



St Leonard's College
An education for life.

From the Principal

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Gently Easing Off the Brakes

In the carefree childhood I shared with my four siblings, there was an infamous day that we simply now refer to as 'The Crash'. We lived next door to neighbours who also had five children, and together made a ragtag posse who played together every day after school, governed only by our mother's command to "come home when it gets dark." Trees were climbed, huts constructed, endless backyard Test matches contested, and elaborate adventures had us ranging wide across the neighbourhood.

One week, we built a trolley. Previous attempts had ended prematurely, with broken axles, wobbly wheels, or dodgy steering. This time, with lessons learned, we constructed a beauty. Sturdy, with room for three seated passengers and a chance for the person pushing to hop on the back bumper once underway. It also had every embellishment imaginable; mud guards, cushions, even a flag commandeered from the local car yard.

On the fateful Friday, we had only to complete the final component, the addition of brakes, before its maiden voyage. That afternoon, after ditching school uniforms for bare feet, shorts and singlets, we gathered in the garage to survey our pride and joy. By way of context, our houses were next door to each other at the very crest of a street called Hill Road. It was well-named. Dropping away from the bottom of our driveway, the road was the steepest in the area. 800 metres of 30 degree slope, dead straight, no curbs, just loose gravel either side.

We actually had the components to build the brakes sitting right there. But the temptation... Just a quick test run first, was the unanimous decision. But who should the test pilots be? Much argument ensued, before the debate was ended by my brothers leaping on board and pushing off regardless. Not to be outdone, the rest of our gang clambered onto whatever space they could. Our three-seater trolley trundled down the drive and onto the road with seven passengers clinging on, whilst the three youngest trailed behind in a motley convoy of skateboards and scooters.

I don't know what the terminal velocity of seven scrawny children and a few planks of wood is, but we reached it within a few seconds. Disaster followed shortly after. I recall a puff of smoke as a rubber tyre peeled off, followed by sparks as the bolt that held it on bit into the asphalt. Then it was just a melee of legs and arms grating along the gravel, cotton offering no protection, as scooters and skateboards flew in like missiles from behind.

We trooped back up the hill like wounded soldiers retreating from the frontline. The toll included four teeth, two split lips, a broken finger, innumerable splinters, and more grazes than there were Band-aids in our two houses combined. After giving me her special "You're the oldest, you are solely responsible" stare, my mother simply said, "What were you thinking?" What, indeed?

During their school-age years, all children own a brakeless trolley. Metaphorically, at least. Like the trolley we built, a young person's brain is also a thing of beauty. Elaborate, sturdy and robust, built for adventure, ready to be road-tested. The only thing it lacks is a reliable set of brakes. They get added later on. The frontal cortex, home to our mind's executive functioning, is still developing when we are young. Indeed, neuroscientists don't consider the frontal cortex is fully formed until our late twenties. Yet this is the device that exercises caution, allows us to consider the implications of our actions, and slows us down when the rest of our brain wants to be impetuous.

That's why being a child is such a challenging time. We are in possession of a beautiful, fully functioning brain that wants to go fast and explore new things, be they physical, social, or emotional. Yet the brakes to control our journey and keep us safe are not yet fully installed. That's why parents and teachers exist.

As our children get older and look and sound more and more like adults, it is easy to forget that the construction of their brain is not necessarily keeping pace with the growth of their body (or their attitude). That doesn't mean that we should keep them locked away in the garage until they turn 30 and are safe to go out into the world on their own. But neither does it mean that we should give them licence to do anything they like. Our job is to keep a careful adult foot lightly on the brakes, gently easing off as they show that they are safely in control. Successful parenting and teaching involve letting children gain independence by steering their own lives, whilst still exercising enough restraint to keep them from crashing.