Rites of Passage

ONLINE

Flaming

Take OFF the shoes please!

HURRY

sickness

NO BODY’S PERFECT

LETTER by LETTER
publisher’s note

This magazine maybe new, but Parentingideas 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. Parentingideas helps parents stay up to date through our presentations, seminars, blogs and Parentingideas 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 Parentingideas magazine!

Michael and Sue

contact us

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Exploring the New Frontier in Parenting - emotions

Michael Grose gives five ideas to help you explore emotions - the new frontier of parenting - and help kids to manage their feelings.

1. LISTEN FIRST
When your child fusses and fumes about some wrongdoing or hurt they’ve experienced clear your mind and listen. Avoid trying to fix the situation just show understanding and compassion. There is no better feeling then being understood.

2. CONTAIN RATHER THAN MANAGE
Let your kids into the managing! Children’s behaviour can become tangled up in upssets and disappointments. It’s hard to separate their behaviour from their feelings. Sometimes as a loving, caring adult you just have to soak up their feelings, and give them the time and space to soothe their own souls. We don’t have to do that for them.

3. KNOW THAT EMOTIONS CAN BE PLEASANT AND UNPLEASANT
We often place value judgements on emotions by saying some emotions are good or positive (happy, motivated, energised) while some are bad or negative (sad, worried, sulled). Avoid passing judgement in such ways. Recognise that emotions are pleasant or unpleasant and that all emotions are acceptable, whereas some behaviours (such as hurting someone when you are angry) are unacceptable.

4. BUILD A VOCABULARY AROUND EMOTIONS
Just as feelings have words so too there are names and terms for emotional intelligent parenting method. For instance, I-messages are a type of communication used by parents and adults who take an emotions-first approach.

5. HELP YOUR KIDS RECOGNISE, THEN REGULATE EMOTIONS
Ever told a child to calm down only to see their emotions escalate? Kids, like adults, need to recognise their feelings before they can regulate their emotional state, and that’s not easy. Emotional recognition is a complex process that takes practice. Even when we are good at it we don’t always get it right. Learning to recognise your feelings is a continuous process that’s best started when young, before the ups and downs of adolescence becomes a reality.

Emotional intelligence is best learned when it becomes part of your family’s culture, or way of doing things. When it becomes part of your family’s DNA then emotional intelligence will be passed down from generation to generation. You’ll know it’s had generational impact when your children identify you as the person who trained them in the skills of emotional intelligence. How cool is that!
Online FLAMING

So what is online flaming? Catherine Gerhardt gives practical tips for parents to recognise the signs and how to respond should your child be affected.

A friend of mine lives with avid teenage gamers, and she was horrified to discover recently the language and the insults that her children were exposed to while engaging in a popular online game with their friends.

Flame wars have become a major online annoyance. When people start a flame war they are deliberately trying to stir up trouble, start a fight and get a reaction. flaming is all too common on multi-player gaming sites, chat rooms, message forums and social media sites.

Most parents are aware of the trolls that can exist out there in cyberspace, and flaming is one of the skill sets that cyber bullies are familiar with. Flamers and trolls use insults to make personal attacks and say offensive things about a person’s individual character, their family or sexuality even though they may know very little about them.

Psychologists have termed the behaviour behind flaming, the “online disinhibition effect.” It means that people behave with less restraint online, and feel powerful behind the computer screen. Experts say a number of factors contribute to online flaming: the apparent anonymity and invisibility of the Internet, the lag between sending a message and getting feedback, and the minimum authority that can find out any personal information about the user.

Some flamers seek out people who are vulnerable. If the flamer can find out any personal information about a target, then he or she will use it to cause that person additional distress. Some flamers seek out people who are enthusiastic about certain subjects, and they intentionally bash the subject while others will intentionally start arguments about any topic.

Parents often complain that we can’t keep up with the technology our kids are using, however many of us agree that we want to be their first point of call if things go wrong. Parents can be their child’s strongest asset in the line of defence against negative online experiences.

As parents we often complain that we can’t keep up with the technology our kids are using, however many of us agree that we want to be their first point of call if things go wrong. Parents can be their child’s strongest asset in the line of defence against negative online experiences.

WHAT PARENTS CAN DO
Discuss with your children what they do online and who they communicate with – try your best to know which social media/ gaming sites they are using. Know that they may have more than one account on any social media platform. One of my daughter’s friends has four Instagram accounts, each one carving out a unique social space.

Know passwords. Youth may feel this is an invasion of their ‘privacy’, however it is a key component of the responsibility that comes with the privilege of using the technology. In most cases parents have either supplied the device or pay the bills for usage – that means you have the responsibility and the right to control it. Mutual respect is required here, having password control does not give you permission to spy, and your child needs to know they are being monitored. Let me tell you the story of another friend of mine who had been ‘monitoring’ her daughter online for several months. However, her daughter was not aware that every message and photo went through her mother’s device as well. When a problem did arise the parent was unsure how to deal with it – after all she had been ‘spying’ and wasn’t sure how to broach the subject with her daughter without giving herself away. It is much better to have that conversation when setting up accounts, and start as you intend to go on.

Start a conversation with your child about the importance of minimising the amount of personal information they give away. Many flamers prey on Internet users who seem vulnerable. If the flame can find out any personal information about a target, then he or she will use it to cause that person additional distress. Some flamers seek out people who are enthusiastic about certain subjects, and they intentionally bash the subject while others will intentionally start arguments about any topic.

Watch for signs of change in your child’s behaviour. If you notice that your child is paying more time online than usual, changes his or her group of good friends, stops spending time with them altogether, or seems withdrawn or depressed and uninterested in activities that he or she used to love, then there may be cause for concern. Keep an eye out for those quiet, introspective kids who have always enjoyed their own company, but no longer want to be alone, and do once again not want to leave your side as they seek comfort in your presence.

Evaluate internal feelings. This is the best way to tell if one is being flamed. Feelings of anger, aggression, revenge or low mood after reading the text will probably indicate a flaming message. When we feel the strong need to defend ourselves we are likely to react and respond to the text, thereby playing right into the flamer’s intent.

Encourage the message “Do Not Respond” The best defence against a flaming comment is to ignore. Do not respond or engage in baiting messages. Once they respond, they have started a conversation. A capable flamer can be cool and composed at first, using kind words and words to lure the unsuspecting person into thinking and saying offensive things about them. Your child may not recognise flaming immediately, with many flamers waiting until they get the person to engage in conversation before they attack. Instead they need to walk away from the comment.

Know the strategies. The best way to deal with a flamer is to ignore. From the moment the flaming becomes apparent do not respond. Many websites and forums will have options which empower the user in flaming situations, like the blocking feature which should be integrated into their practices, and report the behaviour to an online moderator or webmaster. It is also critical that the target exit the site so they are not exposing themselves to more online flaming, and of course, let a trusted adult know about their experience.

At its mildest, flaming is a one-time, name-calling incident. At its worst, it is a persistent and tenacious taunting that can lead a child to suicide. Not all cases of flaming lead to youth suicide, regardless of what the media portrays. Anyone can become the target or the aggressor, and anyone can stop it. There are many options for getting out of negative online experiences.

The Federal Government has recently launched the Office of the Children’s eSafety Commissioner. The Office provides Australians a range of up-to-date information and resources, coupled with a comprehensive complaints system to assist children who experience serious cyberbullying online. https://e safet y.gov.au

Catherine Gerhardt is a dedicated advocate of developing resilience and critical thinking skills in children and young people. Catherine has more than 20 years of experience in Community Services, Health and Welfare and has background in Social Psychology. As a parent of school aged children, she understands the commitment and challenges parents face ensuring they provide the right information to young people in a way that empowers them to develop their personal and social capabilities.
When every hour is rush hour – ‘hurry sickness’ and its impact on families

Modern day lifestyles, a plethora of out-of-home activities and a need to cram even more daily is becoming increasingly common in modern day families. As a result, the phrase “so busy” is becoming ever present in families’ vocabularies. Do we really want to teach our children that their childhood was so busy that they just rushed through it?

**HOW DID WE GET SO BUSY?**

Clinical neuropsychologist and mum Dr. Ash Nayate says that our desire to provide “the best” for our kids has a lot to do with the trend of ‘hurry sickness’.

From dance classes and swimming lessons to structured activities that promise to develop children’s numeracy (e.g. Kumon), strength (e.g. archery) and even strategy skills (e.g. chess), the market for children’s extracurricular activities is booming. Between work commitments, personal aspirations, social outings and commuting, the practical aspects of attending these events can also interfere with a child’s schedule. From after-school care to nannies and grandparents’ house – children can be required to move and adapt to different arrangements to cater for other family members’ schedules.

This can play havoc with the child’s sense of belonging and connection with the family, says Dr. Karen Phillip, a psychotherapist. “While children are usually quite resilient, the most important thing when you decide to raise a child is to spend quality time with them to teach, nurture and share with them. Our children also model the parents’ behaviour so unless you want your child to develop running a million miles an hour or be switched off 24/7, you need to be as short as a couple of minutes – to just sit still and observe.”

However, a parent’s best intention to enrich their child’s life with even more skills (e.g. chess), the market for children’s extracurricular activities is booming. As a result, the phrase “so busy” is not the only thing parents are rushing towards.

**THE IMPACT ON THE KIDS**

The habit of running around to get to different places on time induces a sense of ‘feeling rushed’ in kids just as much as it does in adults, and this is only going to cause stress and anxiety, says Dr. Nayate. “Kids usually don’t know how to do this (manage stress), so they look to their parents for guidance. That’s why stressed parents can often equal stressed kids, because kids pick up on stress from their parents.”

Everyday activities that are part of the routine can have the potential to cause stress, if too many tasks are incorporated into the schedule. “Ironically, the purpose of routines is to reduce stress – so if the routine is causing stress, then there are two things that need to be looked at – the adult’s stress management, and the routine itself. If the routine is too jam-packed, then the parents most likely need to re-adjust their expectations,” she says.

A common problem of society is that an assessment of these expectations can reveal just how unrealistic they are, she says. “Usually when we get to the bottom of WHY we want to do so much, we realise it’s for all the wrong reasons. Or, the parent has a skewed perception of what ‘must’ happen versus what actually needs to happen, for the benefit of the child.”

**ESTABLISHING A BALANCE**

“Kids need unstructured time to consolidate the skills that they’ve learned. ‘Free time’ allows children to be creative and come up with new ideas, without the constraints of being ‘in a classroom’. It’s crucial for their brain development, learning, and general wellbeing,” says Dr. Nayate. Dr. Phillip agrees. “It is great to do lots of different things but pacing is so important. If the children wish to play a sport then perhaps do soccer one year, football or netball the next, karate the next plus the necessary swim lessons for example but we do not need to cram everything into every day.”

The opportunity to develop the imagination by making up games and learning to entertain themselves is what’s at stake if the day is packed with activities that we are hurrying to get to, she says. All kids are different in the amount of unstructured time that they require, says Dr. Nayate. A great way of knowing whether kids are getting enough unstructured time is by understanding how much time the parents are spending with the children.

“Kids who aren’t coping with their workload MAY become anxious or irritable, and some signs of this are: fatigue, difficulty concentrating, difficulty remembering new information, restlessness, worry, difficulty falling asleep, or mood swings.”

**TOP TIPS FOR MANAGING BUSY LIVES**

1. Mindfulness and meditation is all the rage at the moment – incorporate a daily ritual of meditating (could even be as short as a couple of minutes) – to just sit still and observe.

2. Re-assess the family’s extra-curricular activities – if there is a need to rush through one activity to get to another, that’s a sure sign of a heavy workload.

3. Ease the pressure of the mundane, everyday activities – set up car-pools and other caring arrangements with friends and family to avoid having to rush for drop-offs and pick-ups.

4. Enjoy the simple stuff – go camping, build sand castles at the beach, ride bikes, kick a ball around. All this is family bonding time, all this is development, sharing, growing and learning time.

5. Is there an underlying problem? For some parents, being heavily involved in structured activities is way of coping to mask problems like anxiety, depression, guilt, shame or unhelpful beliefs (“more” is always “better”). Is the “hurry sickness” masking some other problem? Seek professional health advice to get to the bottom of it.
Helping our kids to learn better

How effectively we learn depends on a number of factors.

Dr. Jenny Brockis highlights 8 ways parents can help our kids be ready and effective learners

1. **Sleep right**
   - Tired brains find it much harder to pay attention, let alone remember what is being taught. The amount of sleep our children needs depends on age. Between the age of 7 and 12 they need between 10 and 11 hours. Between 12 and 18 they need between 8 and 9 hours a night of good quality uninterrupted sleep.

2. **Encourage daily exercise**
   - Exercise is crucial to brain development and our kids brains aren't fully mature until they are in their mid twenties. Research has shown that kids that exercise regularly are primed to be better learners because the extra ‘shoosh’ of blood flow to the brain brings extra oxygen and nutrients boosting performance and making learning easier.

3. **Fuel ‘em up**
   - Brains need fuel to work at their best and science is showing how food choices impact learning, thinking and mood. Rather than banning certain foods, which are seen as bad, and which only makes them far more desirable — look to encourage your kids to make healthier food choices at each meal especially when it comes to fruit and veg, and keep sweets and snack foods as occasional treats. Our kids follow our example, so if we are seen to be making healthier food choices, so will they. Well that’s the theory! Plus of course you are likely to be the one making the food purchases at the supermarket and/or making that packed lunch.

4. **Foster curiosity**
   - Kids are naturally inquisitive and love to share their ideas and thoughts. Rather than providing the answer to every question, look for ways to encourage them to discover the answer themselves. Not only does it promote imagination and enquiry, it helps to nurture creativity. Talking about different subjects around the dinner table can also be a great way to foster deeper understanding of a topic as well as stimulate some healthy debate.

5. **Reward effort**
   - How we praise our kids has been shown to have a big impact on self-esteem and belief in their own ability. When we reward effort, it promotes what is called a growth mindset where failure is not seen as shameful, merely a stimulus to learn from so as to get a better result the next time.

6. **Encourage whole brain learning**
   - While some kids will be naturally drawn to either be more interested in science and maths, or drama and art, as parents we can encourage our kids to learn to love art, learn about our social history, stay engaged with nature and to explore cool science projects.

7. **Provide down time**
   - Learning happens best in chunks of time. The brain isn’t designed for long-term focus. After a full day of school it’s important kids have some down time just to chill out and relax and not think about school stuff. This is because it gives the subconscious time to decide what it needs to keep in long term memory banks as well as strengthening new memories. It also provides the time needed for busy brains to restore and replenish, then be best prepared for another great day of learning tomorrow.

8. **Check in on happiness**
   - We send our kids to school to learn – but how well our kids do will be the strength and happiness of their relationships with their friends. As parents we can support them through those times when friendships get a little rocky, by teaching them how they can learn how to manage their own feelings in a positive way. Sometimes just being there as a sounding board (trying hard not to succumb to the temptation to tell them how to fix the problem) or to give that much needed hug is what counts the most.

We all learn more effectively when we are relaxed, happy and interested. Teaching our kids how to stay in that zone more often and for longer is what will help them to retain the joy of learning.
Take OFF the shoes please!

Allowing children endless opportunities to walk and run barefoot, especially on uneven surfaces, will allow them to connect with the ground — in all its variety — so they can develop healthy brains which can function at more optimum levels.

WORDS Maggie Dent

Surely one of the cutest parts of newborn babies is their feet. They are like little blobs, soft and squishy and yearning to be covered in kisses.

Part of the reason they are so cute is that when they are born these little blobs are made up of a mass of cartilage rather than fully formed bones. Gradually, through childhood and into the late teens the cartilage ossifies and becomes the 28 bones that exist in the adult human foot.

That journey of physical maturation sounds pretty simple doesn’t it? However it is far from simple. There is so much going on in our babies’ and toddlers’ feet that actually help them develop physically, emotionally and even psychologically.

Sometimes it’s hard to grasp the importance of free movement for babies and toddlers and young children, and we can be easily tempted by products — often very cute products — that are created for them.

While I shake my head at the knee pads for toddlers I saw recently in a baby shop, I am often drawn to the adorable little shoes and slippers.

However, as little ones begin to use their feet they are biologically wired to know what to do. Anything that restricts natural movement can delay other invisible developments.

By covering young children’s feet with lookalike adult shoes we can impede incredibly important sensory development. An emergency nurse told me a disturbing story of a five-year-old girl who had seldom gone barefoot. Apparently this girl was at a stream. It was a very hot day and as they went barefoot to go paddling at the edge of a stream, she complained later that she was hot.

As your child moves from not walking to crawling, which is what toddler shoes tend to do, can cause problems later in life. The soles of our feet are very sensitive and the looking down often throws them off balance and causes them to fall.

If you are concerned about their feet, please see a podiatrist. They can help ensure they are developing correctly.

It’s the looking down that often throws them off balance and causes them to fall.

Allowing children endless opportunities to walk and run barefoot, especially on uneven surfaces, will allow them to connect with the ground — in all its variety — so they can not only develop their physical capacity to move freely in our world, they will also create healthy brains which can function at more optimum levels.

Our feet send messages of discomfort to our brain to warn of sharp things and hot surfaces, however we need practise to discern what those messages are.

Children no longer seem to have the freedom to move and play in bare feet. It seems that parents have picked up the notion from full-day-based child care that children need to have their feet covered at all times.

The soles of our feet are very sensitive and intrinsically wired to our brain. Podiatrist Tracy Byrne, who specialises in podopaediatrics in London, believes that wearing shoes at too young an age can hamper a child’s walking and cerebral development.

She wrote in an article in The Guardian that when toddlers are barefoot they get feedback from the ground and so they keep their heads up more when walking around. That means they don’t need to look down so much, and it’s the looking down that often throws them off balance and causes them to fall.

Allowing children endless opportunities to walk and run barefoot, especially on uneven surfaces, will allow them to connect with the ground — in all its variety — so they can not only develop their physical capacity to move freely in our world, they will also create healthy brains which can function at more optimum levels.

Running with bare feet helps to develop our balance system and this can only be developed through movement. Balance does more than develop posture and motor skills. It also supports centres involved in eye movements, spatial awareness and the executive sense of time, and finally it is linked physiologically to biochemical pathways involved in anxiety.

“As your child moves from not walking into walking, and from there, to running and jumping and hopping and skipping, this is not just a physical journey. It is an inward journey as well. The early movement milestones are a journey upward, not just to walking but to the higher parts of your baby’s brain. The better the foundations that are laid now, the stronger will be the brain grows from these foundations.” — Jo Jackson King, Raising the Best Possible Child (2010).

The main reason for covering feet in young children should be simply to keep them warm. Anything that inhibits toddlers from crawling, which is what toddler shoes tend to do, can cause problems later in life.

So it’s simple. Pop on those cute little shoes, slippers and miniature adult footwear for photo moments and use socks to keep those cute little toes warm but then let’s kick them both off and allow our children to do what they have done since time began — be barefoot and free.
Build your parenting know-how one letter at a time.

Letter by letter:

A by-the-letter parenting guide

GIRLS

Here are 5 BIG tips for raising great girls:

1. Help girls face up to their fears rather than avoid them or be overwhelmed. Research shows that girls have more fears than boys. These include both developmental fears (e.g. fear of separation from parents as a toddler) and learned fears (e.g. fear of dogs). Some experts believe that this increase in fearfulness is related to overprotective parenting. Help girls confront their fears, rather than avoid them.

2. Get girls outside from a young age to build their confidence. Girls really benefit from spending time in natural environments including organised groups such as Guiding; camping in the bush with the family or just free play in the backyard. Spending time outside increases their confidence levels and their sense of autonomy.

3. Praise girls for what they do, NOT how they look. Direct your praise to effort and improvement rather than focusing on how they look. Girls’ body image issues are still a problem. It helps if you can link their self-worth to what they do, rather than how they look. This can be tough for some girls, so persistence is important. (See point 5 for an exception to this)

4. Assist girls to build friendships and avoid cliques. Girls, although more skilled with relationships, can also be very hard on each other in late primary school and through the secondary school years. My colleague Catherine Gerhardt in late primary school and through the secondary years. My colleague Catherine Gerhardt can benefit from positive comments from their dads about how they dress and carry themselves in public. “That dress looks perfect on you. I love it!” Can be just the tonic a girl needs when she is feeling self-conscious and fragile about how she looks.

5. Get fathers involved from a young age to help them feel comfortable and safe. The presence of an attentive male helps girls feel secure, and a father’s approval helps girls feel comfortable in their own skins. Teenage girls can benefit from positive comments from their dads about how they dress and carry themselves in public. “That dress looks perfect on you. I love it!” Can be just the tonic a girl needs when she is feeling self-conscious and fragile about how she looks.

GRIT

Many recent studies have found that character not cognitive ability is the single most reliable determinant of how a person’s life will turn out. These traits include the inclination to persist at a boring task (grit), the ability to delay gratification (self-control), and the tendency to follow through with a plan (conscientiousness), which are invaluable traits at school, in the workplace and in life in general.

The key character traits of grit, self-control and conscientiousness are forged under hardship and duress. This makes our current propensity to overprotect and over indulge kids problematic. When kids continually experience easy success we continually experience easy success we set them up for failure because when they finally face up to difficult situations they lack the capacity to push through the tough times.

Encouraging kids to step out of their comfort zones and take learning and social risks is one of the great challenges for modern parents. It’s critical that we challenge children and young people to attempt activities where failure is a significant option overcoming setbacks and pushing through difficulties is how character is formed.

Parents can actively promote grit and persistence in kids by making character part of their family’s brand. They can focus on character in conversations. They can share experiences where character paid off for them in their lives. They can discuss how character contributes to excellence and success in every day live including at work, at school and in the sporting field. Character and its many components can become part of the family narrative regardless of the age of children.

GOOD GIRL CURSE

Author Kasey Edwards recently highlighted the Good Girl Curse; where the use of excessive praise by parents can lead to compliance in girls. She claims parents use praise to socialise girls to be ‘good, enabling girls’ rather than ‘competitive and capable of realising their dreams’.

While I agree that the phrase ‘Good girl!’ is cringe worthy, praise by itself doesn’t form a compliant girl make.

Let’s face it, kids respond to positive feedback. Not only do they need their pro social behaviours to be reinforced, but they use the comments of significant adults (read parents) to help form a picture of themselves. “Mum says I’m pretty clever..... yes there must be an element of truth to that!” Kids then measure their parents’ comments up with the reality.

So praise or positive comments have their place! But gender and age play a part.

Children under the age of 5 usually like their parents to praise the results of what they do. Developmentally, they have difficulty separating themselves from what they do. “Mum says I’m a good little reader so I must be good!”

The older kids become the more they prefer effort praise, also known as encouragement, from parents and teachers. That is, give less praise about the results of what they do and focus more on their effort (“You’re trying hard.”), improvement (“You can spell more words now than you could at the start of the year!”); and their contribution (“That was a great help to your team.”). If you want assertive, strong young women then it helps to surround them with suitable models. It’s also helps to highlight their assertive, strong-minded behaviour so that girls grow up thinking that those qualities are valuable, and that they can possess them if they wish. What parents focus on with kids usually expands, so think carefully about children’s attributes that you focus on.

Next Issue: H - Holidays, Helping at Home, Hands-off Policy
Rites of Passage

Late last year I began to notice that my fourteen-year-old son and I were not connecting like we used to. I felt he was changing and I was struggling to adjust. In talking with friends who had boys of similar ages, I realised that I wasn’t alone in experiencing changes in family dynamics. Some friends shrugged the issue off—‘Teenagers, hey!’—but to me, there was more to it than that; you can’t just write it off as this vague, testosterone-fuelled period that we hope, in time, will correct itself. Surely there has to be more to it than that…doesn’t there?

As if my changing relationship with my son wasn’t enough to address, friends started asking how I was negotiating the tricky father/son discussions around issues such as sex, girlfriend, drugs, alcohol, pornography and violence. My first thought was, ‘Circky! He’s only just turned fourteen!’ Can I simply continue kicking the soccer ball with him in the park and talking nonsense about Star Wars for a few more years? Apparently not…

Whilst contemplating my next move, I stumbled across a radio interview with a doctor talking about ‘Rites of Passage’ events (ROP) aimed at fourteen to sixteen-year-old boys and their fathers. I declared instantly, ‘I’m taking my son on one of those Rites events…whatever the heck they are!’

From there I tracked down the doctor’s website and started reading all I could and within a week, I had taken what was, for me, a huge risk and signed up my son and I for the four-day event.

As the date drew closer, my partner said, ‘So tell me again, why are you doing this Rites of Passage event?’ All I could honestly say was that my ‘gut feeling’ was that this was an important and right thing for me to do. Furthermore, as I had written to my ex-wife whilst seeking her consent to take our son away for the camp, “Either I take him on a Rites of Passage or we let him fumble his way through life with the help of his fourteen year old mates…and to be honest that didn’t work out too well for me back in the day!”

Six months after hearing that initial radio interview, my son and I set out to begin our ROP experience. My son was anxious and full of questions, but the organisers had encouraged me not to say much to him— which was a good thing as I didn’t know anything to tell him anyway!

As we pulled up at the ROP campsite, we half expected to see a bunch of hippies sitting around chanting, shrouded in a cloud of incense. In reality, this particular gathering of men and boys ranged from solidly built rugby and AFL guys to others who didn’t play much sport at all. There were musicians, academics, blue collar, white collar, different cultures, introverts and extroverts— with not a hippy to be seen. The diversity couldn’t have been greater.

The next four days literally raced by which surprised the heck out of my son, given the fact that no one was allowed to bring phones, laptops, gaming devices, books or even watches on the trip. (Geez, the sigh of dismay he gave when I initially told him that!) On site we were all engaged in an endless range of activities which I’m not going to talk about (secret men’s business I’m afraid) but I can tell you, I laughed furiously, wept a few tears, talked, listened, pondered, reflected, ran, collected big bits of manly firewood, heard a heap of incredibly honest stories and listened intently at the wisdom of all these young boys/men talking about what really mattered to them and the kinds of men they hoped to grow up to be. From the challenging conversations to the long silences, from the deep learning to the profound laughter, it was all a sheer joy and privilege to be a part of.

On the final day as the tents were dismantled, some of the men and boys admitted they never even wanted to be there in the first place. Several of the dads were effectively ‘signed up’ by their wives and had been reluctant to take time off (especially as that involved missing two days of work) yet on the final morning, one of the dads said to me, “Four days ago I believed my work was all that mattered. Now I realise I’ve got it all totally wrong. My relationship with my kids and wife is what matters. My work can wait.”

By that final day no one wanted to leave. For my son and I, having survived four nights in a small (and very smelly) tent, we are now very much aware that whilst we still have work to do with each other and that there will no doubt be some tough times ahead, we now have a strengthened bond that can never be broken. We shared an incredible experience, something meaningful and with real purpose that neither of us will ever forget.

As a father, I honestly believe a seed has been planted in the mind, heart and soul of my son. It may well take months or even years before that seed germinates and starts to grow, but eventually it will blossom into something amazing. Personally it was the greatest parenting experience I have ever shared with my son and that’s saying something—and the best thing is that in a few years’ time I get to do it all again with my two younger sons when they ‘come of age’.

If a ‘Rites of Passage’ experience sparks an interest, take the leap of faith—my feeling is you won’t be disappointed.

Check out www.doctorarne.com (They also run events for girls.)

Till my next parenting adventure…Malcolm.

WORDS MALCOLM DIX

The teenage years can offer challenges for boys and fathers as they struggle to connect. Malcolm Dix reflects on the importance of a Rite of Passage experience with his teenage son and how it offered an opportunity for strengthening their bond now and into the future.

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.

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I can still recall the exact moment I became concerned with my body image. I was fifteen years old and on a family holiday, along with my grandmother. I was sitting by the pool’s edge in my yellow bikini without a care in the world. As I dangled my feet into the crisp, cool water, I was not prepared for the words I was about to hear! Out of the mouth of my nan, who was supervising us by the pool at the time came these words...

"Oh, I didn’t realise you had such FAT LEGS!" 

WHAAAAAAAAAT!!!!!! (MY internal dialogue!)

Yes! You read correctly. And boy did I hear correctly!

As the words stung the air between us, I looked down at my thin, pubescent legs and realised she was talking about my thighs.

It had never occurred to me that the changes in my body - the development of my shape, including my thighs, would amount to being referred to as ‘fat’!

Those words replayed over and over in my mind for many years like a tape player (YES, they were tapes when I was a teenager!)

‘My legs were fat!’

‘I was fat’!

‘If my grandmother comments about my body, then surely it MUST be true!’

At least that’s exactly as I recall this incident, some twenty-five years later. It later ignited in me a passion to work with young girls to help them to look at their bodies in an entirely new light - for the amazing things that our bodies can do, how complex they are – not about how we look!

According to some statistics, between 30% and 50% of adolescent girls are concerned about their weight or are dieting. Our girls are literally bombarded with hundreds of messages each and every day trying to influence them as to how they should look and behave.

Unhelpful messages are received from advertising, the media, internet, music videos and lyrics, as well as social media accounts.

It seems that everywhere they turn, the message is sold to our girls that 

‘Their body is their currency’.

This is not merely a girls issue; there are many boys who are also affected by the toxic messages they see each and every day. It is difficult to imagine how complex it is for our young people to grow up and develop a healthy body image and sense of self in this unhelpful environment.

As parents, we cannot inoculate our girls from pressures placed on them to adhere to a certain body ‘image’, however we can go a way in helping them understand the unhelpful messages and lies that are being continually sold to them. Here are just a few ideas to help you begin the conversation with your daughter.

**Educate**

The more our girls can understand the messages they are being sold about their bodies are mostly fake, the more capable they will become in rejecting these notions. Look at images in magazines together and dissect and discuss what tactics have been used to alter and distort the final image as it appears. Help girls understand that the average image in advertising and on magazine covers has between forty and forty-five changes made to it using the ‘miracle’ of Photoshop and digital retouching. Use Google images to search before and after celebrity photos so that your daughter can see how fake the final images are. Remind girls not to compare themselves to the ‘selfies’ they see in social media; they are merely seeing the highlight reel of people’s lives, and images are often changed before they are uploaded.

**Encourage Healthy Habits**

Encourage your daughter to eat well. This includes avoiding skipping meals. Many girls falsely believe that they can control their body shape and size by avoiding meals and eating only certain foods. Girls need to understand that a good, healthy, regular eating plan contributes to a healthy body and a healthy mind. Genetics play a part in the size and shape of our bodies also. Some girls do not fully understand this, and play the ‘compare and despair game’ with their peers when in actual fact, they have been designed differently. Help your daughter to love and appreciate the body she has and for the amazing things it can do!

**Develop their Spark!**

Help your daughter discover many of the other qualities and talents that she has, aside from how she looks. When we allow our daughters the opportunity to try new things, engage in causes beyond themselves and invest in their own talents and gifts - we give them so much more. Compliment the girls in your life on the small and big achievements they make - whether you noticed she was being encouraging or helpful towards a sibling, or the creative way she has decorated her bedroom. Focus less on how she looks.

**Be a Healthy Role Model**

Finally, our girls will be far more influenced by what we do than what we say as parents:

If we encourage our daughters to worry less about how they look and how much they weigh, yet spend great amounts of time worrying and fussing about how WE look, continually dieting, they receive mixed messages. ‘Our girls cannot be what they cannot see!’

It’s worth noting that significant messages and ideas that children and young people develop about their bodies, body image and eating are from the adults in the families they grow up in, and not solely from the media.

Be aware of how you talk about yourself in front of your daughter and how you view your own self worth. If we demonstrate a positive body image and care for our own health, our daughters are more likely to follow.

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**NO BODY’S PERFECT!**

Helping our girls develop a positive body image