Parent Talk | Term 4, 2015

"The experience of love in marriage and family is absolutely vital to the life of society." - Pope Benedict XVI

Dear Parents & Friends,

Like his predecessor, Pope Francis has on many occasions reflected on the beauty, value and dire importance of family life in our society. He challenges us to examine our own family life: "I leave you with this question, for each one of you to respond to. In my home, do we yell, or do we speak with love and tenderness? This is a good way to recognize our love."

And there’s no doubt a happy family is a place where children are nurtured and loved, where they can flourish and thrive and feel safe and secure. But sadly, for too many women and children (and some men), the home is not a safe haven but a place of violence, abuse and fear.

At this year’s Synod on the Family in Rome, domestic violence was one of the contemporary issues that Bishops tackled. At their request, domestic violence expert, Christauria Weiland drafted a 100-page booklet for the Philadelphia World Meeting of Families titled How Can We Help to End Violence in Catholic Families: A Guide for Clergy, Religious and Laity. Bishop Odama of Gulu, one of the Synod participants recently told the Catholic News Agency that “Violence done to women, or done to children or to anybody is a violence done to the family."

Domestic violence is a serious issue around the world and occurs in all social, economic, religious and cultural groups. In this issue, we look at some of the initiatives being introduced in our NSW classrooms to take action against domestic violence – a must read for all parents. On the flip side, we also have some timely tips on raising happy children plus some great info on social media etiquette.

Linda McNeil
Executive Director

Everyone’s business

"I want to tell people that family violence happens to [anybody], no matter how nice your house is, no matter how intelligent you are."

It was with these grief-stricken words, that Rosie Batty, a single mum from the outer Melbourne suburbs, finally pushed the issue of domestic violence into the minds and conscience of all Australians. Spoken to a packed media scrum in February 2014, just hours after her 11-year old son Luke was brutally killed by his father at the local cricket nets, these words became the catalyst to kick-start a nation into addressing this insidious crime.

Without wishing to diminish the loss of her son, Rosie’s situation was no different to many other victims of domestic violence in our country. Tragically, on average two Australian women have been killed every week this year by a partner or former partner. What made Rosie’s situation different was her decision to face the cameras that day, to make us all understand that domestic violence can happen to anyone, and in doing so, ensure that Luke’s death and her unfathomable loss would not be in vain. From a position of fear, she had become fearless. After all, she had nothing left to lose.

In the months after Luke’s death, Rosie took her message across the nation, creating a groundswell of action that has galvanized our politicians, bureaucrats, media, educators and the broader community into calling for action. Rosie’s efforts to “make family violence every Australian’s business” saw her named the 2015 Australian of the Year and have prompted action at state and federal level, including:

- A $100 million domestic violence package announced by the Prime Minister in September this year which will see a trial of GPS trackers for perpetrators and extra security for women at home.
- A $60 million package, announced by the NSW Premier, which will see specialist police squads targeting domestic violence offenders for the first time and perpetrators forced to undergo behaviour change programs.
- The establishment of the Royal Commission into Family Violence in Victoria, due to report its findings in 2016.

And then in March this year, echoing Rosie’s courage, a 14-year old girl spoke out bravely about her own experience of domestic violence and became the catalyst for a raft of changes to the NSW school syllabus. Weeks after the suicide death of her mother who had suffered years of abuse, the teenager started a petition on change.org.au saying: “I didn’t [sic] know that what happened in my home was different to any other family home, as a child how could I have known any better?” The petition attracted more than 100,000 signatures, prompting the teen to write to the NSW Premier, Mike Baird and then Prime Minister, Tony Abbott, asking them to “educate children about domestic violence and how to seek help”. She believed that had domestic violence been addressed in her classroom she might have gotten help to save her mother.

As a result, NSW will now be the first jurisdiction in Australia to introduce lessons that specifically deal with domestic violence.
From term one, 2016, all NSW high schools will include domestic violence education as part of the years 7-10 Personal Development, Health and Physical Education (PDHPE) syllabus. The PDHPE syllabus will explicitly reference domestic violence, strengthening existing opportunities for students to learn about positive relationships and leading safe and healthy lives. As the “parents of tomorrow”, our children will be taught how to identify, prevent and respond to domestic violence. The update to the syllabus will complement mandatory healthy relationship education in all NSW primary schools. While the PDHPE curriculum will provide the content guidelines for the domestic violence education, teachers will use their own judgment about what and when it is appropriate to include specific details.

It’s also important that parents are aware that domestic violence will be taught at school so that they can also engage with their children about this important issue. Parents wanting more information can find out about the new syllabus on the NSW Board of Studies’ BOSTES website.

More information about Rosie Batty’s campaign to “take action” can be found on the Never Alone, Luke Batty Foundation website.

Anyone experiencing domestic and family violence can get help 24/7 by calling 1800 RESPECT or 1800 737 732.

For crisis support contact Lifeline 13 11 14.

The pursuit of happiness

Some years ago when psychologist, Dr Tim Sharp, was given the nickname “Dr Happy” by a friend, he was initially quite reluctant to accept it. As a mental health professional and as a parent, he felt the moniker carried with it a huge burden and responsibility.

“People have all sorts of expectations when they think they are going to meet Dr Happy, the Chief Happiness Officer of the Happiness Institute,” he said.

“However, over the years, I have come to embrace the name because it raises two important issues. It raises the issue of what is happiness. And what is not.”

Whatever you want to call him, Dr Tim Sharp (aka Dr Happy) is one of Australia’s leaders in the exciting science of positive psychology and happiness. For more than 20 years he has worked to improve mental health and promote happiness and positivity throughout Australia. As well as many clinical and academic achievements, he is the author of a number of books including “100 ways to Happy Children, a guide for busy parents”. He is also the father of two teenage children.

Dr Sharp shares the view with many other mental health experts that our goal should not necessarily be to raise happy children, but instead to raise children who can thrive and flourish.

What’s the difference?

“Well those children who do thrive and flourish do enjoy happiness,” he said.

“And I would go so far as to say we couldn’t live a great life without positive emotions, without happiness. Research has found that when people experience genuine and authentic positive emotions such as happiness, contentment, calmness, satisfaction and pride they are more positive and more innovative. So when children experience positive emotions they become more open minded and more creative. This allows them to build on their internal and external resources, use their strengths better and as a result, become more resilient and solve problems better.”

Are negative emotions important too?

“If you think for a minute what would it be like to live a life without negative emotions – we wouldn’t be here. We would be dead because fear and anxiety actually protect us, make us aware of dangers and stop us from doing stupid things. So, if you think about it, it would be totally unrealistic to expect ourselves, and our children to live a life without negative emotions.”

Getting the right balance

“The challenge is getting the right balance between positive and negative emotions. We know the magic ratio appears to be three to one. We know for those people that thrive and flourish, there are approximately three experiences of positive emotions for every negative emotion.”

When does negative emotion become too much?

“One of the most common and important questions that I get asked is: ‘When does normal distress become abnormal distress?’ One of the simple things that counsellors and psychologists and any parent can look out for is any significant change in a child’s behaviour. By this I mean, significant change in things such as academic performance, concentration, decision-making, social functioning, social activities, sleep and appetite. Any significant behavioural change that occurs for at least two weeks, is a red flag, it’s a warning sign. And if these things go on for a long period of time we need to do something about them.”

Starting the conversation

“One of the best questions that a parent can ask their child is: ‘R U OK?’ It’s a fantastic question because it is so simple. And, depending on the age of your child, you can ask it in different ways. ‘How are you?’ ‘What’s going on?’ ‘Is everything OK?’ As the parent of two teenage children I know full well that the answer you get might be incoherent, or lacking in detail and sometimes won’t even sound like it’s part of the English language. But that’s not really the point. The point is, it’s really important to ask the question and to ask it on a regular basis. Research clearly shows that parents who have more conversations with their kids, parents and children who have stronger paths or channels of communication have significantly better mental health. It’s that simple.”
And remember to accentuate the positive

“Thriving and flourishing is not just about managing negative emotions. It’s also just as important to monitor and highlight positive emotions. We know that children that are thriving and flourishing and experiencing genuine and authentic positive emotions perform better academically and socially and have better physical health. They don’t get sick as often and if they do get sick they recover more quickly, they are more resilient and ultimately they are more successful in life.

“So we need to remember to catch our kids when they are doing good things and to highlight the positive experiences. Pick out specific examples when you see your kids smiling and see them having fun. Too often we just ignore the positive experiences when we should be celebrating and savouring them. Picking up on and addressing mental ill health is important but highlighting the good mental and physical health of our children is equally just as important.”

Want to know more? Have a look at Dr Sharp’s practical tips on how to raise kids that thrive and flourish. More>

Netiquette for kids

By Michael Grose, speaker, parenting educator & author

Parents of every generation have always found ways to frame messages of safety and success for their children to remember. Parents of past generations, who only had to contend with the offline or real world, intuitively knew that they needed to teach children important lessons about safety and manners rather than assume they’d be understood.

The same holds true for the world of social media that children now inhabit from an increasingly young age. Even though our children are growing up with technology as a part of their everyday lives, they will still make plenty of mistakes. This means we need to have direct conversations with our kids about the comments and posts that they make on social media.

As parents we teach our kids to talk politely so that they know how to speak to others when we’re not around. There’s no guarantee they’ll look an adult in the eye when they speak to them, but our discussions, reminders and lessons about manners will hopefully hold up when we’re not there to prompt. The same applies to social media. Our conversations and lessons will prepare our kids to be savvy users when we’re not around. Here are some ideas to get you started:

Is this worth posting?

The relatively impersonal nature of social media means that we can post information and pictures with relative anonymity. Also its immediacy means that we can do so without much thought. This means that kids need to be very critical about what they see online. “Is this accurate?” and “Is this worth posting?” are two valid questions children can ask when they read posts placed by others.

Have you taken a big breath?

A child who says the first thing that comes to mind is sure to put plenty of people offside. “Think before you speak” is the type of message that every child should have rattling around in his head. The same principle applies to social media. Just because a child or young person thinks something doesn’t mean they post it. “Take a big breath” may just about be the most important message to give your kids about social media.

So, you want the principal to see this?

An invitation to a teenage birthday party posted on social media is one way to get more attendees than you bargained for. The viral nature of social media means that kids should only post messages and photos that they want to be spread and read by a large audience.

How does this post make you feel?

We need to teach kids that not every post needs to be commented upon and not every thought needs to be shared, particularly when they are angry. Teaching them to walk away and then to step back in when they’ve calmed down is perhaps the most important communication lesson of all. It is very relevant to social media as emotions are often the last thing on many people’s minds when they haphazardly post a message.

How will you fix this?

Social media, just like any social space, requires kids to behave ethically and with kindness. When kids overstep the mark and post hurtful things then it’s fair that they fix their mistakes and apologise. It’s reasonable that we teach our children to act with tolerance and with empathy online, and if hurtful messages or images are posted on social media then they should try to repair relationships, just as they should offline.

Galit Breen, author of Kindness Wins, says that parents should have conversations with children around social media before they reach the teenage years. I agree that starting these conversations when they are younger means that they are more open to our parenting opinions, as well as being a little more amenable to the messages of tolerance, kindness and empathy that we need to encourage.

Michael Grose is one of Australia’s parenting educators. For great online courses, practical advice and parenting help visit http://www.parentingideasclub.com.au/
SNAPSHOTS

Working together to tackle violent extremism and the radicalization of our youth.

How one mum is driving home a powerful road safety message for teens.

School holiday fun for kids that doesn’t cost a cent!

HAPPENINGS

Schoolzine has transformed the humble school newsletter into a multi-functional, interactive platform that can be accessed wherever you have Internet... at home on your PC, via your mobile or perhaps on an iPad - at your convenience. This is not simply emailing home a PDF copy of your old print newsletter. This is truly revolutionising the flow of information and communication between home, school and the broader community, resulting in the best possible outcomes for the youngest members of the community - our children!

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=docqRB7KdCU

QUICK LINKS

http://www.partners4learning.edu.au/
http://www.btadvisorybodies.catholic.edu.au/
http://www.parents.catholic.edu.au/