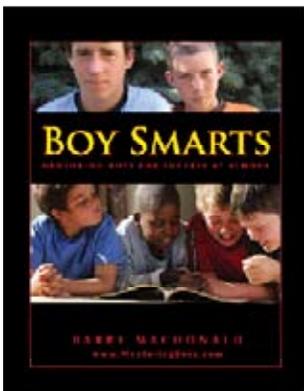




Advocating Success for Boys

In 2006 *The Boy Crisis* took center stage on the cover of *Newsweek*, claiming that seven of the largest U.S. school districts had male dropout rates approaching 50%. A 2010 six-part series of articles published in *The Globe and Mail* posited several reasons for boys falling behind girls in school, including the *boy code*, developmental differences, and lack of positive role models. The 2010 U.S. documentary *Waiting for Superman* pronounced even more scathing criticism: American public schools were broken and bad teachers were largely to blame.

As I travel and meet with parents and teachers at *Boy Smarts* workshops, however, I have met many who recognize that alarmist headlines can do more harm than good, setting up targets of blame and inviting clichéd solutions. Aware that the differences among boys can be greater than those between groups of boys and groups of girls, these parents and teachers don't want to stereotype boys, rush to simplistic solutions, or pit the needs of boys against those of girls. An extensive 2011 report by Dr. Paul Cappon on *the boy crisis* admits that while Canadian boys taken as a group lag behind girls academically, especially in reading, it remarks that the label *boy crisis* is useful only as an entry point into a more nuanced examination of the needs of students who face barriers in education. Like the thoughtful teachers and parents I have met, Dr. Cappon concludes that there is no one-size-fits-all solution.



One principle that there is consensus about is that the quality of teacher-student relationship affects boys' academic outcomes. As a 2005 study entitled *Teachers, Schools, and Academic Achievement* reports: "A teacher has more impact on student learning than any other factor controlled by school systems, including class size, school size and the quality of after-school programs—or even which school a student is attending."

Knowing how important teachers are in their sons' lives, parents may fret about how teachers respond—or fail to respond—to their sons' pressing needs. When we feel frightened for ourselves or our children, it is only too easy to point fingers.

In the best of all possible worlds, parents and teachers would consistently form alliances to identify and scaffold the learning needs of struggling students. In this world, worried parents and over-burdened teachers would in turn have generous support for the hard work they do.

Regular emails from parents and teachers remind me that this is not always the case.

A recent letter from a mother in Ottawa shows how, over time, it is possible to work through problems at school and avoid the proverbial blame game. This mother's searching reflection is the focus of this month's *Boy Smarts Newsletter*. If you are a worried parent, perhaps this heartfelt story will encourage you to work on building rapport with your son's teachers as you advocate for his educational needs.



Dear Barry,

*I had the opportunity several years ago to hear you speak at an event in Ottawa, and have since read your books and have been receiving your newsletters. So it was with great anticipation that I opened the January 2012 Newsletter entitled **Helping Boys Regulate Emotions.***

My boy is now a month from his 16th birthday, but as I read the newsletter and the story of Ethan, I was taken back to my Dante's elementary school years and the struggles we had with his emotional ups and downs. He was fortunate to have a wonderfully insightful teacher in kindergarten, who, rather than telling me his constant movement and activity in the class was a problem, explained to me that she felt he needed room to move. She tried to configure the environment such that his movement would have the least impact on the rest of the class. She did this by seating him at the edge of the story circle so that when he stretched out, wiggled, or jumped onto his knees he could put his hand up higher and he would not distract his neighbours. Apparently he was very enthusiastic and had lots to say, and got upset that he sometimes did not get chosen, but if he got unruly, she would ask him to return to his desk and rejoin the group when he felt he was ready. When I heard about her adaptations I was surprised, as I had heard she was a strict no nonsense sort of woman. So my first Parent-Teacher interview was sort of breathtaking, and in retrospect, defined my interactions with his subsequent teachers, because I had a model for what understanding and mentoring could look like.

Unfortunately, my son's experiences with elementary school thereafter were much like Ethan's experience, and my interactions with his teachers much like Ethan's mom's.

Grade 3 was especially difficult for Dante. At our first interview, I was told that he was very smart, was well-liked by his classmates and showed real

engagement in the lessons. I was also told that he was disruptive, that he could not control his temper, and that he could not stay on task. This was not new, but what was different was that he was spending a lot of time in the hallway. When I asked for examples of specific incidents and behaviours, I was told he spoke out of turn without putting up his hand. After further prodding, I was told that he was enthusiastic about the lessons, always had something to contribute which was interesting and on topic, but he did not wait his turn. When I asked Dante about this, he told me he never got a turn, and so he had to blurt it out if his classmates were to hear the wonderful things he had to say. He told me his teacher had told him numerous times that he knew Dante would have the answer but the teacher needed to give other children a chance to speak. I was told that he kicked chairs and scowled and stomped to his desk when he was not happy with something the teacher had told him. I was told this behaviour was disrespectful and unacceptable. Thus the removal from the classroom and to the hallway. This seemed to be punitive and not particularly helpful and I said so.

The teacher told me he had no alternative as he had other kids to teach. One day in December Dante came home from school especially frustrated and told me he never wanted to go back, that he hated school and thought his life was horrible and wanted to die.



He obviously got past this point, but I think it is really important for teachers to know that the small things they do in the interest of managing their class can have a big impact on some kids.

Although I was always involved with my kids school life, always went for interviews regardless of grades, Dante's comments on that day were a wake up call and sent me to the school to meet with the principal and the teacher to ensure that my son did not disengage further from education. We came up with a plan whereby the teacher would communicate weekly through Dante's journal and if the teacher was displeased, he would give me specific examples of behaviours and what had been done. At home I would talk to Dante about the incidents and encouraged him to find ways to lower his frustration before he became angry and acted out.

I was surprised that the teacher did not seem to be creative with Dante, that he was really great at telling him what was not acceptable, but not at giving Dante some ideas of what to do instead with these emotions. I was searching for something to tell Dante that he could do when he felt himself getting angry or frustrated.

I asked Dante to describe what it felt like inside himself when he was getting angry. He said it was bubbling out of him and he could not stop it. So we talked about a pot of water on the stove. We explored ways to stop it from boiling over - that was when he was angry and wanted to kick the chair. He thought of putting on the lid, but decided it would still boil over, it just took longer. He then thought of turning down the heat, or taking the pot off the burner. I asked him if he could feel when it was going to boil over and if he could maybe in that moment imagine he was a pot of water and try to turn down the heat or take the pot off - we decided this would mean taking deep breaths and counting to ten, or moving away from the situation until he could be calm. He was pretty dubious about this visualization experiment, but apparently tried it with some success. We also talked a lot about levels of unhappiness - he often during this period told me his life was horrible. So we talked about how horrible. He decided "1" on the scale would be losing

a puzzle piece or stubbing his toe. He decided "10" would be if the house burned down, or if he had no food to eat like the kids on TV. So he was able to tell me when he came home where he was - often upwards of "5" but never 10, so it was okay and he could manage it. He struggled through the rest of elementary school, and often came home crabby and telling me he had used up all his "good stuff" at school and had no more for me. Good enough! At this point I just wanted him to survive the year.

Later, Dante encountered a particularly prickly young music teacher with whom he had numerous altercations - she often called Dante out for talking in class. One day she berated the class for following his lead, just like "Pavlov's dog". Later in the class she apparently called them children, so my delightful son said "at least we are not dogs anymore". His teacher, totally frustrated when the class broke into laughter, asked him to leave and remain inside at recess for detention. Talking with Dante about this, I learned that he really disliked this class, he wasn't learning anything, and he thought that the teacher hated him. I asked him if he knew what "Pavlov's dog" referred to. He said no, but did not like being called a dog. He liked it less when I told him about Pavlov's experiments. I wondered aloud if maybe she was just frustrated because she only had the students for one hour every other day, had a whole curriculum to get through, and spent much of the class dealing with the fallout of his disruptive behaviour. And perhaps that was partly why he was not learning anything. I was gratified that he actually considered this point of view. As I could not talk to the teacher before the next day, I sent him with a letter, and asked him to apologize to her, and tell her that he would try to keep his remarks to himself so that she could teach the class. In my letter, I told the teacher about our discussion and that I hoped she would use the time of the detention to talk to him about why he was disengaged with her class and that if she explained why his behaviour was troublesome, given his popularity, she

might find an ally in getting the class on board. I heard later that day that his detention was spent sitting in a chair watching her mark papers. He did behave in class after that, but what a missed opportunity.

Dante was fortunate to have a really great, insightful and creative teacher for his last two years of elementary school and I am happy to say, he is currently doing well in grade ten. He continues to have good marks, enjoys his classes, has big plans for his future education and possible career paths. His report cards still include messages from teachers indicating that he needs to focus in class. His art teacher last year moved him every couple of weeks as he talked too much with his friends, but told us "unfortunately he makes friends everywhere".

His Computer Studies teacher this year told me that he is way too chatty, but really all the kids are and they seem to be on task. In fact, he is beginning to think that the way the kids work, interactively, bouncing ideas off each other is perhaps a function of their generation, and that maybe an interactive, noisy, productive and happy classroom is not such a bad thing.

Thanks for your thoughtful, insightful, encouraging lessons and stories in your newsletters. I still have a few years before I can safely say that my kids have navigated the path towards self determination, and I appreciate all the parenting/mentoring help I can get!

Ann

Ottawa, Ontario

REAL MEN READ WEEK!

**JOIN BARRY MACDONALD AT
ST. TERESA SCHOOL, KITCHENER
MAY 5 - COMMUNITY WORKSHOP
BOY SMARTS ACTION TALK**



Dear Ann,

Thank you for writing about your parental experiences with supporting Dante through his many years of schooling. Mentoring our children through the countless difficulties they will encounter in life can at times feel daunting, even overwhelming. Your thoughtful comments echo themes that parents frequently write to me about; however, your story offers a uniquely long-range perspective, highlighting the importance of a sustaining optimism and practicality.

While you have not proffered a specific question, I have, with your permission, taken the liberty of using parts of your story to show what effective mentoring and advocacy for our children can do. Through the combined efforts of you and your son's teachers, Dante received the kinds of supports that best practices research recommends for responding to the varied needs of boys at school.

Movement Helps Learning to Thrive

It is wonderful that Dante's kindergarten teacher understood the importance of touching, doing, and moving to enhance learning. Interestingly, neuroscientists have also discovered that by boosting the ability of neurons to communicate with one another, movement enhances thinking. Movement activities that stimulate inner ear motion, like swinging, rolling, and jumping, help children especially well to process ideas more effectively and to focus their attention. The inner ear (vestibular) and motor activity (cerebellar) regulate incoming sensory data,

enabling balance, coordination, and the transformation of thinking into action. Movement and learning engage in a constant interplay.

In the same way that movement and exercise shapes up the muscles, it also strengthens key areas of the brain: the basal ganglia, cerebellum, and corpus callosum. As movement fuels the brain with oxygen, it also feeds it high-nutrient food (neurotrophins) to enhance growth and greater connections between neurons. While many people know that sensory motor integration is fundamental to school readiness and that learning in the early years has to be hands-on for patterns to develop, many of us dismiss the connection once children enter school; however, research suggests that the positive relationship between movement and learning continues throughout life—even for us adult learners.

Speaking of the continuing need for movement throughout life, you might be interested to know that the *American Cancer Society* recently released a report stating that women who spent more than six hours a day sitting had a 37% higher risk of premature mortality, compared to those who sat fewer than three hours a day. Other studies have reported that chronic sitters are at increased risk of cardiovascular disease, obesity and metabolic disorders. Apparently, researchers believe that sitting for lengthy periods of time causes our bodies to shut muscle activity down and go into sleep mode. Alternatively, moving—perhaps something as simple as standing at a desk—boosts both our muscle activity and our brain's alertness.

Be Aware of How Fidgeting Can Stigmatize

There appears to be growing evidence that boys who are less mature and might fidget or move their bodies more frequently are at increased risk of being medicated when they seem less calm and mature than their peers. Recent *University of British Columbia* research published in the March issue of the *Canadian Medical Journal*, which assessed 900,000 B.C. children between 1997 and 2008,

found that boys born in December were 30% more likely to be diagnosed with ADHD, and 41% more likely to be prescribed medication than boys born in January.

If your boy is born in the last quarter of the year, especially if he seems to need a great deal of movement, you might consider holding him back from starting kindergarten until he has had a bit more time to mature.



Build Trust between Parents and Teachers

When parents and teachers join forces in a climate of mutual respect, they can both benefit with the specialized knowledge each has about a child. Each side has a particular vantage point that can shine a light on what's beneath a boy's misbehaviour or apathy.

In *Boys on Target* I say: "More than any other group in our society, it is parents who care about making schools, classrooms, and learning work for their boys. When boys are striking out, it is essential that parents be consulted as partners. Parents and teachers may have different perspectives on boys' learning, but they share a common goal—making sure that children receive the best education possible. Mutually respectful communication between home and school takes advantage of both perspectives to provide children with the kind of care and education that will help them thrive."

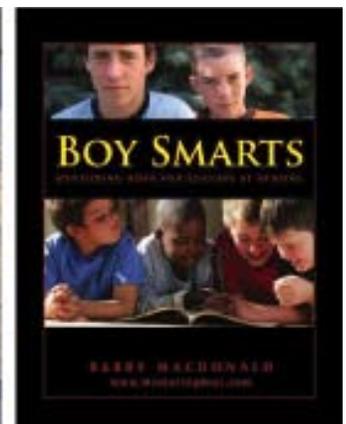
Remember that Teachers Want Success for Your Son

When their child is distressed at school, parents can find it hard to maintain a calm equanimity. To bolster parental courage and maintain strong communication between home and school, remember that teachers know that their job is to meet the needs of all children, and to pay particular attention to youth who struggle with learning or behaviour. If you are a parent struggling, as Ann did years ago, I encourage you to let go of any anxiety you may have about your son being a burden in the classroom. Remember that even in the current climate of diminishing classroom supports, it is still a teacher's job to respond to varying learning styles and needs. Those who are called to the vocation of teaching are committed to doing their best for all children.

Use Neutral Language

Remember too that when parents and teachers use charged or subjective terms to communicate their concerns, the other party may get confused, defensive, even reactive. Using neutral, factual language to describe behaviour and achievement rather than interpretive, subjective language can help you sidestep conflict and explore creative and practical interventions for struggling students.

Available at Amazon.ca



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Invite Additional Input

As a conversation between two people may benefit from a different perspective, consider inviting another teacher to a parent-teacher conference or a scheduled meeting. You might bring a spouse, another care-giving adult, or someone with pertinent information or insight to the meeting. Teachers often tell me how illuminating it has been to learn about a student's life at home or in the community. Inviting a new perspective can help both parent and teacher view a boy's struggle from a fresh vantage point.

Take a Stand against Disrespectful Sanctions

Dante was fortunate to have had a mother courageous enough to risk disapproval by questioning the practice of exiling him to the hallway when he misbehaved. Evidence shows children are more likely to grow into caring and ethical people when they are treated with respect rather than manipulative control. Rather than simply venting her frustration, Ann wisely set up a meeting with the teacher and school principal to explore alternatives to time-outs in the hallway. Using a home-school communication journal that contained specific and objective language to describe misbehaviour was a good start, and provided Ann with everyday insight into the kind of stresses Dante was experiencing in school. If you are interested in learning more about how to go about setting up such a conference with a teacher, read relevant chapters entitled *Parent-Teacher Conferences* and *Discipline that Teaches Rather than Punishes* in *Boys on Target* and *Boy Smarts*.



Boy OH Boy!

Practical Wisdom for Raising Boys



May 6, 2012
Markham, ON
9am - 1pm

Presenters...

Barry MacDonald
Sonia Nicolucci

flyer and details on website
www.MentoringBoys.com

Discipline is a Mentoring Process

Most teachers and parents know that effective discipline is not a simply stopgap measure—a short-term timeout aimed toward a goal of outward compliance. Sound discipline practices help students become increasingly self-aware and sensitive to others around them. While it can be immensely challenging to connect with some students, creative teachers can find ways to engage almost any student by tapping into strengths and interests.

Address Underlying Issues

Rather than punishing students by sending them to the hallway or to the principal's office, best practice success initiatives address underlying causes of misbehaviour and underachievement. For example, teachers can find creative ways to capitalize on some students' high energy levels, seeing energy as a resource, and helping to channel it in appropriate and sometimes helpful ways. Given simple supports, students can develop more clarity about their own needs and more ability to self-monitor their own impulses. See the chapter entitled *When Sitting Still is Not Enough* in *Boys on Target* for 12 practical suggestions to build resilience for active learners.

Appreciate the Pressures on Teachers

While it is reasonable to expect that Dante's teachers would engage him in creative problem-solving, the reality is that teachers today can be overwhelmed by the numbers of students with increasingly complex needs. Often teachers are fully aware of the critical difference small adaptations and interventions can make, but they lack the time and resources to implement these.

Sometimes, teachers are even forced to paddle upstream against insurmountable odds as they advocate for students. In British Columbia the government has recently passed new legislation—Bill 22—that includes what has been referred to as a “cash-for-kids” clause, specifying that teachers will be paid extra for each student in a class beyond 30 students. Not surprisingly, Susan Lambert,

President of the BC teachers' union, has criticized the Bill's misplaced priorities: “It's despicable that they think teachers would trade our professional ethos of care for money. We've been advocating for decades for the conditions that kids need. All students deserve to be in a class where they can get the individual care and attention they need, but after a decade of cuts BC teachers can't keep on filling the gaps for a generation of children growing up in the highest child poverty rate in Canada.”



All Hands on Deck!

When Bill Gates broadcast in his 2009 TED talk that “Great teachers make great schools,” I couldn't have agreed more. It takes passionate, committed, and dedicated teachers to help prepare our children for the 24/7 global information economy now driving change, challenge, and opportunity.

Although I was gratified that teachers were being publicly celebrated, I still had lingering questions.

In this age of diminishing resources, could striving for “greatness” be yet another pressure for teachers, especially if its definition is linked to potentially misleading numbers on test scores?

Of course, teachers are valued professionals who deserve our deepest respect and appreciation.

But what happens if we as concerned citizens do not rally behind teachers when their ability to advocate for children is limited by outside forces? What happens to the morale of all those in the educational community when we suggest that teachers can go it alone?

Teachers need the input of parents and the participation of the wider community in the mammoth enterprise of educating citizens of the future.

Bill Gates tipped his hat to teachers, but he failed to mention that great schools come about not simply through the individual efforts of heroic teachers.

Great schools—where children’s desire to learn is honoured and nurtured—come about through the collaborative efforts of educators and parents.

Together we can help young people to realize their strengths, and to find their places in the communities to which they belong. •••

Barry MacDonald
MentoringBoys.com



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Parenting workshop
How to talk so boys will listen and listen so boys will talk

- Calgary January 21 **Sold out**
- Vancouver February 4 **Sold out**
- **Calgary** March 17 **Sold out**
- **Vancouver** April 14 10% open
- **Kitchener** May 5 50% open

Fall workshops announced soon...



Bring Barry MacDonald to your next conference or community event!



SMART START FOR BOYS

FOR BOYS FROM BIRTH TO KINDERGARTEN

Vancouver • April 14 **Sold out**

Is your learning community interested in hosting a **Boy Smarts Action Talk Saturday workshop?**



We are currently setting up workshops for the 2012 - 2013 school year and welcome invitations from schools willing to provide a venue, AV equipment, day of event operational support, and assistance with promoting a Saturday workshop.

For details please contact Elizabeth at...
info@mentoringboys.com



"Barry MacDonald is full of ideas to help boys"

Janet Steffenhagen - Vancouver Sun

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