

**“I didn’t know how to be a dad... I only knew how to survive.”**

**John, 36, Perth**

I grew up around gang life. That’s all I knew. Violence, control, survival, that was normal for me. When I became a dad, I had no idea what that was meant to look like. I thought being the man meant people listened because they were scared. That’s how I was raised. That’s what I saw. I didn’t realise I was passing down the same pain.

At home, things were falling apart. I was working away a lot, under a lot of pressure, and bringing the stress back with me. I was angry all the time; shouting, being verbally and physical abusive - I was taking my pain out on the people I cared about. My partner, Tasha, was pregnant with our son Leo, and we were already raising her older kids. But fear had taken over our household. I started to lose her and the kids too.

When my son Leo was born, that was a huge wake-up call. Something changed in me. I looked at him and realised, *this* is the life I’m about to hand over. Is this what I want for him?

I decided to leave the gang. But leaving came with a cost, I was beaten so badly I was unrecognisable. Tasha, my partner, had no choice but to move out with the kids. It was about keeping them safe. I didn’t see them for weeks after that. That’s when I started to spiral.

Tasha eventually cut me out completely. I lost everything. I was trying to numb the pain, cannabis at first, but it wasn’t enough. Only meth blocked it out. I wasn’t eating, barely surviving. My weight dropped fast. I was on my own. No partner. No kids. No direction.

Then DCP got involved. I asked them for help. I knew I couldn’t keep going like this. That’s when I heard about *Caring Dads*.

When I first heard about Caring Dads, I didn’t want to do it. I thought, “I don’t need this. I’ve been through worse.” I was scared I’d be judged. The old me probably would’ve gotten into a fight just for being looked at the wrong way. But then I remember Tasha say, “He’ll never change.” That hit me. I wanted to prove that I could. Not just to her, to myself, to my kids, to everyone who thought I was a monster.

The group was tough at first. Sitting in that room, talking about feelings, childhood, trauma and what I had done and the impact of this on Tash and the children - that was all new for me. But it started to make sense. I remember using the Feelings Wheel and the Parenting Continuum, that stuff helped me realise I’d been parenting from a place of fear, not love. I wasn’t helping my kids; I was just controlling them. And I saw it... I was turning into my own dad. That crushed me.

Hearing the other dads share their stories helped too. For the first time, I didn’t feel alone. There were others like me, struggling, trying, hurting, but most importantly also starting to realise and actually change. I learned how to pause instead of exploding. I learned to talk, to listen. I even started having real conversations with Tasha. Before, we couldn’t sit at the same table without it blowing up. Now, we sit out the back and talk through things. I started being there, really being there, for my partner and the kids. She saw that my words were matching my actions. I wasn’t just saying I’d change; I was doing it.

Now, I go to my stepson’s footy training, I even help with school. The kids draw pictures of our family again, with me in them and have started calling me dad again. That’s something I never thought I’d get back.

Tasha says I'm not the same person anymore. She says I softened. I'm proud of that. Her mum, the hardest person to win over is now my biggest supporter, she can see the difference in me and how her daughter and grandkids are safe and happy again. That means the world to me.

**What does being a good dad mean to me now?**

It means being a safe space. It means my kids can come to me without fear. It means showing up, loving them, and protecting them, from the world and from who I used to be. It means owning the past without letting it define the future.

**To any other men thinking about this program:**

Don't write it off, don't judge it before you try it. I didn't believe in talking, didn't believe I could change. But *Caring Dads* helped me find the tools and the belief to do both. I learned how to be a dad. A real one.

***There's a scared little boy inside a lot of us. Caring Dads helped me face mine.  
There's hope, even for someone like me.  
You can change. I did.***