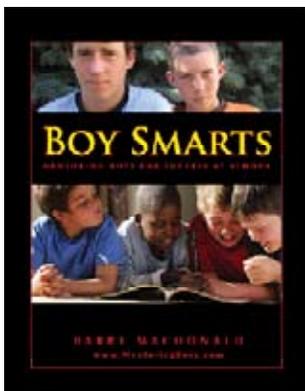




Do you have the report card blues?

RESPONDING TO THE YEAR-END REPORT CARD



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With the promise of summer just around the corner, year-end school activities remind us that soon children will be bringing home their final report card. This *Day of Judgment* often stirs anxiety for boys—and for parents. Do you remember that fluttery feeling in your stomach as you handed over your own report card to your mother or father, unsure of what reaction would follow? Maybe now, as a parent, you have a corresponding sense of dread about what your son's grades signify.

Most boys, whether elementary students or older, feel anxiety about final grades, although older boys tend to be more guarded, their apprehension less obvious.

Recently in my office an 11-year-old boy summed up his own apprehension: "Report cards are like the Stanley Cup. You never know if you are going to win or lose until the bitter end." While this boy's notion of making or not making the grade may sound rather dramatic, worry about being judged is common, and calls for caring adults to respond with empathy and optimism.

We understand that macho culture teaches boys that *It's not cool to do well in school* and only *losers* care about getting high

marks. But when we invite dialogue or offer help, and boys shrug their shoulders in stony silence, even the wisest, most experienced parent feels frustrated.

As a classroom teacher long ago, I would kick-off each report card season by having students report on my performance as a teacher. After all, how could I expect them to be receptive to me evaluating them if I didn't lead by example and demonstrate openness to feedback and the courage to embrace change? As trust in my leadership and openness grew, student feedback about how I could improve as a teacher became increasingly specific and constructive.

Students' wide-ranging, often insightful advice led me to make small changes with big pay-off. For example, I learned to check in with students and other teachers about project deadlines before assigning final due dates to avoid overwhelming students with unreasonable workloads. I also learned that students appreciated how high expectations produce good results, that low expectations produce poor ones, and that we needed to work collaboratively to set out expectations that were rigorous but reachable.

Thoughtful conversations with students led us to reflect on how we functioned as a community of learners and how students could influence their own learning experiences. Boys' contributions to our discussions revealed that they often had differing ideas than girls about what leads to success. Boys seemed to place more value on intelligence over effort, believing that they could learn without working hard if they were smart. Many boys alleged that only *smart* boys got good grades and maintained popularity, and that to show obvious effort—to work hard—put a boy at risk for being called a *suck-up*, or worse, a *fag*. Regrettably, research indicates that this type of peer pressure can be overwhelming for boys, leading them to develop self-defeating attitudes and behaviours around schoolwork.

During the primary years boys are typically alive with a love of learning. As they get older, boys usually change



their views of learning and academic expectations. In *Boy Smarts* I emphasize that “younger boys tend to maintain high expectations for success, even in the face of repeated failure; older boys do not. Young boys tend to see effort as uniformly positive, older boys view it as a double-edged sword. For older boys, failure following high effort carries more negative implications in how they view their ability, than failure that results from minimal or no effort. A boy's perception about his success or failure either expands or inhibits his learning—and sometimes it's easier to not try at all.”

As boys become increasingly discouraged about prospects of earning elusive high grades—mostly to impress their parents—they become increasingly nervous about bringing report cards home. I recall one Grade 7 boy explaining that if he brought lousy grades home, his summer would be filled by lectures, and told that he was lazy and would never amount to much. Another claimed that if he didn't get a *B* or better in each subject, he could forget the new water skis he so desired. A student named Billy seemed highly agitated as he announced that his parents routinely fought with each other over his grades. During a private conversation with Billy, I learned that he considered himself to be the cause of his parent's unhappy marriage. Later, as a school counsellor and district coordinator helping students overcome a myriad of obstacles to learning, I had plenty of opportunity to witness how confusion about grading, and rigid notions of achievement commonly lead to family conflict, to blaming and shaming.

Whether you or your son have the report card blues, or whether you are simply interested in strengthening the quality of your parenting responses at this potentially charged time, I offer the following guidelines to help you prepare yourself to talk about the year-end report card with your son in loving ways:

Ease the Tension

Appreciate that your son may be overwhelmed by the stress of year-end activities—both social and educational—and that he may need time away from school before talking with you about his final report card. Even though older boys may appear aloof and blasé about report cards, remember that the dominant male culture pushes boys to hide their worries and fears. To avoid exacerbating his disappointment or nervousness, take some time to ease your own tension by reading the report card alone as you take in its overall message.

Seek Perspective

Regardless of your son's learning abilities, recognize that some school years are more challenging than others. Certain grades are transitional years, such as the shift from primary to intermediate, or the first year in high school, and each boy has his own unique approach to managing change and transition.

Know that the phrase *not meeting expectations* may not adequately reflect the progress your son has made. Research in child development and education shows that some children simply need more time to learn, and may not be as ready for the next stage of learning as their classmates. The onset of adolescence, when boys need to learn new ways to handle peer pressure, hormonal shifts, and swings in confidence, can be a particularly unsettling time for boys.

Focus on the Positive

Recognize that your son needs to know that you understand and appreciate where he shows motivation and strength. If your son does poorly in math, but excels

at calculating statistics during the *Stanley Cup* hockey play-offs (*Go Canucks Go!*), make the connection for him. Help him to see that he possesses computational skills that he could find a way to demonstrate in school next year. Don't pressure him, but let him know that you believe in him, in his capability, and in his future.

Maintain Your Cool

Remember that report cards do not measure your son's worth, your parenting skills—or your worth. While report cards can sometimes give us helpful feedback, they can also be intimidating and demoralizing. Instilling fear in your son serves only the cause of shame, and may lead to aversion—to school, to teachers—even to you. Years of fear-based learning lead to an increased risk of future antisocial behaviour, including crime and substance abuse.

Be Aware of Gender Stereotypes

Many boys indicate that they view reading and writing as *girly*. Be alert to how this perception can influence you to have different expectations for your son than your daughter. Gendered expectations can also influence some boys to avoid being associated with *feminine* areas of learning. As children build their personal identity by drawing on the messages they receive from adults, peers, and the wider environment, discuss with your son how many versions of masculinity exist and that you value his version.

Increase Male Guidance

With many children living in single-parent families, mostly headed by mothers, it may be tempting to conclude that a lack of fathering may be responsible for boys' floundering achievement. Interestingly, the data on children growing up in families headed by single mothers, collected through the Canadian study *National Longitudinal Survey of Children and Youth*, show that most children who experience academic difficulties do not come from single-parent families. School achievement is much more complicated than whether a child has the

support of one or two caregivers in the home. We know that boys benefit from the encouraging support of any parent as a mentor. Still, many teachers attest that male mentors could play more active roles in boys' school lives, especially to teach boys and model ways that reading and other literacy practices are worth pursuing.



Know that your Expectations are Powerful

Regardless of the source of your son's underachievement, be aware that your feedback about his academic abilities may more strongly influence his perceptions of his competence than you realize. Research shows that children are more motivated when they believe that their parents are involved and interested in their school and encourage them to do well. Over time, your son will internalize your positive expectations and attitudes toward school.



Facilitate Boys to Talk Freely

Adults make mistakes. In *Boy Smarts* I say: "We need to let boys air their questions and criticisms... When a boy complains about homework, he may have a valid concern if the work has been poorly designed or the deadline is unreasonable. Perhaps playground rules are better suited to adult convenience rather than a boy's developing needs. When we engage in genuine dialogue with boys they learn to respectfully offer their criticisms and perspective."

Think Beyond Grades

Given that there are currently almost 700 prescribed learning outcomes in the first four years of school, it is difficult to imagine how your son might be achieving at the same rate as other students, or that a single grade might summarize his achievement. Many school critics believe that school grades conceal more than they reveal. Consider how a **B** in Science says little about what your son can do, what he understands, or where he needs help. Moreover, the basis for that grade, as for any grade, necessarily has an element of subjectivity. A teacher can meticulously record scores for one test or homework assignment after another, eventually calculating averages down to a hundredth of a percentage point, but that doesn't make these individual marks any more informative.

Ultimately, the report card is best used as a communication tool to help learners reflect on learning successes and areas of struggle where needs have yet been met—not for labelling, ranking, and blaming. For some learners, low marks may be a symptom of another problem that could, in an open and compassionate space, be brought into the light. While the following list of possibilities is not intended to be exhaustive or complete, it is my hope that it will help you dig deeper to consider what's beneath your son's struggle with learning.

Take into consideration that your son may be:

- involved in too many extracurricular activities, or be not outdoors enough? (see Chapter 15, *Boys on Target*)
- highly kinesthetic and struggle with sitting for lengthy periods of time (see Chapters 22 & 23, *Boys on Target*)
- frustrated by an auditory processing problem? (see Chapter 17, *Boys on Target*)
- resentful about being held in at recess time as a method to *motivate* him? (see Chapter 17, *Boys on Target*)
- a visual-spatial learner who prefers hands-on learning activities? (see Chapter 24, *Boys on Target*)

—challenged with an attention problem?
(see Chapter 16, *Boys on Target*)

—hooked on video games?
(see Chapter 14, *Boys on Target*)

—overwhelmed by anxiety?
(see Chapter 12 and 28, *Boys on Target*)

—struggling to develop his independence?
(see Chapter 30, *Boys on Target*)



—overly-dependent on parents to do for him when he can do for himself? (see Guideline 23, *Boy Smarts*)

—bullied at school? (see Chapter 11, *Boys on Target*)

—lacking motivation or bored at school?
(see Chapter 24, *Boy Smarts*)

—in the shadow of a sibling? (see Guideline 24 in *Boy Smarts*)

—not evaluated at school in a manner that reveals his intelligence? (see Guidelines 81, 86 & 87, *Boy Smarts*)

—humiliated by harsh rankings and equates failure with character deficiencies? (see Guideline 82, *Boy Smarts*)

—embarrassed by a teacher who grades publicly or disciplines harshly (see Guideline 16, *Boy Smarts*)

—frustrated by a lack of clarity over what is expected of him at school? (see Guideline 84, *Boy Smarts*)

—perfectionist and exaggerating his mistakes?
(see Guideline 89, *Boy Smarts*)

—struggling with an inflexible learning environment?
(see Chapter 31, *Boys on Target*)

—in a power struggle with you or his teacher?
(see Guideline 42, *Boy Smarts*)



Years of providing guidance and support as a parent, teacher and counsellor, have shown me that each of us has innate talents and abilities. Schooling makes available opportunities for our children to develop these talents as well as develop capabilities that do not come easily. With the encouragement of supportive adults, a boy's own creativity and resilience can also help him to discover a constructive life path. More than genetics, more than intelligence, more than any other single factor, it is the belief and encouragement of caring adults that can help boys become motivated toward achievement. When respected others believe in a boy's potential, he can come to believe in the possibility, and reality, of success—as defined by him, not simply by letters or numbers or words on a chart. • • •

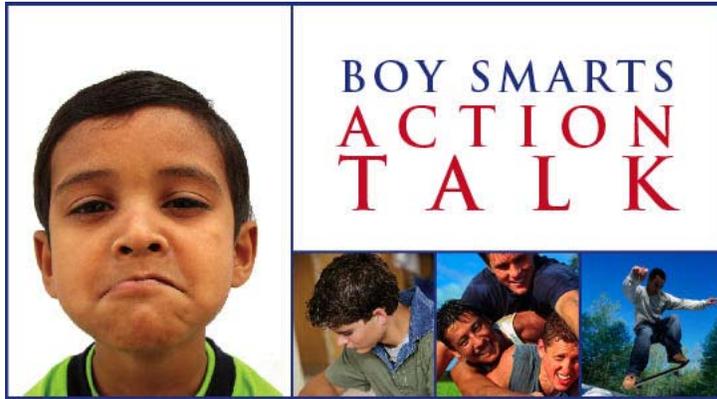
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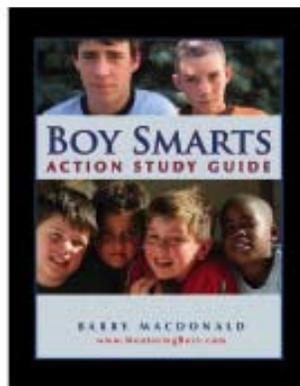
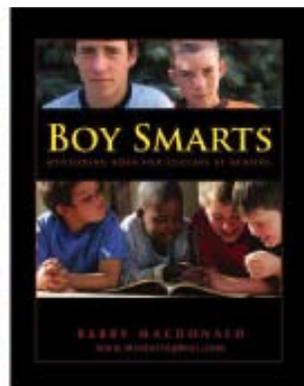
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