Basic proposition

Australian parents lack confidence in their role, are unsure of their place in the parent-child dyad, feel under pressure and see child-rearing as parental responsibility rather than a community-based responsibility. Over 62% of Australian parents lack confidence in their role and 70% feel a great deal of community pressure to get their parenting right. Nearly one quarter of parents feel they will be harshly judged by others in they admit to having problems with their parenting.

The challenge for staff in schools is to support parents in their roles (prop them up to a degree) as primary caregivers, while dealing, at times, with child-like behaviour or behaviour that doesn't promote a strong partnership between staff and parents. Leadership teams need to support staff in their interactions with parents, set the scene for open and friendly dialogue, and encourage an educational and pastoral care partnership that ensures the wellbeing of staff and students.

Parents, families and kids today

Parents are under pressure. Today child-rearing is less about siblings and community and more about parents. This is a flawed model really.

Currently, parents outsource much of their child-rearing to professionals of all kinds. They expect the best from schools. They are a demanding, anxious group.

Parents are less child-literate than ever. Children as a percentage of the population have dropped considerably. When this is combined with delaying of childbirth into the 30’s it appears that parents have less knowledge of child and adolescent development than ever before.

Childhood is highly-commercialised and highly-organised. Little is left to chance with today’s anxious parents who demand far greater breadth and depth of service delivery from schools.

Families are changing. They are smaller, busier and possibly, less supported than ever. Approximately 52% of Australian families with children under the age of fifteen have two or less children.

In many ways parenting is highly commercialised, media-driven activity. Ninety percent of parents believe children and as such parents are targeted too much by companies in their advertising. Parents are being sold the good parent/ideal family myths. That is, good parents act and behave in certain ways and ideal families maybe diverse and slightly dysfunctional but they still have happy endings, homes are compromise-free places where negative emotion is avoided at all costs or is not allowed. The trouble with this ideal family model is that many families just don’t talk with each other on a meaningful level, which plays out through fierce sibling rivalry. Relationships is high driver for Australian parents with over 80% citing having a good relationship with their child as a very high priority. Parents relate to their children and young people as they think they should relate rather according to any context which is established by tradition or predetermined culturally.

We need to promote the responsible parent, mothering/fathering and strong family models.

1. Responsible parenting model

The job of parents is to continually move toward redundancy and to build a strong family regardless of its shape, its size or circumstances. Their job is to move children from dependence to independence by building internal and external resources and
resourcefulness and being the parent in the adult-child relationship. Parenting is a hands-on activity that involves teaching, supporting, encouraging and placing the responsibility for problems squarely on the individual who owns them.

In the Responsible parenting model one parent becomes the primary parent and the other becomes the secondary or supportive caregiver. Influence-based parenting® is the most appropriate model for raising children and young people today.

2. Mother/Father model
Mothering and fathering are gender-oriented activities that occur when naturally. Children nudge the parenting out of their mothers and fathers.

3. Strong family model
The Australian Family Strengths Research Project conducted by the Family Action Centre, University of Newcastle (2000) has identified the strengths of Australian families who cope well with life’s challenges. The study showed families that share these strengths demonstrate resilience when faced with these challenges. There are many family strengths models across the world and they all reflect similar characteristics.

### Australian family strengths model

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Strength</th>
<th>Characteristics</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1. Communication</td>
<td>Members talk regularly, few secrets, humour high, members interact in an open, honest way</td>
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<tr>
<td>2. Togetherness</td>
<td>There is an invisible glue that binds, shared values, beliefs and morals, experiences, sense of spirituality. Strong rituals.</td>
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<td>3. Sharing activities</td>
<td>Participate as a unit in enjoyable activities</td>
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<td>4. Support</td>
<td>Family members encourage, assist, affirm and reassure and look out for each other. Members feel equally comfortable asking for and giving support.</td>
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<tr>
<td>5. Affection</td>
<td>Members show affection regularly (kiss, hug, ‘I love you’), show care and concern, acts of thoughtfulness</td>
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<tr>
<td>6. Acceptance</td>
<td>Show acceptance by respecting, appreciating and understanding each other’s differences. Respect for individuality and uniqueness, give ‘space’ to be themselves, value differences</td>
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<tr>
<td>7. Commitment</td>
<td>Members show dedication and loyalty to family as a whole. Family well-being is a high priority. Not giving up on each other particularly when times are tough</td>
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<tr>
<td>8. Resilience</td>
<td>Respond positively to family challenges and adapt to change. Deal with challenges thru talking, supporting each other, seeking outside support when needed, and pulling together to form a united front to solve problems.</td>
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Generation X parents demand the best

Generation X parents, those in the 29 to 44 age group, are a challenge to the schools that currently educate their children. Like parents of any generation they want the best for their children however, their expectations of what schools should deliver are higher than ever. Paradoxically, they devalue their own roles greatly and lack confidence in their own parenting ability.

Many teachers currently shake their heads in dismay at the way the current generations of parents raise children. These ‘helicopter parents’ have been accused of over-parenting; bubble-wrapping their children in parental concern.

Generation Xers have downsized their families to the extent that a small family is seen as the norm. Approximately half of their families have two children or less, which increases the propensity to over-parent. Adult-child relationships are generally far more intense in small families and the chances for children to grow up and stand on their own two feet tend to diminish. The resilience movement has flourished during the time that Generation X has been parenting.

Generation X had greater access to tertiary education than previous generations, which lead to an increase in women treading a career path. Many Generation X women put partnering and parenting on hold while they pursued a career. With both genders pursuing careers, work defines Gen X families. More Generation X parents work than don't and more families headed by Generation X parents have both parents working than just one working full-time. This group are time-poor rather than resource-poor.

Interestingly, a comparative study conducted by Australian Institute of Family Studies found that Generation X parents find children’s temperament and behaviour a little ‘easier’ compared to children two decades ago. Parents report that children are less irritable and reactive and more outgoing and sociable than their counterparts reported twenty years ago.

These findings are at odds with many of the current concerns that parents are struggling raising their children, or experience greater levels of hardships, stress and isolation. So what may underlie these findings? One suggestion is that they reflect the fact that children spend more time in child care than previous generations and that this combined with the improvements in the quality of child care in recent years is impacting on children’s well-being.

It is more likely that these changes reflect generational changes in the profile of parents and parenting. The most fertile group for women is now the 30 to 34 year age group, easily overtaking the 25 to 29 year ages, which lead the way in 1993. So parents today are older than their earlier counterparts. They are also more educated and have an economic edge on previous counterparts, which may aid them in their parenting roles.

Certainly, Generation X parents have higher expectations of those who educate and care for their children than parents of past generations. Having smaller families means that parental concentration and concern is centred on fewer children, which can cause anxiety for carers, educators and children themselves.

One thing is for sure. Generation X parents take their child-rearing responsibilities very seriously and leave few stones unturned when it comes to wanting the absolute best for their kids. This makes Generation X parents a demanding group to deal with, which many baby boomer teachers are discovering.
‘Challenging’ Parents

Do you deal with any of these Generation X parents?

1. The high maintenance parent: (A parent who readily comes to school when little things go wrong with their children and they want a solution.) It only takes a story from their children for them to be on the phone and in your office. Often they haven’t checked the facts before they have come to you. These parents operate on the mistaken belief that all problems and challenges can be fixed in their child’s favour. These parents are often overprotective and won’t let children experience some of life’s hardships. It is hard to convince high maintenance parents that either some problems can’t, shouldn’t or don’t need fixing.

Tip: Be gentle but firm with the high maintenance parent. Attend to them, help fix their problem and show them the door. Listen to them and ask for their help in coming up with a solution.

2. The complaining parent: (A parent who complains about everything from bus timetables to the colour of the school uniform – a close cousin to the high maintenance parent.) Complaining parents are generally powerless and need someone with power to make things happen for them. These parents tend to create a vacuum that sucks in principals who have a strong wish to help others. Before you know it you can be pursuing the agenda of the complaining parent if you are not careful.

Tip: Listen, empathise, reiterate the reality and accept that they never be happy campers.

3. The myopic parent: (A short-sighted parent who can’t see past their children’s viewpoint.) It’s not that they are perfect parents; it’s just that their children are perfect. Their child may have been caught with matches in one hand and an empty petrol can in the other but they have difficulty seeing that their child may have contributed in some way to the school burning down. Their child said a stranger gave them the matches and petrol can. “If my child said that then I believe him!” is the response.

Tip: Show the myopic parent the facts, the statistics and the records. Stick to the evidence and stick to your guns.

4. The adolescent parent: (A parent who knows their child or young person is in the wrong but absolve themselves of responsibility for children or young people’s poor behaviour as it isn’t my fault!!) Their children or young people are just going through a difficult stage so of course they are less than perfect! Often these parents have an adolescent view of child-rearing and will look to the school to discipline their children.

Tip: These parents generally need gentle reminding of their place in the parent-child/young person relation as well as some communication and discipline strategies so they can regain a little control at home.

5. The high expectations parent: (A parent who has abnormally high or unrealistic expectations of what school can deliver for their child.) They think schools should deliver everything from teaching kids manners to car maintenance and
everything else in between. “Why don’t schools teach (Fill the gap........) is their battle cry.”

**Tip:** Underpromise and overdeliver with high expectations parents but don’t expect a thank you letter for your fine results.

6. **The 24/7 parent:** *(A parent who wants an immediate solution to their problems.)* These parents want a solution to any learning, social or welfare problem that their child maybe experiencing by the end of the week. Many parents currently experience time compression as increasingly we live in a 24/7 world that promises to deliver solutions pronto. It tends to be the way we live.

**Tip:** Lay out a realistic timeframe with these parents and refuse to make promises that can’t be delivered. They need to see some action and some progress too.

7. **The bulldozer parent:** *(A parent on a power trip.)* These parents are on power trips and will try to fill a power vacuum if there is one. They are often used to getting their own way at home and at work. You know these parents because the hackles rise on the back of your neck whenever you are in the same room as them.

**Tip:** Only one thing can stop them – a bigger bulldozer. So look them in the eye and show your willingness to listen, take no nonsense and explore solutions with them. When you make a genuine attempt to solve their problems you generally have an ally for life.

8. **The bullying parent:** *(A parent who uses bluff, bluster, threats or power to get their own way.)* These parents bully teachers and principals into servicing their needs. They work on the customer service model that says ‘the squeaky wheel gets the oil’ but they will harass the underlings in store and shrink when they are taken to see management. They differ from bulldozer parents in that like a dog or a horse they can sense fear or weakness. They will tackle a young teacher or one who is a little tentative rather than go straight to the principal’s office.

**Tip:** Similar to dealing with a bulldozer parent. Don’t be intimidated, work in pairs and keep a written record of your dealings with these parents.

9. **The child-centric parent:** *(A parent whose child is the centre of their universe and therefore believe she should be the centre of your universe too.)* These parents are like high maintenance parents in that they require careful handling but they are exasperating as they can’t see past their own child’s or their own needs.

**Tip:** Encourage them to spend some time in a classroom in a helping capacity.

10. **The good cop parent:** *(A parent who wants to be her child’s friend and expects the school to be the bad cop)* Relationships are a high driver for many Australian parents but some mistake this with being their child’s friend. These parents often make teachers and senior staff the bad guy rather than themselves.

11. **The turbulent parent:** *(A parent who is going through turbulent times such as a marriage breakdown, business problems or experiencing real difficulties with
When it comes to marriage breakdowns principals must do the legal thing. Unfortunately this doesn’t always seem to make sense.

**Tip:** Offer a listening ear and counsel regarding the child’s academic, behavioural and social problems at school. Your role is to ensure the child feels safe and secure at school.

12. Violent, mentally ill, addictive parent: *(The group that needs very special handling)* Obviously, you need to follow all the rules when dealing with parents on the edge. Keep careful notes of dealings with parents in this category.

**Tip:** If trouble looms use Verbal Judo – i.e. never accuse, show you are listening but verbally control the action. “I know you are angry. I would be too if I couldn’t see my son when I wanted to. But taking him out of his class right now is not an option.”
Supporting generation X parents

1. Develop a comprehensive parent education strategy
Generation X parents are primed to be educated about parenting and children. But they won’t do an eight week program as previous generations may have. Look for different ways to engage this generation – they want information delivered in quick, digestible bites. They want access to information that is right, tight and bright. Focus on parenting education through the following four ways:

- Parent information presentations, workshops and forums
- Information through regular newsletters and Internet
- Parenting resources or a parenting library
- Referral to parenting education services

2. Update parenting manuals of all parents
Generation X parents are looking for information about five basics parenting areas:
- Child development,
- Communication,
- Discipline,
- Confidence-building
- Relationship-building.

3. Focus on niche area
Research is showing that parents struggle in the following areas. Education and support in the form of forums, information and resources in the following areas are needed:
- Grief and loss: across all ages
- Stages of transition
- Adolescence and beyond
- Rites of passages through the different stages
- Step families
- Sole parenting for both mothers and fathers particularly related to both genders
- Drugs and alcohol education strategies
- Sexuality education strategies
- Kids and technology
- Raising boys in primary school and living with girls in secondary school.

4. One-on-one support
This ranges from formal counselling sessions to informal support from staff about parenting and child-related issues. Coaching is also a process that generation X parents are open to. This differs from counselling as it is not crisis based. Rather it involves the identification of strategies and assistance to put solutions into place within their family.

5. Link parent together
Get parents talking about parenting and children and also talking to each other. Teenagers and children today speak to each other but parents tend to operate in isolation.

6. Demystify parenting
We have been doing it for 1,000’s of years so it can’t be that hard. Reinforce the ordinary everyday interactions that parents have a daily basis. Get them to trust their instincts and help them find some joy in their children.

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About the author

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*Michael Grose is one of Australia’s most popular writers and speakers on parenting and family matters.*

He is –

- The author of 7 books, including the highly acclaimed One Step Ahead, which has been released in the United Kingdom, Ireland and South Africa.
- The author of over 350 columns in newspapers and magazines across Australia.
- The presenter of keynotes and seminars in the education, community and corporate sectors.
- The creator of a range of high quality, innovative parenting products that are in at least 50 per cent of Australian schools.
- A parent coach who assists parents to raise confident kids.
- The first person to conduct a parenting seminar in Parliament House Canberra, in May 2004.

Michael has worked in schools in every sector, in every state in Australia to assist staff and leadership teams in their efforts to work with and support their parent communities.

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