

How to get your teenage grunTERS to open up

'Good. Yeah. Nah. Dumno. Good. Sorta. Nah. Yeah. Okay. Whatever. See ya."

Those, as anyone with kids will tell you, are the edited responses of a teenage son in a 20-minute conversation with his father.

The monosyllabic grunts drive parents nuts. But we can take it. Until things start to go haywire in the family unit. Then the parents start yelling, the kid grunts dry up and you're in the death spiral towards family disintegration.

That's when a family should reach out for help and support.

I've had a bit to do lately with people who can help when families go bad. Toughlove Auckland celebrated their 30th birthday on Friday with a function at which I was the MC.

Until I found out about them a few years ago, I thought they were the hardliners. The cruel-to-be-kind brigade. But they're not.

Toughlove is "a voluntary organisation that provides ongoing education and active support to families, empowering parents and young people to accept

responsibility for their actions and stop destructive behaviours".

Basically it's all about communication. Helping parents take personal responsibility, to step away from their anger to communicate their expectations and their disappointments in a constructive way.

It was an uplifting night and resonated with me after a couple of stories over the past month.

One was the radio comments of Kevin Donnelly, the head of the Abbott Government's national curriculum review, who backed the use of corporal punishment for ill-disciplined children in schools if it is supported by the local school community.

That was seized on by the talkback crowd who say "bring back the cane, it never did me any harm".

I was at a school that used the cane and it was always wielded by the worst teachers. The ones who could only command respect under a threat of violence and couldn't teach for nuts.

Toughlove oppose the use of violence in the home: "People usually resort to

physical punishment when they are too weak and insecure to think of better ways of dealing with unacceptable behaviour. Kids need loving parents who are prepared to discuss and put in place appropriate consequences for unacceptable behaviour."

The other story was Lucan, the boy suspended over a stoush about his hair length. The judge said even if the hair rule was written lawfully you can't suspend a kid for such a trivial offence. He also criticised the school for not negotiating with Lucan and his family enough.

I compared the case with what Toughlove says about kicking a bad kid out of home if they don't behave. They see it as a sign the parent can't cope.

"We owe it to our kids to demonstrate love and respect. If we can't give it then we shouldn't expect them to give it to us!"

Makes sense to me. The school had a rule but not a reasonable and respectful consequence. They could have banned him from the 1st XV and put him on rubbish duty for a year and kept out of the headlines.

You've got to have rules and you've got

to have consequences but they have to be reasonable and they can't be a yelling match in the heat of the moment. Toughlove doesn't mean being a tough bastard.

Anyway, the other day my grunting older son and I were walking to the car after a day in the mountains. We were exhausted but then the most wonderful thing happened.

He started talking about stuff and just didn't shut up. I learned more about where he was at in that precious moment than I had every other time when we'd called a family conference to bring things to a head.

And as he told me about his challenges and his thoughts and his feelings I replied with, "Good. Yeah. Nah. Dumno. Good. Sorta. Nah. Yeah. Okay."

I guess we all have a time to talk and we all have a time to listen and adults are just former grunTERS who grew up. So let's cut the grunTERS a little slack. But not too much.

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COMMENT