15 minutes without an agenda. Join your younger child's play, let your teenager show you something they enjoy, or ask your adult child when a call would suit. Listen without turning it into a lesson. If they decline, leave the invitation open.

From A Beautiful Mess: Chapter 8, Relentless Presence and Turning Point

2 See the person, not just the behaviour

When we found sleeping pills in Michael's room, we confronted him with advice about drugs, character and friends. Then he broke down. He was struggling with racing thoughts and needed everything to slow down. We had seen the behaviour and missed his pain.

I'm still challenged by that moment. Curiosity matters. So does remembering the strengths and value of the person in front of us. Understanding what is happening doesn't mean abandoning a necessary boundary.

Ask yourself What might I not yet understand, and what do I still admire in my child?

One thing to try Write down three qualities you genuinely value in them. Tell them one, without adding a correction. At a calm moment, ask what has been difficult lately. With a younger child, use simple words and give them time; with older children, let them choose how much to share.

From A Beautiful Mess: Chapter 3, The Breaking Point and Discovering the Truth

3 Do something with them, not just for them

Faith and I started Dutton Property Services to create a place where Michael could work alongside us. We began with lawn and garden jobs. It gave him structure, purpose and responsibility, and gave us time together.

You don't need to start a business. I wish I'd made more room for shared life earlier. An ordinary activity can give us somewhere to begin, without demanding a deep conversation before we've even put the kettle on.

Ask yourself When did we last do something together simply because we could enjoy it?

One thing to try Invite your child to choose one activity in the next seven days: bake with a little one, share a game or walk with a teenager, or cook, garden or volunteer with an adult child. Agree on something you both want to do. Let time together be enough.

From A Beautiful Mess: Chapter 10, Rethinking Careers and Born from Necessity

4 Choose the hills worth fighting for

In our home, Faith and I developed a conflict filter. We asked whether anyone was being harmed and whether the issue really deserved the intensity we were giving it. I reflect in the book on how easily we can turn preferences about interests or careers into battles about acceptance.

I still have convictions. But I want to understand what I'm protecting before I make a disagreement bigger. A safety boundary matters; winning every difference of opinion doesn't build the relationship I want.

Ask yourself Is this about harm, or about my own preference, fear or expectations?

One thing to try Pause over one recurring disagreement. Name the actual concern. If safety is involved, explain the boundary and seek help where needed. If it is a preference, try asking about their view. A child's choice of play, a teenager's interests and an adult child's career need different levels of parental involvement.

From A Beautiful Mess: Chapter 5, Our Family's Conflict Filter

5 Don’t do fatherhood alone

One evening at Susi and Halley’s home, Faith and I finally fell apart. They had walked through difficulty with their own child. They listened without judgement. Nothing about our circumstances changed that night, but we left feeling less alone.

We needed community. Fathers need it in ordinary seasons too: people to laugh with, learn from and be honest with before everything feels too heavy.

Ask yourself Who knows how I’m really doing as a dad?

One thing to try Arrange a coffee or call with one trusted person this week. Share one joy and one difficulty. Ask how they are doing too. Respect your child’s privacy; you can ask for support without telling every detail of their life.

From A Beautiful Mess: Chapter 8, Trusted Friends and Permission for Pain

Your one next step

You don’t need to tackle all five at once. Choose the reflection that speaks to your family today. If contact is limited, choose a respectful step within the boundaries in place.

The one thing I will try

_____

When I will do it

_____

One final question

When your child looks back on this season of their life, what do you want them to remember about how you showed up?

I can’t promise an outcome. I can keep learning, loving and showing up. So can you.
Andrew

Continue the journey

A Beautiful Mess tells the story behind these reflections. Explore the book and more resources, or discover the wider work of Hidden Power Foundation.

abeautifulmessbook.com

hiddenpower.au

This guide shares personal experience and reflection, not professional parenting, mental health or legal advice. It is not a clinical tool and does not promise outcomes. Staying connected can include firm boundaries and distance for safety. For significant distress or safety concerns, seek appropriate professional support; in immediate danger, contact local emergency services.