

# A parents guide to the Dot Com Family journal

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**Dot Com Children's Foundation**

**"Giving children the tools to deal with risky situations"**

# Introduction

## **Family Journal and Getting to Know You**

The greatest gift you can give a child is to teach them to value and believe in themselves. If they believe in themselves they will believe they deserve good things to happen to them and they will make better and safer choices in life.

“Whether you believe you will succeed or fail you will” Children need to be empowered to understand that they have a choice about how they think all the time and they have a choice about how they choose to behave. We cannot change the things that life throws at us and we cannot help our feelings, but we can choose how we behave and then our actions have effects and consequences or rewards.

Children naturally model those around them and it is therefore important to be aware of the models that exist in their environment. You may not always be conscious of it, but as a parent you are providing them with a constant model to copy and so are other adults and children around them.

The values that are instilled in children also come from the models in their environment and having good values is key to children making good choices on a daily basis.

Perhaps the hardest thing as a parent is getting into the mind of your child and understanding how they really think. Getting to know them on a level beyond the day to day physicality of caring for their wellbeing.

The Dot Com family journal and the Getting to Know You Journals are tools designed to create special one on one time with a child so you can discover more about how they are think, who they are modelling and hopefully guide them towards the role models and values that will help them to make their best of their lives.

## **Values**

Values are the fundamental beliefs that we hold about what is important ...freedom, democracy, kindness, honesty, integrity ...are all values and it is vital that your children really understand the fundamental beliefs that those around them hold dear. Often individuals allow themselves to be lead into doing things that they are ashamed of afterwards simply because they have not taken time to think about what is really important to them and their belief systems. If we look at people who have made fundamental change in the world and a huge success of their lives, they are usually people like Martin Luther King or Nelson Mandela with a clear sense of what really matters. It is so important for children to work out what really matters for them.

# Using the journals

The journals belong to the child. They have the right to decide what they write inside, what pen they use and when and how they share the information. The sense of ownership and taking responsibility for this piece of work is truly important.

It is also vitally important that they get the sense that working on this journal together is important to you. It is important to you to understand and respect what they think. It is also ok for you to gently challenge or encourage their thinking, but it is still up to them to decide what they write.

The idea behind the contract in the family journal underpins the child's belief that you are taking their thoughts and beliefs seriously and will make time for it.

## **WHAT WE VALUE WE MAKE TIME FOR**

While it is important for all the adults to share their thoughts and values it is also important the the child decides their beliefs and values for themselves.

The journal should create time too for discussing some of the very important issues in life that we perhaps take for granted that they understand, such as 'what is love'?

Would someone who truly loved and valued us want to hurt us or make us do something against our will or against the law? This should help children in their ability to form friendships and relationship as they grow.

Also research shows that those who are part of a subculture of violence also have values. Children will come across these negative values and need to be certain of positive values so they can make the best choices.

It is difficult to identify the distinctive values of the subculture of violence, but those involved in the life style indicate that members evaluate each other in terms of their conforming to a macho life style which emphasises such things as:

Leading an exciting life

Achieving Status

Protecting one's honour

That is why questions such as what is love, honour and courage are in the journal to give parents a chance to present a balanced view.

## **The Helping Hand**

This is the opportunity for the child to draw around their hand and identify the five people on their safety network who they can turn to in trouble. It is important that a

number of people are on the hand so that if the child has options on where to seek advice and a range of people to go to in case they feel they cannot tell someone in particular about a problem.

It is also important for children to identify the safety network that exists in the community through the emergency services. It is important for children to learn that the job of the police, fire and ambulance service is to keep people safe. If people break the law then they have to be arrested so we can all be safe.

It is critical that children are not afraid of the emergency services because if they are lost or in trouble they need to be able to ask for help and should not feel afraid to do so or it may endanger their lives in a serious situation.

### **Uh-oh Signs**

This is a child friendly way of teaching children to listen to the early warning signs or their own body signs of danger. When we don't feel safe our body tells us by giving us butterflies in our tummy or making us sweat. It is our adrenalin kicking in and preparing us for fight or flight. It is important that children learn to listen to these signs and that if anyone is giving them this feeling then they need to tell someone that a person or situation does not make them feel safe.

It is better to teach children to listen to their uh-oh signs with all people and situations than to teach them to be afraid of strangers. What is a stranger and paedophiles are experts in befriending children and gaining their trust.

### **Secrets**

Children can learn about good and bad secrets. A surprise is a good secret but a secret that gives you uh-oh signs is not a secret that should be kept. Secrets can cause children a great deal of distress and it is important that they have a strategy for dealing with them.

### **Jokes**

Humour can be used to cause a great deal of misery and can disguise passive aggression which can be very hurtful to children. The Protective Behaviours network has had great input into the Dot Com journals and they have a great phrase which is wonderful for children to learn and that is:

'My fun, fun for everyone'

If it's not funny and fun for all, then the chances are it is at somebody else's expense and that person could be you next time.

## **Risking on purpose**

It is important that children are allowed to push the boundaries and can understand when they choose to take a risk on purpose and can distinguish a risk that can harm them. These are important conversations to have.

The three main themes of protective behaviours are very helpful for children to learn:

**We all have the right to feel safe**

**We can talk about anything with someone even if it feels big or small**

**Others have the right to feel safe with us**

If children take on board these three main principles they are likely to make safer choices in their lives.

## **Mistakes**

Another important message for children to learn is that we all make mistakes, but what is important is that we learn from them. It is good to share some of our own mistakes and learning.

## **Failure**

The best way to help a child aim for success is to teach them that there is no such thing as failure - there are only results.

What is important for children to learn is how to put themselves in a positive and resourceful state of mind. Negative feelings of failure are not helpful to our state of mind, so if they can learn to see actions and results it will be more helpful to their state of mind. A child that learns that if the result is not what they want, then they can try again and modify the approach is a child that is likely to succeed in achieving a goal.

True success only comes with practice and commitment.

## **Feelings**

It is important that with the journals the issue of feelings is explored and they come to the understanding that feelings happen all the time, but we make choices about our behaviour. There are no right or wrong feelings, it is only our actions that have results.

Something that children find empowering is the protective behaviours message that nobody can **'make'** us feel anything. We choose all our feelings and our actions. It might be that we feel a certain way when someone says or does something, but we can choose to change that. The power lies with us and not with the other person.

We can because we think we can.

## **Physiology**

In relation to feelings it is important for children to understand the link between their mind and their body.

We can use our body to change our feelings.

Think of how someone looks when they are depressed. They usually have rounded shoulders, their head is down, their eyes are cast down, they often tuck their arms around their body.

If we feel depressed and we want to change the feeling, we can start by putting our head up, taking deep breaths, looking up and pulling our shoulders back. The physical actions immediately start to affect our state of mind.

We need always to be mindful of the internal conversations we have with ourselves that create our state of mind. If we are feeling depressed what is the conversation that you are having with yourself to feel that way? What are you telling yourself?

When you feel happy – what do you tell yourself?

When children feel a lack of confidence they can think of a certain conversation they can have with themselves that makes them feel empowered. They can learn to walk as if they are confident. What does a confident person walk like? You could practice confident walking with them to make them feel better even if they think a situation might be difficult.

## **And finally....**

I hope this explains some of the thinking behind the family Journal and the Getting to Know you Journals which are designed to help children develop a sense of self belief and values and to help parents, carers and mentors to open the gates to communication with children about some of the most difficult and sensitive issues.

As the parents of twins my husband and I took great comfort in this quote from Ralph Waldo Emerson which we found in a book called Unlimited Power by the life coach Anthony Robbins

## **Success**

“To laugh often and much; to win the respect of intelligent people and the affection of children; to earn the appreciation of critics and endure the betrayal of false friends; to appreciate beauty, to find the best in others, to leave the world a bit better, whether by a healthy child, a garden patch or a redeemed social condition; to know even on e life has breathed easier because you have lived. This is to have succeeded.”

**Here's to your great success and the great success of your children!**

# Getting started

The purpose of the Family journal is to reinforce to the child that they are:

1. Individual and Special
2. Have individual strengths
3. Feel part of their environment and know it is a place where they can feel confident to learn and make mistakes

Increasing children's self esteem and sense of self worth is a vital part of the values journal. All children are individuals with their own strengths which are separate to anything their parents or carers have as strengths. As adults we have a role to play in helping children recognise their strengths and learn to feel good about them. Children who feel they are valuable and have good self esteem easily learn to interact and develop with others. They will be more confident about solving problems and seeking help from adults when they need it.

## **Who is Dot Com?**

Dot Com is a friend to children who helps them practice how to do the right thing. Good values have to be practiced and children need to learn that they will make mistakes, but it how we deal with our mistakes that is important. Miss Dorothy Com or Dot Com to her friends is the central character in the journals. She is a 9 year old girl who is learning like other children to value herself and others. Dot makes mistakes, but always does the right thing in the end no matter how hard it is. She is a child speaking to other children in their own language. She empowers children to make the right decisions and understand they are always making a choice about how they behave. She also helps children identify their own network of support and who exists in their community to help them stay safe. Do boys like Dot too? I am pleased to tell you that they do because in the words of one 10 year old boy "she's a mate and not a babe" ! There are also other characters you will find on the [missdorothy.com](http://missdorothy.com) web site who are friends of Dot, including her friend Wizard the dog.

# How values keep you safe

## **Treat others as you would like to be treated yourself**

I believe this is a great value to instill in our children. Asking a child to think about their behavior and think if they would like that to happen to them is a really simple way of teaching values.

## **Dot journals help children believe in themselves**

A child who has a strong sense of self value will work towards goals because they believe that they will achieve and they can do anything they put their mind to. A child who has no sense of self worth will want instant gratification and will take what they want and don't care who they hurt as a consequence because if they are worthless and don't matter then nobody else matters either.

I have learned that the key to showing children that they are valued is TIME.

We have been part of an EU programme on values education and it has been proved that the key to showing children that they are loved and valued is by giving them quality time. People give time to the things that they love. A child who grows up in chaos where there are constant broken promises will have little chance of feeling they are of value. My dream of becoming a newsreader was put into my mind by my grandmother who cared deeply about me learning to read and tell the time. The fact that

she believed that I could do it meant everything to me.

## **Dot helps children learn about real life**

The Dot Com Values vs Violence journals help children understand the real life risks that exist in the world and what they can do to stay safe in different situations. They learn about the choices that they can make in life and that positive behaviour has rewards and negative behaviour has consequences. They learn about the role of the emergency services and the value of the emergency services in society. They also learn who they can turn to for help in difficult situations because a parent can't be with their child all the time and children have to learn that they can keep themselves safe by making choices based on their values and they learn how to ask for help.





# We all have the right to feel safe

In many evaluations with children over the last 10 years it has been proved that owning the journal is very empowering for the child. It is a gift from you – but it is **their** special book and you can reassure them that nobody will read it unless they ask them to.

In this way you create a safe place for the child to write their feelings and inner most thoughts and you will have a chance to share those feelings and thoughts as you work with them on the pages. It should be a way to increase the trust and bond that already exists between you.

The journals are designed to help children feel safe to express themselves and realise that they won't be criticized for anything they write because there are no right or wrong feelings. But there are right and wrong choices about how we behave as a result of our feelings and this is where you can help to guide them to develop good personal values and help them to practice those values.

In this way we can empower children to understand that they are in control of their behavior and help them think before they act. Good values have to be practiced so it is important that they learn that we will make mistakes, but we can always learn from them.

Over the past ten years we have had many emails to Dot from children sharing their worries with her about everything from being bullied, to worrying about their mummy or daddy crying all the time,

bereavement, pets dying and even not being able to cope with sports or drama activities. It is impossible to guess what might worry or frighten a child because they are all individuals, but if they feel they are valued and listened to they will learn that there is always someone to talk to about their problems and if we know what the problem is that we can help them. The hardest part is starting the conversation.

The main messages of the journal are:

**We all have the right to feel Safe**

**Others have the right to feel safe with us**

**And there is nothing so awful or so small we can't tell someone**

We all have feelings but we always have a choice about how we behave

If we value ourselves and think positively we can achieve anything we put our mind to

# Useful tips

There are many ways adults can empower children. The words we use are very important. You can help by saying things like

1. **You have great ideas**
2. **Good thinking**
3. **Well done**
4. **I love that idea**
5. **Aren't you clever at thinking of things to write and draw**
6. **I am really proud of you**

## **Helping to develop confidence and self worth**

It is important that children know that it is ok to make mistakes. This all part of learning. As adults we can help by talking about some of the mistakes we have made and smiling about them. We can talk about the positive things we learned from something that at the time felt awful.

Take time to engage in conversation with the child which is lead by them. This will tell a child that you are listening to what they have to say and you enjoy their company too.

Help the child understand that it is not them you dislike ever, but sometimes you dislike their behavior. Help them see the difference between them as a person and the behavior that they choose. Ensure that the child is getting the message that we all have feelings, but it is what we choose to do with the feelings that matter. Make them understand that they choose how they behave

Try not to criticise the child. Instead of pointing out mistakes all the time, try a different approach and different words, such as 'shall we think about a new way of doing that?' or 'do you think it might feel better if you tried this?'

# Why is it important that a child feels valued?

What is important to know, is that if children feel that they are loved and valued and understand what good personal values are they will make safer choices in life. They will choose friends with good values and are less likely to find themselves in risky situations where they can be hurt. If they value themselves they will also believe that they can achieve in life and that nobody has the right to hurt them.

I believe my own father's rage came from a deep seated feeling of being worthless. He grew up in India, the son of a mixed race couple and felt that he did not fit in. He was beaten in boarding school for being left handed and was subjected to my grandfather's violent outbursts at home. He came to England in his teenage years with his family and again found it hard to fit in. My grandfather sunk into alcoholism and there was no good role model in my father's life. When he met my mother, she became pregnant at 19 and although they married, when I was born they were far from ready to become parents. He became violent towards her three days before I was born and the pattern continued for seven years. He went on to have two more children and has been violent in every relationship because I believe he has never managed to feel valued in his life.

Telling a child 'do as I say and not as I do' was very common when I was growing up, but it is not going to work because children learn their values through the actions of those they love and trust.

If a parent tells their child to be honest and not tell lies, but then lie and steal themselves, very quickly the child will recognise this and start to follow the behavior despite what they are being told, because they will believe it is acceptable if their parent does it. The difficulty is there is no easy way out of teaching values because they need to be demonstrated for children to really take them on board. We all know the story about the man who goes to church every week and claims to be very religious, yet drinks and cheats on his wife in the week or the woman who claims to serve the church, yet spreads terrible gossip about the congregation Monday to Saturday. It is hard, but parents and carers are the role models for children and so it is important to remember that and make the family values clear in the house which everyone will live by.

My father claimed to love me, however his actions in beating my mother and terrifying me with his violent outbursts made it impossible to believe. He also told me to tell the truth and be a good girl while using me as a cover to make visits to the phone box to call women he was having affairs with. My mother also took me on night time drives to spy on my father – all behavior very frightening and confusing for a small child. I found a lot of comfort in my school life as both my primary and secondary schools were places where the values of kindness and caring were very well demonstrated. Interestingly I went to a church of England primary school and a Catholic secondary school but the values were the same. This is because values are the things that unite us. Most of the religions in the world share this same value.

<b>Ways to show a child they are valued</b>	them so treat them as an equal	Support their independence
Make quality time to spend with them even if it is only an hour a week, if you always give them an hour of one on one time that will make them feel special	Tell them you are always there to help them whenever they need it	Be positive and optimistic about their future
Praise their ideas	Help them to see what they can learn from their mistakes and admit you make mistakes too	Show them you are listening
Encourage play and join in if you can	Follow their interests do not impose your own	Show real interest in what they tell and try to remember
Praise small milestones	Accept their decisions without criticism	Assume everything can be done
Use positive language whenever you can	Focus on putting yourself in the child's shoes	Share their risks and worries
Remember a child has all the same feelings as you, but less tools to deal with	Try not to judge but encourage	Challenge the child in a supportive way to try new things
		Be available to them

<b>A lack of self value can be caused by</b>	Imposing decisions on the child	Cross examining them
Ignoring children	Deciding how they will respond to things	Giving no feedback or positive reaction to anything they do
Being authoritarian	Not making time for them	Not attending or celebrating important milestones
Being negative about everything they do	Always sticking to routines and never being flexible	Showing little interest in them
Making them dependant on you	Mocking their suggestions and ideas	
Criticising them	Being domineering to them	
Being disapproving	Interrupting them and failing to listen	
Behaving as if you are superior to the child	Being impatient and aggressive	
Making fun of the child		

## **Frequently asked questions**

### **What is the role of the Police?**

The role of the police is to keep us safe.

I often hear parents in shopping malls or supermarkets shouting at their children that they will get the police to arrest them if they don't behave and I understand why that is said, but it worries me every time I hear it. The reason for this is that if your child is lost or if they are approached by a paedophile or criminal their best chance of staying safe is to turn to the police, but if they are frightened of officers they will not ask for the help they need if they are lost.

I believe it is a very important message to teach children that the role of the police is to keep children and the community safe and that really is their job. But if we are going to be safe then people will be arrested for our protection. Everyone has their own experiences of the police, but for the safety of children I believe that the true role of the police and emergency services should be taught to children as a way to keep them safe.

### **Why are children used as a 'weapon'?**

Speaking from my own experience and from the many childhood stories that have been shared with me when I have spoken publicly or trained professionals, something that affects many children when relationships break up is that they can easily become a weapon to hurt a partner with. Once my parents split up I found life even more frightening. Although I was safe living with my grandmother I became a weapon that my parents could use to hurt each other. They both told me secrets about each other and made horrible comments about each other. I became very anxious and afraid at every custody visit and the front door became the scene of constant aggressive battles between them. I also had no real relationship with my father when they split up because he had never spent any time with me, so I was very afraid of being with him. I very much hope the Dot family journal will give children a way to express their fears and help parents recognise if any of their behaviours are causing their children distress. It is easy to forget that children are often absorbing all the pain of both parents and often have no way to express their confusion and fear.

### **Optional activities**

Make displays of the family photographs of the child as babies and now. Talk about how they have developed over the years and what they can do now that they couldn't do when they were babies. Encourage children to think about and draw pictures of what they dream of being when they grow up. If they don't know then look at pictures together of people doing different jobs. On the plain side of a piece of old wallpaper draw round the child and get them to colour it in or fill it with lovely family pictures. Get the child to write a book called 'Things I can do' or make a poster. Play some of the Dot Com songs to your child from the [missdorothy.com](http://missdorothy.com) web site. Try to tell the child regularly that they are loved and mention some of the things you love about them.

## **Why does the child feel it their fault?**

One of the things that many children share with Dot is the fact that when things go wrong in grown ups lives they believe that something they have done has made this happen. When adults lives go wrong children very often think it is their fault. My father told me I was stupid all the time and I am not sure if he was even aware of it, but it took me years to shake off that feeling of being stupid and worthless even when I was reading the news to millions of people every night. If something went wrong I would always blame myself. Now my husband and I are lucky enough to be parents to beautiful twins – a boy and a girl – I try very hard never to keep all my comments positive. But it's not always easy!

## **Is smacking children okay?**

I know this is a subject which causes very strong feeling, but for me the issue is really simple if you bring it back to values. If you smack a child then you teach them that violence is the way to solve problems. If you want your child to learn that violence is never the answer then it is not an option to hit them yourself. When we feel the need to hit out then we have lost control of our feelings. I know that many parents think a smack is a short sharp shock and a quick way to teach good behavior, however if the police pulled you over to give you words of advice about your driving and gave you a good slap to help you remember the lesson, you might have something to say about it! Again I would encourage you to have strong boundaries for your children and warn them there will be consequences for poor behavior choices, but make the consequences non violent. Also make the rewards for good behavior memorable – everyone likes to be praised.

## **Dot encourages positive activities**

It is vital that children develop interests in positive activities so they can have their own space where they feel safe and can have fun. Encouraging visits to local clubs or groups that offer children and young people fun and healthy things to do are really important. Children need to be encouraged to take part in positive activities to help them engage in good ways to spend their time. This will make them more resilient to negative forces.

## **What are the effects of domestic violence on children?**

Many parents have asked over the years why their children should learn about risks that might frighten them and that they believe their child will never be exposed to. What I explain to them is that you can't be with your child all the time and you never know when they might experience negative behavior from others. If they don't understand the behavior and the risk, they will have no idea how to deal with it and may even think it is their fault. For example my mother grew up with a very loving and gentle father, so when her husband started to beat her she didn't tell anyone because she felt it was her fault.

Domestic Violence is a pattern of behavior about power and control over another person and it happens I believe, because of a real lack of self worth. Controlling another person gives a sense of power and importance.

I watched my father cut my mother off from all her friends and from her family until there was just the two of us and him. The victim eventually is sucked into the belief system of another person who tells them that they are stupid, worthless and that nobody will want them and nobody will believe them if they tell. Money is used to enhance control, not being allowed to go to the doctor or seek medical attention and the perpetrator is often charming and funny and very clever at grooming the victim. First my father made her feel the centre of his universe and then once had complete control of her the violence got worse and worse until he tried to pour boiling oil on her and she knew he would kill her if she didn't leave.

Domestic violence affects people in all walks of life. One of my dearest friends is the actress Lynda Bellingham. She was a victim of domestic violence and put up with years of abuse which she worries very much affected her sons. She has been a great support in promoting our work.

Kristina Rihanoff the Strictly Come Dancing star is another friend and supporter because of the violence she suffered in her childhood in Russia. Like me she found refuge in a dance school and found dancing made her happy and forget the problems in her life.

It is very important for children to understand that nobody has the right to hurt another human being and if they feel valued they will be less likely to ever allow this to happen.

Domestic violence and sexual abuse are very often linked and the perpetrators rely on making victims keep secrets so understanding the difference between a good secret like a birthday surprise and a secret which makes them feel afraid is an important lesson.

I have worked with Northern Ireland Women's Aid on this material in the early days and the methods used have been piloted with children all over the country, including children in refuges and in the most violent communities where terrorism has been a long term threat.

Children watch the news and absorb everything adults experience so they also need a way to talk about the things that worry them.