Parentingideas INSIGHTS

Building parent-school partnerships

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It starts with respect

The public debate following the incident where two Melbourne private school students were suspended for asking students to vote for the 'Slut of 2016' has been almost as concerning as the incident itself.

While most people via traditional media and social media have expressed outrage and disgust for the students' grubby postings there has also been a number who've defended the students suggesting that we're going overboard with the condemnation. A theme emerged in their defence along these lines: "Hey, it's tough being a boy! They're just going through a phase! They didn't know they were doing anything wrong! Boys after all, will be boys!"

This is an echo of Eddiegate, when Collingwood president Eddie Maguire famously suggested that he would pay $50,000 to see journalist Caroline Wilson stay under a pool of iced water and then describing her as "like a black widow" spider. Later this was brushed off as just having a bit of fun, no harm intended. "No one surely takes this seriously It's only a bit of fun. Lighten up everyone. This is political correctness gone mad. Boys after all, will be boys!"

Well no! 'Boys will be boys; it's only a bit of fun, no real harm meant' are the types of outmoded attitudes that need to change.

As an ambassador for the national 'Stop it before it starts' campaign, which aims to reduce violence against women and children I'm convinced that the cycle of violence starts with disrespect.

Not all disrespectful behaviour towards women ends in violence. But all violence against women starts with disrespectful behaviour. And disrespectful attitudes often start at home.

Sometimes without realising it we can say and do things that make children and young people think disrespectful and aggressive behaviours are acceptable. We do this when we play down boy's disrespectful behaviour toward a sibling; accept aggression as just part of being a boy; and even blaming girls for provoking aggression or disrespectful behaviour.

Gradually, boys and girls start to believe that disrespect is just a normal part of growing up.

Respect starts at home

As parents we have an incredible power to shape positively children's attitudes and behaviours, including how they treat others. Here are three ideas and attitudes of respect at home:

1. Start by insisting that siblings treat each other well. Encourage both genders to resolve conflict and disputes using low power methods such as talking things through; give and take and apologising.
2. Socialise your sons. It's easy to excuse boy's aggressive behaviour as part of being a boy. Yes, their physiology may mean they are more prone to handle disputes physically but that doesn't mean we accept that. Model for your sons how to resolve disputes in a civil and civilised way.
3. Put respect on the agenda. Healthy families talk about the things that matter to them. If respect matters then you need to hold conversations around disrespectful behaviours – whether they occur in the family outside. Be willing to listen to children's and young people's views but also to challenge views that are questionable.

Respect is the core value of a civil society and that's also the core value in every healthy, functioning family I've ever worked with.

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