

CHANNEL BOISTEROUS ENERGY AT RECESS



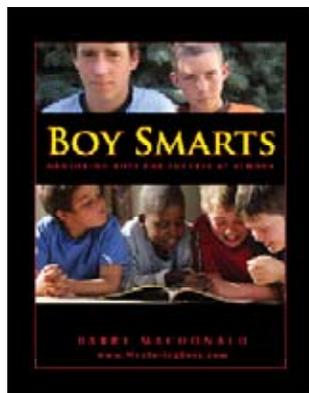
Dear Barry,

My 10 year old son Ryan is a highly physical boy who regularly finds himself in trouble at recess. Although we manage him just fine at home and in the community, at school he keeps being sidelined after playing too roughly. Warnings from school staff to tone it down don't work with him or his competitive friends, who are repeatedly sent to the principal's office after they become overly excited during recess.

Last April the boys were invited into a *Peace Circle* to talk through their conflict, but talking was not their style. My son reported it was boring, and that he just wanted to play. Recess equipment started being removed from the playground so that in June there was none available, and even the simplest of games like *4-Square* were banned. The boys moped around, complaining about nothing to do and getting themselves into even more trouble. I have spent hours in the principal's office being instructed to tell my son to be less competitive and less aggressive on the playground. The principal is now talking about putting these active boys into different classrooms this fall, and enforcing a no-touching policy at recess. How will these highly physical boys manage a no-touching rule?

In one of your presentations here in Toronto, you said that the purpose of discipline is to teach, not to punish, and definitely not to shame. I may be off track here, but I see that benching boys during recess only shames them. It doesn't teach them how to get along. What can school staff do?

Sandra - Toronto





Dear Sandra,

Your email is a timely one as children transition from summertime free-play back into classrooms, where they will have fewer opportunities to physically blow off steam.

Like you, many parents and school staff express concern when a boy's natural exuberance is misinterpreted or penalized. They worry when boys become labelled as difficult and their behaviour as "disordered." For many boys, learning to find a healthy balance between too much and too little aggressive behaviour is a challenging task that takes time to learn. How do boys learn to stand up for themselves if necessary, yet not provoke fights, or lash out in frustration? How do they develop hard-won skills of verbal negotiation?

At workshops and presentations across the country I encourage school staff and parents to explicitly teach boys HOW to regulate their emotions on a daily basis, especially before and during recess periods. Reacting after aggression erupts just doesn't make sense, especially with predictable transgressions. We shouldn't be taken by surprise when boys get worked up over rule infractions, or the calling of penalty shots. We need to help boys understand how to manage their emotional responses before, not after, these common scenarios.

Benching boys outside the principal's office will not teach them how to restrain aggressive impulses, but will instead feed stress, resentment, and more conflict. The *American Academy of Pediatrics* advises parents and school staff that occasional outbursts are a normal part of childhood and cautions that we ought to "be careful not to reinforce aggression with aggressive forms of punishment", and to "model acceptable behavior as a caretaker by managing your own temper."

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Testosterone is a Powerful Hormone

In *Boy Smarts* I say: “While estrogen is the hormone that gives females a sense of well-being, high levels of testosterone account for generally increased irritability and impulsiveness among males. It appears that the higher the level of testosterone, the greater the boisterousness of the boy.” Evidence suggests that many males are quicker than females to express aggression physically, and that females tend to express aggression in less overt ways such as social rejection.

Testosterone, one of the fight-or-flight hormones that regulate cognitive and physical energy, increases when boys become keyed up about winning a game or when they are embroiled in conflict. With females who perceive a threat, testosterone levels also rise, but not to the same degree as in males. Interestingly, studies of testosterone levels of adult male athletes before and after a competition reveal that testosterone levels rise shortly before a match, as if in anticipation of the competition. Winning further boosts male testosterone levels. Even male sports fans get a boost of testosterone when their team is winning.

When a boy’s brain and body is flooding with testosterone, he needs support to manage his impulses—not censure, and certainly not harsh criticism after the fact. As boys become increasingly physical and fidget in response to boredom, stress, or a perceived threat, they are discharging tension. The impulse to push, shove, and bang fists is their instinctive way to release mounting pressure. Highly competitive and action-oriented boys are especially prone to discharging stress physically rather than talking about what’s worrying them at any given moment.

We can anticipate that boys will, in general, have more testosterone pumping through their bodies than girls will, and that their play will be more physically aggressive. Rather than imposing punitive

sanctions, we need to teach boys how to be respectful and cooperative while also channeling their energy in healthy and fun ways. It goes without saying, of course, unstructured physical play can help most children—girls as well as boys—manage stress while developing social skills and relational resilience.



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PRACTICAL STRATEGIES TO ENGAGE BOYS

The Value of Channeling High-spirited Physicality

According to the *Canadian Pediatric Society*, unstructured play is essential for keeping children healthy, and for helping them reach important social, emotional, and cognitive developmental milestones. In *Boys on Target* I emphasize “that rough-and-tumble play characterized by running, chasing, fleeing, playful fighting and wrestling is essential to the development of self-confidence and is a critical part of boys’ healthy development.”

When I was a kid, I used to play with siblings and neighbourhood friends for hours at a time, unsupervised. Our play seemed freestyle, because adults were not herding us and monitoring the parameters of our games. In reality, however, all our games had rules, whether they were spelled out or not. We knew how to pick teams, negotiate grey boundaries, and work through conflicts.

Most children today have very limited opportunities for such unsupervised outside play. Interestingly, a 2007 study published by scholars at the *University of Virginia* in *Science* of 2,500 elementary classrooms found that fifth graders spent more than 90% of their time in their seats listening to the teacher or working alone, and only about 7 % of their time working in groups. As it appears that most classrooms allow very little social interaction, recess may be the only opportunity for students to engage in communal play. Children, especially boys, need opportunities to learn through active play, along with some just in time coaching on how to channel their rambunctious physicality.

Recess offers a valuable opportunity to help children develop emotional regulation. Ted Hupé, the school principal at *Holy Family Elementary* in Whitehorse, works to channel boys’ energy and claims that supervising rough play during recess makes for calmer and more alert learning afterward. More and more school staff have been introducing no-contact playground policies, but this school staff does precisely the opposite. Anticipating that rambunctious students will cross the line of inappropriateness at times, they take time to teach boys appropriate ways of being physical; they help boys manage aggressive impulses by facilitating freestyle wrestling during recess and afterschool. Ted says:

“Since we introduced freestyle wrestling we have noticed a marked decline in bullying and playground misbehaviour... Boys of smaller stature succeed in this sport because they wrestle within their weight class and not by age. Boys identified with ADHD also attend and focus better during the wrestling season... And the girls develop increased comfort with competition and their own physicality. Don’t get me wrong, we emphasize cooperation daily, but we also value competition.”



Help Students Generate Self-Sponsored Rules

While it may be a tall order for many school staff to start facilitating recess freestyle wrestling at school, a reasonable small step they might take is to resist pre-posting playground rules, instead helping students generate their own meaningful ones. Taking time to discuss with students what makes their recess play successful and what sabotages it will help them develop a shared understanding of what fun-loving constructive play looks and sounds like. Listening and sharing genuine interests sets the stage for cooperation better than any externally imposed list of rules or expectations.

Remember that cooperative community will not emerge full-blown during the first few discussions. Allow space for students to process, reflect, modify, and integrate.

When children point out that it is the same few boys who incite trouble on the playground, acknowledge their frustrations and compassionately redirect them to reconsider their student-generated rules. Do the rules still make sense or do they need to adjust them? Ask them what they need for support. If they become stuck, offer a suggestion. Learning democratic practices and interpersonal skills takes time.

Help Students Develop Internal Regulation

When some adults try to improve children's self-control, they turn to systems of rewards and punishments to reinforce good and discourage unwanted behaviours. They tell students that terrible things will happen if they don't control their impulses, or praise, often in exaggerated ways, those who exhibit positive self-control: "Look at how Tommy is playing nicely!" According to Lev Vygotsky, a Russian psychologist who studied the self-regulation abilities of young children, teachers should steer clear of simplistic behaviourism strategies and instead take time to teach children how to master their thoughts and how to talk to themselves when they encounter a difficult task. Learning to talk oneself through conflict helps develop habits of self-awareness needed to slow down and step back before acting. Learning to say "Easy does it" or "I can handle this problem" can help students refocus. Sometimes the simple habit of breaking tension with a quick drink of water is all it takes.

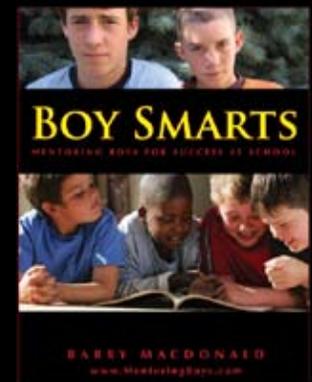
Supervision Without a Heavy Hand

Active supervision during recess is critical. Adults who pay attention to what is happening on the playground can interpret social interactions, consider why certain conflict patterns repeat, and redirect anti-social behaviours in the making. An adult who notices a boy repeatedly becoming too aggressive might reflect on what is going on with this boy who finds it so difficult to modulate his actions. What could help him to check those impulses that will get him into trouble if he follows them heedlessly? Yes, it is essential to sometimes remind students when a rule is being broken, but we should avoid making a big deal out of the incident, appreciating that some

commonly misbehave because they haven't yet learned to find even a micro-second to pause before acting out of frustration or anger.

Thomas Crum, the author of *The Magic of Conflict: Turning a Life of Work into a Work of Art*, says: "Conflict can be seen as a gift of energy, in which neither side loses and a new dance is created." It is from this optimistic standpoint that I invite parents and teachers to reach out to boisterous boys prone to high physical excitement, helping them find ways to express and monitor their energy so that they can gradually become a little calmer, a little more tactful, and little more cooperatively competitive.

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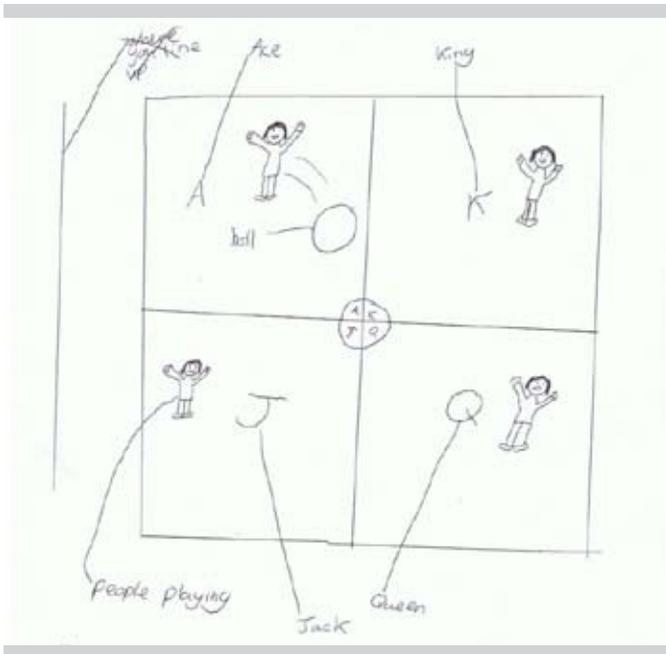


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Sandra, since you mentioned the game of *4-Square* in your letter, I will use it as an example of a game that can be a powerful teaching tool. Not only does it help students develop eye-hand coordination and strategic thinking, but it may also give rise to conflicts that are wonderful opportunities to learn self-regulation skills in a safe environment. Knowing that conflict is inevitable and even healthy on the playground, an adult observer standing near-by will neither take over the game nor shut it down, but will gently remind students that they are being supervised and supported. Students need to know that we expect them to self-manage whenever possible, but also that we will be there for them if necessary, and that we can intervene in gentle ways. An adult who sees tempers flare might take a step toward the students, as if to communicate awareness of their escalating conflict, along with trust that they are developing the skills to handle their own disharmony. If the drama becomes too intense, consider inviting students to take a second to discharge tension through a quick alternative activity, such as running to the goal post and back, or grabbing a drink of water. Sometimes pausing the play while asking students to recollect their rules of play, or offering a few encouraging words will be enough to restore calm as heartbeats lower and problem-solving abilities return. Intervene in discreet ways that keep the play in motion.

Students will likely need some help in settling on rules for the *4-Square* game. The following suggested rules can help get the discussion going.

Considerations for Playing 4-Square

According to *Wikipedia*, "*4-Square* is played on any hard surfaced court, such as wood, concrete or asphalt, with sides measuring 16 feet (4.9 m). The court is divided into four smaller equal-size squares, with sides measuring 8 feet (2.4 m). Each of the four squares has a rank and is occupied by a single player."



How to Play...

1. One player is in each square and the other players wait in line. The player in square 1 is the server and begins the play.
2. The play begins when the server drops the ball once into his/her square and then hits it into a different square (serves the ball). The server must keep both feet in the service box until the serve is completed.
3. The ball can only bounce once in any square.
4. Each player needs to hit the ball with any part of his/her hand into an opposing player's square after it has bounced only once in their square.
5. If the ball lands on a line, or goes out of bounds before it bounces, the player who hit the ball needs to return to the waiting line for another try.
6. If a player hits the ball and it bounces again in his/her square, the player also needs to return to the waiting line.

7. If a player catches or holds the ball, that player needs to return to the waiting line.

8. If the ball bounces more than one time before it is hit into another square, the player who let the ball bounce needs to return to the waiting line for another try.

9. If the ball is returned before it is allowed to bounce, the player who returned the ball early needs to return to the waiting line.

10. Anytime a player moves out of the game into the waiting line, a square is left open. The person at the front of the waiting line advances to square 4, and the remaining players advance to close the gaps between 4 and 1.

Variations...

1. Less skilled players may need to catch and release the ball.
2. Two players can cover one square, working as a team.
3. Use two **4-Square** courts next to each other for a game of **8-Square**.
4. To focus more on jump rope and hula hoops skills as well as learn the rotation order on the court, put either one jump rope or one hula hoop in each of the 4 squares. Have one student step into each square. Have the student in square 1 say **GO** and see how long each student can jump rope or hula hoop.

This is just one of many low-tech, low-cost action games that can get hearts pumping so that students can return to class refreshed, and more alert. • • •

Barry MacDonald
MentoringBoys.com

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