



17 November 2014

Oakhill Parents

Via email

Dear Parents

I am sure you are aware that the temperature has been significantly raised in Parliament at the present moment. Opposition parties are really taking the ruling ANC to task on a number of issues. Tempers are running high and there is lots of blaming and finger pointing. Parliamentarians, in my opinion, have lost focus, focus on their most important duty: serving their constituents. This debacle has definitely caused angst amongst ordinary citizens like you and me and in times like these it is important to remain positive and focused on what is important.

Schools also have constituents: our students. This is a difficult issue to manage because students don't pay their school fees, their parents do. Students, at times, don't live up to their parents expectations and this also causes stress: for parents but even more so, for students. Students are sometimes not as competitive, motivated and focused as their parents would like them to be – teachers see this as part of the journey of learning but parents are more focused on the here and now. Parents are generally results focused and this does not speak to the process of learning and thinking. Each of our constituents grows and learns differently. Each of them make mistakes and excel on a daily basis and this is cause for a 'messy process' called learning, and messiness, while fantastic for learning is not what parents generally want. Parents, including myself, prefer cleanliness, as little disruption to routines as possible, clear lines of communication, crisp, clear outcomes, decisiveness, good results, trophies and ultimately kids who do not need much attention and who inadvertently win at most things.

All of us who have kids, know that this is not true. Whether we like or not, raising kids is messy and so it should be. So as the sun sets on the academic year I would like to encourage all parents and teachers to remember that Oakhill definitely excels in allowing kids to grow and learn. Oakhill is a happy place for kids and all too often we, as adults, get in the way with our egos and our own selfish, focused agendas. The vast majority of our boys and girls and our young men and women have worked excruciatingly hard to live up to your expectations as Moms and Dads this year.

Your sons and daughters are feeling all sorts of emotion at the present time. They are feeling the pressure of ensuring great results but they are also beginning to realize that the year is coming to an end and they would obviously like to do the best they possibly can. Your reactions and interactions, as a parent, are going to be paramount if they are to cope with the highs and lows of the days. Your sons and daughters will be feeding off your reactions about teachers, about tests in which they may have done well, or not! They will be downloading their emotions, fears and frustrations at home and your comments, facial expressions and reactions will either encourage or scare them. There is but one moment to show your first reaction. The image of that reaction can last a lifetime. You will often hear the excitement, flatness, delight, uncertainty in their voice. There are seconds to tune in and your first words will go straight to your son or daughter's heart.

That means that the days ahead provide an opportunity to show your son or daughter what is really important to you as a parent. It is a time to consider your views about South Africa, education, young adulthood and whether your expectations are optimistic, pessimistic or realistic. It is a time to consider whether there is already lingering annoyance, anger or disappointment with regard to your son or daughter's application and diligence over the course of the year.

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Mothers and Fathers often hold different views about academic performance. What pleases one may disappoint the other. It can be difficult for a young boy, girl or adult to deal with delight on the face of one parent and disappointment visible on the other. All the research on academic results shows that parental reaction is the most important reaction. This is the moment when your son or daughter says in essence: *“Look at what I have done. See where I am going. What do you think of me now? Are you pleased? Will you help me? Will I be OK?”*

We live in a society which is driven by competition. You have to be the best - coming second is just not good enough and this philosophy drives a wedge between relationships. There are times that a parent’s expectations exceed the capability of the child and when this happens we follow the stereotypical reaction of society and try to place blame. It must be the teacher’s fault, or the school’s, but rarely do we see that our own competitive attitudes are fuelling this blame culture. Why are we so competitive you may ask? In my opinion, simply because we are intuitively realizing what is fast becoming fact. That there are 60,000 students trying to obtain 4,000 places at UCT in Cape Town. That unless you achieve 9 'A' symbols for Matric you have very little chance of becoming a medical doctor or engineer. These are anxious times for parents and our survival instinct kicks in. I have even had a parent ask me to 'improve' the Grade 11 Maths mark of his son to ensure that he will be better placed in this competition for places at University. Survival of the fittest is not a pleasant script - **it finds us compromising our values and raises the level of anxiety in families’ way beyond normal, acceptable levels.** As I indicated earlier, our children watch our every move. They listen to our interactions, they monitor our reactions and in the split second when we make a poor decision because of these high levels of anxiety, they learn and model what is deemed to be acceptable and what is not.

Our anxiety levels are also raised because of our financial situations. Parents are traveling more for work and families are split at a crucial stage of children’s development. This anxiety is furthermore exacerbated by the political uncertainty in our country, and trust me, our kids pick up on these conversations and deliberations more than we think. I would like to encourage you to take cognizance of the fact that it is important to maintain the structures and accountabilities you have created as parents. Be aware of the outside factors which impact on your actions and reactions, and most of all please do not make assumptions about issues at school - we have an open door policy here and I would encourage you to interact with us honestly and openly if you have an issue you feel needs our attention.

Lastly, as we close out a year which has seen unbelievable growth and the promise of new facilities and opportunities, I would like to thank you for your support and encouragement. Oakhill School is unique and it is in a vibrant phase of its existence and I have no doubt that we will be able to build confidently on these foundations in the future. Oakhill is fortunate to have the most amazing students, thank you for sharing them with us and I look forward to supporting your and their endeavours as we seek to close out the year in a positive way!

Yours sincerely

Shane Kidwell
HEADMASTER