



Building parent-school partnerships

WORDS Michael Grose

Fathering teenagers

Practical tips for fathers on how to shift parenting gears when kids move into adolescence.

Being a dad of primary-aged children is quite easy really. Most boys and girls want to have a close relationship with their dads during these years so a willingness to spend time with them, a sense of fun and a positive, caring attitude will go a long way with kids during this stage.

The fathering game changes in adolescence. As children they may have put you on a pedestal and held you in the highest regard, now as adolescents they go to great lengths to reveal your feet of clay. As kids they used to nag you to play with them. Now as teenagers they barely give you the time of day. And what's worse, they don't laugh at your jokes any more. You're just not that funny!! Ouch! That hurts.

Shift parenting gears

Most parents have to shift parenting gears when their kids move into adolescence. Mothers often make the shift first as they are quicker to see the signs (*such as being argumentative, displaying silly behaviour, spending more time alone*) that their loving child has been replaced by a teenager. Some dads are constantly angry with their kids during early adolescence as for the first time they experience challenge (*"How dare you say that to me!"*). But many are sad at the loss of their loving and lovely child.

Once the shift is recognised and reconciled a dad can establish a new, deeper relationship with his teenager where he teaches, advises and inspires, at the same time giving them the space to make their own decisions.

As our attention is drawn towards young people's schooling, particularly with their academic performance (or lack of it), it's easy to forget that the developmental task for young people is to form relationships outside their family, with peers being the stepping stones to their own family. The job for a dad is to guide and assist teenage children to form meaningful relationships with others outside the family. This is best done by modelling healthy relationships with others; being a sounding board for young people's concerns, and challenging some of their choices without threatening their self-esteem or sense of autonomy.

Be available

The real trick to successfully fathering young people is to be emotionally available. It's not just being in their vicinity because you can be in the same room as a young person but never connect. It means having a shared interest such as a love of the same football team so you have a connecting point, and also a genuine

willingness to take an interest in their life right now. Perhaps the most common complaint I hear from teenagers is that their fathers focus too much on what their young people should be in the future, rather than on what's important in their life right now. Taking an interest in their interests may well be the most potent strategy in a father's armoury.

Fathering sons

Many fathers and sons get locked into the old ram/young ram syndrome. The young ram, full of energy and verve locks horns with the old ram that is desperate to prove himself at the expense of his son. Two things need to happen during this stage. First, dad needs to engage his son in fun, safe ways such as sport, physical games or even verbal jousting. Second, boys need to form relationships with someone outside the family who may give the same message as you, but is more easily accepted. Sports coaches, neighbours, uncles, aunts, teachers, even older siblings can fill this important role. Dads need to make room for others, which can be difficult for some men.

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Talk about relationships

If there is one topic a dad should talk about with his teenage son it is about healthy relationships— both girls and boys. In particular, a boy's attitude to women is strongly influenced by his father's attitude. Peers do play a part, and their voice is strong during this age, but a father's views are vital and need to be heard especially around treatment of women, and the place that pornography, that is now readily available, plays in the formation of their attitudes to females and healthy relationships.

Fathering daughters

A man's relationship with his teenage daughter can be problematic. Teenage girls, who are notoriously verbal, can easily make their fathers feel irrelevant. It helps to have common interests. It also helps to share your passions and open up some of your world to your teenage daughter. If you want your daughter to be interested in you then you need to be interesting to her.

The active involvement of dads in their daughter's lives has been linked to positive outcomes in many areas, including positive body image in girls. There are two things that dads can do that promote positive body image. First, get active with your daughters – rough and tumble games when young, sport in adolescence – to help her develop a sense of power and self-confidence. Also a dad demonstrates that he enjoys being with her in a way that has nothing to do with how she looks. The second thing that dads can do to promote positive body image is to compliment his daughter about how she looks as well as

what she does. Far from sending mixed messages it can be reassuring to a girl that her appearance is acceptable to the most significant male figure in her life.

Allow your daughter to stand up to you

Why is it that some adolescent girls allow themselves to be pushed around while others assert themselves? The reasons are complex and can't be attributed to one factor, however if you want a girl to stand up for herself, first she needs to find her voice in her own family. I believe that there are times when girls should argue with their father and let him know when he is on the wrong track, and that he should get off her back for a while. If she can learn to do this in a loving atmosphere she will learn to be on an equal footing with a man, and importantly to stand her ground and expect to be treated well.

There's no doubt that adolescents are on steep learning curves, absorbing both lessons and values that will stay with them for life. While teachers and peers play a part in shaping their views, parents play a major role. Dads can easily feel locked out of their children's lives during this critical stage. But it's vital to claim your space and let your voice be heard albeit with sensitivity, compassion and a sense of humour.

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