



Helping BOYS WRITE

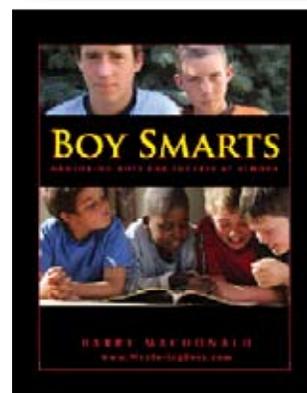
Last month the Boy Smarts newsletter highlighted an interview with a family at our recent *Boys Can Write!* conference, emphasizing the importance of helping boys who struggle with literacy, especially problems with written output. This month's newsletter follows up with excerpted letters from creative teachers who have generously offered their field-tested ideas that get boys engaged with writing. My hope is that this chance to glimpse behind the scenes into the successful, dynamic strategies that real teachers are using will get us all thinking and experimenting with new approaches.

I will begin, however, with a letter from a parent that expresses concerns about her son's literacy that I know will resonate with many readers.

Dear Barry

I read your November newsletter with great interest. I have a son in grade 9 who has always struggled with English - not the language - the class. He has no problem understanding language, and many people have commented on how articulate he is. But getting him to write (on paper or computer) is painful. I wanted to share with you a conversation I had with him.

We were discussing how he has great ideas, but the trouble comes when he has to get these ideas out of his brain and out through his hand onto paper. I suggested that by the time the ideas travel all the way down his arm to his hand, something gets lost along the way.

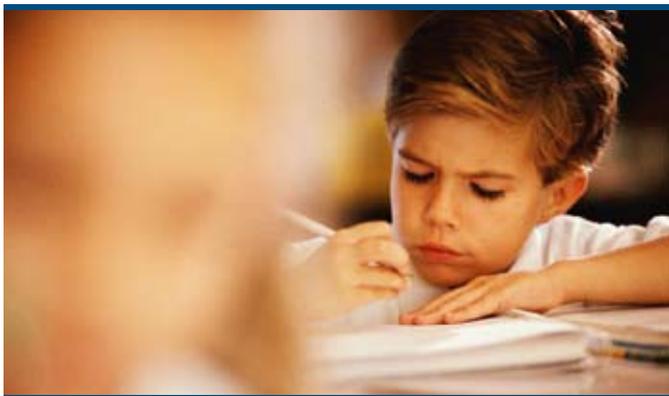


He responded that he felt like his ideas had to travel all the way down to his feet and back up before going out his hand, and that because it was such a long way to travel, it was like the game of *Broken Telephone* - you start with one message, but by the time it gets through the whole path, the message is completely different at the end, and it's nothing like what he started with.

What a great insight he had—and I was so glad he “got it” and was able to articulate it! But how do we help him? How do we shorten that distance so that the message that comes out is closest to what's in his head? In a classroom that judges your output (2 typed double-spaced, grammatically correct pages), how do we accurately capture the essence of his thinking?

We will be having parent-teacher interviews soon, so I'm eager to share with his teacher and have the conversation with school staff about how we can engage boy writers in the whole process of writing, without focussing only on the end product, produced by the hand. Thanks for allowing me to share!

Helen



Writing, like any creative process, is not entirely linear, and does not work the same for every writer. How can teachers help reluctant writers appreciate the challenge of the entire process of writing—from discovering their subject to writing a draft—and revising, fine tuning that draft to make it more clear and interesting for a reader?

Let's turn to the helpful suggestions offered by several resourceful teachers.

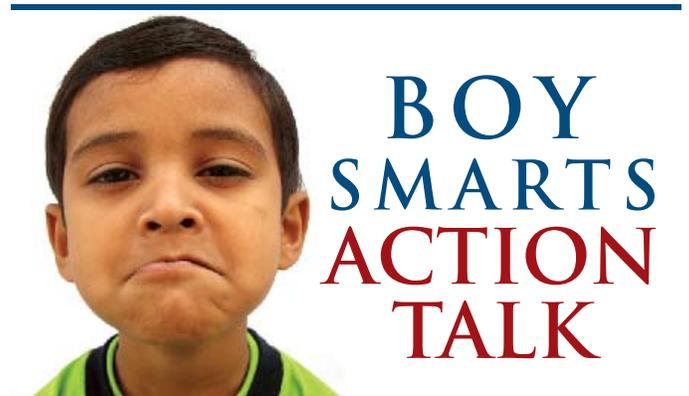
Christina Smith, an enthusiastic grade seven teacher, emphasizes the importance of taking the time to show-and-tell the process of writing: “Teach a boy only about the mechanics of writing, and he will write when he must. Help a boy to explore and write about what he loves, and you'll increase the chance that he'll write more often and more frequently.”

Encouraging Writers to Find Their Subject

Christina notes that many of the boys arriving to her class in September often view writing as a chore to be rushed through as quickly as possible. Christina wants to change that view of writing as a perfunctory chore, and get her students “to use writing to explore and think about what matters most to them, not just to write to get by.”

Thinking Out Loud to Model Writing Process

In her ongoing efforts to engage reluctant boy writers, Christina has discovered how a document camera and projector can help her to model the writing process in a real-life way. (A document camera is a high resolution web cam, allowing to write on a sheet of paper while students watch.)



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As she writes in front of the students, she de-mystifies the writing process by talking out loud in order to reveal her thinking about the writing decisions she is making along the way. Boys frequently tell her that this approach helps them to get inside her thinking and better understand how ideas are developed on the page. “James and Joby tell me that when I use the document camera they get to see what is happening in my brain—a scary thought in itself,” says Christina. She goes on to explain: “As I write these comments right now I am engaging students and soliciting their input about my writing and I am including their suggestions about word choices and the decisions writers make. Evan insists on telling everyone that Giraffe—his name for the document camera with its long neck—helps him to see how ideas move words on a page. Matthew likes how the document camera also projects student work, allowing him to learn from other students. I should add that shared writing helps speedy boys to see that writing takes time and effort.”

Customized Approaches to Literacy

Tara, a classroom teacher from Victoria, BC emphasizes how formal one-size-fits-all instruction has shifted toward diverse classroom literacy centres where students experiment with language and take on increasingly challenging tasks as teachers monitor progress and intervene when appropriate. “Mostly, I seek to develop activity plans and organize learning for students to engage energetically, independently and in a more personalized way. This allows me to respond to differing literacy needs and pay attention to what each child needs. In most classrooms today you won’t see rows of quiet students completing worksheets. You might see some children sitting on the floor reading quietly among themselves, while others actively take turns reading aloud to each other, and still others might be wearing a headset as they read into a recording device. If you visit my classroom you might have difficulty locating me in front of the class, but I might be at a table in the back of the room having an animated discussion with a small group of students about which writing strategy to incorporate, or sitting with a student

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quietly exploring how to phrase a particular nuanced emotion he is trying to write about. Meanwhile, other students might continue to work independently or collaboratively, perhaps logging on to the internet to fact check, or seeking feedback from another child about a writing problem they are struggling with. Each kid is different and therefore so must their pathway to literacy. I absolutely love the challenge of helping fidgety boys to become enthusiastic about writing!”

Promoting Self-Reflection and Self-Responsibility for Learning

Lori Robinson, a school principal from Lillooet, also recognizes the value of diverse approaches for diverse students. Lori pays daily attention to helping students to attend to HOW they best engage in their learning. She encourages students to consider, experiment, and identify their unique *formula*. With a repertoire of suggestions—such as movement, visual, organizational, auditory, and tactile supports—she frequently reminds students to consider new ways to hold and sustain attention: sit, stand, wiggle, use colour, wear a headset, sit on a single leg stool or a wiggle cushion, use post-it notes, play with *Thinking Putty*, talk before you write, or draw before you write, she has a long list for students to consider.

Her suggestions remind me of a student I worked with a few years ago to help him to clarify his personalized *formula* for when learning gets tough:

My Formula for Learning Success =
Chew gum (facilitates cross-talk in the brain)
+ Draw circles around words or problems I don't understand (helps to sustain focus on a challenge)
+ Wear a headset (reduces auditory overload)
+ Wear my ball cap (reduces effect of florescent lighting)
+ Slip my shoes off (to encourage my toes to get moving and my brain activated).

As Lori encourages students to develop their individual learning *formulas* she asks three questions:

1. Why is a particular activity or way of learning working or not working for you?
2. How can I make learning better for you?
3. Is your learning distracting others in our learning community?

These questions make it clear that Lori is helping students to see that learning--and literacy--are not individual endeavours, but are part of a learning eco-system involving educators and peers.



Practical, Action-oriented Drills Can Work

Dee Beattie, an Educational Support Worker in a diverse Surrey high school, has found ways to make learning hands-on and fun.

Dee writes that she is “familiar with boys who struggle with attendance, behaviour, and will almost do anything to avoid written assignments. Many seem to have undiagnosed learning disabilities. One of my students, Brian (not his real name), is diagnosed with a severe learning disability. I can see how he is so smart in many ways but gets easily frustrated when written output is expected. While supporting Brian in his Science 8 class I also help all the students. I draw on many teaching tools to reach kids (Orton Gillingham or Multi-sensory Math for example) but mostly I work to make learning hand's-on, practical, and real.

For Brian's Science 8 class I have created fun but quick flash card memory games using the course content to get them engaged and talking and writing about the material. While these activities were specifically designed for Brian, I was pleasantly surprised to see that many of the boys in the class also gathered at the back of the room with Brian on a regular basis to check their knowledge. If you walked into the room at first glance it might appear as if they were just 'hanging out' but if you observed a moment longer it would become clear that these boys were on task: They were learning! Getting up out of their chairs and moving around a bit seems important to these boys. Because Grade Eight is so challenging in many ways, I can't help but also think that students appreciate a simple and a quick check of their knowledge too.

This term I was astonished with how many students (mostly boys) WANTED to use these practical drills, to talk and to quickly write about their answers. Their engagement motivates me to stay involved myself and to work hard to make each unit practice activity unique. It is very rewarding to see them motivated from the inside. I really loved one of your messages at the **Boys Can Write!** workshop; that we seek what motivates boys to write, not to motivate boys ourselves."

While so much of our current best teaching practices emphasize collaboration and cooperation, it is worth noting that friendly active competition of the sort Dee describes can be motivating--and energizing for some boys who do not respond well to more subdued approaches to literacy.

Our challenge is to keep adapting our teaching to the actual boys we are working with—right here, right now—not the theoretical students we envision.

HOW CAN WE REDUCE ANXIETY AND WORRIES ABOUT TRYING SOMETHING NEW?



Finding Ways to Lower Reading and Writing Anxiety

Casey Lazecki, a teacher at Glen Elementary, writes about building a small support group for reluctant writers to build literacy confidence and motivation.

"Our Principal, Derek Passaglia, at Glen Elementary encourages us staff to *think outside the box*, especially for those boys who are reluctant boys to engage in literacy. After attending one of Barry's workshops I became inspired to try and make literacy more attractive to boys in my class. Several discussions and brainstorming sessions lead us to start a boys' reading club. A small group of Grade 5 boys were selected based on their lack of interest in reading. We met three times per week for 40 minutes each time.

My initial goal was for these boys to give reading a chance. Responding to their needs I initially banished pencil and paper work for the group. This immediately lowered their anxiety and I could see them begin to relax. Each session began with about 5 — 10 minutes of conversation about what was going on in their lives so we could to build a bond of trust, and this we accomplished relatively quickly.

Another key was choosing suitable reading material. I wanted a variety of styles and genres, but knowing these boys were so reticent to read, I decided to begin by reading with a boy's adventure classic, *Treasure Island*. I didn't know how they would respond, but my fears were soon put aside by their obvious enthusiasm. From there, we read a graphic novel, a comedy (the most popular) and a thriller. Occasionally, I would show a movie afterwards if we had read a book that it was based on (*Holes*, for example).

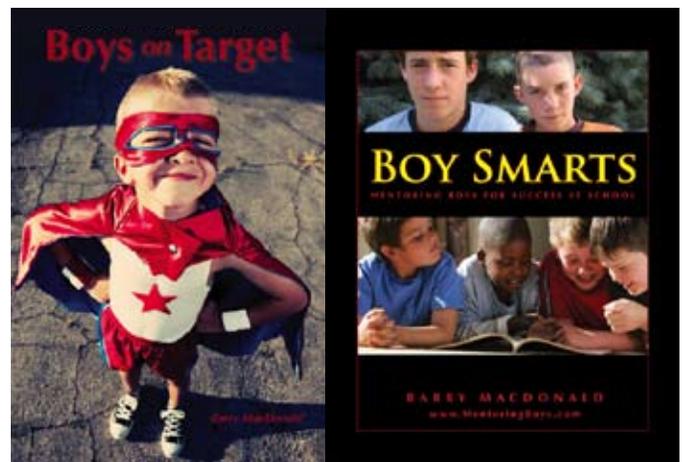
When we began I read the text aloud to them, and gradually the boys started offering to read aloud as well. Responding to their impulse I would stop reading whenever the boys wanted to ask questions and discuss the text. By Christmas the boys did all the reading. They were now in charge of their own book club! And how did I assess the boys, you may ask? We decided to video each boy for about a minute each month reading out loud and have the boy answer a comprehension question. This way, we were able to build an assessment-document that captured each boy's growth throughout the school year. One boy who had not willingly committed pencil to paper or read an assignment during his entire time at our school made significant progress. Despite his quiet and shy nature he became our best reader and overcame his shyness to such a degree that by the end of the school year he read important announcements, even at assemblies. That he had gained such confidence was inspirational to me. These boys loved THEIR reading club and I loved being a part of it!"

WE MUST RESPOND TO THE DIVERSE LITERACY NEEDS OF BOYS!

When I read letters from passionate and creative principals, teachers, support workers, and parents who are mentoring boys to help them thrive, I feel hopeful that boys will find ways to express with cogency what is inside them—and that we will find ways to listen to them, even when they struggle for words.

Sometimes these boys have a learning disability such as dyslexia—disproportionately a problem for boys—and educators may need extra training and extra commitment to work with these boys.

However, this commitment is something we are called to make—not only in the interests of boys, but also in the interests of social justice.



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Ethical and Legal Mandate to Work with Special Needs

Many parents and teachers took time to write me about the recent Supreme Court of Canada ruling that a BC school district had discriminated against a boy with dyslexia—a court case concerning a school district decision made over twenty years ago. While this decision came far too late to help the original family and their son, Canada's top court also claimed that special needs students were still being disadvantaged and that more attention to meeting their needs is required. *The Supreme Court* criticized a school district and province for closing a diagnostic centre for special-needs students without ensuring there was a sufficient alternative in place: "This is an acknowledgement by the government that the reason children are entitled to an education is that a healthy democracy and economy require their educated contribution... Adequate special education, therefore, is not a dispensable luxury. For those with severe learning disabilities, it is the ramp that provides access to statutory commitment to education made to all children in British Columbia," wrote Justice Rosalie Abella.

Imagine having the stamina to fight a legal battle for fifteen years while your boy slowly becomes a man.

A teacher from Surrey, the largest school district in BC, expressed appreciation for the courage it must have taken for this family to persist in court over the years on behalf of their son: “Most families would have given up on such a long legal battle. I applaud this family for their grit and resolution that will surely pave the way for our communities to better determine how we can best meet the learning needs of all. My dyslexic son was lucky. He had a mother who was also a teacher with the knowledge about how to be a strong advocate for him. I worry about those families where parents are struggling to get by and have little extra energy to take on a teacher, principal, or a school district that might quietly be pushing a boy through a system with inadequate learning resources.”



One passionate parent wrote: “Every child has potential. *The Education Act* is very clear. Students with learning disabilities are by law to receive the supports and services they require. While I agree that adequate funding is paramount, let us not forget that it’s not only about money. My son struggled with a written output problem for years at school and I can honestly say that his good years were because a caring and effective teacher had the patience and creativity to help him. I am so grateful for the amazing teachers we encountered over the years. We can’t afford to let the gender literacy gap grow. We must do more to respond to boys who struggle to read and write.”

While many contributors wrote about their son’s positive and negative experiences with school staff, comments about the provincial government’s decreased funding to education were overwhelmingly negative.

“It is indeed unfortunate that the BC provincial government continues to slash our education budget, leaving school boards fumbling to provide the services required by children with special needs. May I remind your Boy Smarts readers that the *John Howard Society* has declared that about 70% of incarcerated Canadian males are illiterate. Our government needs to spend less on building more jails and more on adequately funding our schools. Teach all children how to read and write and you will work toward emptying those jails!” wrote a parent from Vancouver.

Vancouver • Toronto

BOYS CAN WRITE!



- How can we ignite boys’ enthusiasm to WRITE?
- What interferes with boys’ literacy success?
- Why do different boys need different strategies?
- How to address the link between moving and writing?
- How do we use video games to promote literacy?
- How to respond to boys who write about violence?
- How to write less so boys will write more?
- How do we make writing more relevant for boys?
- How to inspire boys into becoming budding authors?

Of course, we all recognize that dyslexia and other reading and writing *disabilities* do not necessarily lead to jail or social and career failure. Many well-known entrepreneurs are dyslexic, and one teacher remarked that dyslexia can be a strength: “In my experience children who are identified with dyslexia are very capable, just not in the ways that many appreciate. Shouldn’t we widen our lens about who real kids are and what learning looks like for them? Dyslexia can be affirmative: Weren’t Steven Spielberg, John F. Kennedy, Pablo Picasso, Albert Einstein, and Leonardo da Vinci dyslexic? Perhaps we can address the “disability” of our society to adequately respond the diverse needs of children.”

In addition to re-framing how we see learning disabilities, we also need to ensure that we do not minimize the importance of literacy in the lives of all.

As a community of families and educators, we must gather all our resources to support those who struggle with reading, writing—and to enable what the 1989 legally binding *UN Convention on the Rights of the Child*, declared to be a universal child’s right: “The right to freedom of expression.” Article 13 in this *Declaration of the Rights of the Child*, ratified by Canada in 1991, elaborates: “This right shall include the freedom to seek, receive, and impart ideas and information all kinds, regardless of frontiers, either orally, in writing or in print, in the form of art, or through any other media of the child’s choice.” The child-friendly language sanctioned by *UNICEF* and *Canadian Heritage* is simple and succinct:

“You have the right to find out things and share what you think with others, by talking, drawing, writing or in any other way unless it harms or offends other people.”

To me, this right sounds like a mandate to support and promote literacy for all our children—including those for whom words get stuck somewhere between the brain and the hand. ■ ■ ■

Barry MacDonald

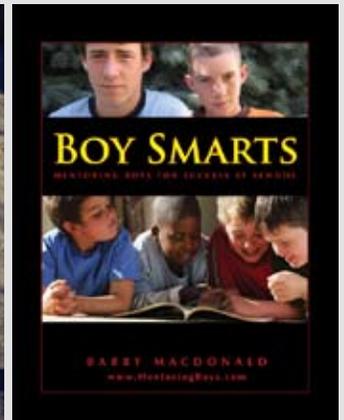
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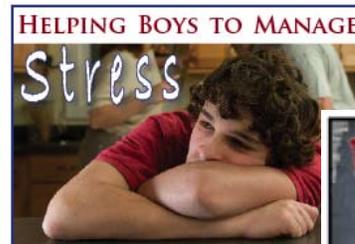
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