

Spring Term 2016

This term in school...

Welcome to my Headteacher's Letter. Sent home termly it will let you know what's happening in school: at a leadership level, for the whole school and in the classroom.

This term's value is Determination. A key focus is encouraging the children to not give up even when things get hard. We want the children to develop a growth mindset, so they believe they *can* do it and when their first attempt fails, don't give up, try a different way. As adults in school we must model this approach by ensuring we believe in every child and enable them to achieve their full potential. One of the most exciting aspects of being a headteacher is being able to encourage and hopefully inspire children and staff to believe in themselves and enjoy their learning journey. Successful schools create a climate that facilitates teachers to continue to grow as educators and consequently provide high quality teaching and learning for the children, delivered with enthusiasm.

Linked to the value Determination, I have so enjoyed our first whole school writing project based on Shackleton's Journey by William Grill. I personally love mountaineering and exploration literature so this project indulged my own interests! I hope your children have talked enthusiastically about the project at home. It is the greatest whole school buzz of learning I have experienced in 7 ½ years of headship. Due to the project being whole school, it created a wonderful cohesive feel and enabled children to share their knowledge across year groups. A defining moment was observing Year 3 children reading Year 6 writing on display and being able to fully engage in what was written due to their own knowledge of Shackleton's Journey. When you visit school for the Open Afternoon on Friday 11th March 2.45pm, take the time to look at the superb displays in the school hall and surrounding corridors. There are also displays of children's work linked to the Shackleton project in each classroom. I am in contact with William Grill and hope that there might be the possibility of him visiting the school in June or July. Miss Foinette is attempting to build the milk bottle igloo again as the first attempt was destroyed in high winds. She quoted Shackleton the following day, 'Difficulties are just things to overcome, after all.' Due to the success of the project we have decided to complete two whole school writing projects a year, in September and January.

Having been immersed in the Shackleton project for the last month, the hardships endured by the crew reminded me of certain aspects of parenting! As a relatively new parent (six years) I am constantly challenged to continue the energy and resolve to be the parent I hoped I would be. Sometimes the energy is there, other times it feels like I struggle to generate it. As we all know there is no preparation or guidance given when becoming a parent and parenting is mainly based on our own experiences and current capacity and, to a lesser extent, on what we pick up from elsewhere. I recently read a very interesting article based on research by Dr Leonard Sax. The article began:

As parents we can sometimes confuse loving our children with treating them as equals and friends.

Sax (a family GP and psychologist in Philadelphia) describes a recent scene in his surgery:

It was while struggling, yet again, to get a look at a five-year-old's sore throat that I realised something was going seriously wrong with the way parents were bringing up their children. The mum said to her daughter, 'Darling, is it OK for the doctor to look at your throat?' The girl said no, it wasn't. Then what should have been a five second manoeuvre starting with 'Please open your mouth and say ahh', turned into a five minute ordeal which only ended when the mum promised chocolate if she'd open her mouth.

He comments that this is an ever increasing scenario, and many parents have lost authority and would rather be a best friend to their children. He feels parents are guilty of giving far too many unconstrained choices ("What would you like for dinner?" rather than "Which vegetable – broccoli or peas?") especially to very young children. His view is that it sounds great to give choice but for young children it's not grounded in the reality of child development. A five year old is not an adult, and you can't lay out the various options and ask them to make a rational choice. Even with older children, the results of unconstrained choice are bad: you either have to make the unhealthy dinner they request or overrule them, which leaves them feeling betrayed (like the girl with the sore throat whose opinion was sought and – unavoidably – ignored, leading to the five minute meltdown).

I'm sure we can all recognise traits of what he states in our efforts to parent effectively. The short term fix may solve a problem immediately but inevitably the problem occurs again and the child expects the short term fix again. For children to achieve well in all areas of life we need to build their resilience. Building a child's resilience is a complex process over many years but is key for them to achieve well at school and in life. Sax states: *"loss of parental authority results in fragile children with inflated egos who give up at the slightest setback and are ill-equipped for adult life. They look to their peer group for approval and their sense of identity instead, which creates anxiety because friendships are by nature more transient and unreliable than the unconditional love you get from parents."*

Leonard Sax provides some top tips (as we all know, reality is always harder than the theory!). I have quoted six of them which you may find interesting:

Make teenagers go on family outings – *It seems harsh to say, 'Sorry you don't like hill walking but you're coming anyway,' but that's what you must say because having fun together is the foundation of family life. Your children need to value time with you and they can't do that if they rarely spend any time with you doing fun stuff.*

Cancel some of their after-school activities – *Extra curricular activities are positive but too many can leave children thinking that what you are is what you do. Other priorities should also be free time, relaxation, family meals, good conversation and listening to others.*

Don't be afraid to make them unpopular – *If your 12 year old is the only one not allowed to play the computer game Call of Duty (rated 16 or 18), it's tempting to give in so as not to alienate them from their friends. Sometimes to be strict is to be loving, especially when you are protecting them from violent games.*

Self-control matters as much as self-esteem – *The best predictor of future happiness and life satisfaction when a child is 11 is not high self-esteem or even IQ or academic achievement, but self-control and conscientiousness, according to several large-scale studies. Chores should start at the age of three or four Sax maintains. They should be useful jobs that contribute to family life and you should teach them properly so you don't have to redo their work.*

Limit social media – *It's unrealistic and unfair to expect a 14 year old girl to regulate the time she spends on social media. "What does she say when her friend says, 'Why didn't you like the picture I put up (at midnight)?' She has to be able to say, my evil parents locked my phone away at 9.30pm so I could go to bed. We have to be the bad guys here: the parent not the friend." Social media is about performing, entertaining people. For some children, that performances never ends, which is very damaging to long-term mental wellbeing.*

Enjoy the time you spend with your child

If you are interested in finding out more, his latest book is: *The Collapse of Parenting* by Leonard Sax. I know that I found the article interesting, informative and at times uncomfortable to read as I reflected on my own parenting!

Finally, 2016 is a very special year for Amherst School. It is fifty years since the first lesson was taught at our current site on 26th April 1966. Please save the date Tuesday 26th April this year as we are planning a range of celebrations to mark the occasion. Further details to follow shortly.

Mr Reid