

# Make time for teens' headspace

Parents of teenagers often feel they are in the middle of a battlefield with no idea of the rules of engagement. But as GILL VOWLES discovers, tough teenage times can be talked through.

**P**ARENTS of teenage boys don't need research from the University of the Bleeding Obvious to tell them they could be in for a rocky time.

What many do need are some strategies to assist them in steering their sons through the troubled and sometimes turbulent teenage years.

Now two Hobart boys' schools believe they have found part of the solution in a program developed by Victorian educator Bill Jennings.

Jennings' Time and Space program is based on the simple concept that sometimes all it takes to help boys (or girls) through their teens is time and space.

Jennings, who gained a masters degree at the University of Newcastle specialising in educating boys, said in his experience communication was the key to a successful and relatively painless journey.

"But that in itself has its own challenges," Jennings said.

"We all have, or know, a teenage boy who communicates only in monosyllabic 'yeah, nah, maybes'."

"Research shows that significant brain development takes place in adolescence and the language component of the brain can sometimes reduce to grunts during this period.

"I'm a firm believer that every teenager should have a big 'Under Construction' sign over their brains."

Jennings said he had two main messages for parents.

"Firstly, there is no such thing as a perfect parent and secondly half the battle in parenting is being there.

"We may not be the most popular person in our kids' lives every moment of the day but in time they will remember and put new meaning to how we hung in there and spent time alongside them."

Jennings, who started the Time and Space program in 2006, said it was designed to establish communication between parents and their children.

"Because talking in single syllables is normal for some teenagers the program culminates in one-on-one conversations between them and their parents.

"My theory is that those conversations are very much a rite of passage and the sessions become a symbol of what is possible."

Jennings said it was lovely to see families

come through his program.

"You see a real shift from parents telling their children what to do to having a very real confidence they will get there.

"Mums and dads come into the program anxious about their child's transition through the teens and at the end have moved to a place where they very much believe their kids will be okay."

So far Jennings has delivered the program in 15 schools throughout Australia, including Hobart's The Hutchins School and St Virgils College.

St Virgils principal Damien Messer said teenage boys often became very isolated and the school introduced the program four years ago to help the students build connections with their parents.

"With young men talking is the key," Messer said.

"They need to have the ability to say they are doing it tough and to express themselves.

"Bottled up emotions can lead to trouble, this program lets the boys realise they are not alone."

Messer said 150 parents took part in the program each year and the school intended to keep offering it.

"The feedback from parents is excellent and we believe it is adding value to what the school offers."

The Hutchins School headmaster Warwick Dean said the school decided to introduce the Time and Space program last year to help students with the difficult transition from primary to middle school.

"It is a huge step for the boys and for their mums and dads," Dean said.

"The boys are stepping out of being a child and are experiencing a hormone explosion of about 800 per cent — there is a lot going on for them, and for their mums and dads."

Dean said one of the most difficult parts of the transition for parents was letting their son's hand go.

"What we are aiming to achieve with this program is to have the school on the other side with our hands out so parents feel it is safe to let go.

"The Time and Space program is taking some of the anxiety out of this time and most importantly our boys believe they are being listened to and know they will be listened to."

Dean said the school had been surveying



program participants and was finding a high level of satisfaction.

"The feedback is that the program definitely provides a significant point where boys start to understand what makes their dad tick and it is making parents a little less anxious about their son's teenage years."

Hobart mum Sandra Paine described the program as akin to magic.

"Somehow Bill manages to create an environment where boys feel it is okay to communicate at a quite deep emotional level," she said.

Paine completed the mother and son program with her 12-year-old son Lincoln, while her husband Michael participated in the father and son program with their 13-year-old Harrison.

"For Lincoln and I the program gave us some very special one-on-one quality time," she said.

"It was a really amazing experience because although we all communicate well our usual conversations involve the whole family and occur while other things are going on, like cutting carrots.

"To sit down just with Lincoln, eyeball-to-eyeball, and be asked to explore meaningful events in your relationship was really special and because there were about 100 other boys in the room doing the same thing with their mums the boys felt it was okay to have this kind of discussion."

Paine said at times she'd felt goose bumps and

been close to tears.

"There were things Lincoln told me were very meaningful to him that I'd never thought significant.

"We had never really delved into each others emotions to that depth before."

Paine said the effects of the program had been lasting.

"It has opened up an emotional level of talk between us which was not there before.

"I think it has made it okay for us to go into territory we were previously hesitant to enter."

Paine said although she could only speak as an outsider about the effect of the father/son program on her husband and older son she had certainly observed changes.

"There is no doubt they did some male bonding," she said.

"Even today there are times when they both refer to the night and they have their own communication code as a result.

"Michael and Harrison were always close but I see a greater depth of understanding between them now which wasn't there before."

Paine said since participating in the programs her sons had both felt more treasured.

"They have both also gained a better understanding of the motivations behind the behaviour of Michael and I as parents and realise why we ask for certain things."

Paine said her only regret was that she hadn't



relationship but after doing the program I think we understand each other better and have a kind of bond we didn't have before.

"For me the program really cemented the idea that dad really is here to support me through anything."

Jesse's father Paul Chevalier said he'd been keen to join the program because as a mental health worker the idea of a rite of passage was something he believed was important.

"I also really liked the idea of a program designed to building up awareness of Jesse's strengths."

Chevalier said one of his favourite moments was a "little ceremony or ritual" held during a camp to welcome the boys to manhood.

"Each of the adult men identified a real strength they saw in each of the young men — it was very special to me."

And because he had a good relationship with his son, Chevalier said the program had not been "mind-blowing".

"But we still did take stuff away and I think it is something Jesse will look back on and value with more significance in the future.

"Right now it certainly has made it easier to talk about on the edge issues".

## TEEN TIPS

- Deliberately plan to make some "alongside" time with each of your kids.
- Consciously leave a gap . . . let your child take the lead in conversations.
- Schedule in diary slots so you can witness your son or daughter in action in their world.
- Encourage your kids to volunteer in some way — this helps the shift from self-focus to others-focus.
- Include your teenager when you have a project around your home.
- Telling someone else's kid: "you sang well" and "I loved your efforts for the team" are examples of how the village raises a child.



ABOVE LEFT: Bill Jennings equips parents with tools to help them talk with teens.

Picture: Jon Hargest.

ABOVE: The Paine family of Sandy Bay, Lincoln, 12, left, Sandra (holding Buff), Michael and Harrison, 13.

LEFT: Paul Chevalier and son Jesse, 17, of Berriedale.

Pictures: Sam Rosewarne