

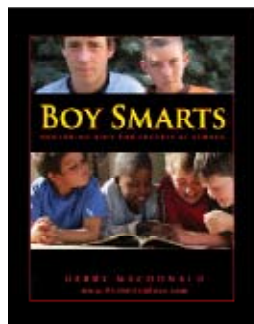
# CONNECTING THROUGH DIFFERENCES



## UNLOCK THE MYSTERY OF TEMPERAMENT TO MANAGE STRESS AND REGULATE EMOTIONS

Parenting is hard work, and exhausting at times. Recently, a distressed father who was struggling to respond to the strikingly different needs of his two boys sought my input. Apparently it was easy for him to talk with his 8 year old boy, but his 10 year old son shut him out like a sealed vault. While the younger boy would offer descriptive details about his school day, the older one deflected all attempts to draw him out by shrugging his shoulders. When the father consulted his parenting friends, they advised him not to worry, saying that many reserved boys are tight-lipped, and that he should be grateful that at least one of his sons would talk with him.

In most families, siblings may have very different personalities, styles, and preferences that have little or nothing to do with gender. Despite the media stereotype of boys as reluctant communicators, brothers in the same family may have very different communication styles. Outgoing boys may be happy to process thoughts and ideas out loud, and may appreciate having time to talk and be listened to. More reserved boys often need time to pause and reflect before they speak. A more extroverted parent can easily misread a cautious communicator as an unwilling communicator.



## Why Temperament Matters

Parent-child conflict can grow out of misunderstandings about different temperaments. Parents who like to be organized before they relax may feel mystified by a son who prefers not to plan so that he can respond spontaneously to whatever happens in the moment. A practical parent with a systematic approach to things might be exasperated by a daydreaming son who works intermittently in spurts of energy; a parent who is highly logical may be baffled by a son who disregards logic in order to preserve a relationship.

A powerful way to strengthen communication with your son is to focus on his particular needs and temperament, paying attention to where his preferences coincide or clash with your own. Discovering your son's temperament is like finding a key that, after some fumbling around in the dark, you find it really fits the lock. Having insight into your son's temperament, especially if it differs from your own, can help you become a more affirming and supportive parent.

Hopefully these longer days of summer away from the pressures of school have allowed you and your son to settle into a gentler rhythm that eases the flow of conversations in your home. If he seems open, you might find a time to introduce a conversation about people's different temperaments, letting him know that you really do appreciate that everyone is unique, and that your way of being in the world is not the only way. Discuss how each person generally views life events from a distinctive vantage point, and through a unique lens. Offer your son an example of how you approach learning a new skill or planning an activity in a way that has become almost second nature to you. You might, for example, describe how you prefer to follow step-by-step directions before you start assembling a shelf from Ikea, or researching options and planning activities for a week-end away. At the same time you understand that others prefer to dive right into the middle of a project and proceed more intuitively, and that neither approach is necessarily right for everyone.



## Tuning Into Stress

As you think about preparing for the challenges and pressures that often intensify during the school year, when the stress levels of kids, parents, and teachers begin to soar, you might also reflect on the ways that the approaches we have come to prefer may be ways of keeping our stress levels more manageable. People respond to high stress in different ways: some people become rigid and even aggressive, while other retreat and shut down. Turning the stress valve up too high often makes people feel so anxious and overwhelmed that they become incapable of enjoying the moment.

You might discuss with your son how people often perform their best when they are in a state of what we might call optimal stress or flow—not hyper, but not zoned out either. When people are relaxed but alert and focused, they are often flexible and open to differing viewpoints. Consider the following examples:

1. A parent might speed up to meet a time deadline, while the son might try to slow things down as he tries to regulate his stress.
2. One person who is worn out from a difficult day might recharge his or her energy by talking with someone on the phone, while another person might let the answering machine deal with an incoming phone call, preferring the refuge of some quiet time.
3. While some people prioritize being productive and efficient, others prefer to allow time to be spontaneous, adaptable, and responsive to the moment.

## Discussion Activity

To help you explore your likes and differences, take time to read each of the following statements that are based on the highly popular *Myers-Briggs Type Indicator*. Determine whether you are more on one side or the other. Avoid the temptation to interrupt each other or sit on the fence. Ideally, you might each provide examples about your preferences; however it is fine if you do not engage in conversation, but simply check off the list of preferences. It is my hope that this simple conversational activity will help you see each other in new ways.

For each of the categories below chose the statement on the left or right that best describes you:



### How I interact with others...

- I show feelings easily *or* • I am cautious with showing feelings
- I jump into new social situations *or* • I watch and wait before getting involved
- I am expressive and enthusiastic *or* • I am thoughtful and calm

### What grabs my attention...

- I am realistic and practical *or* • I am imaginative and creative
- I prefer activities with established rules *or* • I prefer activities that are open-ended
- I work through facts to understand *or* • I start with big ideas to understand

### How I make decisions...

- I am analytical *or* • I am empathic
- I strive to win *or* • I worry that to win, someone has to lose
- I am more embarrassed by mistakes *or* • I am more embarrassed by disapproval

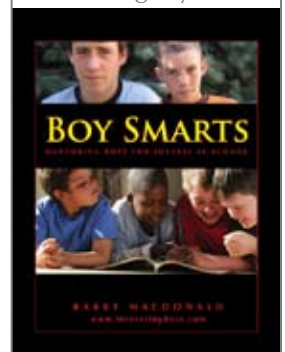
### How I organize my daily activities...

- I prefer schedules and routines *or* • I prefer flexibility so I can easily change plans
- I like to finish projects *or* • I like to start projects
- I work first, and then play *or* • I play as I work

Appreciating our differences, however challenging at times, will help us make a richer, more vibrant world at home, in schools—and in our larger communities.  
*Barry MacDonald*



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## Strength or Blind Spot?

In workshops and in my office I often explore how each preference has inherent strengths and potential challenges. We discuss how the greatest strength of one person can be the biggest blind spot of another. Consider how the person who checks off temperament preferences completely on the left side might differ greatly from a person whose preferences are completely on the right side. Typically, a person whose preferences fall on the left can be described as having a **Supervisor** temperament, while a person entirely on the right can be described as having a **Dreamer** temperament. Although each temperament has unique strengths, they can fight against each other. The **Supervisor** lives in the present, constantly scanning the environment to make sure that everything is running smoothly and systematically. This person can take-charge and be demanding, yet struggle to adapt to new situations that require fresh insight and imagination. On the other hand, The **Dreamer** eagerly plunges into new experiences, enjoying creativity and intuition. With a free ranging imagination, these people can easily become bored with routine details and struggle to maintain organization.

Ordinarily, the more similar temperaments are, the more easily the river of communication will flow. What are the areas where conflicts with your son may arise due to differences in temperaments? When there is temperament friction, as a parent it is your job to take the first step to learn, adapt—and perhaps find places where different temperaments can actually complement each other.

As you discuss temperament with your son, consider these tips:

1. Respect uniqueness without comparing to others.
2. Avoid trying to change the tendencies you consider undesirable.
3. As you spend time together, focus on listening to what is being said as well as what is not being said. Pausing and listening—really listening—provides a critical window into each other's world.

4. Combine your strengths to collaborate on solutions that honour both your preferences.

5. Discuss limit-setting in advance to maintain a shared clarity. Respect opinions but remain firm on important limits.

6. Discuss how all of us, no matter what our age, are in the process of becoming more fully who we are. With new experiences and insights, we are all capable of shifting across the dimensions of personality, depending on the needs of a situation.

7. Paddling upstream against the current of your son's temperament can be exhausting for both of you. How can you turn your canoes around so that you are paddling downstream together more often? Celebrate the differences that could set you apart, but that actually make you the unique person you are.

## BOY SMARTS ACTION TALK



**Victoria**  
September 27, 2014

**Vancouver**  
October 4, 2014

**Calgary**  
October 18, 2014

**Edmonton**  
November 22, 2014

When we parent our child with temperament in mind, we encourage them to grow into healthy maturity. As you begin to gear up for the school year, think about ways that we can avoid lecturing our sons, trying to convert our sons to being more like us, and instead focus on appreciating how we can support them in becoming more and more who they are.

Appreciating our differences, however challenging at times, will help us make a richer, more vibrant world at home, in schools—and in our larger communities.

If you are inspired, take a moment to let me know about your experiences with this conversation activity. What did you discover about your temperaments? What helped to strengthen your communication, what hindered? Consider taking a moment to email your insights at [info@mentoringboys.com](mailto:info@mentoringboys.com). •••

*Barry MacDonald*  
MentoringBoys.com



# HELPING BOYS THRIVE!

Surrey - October 24  
Cloverdale Catholic School  
PD for school staff...parents welcome too



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

"Whether you are a parent or teacher or an adult involved with mentoring boys in some other capacity, you will find Barry's books and workshops enlightening and deeply nourishing."  
Dr. Sue Ann Cairns, Kwantlen Polytechnic University



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](mailto:info@mentoringboys.com).



Soon this newsletter will ONLY be distributed on social media.



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