



Building parent-school partnerships

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Manage like a cat, nurture like a dog

Here's how to get the mix of firmness and nurturing right when communicating with young people.

When speaking about raising teenagers I make the planned observation that parents should 'manage like a cat and nurture like a dog'. So what does this mean?

Teenagers need a mix of firmness and nurturance from their parents. Like toddlers many teenagers wear L-plates when it comes to navigating their expanding world. Of course, the world a teenager inhabits is far broader than that of a toddler so the risks are multiplied hundredfold. They still need to be managed, but not necessarily in controlling or confrontational ways.

Due to physiological changes most teens will revert straight to their reptilian brains when they feel threatened or experience angry, aggressive discipline. They will fight you all the way, or escape conflict by going to their rooms or withdrawing into themselves. Better to manage like a cat so they hear your message rather than pick up your vehemence.

Finding your inner cat

We all have some cat and dog in us. It's just a matter of accessing those parts and bringing them out when we need them. The cat is the credible side we all have, but find difficulty accessing. It is always expressed through your non-verbals – that is, your tone of voice, your posture and your head.

A cat speaks with a flat, clipped voice. His or her head is very still and body upright and confident. The quickest way to access your inner cat is to speak with you palms facing the ground. You can try this now. Stand up with both hands in front of you with your palms facing the ground. Now start speaking. You'll find you'll naturally speak like a cat – clipped voice, still head and body and more serious expression. This is your credible (and calm) side.

When you speak from your cat side people will usually believe what you have to say. It gives you authority.

Australia's foreign minister Julie Bishop is a good example of using cat behaviour.

Like her or loathe her you can't deny she has authority. That's because she accesses the cat side of her nature in public.

You manage a teen like a cat by speaking calmly, quietly and staying still when you speak. Cats will also withdraw eye contact rather than stand and argue so look away or respectfully walk away rather than become involved in argument.

Cats also look for ways to manage visually (look away to indicate not arguing) or kinaesthetically (a touch on the shoulder, move close and whisper) rather than repeating themselves. If they do repeat themselves they are more likely to lower their voice than raise it to get attention. These cat behaviours work well when managing teens.

Using your inner dog

We also have a dog side to our nature. This is the approachable, conversational, relationship-building side. When you access this side you'll speak with lots of inflection in your voice.

more on page 2 >>



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... Manage like a cat, nurture like a dog ...

Your head will bob up and down. You'll probably lean forward as you speak and you'll smile a lot. The quickest way to access your dog nature is to speak with your palms up. You can try it now. Stand up; put your hands out with your palms up and start speaking. You should notice a big difference in how you deliver your message from when you spoke with palms facing down. If not, alternate speaking with palms up and down until you see a difference.

The dog side of our natures is what many of us feel more comfortable with. If you are in a management position there is a fair chance that you spend more time accessing your cat than your dog. Although effective managers will move seamlessly between the two accessing their dog when networking and relationship-building then finding their cat for negotiations or when making decisions.

Actor Hugh Jackman is an example of a public figure who is dog-like as he usually speaks with lots of cadence in his voice, a big smile and open body language. However, I've seen him switch to cat mode in interviews when he talks about something serious. He will invariably speak quietly, calmly and his head will

stay very still. We believe him when he speaks. He's no lightweight. It's his ability to switch from cat to dog and back again that makes him so charismatic.

Bringing cat and dog to your parenting

From experience I've found that effective parents nuance their communication. That is, they alter their style to suit the situation rather than let their moods dictate their communication styles. This is not necessarily conscious. However do it often enough and switching from cat to dog and back again becomes a habit.

My challenge for you is to bring your cat to the table when you want to manage teenagers and access your dog side when you encourage them, build relationships and listen to them.

Get your cat and dog wrong and you'll be ineffective. Manage like a dog and you'll do one of three things:

- 1 Whine at your kids
- 2 Use an angry voice
- 3 Do nothing because you don't want to offend them.

Build relationships like a cat and you'll be distant, stiff and unapproachable. Get the mix right and you'll be able to give

your young person exactly what they need. That is, the leadership and safety that cats provide and the nurturance and encouragement that comes naturally to dogs.

So does the cat side or the dog side come more naturally to you? Think about it. When you discover what you default to then you need to be aware of two things. First, you will need to work a little harder to access the other side. Second, make sure you don't rely on one side of your nature to do the work in your communications with your young people. If you do then you will more than likely either manage or nurture well but rarely do both well. However get the mix right and your parenting (or leading of any group of people) and you'll have discovered the key to charismatic parenting and leadership.

'Manage like a cat, nurture like a dog.'
Who would have thought it's that simple!

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