



## BISHOPS

Dear Parents

31 October 2008

### WEEKLY NEWS FROM THE HEADMASTER

Many of us call each other by nicknames, sometimes they are just shortened or altered forms of our names, but for others we use made-up names that refer to an incident, a person or even a physical characteristic. For some reason boys and men do this a great deal and really seem to enjoy it. So the fearless rugby player could be 'Tiger', Ferguson 'Fergie' and John 'Jono', etc and many of these nicknames are born at school, university or the sports club and they can stick for life. A friend of my son's is known exclusively by his surname. Teachers' friends and his friends' parents only use his surname. Only his immediate family use his first name and he has no idea how everyone else came to use his surname. He accepts it and will even introduce himself in a telephone call by his surname.

Why do many of us use nicknames when we have been given perfectly good names by our parents? I think it can show how far back a friendship goes and also a sense of camaraderie, inclusion, warmth and affection. Men do not always find it as easy to express affection for each other in the same way as women can and tend to do. Society and schools are working on this issue of boys growing into happy, courageous men who are able to express and take responsibility for their feelings, but I am sure nicknames will remain as a form of the expression of a feeling.

However, there is another aspect to this. At school I had a Senior Master who was known as 'Shorty'. He was extremely short but he did command absolute respect from all the boys at school. Years later I realised that his teachers and friends also called him Shorty. Did he like this? Did he enjoy it especially when it first started being used? Did he just get used to it over the years or did he see it as a friendly interaction and acceptance by others of his uniqueness? This probably sounds a bit over the top. Does one really analyse a name that carefully?

I raise it because it is so easy at school for nicknames to become confused with name calling. Name calling belittles, disempowers, insults or, at the very least, irritates the recipient. There has been quite a lot of this coming to our attention in the past few months. I spoke to the boys about the difference at assembly this morning. I told them that for me the difference is simple. Is the word/name we use for someone else enjoyed by both of us? Does he feel at ease and happy about the name? It can only be used in jest if both enjoy it, otherwise it is insulting and destructive.

Boys do often need the difference explained to them. As adults we need to respond when we hear these names: to ask them the simple questions when the name sounds as though it could be derogatory. "Does he enjoy that? Does he find it funny?" Then we can unpack it with them and deal with the bigger issues of respect and power and empathy. We also need to empower our boys to be able to stand up and say, "Cut it out, I don't want to be called that." I think that this is an important life lesson that we have to learn at school. Respect for each, the courage to stand up for oneself, the courage to stand up for each other.

Let's acknowledge the fun and camaraderie that nicknames can engender among boys, but let's not allow them to pretend that an insult or a word that causes hurt to another is a nickname.

Best wishes

A handwritten signature in dark ink, appearing to read 'Greg Brown'.

GREG BROWN  
HEADMASTER