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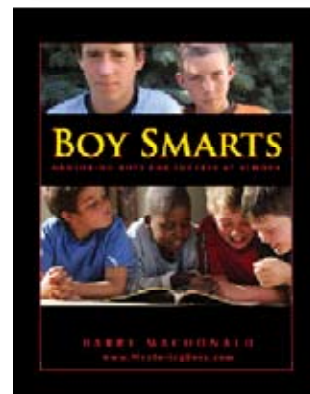
Supporting a Boy's Internal Motivation

How can we help boys find their drive for success at school and in life?

Dear Barry

My son Michael puts forth minimal effort in Grade 7 and just scrapes by. His lack of motivation is driving my husband and me crazy with frustration. In earlier years he worked harder and wanted our approval. Now, in Grade 7, he works marginally, misses assignments, and doesn't seem to care any more. We find ourselves in a perpetual power struggle to get him activated. We've tried getting angry and yelling, but nothing seems to work. Should we start doling out cash for grades like I've heard other parents do? How can we motivate him?

Linda, Surrey BC



Hello Linda,

With all the media talk about boys' disappointing school achievement and stalled development, it's natural for many parents to become apprehensive when their son is using minimal effort and barely coasting through. Many parents worry that a young boy who is drifting aimlessly in school will lack purpose and flounder as an adult, perhaps even becoming one of those *boomerang* kids unable to leave the nest for long.

At the start of a new year, as we adults reflect on our own goals and hopes, it seems timely to think about how we can encourage and support the motivation of boys. This month's newsletter offers suggestions for engaging boys more fully so that they can discover their own inner drive.

Cash for Grades Unlikely to Work

When we become frustrated with our son's indifferent achievement, it's all too easy to reach for the wallet and dangle a few crisp bills before our son's glazed eyes in the hopes of spurring motivation. However, as Career Analyst and writer *Daniel Pink* has discovered, positive effects of external rewards are effective only in the short term for mechanical or simple tasks (see his Ted Talk at http://www.ted.com/talks/dan_pink_on_motivation.html). The motivation derived from external rewards does not last, nor does it yield the internal drive to sustain hard work or higher-order thinking and creativity. More disturbingly, social scientists have found that external rewards, unless they are unexpected and after the fact, actually tend to undermine inner (usually referred to as intrinsic) motivation. In a 1975 study called *Turning Play into Work*, nursery school children who were drawing with felt pens were divided into three groups. One group was promised a certificate for completion (expected reward); one group was surprised with a reward after they completed the task; and one group was given no reward. Two weeks later, when these children were

brought back, the group that were promised the reward showed a mark decrease in intrinsic motivation, while the other two groups showed no change in motivation.

If you promise your son cash for grades, it is likely that he will experience this promise as a manipulative form of control that comes from the outside, not from inside him, and he is likely to feel less sense of self-determination. The best thing you can do to support his intrinsic motivation is to give him choices so that he feels invested, and offer encouragement along the way. Ultimately it is your son's choice to improve or not improve.

The following excerpt from *Boys on Target* cautions against using cash to motivate achievement:

"Often, when we adults use the term motivation, we really mean compliance. Naturally, we want to see children do what we tell them to do, and we may be tempted to use manipulative strategies to get children to comply with our wishes. Those of us raised on punitive approaches to child-rearing are more likely to conclude that we can motivate children to perform better and achieve more through a system of external

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rewards and punishments. However, parents who have tried to improve their children's performance by giving cash for grades, or sanctions such as grounding, usually come to recognize the limitations of these strategies. Parents who have shared with me stories of their own forays into the exchange economy of "Do this and I'll give you that" have observed that rewards can also flip into punishment. Cash for grade depends on satisfying the parent, and when the going gets tough, a child's focus on the far-off prize may shift to an awareness of being controlled. The frustration associated with the withheld cash then seems like a punishment. And the more desirable the reward, the more demoralizing it is to miss out."

Motivation is Complex

Around age eleven or twelve, increased testosterone signals not only the physical signs of puberty, but also an internal drive to separate from parents, a shift in attention from a focus on adult approval and a search for other sources of approval and satisfaction. At this stage of early puberty most boys question everything they have been taught by their parents and other authorities.

It is also common for boys Michael's age to see the goal of pleasing parents and teachers as something for little kids, not cool enough for the young men they are turning into. They certainly do not want to look like a *suck-up*. Unfortunately, just as boys are looking for models of how to be men and trying to break free of parental expectations, they do so largely within a cultural context that celebrates lethargy and underachievement as popular notion of masculinity. Like a washing machine stuck on the spin cycle, boys can get stuck in a pose of invincibility and vulnerability.

While girls are encouraged to relieve their stress by sharing their problems with others, boys are ashamed to disclose. Commonly they internalize their stress, turning feelings of discomfort—including fear and sadness—into anger.

When you are feeling anxious yourself, it can be challenging, but do your best to attune to your son, seeing the world as he might be seeing it. Avoid grabbing simple set of pre-determined explanations or labels—he is seeking power! He is a bad seed! He is lazy! He is testosterone-driven! Consider multiple possibilities, and be alert to what motivates your son, in a particular place, at a particular time.

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Be Authoritative Without Being Authoritarian

Authoritarian parents are strict and rule-bound, demanding compliance without explanation—the *my way or the highway* approach. In contrast, authoritative parents maintain high standards, are responsive to children without being indulgent. They listen and explain; they hold the line firmly but with compassion. New research from the *University of New Hampshire* has found that when children are led authoritatively with clear boundaries and compassion, they are less likely to engage in delinquent behaviour as adolescents. Rick Trinkner, the lead researcher, found that: “When children consider their parents to be legitimate authority figures, they trust the parent and feel they have an obligation to do what their parents tell them to do. This is an important attribute for any authority figure to possess, as the parent does not have to rely on a system of rewards and punishments to control behaviour, and the child is more likely to follow the rules when the parent is not physically present.”



Resist Getting Drawn Into Conflict

Parents can maintain a boundary without fighting or caving in. Knowing that some boys are just more easily triggered than others, we can often diffuse potential conflict or challenges to our authority by sidestepping potential conflict from the start. A boy who strenuously insists on doing things his own way can be trying to show he is his own boss, well on his way toward adulthood. He may also be trying to evade anxiety.

In *Boy Smarts* I note that “Eye-rolling, muttering, and smiling at inopportune moments are meant to provoke adults and also to save face. When adults insist that students do things their way, they risk raising the stakes in a new, heightened level of confrontation.” Stay outside of a boy’s conflict cycle. When a boy says, “This homework sucks,” avoiding getting drafted into a power struggle.



Consider Your Son’s Learning Context

Great teachers work hard at creating stimulating, inspiring environments that are naturally motivating. Rarely do they grind away joylessly at the specific task of *motivating* people; they lead by doing, removing barriers and supporting curiosity, talents, energy. Today, teachers understand that everyone has their own unique way of learning, and that the best learning takes place when classroom experiences are enjoyable and relevant to students’ lives, interests and experiences.

At Michael’s age teachers also know that intrinsic motivation depends on the attitudes of friends. Research shows that students tend to associate with peers who have the same motivational characteristics, and that intrinsic value of education, enjoyment of school, and friends’ attitudes about school become more similar over time. Studies indicate that when teachers emphasize independent work and no opportunities for collaborative learning, students feel forced to choose between meeting academic and social needs. In *Speaking up: Students’ perspectives on school* researchers found that socially engaged learning environments yielded higher levels of motivation and achievement, as compared to classrooms where talking was discouraged and students failed more often.

Support Your Son's Unique Learning Style

Take time to discuss with your son his preferred ways of learning. The follow questions from *Boys on Target* spur reflection about your son's learning styles and needs:

Is he a visual learner struggling in a verbal classroom?

Where verbal learners get more out of words and written and spoken explanations, visual learners remember best when they see pictures, diagrams, flow charts, time lines, films, and demonstrations.

Is he an active learner surrounded primarily by reflective learning designs?

Where reflective learners prefer to think about what they are learning quietly first, active learners learn best by doing something active. "Let's try it out and see how it works," the active learner proclaims. "Let's think it through first," the reflective learner responds.

Is he an intuitive learner who struggles with detailed memorization and routine calculations?

Detail learners patiently and carefully gather particulars and learn the facts; intuitive learners prefer abundant, disorganized details where they may spot possibilities, connections, and relationships.

Is he a macro learner who struggles with micro-logical and sequential paths to finding solutions?

Micro learners gain understanding in linear steps, with each step following logically from the previous one. Macro learners learn in large jumps, absorbing material almost randomly without seeing connections, and then suddenly getting it.

Attend a **Boy Smarts Action Talk** or **Boys Can Write!** workshop to learn more about supporting your son's motivation and drive.

Ensure Expectations are Rigorous but Reachable

In *Boys on Target* I encourage parents to cultivate faith in their boys. This faith includes a deep trust in a boy's innate competence and self-righting capacities, and the expectation that they can perform at a level slightly beyond what they believe they can do. Appreciate that while high expectations produce good results, and low expectations produce poor ones, out-of-reach expectations may tend to discourage growth. Set the bar just high enough to be a realistic challenge.

Teach Your Son How to Turn His Desires into Reality

Your son might find it interesting to learn that experts have discovered that the probability of success increases with each additional step we take to achieve a goal. Briefly summarized, here is the likelihood of success for five different approaches to achieving a goal:

- + Making a conscious decision to do something yields a 25% success rate
- + Deciding when a goal will be completed yields a 40% success rate
- + Planning how a goal is to be realized yields a 50% success rate
- + Committing to someone how a goal will be realized yields a 65% success rate
- + Making a specific future appointment with a person you have committed to about the outcome of your goal yields a 95% success rate

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Setting goals provides a step-by-step approach for boys to achieve their desired level of performance. Athletic coaches especially know that interacting with goals helps athletes to work harder and achieve greater motivation. Research has also identified three key ways to achieve a goal:

- **Write the goal down.** Research shows that we are more likely to accomplish written goals than those we merely talk about, perhaps because written goals provide a visual reminder of what we need to do. Post them in a prominent spot—such as a kitchen wall—where he can refer to them often.

- **Make the goal specific.** “Michael will work harder next term,” is a difficult goal to achieve. A goal worded more specifically, such as “Michael will work on reviewing math problems for 10 minutes Sunday through Thursday” establishes a doable plan of action.

- **Make the goal measurable.** A measurable goal allows your son to chart his progress. For example, you can tell whether Michael is on his way to raising his grade by whether he is finishing homework with less difficulty and whether his marks on math quizzes are steadily improving. If there's no way to check progress, the goal is not measurable.

Lead by Example

It is not through our singular efforts that we all learn to live and express our potential, but through our relationships with others. Children of all ages—even teens—are like sponges, listening to what you say (even those things you mutter under your breath) and watching what you do. When parents take the time to set realistic, obtainable, and specific goals, their children will adopt similar habits—even if it takes a while. When parents face their own setbacks and admit their own mistakes, boys will follow their lead. When we talk openly about our flagging motivation—especially with tasks we dislike—boys will learn that sometimes life is unpleasant, but we still find the motivation to work hard, fulfill our responsibilities, and advance ourselves.

Encourage Your Son to be Resilient with Setbacks

Ensure that your son knows that setbacks and mistakes are simply part of the learning process, and windows of opportunity. While acknowledging your son's pain or sadness around disappointment, you can also add, “Sounds as if you may still have a chance in the next try-outs!” In *Boys on Target* I say: “Caring adults help boys understand that mistakes are not the problem, but a necessary part of learning. The problem is the fear of making mistakes and being humiliated. Caring adults can help normalize mistakes by revealing their own slip-ups in an appropriate way, and demonstrating that trying again, and sometimes again and again, takes courage and self-acceptance.”

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Focus on Your Son's Strengths

Keep in mind those children who struggle with attention, focus, or ADHD challenges often become creative and resourceful learners out of necessity. With maturity, these children develop wonderful traits such as creativity, divergent thinking, inquisitiveness, spontaneity, intuitiveness, resourcefulness, humour, and resilience. As they develop self-confidence in their approach to living, they experience success as adults by choosing careers that build on their unique strengths and abilities. In this way their drive for excitement and stimulation can lead them to success in business, innovation, entertainment, sports and public speaking.

As we learn to trust that all children, with support and encouragement, can learn, grow, and find a valued place in the community, they in turn will internalize our belief, and learn to channel their energy in positive directions.

Helping a discouraged child to get the energy to try, and fumble, and try again, and find his path, is not really about us. If he gets good grades, it is not a reward for us. If his grades slip, it is not a punishment we endure. Supporting a child's motivation, especially through gold stars or different-coloured dollar bills, is not a measure of our parental competence or success. Fostering sustainable, positive change means that we need to attune to what motivates the child.

A modest resolution for this year could be that we, as educators and parents, do more than tinker with the strategies of compliance that make us feel that at least we are doing something.

May we learn to support the inner motivation of our boys, cultivating the patient receptivity and wisdom to attune to the many different needs and strengths of our youth. May we be relaxed enough, alert enough, and caring enough, to pay attention when the eyes of our children light up. ■ ■ ■

Barry MacDonald

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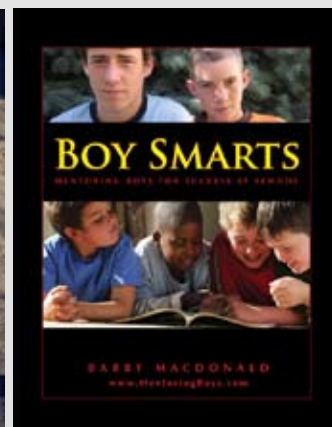
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