

Dear Parents

I had a very interesting trip up to Hilton and then St John's. The contrast between the two schools in terms of position could not be more stark – especially as some of the areas around St Johns have really become “inner-city” areas. St Johns has 61 cameras on their campus now which are centrally manned 24 hours a day. It has certainly had a positive impact in terms of security, theft and control. Their tuckshop is cashless. The boys carry cards which get them into venues and also have credit put on them. It was interesting to note following my last letter, that trauma counseling has become one of the main things which their counselor has to deal with – especially with the younger children at their Prep and Pre-Prep. Violence certainly leaves its scars and the effects can sometimes be immediate and sometimes pop up decades later. The human brain is complex in its emotional defense mechanisms.

Academic work - patience

One of the difficult things about being a parent to a teenager is to know how much to let go in controlling his life in terms of many things. I want to focus on parental control around academic work. I know at this stage some of you can switch off because you are one of those lucky parents whose son is totally motivated and requires little or no controlling. Indeed, he may rather need controlling to stop working so hard and get out there and do other things. For most of us, though, this challenge is something we have to confront every week. There is no simple answer and every boy is unique. However, I think the main thing to keep in mind is that it is his life and that he needs to take responsibility for it. Therefore, as parents, we ought to be withdrawing academic help and control (bit by bit if necessary) so that he can learn to accept the responsibility. This can be quite traumatic (for boy and parent) but it must happen or he will grow up being dependent on a parent for academic (and maybe other) challenges. Apron strings need to be cut while a boy is at school.

A 15/16 year old boy should not need a parent standing over him in order for him to work or to help him to get things done. I understand that it may be that, unless the parent does continually, he may fail. Well perhaps he should then just be allowed to fail now and then. Which is worse, failing a test or exam or remaining dependent on parents? He must at least be given the chance to fail. Failure can be a great teacher in all sorts of ways. Often we learn more through failure than success. We do our children a disservice if we protect them too much from failing – especially if we are doing it because it hurts us to see them fail. Failure teaches them about consequences, encourages them to learn from mistakes, and promotes humility and compassion for others who struggle in life. We parents need to be patient through these difficult times. There is more to growing up than getting good marks and the school years are primarily about growing up into independent and well-rounded young men.

From our side we need to help ensure that no boy fails too much. This is not easy in such an academic environment teaching “academic” subjects. One of the blessings of the greater variety in the forms of assessment is that it is easier now to find things that a boy

can do and so not fail. Some boys will almost always fail a science test, for instance, but can pass a homework assignment or a project or a practical. Every teacher needs an opportunity to praise a boy for a piece of work. Sometimes we need to manufacture these moments – but it is important that we do.

Yours sincerely

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