



# Raising boys

By Rosie Hoban

Social media may be threatening your family time, peers may have outflanked you and your teenage son may offer little more than monosyllabic responses to your questions. Don't give up and never doubt that you are 'still in the game', is the advice from two leading parent experts, Bill Jennings and Michael Grose, who are part of the 2013 Parent Seminar Series.

Bill Jennings, with many years experience as a leader in schools and 'people programs', said many parents feel disheartened once their sons reach the mid-teenage years. The boys begin to retreat from the family and parents fear they have lost control and their boys are moving beyond their reach.

'I believe that half the battle of parenting boys is to keep turning up and hanging in there through the tough times that adolescence will throw up at you,' Bill said. 'Sometimes that's all a parent can do during some dark days of teenage years.'

Of course there's more to it than just turning up, but Bill believes boys will remember the faith and persistence shown them by their parents. More importantly, they will know that love underpinned their parents' actions.

'By turning up I mean that parents who give it their best, who always have the best intentions, despite the many mistakes made along the way, are doing it right,' he said.

'And of course, setting boundaries for boys is a really vital part of parenting. Even if your boundaries are unpopular, boys need to know where they stand.'

Michael Grose, author of eight parenting books, whose Parent Seminar looks at *Raising Mighty Boys*, agrees that parenting boys can be tough and it takes time and patience. Most boys, he said, are basic, straightforward and awkward and need more time to mature, a fact borne out by research. In many ways, the strategies needed to parent sons are different to those needed for daughters.



Look for a way in to your sons' world: Wally and Jane O'Carroll with sons Brendan and Aidan

He said boys are hard-wired to leave home at about 15, which can make that a tense period of time between fathers and sons as the son tries to exert his authority. Boys want to take risks and that could be physical, verbal or social risks. That's one of the reasons they can try and 'flex their intellectual and physical muscle'. It's also why they need boundaries.

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‘Boundaries are essential for boys to learn and it makes them feel safe and secure. If you need any evidence of this, go and watch little boys playing freely. It doesn’t take long before they start making rules for their game, because it helps them know what to do and how to manage their play.’

Eltham parents Jane and Wally O’Carroll firmly believe that making rules is important, but can be meaningless unless there’s a consequence to breaking the rules. Parents, they said, have to follow through on threats of punishment. Their sons, Brendan 17 and Aidan 14, are students at Marcellin College in Bulleen, and like most parents they find the encroachment of social media a challenge to their family life. But Wally recognises that social media, including Facebook, are here to stay – at least while his sons are moving through their teens.

‘You have to create an environment of trust from the time they are very young. At the same time you set boundaries around the use of Facebook. But it is the same with other aspects of behaviour such as alcohol and going out at night – you have boundaries,’ Wally said.

Bill and Michael believe it is important to reward sons who adhere to the rules, by pushing the boundaries out a little when the time is right.

‘There are lots of ways of doing this. If a boy is regularly told to be home from parties at 11pm and follows that rule, think about pushing that back to midnight. But when you need to hold your ground – do it and be comfortable knowing that the word ‘no’ is a complete sentence. Sometimes the best way is to say ‘no’ and walk away.’

The O’Carrolls believe that involving boys in a sport, or team activity, can help reinforce your position on

discipline issues. In fact, the expectations of sporting teams their two sons are involved in have some direct parallels with their family life.

‘Being accountable for your actions, being reliable, e.g. turning up for training even if at times you would rather stay at home on Facebook; and knowing there are consequences if you don’t show up,’ Wally said. ‘Life is a bit like that and sometimes you don’t want to be part of it, but you have to work as a team.’

Bill Jennings advises parents to avoid getting drawn into long debates with sons over rules and boundaries.

‘Teenage boys are bush lawyers and they can wear you down. But that’s okay because you are not your son’s mate, you are his parent, and he needs you to hold your ground even though he doesn’t know it. During these teenage years he needs you to be his parents, not his friends – he finds those elsewhere,’ Bill said.

‘As well as rules and boundaries I advise parents to have non-negotiables in their family: rituals or family events that your son has to be a part of, even if he would rather retreat to his room. But in reality they become points of safety that your son can hold onto when things get rocky.’

Michael Grose goes a step further on the issue of being your son’s friend and believes a vital part of parenting boys is sometimes being able to live with your son’s contempt. But he said it is important to understand that your son might hate what you have done, but doesn’t hate you.

He believes parents can hold onto control, while offering their sons the ‘illusion of choice’. This gives them space and avoids the fight-or-flight response, which is what they will do when under stress.





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*Bill Jennings*



Jane O'Carroll said she doesn't hesitate postponing a discussion with one of her sons if she needs to give the issue more thought, or talk it over with Wally to ensure they have a 'united position'.

Enjoying the good times and having fun in family life is something Michael and Bill stress, particularly given the highly scheduled and busy lives most family members are living.

The O'Carrolls consider themselves blessed. They are loving the teenage years, despite the ups and downs. It helps that they enjoy each other's company.

'We have a loving relationship and speak to each other in a certain way and we expect the boys to relate to people with respect. I think you have to model behaviours to them,' Wally said.

'We are very proud of the young men our sons have become. They are loving and thoughtful boys,' Jane said. 'It is a joy watching them grow up.'

### Parent Seminar Series

**Raising Mighty Boys Seminar** *Michael Grose*  
Primary and Secondary

10 September, 7pm – 9pm  
St Joseph's School, Millers Road, Yarra Junction

12 September, 7pm – 9pm  
St Cecilia's School, 4 Van Ness Avenue, Glen Iris

**How to Stay in Touch on the Adolescent Roller Coaster** *Bill Jennings*  
Secondary

3 September, 7pm – 9pm  
Thomas Carr College, 35 Thomas Carr Drive, Tarneit

**Daughters and Dads** *Bill Jennings*  
Secondary

5 September, 7pm – 9pm  
Ave Maria College, 14–22 Vida Street, Aberfeldie

To register and for further details contact the Parent Seminar Series Coordinator, Doug Sandiford, at the Catholic Education Office Melbourne on 9267 0228 or <dsandiford@ceomelb.catholic.edu.au>. All seminars cost \$10 per person, payable in advance.



## 10 Tips for Raising Boys

1. If you are a couple parenting boys, present a united front.
2. If you are a single parent, seek support from a friend, someone you respect as a parent, and discuss issues with them.
3. Create moments to talk to boys. Side by side can be as good as, and sometimes better than, eye-to-eye contact. A drive can be a good opportunity for talk.
4. Don't be pressured into quick decisions. Make it clear that you need time to think about the issue and set the time for a discussion.
5. Spend time with your sons when they are young and layer memories that will stay with them. Do the groundwork that you and your son can hold onto down the track.
6. If you are feeling shut out of your son's world, look for a way in and do what works, even if you are out of your comfort zone. Send him a text, or the link to a funny YouTube clip you have seen or heard about.
7. You are not your son's mate. He needs you to be his parent.
8. Don't make empty threats. If your son breaks a rule, follow through on the threatened discipline.
9. If you get into an argument with your son, consider taking time out. Tell your son you will discuss it in 20 minutes. This gives you time to think and avoids the argument escalating.
10. Have some family fun. Boys are wonderful, so enjoy the time you have with them.

**Michael Grose** can be contacted through his website, [ParentingIdeas.com.au/Home](http://ParentingIdeas.com.au/Home)

**Bill Jennings** can be contacted through his website, [Time & Space.com.au](http://Time&Space.com.au)



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