

Barry MacDonald's Boy Smarts Newsletter

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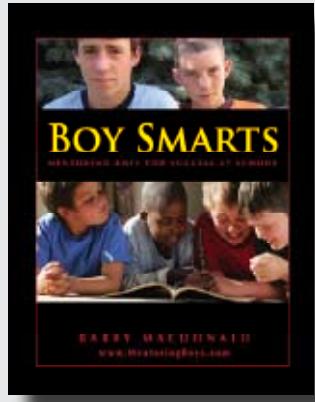
ANAGNORISIS:

*A Parent, Son, and
Teacher Respond
to the Misuse
of Power*

WHENEVER possible, I seek to bring forth the human face of overcoming adversity. If you have been receiving my newsletter for a while, you will likely be aware that my foremost intention is to bring positive focus toward successfully parenting and teaching boys. I also believe we can benefit from occasionally looking at where we might fall short in carrying out our sometimes daunting responsibilities. How can we shift from the all-too-human desires for a particular type of boy in our homes and classrooms, and learn to appreciate the boys we have?

Often, I have the opportunity to interview a boy who has successfully overcome a learning barrier or life hurdle—and sometimes I have the chance to talk to his parent or teacher as well. When I share my findings from these interviews, my hope is to suggest ways we can respond effectively to boys who are floundering, with the resolve that we might collectively learn and grow. And even, I might add, learn as we want the boys in our care to learn—from mistakes, through trial and error, and new approaches.

I would like to share the results of a recent interview with a young boy named Ritchie which highlights the extraordinary influence



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very school staff have over students' learning experiences. My interview with this Grade 10 boy about his school trials and tribulations also reveals the possibility, even after years of teaching, that we may be open to new learning.

As Ritchie spoke about his ups and downs from Grade 5 to Grade 10, I could sense his continuing affection for his Grade 5 teacher, whose creativity and responsiveness helped Ritchie to achieve his best. His motivation came from within—he WANTED to complete assignments. However, this intrinsic motivation changed in Grade 7.

In this transitional year, he locked horns with his teacher, and did not back down, until the very end. By then, his mother and others believed it was too late. It seemed that Ritchie would be seriously, maybe hopelessly, derailed.

The following email from a Grade 3 teacher highlights the extraordinary influence we school staff have over students' learning experiences, and reveals how, even after years of teaching, we can be open to learning new lessons.

Please note that names have been altered to protect privacy.

Dear Barry,

As one of the many teachers who attended your Boy Smarts PD workshop last Friday, I am writing to thank you for the information and strategies that you so passionately shared with us about boys' needs in the classroom. It was a great day. I am also writing to let you know how profound your interview with the very courageous boy, Ritchie, and his mother, Cheryle, was for me.

Could you please tell them both that what they shared with me that day has forever changed the way I will teach? As I listened at the edge of my

seat to Cheryle's comments about her son's struggle in Grade 7, I could not help but think of all of the little boys I have known and taught over the years, and especially of those boys who struggled with power and appropriate behaviour. Cheryle spoke so lovingly about her son and his Grade 7 year that her words went straight to my heart. I could not stop thinking of how I could implement more Boy Smarts ideas. I wanted to rush back to my Grade 3 classroom and respond differently to those boys who misbehave so frequently.

We teachers have so much power to influence whether a child succeeds or fails. Thank you for reminding me of this. Please let Cheryle know that because of her courageous message I am better able to appreciate that challenging students are often misguided and unskilled students who need my support. Listening to her share her story was a deeply moving and a pivotal experience in my twenty year teaching career that I will not forget. I am deeply grateful. Thank you for providing an amazing day!

(name withheld by request)

Grade 3 Teacher

Delta School District



Cheryle has granted me permission to reprint her comments, hoping that it will encourage a loving and respectful dialogue about how we might more effectively respond to the plight of boys—especially those who seem recalcitrant and hard to reach—in our classrooms.

I'd like to tell you a story about my son, Ritchie. He'd be more at the Rambo end of the gender matrix Barry describes. After hearing all about the different ways boy can think, act, and feel here this morning, I think that you get the picture about my son.

A couple of weeks ago Ritchie, his sister and I moved house and some lovely friends rang up and suggested we all get together for dinner, at our new home. "Great," I said, and then I put down the phone, sweating. You see, I can't cook. I follow all the recipes—truly I do—but I'd be better off trading the kitchen in for a vending machine. That means I use up all my energy before the doorbell rings and the little I have left gets burned in a haze of anxiety about whether everyone is having a good time.

This was to be the first time the kids were going to co-host with me in our new home so we had 'the talk.' You know the one: no fighting, be interested and interesting, and absolutely no F- bombs!

The first course was over and as Ritchie had been sitting, as in not moving, for a long while, I could feel his tension at being trapped at the table. In response my anxiety level started to rise. I looked over at him and he was unconsciously folding up his green napkin, back and forth, which he then proceeded to wrap round his head like a bandana. So I'm thinking quickly to myself: Kick him under the table? Too risky! I decide to settle for the evil eye, but before I do so, I quickly glance at our friends first, and realized that the husband is folding up his napkin too and is also tying it round his head like a bandana.

Toward the end of the meal, Ritchie, still wearing his bandana, tells the couple we need to whip up cream for dessert but since we've just moved we can't find the electric whisk and wonders if they have any ideas about how to whip up cream. "No worries," says the bandana-wearing husband. "A fork duck-taped to a

to a drill will work just fine."

In that moment several ideas come together. I had an A-HA! moment. I now know the big word for those moments—the word is called 'anagnorisis.' That's a startling discovery that produces a change from ignorance.

Ritchie had just taught me an important lesson. It's not MY responsibility to make sure everyone has a good time. All that lost energy and anxiety? Nuts! All those years I've stressed out about having company over. Nuts! So if I was wrong about that, what else was I wrong about?

Which brings me to my son's Grade 7 year--that was an absolute disaster. While preparing my thoughts and considering how to describe to you the pain we went through that year, I Googled "the purpose of education." Do you know how many hits I got? 137 million! If I asked all of you teachers in the room here today to write down your definition for the "purpose of education," I'd probably get as many different replies as there are people in the room.

Did you know that each of you carries the responsibility for something that has 137 million different definitions?

Now, let me thicken the plot a little and add the ingredient called 'authority.' As you already know, I used my 'authority' to give Ritchie and his sister 'the talk' before our guests came and I told you what happened there—anagnorisis. I offer the following story with the hopes that you too experience anagnorisis.

As teachers, in your classrooms you have the authority to determine what is important and what is less important. You get to decide whether French class has more status than creativity; whether neatness counts more than ingenuity; and whether math ranks higher than leadership. You also get to decide which students have status. My son's Grade 7 teacher

decided that my son had no status.

I suspected there would be trouble ahead at the very beginning of term. At the parent-teacher night the teacher showed a thick pile of transparencies, mostly text, with a few diagrams. I was overwhelmed by his words. I knew my son would sink that year with the teacher's lengthy descriptions, and the lists of books the kids would be reading in his class, not to mention the worksheets they'd bring home to complete.

Ritchie's life went off track very quickly. Ritchie and his teacher squared off against each other while the rest of the class watched, mesmerized that a boy their age would dare cross this teacher. The power struggle escalated. The teacher started calling my son 'Obno' which was short for Obnoxious. He started sending me emails about Ritchie's obnoxious behaviour.

At the time I did not know that the teacher was also reading the emails he'd send to me aloud to the students in the class, telling them and me how disruptive Ritchie was. He even read Ritchie's report card out loud!

And the class was listening. They knew that in their teacher's eyes, Ritchie was trouble. Ritchie had no status, no worth. Week-by-week I could see my son sinking further into despair. One night before bed-time he knelt down beside me and he prayed that he wouldn't wake up the next morning. I realized that we'd sunk to a whole new place. Ritchie had stopped believing in himself. He did not perceive meaning in his own life anymore. I thought we'd reached rock bottom. I couldn't imagine how our life could get any worse, but it did.

By April the kids and their parents in Ritchie's class had been given a clear message about who my son was by the teacher, the authority figure. "Ritchie was a bad kid—trouble," I imagined they thought.

So one day some classmates decided to set up a Facebook account in Ritchie's name. They posted his name and his full address and filled it with degrading pornographic details about what Ritchie supposedly liked to do and was willing to do with those who were interested.

Remember, I told you that there are 137 million entries about the "purpose of education"? Would you like to hazard a guess about how many hits Ritchie's Facebook entry got and how many sick pedophiles and Internet stalkers found him? Can you begin to imagine how I felt as a parent, as I read about what those people wanted to do with my 12 year old son?

I contacted the RCMP and I learned that once information is posted on Facebook, we don't own it anymore so they have no obligation to remove it. But the RCMP were so concerned about what might happen to Ritchie that they applied to the Canadian Federal Government to get a warrant to make Facebook reveal the IP address of the computer that created the Facebook account. It took weeks, during which time I lied to Ritchie about why the police were frequently calling our home and visiting, ringing to check that he was safe.

Finally, the paperwork was completed and the RCMP contacted me about the outcome. I was shocked to learn who set up the Facebook account. It was our neighbours' kids, two students from Ritchie's class. As I began to settle down, it struck me that over the short course of eight months the kids in Ritchie's class had become so conditioned to seeing that Ritchie was bad and had no worth that they set him up to be a target, just like his teacher did.

This sent painful shockwaves into Ritchie, our family, and beyond into the community where we used to live. At times I feel deeply saddened that I did not take more immediate action with the teacher early

on when I knew my son and his teacher were locked in a nasty power struggle. I recognize that I didn't have a wide enough perspective to see what was really happening in his class, and by the time the Facebook disaster became apparent, it seemed too late. My son didn't want to live anymore and the address of a supposed sexually provocative and willing 12 year old was on the World Wide Web.

That was three years ago and we have moved forward in many ways. From today's happier and healthier place, I am proud to stand before you to speak up as a parent. From the very depths of my heart, I want to say something to all of you teachers here today. Please, use your authority to give each student status and worth, particularly each challenging and misbehaving boy. I know it takes courage to be a teacher. I stand here today in awe of you. I couldn't do your job—the kids would all be dead by lunchtime! Please have the courage to be a learner too, and recognize that each boy has something valuable to teach us. Yes, my son is resilient—as you just heard Barry highlight in his interview with him—but he is still a boy who needs our collective support to find his way. I am blessed that he is back on track now and loving his life as a Grade 10 student. I have you teachers to thank for this."



Beyond the very real and critical issue of finding ways to help children manage a dizzying array of 'info-noise' that bombards them daily, we might also consider how we mentor children to respond to the Internet's barrage of increasing ethical and moral dilemmas. I also wonder how we might provide boys like Ritchie with more positive opportunities to understand the nature of power in relationships.

Although we did not record Ritchie's questions and comments during the interview as it was all very spontaneous, I do recall some of his questions: "Why do adults try to be in charge all the time?"; "Why can't teachers let me decide what is important for me?"; and "Why can't I make up my own ways of showing teachers what I know?" These are worthy questions: knowing we are capable is the true source of self-esteem. Yet, in their own way, Ritchie's questions also inquire about the 'purpose of education.'

In *Boys on Target: Raising Boys into Men of Courage and Compassion*, I point out that we are facing many challenges as we mentor boys today: "Once we might have said to children, 'If you pay close attention to what I teach you, you'll learn what you need to know.' Today, we are acutely aware that we don't know all the answers that children will need, or even the questions they will ask."

Studies have shown that increased testosterone levels at puberty can propel a boy who is struggling with power and authority to become overly aggressive, unless taught more socially constructive modes of interaction. In *Boy Smarts Action Study Guide* I say that "resistance is more common among boys who feel powerless and are driven to assert their autonomy in exaggerated ways." Those of us who are mentoring boys must question what we are doing to help boys at this developmental stage. How can we be less reactive and more responsive to their pressing needs? How do we guide boys to express themselves in acceptable ways that don't infringe on the rights of others? How can we scaffold their learning experiences in ways that help them to assume increasing responsibility over their lives?

As you consider a particular boy's struggle toward autonomy, consider the importance of your role in modeling the right use of power. It can be difficult—especially with a young man who may be towering over you, riding unfamiliar waves of testosterone, and itching to duel with you or with someone—not to get drafted into a power struggle. As teachers, one of your many challenges is not to assert your manhood or womanhood or personhood or adulthood, but to keep your own center and your own sense of humour; managing and recognizing the bravado that so commonly masks anxiety, helping young people to learn that power can be collaborative and respectful. **Teaching** not only what we know, but also who we are, we can guide young people such as Ritchie and the ones in your classroom (you can name them to yourselves!) to develop their own personal power and natural leadership skills in ways that will benefit, not hurt, this speeded up, interconnected world. •••

Barry MacDonald
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If you are like me and struggled with pronouncing “**Anagnorisis**”?

Visit www.howjsay.com
It's a great website tool for children too!



••• *Boys on Target: Raising Boys into Men of Courage and Compassion*

A wonderful gift for a parent or teacher this Christmas!

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Vancouver, March 5 - New

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