



I invented Dad Radio and its talkback program to try to get my seven-year-old son, already as unforthcoming as a teenager, to talk in the car about his school day. But Dad Radio wouldn't exist without Dad Airlines, the business I established more than a decade earlier when the two children from my first marriage were in primary school.

Dad Airlines was the result of my ability to mimic with a cupped hand the tinny-sounding announcements that flight crews make. You know the ones: "This is your captain speaking, we're travelling at 70,000 feet above Woop Woop, enjoy your peanuts."

In a desperate effort to settle back-seat arguments on long car-trips, I chanced upon Dad Airlines' announcements: "This is your captain speaking. I would like to remind you that unruly behaviour when travelling on Dad Airlines could result in a major pocket-money fine or the loss of your electronic gadget for a week or longer."

Or, when aiming to get a trip off to a good start: "This is your captain speaking, thank you for joining us on Flight 22 to Merimbula this morning, stopping at Yarragon for lunch and Bairnsdale for dinner and our stopover. If you require any food during the flight, please ask my co-captain, Joanne, and she will provide you with apples and biscuits from her carry bag."

The announcements proved popular and the kids ended up demanding them for any trip to Whereversville. But, as effective as Dad Airlines was in taming the mob, Dad Radio's power to get my seven-year-old talking has taken flight.

The boy, normally only too happy to hum, squeal or sing at any other time of the day or night, was quickly clamming up when asked what was coming up at school or what had been happening.

Because I am in charge of all drop-offs and pick-ups, it makes me first detective in charge of extracting this information, which his mum is often keen to hear during her work day or, if she's home late, when the boy's in bed.

But I wasn't getting much more than "Nothing", "I can't remember" or "Dad, stop asking that", even when I used that Parenting 101 tried-and-true questioning technique: "So did/will anything interesting happen at school today?"

The boy, however, loves music, mimicking things and generally talking nonsense. So I brought Dad Radio to the airwaves one morning on a trip to school.

"You're on Dad Radio, the time now is [look at the digital clock the boy loves to read] 8.42 and the temperature outside is [look to the car thermostat]

DAD RADIO

Paul Mitchell takes to his own personal broadcast to spend quality time with his son.

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nine degrees..." I then tell the non-existent listeners that I have the boy, a very special guest from his school, in the car studio that morning and I welcome him to the talkback program.

"Thanks very much, Dad," the boy says from the back seat in his best interviewee voice.

"So, what's coming up there today at school?" I ask, and it's incredible the detail I am able to extract when I am a radio announcer.

"Well, today we have computers and I really like computers 'cos I get to do my work, it's numbers and I like numbers, and then I can have free time."

"And is there anything else?" I ask, but often don't get to finish because, although it's Dad Radio, my guest has a habit of talking over the top of me, telling me what's happening in the playground, what kids are saying, what happened on an excursion and what he might do in drama or Italian.

By the time the interview's over, we're nearly at school. It's time then for the boy to change guises and voices and become an announcer on Dad Radio, a regular on the program who runs listeners through the morning traffic report. "Well, Dad, it's banked up on the Westgate [he can see it, just to his right] but everywhere else is running smoothly – and on the train lines, there are delays on the Lilydale, Belgrave and Frankston lines."

If there's time before we start the daily battle to find a parking spot, he bursts into a song I announce for him, cutting it off mid-lyric perfectly when I stop the engine. Then he's off and running into the school morning, preparing content for his Drive Time interview later in the day. •

Do you have a story to tell? If so, send a brief outline and contact details to First Person, sundaylifemail@fairfaxmedia.com.au.