

The Tone of the Home

by Jonathan Doyle MLMEd

The well-known author and psychologist Martin Seligman is the father of the popular new movement that has had some strong impact in Australian schools, *Positive Psychology*. A former head of the American Psychological Association, arguably the world's peak psychological body, Seligman among other interests has been a master of the scientific exploration of human happiness. Why do some people see a glass half full and others only dregs?

Like any area of human behaviour there is always a complex interplay of biology, environment and spirituality that determines how each of us walks upon the lofty peaks and through the intermittent valleys of life. However, one of the things that stayed with me upon reading one of Seligman's recent books was the powerful role of language in shaping our experience of life. I want to suggest in this short article that both what we say as parents and the language structures we permit in our homes can and do have a powerful long-term impact on our kids. In short, your words, and theirs shape your respective worlds.

By language I am not talking so much about getting our kids to stop using certain expressions that might make the odd sailor blush. I once knew a U.S. Marine Captain who called it 'potty mouth.' But if I was honest, when I hit myself with a hammer by accident I don't tend to say, "Thank you dear Lord for the gift of physical pain." I also play a lot of golf, which I discovered recently was only called golf because all the other four-letter words were taken!

The truth is our language gives shape to our experience. We begin to believe what we repeatedly

say. It is the tool we use to interpret the things that happen to us. But, and it's a big but, we actually have enormous control over how we express what happens to us. In essence, my question for you is, what is the tone of your home? Is it a positive place to be? How do key people in your family speak about adversity or success? According to Seligman, the language that you hear each day inside the four walls of your suburban castle is going to be a powerful indicator of the long-term outcomes across a range of indicators for each person.

When I talk about the role of language during live seminars a significant proportion of the room will always see it as some kind of 'feel good' trick that has no impact. Wrong. Rapid growth in insights from neuroscience and psychopharmacology continue to prove the impact of language on brain chemistry and the central nervous system. We eventually feel what we say and say what we feel. There is a powerful reinforcing loop taking place every day of our lives.

It is not just in spoken language but also in the internal dialogue we refer to broadly as cognitive behaviour. For example, if you fail a job interview your brain will say something between the two extremes of, "This always happens to me. I'm terrible at interviews" and "I'm lucky to have missed out. There must be a better job around the next corner!" In essence, for a lot of what happens to us there is no absolute right or wrong interpretation, but there will always be some kind of interpretation. The good news is that we actually get to choose which one. We really do have that power.

So from a parenting perspective, we have a huge role in not just the language we use in speaking



to our kids but the language we help them to use about themselves. When they miss out on being selected for a key team we can coach them into selecting and deploying language that gives the most useful interpretation of what happened. The interpretation might include the need to work harder in the future but as long as it is drawing a beneficial interpretation then that has to be better than allowing language like, "I'll never be any good at this."

I think, as parents we are truly called to a leadership role in creating powerful cultures in our homes that bring about the chance that each of our kids will gravitate toward their God given potential. Language use will be a big part of that. What words need to be rule out in your house? I'll give you an example. In our house we never use the word problem. A long time ago I decided that I was never going to have another problem in my life. From that moment on I decided I was going to have *challenges*. It drove my wife, Karen, crazy. Something big would happen and I would say, "Wow, we have a big *challenge* here!" If you're still a sceptic then you need to take it up with Dr. Seligman, who would tell you that my choice of language was positioning me to be in a more resourceful state where different areas of my pre-frontal cortex would be operating and my central nervous system would be operating with lower levels of cortisol, adrenaline and epinephrine.



A final thought is to think of the fact that Jesus talked about the fact that, "...out of the abundance of the heart the mouth speaks." In short, what your vocal chords shape

has deeper roots. There simply is such a strong relationship between what we think and what we say but that relationship works both ways. What you say can change what you feel and what you think. Our kids need to learn this very early in life and you and I have the incredibly privilege of helping them to learn that powerful life-changing truth.

So here are some ideas to take this further. Have a listen to my podcast called Your words shape your world at <http://www.choicez.com.au/category/podcast/> Also these books are a great place to start:

1. A better way to think – H. Norman Wright
2. Simplicity Parenting – Kim John Payne
3. The Optimistic Child – Dr. Martin Seligman



BIO: Jonathan Doyle

Jonathan Doyle is the founder of Choicez Media, Australia's largest provider of relationship and sexuality formation resources and seminars to Catholic and independent schools. He holds a Master's Degree in Education and is currently completing a second Master's Degree at the Pontifical Institute for studies on Marriage and the Family. He is a sought after international speaker having spoken live to over a quarter of a million people. He has been married for 12 years and is the father of three children under the age of four.

You can hear his weekly podcast at <http://www.choicez.com.au/category/podcast/> and find him on Facebook at fbjonathan.com