

YEAR 8 PARENT TEACHER NIGHT 19 AUGUST 2008

- Good evening, and thank you for coming out on such a cold evening
- It was pleasing to see many of you last week at the Year 8 Parents' Dinner, and I hope you found the event a useful way of connecting with other Year 8 parents
- School life marches on, and we are now deep into the second part of the year
- Soon, your son will be making choices about his classes for Year 9 – and in the not too distant future, he will be making choices for what he will study in Years 11 & 12! That time will come more quickly than you can imagine
- We have a very pleasant group of boys in Year 8
- I met with the teachers of Year 8 yesterday, and they had this to say about the group:
 - A good top end that is working well
 - There is a bit of a tail to the group though, and they need to be more focussed
 - Still keen on games, not theory. They enjoy the physical side of PDHPE and Design and Technology
 - Boys not doing enough prep – but they have been better than some 8s we've had in the past.
 - Some teachers are putting pressure on their boys to perform – more homework, for example, and they are starting to respond positively
 - Some Top Set classes are very strong. Even then, there's a group that coasts.
 - Boys need to produce quality work, not quantity of work
 - Boys are getting homework. Don't let them tell you otherwise
 - Reiterate use of diary
 - Pleasant group – but like to chat
 - Nice boys – still kids. Not trying to be old – like being 13
 - Boys very social
 - Some boys have queried Effort grades. They are not lollies – boys need to work very hard, and some have not quite worked that part of the equation out
 - Not a nasty group, but neither will it die from hard work – no sense that they are malicious
 - They are friendly and enthusiastic support class
 - Some are immature
 - There are a couple of disruptive influences that need close attention
- It sounds very much like a group of 14 year old boys to me
- Year 8 is a year where many boys start to find themselves – but most are still little boys
- Voices begin to break, hair appears where it never used to be, and the whole raft of puberty issues plays upon them
- For some boys it is not a particularly easy time
- To hear teachers talk about them being prone to immaturity is par for the course.
- If any of you have had a 14 year old girl running your house, you will know the vast difference that exists between them and your 14 year old boy
- Some of our boys are very much more advanced in terms of physical maturity than others, so the journey they are on is not the same
- We need to be mindful of the fact that they are still only 14
- For that, we can forgive them a multitude of sins
- That said, we certainly have specific expectations of our boys as we guide and mould them on their academic and social journey at CGS
- You should not be taken aback if you get a call from your son's Housemaster or from me to tell you he has 'got it wrong'
- Boys in Year 8 begin to test the boundaries we have in place for them
- Some of them make really silly choices
- Some try desperately hard to be liked, or to be one of the boys – and make desperately silly choices in the process
- This doesn't mean they are bad kids. They are normal kids!
- Boys respond to clear and consistent guidelines and boundaries
- The fact is, they like to test those boundaries most of the time. That is the nature of boys
- I have quoted Celia Lashlie at almost all Parent Teacher Nights at which I have spoken. We brought her across from NZ a couple of years ago to speak to staff, parents, and boys about the trials and tribulations of being (and raising teenage boys)
- One thing about which she was absolutely sure was the need for boundaries
- She uses the metaphor of an electric fence – something boys can bump into and be reminded of where they ought to be and what they ought to do
- She says that by the time the boys are in Year 9, the power of the national grid should be directed to that electric fence, because boys will test the boundaries time and time again, and unless there is a constant high voltage – so no inconsistent messages or discipline – they will find a hole in the fence, and be in the next paddock doing whatever they like before you know it.
- You can relax, your boys are in Year 8
- I do commend Celia's book to you. It is called:

'He'll Be Ok: Growing Gorgeous Boys Into Good Men'

In the book, she exercised persistence to elicit responses from the teenagers she interviewed. 'I discovered this amazing world of vulnerability, of living in the moment, of intense wisdom if we paused long enough to pick it up. But it's all beneath this veneer of that shrug and the 'dunno' and you had to push to get it out from under there.'

She has incredible affection for boys. 'They are delightful,' she says. 'I think we can admit you know that they're frustrating, they smell, they're noisy. They have a concentration span of thirty seconds if the topic is interesting. They know it all. So there's all of that stuff and they can be pretty obnoxious, but underneath it all, if you just pause and sometimes look up into the eyes, there is this absolutely stunning creature just standing there. And it's about being able to hold that moment, about being to enjoy the magic that is these children.'

(<http://www.abc.net.au/queensland/conversations/stories/>)

- The 'Shrug and the Dunno' is the new vocabulary you will be meeting as parents
- You'll be familiar with this conversation:

'What did you do at school today?'

'Stuff'

'What sort of stuff?'

'Just stuff'

'Did you enjoy yourself?'

'It was okay.'

- A loose translation of this conversation would be that your boy has had a pretty average day at school. He's pretty happy about where he is and what he's been doing
- Don't be alarmed if your once loquacious little boy has become tongue tied and less communicative than before. Boys are rarely expected to be as verbal as girls. They often seem to have an innate preference for expressing themselves through action rather than language – just as in the same way, they learn differently from girls, preferring activity-based learning, or short answer type questions over the long-winded written projects at which many girls excel
- If he came home and you asked

'What did you do at school today?' and he said

'Mr Ball went nuts in Assembly and threw this Year 12 kid against a wall.'

It would suggest something out of the ordinary happened, prompting him to tell you all about it.

- It is good to try to engage the monosyllabic world of the 14 year old. There are some good places to try this.
- You might find good conversation happens in the car. There's no eye contact involved, you should be concentrating on the road, so your son can have some control over the conversation
- You will likely be told some pretty hair-raising things as he describes either the troubles other boys face, or the risks that they are taking as teenagers
- Encourage your son to talk to you, but don't expect him to say very much doing so will show him to be vulnerable. Exposing a boy's fears, weakness or confusion is a pretty sure-fired way of having him shut up like a clam
- Communication with your son will flow more easily when you:
 - Avoid sarcasm and criticism
 - Express positive interest when he takes the initiative to talk to you – make sure you relate to his comments so he knows you are listening
 - Talk when you are doing an activity together, rather than sitting down for a formal 'talk' (the ride in the car; having him help prepare a meal; working in the garage; are just some examples)
 - Avoid 'overquestioning'
 - Respect his confidentiality (within reasonable limits) – he is going to tell you things you didn't think would happen to 14 year old boys and girls
 - Acknowledge the skills and abilities he does possess
 - Let him hear and converse with open, articulate men
 - This last point relates strongly with the thread of Celia Lashlie's thesis
 - I make these observations not with any sense that I know all of the answers, but merely to share advice I have heard and read over my years working with boys (Adam Cox, 'Boys of Few Words – Raising Our Sons to Communicate and Connect')
- Please talk to your son's teachers tonight about his homework schedule

- He should be getting homework on a regular basis. In Year 8 he should have between an hour and an hour-and-a-half each night. If he doesn't seem to be getting this work, please contact his Housemaster in the first instance who will investigate
- I mentioned the use of the diary earlier. It is a good communication tool with home. Be aware that some of our boys (who like looking for a short-circuit in the electric fence) might be operating two diaries – a good one for mum and dad to see, and a bad one – with teachers' comments in it. It might be worth making a couple of annotations throughout your son's diary so that you know the one he shows you is the 'real' one. 14 year olds can be resourceful
- Tonight, you will have received a copy of your son's assessment schedule for the remainder of the year
- I have often heard from parents that they are keen to know more about their son's workload, so this is a document that you might attach to the side of your fridge, to keep you abreast of his workload
- I have not given it to you to use as a weapon against your son. It is wise to know what he has due, and to nudge gently when you want to know how he is going with his assignment or test preparation
- My view of our relationship is that it must be a healthy partnership, so giving parents good visibility of what is on their son's plate is an important way of strengthening that bond.
- Nor did I produce this document so parents could do the work for their boys. That would be entirely counter-productive
- Parents often wonder how they can help their sons without overstepping the mark and doing their son's work
- There are a number of things you can do:
 - Make sure he has a dedicated work space at home to do his prep
 - The lounge room floor in front of the TV is a very bad place, despite whatever your son might tell you
 - Insist that he follows a set routine. It might be that he does his prep in two sessions – an hour before dinner and an hour after. Some might nominate an hour and a half after dinner?
 - You might encourage him to work on some prep at the kitchen table while you are preparing a meal. You are then there for him to ask questions – how to spell a word, how to do a certain Maths problem
 - Offer to proofread his assignments – you might draw some misspellings or clumsy expressions to his notice, but don't rewrite it for him. Praise his good work
 - If he is going to use a computer to work on his prep, make sure you have a good sense of what is going on, on the computer. Consider either a wireless base station so that the computer can be in a public part of your house, or so a laptop can be brought to a public part of your house
 - Monitor his computer use. You might check the history of sites visited to see how long he has been spending on *MSN*, *Bebo*, or other social networking sites. These boys love to socialize – but that does not get homework done
 - These are just a few ideas, but I know that if you engage in your son's homework regime, he has a better chance of doing it well
- Earlier, I mentioned that your sons would soon be asked to choose subjects for his Year 9 studies.
- In the coming fortnight, I will write to you all outlining a revision of our Year 9 & 10 curriculum structure for 2009 and beyond
- In essence, what we have chosen to do in the Senior School is modify our curriculum so that we can offer greater depth to each subject studied by our boys
- In Year 8, boys study 8 courses. In Year 9, this will change to 7 courses. Doing one fewer course over the same number of timetabled periods per cycle means that boys will be able to gain a richer understanding of their chosen courses
- It will mean boys are less busy at school, and that they will need to juggle fewer assignment and homework tasks, allowing greater engagement and understanding of their subject matter
- A wide choice of Electives will be on offer to boys, and all of this will be a part of the communication I send to you shortly
- We believe these modifications to our curriculum in Years 9 and 10 will give our boys a very strong grounding in their chosen courses in preparation for their senior studies in Years 11 and 12
- Thank you for your time