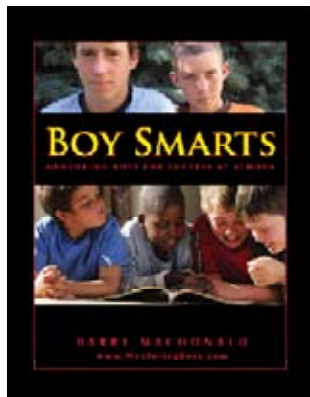




TWELVE TIPS FOR PARENTING BOYS INTO MEN OF COURAGE AND COMPASSION

THESE are daunting times for raising boys. Many parents worry about the possibility that their boys are being mentored by screen violence and hyper-sexualized media content. They worry about pop culture's ability to normalize impulsive, disrespectful, and self-destructive behaviour. They worry that boys are internalizing confusing and disturbing versions of masculinity such as those represented in the television show *Kenny vs. Spenny* or video game *Grand Theft Auto*; and that boys are being conditioned, through dazzling and hypnotic media images, to become ever more aggressive—even violent.

IN addition to worrying about the influence of a media-saturated culture that seems to equate violence and masculinity, parents have many other concerns. We often hear on the news about the widening gender achievement gap in schools, where many boys are floundering, disengaging, giving up. As I reported in my book *Boys on Target - Raising Boys into Men of Courage and Compassion*: "Boys are at greater risk than girls for most of the major learning and developmental disorders—as much as four times more likely to suffer from autism, attention deficit disorder, and dyslexia. Boys make up two-thirds of students in special education—including eighty percent of those diagnosed with emotional disturbances. Boys are seventy-five percent more likely to die in accidents and more than twice as likely to be victims of violent crime."



IN the face of these alarming trends, many parents feel discouraged and hopeless. Some might wish to culture boys in a hermetically sealed bubble, a remote island where digital trespassers are forbidden. Others are seduced by the glossy promises of simplistic solutions—*tough love*, for example, or *bootcamps* that promise to take hold of boys and stamp them out as mature young men.

WE all have images of what boys are supposed to be and what they are going to be like. Any ten-year-old boy will tell you: “Be tough, be strong, and don’t cry.” In *Boy Smarts - Mentoring Boys for Success at School* I argue that “society can channel boys into a sort of cultural straitjacket that molds mind and enforces behaviour by confining emotional expressiveness”; that “boys who want to become real men fear appearing as wimps in the eyes of their peers, and especially their fathers.” Yet many parents who want their sons to live more fully expressive human lives may still feel uneasy, fearing their son might not be perceived as tough enough to fit in, that he might be teased or ostracized, and fail to hit some invisible mark somewhere.

IS it not possible for our sons to learn that they can honour strong versions of masculinity while also cultivating their capacity for intimacy and deep connection?

DESPITE the media’s clichéd portrayals of boy troubles as caused by fatherless homes, lax parenting, excessive video gaming, and broken educational systems, many know that seeking out easy targets of blame does not help anyone. Understanding that we have common concerns, we also know that we need to consider each situation, each boy, one by one. As I listen to the unique stories of parents and respond to their varied concerns about their boys’ development in each of my books, I have endeavored to provide real-life guidance tailored to the different needs, strengths, and personalities of the young boys in our care. It is my hope that you will find the opportunity to read and reflect on the many concrete suggestions I offer in *Boy Smarts*, and *Boys on Target*.

ANTOINE de Saint-Exupéry, the French poet, wrote, “To live is to be slowly born.” Hopefully, as your family eases into a gentler summer pace you will have increased

opportunity to connect with your children and consider the following twelve tips about raising boys. Whether you are confused, mystified, or awed by the front row seat you have watching your son’s emerging development, these practical suggestions will help strengthen your loving responses to your boy’s changing needs.



1. Love the son you’ve got

Support and accept your son wholeheartedly, ensuring that he knows you appreciate his individuality, temperament, and quirks. Tune into your son’s unique gifts, talents, and strengths—even when he may be struggling in school or in the community, or his energy levels may be wearing you down. He needs to know that you value him for who he is. Nothing can replace the time you will spend just hanging out and being with your boy. When you enjoy time and space together, the invisible bond between you gets stronger and stronger.

2. Let him see multiple versions of masculinity

Offer a balance of activities for boys to participate in so that they can see reflected back to them a broad range of possibilities about what it means to be male. Over time, help your son to appreciate how different kinds of males contribute to society in different ways. Boys need to learn that emotional openness can fit with masculinity. Especially when they are stressed and prone to lashing out in frustration, boys need the men in their lives to show them how to identify and express their thoughts and strong feelings in a climate of safety.

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3. Acknowledge your son's feelings

When we are anxious, we might at times, from the best of intentions, invalidate our boy's feelings. "You don't really hate school," we might say, as if we would convince them their feelings are mistaken. Hardly noticing how their eyes glaze over when we proffer our advice based on years of experience, we might go on and on, secure in the presumption that we know our boys better than they know themselves. Less can be more when boys are reticent. Sometimes a simple acknowledgement of his feelings with a sincere "Oh... I see" is enough to help your son settle so he becomes open to discussion or self-exploration. Listening shows we care about a boy's experience and his feelings. Once your son feels heard, you and he may be able to collaborate in thinking of ways he can avoid similar problems in the future.

4. Listen to what is not being said

Given that about seventy-five percent of communication is non-verbal, how we respond to non-verbal messages—silence in particular—is critical. We want to listen to what is not being said as much as we listen to words. We have learned from much recent brain research that the brain attunes to deeper meanings by mirroring non-verbal messages. To understand the full meaning of what your son is saying or not saying, attend to his tone, the inflections in his voice, and especially his body language. Follow your son's lead, and pick up on cues. During moments of high stress be especially aware of how your son reacts to your eye contact; sometimes making eye contact can intensify a boy's anxiety while at other times it can be calming and focussing. By truly listening to what is not being said, we say to our children: "You are a person of worth. I love you, respect you, and want to understand you." Our own mirroring of non-verbal expressions might not speak to a boy's conscious brain, but it will speak to his deeper brain, helping him to recognize that we are on his side.




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5. Action-Talk

A boy's internal processing of thought and release of feelings often involves action—sometimes seen in his fidgeting, avoidance of eye contact, or in his quick bursts of energy, such as slamming a door. For many males, talking is like playing a sport, with bursts of excitement and periods of lull. Many boys can talk more easily when they are moving and engaging in activity. Appreciate that movement helps your son to process ideas from one side of his brain to the other. Even when your son's internal world appears to be motoring around like a washing machine stuck on the rinse cycle, listen, tune in to his struggle and ask questions sparingly. Never push or prod.

6. Talk about verbal and physical violence

Talk with your son about what it means to treat others with respect. Help him work through problems as they rise in his everyday relationships. Try to give him examples of what you might say or do in situations that could turn nasty. As you are calm and reasonable rather than reactive with him, he too will learn to become reasonable with others, even when he is triggered by irritation. Use every opportunity to reinforce that verbal and physical violence has absolutely no place in a relationship. Let him know how you define healthy relationships and seek to treat people in a way that your son can admire. Be honest with him when you have messed up, knowing that by showing him how to admit mistakes and express humility, your son will learn to do the same. Let him know he can talk to you anytime, knowing that you will quietly listen and demonstrate compassion and a solid belief that he will find his way.

7. Open up conversations about motivation

In our desire to motivate boys, it is easy to get sidetracked and confuse motivation with manipulation. Parents who use external rewards to inspire goals on the playing field or grades at school might be surprised to learn they may be impeding their son's potential for real learning. Ultimately it is your son's choice to improve or not improve. Your task is to support his path of learning. Rather than manipulating with external rewards, be curious about what makes

him tick and what motivates his interest. Discuss with him how he might use his motivation to move himself forward toward achieving his desires and goals.

8. Teach your son how to regulate emotions

A boy's brain is constantly monitoring his environment for potential threats or needs for resources. During the early years, parents serve as primary stress regulators, and as children mature, they test the stress template we have provided with our guidance and support. They still need our help—and will continue to well into the teen years—to cope with stress and anger without turning to violence. When he gets overly frustrated or angry, tell him he can walk it out, talk it out, or take time out, but first listen and let him know by your facial expressions that you appreciate his struggle. Let your son know he can always come to you if he feels like things are getting out of hand. Take time to explore with your son the options he has to express his own frustration and anger—and what is out of bounds. Discuss everyday strategies to manage stress.



9. Lead by example

Parents will have the greatest impact when they walk the talk. Keep in mind that your boy is like a sponge watching and listening to what you say and do and will take his cues from you—both good and bad. When parents work through their own conflict in ways that are calmly assertive rather than aggressive, they increase the chances that their children will adopt similar habits when they run into problems with one another. When boys routinely observe us shout and slam doors, or sulk and withdraw when differences arise, they're likely to pick up those habits too. Be aware that your son is also observing you when you're driving in traffic, talking with customer service reps on the telephone, and with food servers in restaurants. Learning to become a contributing member of society takes time, opportunity, and patience. We all learn to live fully not by ourselves, but through relationships with others.

10. Encourage autonomy and independence

Sometimes our *helpful* interventions do more harm than good. If we immediately replace a broken toy or rush a forgotten assignment to school, the boy loses the opportunity to manage loss and frustration. If we try to smooth out every disappointment, we may also rob our children of gratitude. When we interfere with developmentally appropriate childhood difficulties, it's a bit like carrying a one year old around all the time: He doesn't learn to trust his own capacity for propelling himself forward, by crawling or walking himself. Knowing we are capable is the true source of self-esteem.

11. Use respectful & positive methods of discipline

When boys feel they have been called on the carpet, they often try to siphon off their own anxiety by drawing parents into an argument in order to sidestep a discussion about discipline. Parents may become triggered and find themselves reacting instead of responding. During these times it's important to remember that it is the certainty of the response—not the severity or intensity—that makes the impact. It is adult responsiveness and calm follow-through that speaks of commitment and care. Sometimes we can think that boys learn more from a stronger consequence such as being publicly shamed, sent to the office, or suspended, but the results of these tactics usually include alienation and resentment. Scolding reminders are unlikely to change behaviour, and are more likely to fuel negativity in your relationship. Lectures and punishments rarely work, at least not over the long haul, and they don't teach self-discipline.

12. Promote safety inside & outside the home

Talk about everyday safety concerns from an early age. Your best bet for ensuring safety, especially as a boy grows older, is to keep the lines of communication open. Be aware of your son's activities and friends. As your son develops more independence and begins to choose his own entertainment and friends, try to be fair and respectful, even when you are expressing concerns about some of his choices. When your son is little, you can shut off his electronics, but after

a certain point you cannot control what movies he sees at a friend's house, or even what video games he is exposed to. Rather than fretting aloud about video gaming, sit with your son and learn from him how to play video games. Showing interest in his electronic world will help you connect with your son, and will also place you in a better position to discuss limits and other sensitive issues about the ideas and cultures presented within games. Without sacrificing your sense of your own authority as a mentor and guide, you can show willingness to learn from your son, to explore with him new media, new worlds, and new opportunities for connection. It is connection with you, and the self-trust he learns in his own decision-making abilities, that will be your best safety insurance down the road.

And remember, if your son is going through a rough patch and you are finding these tips hard to put into practice, join me at an upcoming *Boy Smarts Action* workshop to gain deeper insight and garner additional practical suggestions to strengthen your parenting. • • •

Barry MacDonald
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P.S. Please pass this article along to someone who might benefit, and email me about your successes and challenges!

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