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Writer/s: [Diana Prichard](#)

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"You can't hit me, there's an ad on TV that says you're not allowed to hit children."

"Okay, ring that number on TV, and tell them your mother smacked you...go on—tell them your mother gave you a 'thwack' on your shoulder because you were rude to her...tell them you sat in that chair and continued to mimic her as she became more and more frustrated, asking you to help..."

Ages ago I read somewhere that whatever parents say or do, they inevitably 'fuck their children up'. I remember not taking it seriously, and dismissing it...

But despite all the cuddles, the bedtime stories, the helping with homework, the ferrying to and from soccer, basketball, cricket, the sleepovers, the birthday parties, the teaching of values in life, it's the odd, awful incidents which settle deep...

The other day my eleven-year-old-son, apropos of nothing, accusingly asked me why I had waited so long for him to have his tonsils and adenoids out to help his breathing, and have the expander put in his mouth to open his airways. I told him I didn't know he had sleep apnoea—I didn't know he was stopping breathing every four minutes when he slept. I just thought he was a noisy sleeper, like a little wombat, snuffling and rooting around. I said to him, 'You were such an energetic, passionate, clever little boy—reaching all your milestones before necessary—I didn't know anything was wrong.'

And then my son reminded me how I freaked out, totally went off my head, smacked him, when he—as a two-year-old—wee-ed on my bare foot as I prepared dinner and laughed loudly when I looked down in shock. 'You were so, so angry,' he said.

That's what he remembers.

Friday is my deadline day at work—it's the one day of the week I can't have off. It's 'non-negotiable'. But I ask my boss, I plead in advance, if I can have a few hours off the Friday my son is giving his 'running-for-school-captain speech'. My boss says 'no', and while I think I'll have to resign, he relents, but says I'll have to take half a day's annual leave.

I leave work at lunchtime, the butterflies in my stomach tying themselves in big, wingy knots. I am so nervous.

'I'm nervous,' my son had said the night before, about to practise his speech. I was nervous too, but didn't want to tell him. I just wanted it to all be over. I wanted to go to sleep on Thursday night, and wake up on Saturday—that's how nervous I felt.

My son had a head cold. His nose ran, his eyes watered and his face was flushed. He practised his speech, reading very, very quickly, the words hardly discernible. Babbling, and sniffing, babbling and sniffing. 'Slow down,' I kept saying, 'slow down—look up between your points—they're good points—the content's great—pause,

pause, pause, so people can digest what you're saying...smile...'

'I'm nervous,' he said again, at breakfast on Friday morning. 'That's good,' I replied, 'it means you won't be 'flat', your delivery will be energetic, full of verve.' I gave him a hug, and looked in his beautiful hazel-green eyes. 'I'm very, very proud of you,' I said, 'you put up your hand to run as captain, as a leader, and I think you have a good chance...'

I know his best friend has a much better chance. Although my son is a good all-rounder, his best friend is a star .. and my son is a bit of a tease—I see myself in him, and that's why he frustrates me at times...

I arrive at the school hall—the children to give speeches are sitting in two lines on the stage, the parents of the children, most likely, hide in the back row of the seats in the audience. I sit in the empty front row—I want my son to see me, smiling at him proudly, encouraging him on. I feel sick, I want it over and done with.

The girls begin. They have props—they wave banners, they stick sparkly rosettes to their school shirts, the coloured lights blinking on and off. Then it's the boys' turn—my son is fourth up. While the first few boys speak, my son studies his speech intently, and wipes his nose.

The boys use gimmicks too—one promises to ask the principal for a swimming pool—and from behind screens on the side of the stage accomplices throw beach balls, which cruise through the air. Then it's my son's best friend's turn, just before my son. He ignores the lectern with the microphone, and stands centre stage. In a big, expressive voice, his body animated, he delivers his speech—it would make a speechwriter proud. He's brilliant—the children laugh, and applaud wildly.

And then my son stands up. He moves to the lectern. My heart is pounding. My son looks down at his speech and begins—babbling-as-fast-as-he-can-without-pausing-for-breath-or-looking-up-until-it's-all-over. Phew. Then he flies back to his seat, plonks down, his relief palpable. His best friend touches him on the arm as if to say: 'That was really great'.

My son then looks at me. I give him an enthusiastic two thumbs up. He smiles.

'Hi mum,' he says afterwards, outside the hall. 'Did I do well?' not really doubting that he was anything less than great. But then he hugs me. And doesn't let go. I suddenly realise he's not so sure. And I suddenly realise that whatever I say or do, one day he'll think I fucked him up.

'Let's go for juice and pastries—to celebrate your school captain's speech,' I say, and we leave, his soft, warm hand, tightly holding mine.

Adapted for performance by Barbara Campbell from a story by Diana Prichard.