

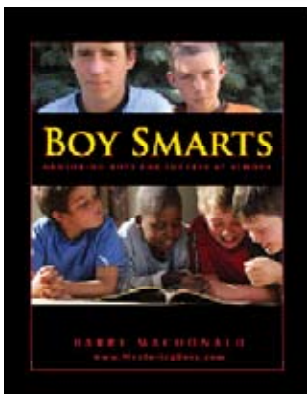


## Helping Boys Regulate Emotions at Home



**Learning** to self-regulate emotions is a fundamental task of growing up. A boy who can stay calmly focussed and alert can better integrate information coming in from outside and inside, and then choose where to direct his thoughts and actions. Increased capacity to monitor and manage emotions will boost a boy's confidence to pursue everyday goals.

**Many** parents and teachers are not aware that from a very early age boys struggle more frequently to manage their emotions than girls. Sebastian Kraemer, a child and adolescent psychiatrist, published his findings in the British Medical Journal, claiming that by the time a boy is born, he is on average developmentally four to six weeks behind a girl born at the same time. Drawing on research from over 50 studies, Kraemer points out in his article that "infant boys are more emotionally reactive than girls. They display more positive as well as negative affect, focus more on the mother, and display more distress and demands for contact than do girls."



In his book *The Origins of War in Child Abuse*, while exploring the question of why males are more violent than females, Lloyd de Mause suggests that the brains of young males are physiologically more vulnerable to stress than the brains of young girls: "If they [boys] do not receive enough interpersonal attention from their caretakers they suffer from damaged prefrontal cortices (self control, empathy) and from hyperactive

amygdalae (fear centers), their corpus callosum is reduced further, and they have reduced serotonin levels (calming ability) and increased corticosterone production (stress hormone). All these factors make them [boys] have weak selves, reduced empathy, less control over impulsive violence and far more fears than girls.”

While we cannot, of course, generalize that all boys will struggle more with self-regulation than all girls, parents would be wise to keep in mind that boys who become easily agitated may need more attentive care as they learn how to find their place of equilibrium.

### Parental Attunement Helps

An infant boy who is in the arms of a caretaker, nursing contentedly, feels calm and safe. Soon after, when his internal thermostats register thirst or hunger, he sounds the alarm, and the caretaker—often, but not always the mother—responds. After hundreds of such cycles of nurturance, the baby learns to depend upon and trust the source of nurturance. Ideally, as his needs are met reliably, he learns a healthy trust and appropriate dependence. Over time he gradually develops increasing confidence to rely on his body’s cues to alert him to discomfort, knowing that whenever he signals his hunger or fatigue or frustration, he will be met with an attuned response.

Many people once assumed that infants with a difficult or fussy temperament would have more trouble later adjusting to school, and that little could be done to change this likelihood. However, a recent study published in *Child Development* suggests that children with difficult temperaments are more sensitive to the type of parenting they receive, both positive and negative. Children labelled as having a difficult temperament as infants but who received good parenting later had similar grades and social skills than less temperamental children. When we respond to a boy’s emotional upset with warmth and sensitivity, we can help even those with so-called difficult temperaments learn to regulate emotions and be successful in school.



The following suggestions may be helpful as you seek to bolster your son’s powers of emotional regulation.

### Lead the way with your own calm response

This scenario may sound familiar to many:

*Having shrugged him into his jacket, and handed him his lunch bag, you are urging your son to get out the door for school. Suddenly he balks. “Chris took my jersey!” Or maybe he is distracted by something else—he forgot his agenda! Or he is angry about something you did, or forgot to do, last night.*

*As your anxiety mounts, how do you manage the ‘morning madness’ in a way that averts a meltdown, and gets everyone out the door on time? Do you grow stern, cajole, or try to reason in a desperately rational way?*

It’s no news that growing up includes, in part, having enough self-control to do what we may not feel like in the moment.

And in such moments of stress and anxiety, what we adults may feel most like doing is becoming reactive, even screamingly reactive. I know from my own parenting experience that when our blood pressure starts to rise, and our internal regulators are out of whack, it can take immense will power to pause, take a breath, and respond rather than react.

When we adults remain calm during stressful moments, boys learn that emotions can be managed, and perhaps



## Accept emotions, especially explosive emotions

Sometimes a tripping fall is very painful, and sometimes it's emotionally overwhelming because it's a kind of shock. By validating both your son's physical pain and his emotional reaction, you will help him to understand that all his feelings are acceptable; he does not have to pretend with you. As mastery of emotional regulation doesn't really happen until the late teens—or even, for some, into the 20's—your son needs to know that a bonk on the head or a fall off the slide is an upsetting event and that you understand how he is feeling. It is amazing how children will be able to suddenly shift into a more positive key once they feel heard and validated.

Show faith that your son can handle disappointment, and that you are there to help him uncover possible solutions. When your son yells, “Jacob RUINED my Lego mom! I'll never be able to make that again!” respond compassionately: “You worked so hard on that Lego project. I guess you must be really disappointed.” (Pause) How 'bout we look for the missing pieces and spend some time putting it back together?”

Over time you might be able to help your son assess the relative strength of his emotions, especially anger. Are these feelings mild, moderate—or ready to boil over? If he can learn to catch and respond to feelings when they are mild “pings” rather than rushing torrents, he will find them easier to regulate. It takes boys time to learn to manage their frustration when they have to wait their turn, or don't get what they want immediately, but they need to learn that explosive tantrums will not get them what they want. Learning delayed gratification is a helpful skill with emotions, just as it is with money matters.

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also that we can help steady them through their times of disequilibrium. When your son blurts out “It's wrecked! He ruined it!” it is time to slow down rather than speed up. Take a deep breath as you summon your energy to be as present with your son as you can. Sometimes it is helpful simply to listen, maybe saying something as simple as “Mmm” or perhaps naming your son's frustration, and by naming his feeling, validating it. “I can see how frustrated you are right now.” Sometimes you can show you understand what he would like to do, even if he can't do it now. “I'm guessing you'd like to go and tell Chris off if you could. Let's talk about this after school if you want.” What is not helpful is to deny and dismiss your son's feelings, or to allow your own impatience and irritation to ratchet up. You want to model the kinds of coping strategies that you would like your son to internalize.

If you are getting too agitated to deal calmly with your son, you can take time out yourself. When you are upset, and you say to your son, “I'm over here calming myself. I'm reading my novel,” you help him to learn that taking time out to manage emotions is a valued skill. In time you will be pleasantly surprised to later hear him reply to you: “I'm in my bedroom. I'm just calming down with my DS” when he gets overwhelmed.



## Provide language

How many times have you encouraged your son to use his words in response to a problem rather than lashing out in anger, whining, or crying? When we ask boys to use words, many will struggle to find the vocabulary to describe what they are feeling when they are upset. Curiously, I have also observed that when adults—especially men—seek support in my consulting office, they too commonly struggle to find the words to describe their feelings.

The notion that providing young boys with words will help them manage their emotions is backed by research. A study recently published in *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* found that language skills are more important in the development of self-regulation skills for young boys than for girls, and that boys who have strong language skills can learn to become just as skilled in self-regulation as girls.

Pay careful attention to the use of feelings words at home with your son, knowing that as you take time to name your own feelings out loud, your son will learn that you value the identification of feelings. It is particularly important for fathers to talk about their own feelings so that boys learn that emotions are not just a female thing. Fathers might say: “I am worried about how I am going to get this car done before we head out on the road,” or, “Right now I am really angry about what you did and I need to go outside to relax and think about what I am going to say to you.”

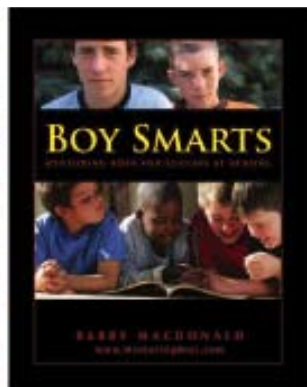
Later, when your son’s feelings are too intense for him to handle, he may say “I feel overwhelmed.” While being able to label his feelings of overwhelm will not make the emotions dissipate, it will increase your son’s sense that he is in charge of his emotions.

It may also be helpful to help your son distinguish gradations and nuances of emotions so that he has more than one feeling word—“upset.” Give your son suggestions, choices. Is he lonely or bored? Is he angry, or frustrated, or more hurt than anything? Is he embarrassed, worried, anxious? And don’t forget that we can name positive feelings too—maybe he is relieved, reassured, pleased, glad, or delighted. Learning how to recognize, name, and distinguish different emotions is an important step toward regulating them.

### Teach your son words that express...

- **anger:** irritated, frustrated, cranky, riled, horrified, steamed, enraged, hostile, or revolted.
- **hurt:** slighted, deflated, isolated, ignored, snubbed, betrayed, forgotten, persecuted, or abused.
- **inadequacy:** helpless, powerless, useless, inadequate, inferior, inept, or incompetent.
- **embarrassment:** foolish, awkward, clumsy, uncomfortable, disgraced, or humiliated.
- **confusion:** distracted, rattled, anxious, bewildered, confused, flustered, puzzled, or dazed.
- **sadness:** blue, lost, low, empty, disheartened, weary, burdened, dejected, let down, or heavy hearted.
- **fear:** afraid, uneasy, boxed in, nervous, frightened, scared, threatened, overwhelmed, or alarmed.
- **happiness:** content, proud, soothed, delighted, gratified, elated, jubilant, thrilled, or ecstatic.

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## Get moving to help process emotions

Sometimes a little movement can help boys regulate emotions if they wiggle or dance or run the stress out of their bodies. Taking a walk, running around the backyard with the dog, or simply moving back and forth in a rocking chair can help boys relax their bodies so that they are better able to cope with their emotions. By activating both hemispheres of the brain, movement helps the brain to process emotions. Even simple activities like colouring or drawing are also bi-laterally stimulating activities that facilitate the processing of emotions; no mood lasts forever, angry scribbling may gradually transform to reflective doodling.

As boys identify an emotion that they wish would recede, they can use activity to help them move toward a more positive emotion. Boys might intentionally change gears—the rhythm of brushing the dog, or walking around the block, can help to interrupt the cycle of arousal. To refocus his mood, a boy who recognizes that he is feeling lonely might phone Grandma or Grandpa to chat.



Boys often report to me that it can be helpful to follow their game plan to release stress and to relax their body. Here is a 5-step plan that I collaboratively developed with an 8 year-old boy the other day to help him regulate his emotions:

- Do 5 shoulder shrugs, rolling the worrying emotion out of the body as the shoulders roll back
- Make a fist and then let the hand drip water off limp lettuce, 5 times
- Breathe in to the count of 5 and then slowly out to the count of 10, five times
- Slowly count my Pokemon cards while looking at each side of each card
- Say: “I am relaxed and I can handle this.”

## Meet basic needs for nutrition & quiet time

Emotionally intense boys tend to be more affected by hunger and loss of sleep than those with milder temperaments. Over the years, several nutritionists and naturopathic physicians have reported to me that highly active and emotionally intense boys often need more protein to provide them with a slow burning fuel. Consider too that they may have sensitivities to certain foods or their environment that may reduce their abilities—their cushion—to manage their emotions.

If your son’s reactions seem especially intense, explain to your son that sometimes our bodies just need extra food or a little rest to relax and find calmer feelings. When emotional storms erupt, suggesting a calming activity—and providing a light snack—can teach him to seek quiet times, and healthy nourishment when emotions go into overdrive.

As emotionally intense children often get over-stimulated more quickly, keep special events and big outings brief, and build in quiet reflection time.

## Teach positive self-talk

As having mastery of a more varied vocabulary can help improve self-regulation, parents should discuss positive self-talk. When emotions and thoughts are spiralling down, boys can make the decision to shift their internal self-talk.

It can be helpful for many to use reflective language and even visual images to manage emotions. Teach your son that when frustration pushes him around, he needs to get tough with frustration. Encourage him to use internal dialogue to give frustration *the boot*. Depending on what kind of images might appeal to your son, you could teach him to say something in his mind such as “Back off, trouble. I’m in charge here!” A boy who needs to build his confidence could practice an affirmation: “This is tough

but I know I'll figure it out." While boys of differing ages need different phrases, here are a few examples of positive self-talk that you can adjust to suit your son's needs:

- "When anger (or another emotion) visits me, I become curious about the anger."
- "I know that problems are trying to teach me something and that they will become my friend."
- "What is this worry trying to teach me?"
- "I know that finding a solution to this frustration will come to me soon. I just know this frustration will get better."
- "When yucky feelings visit me, my mind is alert to solutions."

**I often teach boys how to neutralize strong emotions that provide a way to reframe their current emotional state:**

- "Even though right now I am \_\_\_\_\_ (frustrated/hurt/angry/or another emotion), I know that things will get better. I don't exactly know how but I do know that I will figure it out. Right now I want to feel better and I am reaching for a more positive feeling, like \_\_\_\_\_ (hopeful/happy/eager/or another emotion) to help me get there."

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## Teach boys how to respond to other people's emotions

Since boys who are more irritable as infants are also more vulnerable to parental influence, parents need to discuss everyday relationships that trouble their son. When we ignore their troubles, become perturbed ourselves, or briskly dismiss boys' emotions, even in a misguided attempt to cheer them up, we miss the opportunity to teach them how to regulate their emotions as well as to respond to other people's emotions.



Become aware of your own emotional regulation patterns: Do you fly off the handle easily or withdraw in sullen protest when you don't get your way? We can best teach children how to manage their emotions by illuminating how we manage our own. Consider what a father, who is also his son's hockey coach, might say when he is disappointed with his son's effort at an important game: "I was frustrated to watch our team lose after doing so well throughout the season. I admit it was kind of hard for me to watch you not play as well as you did last week—but that's my issue. I know that we all have our down days—I sure do."

Rather than swearing loudly at an appliance that you can't get to work properly, you might say out loud, "Whew! I'd better give myself a time out here—I'm feeling too frustrated with these crazy instructions right now. I'll tackle this dishwasher after I take a break." If you are disappointed because your boss criticized an effort you were actually proud of, you might say, "I had a tough time today and was feeling blue when my boss ran me down. However, I'm happy to be home now—I could sure use a hug!" Or, if your son might feel discomfited by this request, "I feel like a bike ride right now—care to join me?"

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## Appreciate the Ups and Downs

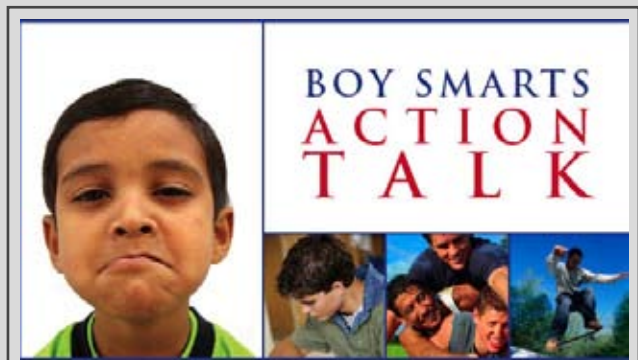
As your son gradually matures, he will become increasingly self-reliant, and better at managing his emotional upheavals. He will learn how to identify the difference between his wants and needs, but he will likely confuse the two many times along the way.

When they come up against disappointments and discontents, boys will need to rely on the support of a caregiver or mentor whenever their coping skills are strained too far. They need to know that, even when they have stepped out of line, they can lean on someone who cares—a parent, a teacher, a trusted adult who has their best interests at heart. To internalize the feeling of self-love that they need in order to do the hard work of learning self-regulation, they need to know that they are accepted as they are.

Authentic self-regulation is not to be confused with the mask of compliance, or the pose of submission. It is instead about the development of core strengths and inner resilience that helps us all, when we feel bowed under, to raise our heads again. Sometimes self-regulation means being quiet and holding back. Sometimes it means expressiveness. Always it means the discipline of conscious choice, learned over time, with the help of trusted mentors. •••

*Barry MacDonald*  
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