



DO WHAT YOU SAY YOU'LL DO

And other tools to LEAD courageously

Interview with Maggie Dent

Maggie Dent is an author, educator, and parenting and resilience specialist who has written seven books full of common-sense wisdom on parenting and life. Her diverse career history includes teaching, youth and family counselling, palliative care and funeral services, and radio announcing. She is the proud mother of four sons and one precious granddaughter.

What is leadership?

Leadership can be seen as performing one or more acts of leading that affects human behaviour so as to influence a group of people to move towards a vision or goal to accomplish success. Exceptional leadership in my view does this with one other key attribute — it aims to achieve a goal for the greater good of all and for the positive growth of individuals. This means there needs to be integrity and a healthy respect that ensures the fair use of power in the process.

I also believe that exceptional leaders are always committed to creating more leaders rather than focusing on maintaining one's own place of leadership. Being able to mentor and guide others to grow both personally and professionally and then to step forward has always been something I have strived for even from my earliest days as a teacher.

As to my own personal style of leadership I believe it changes depending on the situations that arise. Within my own team, my style is a mixture of co-operative, delegative and authoritative. I follow Daniel Pink's philosophy that ensures a high level of authentic motivation and that includes 3 keys things:

1. I allow my team to have autonomy and choice on how they do things
2. they do what they love and are passionate about
3. they do what they have mastery over, i.e. what they do best!

I am not a good manager and so I value the ability of my team to take this over so that I too can concentrate on what I do best and this also allows me to not get overloaded. I totally trust my team to work together without needing to consult me and this allows me to avoid stress and burnout. Travelling does get tiring so I have to ensure that I stay well, healthy and to keep enjoying what I love doing — sharing information that builds understanding and helps families, schools and communities in the healthy raising of children.



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In my travels I am always asking questions of those at the grassroots level of our communities about their concerns and worries. This, plus what I hear via my emails and social media, was where I heard the increasing voices of concern around the experiences of young children in our education system. Last year I had an inspired moment where I thought, “I need to step up and gather these different voices from parents, early childhood educators and allied health professionals and take these messages to the bureaucratic powers that be so we can have conversations to stop what is unhelpful and unhealthy for children.”

Thankfully social media enabled me to put out a request for stories about what people were experiencing, especially around the push down of formalised learning into early years that also sees play being demonised and trivialised. Once the emails started pouring in I never had a doubt that I was the right person at the time to lead the challenge to stop our world from stealing childhood in the name of education. The flame in my belly was burning very bright and I was also hearing of experienced early years’ educators being told that they needed to change the way they had been teaching, even if they had been producing ‘stand out ‘ students for year 1. Some were being silenced or even threatened with losing their jobs — oh that was when my social justice consciousness was totally activated.

So I gathered the information and put together the submission [*Stop Stealing Childhood in the Name of Education*](#) to take to Canberra. It was a symbolic journey on many levels to take that document and place it in the hands of the Honourable Christopher Pyne’s under secretary because I know how bureaucracy often works — decisions made without consultation with those that should be consulted.

My vision was to awaken Australians who lived with or worked with young children to have conversations and to question what was happening. Rather than just attack those who were making these decisions that were causing so many problems for so many children, I chose to use the power of stories from those who live or work with children.

I also have a strong focus on avoiding deficit thinking or just focusing on what’s bad and wrong – I have always been a strength or solution-focused thinker and I know this is a key part of my leadership and communication styles. I am an innovative and creative problem solver with a highly practical approach.

Theories and ideas that have poor practical application are just head stuff. Human behaviour needs to have pathways that allow turning ideas and choices into reality — no matter how small that may start. One small action that works opens the door to bigger actions that will also work. I found this from my resilience consultation work in communities after natural disasters — small is beautiful because we need to experience some success to create the momentum to move further.



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Funny that within weeks, the submission was being shared in the UK and USA where the same problems were being passionately questioned. We truly are a global community and my questioning and my expression of concern was much bigger than being just an Australian issue. I am now seen around the country as a person who is a passionate advocate for allowing our children to have a childhood that is healthy, happy and full of playful moments that helps grow the whole child rather than seeing our young children as 'brains on seats' or just sources of data.

Rich experience, play-based childhoods can still create kids who do well at school and also be creative problem solvers and who are happier and more resilient. We need to remember that when we were much further up the global education levels on the OECD this is what was happening.

What action do I think a leader could do today to make a positive difference to the way they lead?

Oh I would suggest create a regular habit of mindfulness or spaces for 'pondering'. When we can lead with all our faculties not just our conscious mind, we are better attuned to our teams and to what is really happening, rather than what we think is happening. We can sense changes in the mood of the workplace, a shift in culture and we are better able to communicate with the people who we lead.

When we are grounded — which means present to the 'now' we are often calmer and a calm mind is a kind mind. From this place we remember to validate effort, offer encouragement, model and mentor with integrity and make it safer for our team members to bring their concerns and challenges to you. Time for 'pondering' even if it's a regular 5-10 minutes where we quietly have a 'pause' where we cannot be disturbed — gives our unconscious mind and higher self a window to allow inspired thoughts, ideas or perceptions that often get lost in the busy mind.

I spend a lot of time in quiet spaces in nature doing nothing other than 'being quiet'. My most creative thinking happens when I am away from my 'work mode' and in a way it's when I am able to be a good leader to myself. I reflect often on my life choices and life direction rather than just once or twice a year. I also often ask myself — how may I serve humanity better? I used to worry about the bottom line, the turnover and the financial markers of running a successful business. However, I worked out that when I was following my passion to help others with compassion and integrity, the financial markers improved. So I have chosen to continue to do that — even though my accountant wishes I would do it his way with a business plan every year!

In my work I meet many people who share my passion for children and families. I have encouraged countless people to also follow their dreams by mentoring or connecting them to others who may be able to help. Apparently I often inspire people to take 'the leap of faith' and it is one of the best non-financial rewards imaginable. I especially like encouraging women as I believe the sisterhood needs to be kinder and more supportive like it was in traditional kinship communities. When I help another woman's light shine my own light shines brighter not dimmer.



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I remember having a crushing low self-esteem and a deep sense of inadequacy and my inner saboteur held me back from many things earlier in my life. Helping others overcome the hidden inhibitors to growing and following dreams is everyone's job. There is an abundance that can be shared rather than seeing life as a limited reality and to be wary of competitors. I celebrate others who work in my sector of work who act with integrity and who share my passions and often work with them to help families, schools and communities.

What have I learned from happy loved children?

The greatest gifts I have learned from young children are

1. Slow down and be present
2. See failure as a tiny thing and keep striving until you succeed
3. Laugh more easily and loudly
4. Imagination has power beyond the intellect — pretend before you do.
5. Share, take turns and forgive easily
6. Love unconditionally through dirt, mud and vegemite
7. See the world as a fascinating place
8. See play as the most important part of childhood
9. Always keep a four-year-old child hiding inside you
10. Smile with your eyes and your heart as well as your mouth

On Emerging Leaders: On Mentors:

I think as children and adolescents we are always watching adults — looking for adults we respect and value and then copying how they behave. I know I did and I was blessed to have an amazing dad who was a passionate humanitarian, nature lover and committed family and community member. He modelled deep human care and connectedness — so I was really lucky. I also had some teachers who shaped me positively. I also learned how not to be a good leader from witnessing toxic, poor leadership. I chose to never do the things I saw that were quite frankly appalling dictatorial, autocratic and bullying.

I know I have been a mentor of many young people either overtly or implicitly and I am pretty stoked to have had that positive influence. To help others realise more of their potential has always been something I have valued ever since I first stepped into the classroom almost 40 years ago.

On young people:

I have serious concerns about how schooling has changed. The benchmark testing has made teaching to the test a reality much to the angst of most teachers. The years NAPLAN tests occur 3,5,7 in primary school sees science, music, the arts and often play and sport pushed aside. An engineering professor recently told me that the first NAPLAN students have reached university and there is a noticeable decline in their problem-solving, creative thinking ability. They expect the answer to problems to be up the back of the book!



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Less outside play is also deeply impacting our kids with declines in self-regulation and poorer attention spans. The unhealthy use of technology is also concerning me with preschool children. We need to guide and educate the whole child and a child with poor social skills will find it hard to make friends, get along with others and work in groups. No screen or app can build social and emotional competence — only human interaction can do that.

It still astounds me that we follow the worst education systems in the world in the pursuit of high grades when we have more and more troubled teens struggling with disengagement, mental illness, self-harm, and alcohol and drug addiction concerns. Quite frankly in our beautiful Australia our kids are sicker, sadder, fatter and more disconnected than ever before for no gain.

I also have concerns that we do not consult children and adolescents in decisions that concern them. I seldom initiated anything to my classes without getting their feedback. My classroom guidelines were often created by asking what they wanted in a safe classroom. It was pretty much what I wanted and this simple process made them feel heard and valued. The same goes for children — they are quite capable to share how they see the world. Adults often forget how to see the world through the eyes of a child!

On you:

I still see myself as pretty much no-one special and just a 'scrubber from the bush.' I do get surprised when a big crowd comes to one of my parenting seminars or I am asked to speak at a huge conference or someone tells me how one of my books has helped them be a better person or parent.

Undoubtedly my greatest achievements are my four wonderful sons and the warm relationships I have with a special circle of people — some family and some friends. I struggled at times as a child and an adolescent with letting people get close to me so I value and celebrate those who I love and who love me unconditionally.

My books are also like additional birthings — it takes a long time for the seed of an idea for a book to eventuate into a book you can hold. I have so many people who come on that journey with me and I value and appreciate these people so much. My latest book, *9 Things: A back-to-basics guide to calm, common-sense, connected parenting Birth-8*, created a similar response in me to when I held my first book — tears of joy and relief and a deep wish I could have shared that moment with my dad. I am sure it's his ability to write that came through to me on my DNA.

Finally, the joy of meeting someone years after I have taught them, counselled them, conducted their wedding or a funeral of a loved one and know that I made a positive difference in their lives — that is pure gold. From the lost, lonely teen who almost took her life when she failed a uni essay and who saw herself as worthless and useless this is beyond believable. This is what I believe is our life purpose — using our unique gifts and talents to share in a way that makes our world better because we have lived. If I can lead others to embrace this reality in their own unique ways by bringing more compassion into our families and communities, I will know that I have done what I