

# Bad Dogs Have More Fun

Selected Writings  
on Family, Animals, and Life from  
*The Philadelphia Inquirer*



John Grogan

Author of the #1 *New York Times* Best-seller

*MARLEY AND ME*

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More Fun

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☞ Selected Writings ☞

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by John Grogan

for *The Philadelphia Inquirer*



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 *Family*



 January 24, 2003

## Deaf Girl Provides Lesson in Courage

Caitlin Reel was just six months old when her mother knew something was wrong.

The baby did not respond to voices or sounds, not even a loud clap of the hands. The doctors told Luann Reel not to worry. Her baby was fine.

But the mother persisted, and when doctors finally tested Caitlin's hearing a year later, they confirmed her fears.

Caitlin was living in a world of silence. She was profoundly deaf.

Flash forward ten years to last week at Shady Grove Elementary School in Ambler. The gymnasium was filled for the winter concert.

Music teacher Ryan Dankanich stepped to the microphone and told the audience they were about to hear "a very special violinist." The only clue he gave that this student had made a particularly arduous journey here was when he said, "Make sure you applaud very loudly."

And then out walked Caitlin, now 11, the deaf baby who never learned to give up. She lifted her violin to her chin and took a deep breath.

In the audience, Luann, the proud mom, stood poised with a video camera. Her hands were shaking.

"I was really worried," she said later from the family's home in Parkside in Delaware County. "She had crossed a lot of barriers to get here. I didn't want something really unpleasant to come out of her violin."

### **A Long, Hard Battle**

What a long road it had been. From birth, her daughter had been misunderstood, stared at, whispered about, incorrectly labeled—even by a teacher—as mentally retarded.

Caitlin set out to prove them wrong. She learned sign language and the rudiments of speech. She received a cochlear implant, which allows her to hear some sound. A major accomplishment came last fall when she ordered a Big Mac and fries all on her own.

While her hearing brother, Jared, 9, walks two blocks to school, Caitlin must ride 45 minutes or more each way. The Perm Delco School District buses her to Shady Grove Elementary, which has a program for hearing-impaired students run by the Montgomery County Intermediate Unit.

Caitlin saw hearing students arriving with musical instruments and said she wanted to play, too. And so, despite all odds, she began violin lessons—the first deaf child at the school to attempt them.

"It's taken a tremendous amount of concentration and perseverance on her part to get to this point," said Melanie Stefanatos, Caitlin's hearing-support teacher.

And last week's concert was her chance to show the world.

The audience hushed. Caitlin drew the bow across the strings. And out came . . . music. Slow, sweet, and steady—and with rock-solid timing. She played "Mary Had a Little Lamb" and "Twinkle, Twinkle Little Star."

Her mother fought back tears.

"I know she's not playing Tchaikovsky," Luann Reel, who is divorced, said. "But this is my deaf daughter—and she's playing the violin."

### **An Incredible Feat**

For most children, the brief performance would be just one of many Kodak moments on the road to adulthood. For Caitlin, it was a Herculean leap. To play this handful of notes, she had to overcome more obstacles than most of us will face in a lifetime.

As Dankanich, the music teacher, put it: "It's just an incredible feat she's been able to accomplish."

Caitlin probably will not go on to become a famous musician. She doesn't need to. The violin already has taught her about courage and perseverance and faith.

A girl without hearing tackled an instrument that has everything to do with hearing, and she didn't give up. For the determined, she learned, even the steepest mountains can be scaled, one step at a time.

Her performance over, Caitlin hurried off the stage. Principal Beth Pearson told the 500-member audience the truth about Caitlin—that she was one of the school’s seven deaf children.

The audience roared its approval—loudly enough, in fact, that Caitlin could hear the clapping through her cochlear implant.

Backstage she signed to her mother: “I’m so happy. They were clapping for me. They were clapping for me.”

— April 14, 2003

## Food for Thought on Child-Rearing

The book arrived unannounced in plain brown paper.

On the cover was a photograph of a little girl beneath the title, *Too Much of a Good Thing: Raising Children of Character in an Indulgent Age*.

Hmmm. Was someone trying to tell me something?

A note inside solved the mystery. It was from an old high school friend who had done well enough financially to retire from his career as an investment adviser at the ripe old age of 45.

The way my investments have been going, I’ll be working until I’m 95. Other than that, we have a lot in common.

We each have two boys and a girl of similar ages. We each live in nice suburbs with good schools where most children grow up assuming a God-given right to a minimum of 3,000 square feet of air-conditioned living space.

We each worry about what effect all this comfort will have on our children. Nothing instills more dread in either of us than the S word. Spoiled.

And so he sent me the book with the caveat, “not that you need this.” Like heck I didn’t. My idea of tough love is saying no three times before caving in.

The book, by Harvard psychology professor Dan Kindlon, has been around for a couple of years and covers the obvious bases: the perils of focusing on career over children, on wealth over relationships, on indulgence instead of consequences.

Or as Kindlon put it, “Giving too much and expecting too little.”

### **Breaking Bread**

The book is filled with anecdotes of parents doing all the wrong things to win their children’s love—including hiring lawyers to help them avoid the consequences of their bad actions. (Remember the student at Philadelphia’s Chestnut Hill Academy last fall whose parents hired a lawyer to beat a deserved expulsion for secretly videotaping a female student?)

What makes this book different from the other parenting claptrap out there is its solid research. One fact jumped out at me—the quantifiable correlation between family meals and children who are blessedly normal.

Kindlon's research and a number of other national studies reach the same conclusion: Families that eat most meals together—and that means with Dad at the table—have children who are at a significantly lower risk for drug abuse, depression, promiscuity, and underachievement.

Easy enough. But I had to admit that work hours and long commutes had lately conspired to keep me away from the dinner table more times than not.

Last week, I found Kindlon at home in Boston during break in a publicity tour for his new book, *Tough Times, Strong Children*, and popped the question: Is it really that simple?

In a word, yes. Sitting down as a family, even if it is microwaved pizza, is a way to reconnect, share, and bond, Kindlon said. It lends structure and predictability and balances the negative influences of popular culture and wrong-track friends.

Hey, and you get to eat! I'm in.

### Fighting Back

"Basically, kids don't get in trouble as much when they are alone as when they are with friends," he said. "So when you allow the peer group to have more influence than the family, you're increasing your child's risk. Those family dinners are a time to remind the child: This is what we believe in, this is our view of the world."

But why dinner? Wouldn't, say, family walks do the same thing? Perhaps, but Kindlon suspects the food itself has a healing effect.

"Feeding kids, nurturing them—it's what parents do," the professor said. "There's something almost primordial



about parents supplying food to their kids that cements the bond.”

I also spoke with William Lessa, superintendent Hattboro-Horsham School District, who will speak tomorrow night at the Parenting Center at Abington on the importance of fathers.

Lessa agrees family meals are key.

“In our family, dinner was pretty much sacred,” the father of two said. “Kids clearly need food. They also need guidance; they need structure; they need love.” All of which can be provided around the dinner table.

So bring on the lasagna. Tonight, I swear, I’m wrapping up early and sitting down where I belong—at dinner with my family.

— April 21, 2003

## Phila. in Spring, and Free Parking!

Some vacations just aren’t meant to be. Our long-anticipated family spring break was one of them.

The plan was to drive to Williamsburg, Virginia, for five days of the kind of family togetherness you can achieve only by cramming five people into a standard hotel room. We would see the historic sites, eat in colonial taverns, buy tacky souvenirs, and swim at the hotel’s indoor pool.

That was the plan.