

Parenting *ideas* INSIGHTS

Building parent-school partnerships

WORDS Karen Fontaine

A mother like no other

Seventeen years ago, Cheryl Koenig was a typical young Sydney mum celebrating Mother's Day with her husband Robert and their two sons, Jonathan, 12, and Chris, 10. One week later, Jonathan was involved in a car accident that left him with a severe traumatic brain injury. Since that day, Cheryl has worked tirelessly to help not only Jonathan but also other sufferers of brain injury. Here, New South Wales' 'Woman Of The Year' for 2009 – and the recipient this year of a Medal of the Order of Australia for service to people with disabilities, their families and carers – shares her extraordinary story.

I grew up as one of five kids in a close-knit family, and from an early age I wanted nothing more than to be a stay-at-home mum. I'd met Robert when I was almost 16 and, after nine years together, starting a family seemed as natural as night following day.

I gave birth to Jonathan two days before Christmas in 1984. He was an adorable baby and as a toddler he was boisterous and creative. I enjoyed every minute of those years at home with him and Chris.

Becoming a mother defined me. How can you not change when suddenly there exists something that is more precious than your own life? I discovered new things about, and deeper levels within, myself – because I held so much more in my arms. Of course the boys took my time, my space, even my patience – but they gave it all back with a smile.

Now that my boys are men, it's not the fancy holidays or big events that are my most golden memories. It's the ordinary, everyday things. Bedtime stories were a special time because they opened up their imaginations. Music: playing their favourite songs and dancing crazily with them. Dinner times: every night, without fail, we ate at the dining table together – the same meal for everyone, too. This was, and is, an important

ritual in the milieu of our family life. It's where we partake in each other's day, share thoughts and exchange memories. I often call the dinner table 'my altar table' – it's like a religious conviction, I guess, where I get to nurture and nourish my family.

On Sunday, May 18, 1997, I was cooking one such dinner for us when everything changed. Jonathan was 12 and I was 37. He'd been playing outside with the boy from next door and I was making nachos. Just after 5 pm I called Jon inside, and minutes later I heard a huge bang.

Jonathan didn't see the car coming. The car took him out and sent him flying for 20 metres. I found Jonathan lying on the street, his leg all twisted, with a horrible amount of dark-red blood coming out of his mouth and nose. There were two voices in my head – one telling me to scream hysterically and the other telling me to stay calm because my baby needed me calm. That was the voice I chose to listen to.

At the hospital I didn't cry; I just felt numb. A doctor told us a CT scan indicated a brain injury; that Jonathan's clinical signs weren't good, and he couldn't tell us if he'd make it. I thought, 'You don't know Jonathan'.

Jonathan was in an induced coma for the first month and for four more months I didn't leave his

side. Some deep reserve of energy kicked in and I knew I was making a difference to his recovery. All day long I told him how much we loved him; that he was going to be all right. But Jonathan got worse before he got better and each day felt like a ghastly repeat of the one before.

Jonathan was in intensive care for three weeks and then his eyes started to open. From early on, I knew he knew me. I'd lie on his bed and cuddle him and tell him about his life and read him stories. I was completely driven in my mission to restore what little semblance was left of my family. I saw signs of positivity everywhere.

Around the two-month mark I knew I had something to work with. I wheeled Jonathan to a piano in the hospital music room. He had no neck control, he was still dribbling and not talking, but he was just starting movement in his right arm. He'd begun to reach up and touch my face and take my rings off and do little things he'd done as a toddler. At the piano he reached out and started playing 'Chariots Of Fire', which he'd been learning at the time of the accident.

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... a mother like no other ...

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Our kids learn through watching us

There were no doctors around but the teachers saw it and everyone was crying – me hardest of all. That’s his theme song now, and he played it at the launch of my book.

Jono had post-traumatic amnesia for about 10 months, which indicates the worst kind of brain injury and the unlikeliness that memory will be regained. But we didn’t listen to the doctors. I see his memory improving all the time and that’s because he has a full and active life.

It’s been a long, hard journey. At three months he started making moaning sounds. I saw that as positive – he was trying to communicate. And then he started making ‘mmmm’ sounds. I literally pulled apart his lips to get his mouth moving but I closed the curtains around us because people thought I was crazy. But then one day he looked at me and said ‘Mum’. I can’t describe the joy I felt.

The first day I left him, to go to the hairdresser because I was a mess, my sister stayed with him and gave him a drink of grape juice that hadn’t been diluted. He gagged and blurted out: ‘I want my Mum!’ I’d cried all the way through getting my hair done but I walked back into his room and he was talking! We called Robert and I said ‘Someone here wants to speak to you’. Without any prompting, Jonathan said in the softest voice: ‘Hi...Dad...I...Love...You...Dad’. We were all in floods of tears.

Jono’s accident not only changed who I was, it also changed the complete dynamic of our family. I had to wear so many different hats in my new role as mother to Jono. I was – and, to varying degrees, still am – his carer, his rehabilitation case manager, speech therapist, occupational therapist, physiotherapist, tutor, social secretary, counsellor for depression, and by and large his navigator through life.

My mothering of Chris did a complete 360, too. Chris was only 10 at the time of Jonathan’s accident and I had to neglect him and his needs for the best part of five to 10 years because my entire energy was driven towards getting Jonathan better. To this day, I feel an enormous amount of ‘mother-guilt’ about not being there throughout probably the most crucial years of a boy’s life: adolescence.

I was also guilty of being overprotective because I was terrified something bad would happen to Chris too. But I learnt, with time, to let him find his own way and I’m so glad I did, because he has become the most extraordinary young man, with the right blend of compassion and empathy, integrity and humility. He’s a civil engineer and he married his girlfriend Danielle last year, with Jono as his best man. It was an incredibly happy day for our family. Jono made a five-minute speech he’d memorised, jokes and all, which brought the house down.

I’m enormously proud of both of my boys although Chris is probably my proudest achievement, because he’s done it all by himself. But our kids learn through watching us, in ways we don’t even realise at the time.



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