

WORKING THROUGH PARENTAL CONFLICT

Co-Parenting Your Sensitive Son



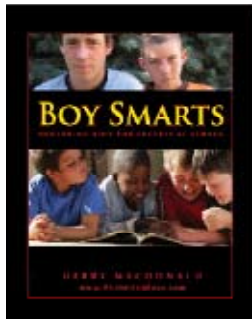
Dear Barry,

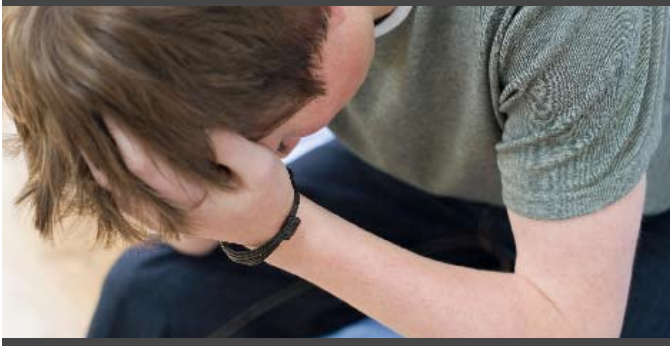
Your recent comments here in Ottawa about the effects of harsh discipline on sensitive boys really struck a chord. Later that day, when I tried to discuss your suggestions with my partner, we argued once again about how to raise our son Calvin. Despite his own sensitivity, my partner Tom says that I am too easy on our 11 year old son and that only stern discipline will work. The more I want to discuss Calvin's needs, the more Tom digs in or passively retreats (apparently like he did in his first marriage).

As Tom works long hours as an engineer and I am the primary parent, I get furious when he waltzes into the middle of a discipline conversation and angrily forces his restrictive logic on Calvin, saying something like: "If you don't want a consequence, don't do it!" or "Tell those bully boys to get lost!". Tom doesn't see how his loud, reactive threats to remove *Minecraft* or his assertions about boyhood conflict only antagonize and frustrate. We are at a stalemate. I worry that the opportunities to guide Calvin are fading. I also fear that our smoldering conflict is pushing us toward divorce. I'd dearly love to go for couple counselling, but Tom won't go.

Like Tom, Calvin is a *Spidey Sense* boy who gets easily stressed out and is highly sensitive to noise, time pressure, transitions, low blood sugar, and conflict. Since kindergarten Calvin has struggled with peers, who often taunt and tease him. He manages to hold in his frustration at school, but arrives home yelling and mad as hell. His grades are good, but teachers say he is somewhat socially isolated and flies under the radar. I worry that teenage testosterone will turn Calvin into a powder keg, push my marriage over the edge, and turn me into a basket case. Mostly though, I worry about the impact all this stress is having on our son.

Julienne, Ottawa





Dear Julianne,

Of course, as frustrating as it can be to feel at odds with our partners over disciplining our children, it is a very common scenario. As difficult as it can be for parents to feel unsupported in their parenting styles, we all know that there is no such thing as a relationship free from conflict—not on playgrounds, schools, workplaces, nor in our homes. Repeatedly I have heard couples attending *Boy Smarts parenting workshops* acknowledge their parenting differences, often indicating that they are seeking fresh input to get on the same page. I often hear one partner say to the other, “I told you so!” when I make a point they agree with, or to be silent but attentive when their assumptions are challenged.

Sometimes parents who grew up with parents stalled in conflict gridlock tell me they want to chart a new pathway for their own children. These parents understand that frequent expressions of rancor or unresolved, simmering conflicts may hurt their children and erode their connection. They also know from experience that divorce does not erase conflict over parenting differences.

It might interest you to know that a national survey about couple communication, conflict, and commitment published in the journal *Family Process* notes that in first marriages, couples argue most about money, while in second marriages, they argue most about children. The study discovered that *how* couples argue was more related to their divorce potential than *what* they argue about. Further, while male divorce potential was more strongly linked to levels of negative interaction with their partner, female divorce potential was more strongly linked to lower positive connection within the relationship. That you and Tom argue about how to raise Calvin is less important than *HOW* you argue.

Studies also reveal that in homes where conflict is intense, many children become more aggressive, develop more frequent illnesses, more depression and anxiety, and more sleep problems than children who come from more harmonious homes. Yet pretending that conflict is not happening and sliding it under the rug is not healthy either. Children who rarely see conflict being worked through may learn to shy away from any form of disagreement; later they may find it easier to succumb to peer pressure than to resist it. Children copy the patterns of interaction that they observe, whether it is demeaning criticism, threats, or volatile eruptions of rage; or healthy and respectful ways to manage anger and work through conflicts.

Marital attitudes toward conflict may also be influenced by our hormonal wiring, as well as by the cultural messages we internalize about our gender. Louann Brizendine, the author of *The Male Brain* and *The Female Brain*, posits that the interplay of culture and biology helps explain why each gender tends to engage in and recover from stress and relational conflict differently. In general, in our culture women want to talk through conflict and men prefer to avoid discussing it. Both approaches have their strengths and limitations at different times. However, the reluctance to talk through conflict and express emotions that is more commonly ascribed to males can contribute to a build-up of negative effects from stress, including a sense of isolation, depression, low self-esteem, and substance misuse.

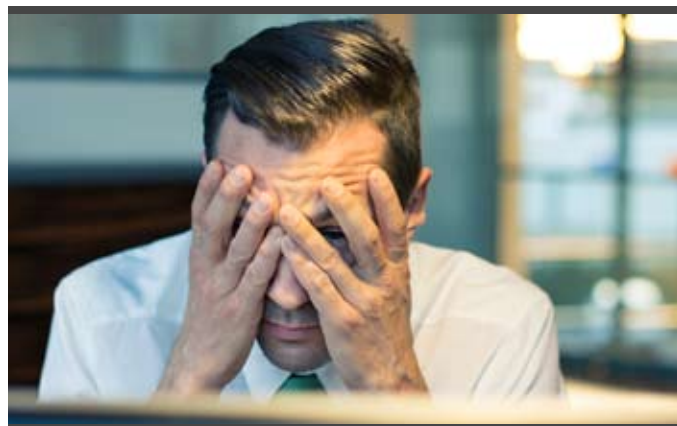
The traits associated with stereotypical masculinity such as being action-oriented, able to compartmentalize and take a relatively objective stance, can serve us all well at times. However, those who believe they just have to tough it through and eventually life will get better, but who are unable to acknowledge a full range of emotional experiences, limit themselves and their potential for intimacy. I meet many men in my consulting office who describe symptoms of stress without even recognizing what they are revealing. These males regularly fail to note connections between their emotional or mental health and physical symptoms such as headaches, digestive problems, and chronic pain.

To explain why many males tend to shrink from working through relational conflict, some turn to biology, proposing that for thousands of years rigid gender roles

may have helped ensure our survival in harsh, dangerous environments. While males specialized in hunting and protection, females specialized in feeding and childcare. Females who better managed stress and maintained calm were rewarded with increased amounts of the hormone oxytocin, which facilitated stronger attachments with children, partly through increased production of breast milk. (Recent studies still indicate that the amount of breast milk a female produces is related to how relaxed she feels.) On the other hand, males who maintained aggression and alertness became exceptional hunters and were better able to safeguard offspring. Driven more commonly by adrenaline rather than oxytocin, males were more reactive to threats than females, but slower to calm down.

Today men like Tom may be more likely to react to perceived threats where they do not exist. As our gendered brains and physiological responses may be similar to those

of our ancestors, it is not surprising when a threatening event occurs—for example, the ringing of an alarm bell—studies show that the male system generally has a higher level of reactivity than the female one, with increased blood pressure and heart rate. Generally males are also slower to recover from the triggered stressor. The blood pressure of males, unlike that of females, may be high for over twenty minutes after the triggering event.



Responding to Male Sensitivity & Reactivity

Being a sensitive male like Tom or Calvin can be difficult in a culture that perpetuates a code of masculinity that does not sanction the expression of feelings other than anger. Highly sensitive people, whether male or female, may get easily overwhelmed by sensory and emotional information from the stress of modern life, and being unable to express those feelings safely can take its toll. High emotional sensitivity that has nowhere to express itself leads men to over react. However, with insight into themselves that may develop not only through counselling, but also through life experiences and other pathways, highly sensitive males can discover that their sensitivity is both a gift and a strength.

In the face of Tom's reactivity, consider that in moments of intense conflict, he is doing the best he currently can and no doubt fully intends to contribute to your son's wellbeing. Many men I have counselled tell me that their own boyhood sensitivities were railroaded or ignored, and they now lament the realization that they are repeating a similar cycle with their own children. With support, these men begin to learn that pushing feelings away does not make them disappear. In fact, the feelings that are stuffed inside grow more in the dark, pushing more and more for expression; no doubt we have all seen people who appear to be calm and even until they suddenly lash out over something seemingly small.

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BOY SMARTS ACTION TALK





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

Reactive men need to take responsibility for their reactivity. Studies in neuroplasticity have demonstrated that the human brain is malleable, capable of change well into old age. I tell men that whatever their age and history, they can learn to recognize and unpack their own emotions, and manage relational conflict more skilfully.

Although I am not suggesting for a minute that these stress patterns apply to all men or all women, I have observed that women tend to handle stress better than men, and are more likely to bring up sensitive issues for discussion than men are. Men more commonly try to deflect stress by retreating or defending. Whatever you believe about your partner's style of handling conflict, it's my belief that very few people have learned how to engage in healthy relational conflict so that all perspectives can be included in whatever solution emerges. Learning to work through conflict rather than evading it or riding roughshod over another's viewpoint takes work, time, commitment, and often the support of an empathic and skilled counsellor or mentor.



Resolving Healthy Couple Conflict

Research at the **University of Washington** by John Gottman has discovered that only 40% of couples' divorces are precipitated by frequent, devastating fights. More often relationships end because, in order to avoid constant skirmishes, couples distance themselves so much that they lose their sense of connection.

In his book, *The Seven Principles for Making Marriage Work*, Gottman encourages couples to join forces against conflict gridlock and to work hard to resolve problems before they become entrenched. Here are five of his numerous suggestions for resolving solvable problems as they arise:

Soften conflict startup: Gottman indicates that 96% of the time couple conflict ends as it starts, so one ground rule can help couples begin to air a conflict in a gentle, respectful way: couples can agree that it's okay to complain, but it's not okay to criticize. Evidence indicates that when couples learn to be gentle on each other but hard on the problems, their relationship is more likely to be stable and happy.

Learn to make effective repairs during conflict: When attempts at conflict resolution go sideways, call a halt. Gottman argues that damage control is essential. To slow down unproductive escalation of conflict, Gottman offers scripted statements such as: "Please say that more gently"; "I feel blamed. Can you rephrase that?"; "Tell me that you love me"; or "My reactions were too extreme. Sorry."

Soothe yourself and your partner: As males often find it harder to calm themselves than females do, it is critical for men (and the boys who are observing) to manage the flood of overwhelming emotions and to avoid uttering overwrought ultimatums such as "I don't have to take this any more!" Gottman notes that when heart rates of males exceed 100 beats per minute, those males won't be able to hear what their partner is trying to say, no matter how hard they try.

Compromise: For compromise to work, each person needs to be genuinely open to considering the other's opinion. Both partners must learn to ask a partner questions to understand his or her viewpoint, and to value the sharing of feelings, goals, and needs.

Accept each other's faults: Gottman argues that too often couples get bogged down in 'if only' thinking, desiring that a partner be different than they are. He believes that it is vital for people to accept their partner's flaws and idiosyncrasies and love, not an elusive "what if" fantasy, but the flawed, real person they have partnered with.

As you learn to appreciate that Tom's innate sensitivity and masculine conditioning trigger his reactivity toward you and your son, Tom in turn can take charge of his own emotions, recognizing that reactivity and punitive parenting isolate him and Calvin, and exacerbate the stress of everyone in the family.

Tips for Men (and boys) to Self-Soothe

While every highly sensitive person will benefit from the following suggestions, my experience is that women are more likely to be actively engaged in self-soothing. More and more males are slowly waking up to the ways that nourishing self-care enhance the quality of their lives and wellbeing. Here are some ways that we can all practice self-care:

Get enough sleep and eat healthy food: Lack of sleep (less than 7 hours, for most adults) produces irritability, moodiness, and decreased concentration and productivity. Getting enough sleep soothes our senses and will help cope with an already overwhelming world. Also keep edgy nerves calm by limiting caffeine, maintaining a steady blood sugar level by eating regular healthy well-balanced meals and snacks. Take fish oil (omega-3) supplements daily as the brain loves these, and many studies demonstrate their beneficial cognitive and emotional effects.

Enlist the intellect: When you're emotionally wrung out or suspect you've taken on someone's distress, think things through to counter anxiety. Use both positive self-talk and logic to get and stay grounded. Repeat the following two mantras: 1) "Even though I am feeling (overwhelmed), this will pass. I choose to relax now, knowing that I will figure this situation out"; 2) "It is not my job to take on the emotions of others. I can be loving without doing so."

Wear noise-reducing headphones: Sound-protecting headphones can help construction workers and anyone who is highly sensitive to noise, especially the kind we can't control. These headphones provide control over a noisy intrusive world and promote a sense of calm.

Build in mini-breaks throughout the day: Avoid overly packed schedules or too much time in noisy, crowded, high-pressure environments. If you know you're going to be in a challenging environment, take breaks, breathe in some fresh air, take a short walk, and stretch. These interludes will reduce the excessive stimulation of going non-stop.

Practice yoga or meditation: To counter emotional overload, take charge and meditate for a few minutes. Find a private place to close your eyes to breath and release stress. Take long and slow exhalations to release stress. Exhale pent-up negative emotions—loneliness, worry, and more. Feel them dissipate with each deep breath. Also, put your hand over your heart and visualize loving-kindness permeate you from head to toe. These small actions, repeated over time like mantras, will teach your system to relax.



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Responding to Sensitive Boys

Intensely perceptive boys can also get overwhelmed easily by crowds, noises, new situations, sudden changes, and the emotional distress of others. Yet their sharpened sense of awareness also leads them to be reflective, creative, and compassionate. While these interpersonal and intrapersonal skills are highly desirable in the adult world, the downside is that sensitive children tend to feel criticism, defeat and distress very deeply.

Because Calvin is more easily upset than many boys, he may also feel at odds with other boys at times—and they with him. Remember that children grow and develop at their own rate, not according to a chart of norms. While Calvin stands awaiting an invitation to play, other boys may be bossier and more demanding. Misinterpreting their behaviour, he may complain later: “No one likes me.”

When I talk with boys who are sensitive, at times they tell me that adults have been able to offer a haven of support and understanding. While boys are teased for being different, mature adults can reassure him that he is appreciated for his unique qualities.

The best gift you can give your son is to accept him where he is, and develop an appreciation for his sensitivities, or his *Spidey Senses*. This may involve simply understanding

the *Boy-Code* (see page 54 of *Boy Smarts*), or helping your son to understand how there are many ways to be masculine (see page 7 in *Boys on Target*). Tom especially might practise reframing his perspective of Calvin’s *Spidey Senses* in a positive way. I suspect that as Tom embraces Calvin’s extreme sensitivity, he will also recognize his own. It would be helpful for both Tom and you to additionally discuss the suggestions in Chapter 1 of *Boys on Target* to consider ways you can work together to support Calvin’s sensitivity and maintain a positive connection with him.

In many years of consulting with parents about mentoring boys, I have observed that boys thrive when they feel understood and appreciated for who they are. As a boy who relaxes into his *Spidey Senses* becomes more self-aware and self-accepting, he will also develop practical coping skills to deal with others’ aggression.

Also recognize that even when there is caring, open and effective communication at home, most boys feel reluctant to talk about their troubles, but we do not need to tip-toe around sensitive boys’ needs, or retreat from providing guidance and discipline. Calvin’s sensitivity does not imply that he cannot handle structure or limits. Being able to give Calvin gentle structure and clear limits with respect goes a long way. For example, if its time to stop paying *Minecraft* and he is resisting—you might say, “I realize you want to play all night but it’s time to switch gears. You need your rest and we have agreed to stop gaming by 8 pm and it’s after 8pm—please shift your focus and take the dog for a walk.”



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Prepare for Teenage Testosterone Turmoil



Whether readers are struggling with a sensitive boy, an overly aggressive boy, or somewhere in between, appreciate that parenting challenges will intensify during the teenage years. As testosterone increases during

adolescence, most boys become more aggressive, agitated, and moody. Our culture also expects boys to push hard toward independence. During these years your son can become stuck in conflict gridlock or alternatively, develop greater courage and compassion. Recognize that he may be more influenced by your ability to listen to him and collaborate with him without getting caught in his conflict than by laying down the law or doling out punitive consequences. Parental reactions to a boy's masculine posturing—sometimes seeing through his resistance, sometimes yielding to his frustration or despair—can teach boys to see through cultural stereotypes and to become better managers of stress and conflict.

We may not be able to control the genetics we have been given or the wider cultural message that surrounded us; however, we can appreciate that differing temperaments and differing cultural messages lead us each to respond to challenges in different ways. As we search actively for common ground with our partners and children, we can free up the energy and optimism needed to collaborate on problem-solving.

Our children watch us, and learn from our patterns of interaction. When we work through conflict in ways that are respectful rather than blaming, calmly assertive rather than aggressive, we are modeling emotional maturity for our children.

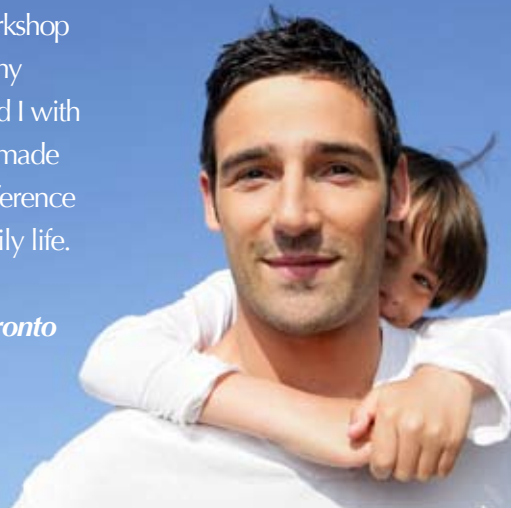
Brains and habits can change.

But emotional work, sometimes going into overtime, is required. • • •

Barry MacDonald

MentoringBoys.com

Barry's workshop provided my partner and I with ideas that made a huge difference in our family life. Thank you!
Logan, Toronto



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



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.



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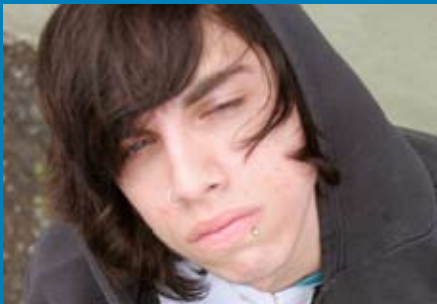
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The intention of MentoringBoys.com is to encourage a positive focus on boys' strengths and their varied needs in our homes, schools, and communities.

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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!