



## Helping Boys Regulate Emotions at School

*Dear Barry,*

What is *emotional regulation*?

How can teachers help my son to develop it?

How can I help him become calmer and less reactive at school?

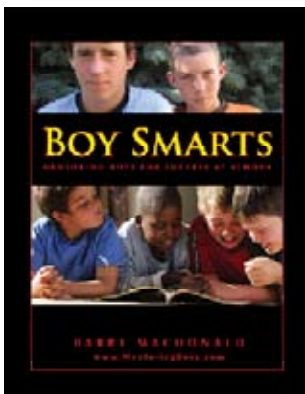
**Here's why I am asking you these questions:**

Ethan's teacher says that he doesn't listen to her when she is teaching and that he lacks focus. I find this confusing because he is a keen, focussed, and passionate learner at home or wherever we go in the community. I can't help but think that he is frustrated with listening to the teacher as he sits still at his desk completing worksheets on his own. He is just too social to remain isolated throughout the day.

After reading your chapter about parent-teacher meetings in *Boys on Target*, and the importance of asking clarifying questions, I asked:

- What does it look like when Ethan is not listening?
- What specifically is Ethan doing?
- What are others doing when Ethan is not listening?
- How do you help him to listen and to focus?

The teacher explained how Ethan doesn't look at her when she is teaching, that he seeks eye contact of other students to engage them, and that



he generally has trouble focussing his attention onto his learning. She expects the Grade 2 students to focus on her when she is giving a lesson for about 7 to 10 minutes. She said that Ethan has to learn how to *listen with his eyes*.

I told her that at home Ethan complains that she yells at him and doesn't call on him when he tries to answer one of her questions. She says that she doesn't yell at Ethan, but has to be firm with him, and that she calls only on students who sit quietly and calmly raise their hands. She says that this teaches students to develop self-control and to develop *emotional regulation*.

Apparently, Ethan waves his arms too exuberantly, and needs to learn how to calm himself and to focus on the teacher. I am certain that he will never get to offer an answer this year if he has to sit calmly before speaking. It's just not his nature to be calm. He's a very intense and emotionally excitable kid.

I am also concerned that he spends a lot of time at the time-out chair each day. The teacher says that as Ethan is the youngest in the class (born on December 26th), he will be slower to develop his emotional regulation and the time-out chair will teach him to be less reactive with his peers. I know that Ethan can be overly demanding, but I can't help worrying that the time-out chair will lead to more frustrations and academic failure.

*Karen*

*Toronto, Ontario*



*Dear Karen,*

Many parents with primary school-age children remember the quiet classrooms they attended years ago: students sitting in rows of tidy desks, listening to the teacher and, when asked a question, raising their arms obediently. I recall how that it was so difficult for me to sit quietly at my desk, feet planted on the floor, that my Grade 1 teacher taped my feet to my chair.

I now understand that individual needs for activity are not so easily controlled.

Most parents believe that good grades in elementary school will lead to good grades in later years and in life. Indeed, researchers can make fairly strong predictions about children's long-term success at school, depending on their literacy and numeracy capabilities when they begin kindergarten. However, parents might find it also interesting to know that it was not until very recently that researchers began to identify what makes it so difficult to alter a child's pathway from failure to success if they do not arrive to school with strong skills.

Today, neuroscience is teaching us that it is not the literacy or numeracy skills children bring to early schooling—nor their IQ—that determines academic success. Rather, it is a child's ability to regulate emotions, to manage impulses, tolerate frustrations, and to focus or shift their attention—to stay calmly focussed and alert while taking action.

Children are not born with the ability to regulate their emotions. Those who learn emotional regulation are more likely to feel academically competent and to be liked by their peers. Children lacking emotional self-regulation can become easily angered, agitated, and excessively demanding. They are often rejected by peers, and may become social pariahs.

We know that boys who are born later in the school year are likely to be slower to develop emotional regulation. They are also more at risk of developing a negative

self-concept and lack of academic confidence. As a December baby, Ethan has had less time to learn how to manage his emotions in the classroom than his peers, especially the January babies who have almost had a full year to grow and develop. Ethan's exuberant and outgoing temperament also makes him more vulnerable to emotional dysregulation.

Although it may take longer for Ethan to learn how to manage his emotions, it is important to understand that the developing ability to self-regulate is not simply a matter of mastering self-control. For someone who thinks that self-regulation is really just a matter of Ethan getting his negative emotions in hand, there can appear to be very little difference between self-regulation and compliance. But, unlike compliance based on the desire to avoid punishment or gain a reward, healthy self-regulation nurtures the ability to cope with greater and greater challenges, and to tolerate the frustrations that come with these challenges. Self-regulation, which involves arousal states, emotions, behaviour, and thinking skills, leads to the ability to calm oneself when one's needs are not met.

This ability is especially important for academic success, as children in the classroom often have to cope with frustration in learning difficult tasks, or waiting longer than they would like for attention and feedback. Ethan may become compliant because he fears the consequences, or because he is hoping to obtain some reward—but it is not consequences or rewards alone that help children to cope with greater and greater emotional challenges. In fact, a multitude of studies show that the overuse of punitive measures to elicit compliance is a predictor of not taking responsibility for one's behaviour, while the overuse of rewards can have a dampening effect on motivation.

How can teachers help boys regulate emotions?

For years parents and teachers have told me that boys who lack social awareness and control of their emotions need *structured* or *traditional* learning environments with a 'strong' teacher. Whenever I probe for detail, they offer rather romanticized descriptions of students sitting quietly at their desks, drinking in a lesson and maintaining focus. Some have even argued that ADHD prone boys need controlling and highly structured learning environments in order to avoid becoming too excited.

Best-practice classroom research indicates something very different, however.

If you leaf through a current professional education journal or teacher magazine, you are unlikely to find any positive references to traditionally structured learning environments with authoritarian teachers. Most contemporary articles will instead emphasize socially interactive and diverse learning. They may, for example, describe how to group students into interactive, sometimes even noisy learning pods, characterized by students standing, sitting, and moving about the classroom as they work together to solve problems. A 1950's time-travelling teacher would probably judge these learning environments as chaotic and unruly, at first glance.



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But consider how, in traditional teacher-directed classrooms, most students are passive for most of the time. Typically, when a teacher asks a question, only a few hands—often the same hands—go up. Only one child at a time gets called upon to speak, while the remaining students sit quietly, thinking their own thoughts, maybe watching the hands on the clock move with agonizing slowness. In a traditional classroom, when the activity shifts from listening to the teacher to, say, getting workbooks out, there might be a small flurry of commotion. Quickly the teacher would *settle students down* and *get them back on track* to focus on the task at hand. Quiet would reign once again. If your classroom looked like this some years ago, you may recall how you did not have to stay focussed and authentically engaged in learning. It was easy to don the mask of attention. You could fly under the radar by simply appearing as if you were thinking, and trust that only a few select students would be called upon. If the teacher did call you out of a waking sleep, perhaps in the sharp tone of a rebuke, there was likely only a brief pause of embarrassment when you found yourself at a loss for words.

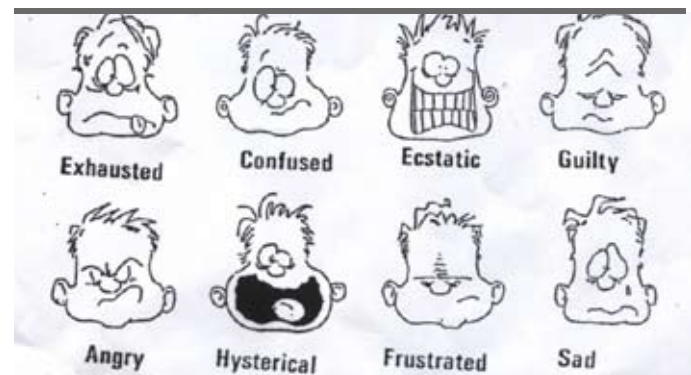
As I am a frequent visitor to contemporary classrooms, I am impressed to see the many ways that teachers find rich, diverse approaches to promote student curiosity, active experimentation, and the ability to keep reaching for higher levels of thinking.

Another striking contrast between the engaging, interactive classroom and the traditional, hierarchal classroom is the way these two approaches deal with emotional regulation. A traditional, teacher-directed classroom does not tolerate disruptive behaviour, but scolds children into compliance, perhaps even threatening a visit to the principal's office. In a more democratic, engaging classroom, the teacher knows that emotional regulation is best taught in the moment. An attuned teacher can help a student learn to self-monitor, taking a moment to catch an impulse before it becomes an action that produces regret. As disruption or conflict arises, the

teacher engages the students into taking a break, reflecting on what they are doing, listening to each other, searching for collaborative solutions.

Sometimes self-regulation is not simply suppressing or dampening desires and impulses, but is more a matter of up-regulating desires and emotions. In some cases children have trouble paying attention because they don't find the material interesting. Others, especially kinesthetic learners like Ethan, may feel as if they are paddling upstream, unable to take in and process information with ease.

Rather than jump to the conclusion that excited or restless children have an *attention deficit*, we need to question what underlying factors could be making it difficult for them to metabolize the information in the way it is being delivered.



An occasional time-out for Ethan to calm his emotions may be of some use, especially if it leads to Ethan's increasing ability to self-regulate—perhaps even providing him and similar students with an activity centre where they can go when they feel the need to recharge and refresh. It is critical that Ethan does not perceive the time-out as a punishment, but as an opportunity to take a moment to do something different, to refocus, and to relax his thinking and emotions. When a teacher approaches a student like Ethan with gentle curiosity, asking what is going on for him, the student has a chance to explain himself and also be distracted from the problem he is not yet able to solve on his own. When Ethan feels listened to, he will become calmer,

and will feel more in control of his emotions. He will be then become more receptive to seeking alternative strategies and solutions, and can return to his classroom learning activity. In time, as Ethan learns that he has choices in how he deals with his emotions, he will become less reactive and quicker to self-soothe.

It is essential that a teacher who uses time-outs has healthy self-regulation himself or herself, and is not acting out of a flash of anger. Abruptly ejecting Ethan from the group and sending him to a time-out chair can easily make things worse. Feelings of isolation and shame will likely intensify Ethan's emotions and make it even more difficult for him to recover a state of balance on his own. A downward spiral may be launched when Ethan is punished for exhibiting negative emotions. As Ethan learns to associate the feeling and expression of emotion with negative consequences, his distress will intensify, and this intensified distress will, in the long term, make his emotions even more a muddy, swirling, unregulated mess.

**Over time I have observed approaches that effective teachers use to help disruptive boys regulate their emotions:**

1. They have awareness of children's emotions, including those that are under the surface.
2. They view emotional upset as a time for teaching.
3. They help children to get curious about and identify their emotions.
4. They show empathy and validate emotions.
5. They take valuable classroom time to help children solve problems as they occur.

Whatever the circumstances, we always want to ask why a particular child is having a problem staying calmly focussed. It may be that Ethan is having trouble paying attention because he needs more activity and movement. It could be that he is anxious about peer

acceptance and approval, and that his anxiety mounts as he watches his peers watch him, again and again, get exiled to the time-out chair. Of course, his mounting anxiety would then increase his painful sensitivity, setting off a vicious cycle.

With a teacher's compassionate coaching support, Ethan will in time develop his ability to regulate his emotions. He will learn how to monitor his outgoing nature and express his genuine enthusiasm in ways that are respectful of others. He will also learn how to manage his needs for mobility and to maintain focus on the task at hand.

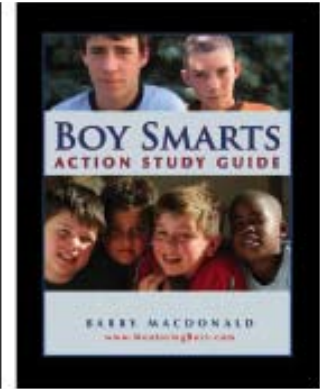
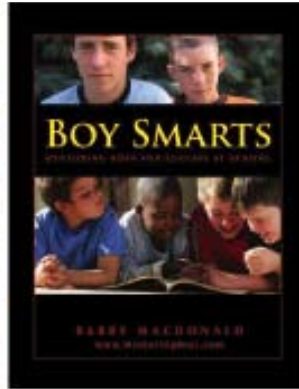
But Ethan will need more than a teacher's support if he is to learn how to regulate his emotions. He will need your loving guidance too. I know that you are aware of the importance of your role as you inquired: "How can I help him become calmer and less reactive at school?"

Wanting to be sensitive to the many parents and teachers who subscribe to the *Boy Smarts Newsletter*, I have decided save my response to your question about how to help Ethan at home for next month. You could assist me by providing some specific examples of when he struggles with his emotions at home. This way my advice can be tailored to Ethan's specific needs.

Meanwhile, I encourage you to share this article with his teacher. Work with her to ensure that Ethan does not experience the time-out as a punishment, but as an opportunity to pause, re-settle, and re-direct himself. Explore with her approaches that can help Ethan learn the essential life skill of emotional self-regulation in a way that will serve him over time. • • •

*Barry MacDonald*  
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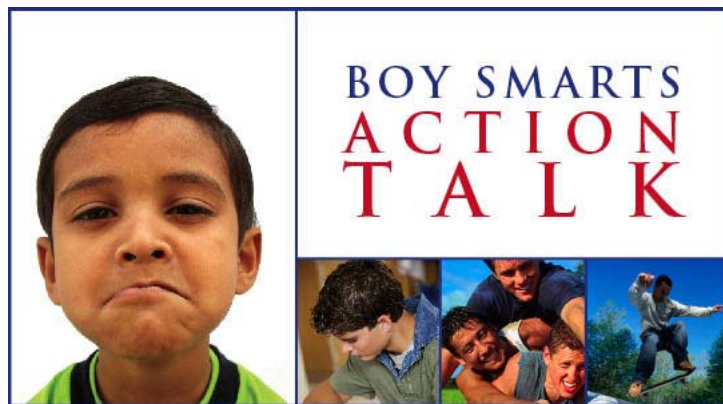
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