

# Cultivate Self- Reliance



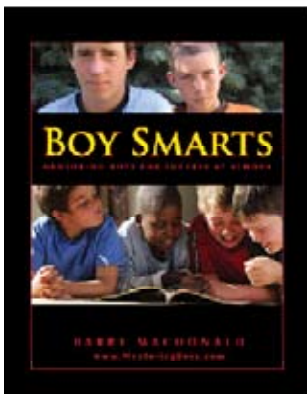
*Dear Barry,*

In the community where I am a school principal, many of our students seem pandered to with an excess of food, clothing, and electronics. I worry when we adults give in too easily to children's demands and blur the line between wants and needs. The boys who seem more disengaged than girls particularly trouble me. With the exception of sports teams these boys are less active in school clubs and make fewer contributions to our school community. They expect parents to monitor their assignments, and even to deliver homework or lunches when they forget them.

I'd have to say that many of these boys appear relatively certain that they will get their way and are bound to put up a good fight when their wishes are frustrated or denied. Toward the end of the school year a teacher relayed to me a story

**WITH THE EXCEPTION OF THE IMPERIAL OFFSPRING OF THE MING DYNASTY CONTEMPORARY KIDS MAY REPRESENT THE MOST INDULGED YOUNG PEOPLE IN THE HISTORY OF THE WORLD...**

about a mother wanting advice after her 16 year old son totalled her car. Apparently the son demanded that his mom drive him to school until the car was fixed. While she fretted over his impulsivity and poor judgment, she struggled more with whether she should drive him to school or let him walk the kilometer alone. She was nervous that he would dawdle or



get into trouble along the way. She decided to drive him daily, claiming that if she didn't he would become cantankerous and make family life miserable.

Doesn't excessive pampering encourage entitlement while also inhibiting maturity? I'd appreciate any practical suggestions you have about helping boys develop healthy independence and self-reliance.

*William*

Metro Toronto



*Dear William,*

Despite millions of children around the globe growing up in severe poverty, the majority of our children have far more than they need. Recently, Elizabeth Kolbert remarked in *The New Yorker* that, "With the exception of the imperial offspring of the Ming dynasty and the dauphins of pre-Revolutionary France, contemporary American kids may represent the most indulged young people in the history of the world."

Like you, many people worry about children mistaking their wants for their needs. Many question how children will learn the necessary skills they need to manage their own lives and to eventually become contributing members of society. Still, parents also tell me that in our culture of instant gratification it takes inordinate energy to resist kids' demands and pull back.

In **Boys on Target** I point out that since the earliest of times parents, mentors, and teachers have helped children to develop independence and autonomy by scaffolding or supporting children's learning in appropriate ways, then gradually withdrawing their support as children develop increasing self-sufficiency.

Students benefit when parents take interest in their schooling and assignments, of course, as long as parents are also mindful not to break one of the cardinal rules of parenting:

Never do for a child that which he can do for himself.

Some of the best-intentioned parents and teachers may be tempted to ignore their better judgment and give in to children's wants and demands. The more we do this after they nag and pressure us, the more we teach them that nagging and pressure are effective strategies for getting



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what they want. And when we focus too much on trying to cushion children from disappointment and make them feel good, no matter what, we may think we are supporting them. However, at such times we are not supporting, but inadvertently disabling them.

Hovering over children with too much solicitude may actually teach children to sit back, wait to be served, or even wait to be bailed out. These kids are at risk of later developing resentment when special service and rescue does not arrive. They can have a difficult time adjusting to life's challenges.

In the **Boys on Target** chapter concerning **Developing Independence** I say: "We know cognitively that we get stronger from facing disappointment and negotiating challenges, that true self-esteem comes, in part, from learning that we can engage in struggle. Children who test their competencies in safe and caring atmospheres, without fear of humiliation, learn to believe in themselves and in their ability to solve problems. They develop courage to face failure, to pick themselves up when they are down, to take risks and try out new possibilities. Even though we may long to rescue our children when we see them suffer, we know that we learn resilience from dealing with life's adversities. Indeed, when we observe from a distance and intervene only when absolutely necessary, children learn that we have faith in their ability to manage frustration as they work through life's hurdles."

Here are some of the practical suggestions from **Boys on Target** that I hope will get your learning community talking about how to encourage healthy age-appropriate independence and self-reliance among boys:

## START YOUNG

When boys are approaching their second birthday, build on their desire to try to be like us by encouraging their helpful behaviour in everyday chores. Your knowledge about your son's personality and frustration

will help you to discern "doable" tasks from ones beyond his capability at a given stage of development. Over the years pitching in to help others will teach boys that their contributions count.


## CREATE ROUTINES

Visit a primary classroom where kids are happily learning and you'll discover an organized teacher who provides predictable routines for a reason: routines provide security for kids as they experiment with independence. Consistent home routines also teach boys to self-regulate their thoughts, feelings, and behaviours.



# BOY SMARTS ACTION TALK

Because its better to build boys than to mend men!



*Upcoming parent workshops...*

*St. John's, September 15*

*Edmonton, September 29*

*Calgary, October 13*

*Maple Ridge, October 27*

*Earlybird registration available*

## LEAD BY EXAMPLE

Children learn eagerly through imitation and are often more influenced by what we do than by what we say. Boys copy our behaviour, especially when we are stressed or upset, whether we want them to or not.

## HOLD FAMILY MEETINGS



While many families have meetings only when crises occur, consider having weekly family meetings to provide children opportunities for input on family life and teach how to operate by democratic dialogue or consensus rather than blind assumption or bossy demands.

## LET YOUR CHILD EXPERIENCE CONSEQUENCES OF HIS CHOICES

As long as the outcome isn't harsh or dangerous, let your son live with the results of his behaviour and his decisions. When he becomes distracted with a program on television and burns his toast, stay quiet and let the burnt toast be his teacher. Over time he will learn that actions lead to certain outcomes, both positive and negative. Avoid interrupting his learning experience with an "I told you so" reminder that often only shifts his disappointment about the results of his negligence to resentment about your reminder.

## SIDESTEP SCOLDING

It can be tough to maintain your cool when your son repeatedly fails to comply with reasonable expectations. But lectures and punishments rarely work, at least not over the long haul, and they won't teach him self-discipline. Be firm, yet respectful, simply stating the chore agreement: "At the last family meeting we agreed that you would empty the dishwasher and your brother would load the dishwasher."

## SMART START FOR BOYS



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 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...*

**AVOID BUBBLE-WRAPPING EMOTIONS**

When we recognize that our children can't always be happy, we are liberated to listen compassionately, maintaining our connectedness while our children struggle with their disappointments. We learn to appreciate that our boy's unhappiness does not reflect our success and worth as parents.

Self-esteem and faith in oneself comes not from having things made easy, but from the lived experience of feeling capable, connected to others, and knowing that you have something to offer.

Imagining at times that we are bolstering our children by reducing stress in their lives, we teach dependence on others for happiness, but when we pass over responsibilities to our children in developmentally appropriate ways, we foster independence and self-respect. ■ ■ ■

*Barry MacDonald*

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**Postscript...**

Perhaps you have a question, comment, or a story from home or school about mentoring a boy to become more independent and self-reliant?

Next month's newsletter will feature your comments and stories, as well as provide brief responses to the questions that concern you.

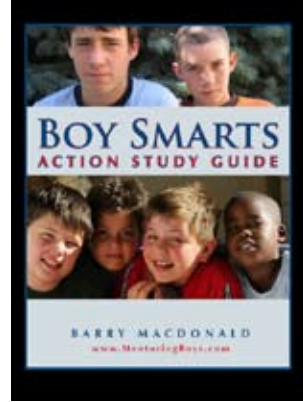
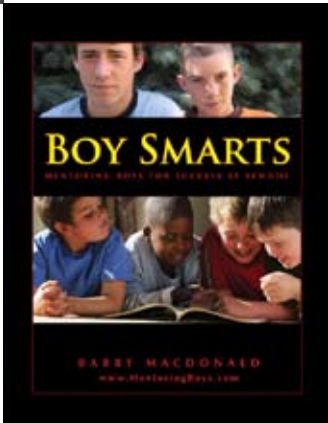
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