



Past lives therapy

Getting the kids into dinghy sailing has had unexpected rewards for Mark Rasmussen

DID you grow up sailing dinghies? Do you have a young family? Does this not seem to mix with lots of on the water time? Want to improve the situation and have a ball at the same time?

Do what we did. Participate in "past lives therapy" for sailing parents. You might be amazed by the results!

We thought we would enrol our kids in sailing lessons. We really wanted them to enjoy cruising aboard the family Catalina 27 *Samos*. Little did we know that it would lead to dear old Dad getting back into a dinghy 20 years after he had given away all of that.

Picture this...

It happens every summer around the country at countless sailing clubs. Our local club, the Lindisfarne Sailing club, on the shores of the Derwent, just north of the Tasman Bridge is running Sunday morning training for six to 13 year olds.

My very timid daughters, Molly (8) and Lilly (6) have plucked up the courage to head out onto the sheltered waters of Lindisfarne Bay in the company of other beginners in the club's fleet of Sabots. It is a glisteningly clear summer morning.

Dad, who also learned to sail here way back in the 1970s, is somewhat nervously herding the fleet of a dozen or so Sabots out away from the numerous moorings that surround the club's launching area in one of the rescue boats, accompanied by another parent.

ABOVE: The author with his daughters in one of Lindisfarne Sailing Club's training fleet of Pacers.

RIGHT: Molly (left) and Lilly aboard the Rasmussen family's Catalina 27, *Samos*.

Faded memories of that skinny ten-year-old kid in an old Heron with his older brother at the helm come wafting back. It was so long ago, Neil Armstrong had only landed on the moon a few months earlier. Now it's my own children's turn.

A gusty north-west breeze is filling in, making the little Sabots move at seemingly alarming speed for the very inexperienced crews. At the back of the group, performing an incredible array of unplanned gyrations is the Sabot containing my



daughter Molly and her partner, a small boy with fear in his eyes.

We drop back in the rescue boat to offer some timely advice. That common parental conundrum presents itself ... How much should I interfere?

The breeze gusts a little, the boat heels alarmingly and rounds up as the two kids begin to scream. All advice is now too complicated for the young lad at the helm, and the situation could soon degenerate into capsize and almost certain refusal to ever set foot in a sailing dinghy again.

We pull directly alongside, hoping to calm the situation. Like drowning puppies, the two kids begin to leap upwards, desperately attempting to reach the safety of the rescue boat. The young lad is first aboard, leaving Molly now even more concerned that she is on her own. The obvious choice is to pull her aboard and head to shore, defeated. Molly looks up pleadingly at me.

"Pleease Dad, get me out of here!"

The look of terror, tears and plaintiff tone tug at my parental heartstrings. What would any reasonable parent do?

Pull the poor terrified child out, of course!

If I pull her out, she'll never get back in a dinghy. If I leave her to fend for herself, she'll never get back in a dinghy or speak to me again *and* her mother will probably remove several bits of my anatomy. (Some of which I still need!)

There is, of course, one other alternative. I look at my partner in the rescue boat, who gives me a shrug of the shoulders in agreement that I'm damned if I do, damned if I don't. Then I take the plunge over the side, into the Sabot.

A look of even greater horror crosses my daughter's face when she realises there is no escape, and at the sight of Dad, 48-years-old, 6ft 5in and 110kg, squeezing himself into this tiny boat.

I quickly grab the tiller, stabilising the course. I begin to take in my new surroundings. Molly is quietly sobbing up near the bow.

"Take me home daddy", she whimpers.

Sabots have obviously shrunk in the 30 years since I last set foot in one. My feet are hanging over the leeward side, my backside is planted safely in the centre of the floor, and my head is well to windward of the gunwale. The mainsheet

block is attempting to perform that prostate examination I've been putting off.

We are also attracting spectators. God, I hope I don't go straight through the bottom of this thing! Another mildly out of control boat emerges, horribly close to colliding with us. I spot them at the last second and swerve to avoid them.

"F#%*!", I cry in alarm. Oh s#%, I just swore in front of my eight-year-old daughter.

"Daddy, you just swore!" At least she's stopped thinking about how scared she is whilst she worries about my vocab. Perhaps I should swear some more!

Sailing is fun

My aim is to help my mortified daughter see that "sailing is fun", a sentiment far from her thoughts at this stage. First on the list is to work out a way of positioning my gargantuan frame to avoid the embarrassment of an unscheduled capsize to windward.

Molly's breathing and heart rate have returned to somewhere near that of an Olympic 400 metre runner in the last 5m of a race, and her wide-eyed look does nothing to induce a calm and confident feeling.

The wind is now gusting up to about 15kts, and we are travelling alarmingly quickly *away* from my daughter's preferred destination. The pursuing gaggle of spectators smell blood. Several rescue boats nearby stand by to drag us from the cold waters of the Derwent - a sensation I haven't experienced since the 1970s.

Delicately, I attempt to shift my frame to a kneeling position, my knees protesting vehemently. Having succeeded in this manoeuvre, the next terror presents itself - we have to gybe or face the real possibility of hitting one of the Tasman Bridge's pylons. Geez, I hope these inflatable lifejackets really work.

Okay, no time left for prevarication. The cold, hard, grey cement of the Tasman Bridge looms large above us as I grip the tiller behind my back and gently pull it to windward. At the last moment I remember to tell Molly to duck and I do the same. With me in the back, at least we're not going to nosedive!

We survive.

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BELOW: Sabot under tow during the sail training program for youngsters at Lindisfarne SC.

Dispel the demons

Now at least we are heading for the safety of the bay. Molly, oblivious to the peril that she has just avoided, actually looks to be beginning to enjoy the experience. Her dad is likewise warming to the task. The challenge is to dispel all of Molly's demons in the 15 or so minutes it will take us to sail back.

As it turns out, the ride back in is perfect. The breeze stabilises and we reach all the way home without mishap, Molly even begins to smile. Those wondrous words come unsolicited from my daughter: "This is fun, Dad!"

The floating ramps at Lindisfarne SC mean that you always climb up to emerge from the boat. Doing my best impersonation of a bull walrus working his way across the polar ice as the wildly swinging boom hits me in the back of the head, I safely make it back to dry land. I stoically ignore comments such as "Call Greenpeace! They'll know how to roll him back in!"

Incredibly, my now smiling daughter looks up at me and utters those fateful words, "Will you take me out again next week?"

She's hooked and I'm back in love!

Thus began our journey through sail training, perhaps the most wonderful "father child" experience I have had.

Independence and achievement

My wife Louise and I have always been boat owners, she being a granddaughter of Sydney to Hobart legend Jock Muir, me a lifetime yachtsman of very limited ability. We decided that the kids would enjoy cruising and the occasional twilight race much more if they had a clear idea of what was happening. We also wanted them to experience the pleasure of being able to sail a small boat. It fosters confidence, independence and a wonderful sense of achievement.

Hence, when the opportunity arose, we enrolled our kids in lessons. Ten mornings for \$80 seemed too good to pass up.

Lesson one took place at the local swimming pool. Both girls had a ball, in and out of the water, building confidence in their own ability to cope while wearing a life jacket.

Capsize procedure was next. The club provided a couple of old Sabots for the children (and a couple of adults) to work with. Doing this in the heated water of an indoor swimming centre was a brilliant move on their part. Once again, no problem.

Coming home

The next week was on the water at Lindisfarne. Walking back into the clubhouse was a joyous experience for me. I grew up here, racing dinghies in the 1970s, and many of my happiest memories revolve around the events of those days.

It was a bit like "past lives therapy" to see kids and adults loving their sailing and socialising just as I had done all those happy years ago. While much remained unchanged - the furniture, pictures around the walls and smiling faces everywhere - there were radical and without doubt worthwhile changes to the way the club operates.

The first thing I noted was that the club is no longer the almost exclusive domain of teenage sailors supported by adult officials. These days, a dinghy club attracts a large group of adults, many of them relative newcomers to the sport. There are also lots of youngsters, many of whom are the children of contemporaries of mine from my youth. I can't escape the sensation of "coming home".

The first couple of lessons came and went without incident. The group of 20 or so learners gradually improved both skills and confidence in a safe and controlled environment. Our own children delighted us with their expanding lexicon of terminology and improved levels of confidence and understanding.

Once the "Sabot incident" had happened, a new dimension was added to the equation. Dad was required on the water. Thankfully, the club has a fleet of eight Pacer dinghies specifically dedicated to training. These allow an adult (even one my size!) to skipper a boat in the company of two or three learners. The hugely welcoming organisers of the training sessions were more than happy to allow me to skipper a boat and teach my own kids.

What a joy. My main problem was actually giving up the tiller to the kids. This was so much fun! I'd forgotten how much pleasure there could be in "Messing about in boats". The immediacy of close contact with wind and water and the joy of a responsive dinghy threatened to make me forget the real purpose of these expeditions.

Capsize drill

The next major disaster for Dad was the day when capsize drill needed to be practised. Better wear a wetsuit for this one! The garage was turned upside down looking for the 1980s Rip Curl. Eventually it was discovered, seemingly in one piece. Getting it to fit was an entirely different exercise. Do these things shrink when stored away? I seem to remember buying this about the same time *Australia II* won the Cup. Now I feel like I'm trying to fit *Australia II* into it!

On the water, the big moment came. Reassuring words were muttered over and over.

"Don't worry kids, Dad's done this dozens of times. It's easy. We'll tip the boat over, I'll right it, you two climb back in and I'll follow".

Stages one and two went well. Over easy, no panic. Hell it's cold! Calm and reassuring



Mark Rasmussen is a 48-year-old high school English teacher from Hobart who has been sailing since the age of ten, progressing from Herons to Lasers, Dragons and other assorted keelboats. He and his wife Louise have three children, all of whom have inherited their love of boating.

If you can, get in the boat with your children, expose yourself to the possibility of humiliation and revel in it. There are very few sports where a parent and child can genuinely compete together in open competition. Sailing offers that chance. If you race together, you can compete "for real" against other sailors. There aren't many opportunities for an adult and a pre-teen child to do this.

Trials and triumphs

There is more to this story. All about the purchase of a Heron to keep the kids and Dad on the water in a dinghy, the subsequent trials and triumphs as we finished a dismal distance behind the leaders in our first couple of races, gradual improvement and even the occasional win. The opportunity regularly arises for my daughters to say, "Gee, that was a stupid thing to do, Dad", and for me to agree.

Now, thanks to sailing's version of "Back to the Future", my kids are having a ball, and I get to feel like I'm 17 again for a couple of hours on Sunday afternoons in summer.

National Heron championships loom here on the Derwent in January 2008. The boat has been painted, the rigging replaced. Dinner table conversation regularly revolves around anticipation of upcoming events. We can't wait.

Has it all been worth the effort?

You bet!

instructions for the girls. Boat back up, easy (there are some benefits to being a bit heavier these days!) Help flip the two children back in. All good.

Right, reach up and grab on. Heft yourself up. Shoulders over the side, kick!

Right, reach uppppp...and grab onnnnn... Heft yourself uppppppp... Shoulders... ooover the...siiiiiide, ... kiiiiick!

I can't do it!

The kids think this is funny, the spectators on the club lawn think it's hilarious. Thankfully, I'm splashing and kicking so much I can't hear what's being said. Why did I think it would be a good idea to do this right in front of the clubhouse? One final effort before I call for help. A brainwave hits.

"Girls, I need you to sit on my side of the boat. Move to the other side when I tell you."

Instantly, the Everest-like gunwale sits closer to the water. This time, with Indiana Jones style heroics and strength, I manage to flip my panting frame back into the boat.

Thank god.

Still puffing from the exertion I confidently (at least outwardly) resume tiller duties. What else could go wrong? How about "Dad, that was fun, can we do it again?"

"Maybe next time, kids!"

Give me the tiller

As the lessons continued, the club did a brilliant job of making the whole activity interesting, a great learning experience and most importantly, fun. Later lessons consisted of boat handling practise, basic rules and short races. I found myself becoming a little too competitive in the races; "Give me the tiller kids" was a sign of things to come.

When the lessons concluded we began to reap the benefits back aboard *Samos*. Cruising became a much more participative affair. Sail trim was analysed, steering became a privilege to be argued over, compass courses were checked and charts examined.

Even if we took dinghy sailing no further, much had been gained. Our initial aim of improving our children's awareness and understanding had been achieved. Those wonderful words, so beloved of sailing parents, often emanate from the mouths of our youngsters: "Can we go for a sail, Dad?"

My advice to other parents is to get down to your local club and do the same. Not only will your kids have a wonderful and fulfilling learning experience, but you will have at least as much fun, maybe even more.



ABOVE LEFT: Mark and Molly sharing the fun of sailing.

BELOW: Six-year-old Lilly concentrating on the jib luff as she steers *Samos* in Barnes Bay, Bruny Island. Note the two-finger tiller grip. Three-year-old Tom (at left) is still too young for formal lessons, but able to steer while sitting on Dad's knee.

BELOW: More room in a Pacer than a Sabot for parents to introduce children to the fun of dinghy sailing.

