

MOTIVATION MATTERS!



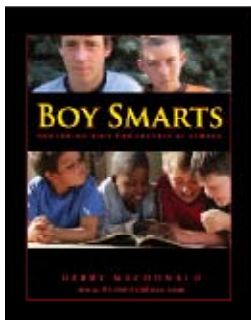
TRUE MOTIVATION IS A WELLING DESIRE TO
INVEST AND ENGAGE FROM DEEP WITHIN

Dear Barry,

When you said that parents and teachers can't motivate boys, but can learn about what motivates them, we listened with interest. At the time, though, our son was doing well at school, and we were more focussed on issues at home. Now he is in Grade 9 and is having an exceptionally hard time staying on track. He says that he is bored at school and is fed up with adults who tell him, "If you do this, then you'll get that." As we watch him turn away from school, we are puzzled about what makes him tick and how we (and his teachers) can help him find his drive again. We would appreciate a refresher on what propels motivation and a recap of the practical suggestions that work with resistant boys.

Dean and Debbie

Ottawa, ON





Dear Dean & Debbie,

When we are born, no one needs to coax us to learn, as learning is essential to survival. Yet we learn in different ways, for different reasons, and at different speeds. The drive behind our motivation to learn is specific to each person. However, a growing body of evidence points to one clear feature of motivation: it is hindered, at least in the long run, by rewards and punishments, but stimulated by personal investment, and the exercise of autonomy.

Research highlights the connection between student well-being and academic success. Daniel Pink, the best-selling author of *Drive: The Surprising Truth About What Motivates Us*, says: “The problem with making an extrinsic reward the only destination that matters is that some people will choose the quickest route there, even if it means taking the low road. But introducing an if-then reward to help develop mastery usually backfires. That’s why schoolchildren who are paid to solve problems typically choose easier problems and therefore learn less. The short-term prize crowds out the long-term learning.” Pink acknowledges that it can be tempting to try to motivate others through manipulation, but fostering deep motivation means letting go of the desire to control others, and “instead doing everything we can to reawaken their deep-seated sense of autonomy.”

The 2014 American report, *The Path to Winning Again in Education* draws on key findings from Gallup’s research into motivation and student learning, and concurs that increasing student engagement and emotional in-

vestment is key to learning. Citing data from the largest annual survey of 5th to 12th graders as well as several studies of exceptional teachers and principals, the report found that just 33% of the more than 600,000 students in the study received high scores on those factors linked to success within and beyond school—hope, engagement, and well-being. Students’ emotional engagement at school was found to be the non-cognitive measure most directly related to academic achievement, with 55% of students indicating that they are engaged in the learning process, 28% are not engaged—mentally checked out, and 17% are strongly disengaged.

An earlier 2009 Gallup poll conducted an in-depth study of more than 78,000 students in 160 schools across eight states found that a one-percentage-point increase in a school’s average student engagement score was associated with a six-point increase in reading achievement and an eight-point increase in math achievement.

Learning Environments That Engage

Decades of talking with boys about their learning struggles have given me first-hand insight into the ways that boys who feel forced, pushed, and controlled will choose either passive compliance or angry, resentful defiance, but neither choice has anything to do with true motivation—that is, a willing desire to invest and engage from deep within. Boys reveal that if we want to encourage their engagement, we need to pull back on the controls and create a climate that sparks inner motivation. Here are a few of ideas I have garnered from these boys:

1. Give me freedom and choice and lots of opportunities to get out of my seat so I can actively engage in my world.
2. Let me be social and have conversations, class discussions, and debates with other students.
3. Accept me as I am and especially my mistakes. My mistakes are for learning, not shaming.
4. Switch up learning activities every 10 to 15 minutes to keep me interested.
5. Let me laugh and have fun while learning.
6. Let me use technology to learn.

Ninth Grade is Pivotal

The University of Chicago research brief published in April 2014, *Why Grades Drop When Students Enter High School and What Adults Can Do About It*, highlights the dramatic drop in grades, attendance, and academic behaviour that commonly occurs between 8th and 9th grade. The study confirms that both high and low achieving students struggle with transition into high school. Since students' grades decline in direct proportion to levels of attendance, autonomy, and engagement, the study proposes that intense support and monitoring will help keep more 9th graders on track to graduation.

Engage Internal Motivation

In the chapter titled "Fostering Resiliency" in *Boys on Target: Raising Boys Into Men of Courage and Compassion*, I describe practical ways that teachers can engage boys who flounder with internal motivation. Using carrots and sticks, bribes and threats, do not help students find the joy of learning for its own sake, and commonly erode it. Instead we can work with boys respectfully from the inside out:

Put Relationships First


Some students who drag their feet into the classroom, or skip out to the halls at the first opportunity, often become labelled as unteachable. These students can spiral downward into despair, believing they are on their own. Yet most of us know that kids don't care how much we know until they know how much we care. Teachers activate resilience when they convey empathic support, validation of their students' feelings, and respect for their students' struggles. Teachers who wisely separate student learning outcomes and achievement from the students themselves may become compassionately curious. What makes this person, here and now, shut down? What makes him or her light up? These teachers recognize that discouraged students are often doing the best they can at any given time, given their skill and stress levels.




Maximize Student Involvement

Authentic learning experiences that provide opportunities for students to make real and meaningful decisions about their school lives increase intrinsic motivation and commitment to action. When we realize that student motivation is driven by fundamental needs for belonging, autonomy, challenge, mastery, and enjoyment, we become more aware of the underlying causes of discouragement, and work with boys to design and negotiate solutions.

BOY SMARTS ACTION TALK





Victoria
September 27, 2014

Vancouver
October 4, 2014

Calgary
October 18, 2014

Edmonton
November 22, 2014

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Believe That All Students Can Achieve Their Learning Potential

Believing that everyone has the power to learn and grow, transformative teachers and parents seek to re-frame the label applied to struggling boys from at-risk to at-promise. These imaginative teachers work to recast problems as learning opportunities. Knowing that people naturally internalize the beliefs that others have about them, these teachers cultivate faith that any current struggles are temporary, and may even be necessary parts of a still unknown big picture.

Seek What's Beneath a Struggle with Learning

Teachers who understand that students who are resistant or disengaged are likely trying to manage their anxiety and frustration in unskilled ways help support resilience. Successful teachers do not write off a boy as unteachable, but tune into his version of reality, seeking a deeper understanding that his non-conforming behaviour or low achievement typically represent his adaptations to his circumstances to ensure his survival. These thoughtful teachers do not grab at a simple set of pre-determined explanations, but consider multiple possible explanations. They do not distance themselves from boys through alienating labels and diagnoses, but are receptive to learning what they can about a particular boy, in a particular place, at a particular time.

Provide Flexible Learning Environments

Rather than expecting students to mold themselves to the curriculum, transformative teachers adjust the curriculum and learning activities to meet varied learning needs. They build when they can on students' strengths. When students are off task, transformative teachers ask, "What's the task?" recognizing that students need multiple options for taking in information; for making sense of ideas; and for expressing their knowledge.

Set Expectations that are Rigorous but Reachable

When boys are floundering at school, teachers can help them to see what's possible by holding a deep belief in their innate competence and self-righting capacities, and by challenging boys to perform at a level beyond what

they believe they can do. Yet they are careful not to set the bar too high. At the same time that transformative teachers know that high expectations produce good results, and low expectations produce poor ones, they also understand that out-of-reach expectations may hinder fledging growth. By ensuring a sensible congruence between expectation and capability, teachers can set the bar just high enough to be a realistic challenge.

Maintain Perspective with Mistakes

Capabilities for resilience are often linked to a student's response to mistakes and failure, not to the mistakes themselves. Teachers who facilitate transformative learning experiences find ways to convey that dwelling on mistakes blocks resilience, and blunders are simply part of the learning process. 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.



**HELPING BOYS
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Surrey, BC - October 24
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Provide Frequent, Timely Feedback

Observing boys play video games has taught me that boys appreciate frequent feedback about their learning. Turnaround teachers likely know that when feedback is timely, student-involved, targeted, and specific to the content being learned, boys feel empowered. Through close observation of boys in the process of learning, regular collection of feedback on their learning, and the design of modest classroom experiments, teachers can learn much about how boys learn and, more specifically, how they respond to particular teaching approaches. From these observations classroom assessment can be designed which provide useful feedback on what, how much, and how well boys are learning. Teachers can then use this information to refocus their teaching to help boys make their learning more satisfying and successful.

Sidestep Conflict

Transformative teachers welcome differing personalities among students. Knowing that some boys are just more easily triggered than others, they can often diffuse potential conflict, or challenges to their authority, with a light touch. Insisting on doing things his own way can be the boy's method of showing he is his own boss, which can be productive for him on one level. It can also be a way of avoiding his anxiety. 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. To build resiliency perceptive teachers stay outside of a boy's conflict cycle. When an adolescent boy says, "This homework sucks," resilience-building teachers do not get drafted into a power struggle. They may even express genuine curiosity: "Maybe if we talk about what you don't like, we might be able to find a solution that we can both be happy about." When a boy digs in his heels, wise teachers refrain from getting hooked in. They don't fight, they don't cave in. They seek a negotiated solution that satisfies everyone.

The Bottom Line on Motivation

Among the thousands of students who took the 2013 **Gallup** poll about motivation and learning, those who strongly agreed with two simple statements were 30 times more likely to be emotionally engaged at school as those who strongly disagreed. Those two statements were:

1. My school is committed to building the strengths of each student.
2. I have at least one teacher who makes me excited about the future.

As we support each child's motivation to learn, we ought to also remember that it is not just students who struggle with drive or optimism about the future. Marianne Williamson, the author of *Return to Love*, challenges us all to fully engage in the uncertainty and mystery of life, with its dips and turns: "Our deepest fear is not that we are inadequate. Our deepest fear is that we are powerful beyond belief." • • •

Barry MacDonald
MentoringBoys.com



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.



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- Understand how boys' varied needs require differing positive responses.
- Reframe adult attitudes to cultivate resiliency in boys.
- Learn how to teach your son to manage stress & to regulate his emotions.
- 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!