

## **Must do better** *The kids are OK. Really*

We were understandably proud when Ophelia earned a place at Sydney Girls' High School. I could have assured her a place at St George, arguably an even better selective state high school, but preferred she get there by her own effort and talent. Great for herself-esteem, but pedagogically a near-catastrophe.

In her first week she met Belinda, a brilliant girl and a true original thinker and they formed a lasting friendship. For their first physical education (PE) class they were told to jog around Moore Park, a distance of three or four kilometres. Bemused by the idea, Belinda and Ophelia shrugged and went jogging off with the rest of the girls. But, realising that the teacher had no intention of doing the same, they decided to follow that example and so caught the bus back and went for a hamburger at the Colonial Diner before joining the class for the last few metres.

Things proceeded as they had begun. Noting that teachers frequently skipped classes, they saw little advantage in showing up themselves. Belinda's parents and I were summonsed on a number of occasions to answer charges of "fractional truanting", in other words, turning up for roll-call (stupidly set for 9.00 each morning) then bugging off for the rest of the day. In the dock I pointed out that, at home, Ophelia was affectionate and cooperative and reminded her teachers that it was only at their school that she had exhibited no discipline problems, suggesting the problem lay with them, not Ophelia or me. As I put it: I get her to school, you keep her there. (The deputy head duly noted: Problem is Mother) Lynne, for her part, noticed on at least one occasion their teachers shopping in Bondi junction at a moment when they should have been teaching our daughters.

The school counsellor was engaged, an earnest Canadian called Mrs Knittall (aka Committal). She'd read all the psychology textbooks, so knew all about it. It was futile, I knew, to get anyone this vacuous to understand, but I thought I'd better try to explain that Ophelia was used to bearing a lot of responsibility and naturally responded poorly to being treated as a child.

I nearly fell out of my bean chair when she remarked: Oh yes, I noticed that Ophelia knows all the steps in preparing the family meal. I could imagine Ophelia, laughing in her sleeve as she describes scraping the carrots, defrosting the chops and so on - which she had never once seen happen at home, though she would have seen it at her friends' places.

Preparing the family meal chez nous usually entailed, first, our deciding we were hungry, then deciding whether to go to the Greek across the road or get a pizza. She usually favoured the Greek, but we rather liked the pizza idea. That was because Jimmy, the (Greek) pizza man, had the hots for Ophelia and would give her two pizzas for the price of one and throw in a fizzy drink. She thought he was a slime-bag, but free pizza is free pizza, after all.

And then there were the lamingtons<sup>1</sup>: I'd once been persuaded to buy a dozen in a charity drive at work. Ophelia had never seen such a thing in our house and in response to her question I echoed the traditional mum and said she'd have to eat her dinner before she could have a lamington. She knitted her brows and asked: Erm, so does that mean we're getting dinner? OK, OK. Just eat the bloody lamingtons!

Back at Sydney High, the deputy head announced that he would fail Ophelia in her school certificate, which would prevent her from proceeding to matriculation. I pointed out again, that, given the competitive entry to the school, this would reflect badly on its teaching. What's more, as a public school, short of expelling her (which can only be done on very serious grounds), he would then be obliged to accept her for a further year, and further years after that, until she passed. So I suggested a deal whereby he would pass her and I would send her to another school to complete her matriculation. He saw the sense in this and agreed, albeit with some face-saving conditions.

So as to be seen to be conciliatory, I agreed to a limit of ten missed classes in the six months that remained of the year. Does that include art? A policy of the school that I disagreed with strongly was of presenting seven subjects when only six were demanded by the system. I wouldn't have minded if the extra subjects were interesting or useful, but art classes at that level consisted of little more than potato cut-outs. Kindergarten stuff. The kids were better off doing almost anything else with their time.

Ophelia had never contested my forbidding her to attend the art. Perusing her report card for a recent term: 60 for English, 45 for maths, etc. 4 for art. I'd questioned the art score and she protested that she had no idea where the 4 had come from, that she had never been to a class. Now she had to go and she said she could see what I'd been on about. The art teacher turned out to be even more vacuous than the counsellor.

It was an uncomfortable six months. One evening, over pizza, she startled us by saying she'd learned something interesting in science that day. They'd learned that goldfish have a memory span of 30 seconds. Ophelia continued: but do you understand what that means mum? Each time they swim around their bowl, they can't remember whether or not they've been there before.

The International School was a good choice, as they encouraged her to pursue her interests, which turned out to be environmental degradation and the Tragedy of the Commons. Juggling the many, often conflicting priorities of 16 and 17 year-olds, she managed to scrape university entrance, eventually completed a bachelor of science. (I enrolled on her behalf while she back-packed around Indonesia). She then went on to a very successful career in environmental campaigning, serving as policy adviser to ministers of government, drafting landmark legislation and heading key policy divisions within Treasury. Along the way invited to complete two masters' degrees, sponsored by the universities and the Australian government. She was also invited by the US State Department to join their International Visitor Leadership

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<sup>1</sup> Traditionally a recipe for using up stale cake, these days lamingtons are usually made of fresh sponge cake, cut into cubes of 6-8cm, coated on all six sides with chocolate icing then rolled in desiccated coconut.

Programme, joining a select group that counts several heads of state among its members. Not bad for what the principal of Sydney Girls' High referred to as riff-raff.