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A parenting style for our times

by Michael Grose

I spoke to a mother recently who was struggling to find the right balance in her parenting approach. She was frustrated that she always had to nag her children to get cooperation. More disturbingly, she felt a lack of connection to her children, which concerned her given the challenges we are now experiencing.

I suggested that she should “guide like a cat and nurture like a dog”. She loved what I had to say so I thought it valuable to share my ideas with the Parenting Ideas community.

You have some cat and dog in you. It’s just a matter of accessing those parts and bringing them out when we need them.

Find your inner cat to guide and manage

The cat is the credible side you all have, but find difficult accessing. It’s expressed through your non-verbals – your tone of voice, your posture, and your head position.

A cat speaks with flat, clipped voice. Your head is very still and body upright and confident. The quickest way to access your inner cat is to speak with your palms facing the ground. You’ll find you’ll naturally speak with a clipped voice, still head and body and a serious expression on your face. This is your credible (and calm) side.

When you speak from your cat side people will usually believe what you have to say. The cat side gives you authority.

Australia’s former foreign minister Julie Bishop was a good example of using cat behaviour. Whether you liked her or loathed her you couldn’t deny that she oozed authority. That’s because she accessed the cat side of her nature in public.

Guide like a cat by speaking calmly, quietly and staying still when you speak. ‘Cats’ will also withdraw eye contact rather than stand and argue so look away or respectfully move away rather than become involved in a pointless argument with a child.

‘Cats’ also look for ways to manage visually (with such things as rosters or charts) or by moving close and whispering, rather than repeating themselves. If ‘cats’ repeat themselves, they are more likely to lower their voice than raise it to get attention. These cat behaviours work well when guiding and managing children and teenagers.

Use your inner dog to nurture and build relationships

We also have a dog side to our nature. This is the approachable, conversational, relationship-building side. When you access this side, you’ll speak with lots of inflection in your voice. Your head will bob up and down. You’ll probably lean forward as you speak, and you’ll smile a lot. The quickest way to access your dog nature is to speak with your palms up. You can try it now. Stand up, put your hands out with your palms up and start speaking. You should notice a big difference in how you deliver your message from when you spoke with palms facing down. If not, alternate speaking with palms up and down until you see a difference.

The dog side of our nature is what many of us feel more comfortable with. If you are in a management position at work, you probably spend more time accessing your cat than your dog. Although effective managers will move seamlessly between the two, accessing their dog when networking and relationship-building, then finding their cat for negotiations or when making decisions.

Actor Hugh Jackman is an example of a public figure who is dog-like as he usually speaks with lots of up and down pitch in his voice, a big smile and open body language. However, he can switch to cat mode in interviews when talking about something serious. He will speak quietly, calmly and his head will stay very still. We believe him when he speaks. He's no lightweight. It's his ability to switch from cat to dog and back again that makes him so charismatic.

[Bring your cat and dog to your parenting](#)

Effective parents can make subtle adjustments to their communication. That is, they alter their style to suit the situation rather than let their moods dictate their communication styles. This is not necessarily conscious. Do it often and you'll find switching from cat to dog and back again becomes an ingrained parenting pattern.

Get your cat and dog wrong and you'll be ineffective. Guide like a dog and you'll do one of three things – whine to get cooperation, become angry if they ignore you, or do nothing because you don't want to offend your children. Build relationships like a cat and you'll be seen as distant, stiff, and unapproachable.

Get the mix right and you'll be able to give your children exactly what they need. That is, the leadership and safety that cats provide and the nurturance and encouragement that comes naturally to dogs.