

HELP YOUR SON THINK POSITIVELY



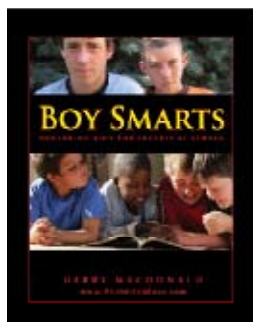
Dear Barry: At a recent *Boy Smarts* workshop, I sat captivated, listening to you respond to all the questions other parents asked, and weave together theory and practice in order to address the needs of boys. I realized that I have been giving my own boys incomplete messages about how to manage failure by jumping in too quickly with praise and solutions. Interestingly, my wife says that I often do the same with her.

When I get home after a long day at work, I am worn out. All I want to do is to dial down my stress and the boys' stress. It's so much easier to give in to their whining demands than to take the time to really listen and help them work through their problems.

When you said that children need parents to help them identify and overcome self-defeating thinking patterns like "I can't do that," I felt like you were talking to me. I guess I somehow assumed that I would have long talks about positive mindsets later when they were older. By jumping in to solve their problems, I thought that I was buffering them from too much discouragement, but I now realize that they need more.

I would appreciate your suggestions to help boys manage their attitudes and thinking about overcoming challenges.

John, a dad from North Vancouver





Dear John,

By acknowledging that trusting that change and growth can happen, and that you wish to develop your parenting skills more, you are already taking a step in that direction, and showing a positive mindset yourself.

My guess is that, a couple of years ago, you may have been reading the classic children's story *The Little Engine That Could* to your boys. Most readers will recall this simple tale about an undersized train that must chug its way up on a very high mountain. None of the bigger engines that he asks for help along the way come to his aid, but he keeps pushing on, repeating the mantra "I think I can, I think I can, I think I can." Eventually he makes it, and children, we hope, will internalize this message:

When we stick with a problem long enough, trusting that we can work it through, we discover our potential.

Even the most capable adults can struggle to find equilibrium when setbacks throw us off balance. When our capabilities are questioned, when we are criticized by someone we respect, when we hear a disappointing report at a parent-teacher conference, we can feel disheartened and demoralized.

And yet, even though they may experience periods of sadness or deflation, there are those who never entirely lose touch with a certain native optimism that they can still recover, learn, and grow from the challenge that is presenting itself. They learn to shift their thinking to focus on meeting the challenge head on, staying resolved on their long-term goals, or reframing their goals to match the changed picture. Developing faith that "I can figure this out!" is a process that takes time, effort, and intention. Our confidence and resilience grow as we struggle through dark moments and come out on the other side.

You can support your boys when they struggle with age-appropriate problems by showing faith that they can work these through. Over time they will learn to cultivate inner self-trust that will help carry them through the rising—and falling rhythms of life.

As their challenges become more complex over time, your sons will need your support to help them sustain optimism about their own potential. When you see your children's discouragement or sadness, it can be tempting to jump in to try to rescue them with words of praise or advice. Yet this attempt at rescue conveys doubt that children have the resourcefulness to manage themselves. Wise parents do not hover anxiously over small children on a playground, but encourage them to come down the slide on their own, or climb the monkey bars to the very top if they want.

While I am not saying that showing admiration or giving praise is always a bad thing, I discourage you from giving empty praise, or praise that implies judgment of your son's intelligence or talent. Too much generic, exaggerated praise is like too many gold stars that begin to lose their value as supply exceeds demand. Children do not learn specifically what they did to merit this gush of praise. In addition, they do not really feel seen when they are told over and over again every time they colour a picture: "You are an amazing artist!"

Heim Ginott, the child therapist and acclaimed author who wrote extensively about helping children develop inner strength, made a strong case to steer clear of evaluative praise, indicating that it discourages self-reliance, self-direction, and self-control, and instead "creates anxiety,

invites dependency, and evokes defensiveness.” When we say, “You are a terrific kid,” or “You were the best,” we can unwittingly convey the opposite message: “You are only worthwhile when I say so,” or “I need to intervene with praise because I don’t think you can handle it on your own.” Children need to know that we accept them for who they are, and do not judge their worth based on what they do.

Instead comment on their growth, on their effort, or their choices: “That seemed like hard work. Good for you to have hung in there to figure it out,” or “I can see that you have worked hard figuring out the graphs for this science report,” or “Your smile tells me that after you have weighed all your options, you must be feeling pleased with your final decision.”

Like all of us, children need struggle and conflict in their lives so that they can learn how to begin to think about mistakes or failure as learning opportunities, not badges of deficiency. Rather than immediately jumping to conclusions and grabbing at a solution, or reducing complicated choices to all-or-nothing binaries, children can learn more nuanced ways of thinking about struggles. In fact, if some struggles did not actually bring a kind of joy, why else would people commit to marathon running or engage in friendly competition?


Consider how you overcame doubt and developed a sense of efficacy when you were growing up. I remember, for example, of how I struggled as a first year undergraduate student, working long hours to make financial ends meet. As I had very little time to study or complete assignments, my grades began to plummet. By the end of the first term, thoughts of failure loomed, and pessimism began to colour my thinking


Searching for a way out of a failure mind-trap, I was inspired by Viktor Frankl’s moving account in his book *Man’s Search for Meaning*. His story of being imprisoned and forced to work as a slave labourer in a Nazi concentration camp during World War II somehow activated my own resilience. As he described his separation from his wife, mother, and father, and the way he watched those who remained behind die slow miserable deaths during the holocaust, I found myself in tears.

His story spurred me to reflect on **HOW** I was thinking about my own minor time management problems. I called myself to heel, shifting from the thought “I can’t do this anymore,” to question, “Can I approach this in another way?” Gradually I began to re-imagine my potential: “I will figure this out. I am not certain exactly how yet, but I am certain that I will.” While my struggle was puny in comparison, it was what I was experiencing then, and it allowed me to reframe the way I thought about it. A couple of sentences from Frankl’s story have remained with me ever since, as they remind me that even if we cannot always take action, we have a choice in how we think about things:

“We who lived in concentration camps can remember the men who walked through the huts comforting others, giving away their last piece of bread. They may have been few in number, but they offer sufficient proof that everything can be taken away from a man but one thing: the last of the human freedoms—to choose one’s attitude in any given set of circumstances, to choose one’s own way.”

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Learning to Become Optimistic about Life

I recognize, of course, that we do want to protect children, as much as we are able, from genuine trauma or relentless, battering failures. However, societal messages pressure parents to intervene whenever the slightest disappointment occurs and to guard our children against minor threats against a child's fledgling confidence. At *Boy Smarts* workshops parents often ask if and when adults should intervene with advice, and under what circumstances. Certainly, there are times when a parent's advice is exactly the right thing—but timing is key. Think for a moment of how you sometimes feel when people offer you unsolicited advice. The best way to know if our input is really needed is to follow a child's lead. The worst time to offer advice is when people haven't asked for it or are in the middle of agonizing about problems. I have learned that most times children will come to their own wise conclusions when their expression of emotion is fully respected. Sometimes, a brief inquiry such as, "You seem to be working on something. Would you like to talk about it?" encourages a child to keep working on their own problem-solving without conveying the message that we think they can't handle it. Letting children know that we believe in them and in their ability to work things out is probably one of the most powerful expressions of our love for them.

Here are a few more additional suggestions to help your boys develop their own sense of inner resourcefulness.

Lead by Example

It is not through our singular effort that we learn to become optimistic, but through our relationships with others. Children of all ages are like sponges, listening to what you say and watching what you do. Tune into the subtle everyday messages you give your child about how you manage setbacks. When you are running late, have misplaced some necessary documents, and become flustered and even self-critical, reframe your thinking out loud so that your child can hear and learn from your own process. Emphasize that you are trying to change by saying something like, "It looks like I misjudged the timing for today and we will be arriving late. I am disappointed in myself but I will do my best to make up time. I also just realized that we won't be as late as last time and that I have improved on the last time I made us late by 20 minutes."

When we face our own setbacks and admit mistakes, children will follow our lead. When we talk openly about our own struggles with motivation—especially with the tasks we dislike—children will learn that yes, life is sometimes hard and we still work to fulfill our responsibilities by taking charge of our motivation. Be real. Let your sons know that you too are always learning, maybe saying something like, "I know I messed up today. I am doing my best to fix this problem and believe that I can get better. I would be grateful if you hang in there with me while I am on this learning curve."

Imagine a world where children are so excited about what they are going to learn that they can hardly wait to get started.



Avoid Labels

It is easy to label different children in a family or the community, perhaps pointing out that one is the math whiz and the other is the natural athlete. Labels can limit children's potential to grow beyond them. Try to avoid filling your child with limiting thoughts that proscribe his capabilities or talents.

Openly Discuss Negative Mind-traps

Limiting thoughts about capability can cloud potential and the desire to change and grow. Talk about how individual challenges like shyness or nervousness can be overcome before negativity sets in a taproot and becomes a lifelong pattern. How can you help your child learn that social interactions are not for one-upping others or being judged by others, but for learning and enjoyment? Use language that instills an "I can" orientation as you explore potential opportunities together. You can encourage your son who is struggling to give himself a very simple message: "I think I can, I think I can," or maybe, "I am in control of my life. I learn from my experiences, including the difficult ones."

Encourage Your Son's Resilience with Setbacks

Let your son know that setbacks and mistakes are simply a part of life-long learning processes. When he appears confused or lost, recognize that he may have temporarily lost his confidence to generate his own solutions. You can help with an encouraging statement like, "This seems hard but you can help yourself. Give it some time and I know that you will find your way." If the issue is still unresolved, and you feel it might be time to offer a few suggestions, end with, "And these are just a few ideas. You may have a better one." When he seems to be leaning on you with a direct question and you know that he is capable, throw it back to him with a question: "Hmmm... that's a tough one. What do you think?" Validate with, "I know that you will be able to come up with a solution," or, "Lots of things to think about here. Take your time." Later, during a calm, neutral time away from the setback, take time to explore what he learned about himself during this struggle. You might also think about what you did to show support without taking over.

Listen to Crying and Show Support

When your refusal to give advice brings on crying or a tantrum, listen and validate feelings with something like, "I know this is a hard time. I am guessing that you would like me to come up with a solution for you, and you might even feel alone or angry since I am not. The thing is—I can't because I am not you. I love you and I know how capable you are. Let's take a break from this so that you can consider it all later. I have total faith that you will find an answer that is right for you." Let your son express his feelings, in tears or even angry outbursts. Your son's crying can help release stress and tension and restore his sense of self-reliance. Often, after waves of tears, the quiet aftermath is a valuable time when children can settle and find their own internal answers.



Be Cautious with Constructive Criticism

When your boys appear stuck in a negative spin cycle and you find your own negative attitude in sync with theirs, be mindful of how you phrase your feedback. Work on managing your own state of mind and do not attack their capability or their worth: "Can't you ever get it right?" or "Either you don't care or you are just not paying attention!" Other suggestions to offer non-damaging, constructive feedback might be:

"While failing is an option, let's work together to find a way to lessen the frustration and still get the job done on time."

"Son, I feel troubled when I see you not following through with your agreement. Can you think of another way to approach this that would get you back on track?"

"Is there some part of the assignment that is especially challenging? Can I or someone else take a look at it with you?"



Give Advice Sparingly When You Do Give It

When you determine that giving advice is warranted, consider that your input is an offer—but try not to be overly committed to your own agenda. Suggest that these ideas are just possibilities, but he has more of the whole picture, and he may well have a better idea. Be concise; less is more here. Speak positively about possible solutions without offering judgments. Gradually give less and less advice about what to do and show more confidence in your son's capability by saying something like, "This has been a long haul. I know that you will find a way to work this through in a way that satisfies you."

Remember too that just as these suggestions cannot be rigidly followed through as though you are baking a cake, you need not withhold support when your son seems not ready to come up with solutions. As you offer increasing opportunities for self-reliance, observe and respond to cues of readiness as well. Sometimes it is compassionate to free a child from the dependence on our advice, and at other times it is compassionate to yield to dependency on our advice.

Accepting and trusting that your son will find his way will free him up to realize that he is fine as he is, mistakes and all. Sometimes just saying *Attaboy* will convey your confidence about his growing self-direction.

In this regard Viktor Frankl suggests a way we can all develop more sense of inner freedom: "Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and freedom." Look for a sense of spaciousness with your son, where you are not criticizing, advising, praising, or steering—but being present with him, accompanying him in his journey. • • •

Barry MacDonald

MentoringBoys.com

Join me at an upcoming workshop in Surrey/Langley, and Victoria

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Between stimulus and response there is a space. In that space is our power to choose our response. In our response lies our growth and freedom.

- Viktor Frankl



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.





Summary of Suggested Language Used in this Article to Help Your Son Think Positively

—“You seem to be working on something. Would you like to talk about it?”

—“I know I messed up today. I am doing my best to fix this problem and believe that I can get better. I would be grateful if you hang in there with me while I am on this learning curve.”

—“I am in control of my life. I learn from my experiences, including the difficult ones.”

—“This seems hard but you can help yourself. Give it some time and I know that you will find your way.”

—“And these are just a few ideas. You may have a better one.”

—“Hmmm...that’s a tough one. What do you think?”

—“I know that you will be able to come up with a solution.”

—“Lots of things to think about here. Take your time.”

—“I know this is a hard time. I am guessing that you would like me to come up with a solution for you, and you might even feel alone or angry since I am not. The thing is—I can’t because I am not you. I love you and I know how capable you are. Let’s take a break from this so that you can consider it all later. I have total faith that you will find an answer that is right for you.”

—“While failing is an option, let’s work together to find a way to lessen the frustration and still get the job done on time.”

—“Son, I feel troubled when I see you not following through with your agreement. Can you think of another way to approach this that would get you back on track?”

—“Is there some part of the assignment that is especially challenging? Can I or someone else take a look at it with you?”

—“This has been a long haul. I know that you will find a way to work this through in a way that satisfies you.”

Additional suggestions:

—“Since you’re not satisfied, what do you think you can do so that you will become pleased with it?”

—“It seems like that project was too easy for you. Next time let’s do something that you can really learn from.”

—“You spent a lot of time thinking that through but it still looks hard. Remember when we talked about how tedious things help us learn to concentrate?”

—“I trust you to become responsible and independent.”

—“How you feel about yourself and your own efforts is more important than grades or how others see you.”

—“You don’t have to be perfect, or even near perfect. Smile at your mistakes and learn from them. Effort and improvement are important.”

—“Your contribution counts. We function better with you. I appreciate what you have done.”

—“This looks like a really boring assignment. I guess teachers sometimes mess up. Can you think of a way to make it more interesting?”

—“If you tell your teacher that you tried your best, she wouldn’t be angry with you. I’m not upset about this? Are you?”

—“You are being a successful student when you focus on expanding your knowledge and your ways of thinking and investigating the world. Grades are only important when we use them as a way to continue to grow.”

—“Finding a way to contribute to others and to be satisfied with your contributions is more important than grades or what others think about you.”

—“If you don’t give anything or expect anything, success is not coming to you, you must come to it.”