

Supporting Boys to Become Organized

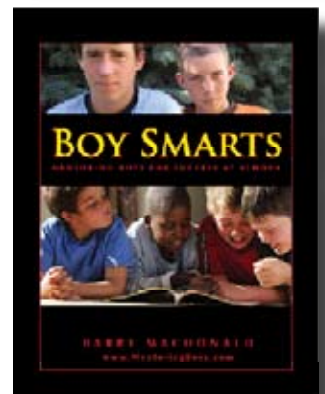


Dear Barry

My son's chaotic disorganization is very stressful for our family. We send him to school each morning with an organized backpack and he returns home with a rat's nest. In moments of frustration I worry that he might be just plain lazy or irresponsible. I've even resorted to bribing him but found that it doesn't work unless I'm standing over him and prompting him. After reading your recent article about motivation and your chapter about how Cash for Grades won't work, I have to admit that I agree, but I am still troubled that he won't learn to become organized for later years.

With both of us working fulltime we are super organized in our home, which leaves me shaking my head about why our example hasn't rubbed off on him yet. (Our daughter is two years younger and does not require prompts to get organized. Go figure.) His Grade 5 teacher says that he's doing well academically and socially, but that he does require extra support to keep organized. I worry that if we don't help him to "want" to be more organized that his academics will take a dive when he reaches high school. Am I missing something? What can I do to help him get more organized?

Michael, Calgary



Hello Michael,

Many parents can relate to that sense of helpless deflation when they learn that their son has, once again, forgotten to hand in the homework assignment he laboured over the night before, or has no idea what happened to his agenda planner. I can still vividly recall my frustration over a decade ago when our youngest son's common habit of "misplacing" his school materials became the focus of countless discussions with his exasperated teachers. Needless to say, this disorganization resulted in lower grades.

Boys' lack of organization is a hot topic in many homes and classrooms, and draws a wide range of responses. Some parents and teachers anticipate that many boys will naturally be less organized than girls are, and try to help by, for example, providing a printed schedule or checklist that boys can refer to. Others, however, throw up their hands, add another sad face sticker to an already sad chart, and attribute lack of organization to a lack of character. Still others suggest that each person has a unique style of organization, and that too rigid a view of organization can hinder creative expression.

Regardless of what you believe to be at the root of a boys' disorganization, most adults agree that getting organized is a foundational skill for a healthy, productive life, rather like eating balanced meals or getting exercise. Indeed, researchers often identify organizational ability as an essential non-cognitive skill or work habit needed for higher grades, along with qualities of attentiveness, persistence, independence, flexibility, and eagerness to learn. I have overheard many teachers proclaim that boys must acquire these non-cognitive skills—organization in particular—if they are to make the grade. With so much media talk about boys' underachievement at school and underrepresentation at our universities, it's no wonder parents get anxious and frustrated as they strain to uncover practical ways to support disorganized boys without judgment, blame, and anger. Parents who are them-

empathizing with boys who seem to leave a trail of chaos behind them, while parents who themselves are not very organized may not know where to begin. Whatever your organizational style, it is not easy to guide a boy who is losing homework, backpacks, planners, and assignments on a regular basis.

Is there a bias against boys' disorganization?

Recently, researchers from the *University of Georgia* and *Columbia University* offered insight into why girls may be more likely to earn higher report card grades than boys do. They analyzed data from 5,800 elementary-aged students and found that at every level, boys' academic grades fell below where their standardized test scores predicted. The study, published in the latest issue of *The Journal of Human Resources*, attributed the wider gap between school grades and tests scores for boys to what they called a bias toward non-cognitive skills (the six work habits identified above), or "how well each child was engaged in the classroom, how often the child externalized or internalized problems, how often the child lost control and how well the child developed interpersonal skills."



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Christopher Cornwell, head of Economics in the *UGA Terry College of Business* and one of the lead researchers, believes that this bias can have long-reaching effects: “The trajectory at which kids move through school is often influenced by a teacher’s assessment of their performance, their grades. This affects their ability to enter into advanced classes and other kinds of academic opportunities, even post-secondary opportunities. It’s also typically the grades you earn in school that are weighted the most heavily in college admissions. So if grade disparities emerge this early on, it’s not surprising that by the time these children are ready to go to college, girls will be better positioned.” This study also suggests that in our efforts to improve boys’ achievement levels, we need to address how they are learning—their behaviour—and not just what they are learning.

How are learning tasks, work habits, and motivation related?

While there are many boys who do not struggle and are satisfied with school, the ones I meet in my counseling office are usually those who struggle with school achievement, behaviour, and yes—organization. The hundreds of boys I have met as a counsellor for well over two decades offer different reasons for their lack of engagement in school. Many tell me that school is boring, and that school tasks are simply not worth their time. Others say that assignments lack purpose and that when adults say “Do X because it’s good for you” without any real evidence, these boys are not convinced. Mostly, boys claim that repetitious drills, worksheets and textbook lectures are dull, and that they prefer real-life learning.

Educators may assume that an unexciting assignment is worthwhile—perhaps in some remote future that boys have a hard time imagining—and besides, if an assignment was good enough for them, it must be good enough for the new generation. In another mood, however, they may also admit that assignments which have no clear explanation of their relevance, or that offer very little student input or choice, often leave boys cold.

In *Boy Smarts* I emphasize that a boy’s motivation and classroom behaviour are intertwined with what he is asked to do, and that before we judge his behaviour or work habits as poor, we must first consider the learning context. Years ago William Glasser, the author of *Control Theory in the Classroom*, said it best: “To focus on discipline is to ignore the real problem: We will never be able to get students to be in good order if, day after day, we try to force them to do what they do not find satisfying.”

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VANCOUVER OCTOBER 18, 2013

Addressing the challenges
of making learning
relevant for all boys

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While it is true that many boys certainly need to become more organized, we also need to consider to what degree we adults are contributing to their struggle. Are the expectations reasonable? Does the learning task have merit? Do students have input? Is the task relevant and engaging?

Are you accepting of the different ways your son is smart?

Those who study personality say that each person is unique and has differing strengths or ways of interacting with the world. Some people may be naturally outgoing while others are shy or reserved. Some people have an almost instinctive compassion for others while others effortlessly keep logic front and center, regardless of emotions. Some of us prefer to live in a structured way whereas others prefer flexibility and the freedom to change plans.



When a boy's instinctive tendencies—sometimes also referred to as strengths—are discouraged, he may begin to doubt his inner wisdom. To better understand your son's manner of interacting within his world, consider the following descriptions of personality tendencies, and identify those he prefers. Remember that these descriptors may apply at some time, to some degree, to all of us when we are relaxed and confident, but will genuinely lean toward one set of preferences over the other when stressed. Do the phrases in list ONE or TWO seem most like your son?

List ONE

- Likes schedules and routines
- Makes decisions quickly and easily
- Likes to make and stick with plan
- Too many changes can be stressful
- Strives to be productive and responsible
- Prefers to finish projects

List TWO

- Likes flexibility and freedom to change plans
- Postpones decisions to gather details
- Likes to adapt and change plans
- Too few changes can be stressful
- Strives to be friendly and playful
- Prefers to start projects

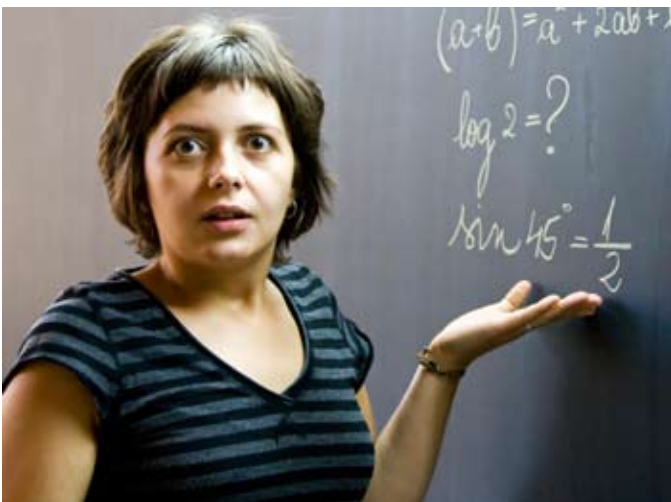
A preference for structure (List ONE)

If your son's preferences are mostly in list ONE, he is likely a natural organizer, preferring to have things settled and prearranged. He likely feels more anxious when plans are left open-ended. He may become very frustrated with freedom-preferring parents and teachers who always seem to put everything off until the last minute. He can relax more when decisions have been settled. When highly stressed he prefers to know what's happening just around the corner. At school your son will tend to get his homework and assignments done on time.

A preference for freedom (List TWO)

If your son's preferences are mostly in list TWO, he is more inclined to go with the flow and will put off making decisions until the last minute as he looks for new information to help him decide. He will become frustrated when pushed to make a choice. If he does have a "to do" list, it will likely be just a scrap of paper. At school he may appear messy and disorganized.

Those preferring structure tend to view those preferring freedom as disorganized and indecisive. People who prefer more spontaneous freedom typically view more structured individuals as rigid. Parents and teachers who have a preference for structure may have a hard time grasping why a boy can be so unfocused, so disorganized, or so reluctant to follow plans and agendas. Adults who press these boys to fit into a more structured framework may feel a bewildered frustration, wondering how anyone can live in such a chaotic way. The boy may experience this adult frustration as disappointment in who he is as a person. Over time the boy may feel there is something fundamentally wrong with him, and may begin to mistrust his own creative spontaneity.



Personality trait research indicates that a greater proportion of teachers as compared to the general population prefer things to be settled and structured, but teachers and parents who prefer structure need to look beyond the surface messiness of this boy's backpack, desk, or bedroom, and recognize the positives that a preference for a more relaxed freedom can bring. Whatever your own organizational style, appreciate your strengths while also paying attention to times when you need to lean the other way, loosening up or tightening up.

As studies show that in the general population we are divided equally, it is important to remember that it takes all kinds of people to make our communities productive

and satisfying. Structured people have a well thought out plan and don't get distracted by details as they move toward goals. Unstructured people are innovative and responsive to new opportunities. Without a fixed plan they can easily adapt to new information, changing directions and seizing the moment.

Children need to develop appreciation for structure AND freedom. A child with a preference for order who does not develop his ability to "go with the flow" may become so locked into his goal that he misses out on the serendipity that may arise in present moment. A child with a preference for freedom who does not develop his structured side may become a disorganized procrastinator who never finishes a task. Children need support to develop both sides of the structure-freedom continuum to become balanced. While supporting children with either preference is essential, this article will focus on supporting disorganized boys who prefer an open-ended freedom. I hope to help you encourage these boys to appreciate order in their world so that the gifts of their spontaneity can shine:

Combine play and work

Appreciate that a boy who prefers freedom needs to play as he works. Parents and teachers who don't share his preference may find his insistence to play as he works annoying. Instead of insisting that he work before play, realize that you son will perform better when he plays as he works.



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Reduce clutter

Children can usually focus better on tasks when there is less clutter competing for attention. Encourage your child to clean out backpacks, lockers, and desks on a regular basis. Help him sort through loose and unused items, discarding old food wrappers, broken pens, wadded up papers, and rotting apples. Decide together whether there are things that are needed only rarely and might be stored somewhere besides the backpack that he carries with him every day. At home take time to go through drawers, closet, toy and equipment barrels with him and encourage him to get rid of whatever he does not need. In a less cluttered bedroom your son's homework area will appear more organized. Approach this cleaning and sorting out task in a good humour so that it's fun and collaborative.

Create a place for everything

Make important things easier to find and put away. The challenge is to find what works for your son and stick to that solution. If he consistently can't find his shoes and jackets, clean out the closet, and then purchase a few inexpensive closet organizers so he can find and put things away quicker. If his sports gear is all over the place, place small plastic barrels in the garage with labels designating the type of equipment. If he misplaces school papers and supplies, identify a special place to hang up his backpack the moment he enters your home, along with a place to immediately empty the backpack and where special notices are to be placed. Create a routine and stick to it. Of course, you had better do the same. If you are regularly stressed about searching for your car keys at the last second, be aware that your actions speak louder than even the best plan for creating order. Hang a hook for those keys by the front door as you enter, and talk about your own process of thinking through your own organizational challenges.

Establish rules

Children preferring freedom may disobey rules because they live so spontaneously that they often act before they have time to think about the rules. They may believe that rules exist for other children and if they can be ignored, they will be. These children will also test rules to be sure that parents and teachers mean what they say. If you enforce a rule one day and not the next, this child will think the rule can be adaptive. Remember that while some rules are necessary, keep them simple, clear, and short. Follow through consistently.



Are you accepting of the different ways your son is smart?

Identify deadlines

For children who prefer to keep options open and delay making decisions, deadlines may provide the stimulus for action. Provide age-appropriate choices, knowing that when the available time has elapsed your son will gear into action.

Appeal to visual preferences

With younger boys, take photographs of the boy doing essential tasks like brushing teeth or hanging up his coat and turn those photos into a reminder chart. Pictures and images can help the visual child.

Use checklists, agendas and calendars

List reoccurring tasks, such as the weekly spelling test, library book return, or soccer practice, use the list to create a sense of order. Find a simple calendar where your child can mark down assignments. You may need to help him update the calendar each day until he finally gets into the habit of writing down his own assignments. A white board is an ideal organizer and will last the whole year. Hang it in a visible spot where it is easy for you both to refer to it.

Post deadlines

Encourage your son to write deadlines on post-it sticky notes (there are also post-it digital notes for older boys) and place them on a visible spot like his bathroom mirror, bedroom door or by a nightstand. Provide him with a small hook or bulletin board to hang on the outside of his bedroom door so he sees the reminder as he enters and exits his room. The trick is to teach him to always put the reminder in the same place each and every time.

Use technology

If your son has a smart phone or a tablet device and likes to use it, instead of recording homework, assignments and tests agenda to keep track, take a photo of the summary on the classroom board. Remember too

that increasingly teachers are posting details about assignments, texts and expectations on the classroom website. An older boy who has a cell phone may have a time management app that can help him keep a to-do list, or have his phone send him timely reminders.



Use a binder

Use a three-ring, loose-leaf binder for each academic subject, and divide each binder into five sections—notes, homework, handouts, tests and quizzes, and blank paper. Ensure that every sheet of school-related paper is put into its proper section. Keep a three-hole paper punch handy. Avoid accordion files, as they create a *black hole* where papers end up stuffed into the wrong section and become lost.

Also, identify a regular time when the two of you can sort through his papers. Avoid lecturing. Help him by focussing on maintaining order. As you keep it positive—and maybe even fun—he will appreciate your support, and over time he will develop his skills to become better organized.

Use a kitchen timer or cell phone to set break times

When it comes to home study time, a kitchen timer or even a cell phone can help you keep track of time, ensuring necessary break times. Each child can sustain focus for differing intervals, and this period may

fluctuate depending on the time of year. Keep track of what seems to be the optimal amount of time for your child to pay attention to his work.

Give your son enough distance

If your son claims that you are over-involved, understand that your son may be indirectly asking you to respect his growing independence. Remember that over-involvement can deny him of the opportunity to try, and fail, and learn from his own experiences.

Seek outside support if necessary

If your teenage son has experienced years of frustration at school, he likely has diminished self-confidence with his academic abilities. He probably needs a mentor or tutor who can help him feel smart again. Make sure that he has input regarding who this person will be.

If your son is resisting your advice, understand that begging, bribing, or threatening him to become organized will increase the likelihood that he will resist, pushing back and demanding more freedom.

And remember that we are all works in progress, learning as we go, finding our freedom within the necessary structures we invent. ■ ■ ■

Barry MacDonald

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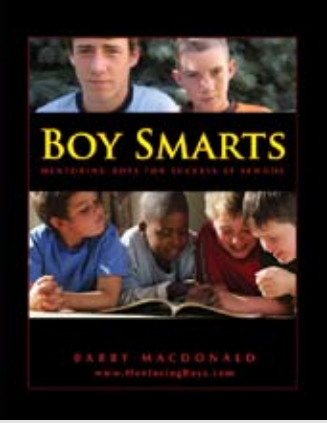
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