

Dear Parents

I wonder how you remember exams. One of the more memorable days in my life was the day I learnt that I had failed every exam I wrote at the end of my final year at school. Now, I cannot pretend it came as a great surprise and it certainly did not occur to me to ask for a re-mark (if such things existed), but it was a rather depressing moment. One always hopes... Anyway, on that January morning decades ago, hope died and I had to face the fact that being utterly lazy did have consequences after all. I remember writing to my parents to suggest that I leave army training (which was not as much fun as I thought it would be) and return to school. They decided I should rather continue to suffer the abuse and the possibility of violent death later instead. I think they were a bit cross with me.....

Now, I am not sure how your son is going to do in these exams. I was marking all of the matric physics papers last week and found myself hoping that some of the boys had very understanding and merciful parents (and I hope they all worked very hard for the chemistry today to help mask the physics a bit). What do you say as a parent after exams? It is easy if you have one of those boys who works hard and is as bright as a button. Then you can just heap praises on him and take yourself off to dinner with your wife/husband/partner/friend and bask in the glory of being such a great parent. (Mr Bantjes pointed out to me that it is worth saying that it is really important to praise your son and resist the temptation to hold back praise in the hope that he will do even better. To be praised by a Dad or Mum means a lot to a boy and is a great motivator. You do not want him to think that “nothing is good enough for my Dad or Mum”). But what if your son is like I was (note the “was”). You cannot pack your son off to be shot, no matter how you feel. Or maybe your son is just struggling academically and you know he tried and yet did poorly and feels bad about it all. How do we help as parents?

I am afraid that boys differ so much from one another that I cannot give an answer – even two or three answers will still not cover all boys. However, can I recommend that you take time to think before responding. Take the results or report and give yourself time. Tell your son, “This is not quite what we were hoping to see. Let’s not deal with it now but in a day or two (... evening) we will sit down and discuss things. Meanwhile just enjoy being on holiday.”. This will give you time to think; to talk things through with your spouse or a good friend. It will give time for you to work through any emotions and identify why you have those emotions (fear for his future, wounded pride, righteous anger, disappointment...). You will be able to consider your son’s emotional state and how well he is coping with life. It may be that the exam results are not the major concern at the moment. You could even consider your own ideas about his academic ability (remembering that these change with age and can be severely affected - even temporarily - by the changes happening to him as he turns into a man). It will give you time to prepare for the meeting and steel yourself to respond calmly and rationally to him, to remind yourself to listen sympathetically and to watch his body language so that your responses to him assure him that you have heard him (and, even harder, are trying to understand him). It will give you time to think back on what it was like for you being a teenager. (Sometimes we use the excuse that we did not work hard (if we did not) because it was not so important then in a less competitive world, but I am not sure we are being honest. If we did not work then it was probably for the same reasons (a multitude) as some boys do not work now.) Be patient – preserve relationships. I often regret when I just respond instinctively to something my son has done (or not done) without thinking it through first because often I respond too aggressively. Of course there is a place for this sort of response (the child learns through seeing our passion) but I am not sure such a response to reports and results is helpful. It can just close the door to helpful discussions because boys are likely to respond to aggression with aggression (even if it is not outwardly apparent at the time). In the end the boy needs to help identify the problems and work out solutions. We understand that if he does

not cooperate then we just have to impose conditions but the best situation is if he can see the problems for himself and help formulate a response.

In the end, though, it is our job as teachers to teach the boys and convince them to work hard. Teaching is relatively easy but convincing a boy who does not have self-motivation is always tough. Why it works sometimes and not other times remains something of a mystery. Some boys respond to pressure, some to praise, others to nothing at all for a while as there is just too much stuff going on in their heads. Still, it is our job and you must feel free to contact us and let us know your concerns. Maybe working together we can do more than working apart. There are no absolute guarantees though. These humans are much too complex for such guarantees.

We took ownership of an Automated External Cardioverter Defibrillator, which was donated to the school by PACE and Medtronic. This is a remarkable little machine which “when applied to an unconscious cardiac arrest victim, senses ventricular fibrillation (VF) automatically and advises an electrical shock to terminate the VF.” A press of a button and it administers the shock. It will not shock a normal heart and will continually assess the heart and instruct the First Aider. All the schools who received a machine have had a pupil who has either suddenly died (as happened with Dane Lucombe of Founders) or has a pupil who is presently at risk due to genetic factors. We will be training certain members of our community in the use of this machine and general cardiac resuscitation. The machine will be kept in the San. It is very portable.

I hope none of you need it when the exam results come out....

Yours sincerely

Peter Westwood
(Deputy Headmaster Pastoral)