

## My week being a playful father: a dolphin dad

<http://www.thetimes.co.uk/tto/life/families/article3874734.ece>



The summer holidays dragged like a ball and chain and I resorted to pre-emptive yelling – mostly “No!” at any request of my sons Caspar 6, Conrad 8 and Oscar 11. By early September, I was keeping a kind of informal criminal record for each child in my head. I exploded at the smallest infraction. I had rules for just about everything. I felt mean and petty. Parenting had become more about the children letting me down than me teaching them how to explore the world safely.

It is fair to say that though most of the time I am a good, present father, I have slightly lost my way. As a parent, it’s also easy to get into a pattern of shouting; you feel exhausted, pressurised and become more child than an adult. Intelligent children are great at prompting this kind of collapse because, superficially, they sound much more mature than they are. I find it easy to slip into a narrative where me and my children are equally matched, and I am the one who is not listened to or respected. And once I forget that my children are still children, I quickly begin to feel hard done by, and a volley of parental yelling and foot stomping is never far behind.

My constantly slipping between adult and child must be confusing for my sons. Would a whole new attitude to parenting help? The Harvard psychologist Shawn Achor believes the way forward is to mimic the behaviour of dolphins and raise children by adopting a “playful, intelligent, social” approach to communication and discipline. Contrary to the cold-hearted tiger parent, who trades a

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childhood of contented lollygagging for an A\* in statistics, dolphin parents aim to create secure, socially adept human beings who won't end up gibbering in matron's office at their first whiff of failure (a B grade).

I don't think I'll ever qualify as a full-on tiger father, but I would like to stop feeling that fatherhood has become a stone-cold battle of wills, and a fight for ultimate control. I want my sons to be happy that I am their father. There are a few basics that effect almost immediate change: ensure that you have five positive interactions with your kids for every negative one. Try to be optimistic: think positive, be positive. And draw their attention to the smaller everyday blessings as much as possible.

My habit is to give the boys as much freedom as possible, but for this method to work, I need to stop lingering on the sidelines like a disinterested referee. They decide to construct an elaborate game in the garden involving an armed prison guard (Oscar), some kind of shop steward (Conrad) and a recidivist jail breaker (Caspar). The game is borderline safe. Ordinarily, I'd let them play by themselves and ignore them until someone started crying. Instead, I dip in and out of view, offering the occasional suggestion to make the game more fun and avoid violence and anarchy. The dolphin approach feels more collaborative. Already I can feel my role evolving into more of a tour guide than a tyrannical captain.

I let them play until it's so dark that they come inside to ask for torches. This feels like a natural moment of punctuation, and when I suggest it's time to finish, they're surprisingly happy to end the game for today. Because I've been involved from the start, my suggestion is accepted rather than viewed as an unwanted edict forced on them from on high.

One key method of dolphin parenting is to resolve problems using a playful approach. To use guile, not lazy verbal reprimands. The idea is to make it easy to be good and more of an effort to develop bad habits. In the past, I've encouraged them to do their school work with threats of working at McDonald's. Utilising the dolphin approach, I hide the TV remote and put apple juice and biscuits on the dining table beside their maths books. Conrad sits down to munch a biscuit and quickly gets on with some long division. Unprompted, the others bring their books over to join him. Caspar wants to know what 19 minus 7 is. I'm almost too dazed with shock to answer him.

I thank them all for working hard. Because I have spent the evening thinking about helping them, rather than trying to control them, I naturally feel more empathy and genuinely appreciate the effort they've made — in the past I'd have dismissed it, tiger-parent-style, as never quite enough. For the first time I feel like a proper dolphin.

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This calmer pattern continues. Usually by about 7.30-8pm, we go through a period akin to chucking-out time — fractious children and parents indulging in petty squabbles and score-settling. But now, patience and positivity have replaced snarling: “I’m going to count to ten”, through gritted teeth. Because I have been five times more positive than negative, I’ve seeded the ground with upbeat affirmations. They settle into bed relaxed, ready for a story, and the only howl emanating from Conrad’s bedroom is one of disappointment that the cat is late for its night shift as a hot-water bottle. One thing I have realised is that I am a dolphin dad with other people’s kids, but not with own. I manage my -year-old son’s cricket team. As a coach, I have to create a supportive, fun, team environment to encourage the kids to keep coming back. The problem is, I have a clear double standard with my own boys, setting impossibly high standards. Spending time as a dolphin dad has already made me realise that I will be a better father when I engage with my own sons as if they have a choice as to whether they are part of my team, or not.

One small glitch comes when Conrad runs up to me the following day proudly wielding what only can be described as a prison shank — a gnarly stick to which he has glued and taped a serrated pumpkin carving blade that he flashes in front of my eyes. Instead of losing my temper and making him feel bad (cue elaborate speech on “childhood eye loss”), I distract him and Caspar by constructing a couple of toy rifles from basement junk and duct tape. These guns are “awesome”. They disappear to hunt the cat.

My 11-year old is at a vulnerable point, having just started secondary school. He is happy, but emotional. The smallest request — such as “turn off the TV now” — can prompt a meltdown. At which point, the easiest reflex response is for me to repeat the request at bone-shaking volume. But the dolphin method highlights how inappropriate and pointless it is to resort to shouting, which inevitably leaves both of us shaken and upset. It emphasises the unpleasant journey, not the happy destination. I realise, this week, that almost every single disagreement I have with my eldest can be best resolved with gentle humour: asking him what he wants for dinner in text- speak. As long as I keep my patience, I can charm him into acquiescence, and, even better, he leaves the room happy. The final test comes during a shopping trip to Canary Wharf, in London’s Docklands. The restrictive mini-Singapore vibe seems to send Caspar into a law-breaking frenzy. We are waiting for my wife outside the supermarket as it draws down its shutters for the night. I think we’ve all probably thought about rolling under these like Indiana Jones. While my mind wanders, I realise that Caspar has run up to the shutters and is performing a dance similar to “the Bart man” for the benefit of the two security guards staffing the doors. Before they, or I, can stop him, he has darted under the closing shutter, performed a quick lap of honour inside the shop and emerged triumphant through the front door with the last of the customers.

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At this point I would usually shame him with a telling-off, or terrify him with a dire image of being squashed to death, but the dolphin approach tasks me to deal with realistic outcomes. Could he have been crushed? Possibly, faintly. Could he have banged his head? Yes. Was any harm done? He might have hurt the security guards' pride. I tell Caspar that I'll talk to him about it later. Paradoxically, the dolphin method is making me understand my son better as a human. I liked his cunning, skill and agility. I liked that he wasn't scared or meek. He knew what he was doing, that it was naughty and funny. That's the entire point of the gesture. This is how 6-year-olds say: "This is me."

I am sure this dolphin-like irreverence for petty rules has served us humans well as a species. We want to climb, hunt, go fast, pry open rusted doors or let rather ordinary things rot and ferment until they become paradoxically delicious. We need to break rules. We need to allow change. While it feels good to be a dolphin for a week, the amount of energy and effort it takes to bend all my own rules is alarming. I might need to spend a few weeks developing my brand of lazy carp parenting before I give this another go.