

DADS **RAISING DAUGHTERS**

by Paul Freedman





Nigel Latta. Now there's a name to remember! Think of *The Politically Incorrect Parenting Show*, and you'll probably be smiling. Plus, chances are, you've been watching his new series, sorting facts from spin and getting to the core of major social issues.

A respected clinical psychologist, prolific author, and popular TV personality, Nigel's a very busy boy. But he's chatted with Grapevine before about parenting how-tos, and he happily agreed to do it again – this time on the tricky topic of *Dads Raising Daughters*.

We wanted his 'take' on a range of vexing questions. Like: What's the difference (apart from the colour of their booties) between girls and boys? And we were surprised to learn that he doesn't really think they're all that different, deep down. But hang on a minute: we thought science, with its MRIs and CAT scans and so on, had proved the opposite? We had to find out more ...

NIGEL LATTA: Girls and boys do have differences, of course. But I think that what the research mostly shows is that the *girl-culture* and *boy-culture* is different. The surface stuff is different, but, underneath, boys and girls really have more similarities than differences.

The problem is, we've been told too often that boys and girls (like men and women) are from different planets – that they're totally unlike each other – whereas the research simply doesn't back this up.

GRAPEVINE: This was the John Gray idea, right – *Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus*?

NIGEL: Yes, John Gray and lots of others – all selling untold millions of books! And they all quote screeds of 'scientific' references to current or recent research.

However, all too often, when someone with a true scientific background actually checks these claims, they don't really reinforce the conclusions drawn ... or only at a very long stretch!

GV: But just about every self-help male/female book refers to all this scientific 'brain-scan' stuff – how the 'male brain' is wired-up differently from the 'female brain'. Is that not true?

NIGEL: Well, your actual, real scientists are usually very careful about drawing conclusions from their findings. But when authors start dragging that 'science' through into their self-help books (and there's a HUGE market for this), they have a tendency to misinterpret or over-extend – and occasionally *twist or misrepresent* – those findings.

This whole male/female brain thing has become accepted – it's gone into the 'general wisdom'. However, if you rigorously examine the *actual science*, what it boils down to is that there are *some* differences between males and females (in terms of how our brains are structured and function). But those differences tend to be *very small* ... and there's lots and lots of overlap.

GV: So much for the 'experts', eh! How can we know who or what to believe? Like, should we even believe *you*?

NIGEL: Well, it's a paradox I often find myself in, because there's just so much information out there about raising kids.

I have real difficulty when someone says, "If you don't raise your children *my way*, they'll somehow be damaged!" It leads to parents who doubt everything.

Almost all parents want the best for their kids – but with such an ocean of information out there, what do they choose? They *Google* stuff or go onto parenting blogs, and they're just getting swamped by it all!

GV: So what's your approach? "Try this and see if it works!" – rather than "Do this because I'm an expert"?

NIGEL: Yeah. I like what Buddha said: "Don't believe things just because someone said so – no matter who they are or how they said it." Believe it when you've looked at it ... you've thought about it for yourself ... you've tried it out and it seemed to help. *Then* you might take it on board.

GV: When you wrote about dads raising daughters, were you thinking of all dads – or just dads as solo-parents?

NIGEL: No, ALL dads – all dads and daughters. Dads tend to see daughters

as a bit of a mystery ... and, let's face it, they kind of *are!* But they're not a *total* mystery. I think many dads are floundering a bit, trying to figure out what's going on. So my book was intended for them.

GV: Do dads (as a class) tend to be a bit resistant to parenting and self-help books?

NIGEL: They do. And because some of these books will be given to dads by mums, I've put bullet-points at the end of each chapter. If Dad is highly allergic to digesting parenting books whole, he can just skim the bullet-points and act as if he's read the whole thing. That way he'll keep Mum happy!

GV: You describe raising daughters as a two-part challenge: the before-puberty 'bit' ... and the after-puberty 'bit'. The first bit's easier – right? But 'first-bit-dads' can't afford to take things too easily, can they?

NIGEL: The first bit's where you do all the stuff that sets you up to get through the second bit a lot easier. Fundamentally, it's all about building relationships. The more time mums and dads put into that relationship, the more they work on it, the easier things become – and the easier they'll get through the hard stuff in the second bit!

A dad and his daughter are just two human beings. One's trying to guide the other. And those being guided tend to accept guidance more willingly and trustingly from people they have a good working relationship with. So, if you're a parent, it's vital that you start building that when your kids are little.

It's fun ... it's lovely ... they're so enjoyable at this age! And all that fun you're



having will help you get them through the tempestuous, fraught time of their adolescence.

GV: There's a technique you recommend for younger kids, called the '*Ladder of Certain Doom!*' It's based on rewards for good behaviour and penalties for bad. Want to tell us about it?

NIGEL: Well, most parents could use some help with managing their kids' behaviour – and what you actually DO here, especially with younger kids, is little different, whether you're raising boys or raising girls. Basically, what the '*Ladder of Certain Doom!*' does is teach kids self-control. When they're little, you can tie it to early bedtime – so if the kids break the rules, they get an earlier bedtime. But they can earn back lost time by doing jobs.

When they're older you can hook it up

to things like curfew times, or time spent in front of TV. Something that's important to them that you can take away by increments if they fail to keep the rules – or they can earn back by good behaviour.

GV: So there's both a carrot and a stick?

NIGEL: Yes, because this is what changes behaviour the best! It's not just about praising the *good* behaviour – there also has to be a consequence for *bad* behaviour. And what you really don't want is to get into a big, screaming fight about it. You want to be able to set the system up so they know that if they don't perform a certain task as agreed, they lose time. Then they can make their own decisions about it: do it – don't do it ... lose time – earn time.

Behaviour systems like this are not really about *controlling* kids or forcing them to do stuff. **It's possible to make**

kids do stuff, but ultimately there isn't any real teaching in that. What we're aiming at is helping them be self-disciplined and exercise self-control.

Ultimately, self-control is a hugely important skill that they'll all need in later life. You want them to be exercising their own judgement, thinking: "What am I doing? And where's that going to take me?" And you want to be able to achieve that in a way that doesn't involve your having to sit down and lecture or nag them every time they need to make a decision.

The *Ladder of Certain Doom* teaches them consequences of their actions and puts the onus on them – not you.

GV: Okay. So let's get to some of the tougher issues. What are the fundamental dos and don'ts for raising teenage daughters?

NIGEL: Well, that'll vary a lot from daughter to daughter. But high on the to-be-underlined list is the PUBERTY stuff that dads and their girls are heading into: "How do I talk to her about THAT?"

Us dads worry about parties and drugs and boys. Why? Because *we* used to be teenage boys – so *we know* what teenage boys are thinking about, no matter how nice and well-behaved they may appear.

GV: And what *are* teenage boys thinking about?

NIGEL: They're thinking about how to have sex with your teenage daughter – that's their primary aim. And, even though they're smiling and polite, you KNOW that's what it's all about!

GV: You discuss 'mean girls' in your book. Are teenage girls more mean and nasty than they used to be, or are we just more aware of them?

NIGEL: We humans have been around

for 200,000 years or so, and I don't think we've changed all that much. What's different today is that technology hugely extends the reach of that 'meanness'. Back in the day, people could only say mean things to your face. They didn't tend to ring you up at home and have a crack at you. But, today, with texting and *Facebook*, that nasty stuff arrives on your tablet or mobile phone. There's much more scope for the meanness to make its way out into the world.

GV: Which leads us to the internet and its effect on kids. Most parents are pretty well aware of the huge – and sometimes malign – power the internet has in the lives of our kids. But are there any special dangers dads need to be alert to when it comes to their daughters?

NIGEL: Some of the conversations we should be having with our girls can be daunting for ALL parents, not just dads. And that's especially true when we're discussing sex and sexuality. My view of the internet is that it's neither good nor bad – it's just *there*. So the challenge is: how to *use* it. You have to treat the internet like sex and alcohol and all those other potential risks. You need to be talking with your kids constantly about all this stuff and what it means.

With my kids, we've talked about keeping ourselves safe online basically from the day they started using it. After all, kids have access to it everywhere, all of the time. The idea that you can monitor what they're doing and who they're talking to all of the time is simply unrealistic. You just can't. So you have to check they're safe by continually reminding them that everything they post online is there *forever*.

Employers, for example, will be



looking them up. They'll be increasingly paying professionals to research potential or current employees and find out about their histories. So, if your kids have posted stuff online about crazy, stupid things they're doing or have done ... well, it could easily come back to haunt them.

GV: Teenagers are notoriously unable to take that long-term view of possible consequences though, aren't they?

NIGEL: Yes, that's true. And despite their views about their own sophistication, they often don't stop to think about what they're *really doing*. Your 14-year-old daughter might think she's 'chatting' to another 14-year-old girlfriend somewhere – but, actually, it could well be a 45-year-old *man* in Minneapolis! Even

though they say they know about this stuff, they can still be quite naive.

That's where keeping the channels of communication open and active is really important.

GV: A daughter entering puberty with all its complexities can be a real challenge for any dad – especially a solo-dad. Have you got any tips for solo-dads on how to communicate with their girls about all those sex and reproduction issues?

NIGEL: The golden rule for parents is this: *being involved is a good thing – and the more involved you are, the better!* And that's a particularly difficult thing for some dads, especially for a dad raising a girl by himself.

The embarrassment and discomfort that can accompany those issues ... well, you've just got to push through it. When you're telling her about periods and what they are, once you get past that first bit it just becomes another conversation. As you talk (as calmly and matter-of-factly as possible) you take some of the awkwardness out of the situation.

You can sit down with your girl and talk about the mechanics of sex, but then you can move on to the realities of sexual relationships. Because kids can have some really strange ideas about what sex is and isn't.

GV: Every parent has nightmares when their kids (especially girls) announce that they're "off to a party" – but won't tell the parents where it is, who's throwing it, or when they'll be home. You had a policeman friend who came up with a great set of rules covering party-attendance didn't you?

NIGEL: That's right. He's a Police Youth Aid worker. He never had any trouble

with his kids at parties – and I’m not surprised! (*See Party Rules – OK?*)

Kids going out to parties is a normal part of life. And it’s important that, at an appropriate age, they do this sort of thing – that’s how they learn to relate and socialise with others. Yes, they’ll make mistakes sometimes ... and that’s okay too, because that’s also how we learn. But in the midst of their launching out on these things, you want to keep them as safe as possible.

It’s pretty clear that there are people out there preying on kids – particularly inexperienced young girls. So having some definite rules is very important. The idea that kids can just disappear off somewhere you don’t know ... that stuff gives parents nightmares, understandably, and it should be an absolute no-no.

You need to be saying to your kids, *“I want you to have more freedom and more autonomy, and I want you to be able to make your own decisions – but you have to show me you can make responsible decisions and that I can TRUST you. The more I can trust you, the better life will be for you!”*

And then you have those rules – about where the party is and who’s holding it, what the rules are about alcohol, and the time to be back.

It’s tremendously important for your kids to know that you’re THERE ... that you’re not going to just stand back and let them run wild. And for kids, funnily enough, this can be quite reassuring. They do actually want rules. And having rules can be a good ‘out’ if they need one with their peers. If they know that their dad is sitting outside, and if they’re not back in the car with him by 11:30 he’s going to

come inside to the party – that gives them a way out of some awkward situations that they may not want to get into.

If everybody else, for example, decides to take off to another party, your kid can make the excuse that, *“I can’t go because Dad’s coming soon, and he’ll be angry if I’m not here ...”* They can put the blame on Dad when, chances are, they may not really want to go to this other party – it might be freaking them out a bit.

GV: So rather than seeing the rules as a

PARTY RULES – OK?

1. If you’re going to a party, I have to know who’s holding it and where it will be.
2. I will drop you off a block away from the house so your friends don’t have to see you getting out of your dad’s car.
3. You can take a six-pack of beer – and that’s all you’re allowed to drink.
4. No drugs. At all. Ever.
5. At the agreed time I will park in the same spot, a block away from the house, and you will meet me there, so no one has to see you getting into my car.
6. If you aren’t there on time I will park in front of the house, turn the hazard lights on and walk into the house making more fuss and noise than you ever dreamed possible. I will find you, and march you out to my car in front of all your friends.
7. Stick to the rules and we’ll have no problems, and you’ll go to lots of parties.
8. Break the rules, and that’s the end of parties for quite some time.



barrier, the hope is they'll see them as a safety net – right?

NIGEL: Yeah. A safety net is exactly right. As the parent, you're the back-up ... you're the 'Plan B'.

GV: Another big ticket item for some dads who are raising girls is their formal education. What's your opinion: are single-sex or co-ed schools best for girls?

NIGEL: One of the episodes I made recently for TV covered this. And we talked to a guy called John Hattie, who's done major research covering about 250 million kids. He's looked at all these things and, surprisingly, it turns out that the whole single-sex/co-ed question doesn't seem to matter. It doesn't make much difference in terms of achievement.

You feel, instinctively, that it *should* be important – but the actual evidence on

academic achievement suggests it doesn't really make any difference either way. It's more about the school itself. And, in New Zealand, there's much more variation *within* schools than there is *between* schools. We actually have a very good education system.

The questions you need to ask are about the tone of the school, classroom management and teacher expertise – those sorts of things.

GV: Something else dads worry about is that whole issue of how girls look – the idea that thin is glamorous, that if they don't look like those magazine models they're never going to cut it. Got any suggestions here for struggling dads?

NIGEL: This sort of stuff, as you know, plays a huge part in the lives of many girls. It's all about "Do I look pretty?" "Do I look nice?" It's how they rate themselves. They



talk endlessly to each other about their appearance. And we have media who are selling that thin-ideal all the time.

You might think that, for dads, it would just be a matter of saying, “Oh look at those skinny girls – that’s not normal!” But research suggests that if you just do that – if you just call attention to skinniness and say it’s not right or normal – that simply sensitises girls to the issues of physical appearance.

The best approach is not to make it a

topic of discussion. Just talk about people in the wider sense, about people’s personalities, and avoid making body-issues the be-all-and-end-all.

GV: Parenting daughters – or sons – must be so much harder if the parents fall out. And you’re on record as saying that, when a marriage is in trouble, the thing that hurts kids most is watching their parents fight in front of them. How do you get adults to just stop this sort of thing?

NIGEL: Everybody fights – it’s a part of

life. But when it spirals down into *toxic* stuff, when it's conflict *all the time* – that's where it's really damaging for kids.

You'd think that at least somebody in that situation would realise what they're doing: *"Hey, we're the grown-ups. We need to sort this out, or maybe separate, because exposing kids to this endless conflict isn't good ..."*

I'm pretty direct in situations like this. It's *"Grow up! Sort it out! And if you can't sort it out, then you really have to think hard about whether you should be together. Maybe it would be better for everyone for you to be apart ..."*

GV: Back to dads and their girls: have you got one last bit of advice for guys who want to be truly great dads to their daughters?

NIGEL: Oh, that's really simple: MAKE TIME!

GV: Time?

NIGEL: Yeah, time with your kids. Ultimately that's all they want. They say they want *PlayStations* and *Tablets* and all that other palaver, but really what they want is YOU ... and in decent-sized doses! So, the more time you can invest in your daughter, the better.

Yes, I know. That's hard, and it's getting harder. Lots of people – dads especially – are having to work long hours just to put food on the table. But it doesn't change: you still need to give your kids as much time as you possibly can, as much time as you've got.

Don't get me wrong. I'm not suggesting that dads need to be doing 'girly stuff' all the time. Your daughter will probably enjoy doing some 'blokey stuff' as well – because that's kind-of-interesting and can be fun, too!

GV: What sort of 'blokey stuff'?

NIGEL: Well, my brother's got two girls. And he's always taken them hunting, ever since they were quite small. So they might go out shoe-shopping with Mum – but with Dad, it's shooting deer, and cutting them up and dragging them home! That's not 'girly' at all – but they love it, and they'll always remember it as heaps of fun.

Now, of course, as a dad, you can take your girl shoe-shopping too – or go for a jaunt in the country, or just enjoy a walk and a coffee together. You can have a game of tennis, or you can sit down and talk together about what she's doing at school.

The lovely thing about girls is that they will actually TALK to you. With boys it's much harder. When you ask boys what's going on in their lives, they'll typically just shrug and mumble. But ask a girl what's going on in her life – whoomph! She'll give you everything!

That's the lovely, up-side of daughters.



You'll KNOW what's going on in her life because she's actually pretty happy to share that with you. But it doesn't happen unless you put in the time.

Time is everything! 🌸

IF YOU'D LIKE TO FIND OUT MORE, VISIT NIGEL'S WEBSITE: WWW.GOLDFISHWISDOM.ORG. NIGEL'S BOOK 'FATHERS RAISING DAUGHTERS' IS AVAILABLE ONLINE OR FROM ALL GOOD BOOKSHOPS.



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