

Bonding through PSLE

Like most parents, I was very anxious at the beginning of last year because my son was going to sit for his PSLE. My anxiety was not about getting him into one of the top schools. I was more concerned that he would give his best and not have to regret in future. The other worry was about uncertainties as he turns into a teenager. I decided then to use the PSLE preparations to build a strong relationship with him before he becomes a full-fledged teenager. As a father, I believe I can only do my part by sharing my experiences and wisdom so that he can have wings to reach his full potential while giving him all my love and care so he can have roots to be secured and grounded on solid values.

We began our journey by setting our goals together. I have discovered in my own life that true learning does not come from mere knowledge transfer. It can only be achieved through self-discovery and revelations, resulting in 'transformational learning'. As Christians, we spend the last hour every night before bed discussing Bible passages he had read, any insights he had discovered and how he would like to apply them. By going through this exercise, not only did he build up his character, it also helped him discover the wonders of reflection and insights. Most importantly, that one hour every night became a very precious part of our bonding experience.

Some time in March, I discovered that my son's interest for Chinese was dropping drastically. His first semester results were on the borderline. As a last ditch effort to salvage the situation, he agreed to make a short 'immersion' trip to Beijing with me. Yes, just the two of us. I figured that it would kill two birds with one stone. It would show him the importance of Chinese as a medium for communications in the future, as well as allowing us to spend five full days together. As we toured the historical sites and savoured Beijing's cuisines, his confidence and interest in Chinese increased. When he was back in Singapore, I could see an improvement in his attitude towards his mother tongue. More importantly, I could tell that he was very appreciative of my taking five full days off work just to help him with his Chinese. Even till today, he continues to encourage his younger brother to make a similar trip with me.

I would be lying if I told you that the journey was a smooth one all the way. We had numerous arguments when we worked on his assessment papers. Once, it ended in a bad cold war. It broke my heart and left me to conclude that I have failed. In my sorrow, I wrote him a five page letter telling him how I felt, being very careful not to judge how he should have behaved. It worked! He opened up and shared with me how he had been feeling, including something very significant, that he would never be able to meet my expectations. That mutual opening up brought us to a new level in our relationship. Since then, we respect each other a lot more and are more sensitive to each other's feelings.

All work and no play was never my idea of growing up. I realize that if I want to know my son better, I need to be 'in his world'. So I tried to get to know his friends by organizing street soccer matches, badminton games and even computer game parties. That way, he had a chance to relax, develop his social skills while allowing me to be a part of his world. I could tell he appreciated it because he once mentioned how his friends thought his father was 'cool'!

Many of us think our children are too young to appreciate some of the things we do at work. I discovered that I had underestimated him. As I shared more and more about my views on examination strategies, he began to understand what it takes to excel at work and in life. Somehow, sharing my personal experiences worked well for him. I found it especially powerful when I shared my mistakes and failures. It made him realize that parents are human as well and make mistakes in their lives too. At times, he even consoled me.

As I write this article, he has already started his secondary school journey. He had worked hard and gotten into the school of his choice. What prompted me to share my experiences was an introductory essay my son wrote as part of his first week at school. His exact words were as follows:

"The most interesting experience in my life was the time I spent with my father while we were preparing for my PSLE. We learnt so much about each other."

It brought joy to me beyond words. I would like to encourage fathers to take the opportunity to build a strong bond with their children while they are young. The rewards are definitely worth more than the biggest bonus or promotion at work. As for me, I would not trade my relationship with my son for anything else in this world.