

Teaching Tough Kids

Simple and proven strategies
for student success

A David Fulton Book

Mark Le Messurier

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Teaching Tough Kids

This book is dedicated to Lucy, an inspired and young aspiring writer in our family. May you find what I have. I have had the privilege to work with an extraordinary group of adults over the years who taught me how precious it is to nurture the hearts and minds of children. They are teachers. A unique group of unsung heroes who understand the kinds of messages kids need to receive. Their passion is responsible for mine, and I hope mine inspires yours.

About the author

Mark Le Messurier

Mark Le Messurier is a teacher, author and conference presenter. His background spans twenty years in schools and includes special education, adult education, child-centred education and community education projects. Mark is a recipient of the prestigious Australian National Excellence in Teaching Award. He is a passionate educator.

Mark works in schools and in private practice at Fullarton House with children and adolescents he affectionately refers to as the ‘tough kids’ – kids whose lives are compromised by the unpredictability of their functioning, or by the capricious nature of their home life, or by both. Consequently, they find life much tougher than most and in the process make life tougher for those who care for them and educate them. They comprise a challenging population of students who are increasingly being identified with underlying executive functioning delays. Without adequate executive functioning capabilities kids lack the ability to delay gratification, listen and filter out distractions, process new information, remember, plan, persist, adapt to change, keep track of time and self-regulate emotion and behaviour. Mark provides practical and therapeutic interventions to strengthen the performance of the tough kids. *Teaching Tough Kids* encapsulates the work he is engaged in.

Mark regularly presents at conferences for public and independent schools, parents and interested groups throughout Australia and Australasia. In 2007 he was a Keynote Speaker at SPELD New Zealand’s International Learning Difficulty Conference. His presentations relate to mentoring, ADD and ADHD, Asperger syndrome, specific learning difficulties, developing emotional resilience, successful parenting and teaching children with challenging behaviours.

In 2004 he wrote *Cognitive Behavioural Training: A how-to guide for successful behaviour*. This popular resource was written for special education coordinators, teachers, teachers in training, school support officers, counsellors, psychologists and health professionals and is now distributed throughout Australia, New Zealand, the United States and the United Kingdom. It addresses common problems that students face: organisation, remembering, self-awareness, motivation and emotional resilience. Mark has also completed a training and development film on learning difficulties,

Reflections on Dyslexia. The package, which also contains a staff development hand-book, is available to individuals, schools, colleges and tertiary institutions.

In 2007 *Parenting Tough Kids* was released. It is a book for parents, parent resource libraries, teachers and school counsellors, in fact for anyone with an investment in children. It has also become a popular book in Australia. In 2008 Mark and Lindy Petersen's *STOP and THINK Friendship DVD Package*, first released in 2000, was revised and reprinted. This social skills development resource is also distributed to schools, educators and clinicians throughout Australia, New Zealand and Europe.

Mark is also the architect of the unique *Mentoring Programme* currently building capacity in South Australian Catholic schools. The programme provides opportunities for interested staff members to develop skills so they are equipped to mentor students who are experiencing learning, social or behavioural difficulties. These students, aged from six to eighteen years of age, often do it tough and benefit from the ongoing friendship and encouragement from a caring adult working within the school system. Mark describes the programme as truly inspirational and will tell you what a privilege it is to work alongside such passionate staff. Already, in a short space of time, a number of highly skilled school personnel are taking extra care of some of the most vulnerable students in schools.



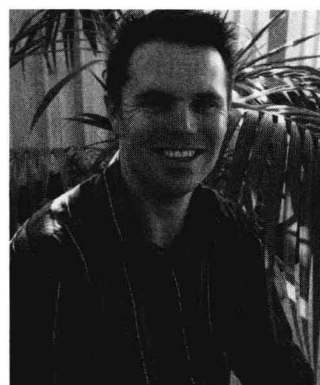
About Bill Hansberry, co-author of Chapter 2

Bill Hansberry lives in Adelaide, Australia and divides his work week between being a classroom teacher, a consultant in restorative practices in schools as well as an educator and mentor to young people in private practice.

He has spent the last fifteen years working in primary and secondary schools in Australia and the UK and has specialised in the area of school counselling and whole school approaches to behaviour management. Bill has worked at both school and district support levels within the South Australian public education system and has taught within the Catholic education system.

Recently, he has had the privilege of mentoring many, many committed educators in the area of behaviour management through workshops, online forums, and international conferences where he has shared his knowledge and experience in restorative practices in schools. He is passionate about helping young people to discover (or rediscover) their potential.

Bill believes that relationships and learning are inseparable, and that without a focus on strengthening relationships in schools, quality learning is a casualty.



Foreword

by Stephanie Newland

I am one of Mark's 'tough kids' and at eighteen years of age I'm probably his longest serving project! I'm challenged by mild cerebral palsy, dyslexia and more recently severe clinical depression.

High school was not a happy place for me. My differences were obvious and because of these I became a target for silent bullying, gossip and humiliation. Needless to say I never graduated into teen girl world. Naturally, with my physical and learning disabilities it was a struggle to keep up with my peers and with the work. I constantly battled fatigue. Dealing with all this at such a young age was too much for me and by the time I reached fourteen I was caught in a downhill spiral of severe clinical depression. Despite the hardships I faced at school I was incredibly blessed to be surrounded by a few extraordinary teachers. Amongst these teachers was my beloved special education teacher, who became my biggest supporter, defender and dear friend. Whenever necessary she went into battle for me, convincing teachers to see things in a different way, or to put a little extra time and effort. She set up a desk and chair dedicated to me in her classroom and we spent a lot of time together, especially when I first started high school. She listened to all of my fears, worries, disappointments and ranting. She comforted me when I cried and never stopped helping me with my school work. My biggest issue has always been my shocking organisation and planning. I'm sure it is a part of my condition. My special education teacher understood this natural challenge and she constantly showed me how to break tasks down and get them done.

Even though I have faced hardship and injustice my story to date is one of triumph. I am grateful to the amazing teachers who saw my potential and wanted to care for it. They made me feel that it was okay to be me, and did not judge me or write me off because of my differences. They fought for me when I could not fight for myself and because of their work and belief in me I managed a score of 90.45% in my final year of secondary school!

The tough kids are real kids, their problems are real and they depend on teachers to draw strength, reassurance and direction from. Dealing with us is never easy. We tough kids can be gruelling work, but we can be inspirational too. We can annoy you and we can delight you. We can give you the worst or best teaching years of

your life, but if you choose to let us in we will touch you and leave our gentle footprints on your heart forever, and you will never ever be the same.

Teaching Tough Kids captures the essence of what it is really like for a child to live with a difficulty or disability, but it never loses sight of the spirit and untapped capacities we have. Mark's book communicates his experience and contagious passion to mentor kids with unique differences. It also expresses his enthusiasm to find practical ways to help kids discover success and meaning in their lives despite the roadblocks they face. I encourage every educator to join Mark's quest to make a difference to each of the tough kids that come your way.

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Anne Carolin, behavioural educational consultant, Catholic Education Office

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Joe Blefari, acting deputy principal, Catholic Education, SA

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Suzie Mackie, client and mother of Tim
Tania Masters, teacher, Catholic Education, SA

I also wish to acknowledge each and every educator who has, over the years, taught me how precious it is to nurture the developing spirit within the children and adolescents we teach. Those who enjoy being with kids, who see value in forging relationships with them and see potential in young people. I am blessed to be part of an exceptional profession who strive to make a meaningful difference for kids. Your enthusiasm is entirely responsible for mine.

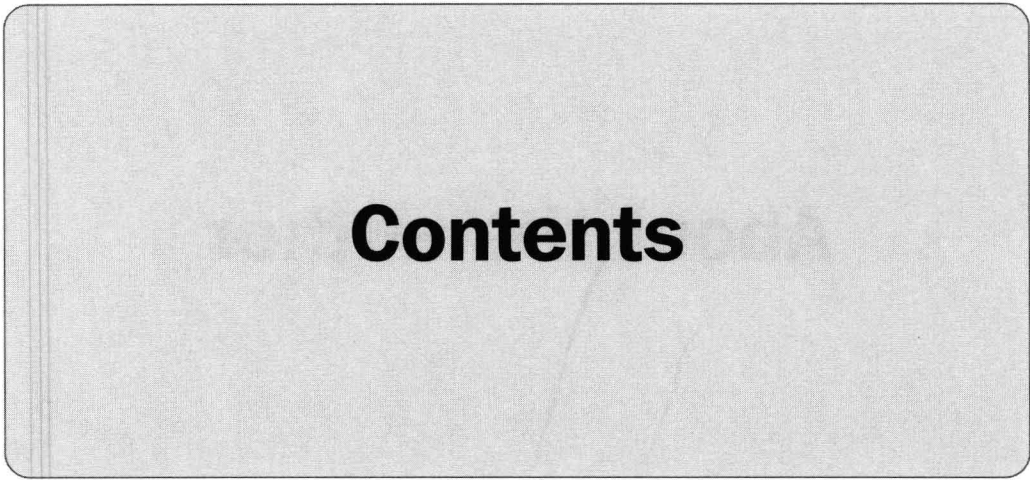
Intellectual property

Determining absolute intellectual ownership of many of the ideas presented in this book is easier said than done. It's frequent to see one idea evolve into a new concept depending on the situation that presents itself at the time. This is just the way it is. Wherever possible, the obvious sources are acknowledged. If, by chance, an original source has been omitted, I apologise. The overriding motivation is to add to the repertoire of practical strategies that will benefit our children.

Online content on the Routledge website

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Introduction

Who are the ‘tough kids’?

These are the kids whose lives are compromised by the unpredictability of their functioning, or by the capricious nature of their home life, or by both. As a result they find life much tougher than most and in the process make life tougher for those who care for them and educate them. They comprise a worrying and growing population of students in schools (Russell 2008).

These are the kids we take home in our thoughts most days, over weekends and on holiday breaks. They are complex kids living complex lives who present us with great challenges. Many, often boys, are inclined to explode and let their hot-headed feelings run away for all to witness. When things don't go their way they overreact, refuse, disrupt, avoid, threaten and clash with peers and authority figures. In contrast, there are those who deal with their feelings inwardly. They learn to mask feelings of worry, shyness, shame, sadness, isolation, despair or inadequacy. They struggle, but hold their very private feelings inside and do their utmost to keep them invisible. What we often see at school is just the tip of the iceberg. They teeter on the brink of unravelling, imploding or giving up. Sadly, a few quietly slide into anxiety, introversion and depression before our very eyes. Yet, they are also inspiring kids to teach. They compel us to confront what we do and why we do it, and whether our actions are truly helpful. As they take our patience, persistence and endurance to the outer limits they prompt both our personal and professional growth. And, in those moments when something clicks for them, or a few years later when we hear about their success, it reminds us that we are all in this together. They teach us about the value of connectedness and the depth of human spirit.

This book is written to enrich the ways we think about the tough kids and fortify the work we do with them in our schools. It celebrates the real heroes in schools – educators who dig deep everyday to regenerate the spirit within kids so they can stay connected to school, to learning and to their dreams. *Teaching Tough Kids* is a collection of ingenious understandings and ideas, inspired by the resourceful practices of my colleagues aimed at maintaining the buoyancy of students with diverse abilities.

So, how is a tough kid best defined? No one description adequately tells all. Perhaps the best way to explore this is to offer a series of personal snapshots that may bring you closer to understanding the complex lives many of the tough kids live. As you will discover, unpredictable home lives, disability, misfortune, ridicule, tragedy and disadvantage often feature in the lives of these kids.

Case study

SNAPSHOT: *'My mum doesn't tuck me into bed at night anymore'*

When she comes home from work she goes straight to her laptop in her bedroom to do her Facebook. She doesn't even say, 'Hi, how was your day?' I wish she could just get off the laptop and do some stuff with my brothers and me. A few days ago it was nine o'clock at night and I asked for dinner. She said she didn't have to get it because I'm a fat little boy and I've eaten everything in the house anyway. Mum has not cooked for so long now. She just orders pizza. I like it, but it's not good to have every day. When I stacked the pizza boxes out the back one on top of the other they were higher than me. The way it's going I don't like mum at all. She blames dad for everything. He blames her for everything. She says she'll leave if dad doesn't stop doing what he's doing. I don't know what he's doing.

Max, 10 years

Case study

SNAPSHOT: *'You can't help me mum. I'm never going to learn to read.'*

Our Timothy had been very flat for most of the summer holidays, but the last couple of weeks were particularly hard for him. He had cried a lot about having to go back to school. A day did not pass without him questioning why he had to go. With a week of holidays left the tantruming subsided, but the tears continued. It seemed he had resigned himself to return to school.

His younger brother and sister were asleep, Timmy was watching the television and I was in the kitchen.

'Thud.' A couple of seconds passed. 'Thud.' A few more seconds passed. 'Thud' is the only way to explain the sound. It was deep and powerful like nothing I'd heard before and recalling it makes my heart jump to my throat.

'Thud.' It got the better of me, so as good mothers do, I went to investigate. Not often did I need to check on Timmy, we had been blessed with a calm, thoughtful child. I made my way into the lounge, stepped inside and looked. There I saw Timmy doing a tall handstand on the couch.

'Timothy how many times have I told you and your brother?'

'Thud.'

'No. No. No. No. Stop!'

It all hit home. He was lifting himself up as high as he could with his hands on the back of the couch, and then jerking his hands away so his head

crunched into the couch seat below. The 'thud' was his feet hitting against the wall helping to propel him with all the more force into the seat.

I grabbed him and pulled him onto my lap.

'You could break your bloody neck if you keep doing this!' I screamed.

'I know,' he calmly responded.

'If you know why on earth are you doing it?

'I don't want to be here.'

Innocently, I said, 'That's fine. If you're bored don't stay here. Go and do something else.'

'No. I don't want to be here. I want to die,' he said staring up into my eyes.

He continued, 'I don't want to feel this way anymore and if I am dead I won't have to go to school.'

'You can't help me mum. I'm never going to learn to read.'

I hugged him and sobbed. I couldn't let him go.

Timothy had spent eighteen months in preschool, eighteen months in reception and twelve months in Year 1. After four years of formal education he had stalled on the readers from the orange box. Each of them had just a word or two to a page. His best friends were beginning to read the Harry Potter books. A few months later Timothy was identified with a learning difficulty, dyslexia. That helped to explain why he has such confusions, but it hasn't changed the way he feels about it.

I love our son. I hate our lounge. I still can't think of our beautiful desperate little boy bouncing on his neck because he didn't think there was anything else he could do. Timothy was seven and half when he tried to escape the world because he couldn't read.

Suzie, Timothy's mother

Case study

SNAPSHOT: *'My life has been about me and my mum surviving it.'*

I know my life is different to most kids. I live with mum and gran. Mum doesn't work and drinks white wine most afternoons. I hate her doing it and every afternoon at school I start to worry about how she'll be when I get home. When she does drink I lock myself in my room until she falls asleep. Gran is old and bossy and mum says she's lost it. We live in her small house and because she has more money than mum and I she makes the decisions. I don't have a lot of things and there aren't many places I've been to that I can brag about. I've never been on a plane and I've never been out of my city. My life has been about me and my mum surviving it.

I don't know my dad because he's never wanted to know me. I don't know any stories about him and we don't have photographs of him. For a long time I thought there must be something wrong with me and that was why he couldn't be bothered staying around. Now I think my dad is the one who's missed out on me. I know I'm okay now, but it still hurts sometimes. When I was younger I was pretty crazy though. Everyone tells me that when something

went wrong at primary school I'd chase kids yelling and screaming and swinging my fists or a cricket bat at them. I'd chase them around the yard trying to get even. I got so mad. I was too sensitive. I've learned that I always want things to be fair. Mum says I've got justice problems and I think she's right because I still feel so bad when things aren't fair for me or for others.

My life has shown me that I'm probably a nerd. I like computers, video games and know a lot about them. I'm good at them too. If that makes me a nerd then I am a nerd.

So you can see my life has been different compared to most fourteen-year-olds. I've learned some things about myself, and after three years fighting anorexia nervosa, I've learned that I like myself. I'm a good person and don't want to fall into the slot of mediocrity. I want to be me, but it's hard to be true to your beliefs.

Dom, 14 years

Case study

SNAPSHOT: *'No wonder I hated school so much.'*

Late last year on my birthday I found out I was dyslexic. I'd never heard of it before, and finding out about it has answered so many questions for me.

Having dyslexia was like carrying a huge weight on my chest, and it hurt. It made me feel so dumb each day in front of everyone I was growing up with. These days I know that I just learn differently than other people. Now at sixteen I have decided to accept it, but it has left me with low self-esteem. Finding learning hard caused my low grades at school and meant teachers had to witness me giving up and complaining that the work was not worth the trouble. And, my family and friends have had to tolerate me being happy one minute and upset the next.

What's the worst thing a teacher ever said to me? That's easy to remember. My maths teacher told me in front of the class that I would never amount to anything. That was just last year. After she said that I found it even harder. Her words jumped into my mind whenever I didn't understand the maths. Looking back, I can't believe she made me blame myself for something that isn't my fault. To calm my anger at her, or when I couldn't get something in maths, I'd sing a song I liked over and over in my head. Then she left the school, and now I can't listen to that song without crying. But to this teacher I say, 'I'll succeed in life. I'm much more than you ever thought about me.'

How can teachers help? The most important thing is for them to be positive. To praise the work I do so I know I'm going in the right direction. But the most important thing is the support I have got from teachers this year now they know I'm dyslexic. I feel so relieved. I don't have to go through this by myself anymore.

Now I know I have to work on accepting my disability and that means honestly accepting that I'm never going to be as fast or accurate as the other kids in maths, pop quizzes, reading or writing, but being dyslexic will not stop me from what I want to achieve.

Pennie, 16 years