



STUCK IN THE HALLWAY

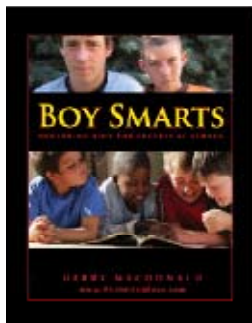
Dear Barry,

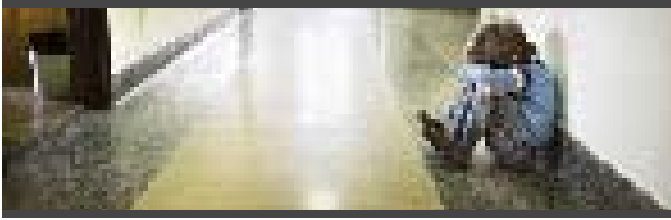
My son is stuck in the hallway and I don't know what to do. Two days ago a neighbour friend stopped by the school and found my son Adam outside his classroom with his head between his hands looking miserable. That evening we spoke but he didn't want to talk much, except to say that he was sorry and that he didn't know why he was in so much trouble this year.

The next morning I telephoned his grade 5 teacher. She said that Adam was willfully defiant and had to spend lots of time in the hallway as a consequence. Apparently, the principal threatened suspension if he didn't change his ways. When I asked her why I wasn't contacted, she apologized, saying that she had several special needs students in the class and was totally swamped. We meet this Friday.

Adam misbehaves minimally at home and in the community, and when it happens, we talk it through. It's hard for me to understand his recent change in behaviour at school. I question the merit of isolating him in the hallway, and the threat of suspension really scares me. I'd appreciate your thoughts about the use of hallway time-out, suspension, and ideas to think about for when I meet the teacher.

Teri, from Toronto





Dear Teri,

Despite our shared understanding that learning is social and emotional as well as cognitive, it's not surprising that in this era of eroded school services, educators who are stretched too thin are likely to be reactive rather than respond to the very students who most need their support. Rather than questioning what needs these unskilled children might be struggling to meet, stressed teachers may see them as willful, disrespectful, or manipulative. It may seem like a quick fix to simply get rid of the non-conforming student somehow, somewhere—out in the hall, even exiling him from the school community through suspension.

Suspensions are a Reaction, not a Solution

I imagine that many parents and teachers would share your concerns about Adam being put in the hallway and threatened suspension. These concerns are justified.

Back in the middle of the last century exclusionary disciplinary tactics such as sending students for time-out and detention were widespread. Behaviourists like B. F. Skinner endorsed these practices, believing that negative consequences such as isolation from peers, or the withholding of an anticipated reward, would reduce the likelihood that misbehaviour would not be repeated.

Today, we recognize that casting a child out into the hall or even marginalizing him by placing him beside the teacher's desk might shame him into superficial compliance. However, this separation from community will also isolate from social acceptance rather than teach how to get along with others and fully engage in learning. Punitive measures do not teach children the skills of self-regulation and critical thinking that they need to make other choices. Teachers and principals who disperse time-outs might imagine they are correcting misbehaviour, but it is more likely they are intimidating students into donning the mask of compliance.

A student who is repeatedly isolated in the hall will probably not spend his time developing a reflective thoughtfulness

about social appropriateness. Threatened with exclusionary discipline, students are likely to seek revenge, become defiant, and withdraw.

School discipline statistics are not tracked nationally in Canada as they are in the United States, where 95% of school suspensions, 80% of which are given to boys, are for nonviolent misbehaviour such as being disruptive or disrespectful. The American 2011 *Breaking Schools' Rules* national study found that among students suspended at least once, 31% repeated a grade and nearly 10% dropped out of school. By comparison, only 5% of the students not suspended repeated a grade and only 2% dropped out. American data further reveals that exclusionary school discipline increases exposure to the justice system. It's no wonder that the *U.S. Secretary of Education*, Arne Duncan, voiced his concern about the use of exclusionary discipline, saying: "There continues to be no evidence that using restraint or seclusion is effective in reducing the occurrence of the problem behavior."

BOY SMARTS ACTION TALK





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It's better to
build boys
than to
mend men...

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Recently, a parent described how she had challenged a school principal for excluding her son from lunchtime play for a week, making him sit outside the principal's office instead. The boy's offense? Apparently he was too competitive playing *4-Square*. The principal advised her that the benching was not a "punishment" but a "consequence," emphasizing a distinction she was unable to see. She assumed he was only trying to make exclusionary discipline sound more benign.

If we want to call punishment a consequence, we can, but we're not fooling boys who feel shunned or shamed. "Time-out is to make me suffer and to show who's boss," an eleven year old boy said last week. Boys also describe how time-out can cause embarrassment and humiliation, especially when used in the presence of peers. After all, who wants to be isolated and totally ignored?

Although we profess to honour diverse learning needs and value inclusiveness, we might reflect for a moment on what we are teaching other children in the class when we get rid of a perceived problem student by sending him out into the hall, where he is easily forgotten. Consider too that as students witness peers being isolated, more complicated social dynamics can develop, such as scapegoating and bullying.

Address Underlying Needs

Although we have not, like the Americans, had a national Canadian leader take a strong public position opposing exclusionary discipline, provincial documents across the country question its usefulness and advise that teachers first consider what fuels misbehaviour before reacting to it.

The *Ontario Ministry of Education* 2013 document, *Supporting Bias-Free Progressive Discipline in Schools*, states: "When educators focus only on what the student is doing and try to eliminate the behaviour, they often find that another inappropriate behaviour arises in its place, because the underlying need has not been met. Inappropriate behaviour is often a student's way of responding to something in the environment. It may be an attempt to communicate a need, rather than a deliberately aggressive or purposefully negative act. Behaviour can be understood differently when viewed from different perspectives and when the context in which it occurs is taken into account."

Crowded Classrooms Impede Learning

With the increasing pressures on teachers to do more with less, many readers of this newsletter will nod knowingly when they read the comment your son's teacher made about being *swamped*. Crowded classrooms make it harder for teachers to give students the individual attention they need to thrive. How does a teacher identify and address what could be exceptional learning needs of an individual while still managing to meet the learning needs of the collective? With more and more students identified as having special needs in regular classrooms, teachers need additional support to successfully integrate these students.

According to the *U.S. Department of Education*, boys make up two-thirds of the students in special education. They are five times more likely than girls to be classified as hyperactive. Without additional support, the lack of time and attention these students need may well lead to behavioural challenges that disrupt classrooms. In my home province of British Columbia, this year more than 16,000 BC classes have four or more students with special needs; shockingly 3,800 classes have seven or more.

In my experience, teachers who use exclusionary discipline measures often do so out of frustration. At *Boy Smarts* workshops teachers tell me that beneath their exhaustion and exasperation they genuinely appreciate that students who feel empowered, respected, and connected are more likely to achieve. The Ontario discipline document agrees, indicating: "There is an increasing body of research showing that students who feel connected to school—to teachers, to other students, and to the school itself—do better academically."



Collaborate to Solve Problems

Parents and teachers may at times have differing perspectives on boys' learning, but they share a common goal—making sure that children receive the best education possible. Before meeting with your son's teacher to discuss the hallway time-out, I encourage you to read, in *Boys on Target*, the chapter on parent teacher conferences and another on fostering resiliency to encourage a more in depth dialogue while staying on track. Meeting with the teacher can help you better understand your son's behaviour while also appreciating the constraints the teacher has in the broader classroom context. It is my hope that as you explore with his teacher the deeper reasons for his recent change in behaviour, you can collaborate in identifying his unmet needs and drawing up a constructive response. As you remain calmly optimistic and persistent, consider the following suggestions to encourage your dialogue:

Become Curious

At times adult frustrations spill onto children. When we are flooded by frustration or anger, we can overreact, and rush to a quick remedy. However, we can develop practice in finding that moment, or maybe several moments, when we can slow down, take deep and calming breaths (a kind of brief internal time-out for us, not the child) and we can notice that we have a choice about what to do next. In that moment we can shift our attention from reactivity to curiosity. What might have prompted this misbehaviour? As we re-gain our composure, we can ask: "Is the situation as urgent as my initial reaction suggests? Am I able to separate the child's

behaviour from the child? Could the student be having difficulty managing a transition or considering multiple ideas simultaneously? Might he be avoiding the discomfort of anxiety by acting out impulsively? Are his needs for independence or recognition being overlooked in this busy and demanding classroom?" When you engage in dialogue with the teacher about your son's behaviour, see whether you can both develop some shared curiosity about your son's needs, temperament, and learning style.

Look Beyond Behaviour

Rather than concluding that misbehaviour must be simply willful or manipulative, consider that when excessive demands exceed a child's capacity to manage stress, unskilled reactions result. Is the student overloaded in some way, and acting out of frustration? Sometimes students are frustrated with difficulties in seeing the "greys" and ambiguities that are inherent in life—and some school lessons. Is his black-and-white thinking keeping him stuck? It's possible that your son's behaviour may be a clumsy attempt to solve a problem he has, or to communicate a feeling he does not have the skill to articulate.

Provide Empathy

Boys often express their emotions indirectly and in ways that adults find puzzling. Sometimes children just want to be heard. If we listen carefully with open hearts, however, we can often decode messages that boys unconsciously embed in their interactions, their play, and their everyday behaviour. Parents and teachers who listen to, reflect back, and validate a child's feelings pave the way toward mutual respect and collaborative problem solving. Is the teacher developing a thoughtful hypothesis regarding your son's increasingly defiance? A transformative teacher might ask him the following questions:

"What happened?"

"What did you want to have happen?"

"How did you feel?"

"How do you think the other child felt?"

"How can we work together to find a way to help you both?"

Support Autonomy

Autonomy is the experience of being the agent of one's behaviour. Age-appropriate autonomy is not fostered in an anarchic climate that permits students to do whatever they want when they want, but instead by tuning into student perspectives, preferences, and interests while also providing optimal challenges that are relevant and engaging. Does the teacher make an effort to involve students in everyday decision-making? Does the teacher provide your son with choices that are genuine and open-ended, or are the choices confining, perhaps even controlling: "You can either do what I say or go out into the hallway." At the very least, if time-out is used, very sparingly, I would hope, a student should have the freedom to act on his authority and decide himself when he is ready to re-join the group.

Foster Internal Motivation

Performance spins off from the interest that creates motivation. It's easy to glance in on a class, and see whether most students look curious and engaged, or whether they are sitting with glazed eyes, passive and bored. Just how engaged students are during instruction and how independent they become depends, in part, on the supportive quality of the teacher's motivating style. When students are excited about learning, they acquire the skills they need to do it well even if the process of learning is slow and tedious—just consider the current video game your son is enthralled with. Does the teacher understand what motivates your son to become engaged and excited about learning?

Cultivate Respect

When exasperated adults complain about a boy being disrespectful, they often mean that he is questioning authority. In traditional classrooms students are mostly expected to follow the rules whether or not they make sense. In opposition to exclusionary learning, inclusionary teachers take the time to establish rules and norms *WITH* students—often through regular classroom meetings—so they can learn how to voice grumbling in a respectful manner without fear of reprisal, and help to co-create solutions. Does your son's teacher consider how placing him in the hallway may foster resentment and degrade their relationship? Could you brainstorm with her about another kind of response that would also teach respect?



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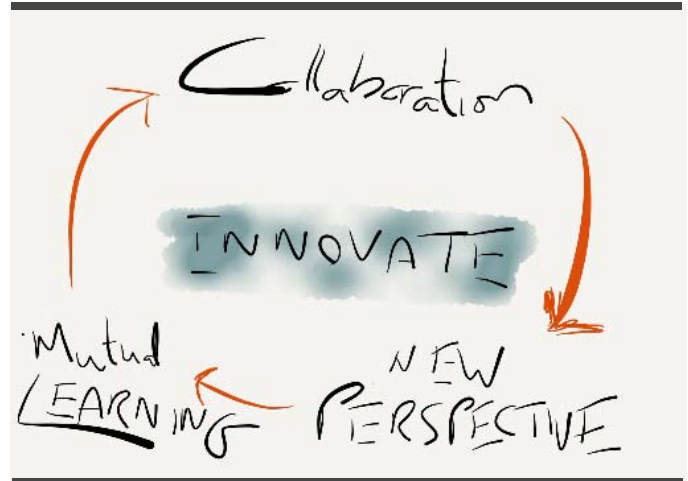
In an article about courageous educators, Alfie Kohn emphasizes that when teachers take responsibility for student behaviour and learning, they don't suddenly blame them when the going gets tough, and they certainly don't banish them to the hallway. He refers to a teacher in San Diego who says: "If a child starts to act up, I ask myself: 'How have I failed this child? What is it about this lesson that is leaving her outside the learning? How can I adapt my plan to engage this child?' I stopped blaming my children." The question about blame is a delicate one, for just as it is not productive for teachers to blame children, or their parents, it is also not productive for parents to blame educators. How can you and the teacher move out of a system of blame to a collaborative problem-solving where we all take appropriate responsibility?



Take a Broader Perspective

Three decades of school research has shown that student success is more influenced by relationships and the climate or atmosphere in a school than all other resources at its disposal. Consistently, we have found that academic success is linked to children's experiences of caring relationships, emotional and physical safety at school, as well as as rigorous yet achievable expectations.

In the *Courage to Create*, the famous psychologist Rollo May said, "People attain worth and dignity by the multitude of decisions they make from day by day. These decisions require courage." Without a doubt, a parent who challenges the status quo needs courage to advocate for their child who is struggling and misunderstood at school. As you engage in straightforward and respectful dialogue about your child's needs with a teacher, a coach, or a community leader, it might strengthen your courage to remember that he is picking up cues and learning from you, maybe in small ways, about possible ways to respond to others or think through problems. It is not only teachers who teach who they are, but all of us.



Outcome of Parent-Teacher Meeting

Realizing that this month's newsletter would not be published in time for Teri to draw on my suggestions before her meeting with the teacher, she arranged for a telephone consultation to discuss her son's temperament, his history at school, and specific suggestions to consider for the meeting. As I anticipated, the meeting with the teacher went well and Teri has given me permission to share the outcome.

It turns out that a combination of factors led Adam to begin acting out:

- 1) Among four special needs children in Adam's class, a boy identified as having autism had been seeking Adam's attention more than others and Adam would become angry when the boy would pester him. The teacher acknowledged that she may have been too critical of Adam's response, not realizing that he was a sensitive boy who interpreted her reactions as harsh.
- 2) The Learning Specialist Teacher who provided support for children with identified special needs was away on long-term leave, and the position had been temporarily filled by inexperienced short-term staff, resulting in inconsistent support for the autistic boy in the classroom.
- 3) The teacher was also struggling with a couple of aggressive and demanding parents in the classroom and was fearful that her temporary position at the school might be threatened.
- 4) Adam's response to the increased classroom chaos was to take charge of others, including the teacher, in his attempt to create consistency and stability.

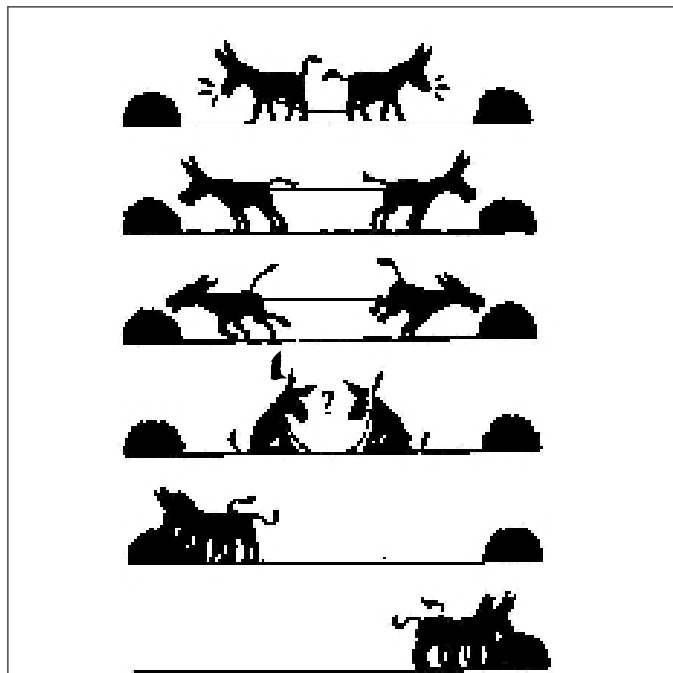
5) The teacher agreed that she had been micro-managing Adam in her own attempt to manage the general chaos in the classroom. She agreed to take time to talk with Adam and seek his input rather than criticize him.

We have another telephone follow-up consultation to ensure that the strategies that Teri and the teacher have put in place are working.

Congratulations to this parent, who had the courage to enter into respectful dialogue with the teacher.

And congratulations to the hard-working teacher who, despite many pressures, was willing to take the time and thought to talk, think, imagine, and co-create new problem-solving strategies. • • •

Barry MacDonald
MentoringBoys.com



Sometimes we just need a little help and support...

Arrange a telephone consultation with Barry MacDonald, Registered Clinical Counsellor
Contact: sagepoint@telus.net



Facing new challenges?

Past workshop attendees can register for HALF price!



The challenges associated with being male vary from community to community. I welcome the opportunity to meet you at an upcoming workshop or conference to discuss the needs of your boys. For details contact info@mentoringboys.com.



Soon this newsletter will ONLY be distributed on social media.



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The intention of MentoringBoys.com is to encourage a positive focus on boys' strengths and their varied needs in our homes, schools, and communities.

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- Understand how boys' varied needs require differing positive responses.
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- Learn how to communicate with a boy who is withdrawn, angry, or distant.
- Learn how to encourage healthy independence so confidence will flourish.
- Learn how to help boys navigate video games, facebook, & other technology.
- Learn how to foster peace with siblings to nurture empathy & compassion.
- Learn how to help your son develop a sense of community, respect for others, healthy skepticism, & appreciation for diversity.

"I have seen first-hand how Barry MacDonald's writings and his public presentations to sell-out audiences inspire teachers, parents, and others in the community to reframe and refresh their perspectives on boys who struggle. Wherever he has taken his message, he has struck a chord with parents and teachers who are asking questions that are driving change. Barry is challenging us all to pay attention and revisit old assumptions; his practical wisdom suggests how we can learn to see boys not as an objectified *problem* but as whole persons with strengths we can help them to uncover.

Whether you are a parent or teacher or an adult involved with mentoring boys in some other capacity, you will find his books and workshops enlightening and deeply nourishing."

Dr. Sue Ann Cairns, Kwantlen Polytechnic University
Co-author *Strategies for Successful Writing*

...because it's better to build boys than to mend men!