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publisher’s note

This magazine may be new, but Parenting Ideas already has a strong track record of supporting and educating parents. In fact, it’s over two decades since we conducted our first parenting course and contributed our first column to a major daily newspaper.

We’ve always believed that if we are to have better kids we need to have better parents. And, of course, better parents are informed parents. Parenting education is for all.

Parenting Ideas helps parents stay up to date through our presentations, seminars, blogs and Parenting Ideas TV. This magazine is the natural extension of our educational work.

Most of our hand-picked team of writers are parenting educators or professionals who work with children and their parents. Their work is knowledgeable, heartfelt and supportive of kids and parents. These experts also feature on our website so head over to parentingideasclub.com.au for more of their professional insights.

Enjoy this issue of Parenting Ideas magazine!

Michael and Sue
“Doh! I didn’t think that through!”
That was my immediate response after I’d engaged in some play fighting with a friend’s eleven-year-old son.

After a day spent with my friend’s family we were getting ready for a group photo but Mr. 11 suddenly became a reluctant participant.

I playfully placed him in a headlock and good naturedly pulled him in for the shot. Photo taken and we all had a laugh about it.

I quietly congratulated myself for winning the young boy over.

Two minutes later all hell broke loose. The eleven-year-old had grabbed his nine-year-old younger brother in a headlock and dragged him to the ground. And he wasn’t letting go.

His father yelled at him to stop, but Mr.11 wasn’t listening. It took some very physical intervention from dad to bring the wrestling to a halt.

The previously harmonious scene was gone, replaced by angst and anger from parents and kids.

Gulp! I’d done the wrong thing when I grabbed Mr. 11 in a playful headlock.

Even though it was meant in jest my headlock gave Mr. 11 permission to do the same to his younger brother.

His headlock wasn’t in the spirit of playfulness as mine was. It was malicious but that didn’t alter the fact that I gave him permission to place his brother in a headlock by doing the same to him.

**WE ARE ROLE MODELS**

As models for kids adults teach kids how to behave and how to speak to others. It’s parents who provide social scripts for kids, which they often use when we’re not around. Most primary school kids use the social scripts they learn from home when they speak and interact with others.

A script that shows tolerance and kindness is usually learned at home, and reinforced by teachers and other adults at school.

But parents not only teach kids how to behave through our modelling, but our own actions give kids permission to behave in those same ways. In fact, we give our kids permission all the time through our behaviour. When we are angry, terse or overbearing we give our kids permission to be the same. The permission is implicit rather than explicit. We don’t actually say to our kids, “It’s okay to be really angry to your brother. Go on yell and shout all you want!” But when we shout and get angry with our kids regardless of the justification we give our kids permission to do the same to others. Okay, we don’t actually encourage or even allow them to do so, but our behaviour speaks louder than our words.

**USING THE PSYCHOLOGY OF PERMISSION POSITIVELY**

Conversely, we give kids permission to be kind, caring and tolerant when we behave in those ways. Our behaviour lets kids know that it’s okay for them to be kind, caring and tolerant.

That’s why modelling is such a powerful shaper of children’s behaviour. And it’s even more impactful when a child holds their parent in high regard. That makes the early and middle years of childhood when kids really have their faces turned toward their parents as the ages when modelling is of paramount importance.
GENDER ALSO IMPACTS ON PERMISSION

Mums can model behaviours for their sons just as much as dads, but it’s a father’s behaviour that gives permission to his son to act in the same way. The British found out years ago that one of the keys to getting boys from lower socio-economic areas interested in reading was for their fathers, or the admired males in their lives, to be seen reading at home. A father’s reading gave his son permission to read.

The same holds with boys handling emotions. While I’ve long believed that mothers make great relationship coaches for boys – most boys need one – it’s dads who are best placed to help their sons to communicate on an emotional level. Quite simply, when dads can communicate their feelings maturely they give their sons permission to do the same. In this situation it’s a case of mums showing, and men allowing.

PERMISSION PROVIDES SAFETY AND ENCOURAGEMENT

A parent’s smile to a child gives a youngster permission to smile and be happy. Kids are mood detectives with great expertise at picking parents’ moods. When we smile and laugh even though life maybe tough we give our kids permission to smile and be happy. Following a loss in the family kids will usually take their cues from their parents about when it’s okay to bring play and levity back into their life. A joke, a laugh or game initiated by a parent can send the message that it’s okay for kids to do likewise.

Our behaviour can help kids feel safe and take risks. When we laugh at children when they are funny we give them permission to take risks. When we accept honest mistakes in anything they do we give them permission to try without fear of failure and confidence is more likely to follow. Our reaction to kids’ learning and behaviours will either provide or deny kids the permission they need to develop and learn in positive ways.

WHAT PERMISSION MEANS AS A PARENT

I’ve long believed that parenthood is the great maturing agent of our time. In an era when young people seem stuck in a long, drawn-out adolescence the birth of their first child is the introduction to selflessness and responsibility for many people. Apart from the fact that new parents are now responsible for the upbringing of someone apart from themselves, the fact that the minutiae of their behaviour for the first time is being watched and copied by another is indeed a game-changer.

But it’s the fact that their behaviour provides their children with permission to act in similar ways that is the scariest thing. Quite simply, parents in particular and adults in general need to be mindful about how we behave when kids are around. I don’t want to put a dampener on a person’s playfulness, spontaneity and sense of individuality. But when kids are around you just have to think and be smart about how you behave.

Which is why a seemingly harmless and playful headlock of an eleven-year-old was so thoughtless. In truth, I’d known that the eleven-year-old could be quite a handful. I had seen hints of it all day. I should have known that my physicality was going to be a green light to a youngster just hankering to create a little mayhem. That’s the point. I didn’t think. Next time, I will.
Parenting with the Brain in Mind
There is some great news for parents on recent research on how children’s brains grow and learn. Maggie Dent has 10 top tips for parenting with the brain in mind.

Over the past 15 years there has been a massive outpouring of research that explores the human brain. Many old theories have been tossed out, many new ones are now considered the norm, and much debate goes on in the corridors of our universities as neuroscience touches every corner of academia. As a former teacher it would have been really useful to have this fabulous research at my fingertips and as a mother, equally as important.

The first key concept to hold in mind is neuroplasticity, which essentially means that the brain has the capacity to change all the way through life.

Norman Doidge wrote in his book, The Brain that Changes Itself of how this idea of neuroplasticity — that our thoughts and actions can actually change the way the brain is structured and works — is the most important shift in how we see the brain as when we were first able to sketch its anatomy.

Put simply, neuronal ‘highways’ can be strengthened through repeated and focused thought as well as repeated activities and the stronger they are the better they function. Almost everything a child does and experiences from birth onwards involves building connections between the neurons.

The human brain continues to evolve from primitive times and the executive functioning part of the brain, also called the prefrontal cortex, is the last part of the brain to mature — often not until the mid 20s. This helps many parents understand the confusion and angst that can happen during adolescence.

The brain also needs to have horizontal integration of the left and right sides, as well as the vertical integration from our primitive fight-flight instincts to our responsible mature functioning. All this fabulous brain growth happens best with real experiences that engage the senses in real time, especially in the first years of life. There are many adults who still struggle to use their prefrontal cortex when they are exhausted, stressed, hungry or in pain — think of road rage, troll behaviour online and family violence.

The neurotransmitters in the brain — essentially a form of brain chemical — also make life interesting. An overload of cortisol, which is the stress hormone, plays havoc especially with children who, without a prefrontal cortex, struggle to manage heightened stressful times.

The tantrum in the shopping centre can now be viewed as an event of the brain — a massive cortisol discharge, so the child can return to a calmer state. The feel-good brain chemicals of serotonin, dopamine and endorphins are not always easy for young children or adolescents to create on their own. The capacity to self-regulate one’s emotions, moods and physical energy is another one of those invisible capacities that parents find hard to understand.

Humans are biologically wired to survive first, and to be smart and happy after that.

As John Medina writes in his excellent book Brain Rules for Baby: “The brain is not interested in learning. The brain is interested in surviving. Every ability in our intellectual tool kit was engineered to escape extinction. If you want a well educated child, you must create an environment of safety.”

There is some fabulous news among this research for parents. The first is that our children are biologically wired to learn and they are also biologically wired to move their bodies in ways that enhance learning and physical growth. So we don’t need to strive to stimulate them — they find almost everything stimulating the first time they meet it.

**TOP TIPS FOR PARENTING WITH THE BRAIN IN MIND:**

1. Happy, calm children learn best.
2. Repeated activities consolidate strong neuronal pathways — even if it is reading the same picture book over and over.
3. All children struggle maintaining good brain chemicals — as do some exhausted parents. An upset child is not a bad child — rather a child who is not coping.
4. Allow children to be inquisitive and curious — lipstick drawings = a creative mind.
5. Ensure plenty of sleep — deep sleep creates spaces for new learning.
6. Ensure good quality food — it helps stabilise moods and improves concentration.
7. Create plenty of opportunities for children to use all of their senses preferably outside.
8. Help calm and soothe your child when they have a massive cortisol overload.
9. Water is the only liquid that hydrates the brain — a massive cortisol overload.
10. Model the behaviour you want from your children — they are watching and learning.

Given the brain research, it is helpful to remember that neuroplasticity enables our children to learn good habits to replace annoying and unhelpful habits. Of course the same applies to us — however it is easier to create a new habit, than to stop doing an old one that we enjoy. Remind your children we can all become smarter, stronger, kinder and more resilient by the choices we make in our life and with practise we get more competent. That is neuroplasticity at its best.

MAGGIE DENT is an author, educator and speaker dedicated to quietly changing lives through common-sense wisdom. She has four adult sons and is the author of five books including her latest release, Nine Things: A back-to-basics guide to calm, common-sense, connected parenting birth–8. Check out her blogs, newsletter and other resources at www.maggiedent.com | www.facebook.com/maggiedentauthor | www.twitter.com/queenofcommonse
Who moved the goal posts?

‘Love is learning how to say YES to what is’ R. Rohr

MALCOLM DIX is a father of four. He’s negotiating life in a blended family of two teenagers and two toddlers. He is also a recovering social worker and stand up comedian which comes in very handy. He runs parenting workshops in Perth on Raising Mighty Kids and he’s also a tragic Dockers fan and lover of Test cricket, chilli and Game of Thrones.

WORDS Malcolm Dix (AKA Ninja Dad)
As a parent, saying ‘yes’ is all well and good but what if the “what is” involves your children not picking up their toys, cleaning their room, avoiding their chores, spending far too long on their laptops, bickering, not doing their homework, forgetting to empty their lunchboxes and failing to hang out the washing you had specifically asked them not to forget! How do you say ‘yes’ when that is your daily reality?

Two years ago it hit me that raising my children was proving to be hard work. Parenting was taking me to some dark, murky places that were testing - and occasionally conquering - my patience. On some occasions, kid wrangling was leaving me flayed, bewildered and at a loss for answers. Occasionally in the midst of those challenging moments it was proving to also be downright humiliating. Catching a glimpse of oneself in a full blown, angry, pointless rant is never easy to accept at the best of times. Is that really me going off my nut? Did I honestly just say that, do that, threaten that...oh, yes I did! (It was even worse when I would hear myself muttering the same unhelpful things my own parents long ago muttered to me).

It was also during this time I stumbled across a simple yet shocking definition of suffering - suffering is whenever you are not in control.

Yikes! That’s what my parenting was feeling like much of the time: like I had no control. Even when I fleetingly felt like I had a good handle on the kid-raising caper …BAM! The goal posts changed and before I knew it I was mindlessly chasing my tail all over again.

Slowly I realised that I was stuck in an unhelpful parenting roundabout and I knew something had to shift and that something was indeed me. It was around that time I consciously started practicing saying yes to what is. It was difficult because it was much easier and quicker just to fix things for my children or angrily explain things to them rather than gently let them discover it themselves or simply just make them do things my way because I knew best. (Ha Ha!) I quickly discovered that saying yes to what is takes significant time, patience, forgiveness, negotiation and above all...awareness, awareness, awareness (which was something I wasn’t particularly good at back then.)

Saying ‘yes’ to being the best father I could be has been required me to let go of the need to control lots of things. It has forced me, somewhat reluctantly at times, to get comfortable with uncertainty and the unpredictable nature of raising kids. To learn how to leave things unresolved, somewhat messy and dishevelled but to know that it’s all good. To recognise and admit that I don’t have all the answers. Accepting ‘what is’ has helped me to ‘clean the lens’ and see that raising my children is much more a well-paced marathon than a hectic, blinding sprint.

Today I understand that all I can do is humbly be the best parent I can be at any given moment and that includes accepting all my limitations, flaws and deficiencies as a dad. I still have high expectations for my children to become the best they can be, but I’m learning not to hold ‘things’ so tightly anymore. It’s not a ‘giving up’ or ‘sacking off’ but rather making that conscious decision to say yes to what is. For me it’s about exploring new ways of being an effective dad, a loving parent and a ‘kooky kid’ raiser. So here are five tips that have helped me over the last two years to say ‘yes to what is.’

1. As a mum and dad, start practicing letting go of comparing yourself to anybody else. Know that the comparing mind never wins. It’s a one-way trip to misery and resentment. Trust me, I know!
2. While you’re at it, let go of comparing your children to other children, and that includes siblings (See above about one-way trips).
3. Breathe…seriously. Practice some simple breathing when parenting gets difficult. There are so many ‘mindfulness’ apps these days. Smiling Mind is an Australian app that I use with my family and myself as it also caters for seven-year-olds to adults. A quick two or three minute conscious breathing exercise (sometimes I hide in the loo) has saved me from losing my mind many a time.
4. Always remember to treat yourself with kindness – if you make a mistake admit it, apologise where possible and realise you now know a better way to do it next time. Don’t get stuck in guilt or negative self-talk. You simply made a mistake – hey, join the queue, you’ll find me in it!
5. Finally, remember that at the end of the day none of us are parenting experts. We all come to this kid-raising caper as novices, but with a little humility, humour, patience and openness to asking for help we can all do a fine job. (It also helps to know that kids are often far more resilient than we give them credit for.)

Parenting is a life long adventure. You never stop learning and growing. It’s the greatest ride of our lives. Full of twists and turns that will make you want to throw up, scream and beg to get off the ride, but it’ll also leave you exhilarated and take you to places you only ever dreamed of. It’s a cracking, thrilling ride so strap in, hold on and have fun.

See you on the next wild loop. Malcolm
In a digitally literate world of ‘likes’ and social criticism, Lakshmi Singh looks at how parents can foster critical spirit in a constructive, healthy and balanced way.

American keynote speaker, author and educator Tim Elmore recently penned an article observing a trend amongst kids dishing out careless criticism of processes, ideas and institutions.

From criticising classes to sports programs, the food offered on campus, administration or accommodation in some colleges and universities, students were increasingly displaying what Elmore calls, a ‘critical spirit’.

Time magazine also ran a feature discussing the narcissistic tendencies amongst Millennials (or Generation Y), contributing to a feeling of entitlement amongst youngsters.

So, is there a generational change brewing, where more kids go about criticising anything and everything, becoming self-absorbed in the process?

Experts say that a critical spirit has and always will exist in all of us, it is just the nature of today’s society and the easy accessibility of forums through which criticism can be provided that has given it more opportunity to be heard.

While experts say that cultivating a spirit of thinking critically about problems and situations is important, it is also necessary to foster a healthy decision-making process.
Parents have always wanted the best for kids, but taking the “you deserve the best, this/he/she is not good enough” mentality a bit too far can also be detrimental, says parenting and education expert Ronit Baras.

“The rules of education are very simple, judgmental parents will raise judgmental kids. Why? Because judgment is a coping mechanism to fight inadequacy. Judgmental people have weaknesses (and) judgment is their way of hiding. ‘If I find faults in others, I will be able to hide mine.’ If parents model this mentality, kids will adopt it.”

Similarly projecting a “my child is special and they need to know that” vision by over-supplying them with activities, commodities and even praise can lead to an unhealthy sense of entitlement, says Dr. Ash Nayate, clinical neuropsychologist.

“Narcissism (i.e. a feeling of entitlement) is a sign of unhealthy self-esteem. Narcissistic people don’t see themselves as equal to others, they see themselves as better than others - and the reason they hold this belief is to cover up their fear of ‘not being good enough’,” she says.

Judging people helps alleviate that fear, she says. To help stop the cycle, she believes parents need to lead by example.

“Developing a healthy self-esteem is critical. If as a parent you have low confidence and low self-esteem, your kids are going to pick up on that as well. If you want your kids to be resilient and confident, then you need to work on the confidence and self-esteem within yourself.”

It is no secret that Millennials are more digitally literate than the rest of us. With most having access to their own mobile phone, laptop and social media accounts, the stage through which they can communicate with others is wide and always available.

“Social media encourages us to be more vocal about criticism. So instead of just judging people quietly, in our mind, we can do it aloud, behind the safety and anonymity of a computer screen,” says Dr. Nayate.

The privacy that social media affords also brings to the fore a trait that Baras calls a “brain fart”. “In my program we consider it a “brain fart” when you do not consider others or the outcome of what you say and only want to say it, at all cost,” she says.

She believes the problem is intensified in a society that values external standards and imposes them on the education system through set metrics. “Teachers use marks, tests (and) they flash with standards and rules and this is far away from teaching critical thinking. So, no wonder kids are learning that everything in their life needs to be judged.”

From teacher review sites to specialist groups and threads on social media forums, kids today can critique anything about their school, programs or individual people, making up their mind whether something makes the cut or not.

So, how do we turn all this ‘judgement’ into something that is more considered, evaluated and more respectful of the people and practices involved in the process?

By understanding the difference between informed decision-making or critical thinking and straight judgement, says Baras.

“Critical thinking is when we present kids with options and teach them to evaluate and consider the advantages and disadvantages between options. Criticism/judgment is considering yourself above others and rating them based on your own individual standard.”

The good news is that critical thinking skills can be developed without being critical of others says Dr. Nayate. “It’s about adopting an attitude of open-mindedness and healthy curiosity. Just like a three-year-old who always asks “why” - the child isn’t doing it out of judgement or maliciousness, it’s simply a raw desire to learn more about the world.”

While critical thinking skills depend on the maturity of the child, Dr. Nayate believes parents can nudge kids in the right direction by role modelling:

1. Verbalise the thought-process involved in everyday decisions – for example choosing healthier food options (“When I eat fries, I feel a bit sick in the stomach, and the next day I get a headache from all the salt and grease. And then I feel sluggish and lazy, and I just want to sit around at home all day instead of going to the playground with you.”)

2. Assist with decisions and evaluations – implement this as a two-step process, she advises: first, acknowledge kids when they have demonstrated critical thinking. For example: “that was a good decision to do your homework before you went to your friend’s house. That way, you can really have fun and you don’t need to rush to get home”.

Secondly, help them assess whether the decision they made was because they accept an idea or because it came from a person they accept. As an example, many teenagers tend to accept information as credible when it comes from their peers or celebrities more so than their parents.

3. Help them put their higher values in perspective – while some children may value hard work or aim for certain levels of achievement, they would also value acceptance, connection with others, happiness, fun and adventure, she says. For example, a child who values health and fitness highly might override them in favour of other values like fitting in with their peers who smoke and thus take up that habit. Encourage them to see when decisions are made based on what we value, rather than on impulse or what feels good at that moment.

Sources:
- Tim Elmore’s blog on ‘Curing a critical spirit in students’ - http://growingleaders.com/blog/curing-critical-spirit-students/
Choosing THE RIGHT Babysitter
Dr. Jenny Brockis looks at the new babysitter in town – technology devices - and has some advice for parents on teaching kids healthy ways to interact with technology and where to set the boundaries.

Juggling work, family life and parenting today can be tough. Having time to get all that needs to be done and stay sane sometimes means we have to call on others for help. If you don’t have extended family nearby, or you’re a solo parent this might mean calling a baby sitter.

Though as our daughter pointed out to us at the tender age of eleven, she was no longer a baby and therefore didn’t need a baby sitter. The child minder arrived shortly after that.

Baby sitters (sorry child minders) are wonderful. They make our busy lives just that much easier and when you have a great sitter that your kids love, and you know loves them back; it’s pure gold.

But there’s a new sitter in town. This used to be the telly. Is there a parent anywhere who hasn’t at least once plonked the kids down in front of the goggle box so as to have a few minutes to get dinner ready, to have a shower, or finish off that bit of work on the computer? Or was that just me?

Today though, there’s a new sitter in town. It arrived by stealth, attracting first the attention of us parents who instantly fell head over heels in love.

And now we want our kids to share in this love affair – except this love comes with strings, which as parents we need to be aware of.

WHO IS THIS NEW BABY SITTER?
The iPad/tablet or smart phone.

Take a look around you. They are everywhere: in strollers, in restaurants and cafes, in the back of the car, on the train or bus. It certainly keeps them quiet and “entertained.” But is it good for young minds?

There is an increasingly amount of evidence that suggests that over exposure to these devices, especially at a very young age, can be detrimental.

This is not an anti-technology piece. Far from it. Our new technology has revolutionised our world and how we educate our kids. It provides them with access to information to a level that was previously unimaginable. It stimulates curiosity and facilitates creativity.

But as with all good things, it’s about finding the right balance between too much and enough.

Our own love affair with technology means that sometimes we may not be giving our kids the attention they crave – so they look for other ways to entertain themselves and what better way than an iPad/tablet or mobile phone.

Here are the current recommendations from The American Academy and Canadian Society of Paediatrics on safe technology use by children.

**Age 0-2** No exposure to ANY technology

**Age 3-5** One hour per day

**Age 6-18** Two hours per day

You may be thinking - no way! They spend more time than that on screen at school!

It’s estimated that a seven-year-old will have already spent the equivalent of a whole year (24 hours a day) watching TV or playing with other technology.

**What is important is to understand why these recommendations have been made so you can decide your own technology boundaries as appropriate to your own kids.**

**1. Children’s brains are enormously plastic.** They triple in size between birth and two and continue to develop until maturity in their early twenties. It has been shown that interacting with any screen before two, does not help them learn (apart from how to operate the gadgets) and is implicated with an alarming increase being reported of developmental delay, attention deficit, impaired learning, increased impulsivity and poorer emotional regulation i.e. tantrums.

**2. Technology is increasingly winning out over active play.** This means kids are sitting more and they need to be moving, to stimulate normal brain development and function. Secondly, while some computer games are interactive many are for solo operation denying the child social time with either other children or their parents.

**3. Our children are getting more tired.** TVs or access to a computer or smart phone in the bedroom is leading to an epidemic of grumpy sleep-deprived kids who are not performing so well at school.

**4. Our technology is addictive and kids are especially at risk.** Increased levels of childhood anxiety and levels of depression are being blamed partly on this. Every ping, every ‘win’ in a game simulates a reward signal in the brain leading to dopamine release, which causes the brain to seek out more, and more and more...

Being over engrossed in a game when it’s time for dinner, or time to go to bed, or go to school can lead to arguments and a disconnection from other family members.

**5. Kids need parental attachment and interaction to develop the emotional and social skills required to function well as adults.** You may have noticed yourself just how easy (and fun) it is to connect with others elsewhere, by text or Tweet or Snapchat and forget to connect with the person we may be sitting next to.
Face to face interactions are essential to help us to understand what another person is feeling or what their intentions are. Visual cues and body language tell us far more than a text or even a screen image.

Social media can paint an unrealistic world where everyone appears perfect and happy. The dark side of social media is that it’s too easy to inflict emotional pain by unfriending, or to be a cyberbully.

**SO WHAT CAN WE DO AS PARENTS TO HELP?**

1. **Maintain connection with your kids:** Parents, family and caregivers first and REAL babysitters.
2. **It’s not about denying total access (except under the age of two) to technology - that’s unrealistic and unnecessary. Technology when handled well is a phenomenal tool.**
3. **It’s about giving our kids the one thing they need the most: our love and attention. When we are present for our kids, they feel loved and cared for. We can fill their time with fun, play and interaction.**
4. **Keep family time sacred: that’s meal times, getting ready for bed and how about a technology free holiday! Lead by example and unplug regularly. Have specific technology free zones at home, especially your child’s bedroom. Create healthy time limits and that means switching off at bedtime.**

As parents we are responsible for the safety and well being of our kids. We can teach our kids healthy ways to interact with our new technologies to help them maximize all the potential it has to offer.

**Popular PARENTING Books**

**RAISING BOYS** Few books have stayed in the news as much as Steve Biddulph’s million-copy seller Raising Boys. It has changed how we parent sons.

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Do you have childhood traditions (things YOU loved to do as a child) that you are sharing with your kids? What kinds of things, if so?

What jobs do your kids help with around the house? And do you give pocket money for chores?

Here’s some really useful advice on handling troubles at school. Tip number five is a really important one.

facebook.com/parentingideas.com.au
CATHERINE GERHARDT, Kidproof Melbourne. Kidproof provides proactive and preventative child and family education programs. They work with schools, community groups and other child centric organisations. They provide peace of mind for parents and create safer communities for everyone. www.kidproofsafety.com.au
Most girls know what it’s like to have a ‘frenemy’. Catherine Gerhardt discusses how parents can help daughters develop the skills to deal with emotional aggression and to safely and effectively address negative behaviours from peers.

If I had a dollar for every school that has shared with me issues they have had to deal with around girls, well, I’d be a rich woman. A male principal I spoke with recently said to me “I just don’t get it; if girls are meant to be smarter, more advanced in their language skills, why do they use it to inflict so much harm on each other?”

Relational aggression refers to acts of emotional bullying hidden among tightly knit networks of friends. Kids who use others emotions negatively often use relationships, words and gestures as their weapons of attack. It comes as no surprise to many parents that this style of bullying is common among girls. Using relationships to intimidate and hurt others is by nature covert, secretive and difficult to detect. Even adults can find it difficult to identify, let alone deal with it.

Girls tend to use this emotional aggression towards other girls and as a way to protect their reputation. Girls attack their victims through what girls value most – their friendships and social acceptance.

Most girls know what it is like to have a ‘frenemy’ – that girl who is both a friend and a rival at the same time. If you have a daughter you may have heard “She is one of my friends, so I don’t know why she would do that.”

If you are worried about the impact of frenemies on your daughter, there are things you can do to help.

**Talk with your daughter about what ‘good’ friends are like** – they are the ones that are fun to be with and easy to be around. Good friends treat you with respect, look out for you and include you in activities.

**Encourage diversity in friendships.** Having a wide range of friends from a variety of places is a protective measure for when something goes wrong with a friendship. Challenge your daughter to get to know kids from many different backgrounds and perspectives.

**Get to know their friends.** Give yourself the chance to quietly observe your daughter and her interactions with others. I’ll never forget a sleepover party we once had at our house – it didn’t take me long to figure out ‘who was who’ in that gaggle of girls. Encouraging your daughter to have her friends over can be a first hand chance to assess what the relationships are like.

**Avoid criticism.** Criticising their peers, even if they are a frenemy will get you nowhere; in fact they will be less likely to share what is going on. Instead, be honest with your daughter about your concerns and be open and willing to listen to what she has to say. Talk about what makes you nervous.

**Set limits.** Set limits on how much time your child spends with her friends— it’s important to develop positive relationships with family members as well.

If your daughter is the target of relational aggression we recommend the following helpful suggestions:

- Let her know that it is not her fault.
- Let her know that she hasn’t done anything to deserve it.
- She can ask the girls who are acting negatively towards her to stop – but only if she feels safe to do so.
- If possible, she needs to remove herself from the situation.
- Remind her to always let a trusted adult know about what has happened. Having a trusted adult at home and school offers an additional layer of support.

Although there seems to be many different reasons for someone to target another, in reality, there is only one. It is because they are choosing to be mean. They want to make the other person scared, hurt or angry. If the frenemy can successfully push your daughter’s “hot buttons”, they get the reaction they want and it makes them feel more powerful.

Everyone has a role and responsibility when it comes to relationships, and your daughter is no exception. We often focus on the mean things others do to us, without really paying attention to the mean things we are doing to others. Self-preservation is an instinct and everyone will tell the story in the perspective that shows them in the best light.

It is of utmost importance that we as parents help our daughters become more aware of their behaviours and how their behaviour affects others. In many cases, it is related to the social and emotional intellect of each individual.

Growing up can be a social minefield. As responsible and caring adults we need to guide our girls so as to break this vicious cycle of relational aggression. The secrets of emotional bullying need to be brought out into the open. Helping our daughters develop the skills and coping tools to deal with it will enhance the knowledge they need to safely and effectively address negative behaviours from peers. The awareness they construct now will help build the foundation for the woman they are going to become.
Surviving HOMEWORK BATTLES
Homework battles? Sharon Witt has some practical tips for parents of children and teenagers to help change the battleground into a productive, calm, stress-free environment.

Homework can be a stressful aspect of raising children. Despite the most organised and relaxed households, the stress of it can cause immense pressure on both children and parents, not to mention the imposition it places on valuable family time.

Homework is predominantly set by schools to revise skills introduced in the classroom and complete work not finished at school during the day. Whilst this is the ideal, many children and teens struggle with this daily task, often causing great stress to parents and the home environment.

Indeed it is often difficult for young people to sit down and concentrate at home after being required to concentrate for over seven hours during the school day. Added to this, most teenagers are connected to social media and other online activities that ensure easy distractions.

Ideally, during the time set aside for completing homework, children should be device and social media free to ensure optimal use of the time. Although many teens report that they are able to concentrate better with music playing: as an educator of teens, I have observed this to be the case! So find what environment works best for your child, and help facilitate their homework environment.

How much homework is reasonable?

Homework should not be stressful in Primary School years. Ideally, any tasks required of children at home should involve reading and practicing words and basic math skills such as learning times tables.

In the latter years of Primary School, increased time to work on completing projects might be needed but should not be too time heavy. Children need time out, to climb trees, relax and play!

In the early years of High School, forty minutes to an hour is quite reasonable to allow for homework. This is of course, providing it is dedicated to just homework (trying to multitask is not advisable!)

From Year 9 onwards, homework time will increase to a couple of hours, until Years 11 and 12, where a few hours of study time may be required each evening, particularly in the lead up to exams.

How long should you spend on one subject before having a rest or moving to another subject?

Generally speaking, I would advise no more than one hour is spent on a specific subject. If you find your teen is really struggling with a particular subject, advise them to leave it be and seek help from their teacher back at school. If it is set homework they are required to complete, ensure that you write the teacher a note explaining that they have tried and need extra assistance.

How should parents handle a teenager who never completes their homework?

Trying to assist a child/teen that struggles with concentration and general organisation can be very stressful for a parent. If your child is disorganised, you will be lucky if they actually bring home the required books and homework requirements. Alternatively, you will continually get the standard line ‘I have NO homework!’ If you get this line too often, it is well worth sending an email to your child’s home or subject teacher advising them of your child’s lack of study. Ideally, if your child says they have no homework at all, they should read for half an hour at minimum, depending on their age. This will encourage your child to set aside the designated time to complete learning based tasks.

What should you do if you think your child is getting too much homework?

Is there such a thing as too much?

Some children and teenagers actually take a much longer time to complete homework. They may be struggling to comprehend the work requirements or specific processes if it’s a Math problem. If your child/teen is spending hours and hours on homework for days at a time, you should make contact with the school and let them know this is occurring. Sometimes, it’s a matter of communicating this to the teacher and perhaps adjusting the task requirements, taking into account your child’s individual learning needs. However, be mindful that some students will put off a school project or homework for weeks, before finally reaching the nearing deadline and cramming to complete several weeks worth in a mad panic.

You can help your child develop a healthy homework routine using the following guidelines:

• Where possible, set a regular time for homework to be completed
• Have a healthy snack such as fruit, nuts and water for your child to snack on whilst working.
• Ensure that homework time is social media free- shut down all devices where possible
• Have a designated area for your child to complete homework (not on their lap whilst watching TV in the lounge room)
• Be present and involved! This does not mean constantly harassing your child, but be there to help establish a regular routine, help them with spelling words, reading etc. For teenagers, be present where possible and offer assistance when needed.

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**FEELINGS**

Strong families thrive on good feelings. They are not devoid of conflict or criticism; but generally strong families are pleasant environments to be part of.

One way to increase good feelings in your family is to increase the number of compliments.

As a general rule, the ratio of compliments to criticism should be around five to one. That is, there should be five times more positive, affirmative comments than negative comments.

In unhealthy families the ratios is reversed. In fact, families are quite toxic when the ratio is five negatives to every one positive comment.

How does your family rate on this scale?

If you use children only as a measure I suspect that the complement/criticism ratio will be a little scary. Some siblings can be unkind to each other, and find it hard to say a pleasant word. This skews the ratio a lot and can make family-life awful for everyone. BUT this can change over time.

Here are five ideas to help you alter the criticism-to-compliments ratio:

1. **Increase** your own number of affirmations, compliments, affectionate phrases and kind remarks to skew the ratio a bit. Aim for a one in seven ratio. Not only is this good modelling for your kids, but it will make family-life more harmonious.

2. **Keep** a check on your use of good feeling (& self-esteem) killers. Eradicate comments such as: "Typical boy!" "If I told you once I’ve told you a 1,000 time don’t......." "What a stupid things to say to your brother/sister!" Bite your tongue rather than say what you may be thinking.

3. **Make** kids aware of their language and the potential harm to self-esteem, not to mention family harmony that constant criticism can cause. Use “I statements” to let kids know the impact of their negative talk on you. “When you talk so aggressively I feel quite scared about what you are going to do next.” It’s impossible for kids to disagree with “I statements”.

4. **Develop** the habit of following-up a negative with a positive. When I was teaching I always tried to follow up discipline of a student with a compliment or positive feedback so that we could maintain a good relationship. Do the same in your family. Follow-up discipline, a rebuke, or negative comment with a positive act or comment. TEACH YOUR KIDS TO DO THE SAME!

5. **Let** the bad feelings out! Sometimes there can be such a build-up of ill-will between siblings that you need to let the bad feelings out. One way to do this is let a child vent to you about their sibling. You may not like what you hear but a clearing of the air can work wonders in terms of improving the family atmosphere.

**FRIENDS**

Children who are able to form friendships when they start school are happier at school and also learn better.

More significantly, positive friendships have long-term implications for social and indirectly academic success.

Friendships skills are generally developmental, but they don’t develop in isolation. Kids acquire these skills when they play with their siblings and interact with children and adults outside their family.
Today’s children grow up with fewer siblings, fewer opportunities for unstructured play and less freedom to explore friendships than children of even ten years ago.

Parents can help kids develop important social competencies by teaching them sociable behaviours at home, being good role models and providing opportunities for kids to play with each other in a variety of situations.

**Fighting**

Conflict and disagreements between siblings are part of family life. Most conflict revolves around “sharing” issues – it occurs when personal territory, personal space, possessions and time are invaded or violated.

Rivalry, jealousy, competitiveness between siblings is usually at the heart of fighting or poor conflict resolution. It must be remembered that many children have L plates on when it comes to resolving conflict. For many conflict resolution in civil terms doesn’t come naturally, so they need some adult assistance so they can learn to resolve disputes amicably and reasonably.

Gender has an impact on how children resolve disputes. Boys are often reflexive, action-oriented and hierarchical whereas girls are often more reflective, more verbal and emotionally adept than boys. In short, boys often need some encouragement and assistance to talk problems through rather than to thump each other.

Children generally model the conflict resolution of significant adults in their lives. They need to see adults resolve problems and disputes without using power, without losing control and by focusing on the issues rather than the dispute. Of course, conflict usually generates high emotions such as anger and jealousy. Children also need to develop ways to deal with their emotions effectively.

There are two broad approaches that parents can adopt with kids fighting - become involved or remain neutral. Your approach will depend on the age, maturity and ability of your children to sort out their own problems, your ability to ignore noise and your beliefs about how conflict should be resolved.

This approach makes a great deal of sense, but as most parents know, some fights are impossible to ignore particularly when they happen under your nose. If this is the case make a swift retreat when children fight or invite them to resolve their noisy disputes outside. Many parents have found that arguing and fighting practically disappears when children are consistently shown the door to the backyard.

**Free Range Parenting**

There’s a lot to be said for giving kids a little bit of rope. Giving children more independence is one of the most effective ways of developing confidence. It builds a broader experience base than parents can normally provide.

Greater freedom also involves an element of risk, which is naturally scary for parents. While our basic job is to keep kids safe and secure, that doesn’t mean we eliminate risk altogether by overprotecting them.

Instead we reduce risk by skilling up our kids to navigate the broader environment safely on their own.

**Scaffolding** – children being granted small degrees of independence – is a strategy many parents use to reduce the risk for their children in public while they grant their children more freedom. Dropping young children off a few hundred metres from the school gate and allowing them to walk the rest of the way on their own is an example of scaffolding to independence.

The primary school years are the time to build the skills of independence, so that when children move into adolescence they are more able to be self-sufficient.

Adolescents usually want greater freedoms than parents are prepared to give. Expecting young people to maintain contact with you; setting time limits for being out and rewarding responsible behaviour with greater freedom are some practical ways for parents to reduce risk with this age group.
BILL JENNINGS has more than 30 years experience in ‘people program’ innovation and design, and almost 20 years experience developing and presenting intergenerational programs for young people and their parents or mentors.

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Mum, some people are really lonely,” said The Wolf of Bell Street. “This lady I just met, I'm the first person she has spoken to today. You know the great thing about getting your quota early, is you can just chat with the person. I knew she didn’t want to buy solar panels, so I just chatted for fifteen minutes. Some people are really lonely mum.”

There’s a vignette for you of the types of phone calls that were coming in through the early months of this year to my wife, Lisa. And The Wolf of Bell Street is more usually known as Jack, our son.

Our son has taken a gap year after finishing high school. Lisa received multiple calls daily in those first few weeks.

From about Grade 3 up to Year 12 school was the proverbial round hole. Jack - a classic square peg.

The danger of a story like this is to simply compare and contrast and say that all is well now. How do I put this? Okay - if you have more than one child – do you reckon it is fairly normal that one might give you a slightly easier parenting run than the other? That’s been our story. Jack has an older sister who found her journey through school one that was meaningful, it made sense to her and it was rewarding. She could accept that some tasks might not appear readily relevant but was prepared to trust that they were all part of building towards her ultimate goal of doing as well as she could in her final year. She was a self-starter, motivated. Still is.

Before he was The Wolf of Bell Street (we live in Preston), Jack had thousands of mornings where there was the opposite of self-starting - it was tough to get out of bed and even make it to school. There’s a delicate balance between looking after him (and his private ongoing journey in life) and also reaching out maybe to the mum or dad who is reading this and quietly saying, “He's just like my kid”. Let’s put it this way – just because your writer facilitates experiences for mums and dads and their teenage kids in schools around the world, doesn’t mean that he’s had anywhere near all the answers as the dad of a kid whose had his challenges growing up. In fact there were plenty of times I stuffed up. Fear got in the way (for me), and at times I forced him to get to school on days when he was genuinely sick... sometimes sick because he was anxious.

So – in the overall comparison... holding the first few months of this year up against the last ten years, you would have to say, we have seen a pretty motivated, indeed self-starting young man.

Here’s another observation on the glorious imperfection of family life... if you are doing the parenting job as two people, I reckon there are very few of us in the world that have parenting styles that are in harmonious alignment. In teenage terms (and no reflection on Lisa because she is a brilliant mum who can be tough when she needs to be), I would be characterised as the tight parent. On that score though there are the rare moments when we do get something in alignment. Lisa and I had said to Jack that his pocket money was going to finish at the end of January. By about the 27th of January, he was getting grumpy about this. We made it clear that the cut-off date was not negotiable. By about the 30th of January after marching up and down Brunswick Street with copies of his CV, he decided to try some online jobs.

“I’ve got a training day tomorrow, for selling solar panels door-to-door all around Melbourne” Jack proclaimed. The next day he came home inspired. “I reckon I can do this. The trainers there are awesome”

Through a few searching, gentle questions we learned that the job was purely commission. And this is where, amongst the many times I stuff things up like offering advice when it is clearly unwelcome and probably not useful, Lisa and I high-fived each other.

Why? Well, because we said nothing. Lips – well and truly – bit and zipped. We both enquired after to the contents of our inner dialogue as we learnt about Jack’s new job... that he had found himself.

We both thought... “Sounds dodgy…”

“Commission only is hard – not sure he will last the week.” “Door-to-door is really tough work.”

So here’s what happened. The next day, he started amongst the group of fifteen young folk who went to the training. The day after that, thirteen didn’t come back – it was just him and another girl. Within a week, he was the only one left from his training day and he was loving it.

The phone calls came in – pure joy – as reported to his mum... “Just got my fifth lead mum!” “Mum this old lady asked me to fix her oven... the door just needed some support so I made up a wedge of foil and got it to close properly” (To this day, we have no reports of a septuagenarian having recently been blown up in her kitchen from that suburb!) He simply loved the incentive that came: when you sold 10 leads for the week, your commission went up five dollars and every sale to that point went up by five dollars as well.

Sitting in a local shed on a pleasant Sunday afternoon, my mates asked me how Jack was going three weeks in. “Fellas – do you know he got 30 leads this week and he cracked four figures for his pay?!” My mate Rob made the eponymous remark – “He’s The Wolf of Bell Street.”

**TAKE AWAYS AND OTHER THOUGHT BUBBLES**

1 This article is for a lady named Tiffany. Last year when we chatted, she remarked – all your stories are positive, what about when you are having a tough time with your teenager. Well, Tiffany, apologies again that this does have a sunny tinge to it but believe me... it has and still sometimes is a tough journey with The Wolf of Bell Street. I want you to know, that if you are feeling like you haven’t got any more answers, I have been there.

2 Joseph Campbell, the famous writer and mythologist said “If you do follow your bliss you put yourself on a kind of track that has been there all the while, waiting for you, and the life that you ought to be living is the one you are living. Follow your bliss and don’t be afraid, and doors will open where you didn’t know they were going to be.”

For you as the parent of a teenager – I reckon one of the biggest protective factors in their life is having that bliss, a spark of passion – having something they love doing and are good at.

3 I shared this story with my friend and colleague, Valerie Campbell-Hogg, facilitator of the Silkwood School – an amazing education community in the Gold Coast hinterland. She loved the story and then put her psychology training hat on and said... “Don’t worry about the times you have stuffed up, what I love is that you and Lisa got really clear about one thing... the money was running out on January 31. There was no daylight between you two. It was one simple, clear boundary. That’s the key – don’t have too many rules but make sure the ones you have are clear and non-negotiable.”