

Back-to-School Chats

Advice from Fathers to their Sons

compiled by
George Bradt

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Genesis

In September 1999, I was giving my 13-year-old son, Peter, some fatherly advice before he went off to boarding school. I had done something similar the previous year and it seemed to have had the desired impact, so I thought I would try again. Well, that year, after our chat, Peter made me promise to find him or call him up every year, wherever he might be, and give him a “back-to-school chat.”

I have honored that promise. By the time you read this, I will have done so at least seven more times. But there’s an opportunity for even more. Hence this.

This is Peter’s 21st birthday present: a book of back-to-school chats—advice a range of sons have received from their fathers. When the time comes that I am unable to give Peter his back-to-school chat in person, he will have this to refer to.

As long as I’m planning to compile these, why not make them available to others as well? Peter gets the first copy. The rest are up for grabs. If you are reading this, I hope it brings to mind a wonderful back-to-school chat you had with your father.

George Bradt
Peter Bradt’s father

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Conditions, Choices and Consequences

Basics

Advice received by Peter Bradt from his father
(September 1998, Tokyo)

As you go off to boarding school for the first time, remember three things: conditions, choices, and consequences.

Conditions: There are no conditions attached to the way I feel about you. I will love you totally and completely no matter what happens, no matter what you do. If you do something terrible, I may be disappointed, but I will never, ever stop loving you. So, whatever happens, whatever you do, know that I'm on your side and that you can always turn to me—without any conditions.

Choices: You always have choices. You may choose not to choose. You may choose to do what others tell you to do. You may not like your choices. But you always have choices. So think them through and be conscious of the choices you're making.

George Bradt

Consequences: All choices have consequences. You will make better choices if you think through the potential positive and negative consequences of those choices before you make them.

You are going to make some bad choices. Sometimes you won't understand all the consequences. Sometimes you'll misjudge things. But I'm convinced that if you are consciously making your own choices and thinking through the potential consequences of those choices, you will make far more good choices than if you don't think them through.

So, remember conditions, choices and consequences. Make your own choices after you've thought through the potential consequences. And remember that whether you've made a good choice or a bad choice, there are no conditions on my love for you.

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Jorge Silva-Risso, Uruguay

I come from a modest family. The day I started kindergarten, my parents walked with me to the school. They stopped at the gate and before I got in, they told me, “Jorge, if you take advantage of it, your education will be the basis of your success in life.” They never gave me any gift to reward my achievements in school. They always said “You’re doing this for your own good, not to please us.”

And, to be sure, I was always convinced that my success would hinge on my education, and, of course all the efforts were for my own good.

George Bradt

*Advice from George L. Williams (father) to
George L. Williams II (son), California*

My father once told me that human beings sometimes tend to act like herd animals, meaning that they follow trends without thinking because others are doing the same thing. Maybe people feel that there is “safety in numbers” I guess. His point to me was to be very careful in following these types of mass trends, and not to be afraid to act on my own insights... to be my own person. “When you see people doing things out of blind faith... do the opposite or don’t participate.” His advice has saved me a lot of money in the recent financial market downturn.

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Michael Davis, Connecticut

The best advice I ever received from my father was as a high school senior preparing to go to college. He told me that I had to begin right away preparing for a profession. He did not care whether it was a doctor, lawyer, accountant, engineer, etc., but I should study a profession and not even start out in a liberal arts program. Obviously, this had an impact on which schools I applied to, and my choice was accounting. Since my dad was killed in a plane crash when I was a freshman in college, I never got to thoroughly discuss his rationale and the reasons for his attitude, and obviously he never got a chance to see the results. But I believe this was the best advice I ever received from him.

George Bradt

Matt Perry, Massachusetts

Words from my dad: “No drinking and driving.
And don’t take the jeep on the beach.”

Result: drunken driver with a jeep upside-down
on the beach below the high water level.

(A good lesson to learn: Listen to what your
dad says, before you have to call him the following
morning and hear only two more words: “FIX
IT!”)

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Steve Layton, Florida

My father was a great role model for me, mostly through what he did and not what he said. This advice, however, stuck with me because of what was not said. I was in high school and dated one girl for a few months. My dad said, just before I left on a date, “Just remember, Steve, you don’t have to marry her.” That was it on sex from my dad. What he didn’t say was, be responsible and I trust you. I got the message. I don’t think that women, like my wife, understand this from a male perspective.

George Bradt

Richard A. Karwic, Connecticut

A couple of pearls of wisdom come to my mind in terms of “fatherly advice.”

The first has to do with advice I gave my four sons about choices and decision making. One of Newton’s Laws of Physics is that “to every action there is an equal and opposite reaction.” I just took it one step further to behavior and child rearing. I always emphasized to my sons that life is a series of decisions (actions) and in order to make good decisions, they needed to learn and understand the consequences of their decisions (reactions). Then decide (choose).

Choosing, decision making, and understanding consequences (both good and undesirable) was a constant theme in our house.

At an early age, they learned that if they stayed up too late in the evening, then they would find themselves tired the next day. If they hurt someone, expect to get hurt back. More importantly, if they were nice to someone, expect that person to be nice to you, and maybe feel good about yourself. If they spent their allowance on many little spontaneous purchases, there would be no savings accumulated for large purchases. If they worked hard in school and got good grades, they would be rewarded. Etc.

A practical example of how this was applied would be in our rule about playing baseball in the

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backyard. Most fathers would get nervous about their sons playing baseball in a small backyard. (All those windows!) I never told my sons they could not play baseball in the backyard. I simply told my sons that if they wished to play baseball in the yard, then they had assumed responsibility for the well-being of our house's windows. The phrase was "every window has a price." If you break a window (action), then you will buy the replacement window from your allowance (reaction). The choice: "play at home and risk breaking a window, or walk to the park, and play safe." Some days they took the risk. Some days they took the walk. In thirty years, I only replaced one window. (At that, it was an inexpensive cellar window). There was no reprimand, no punishment, no being grounded, no criticism. I simply handed them the bill for the glass, and out came the allowance funds.

Another piece of advice has to do with dispelling the myth that "boys will be boys." That is nonsense! Those words are usually spoken by fathers regarding mistakes, misbehaviors, or other poor actions of their sons. The advice I was given was that "boys will be young gentlemen."

Being well mannered, properly disciplined, and respectful of others has nothing to do with gender. Fathers who are failing to properly raise young gentlemen usually start the process well before the child understands gender, so the "boys will be boys" excuse does not hold water.

George Bradt

Lloyd Hansen, North Dakota

My dad told me if you do something you love, it won't seem like work. I took that advice. Although I grew up on a farm in North Dakota, I became an accountant. A high school teacher introduced me to accounting and it was like a light turned on inside me. I've been one now for over thirty-five years and go to "work" each day with a sense of excitement and anticipation. It sure doesn't seem like work.

As my children were growing up, I taught that same principle to them. One of my sons always walked around with a pencil in his hand drawing, doodling or illustrating something (my wall, my window, my book). Today, he is a graphics designer doing Web design work and beta testing new graphics software. Another son used to come home, sit on his bed and read the paper from front to back. Today, he is a reporter for a major newspaper in California. A daughter got involved in practically every social cause available in high school—walks for cancer, teaching mentally challenged children, rape victims counseling. Today she works for a Washington, DC, non-profit organization dedicated to improving the health and safety of women, children, and families. Another daughter now is studying nutrition and childcare in college. She has been taking care

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of children in church since sixth grade, and she comes home at night and spends 2-3 hours in the kitchen practicing cooking. All of them are doing something they love, and three of them are even getting paid for it.

George Bradt

*Letter from Jamie Cornehlson to his Father,
June 18, 2004, New York*

Thirty-three years ago today (Father's Day) you became a father. You e-mailed me a few weeks back about remembrances of our parents or grandparents. On this, your 33rd Father's Day, I have a few. You were invincible. I always looked up to you thinking that you could do anything you put your mind to. I remember going to Mohawk, that lump of dirt in Connecticut, to go skiing, except on this day we were a little late getting on the slopes. Not because we were late. We were always the first ones on the lift and the last ones off. Even if that meant frostbite. We were delayed because you were studying the design of the covered bridge at Mohawk so you could build a bridge for the house on Green Beach Drive. You weren't an engineer or a carpenter but you decided to build it. Last time I checked it was still there.

I also remember driving back with Fred Grey from whitewater rafting in Pennsylvania. The VW bus they had broke down outside of New Jersey. All I could remember as we tried to get back home was that I wished you were here because you would know what to do to get us out of this mess.

Well, that brings me to what I took away from all this. I have a lasting impression that if you could do anything you put your mind to, then I

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can do just the same. It's not like I had a choice—you basically burned that into my conscious.

Well, it is now time to prove that I can do anything I want to. I have enclosed my business plan. Your help and insight would be much appreciated. Please do not hold back on the tough questions or criticism. The whole point of this exercise is to clear up any hurdles now before I pull the trigger and launch the product.

Have a great Father's Day.

Jamie

George Bradt

Learning is life's blood. *Neal Greene, California*

Think independently. *Steve Shyung, China*

It's not important if you know it. What's important is if you know where to find it. *Dan Kelly's grandfather, August Seher, Georgia*

Education is the one thing nobody can take away from you. *Scott Ewart, England*

My father was strong on "people must live their own lives." Too bad he seemed able to apply it to everyone except me! *Roger Neill, England*