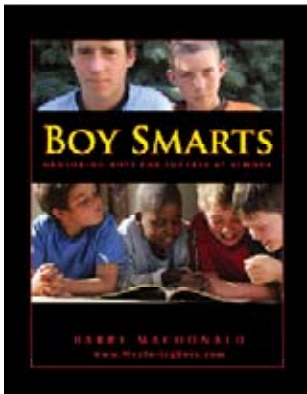


*Encouraging your Son  
to Develop* **SMART  
Study  
Skills**



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One thoughtful response to my last month's newsletter got me thinking about the pain that many parents feel when their sons are floundering in school, and the finger of blame seems pointed at them. In trying to support their sons, mothers especially often find themselves in a Catch 22—judged for doing too little or too much to support their sons. When they see their sons falling behind, how can they encourage without taking over? How do they develop a sense of when to step forward and when to step back?

*Dear Barry,*

The principal's reference to "pampering" in your recent newsletter about self-reliance took me off guard. I realize that parental involvement can have its extremes but the word "pampered" is SO loaded. I know that at times I do too much for my 11 year old boy, but the line between doing too much and too can become blurry, especially when it comes to his schoolwork. It is not my intention to overindulge Jared when I help him organize his assignments or his room. I want him to develop his resilience and self-reliance as you have described, but I have a hard time when he founders with disorganization. I worry that without my

prompting suggestions he will get snowed under and left behind. Last year was a disaster as his teacher was exceptionally disorganized too and my son and his teacher blamed me for being over-involved.

A recent talk with Jared got me thinking of a way that you might help us out. Last week I found Jared flipping through my copy of *Boys on Target* and stop at my bookmark, somewhere in the video game chapter. I pretended to not notice him as he read but then couldn't help myself and asked him what he thought. He said you were pretty cool on video games. I took the opportunity to listen and we had a heart-to-heart discussion about balancing gaming with his other activities. When I introduced the idea of developing his study habits I pushed too hard and Jared angrily stormed out of the room. Because Jared views you as on the side of boys, I'm convinced that he'd read what you had to say about study habits. I'd love for you to write about this topic so my son and I can read it together and talk, like we did about your chapter on video games (only this time I will avoid lecturing). Any suggestions you could offer would be greatly appreciated.

*Astrid, Burnaby*



## BOY SMARTS ACTION TALK

*Because it's  
better to build  
boys than to  
mend men!*

*Calgary, Oct 13  
Maple Ridge, Oct 27*



*Dear Astrid,*

I have thought about your comments, and I can well imagine that highly charged words such as *pampering* and *entitled* may unwittingly add to the anguish and self-doubt of even the most skilled parent or teacher. When we are frustrated with what seems at times an unresponsive school bureaucracy, and anxious about our kids, an ill-chosen word can sting.

While we need to respect boys' emerging autonomy—including their right to be unhappy, to fail, and to learn how to pick themselves up—there may also be times when we are called to step forward as advocates.

As a parent, teacher, and a counsellor, I have discovered that the line between doing too much and too little for our children wavers and blurs, changing day to day, even hour to hour. Recognizing that this line is a hazy one often indicates, ironically enough, that we are actually on track. How do we offer just enough support at just the right time? How do we know when to step back and trust that our boys will learn from their experiments and setbacks?

Of course, it is natural to feel anxious when we see our children having trouble. When we sense that they are in real danger, way out of their depth, there are times we need to step forward. As they grow, however, we need to let go more and more. We can't monitor them and their activities at all times—nor should we. We can give a helping hand, but they are the ones who will have to develop the resilience to negotiate their world. Increasingly, as our children grow, we need to cultivate trust that our boys will be able to weather storms, that they will learn adaptivity and resilience from failure. Our trust in them will help them to develop trust in themselves, and in their own capacity for growth.

In the *Boys on Target* chapter about helping boys develop confidence, I say: "When we are truly focussed on what's in a child's best interest over the long term, when we are willing to question conventional wisdom, we may, at times, find our own resilience depleted. We may worry that our

child is taxing the system, that a particular teacher has derailed our child, or that the system itself is deaf and dumb. Yet I know from experience that blaming outside forces, or trying to go it alone, leads to bitterness and defeat. As we work toward the development of compassion toward young people, we help them best as we minister to ourselves with kindness, compassion, and an awareness that all adversity is temporary. We can treasure small victories, tiny transformations that may, with time and patience and nurturance, grow into major ones.”

As parents, mentors, and educators, we can support our children to develop what is now being referred to as self-regulation—a sense of inner control—the skills of self-management that we all need for social, academic, and work success. We can encourage these emotional skills. And we can also encourage practical self-management skills.

You are wise to focus on helping your son develop smart study skills. Problems with study skills have long been identified as the reason for failure among first year trade school and university students. Studies indicate that these students do not know how or what to study, how to organize their time, or how to express what they know in written assignments. How can we help?

### A WORD OF CAUTION

Years of advocating for boys—especially underachieving boys—have taught me firsthand about the limitations of motivating them through the use of external control devices, like cash for grades. These boys often tell me that their classes are dull, uninspiring, and that failure seems to be a built in expectation. Sometimes I can see that they are trying to slither out of responsibility and shift blame, as frustrated children are prone to do, but more often than not, I have seen how the ways their learning needs are left undefined and unaddressed.

We all can appreciate that a tired, scared, and frustrated 10 year old boy will agree to almost anything we suggest, especially when he knows that our own emotions

are running high. Coercing and manipulating boys to follow our agendas, without regard for motive or context or underlying emotions, does not work. Consider also that when we bribe boys to do what might be inherently rewarding—such as researching a topic at home—we can send the message that this activity is really not intrinsically enjoyable.

Acquiring the skills and developing the habits to study effectively is a slow, graduated process that takes time. I offer the following suggestions to help parents to open up conversations with their sons and to navigate the line between doing too much or doing too little.

Below are some suggestions that may encourage your son to develop smart study skills.



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# HOW TO USE SMART STUDY SKILLS TO GET BETTER GRADES

## WORK SMARTER, NOT HARDER

No matter how hard we work, it seems like there is never enough time or energy to get all the important work tasks done. Rather than worker longer and longer hours, consider working more strategically—smarter, not harder. Often finding a place of less effort can be more productive than trying harder, and harder, and harder until exhaustion sets in.

## DON'T MAKE WORK HARDER THAN IT ACTUALLY IS

Much pressure is self-induced. We set unrealistically high goals or standards for ourselves and feel like we should be doing more. If we set the bar too high, we may get too discouraged too easily and give up. Trying too hard to be perfect usually gets in the way. Most times we can even seek out help in understanding the assignment. We can also keep perspective by focussing on just one step at a time, rather than trying to tackle the whole project at once.

## TUNE INTO HOW YOUR BRAIN REACTS TO MISTAKES

Henry Ford, the guy who designed the famous Model T car and invented the assembly line for automobile manufacturing, once said, "Whether you think you can or think you can't, you're right." One big difference between people who think they can get better grades and those who think they can't is how they respond to mistakes. Guys who say, "When I make a mistake I figure it out" or "When the going gets tough, I hang in there with more effort" find a way to become successful. Recognize that we can't learn without making mistakes, and that mistakes are part of a long learning process.



## PRACTICE A REGULAR STUDY HABIT

Building and breaking a habit takes approximately three weeks. After those 21 or so days of sticking to a new plan, we start to find the new routine more natural, and results begin to appear. After three weeks of a sticking with a regular study habit, you'll find you don't have to think about it so much, and you'll have more time for fun stuff.

## NOTICE WHAT GETS IN THE WAY OF YOUR LEARNING

As long as you are doing your bit to stay on track, you can pay attention to what makes it difficult for you to focus in class. Are you bored or maybe over-stimulated? Are you sitting next to a loud person? Is it hard to hear, or to see the board? Do you feel sleepy when you sit too long? Are you feeling pressured by inner or outer demands? Is someone stressing you out, or even bullying you?

If you recognize a problem that may be interfering with your learning, talk with your teacher or parent and invite them to help you brainstorm possible solutions.

## STAY HYDRATED

Are you drinking enough water? We know from brain science that the brain needs lots of water to function at its optimum. Have a water bottle at your desk and take a sip every 15 minutes or so.

## USE SMART FUEL

Everyone loves junk food, especially boys, but is it a smart fuel? Eating healthy food gives your body and brain the fuel it needs. Eat breakfast and avoid too much sugar, especially in the morning. Consider whether you need slower-burning protein foods rather than the fast-burning carbohydrates and sugars commonly found in pre-packaged snacks.

## RECHARGE WITH HEALTHY SLEEP HABITS

Did you know that while you are sleeping you are recharging your batteries and growing? Get a good night's sleep and you'll be surprised by how much smarter you are in the morning. You might already know this, but avoiding pop and screen time before bedtime makes for better sleep. Scientists have learned that texting or using any screen in the middle of the night can stress a brain out. Turn your personal devices off and leave them in another room where you won't be tempted to check for texts in the middle of the night.

## GET MOVING

Did you know that Canadian boys are three times more likely to be obese than girls? Walking, long-boarding, or riding a bike will not only keep you fit, but will also increase your memory and study stamina, and help you to feel more confident. Aim for 30 to 60 minutes of vigorous activity every day.

## CLEAR THE CLUTTER

Are you the super-organized kind of guy who is picky about putting stuff away, or do you find it practically impossible to find stuff when you need it? If you are a bit disorganized, start fresh by organizing your desk or your workspace. Are you a bit of a pack rat? Some guys will dream up the strangest excuse to keep everything. Don't. As you clear the clutter in your desk, throw away anything you haven't used in a month, and you can't foresee needing for another month.



A WORKSHOP FOR PARENTS OF YOUNG BOYS  
WHO ARE AGES BIRTH TO KINDERGARTEN

BOYS are at greater risk than girls for most of the major learning and developmental disorders – as much as 4 times more likely to suffer from autism, attention deficit disorder, and dyslexia.

HOW can parents support their active and exuberantly affectionate young son so he can settle himself to focus, and soon learn how to read, and eventually write?

HOW can we support young boys so their curiosity to explore, question, and wonder is supported as we also prepare them to thrive at school?

*Provide an optimal start  
for your son's school success!*

*Vancouver, December 1, 2012*

*Details on website...*



## FIND A PLACE FOR IMPORTANT STUFF

You will have less stress when you are able to find stuff when you need it. Use shoeboxes or baskets or file folders to store your important stuff and group things together in a way that makes sense to you. Find a system that works for you—labels or colour coding—for notes, supplies, and assignments. After you use something, put it back as soon as you are done with it.

## KEEP YOUR BACKPACK TIDY

Every couple of days—maybe daily for some guys—completely empty your backpack and/or locker and tidy it up. You may be amazed at what you uncover—sometimes that missing homework shows up just in time. If there are old assignments and quizzes that you might want to use later for review, file them away in a special folder. Clean out handouts or assignments you are sure you won't need again, and send them to the trash.

## FIND A PLACE AND SCHEDULE THAT WORKS FOR YOU

Find a place to study that is free of clutter and distraction—including the distraction of the television. If you set aside a specific time to do your home study every day at the same time, you will be more productive. Whether that time is right after school or after supper, setting a schedule and keeping to it will help to keep you focussed.

## SWITCH UP THE ROUTINE ONCE IN A WHILE

If you are feeling antsy or uninspired in your study time, stir things up a little: work outside, move to another room, or even consider working at the public library. Sometimes completely new surroundings will help you work better and faster.

## USE A PLANNER

Ask any successful adult about how they organize their life and they will probably tell you that they use a planner. What are the most important things that you need to do in the next while? Write down your test and assignment due dates. You can then plan how much to do after school each day, and how much time to spend on each topic. If you have a cell phone, use the calendar to remind you when important tasks are due.

## SET GOALS

As a part of your study plan, set realistic and measurable goals. Rather than taking on a large goal such as completing a major essay for English, you might break this goal down into sub-goals such as finding a topic, jotting down notes, writing a draft, and revising a draft. Goals should state which tasks are to be completed and approximately when. Rather than setting firm deadlines, which can lead to pressure and stress, allow a realistic time frame to reach goals.

## MANAGE YOUR TIME

If you notice that you are getting stalled on one thing for too long, it's time to step back. If you are on the web gathering research, time can disappear, be mindful of how fast time can disappear as you surf the web. If you get stuck on one particular piece of schoolwork, leave it and move on to the next piece; otherwise frustration will rise and make matters worse. Go back to it after a while and things might be clearer or talk with your teacher, parent, or a friend to find out more.

## CHUNK THOSE TASKS

Do you ever put off big tasks like a book report or reading a novel until it's too late, and then wonder why you did that? Most people take one look at the task and a cloud of worry or boredom tells them that it's too big to tackle. When there's a lot to study, it definitely helps to break things into smaller chunks. Write down the steps you need to take to accomplish a task, and then do one step at a time. If you are doing a book report, don't try to do it all at once. Even breaking the book report down into three or four elements can help: maybe writing about the plot, then later your ideas on what you liked and what you didn't like.

## TAKE FREQUENT BREAKS

Study more often for shorter periods. Instead of trying to do everything all at once in a marathon study session, set a timer for 15 minutes, or whatever feels right for you. Even 10 minutes of work is better than nothing. Stand up and get your body moving and you will recharge your brain cells and be more focussed when you get back to work.

## MOTIVATE YOURSELF

Discover what motivates you and use it to reward yourself when you reach goals, both big and small ones. When you reach a big goal, treat yourself to a movie or buy that new video game you've been saving for. Smart studying also means finding motivation for the smaller goals, treating yourself in a small way after you read a page or a chapter in a textbook. These tiny rewards could be as simple as having a Smartie—or a mandarin orange—or allowing yourself a flash game such as *Angry Birds*. They could also be exercise breaks—shooting a few hoops in the driveway, or racing your dog outside.



## FIND A TUTOR OR A MENTOR

If you find that you are still struggling with study time, talk to a trusted adult. Asking for help is a sign that you are confident and taking charge. Remember too that your school will likely have study help available for you during lunch or after school.

## TRAIN YOUR MIND TO BE POSITIVE

At the end of every day, identify three things that went well. This habit trains your mind to find the positive in everyday life. Remember that you are the boss of your happiness. Rick Hanson, the “Man in Motion” guy who didn't let living in a wheelchair get him down, says our brains are like Velcro for negative experiences and like Teflon for positive experiences. If we don't pay attention, our minds will focus on the negative and wash away the positive. If we don't accentuate the positive we can burn out. If every day you can identify what's going well and how your actions resulted in those going-well moments, you might have a very different kind of school year than you've had before. You might also find that other people like being around more positive energy.

## FIND YOUR OWN STUDY STYLE

Don't try and apply all of these ideas at once, but work on a few that draw you the most. Pay attention to the things that seem to work the best for you. What seems to be your study style? Are you more alert and focussed earlier in the day, or in the evening? Some people like to study with other people to prepare for a test; others prefer to study alone. Some guys like to write down





things to remember them; others might have to read things out loud; and many people learn best when they are actively moving or building something. The best ideas may come when we are engaged in what has been called a *flow* state—when we are fully absorbed in the moment. Take time to discover your own smart way to study successfully.

As parents, mentors, and teachers, we can also help our boys at times less by what we say than by what we embody in our own lives.

When we are most stressed, that is the time to remember that we too need to take breaks, set small, attainable goals, and find the positive.

And give ourselves small rewards. A *Smartie* can sometimes be enough. ■ ■ ■

*Barry MacDonald*

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**Postscript...**

Perhaps you have a story or suggestion from home or school about encouraging a boy to learn smart study skills?

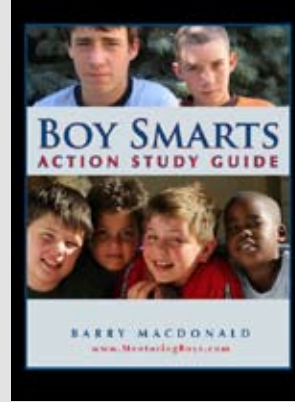
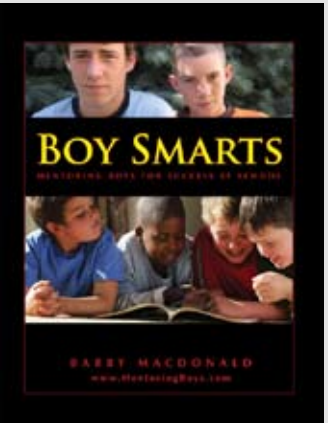
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