

A Note for Fathers

The Father & Son weekend is coming up in September. I'm no expert at this fathering business – I was given my "father's licence" when my first daughter was born in 1994 and haven't got past the red "P-plate" really (can't go too fast!). She's now off at University and things change, but I'm still learning.

Over many years of helping on the Father & Son weekend I've talked with a number of fathers. I have come away from these weekends with the ideas that:

- Fathers saw the weekend as a great opportunity to be with their sons and to "have a conversation" with them;
- Sons enjoyed showing their dads what happens at Colo and spending some time with their fathers;
- Fathers appreciated the opportunity to talk to other fathers about the challenges and joys of raising boys.

Most of the weekend will be time for you to spend with your son, but on the Saturday night we will break into two groups. The dads will share a conversation about this fathering business.

At the same time your sons will spend a session with Colo staff member Paul Bryant, looking at the journey of becoming a man and the importance of the father-son relationship. Paul speaks from the heart and delivers some powerful messages. Paul will relate his personal journey to becoming a man, including that Paul lost his dad to suicide when he was 12 and his mother died in a car accident beside him at 13. Paul will also speak about the changes in his life since becoming a father and the importance of the relationship between father and son, as well as the lessons he's learned from his five year old son, Jack. For some of your sons part of this might touch a raw nerve. If you have any concerns please feel free to contact me.

Letter to your son.

In the past, as with the weekend this year, the Fathers have been asked to write a letter to their sons in preparation for a conversation that they would have with their sons on the Saturday evening. The idea of the letter was to be a "conversation starter" and to perhaps say things to their sons that maybe they hadn't said before, or wanted to say but couldn't get the words right. The consistent messages that I received from fathers were that:

- Some fathers found the task of writing the letter quite difficult – they didn't know where to start, or what ideas to use, or what sort of language to use – some of these fathers wrote a letter but found that it didn't say what they really wanted to say, and other fathers simply chose not to write at all;
- Those who did write a letter found that they had a good conversation with their sons about the ideas in the letter, but many of these fathers wished that they had done a better job and spent more time on the letter.

Having gone through the process of writing letters to each of my own three children, I have found it moving, thought provoking and rewarding, but not straight forward or easy.

Sample Letters

Paul Gibson, the father of a Joeys old boy, who has a special interest in this business of raising boys to be good men, has volunteered to write some sample letters to help fathers with their letters - ideas, format, language and even the expression of the ideas.

There are 3 sample letters attached that may assist you.

- **Sample 1** – is from a father who finds letter writing easy and has a good relationship with his son – it is open, warm and loving;

- **Sample 2** – is from a father who isn't really into expressing his feelings easily but wants to say some important things to his son – it is guarded but still honest;
- **Sample 3** – is from a father who has been struggling with his relationship with his son – and is honestly trying to “put things on the table”.

Paul's advice to you as you draft your letter to your son is:

1. Select the 3 or 4 main ideas that you would like to talk with your son about (you could get some of these from the Sample letters);
2. Develop these ideas using actual examples or instances that will be familiar to him;
3. Be positive and constructive about his qualities and his talents;
4. Try to be open and honest about how you feel;
5. If you're having trouble with your relationship with him – say so, be specific about why, and use examples;
6. And keep it simple; simple is good!

Useful References

Some fathers have asked me “What can I read that will help me? “Where can I get some more information about this father son business?”

The short answer is that there is heaps of information; the long answer is that there is a lot of rubbish written about the subject as well. Paul Gibson and I have provided some references for those of you who are interested and I hope that you find them helpful. We have deliberately chosen Australian (and one Kiwi) references as we believe that the Australian concepts of “manhood” and “mateship” are missed completely by many international authors (Americans for example!).

1. **“He'll be OK: Growing gorgeous boys into good men”;** Celia Lashlie (2005), Harper Collins.

This is a seriously good book. Get your wife or partner to read it too and half the battle is over.

Celia also has a cd and other books available. www.celialashlie.co.nz

There is also an excellent podcast of Celia in conversation with Richard Fidler which is well worth a listen. <http://www.abc.net.au/local/stories/2007/03/14/1871891.htm?site=conversations>

2. **“The making of Men”;** Dr Arne Rubinstein (2013), Griffin Press.

Another good book. There's also more information at www.doctorarne.com including practical programs.

3. **“Brainstorm: The Power and Purpose of the Teenage Brain. Daniel J Siegel, Penguin**

This book is based on recent research on brain development. Fascinating stuff.

4. **www.thefatheringproject.org**

This website gives details of many outstanding resources. Two of the best are the DVD “What kids really need from their dads” and the book “Fathering from the Fast Lane” by Bruce Robinson. Finch Publishing. Don't be overwhelmed by the amount of information that's available – try either of these as a kick start.

5. **www.parentingideas.com.au**

This website also gives details of many resources. Michael Grose has written eight books on parenting, as well as advice columns in newspapers and magazines across Australia. The blog and facebook page are easy to read and often contain simple, down to earth advice.

6. “Boy oh boy: how to raise and educate boys”; Tim Hawkes (2001), Prentice Hall.

This is a useful book for a number of reasons – it is easy to read, it provides a vast number of references to other good information, and it deals specifically with the issues for 14 yr. old boys. Hawkes is an educator and spends perhaps a disproportionate amount of the book on the “educating” part rather than the “raising” part.

7. “Raising Boys”; Steve Biddulph (1997), Finch Publishing, Sydney.

Biddulph is good – he is a psychologist whose insights into men and boys have been formed from his contact with men from all parts of society. He provides really useful advice that is easy to read, pragmatic (you can actually apply his ideas) and is humorous.

8. Other books by Steve Biddulph that are well worth reading – “Manhood; a book about setting men free” (1994) and “Stories of Manhood” (2000).

These are seriously good books and should be essential reading for all men trying to understand themselves and their relationships with their own fathers (so that we can avoid the same mistakes!). The “Stories of Manhood” is a collection of stories gathered from other men – the idea being to challenge the stereotypes that we have of men and manhood.

Good luck with your letters. I look forward to seeing you on the weekend.

Mark Brackenreg.

Additional information: Looking for something practical? Maybe a holiday with a difference for you son? Here are three organisations that run father/son programs. They usually also have programs involving mums and daughters too.

1. Arne Rubinstein runs a 4 night bush program “Making Men”. www.doctroarne.com
2. The Pathways Foundation run 5 or 6 day programs “Pathways to Manhood”
www.pathwaysfoundation.com.au
3. Outward Bound run 7 day family programs. www.outwardbound.org.au

A letter from a Father to his Son (1)

My dear son,

I remember when you were born. It was a funny night. Your mother and I had gone to bed and about 11.00 your mother woke me and we rushed to the hospital. We dropped your sister off at friend's house and arrived at the hospital at 11.45 pm. You were born at 1 o'clock in the morning on the 12th of May 1990.

That was a truly special day for me. I was in the hospital room with your mother and I watched you enter the world – all shrivelled and pink with lots of dark hair. I was so proud and so happy – I had a son; you were born. After the nurse wrapped you up your mother held you and then I held you. It was such a special moment in my life.

Every time I nursed you and cuddled you as a little boy, I remembered that day you were born, that special day. Later as you grew bigger and stronger every time I hugged you I remembered that special day. Even today when we hug, I still remember that special day. I love those moments when we hug as they remind me of the day you were born and they remind me how special you are and how much I love you.

When you were a little boy you loved to climb – you would climb trees, fences, and gates. Once you climbed up, you would jump down – “look Dad; look at me; watch me” you used to say. Once you climbed onto the garden shed and jumped off in your Batman outfit – that's how you broke your arm. But it didn't stop you climbing; you loved being up high and looking down. As you grew older you took more risks – trying difficult and mad things.

Once when you were 3, we went to the Show and you wanted to ride the dodgem cars. Over and over we went in a car, round and round, bumping other people, crashing into other cars deliberately. You were sitting in front of me and screaming out “Do it again Dad; do it again”. You were laughing and screaming and having a wonderful time. We almost got thrown out of the Show.

When you were 8 you wanted a skateboard – and eventually we gave you one for your 9th birthday. Your mother was so worried that you would have a terrible accident and hurt yourself, but you were really responsible with the skateboard and didn't do anything that was really dangerous. You loved the speed and the excitement of going fast, and you didn't hurt yourself much – some crashes and some lost skin, but no broken bones.

I used to watch you play with the piano when you were a small boy, probably about 6. Your mother played the piano and you would sit alongside her and pretend to play too. When she left the keyboard open, you would play with the keys – lots of noise and not much music. When you said that you wanted to learn I knew that it was a passion of yours. I could never have known what a passion it would become and I am still amazed by how good you have become. When we hear you play, I am so proud of you. You have worked hard, you have practised and done your exams and you are so good at it. I love it when your mates come round and they get you to play the latest stuff – I don't understand it much, but it sounds good and you all have a great time. You have real talent.

I am telling you all this stuff because I probably haven't told you before how talented you are, how proud of you I really am, how lucky I am to have a wonderful son like you, how lucky I am to be your Dad and how much I love you.

I love your tenderness. You are gentle with your sister; you love Buster and you care for him and you are always kind and gentle to your sister's friends. You are great with your grandparents – you talk to them, you care about them and you love them. And they think you're an absolutely terrific boy. I notice that you always treat the neighbours and strangers with respect and I think that it's so great that you play the piano at the "old peoples' home" at Christmas time for their carols. It shows your generosity of spirit.

You are growing up to be a man – a good man. You are strong and yet you are gentle. You are tall and yet you don't put people down. You are talented and yet you help others who aren't as talented. You are respectful and kind to others, and you are generous.

I think that one of the most important things about being a man is the way that men treat women. I know that I sometimes get angry with your mother, and say things that I shouldn't say and I always regret that. I know that you love your mother and that she loves you dearly. My test for you is to always treat a woman the way that you would like one of your friends to treat your sister. Have girls as friends and show them the respect that you show your mother – share your feelings with them and try to understand how they feel about things and about you. Learn to trust girls and talk to your girlfriends as real friends.

You and I have talked about the physical and biological parts of sex. We haven't really talked about the emotional parts though. You will find yourself attracted to girls sexually and you must remember that girls are not sexual objects who are there for your gratification. Always remember that you are in charge of your sexual urges and that you can choose the right time to enjoy sexual pleasure with a woman and you must always do so with her full consent.

I think that it is important to have a male friend – a really good mate who cares about you and understands your dreams and your fears. Talk about your dreams and your fears with your best mate, support him in good times and bad times and he will do the same for you. Be there for him when he needs you. Peter is like that for me – a real mate who had been there for me in good times and bad times.

We talked last holidays about your dreams. The fact that you don't know what you want to be is OK. You can be anything you want to be. You have the talent, the drive and the ability to do many things. I want you to know that whatever you do will be OK with me; I will always be here for you.

I still want to be able to hug you no matter how old you are, how big you are, or how old I am. I want to remember the day you were born until the day I die. I love you; you are a wonderful son, and a man of whom I am so proud to be the father.

I'm sorry that I have raved on a bit, but I wanted to take this chance to tell you stuff that I don't say to you as often as I should.

Your loving Dad.

Sample Letter 2

A Father to his Son

Dear Son,

When the note came from the school suggesting that I write you a letter, I really didn't know what to write, so here goes.

When I think about you I can think about lots of things. I think about what you are good at – art, history, cricket, tennis, rugby (most sport really). You are a terrific artist – you can paint and draw anything and you don't get that ability from me. You are good at history, and you always have been, but you have loved stories since you were a little boy – you loved listening to stories, reading stories and telling stories. You are a terrific sportsman (take after your grandfather I think) and if the sport has a ball, you're into it.

You are a cheeky boy – always with a quick wit, a smile, a joke and other people love being around you. You make friends easily and people like you – boys and girls, old people and little kids (just look at how you get on with your sister's kids). You always have a good thing to say about everyone. Your mates talk to you because they like you, and they obviously trust you.

You are brave – you will have a go at anything. Some things work out well for you – riding the horses and the trail bikes. Some things don't work out so well – learning the clarinet and joining the swimming squad. But it doesn't matter, you at least have a go and that's a great thing about you.

Your grandad always says that you will be a famous artist, but that's because he wanted to be one I think. But you could be, your art teachers have always told us that you have a great talent for painting.

I know that you want to travel when you leave school and you want to see the world. That would be terrific for you and I only wish that I had done that but I didn't really have the chance – had to help grandad on the farm. You will meet lots of interesting people and see lots of interesting things.

You're really growing up, shaving and talking in deep voice. You're a good boy and your mum and I are really proud of you. I want you to be happy in your life, to do what you are really interested in, have good friends who stand by and you will stand by them. I will always help you however I can and I want us to be friends. I hope that you feel that you can talk to me about anything and that I will help you.

I probably haven't been the best father in the world, often been too busy to watch you play sport and go to things at school but I do care about you very much. You are a terrific son and I think you're great.

All the best from your father.

Sample Letter 3

A Father to his Son

Dear Son,

I know that the last couple of years have been hard on you. We have been through a lot as a family.

I often think back to when you were younger and remember the time we used to spend together throwing and kicking a ball in the backyard. You often would follow me around “helping” me as I did jobs. I wish I had shown more patience with you when your “help” made the job harder.

I know that you think I’m being really hard on you at the moment but hopefully over the next stage of your life you will see what I’ve being trying to do for you. You often compare our family with some of your friends, but they all have their differences.

I really care about you and I find it hard being strict with you, especially now you don’t tell me much of what is going on with you. I only wish we found it easier to talk to one another. Perhaps this letter can be a start.

I want to be able to work with you rather than against you. I only have your best interests at heart. I’m sure that it doesn’t seem like it to you sometimes, but I do love you very much, and try to do my best for you.

I know that you are going to grow into a great man who has a great deal of respectyarda, yarda, yarda

You are a very talented young man, especially with your footy, and know that you can do well at whatever you choose to. I just hope that you will think carefully about the choices you make and not just follow along with what your mates are doing.

All the best from your father.