

TWELVE TIPS FOR PARENTS TO FOSTER EMOTIONAL RESILIENCE IN BOYS



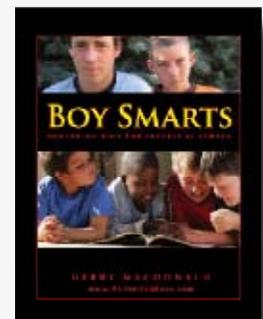
Hi Barry:

Our school principal here in Ottawa attended your workshop and has been referencing your ideas and giving us parents your monthly articles ever since. Like you, he believes that we can help reactive kids better manage their emotions and become happier, calmer, and more focussed learners. Our teachers also work conscientiously to provide great classroom learning experiences and respond to the emotional needs of students in caring ways.

My son is a handful, but he loves going to school. I have read enough of your material to know that you absolutely understand boyhood. My problem is finding time to read everything that you have written to help my 9 year old son slow down his 0 to 60 emotional reactivity.

With the principal's encouragement I am writing you to see if you might summarize some key ideas about helping boys regulate emotionally intensity at home. As I am swamped with my career and raising kids, I have time only to read your nitty-gritty highlights.

Anusha, Ottawa



Hello Anusha,

Learning to self-regulate emotions is a fundamental task of growing up. A boy who can stay calmly focussed and alert can better integrate information coming in from outside and inside, and then choose where to direct his thoughts and actions. Increased capacity to monitor and manage emotions will boost your son's confidence to pursue everyday goals. Here are 12 key ideas from several articles that I often discuss at workshops. It is my hope that these pared down tips will help you support your son's capacity for developing emotional resilience.



1. Anticipate needs

We should expect that from time to time children will be cranky, irritable, or running on empty, but as we take the time to observe patterns of upset, we will be able to anticipate a child's needs before they get acted out. Consider what your son's needs might be during difficult transition times throughout the day—such as in the morning, after school, and after dinner—or during big life changes such as moving from one home to another. Provide connection through regular brief daily activities that allow you to tune into signs that he might need further support. Consider a lighthearted check-in activity like “You wouldn't believe what happened to me today!” where you each tell tall tales about what happened and then settle into reporting high and low points of your day. Each of you might even rate your stress level between 0 to 10, keeping in mind that optimal stress is somewhere between 4 and 5—not 0. For most of us, a certain amount of stress is motivating, but when it tips over into the red zone, we need to learn self-regulatory strategies to bring it down.



2. Support your son's temperament

We may not be able to control the genetics we have been given; however, we can appreciate that differing temperaments lead us each to respond to different kinds of challenges in different ways. Children with difficult temperaments are more sensitive to the type of parenting they receive, both positive and negative. While some boys may be temperamentally predisposed towards emotional reactivity, these boys can still learn healthy emotion regulation strategies through their interactions with caregivers. When we respond to a boy's emotional upset with warmth and sensitivity, we can help even those with so-called difficult temperaments learn to regulate emotions and be successful in school.

3. Lead the way with your own calm response

Become aware of your own emotional regulation patterns: Do you fly off the handle easily or withdraw in sullen protest when you don't get your way? We can best teach children how to manage their emotions by showing how we regulate our own. When we adults remain calm during stressful moments, boys learn that emotions can be managed, and perhaps also that we can help steady them through their times of disequilibrium. When your son cries “It's wrecked! He ruined it!” it is time to slow down rather than speed up. Take a deep breath as you summon your energy to be as present with your son as you can.



4. Listen to and validate feelings

Sometimes a tripping fall is very painful, and sometimes it's emotionally overwhelming because it's a kind of shock. By validating both your son's physical pain and his emotional reaction, you will help him to understand that all his feelings are acceptable; he does not have to pretend with you. As mastery of emotional regulation doesn't really kick in until the late teens—or even, for some, later in the 20's—your son needs to know that a bonk on the head or a fall off the slide is an upsetting event and that you understand how he is feeling. It is amazing how children will be able to suddenly shift into a more positive key once they feel heard and validated.

5. Teach empathy and feeling vocabulary

When we ask boys to use words, many will struggle to find the vocabulary to describe what they are feeling when they are upset. Pay careful attention to the use of feelings words at home with your son, knowing that as you take time to name your own feelings out loud, your son will learn that you value the identification of feelings. It is particularly important for fathers to talk about their own feelings so that boys learn that emotions are not just a female thing. Fathers might say: "I am worried about how I am going to get this work done before we head out on the road," or, "Right now I am really angry about what you did and I need to go outside to relax and think about what I am going to say to you." Later, when your son's feelings are too intense for him to handle, he may

say something like "I feel overwhelmed." While being able to label his feelings of overwhelm will not make the emotions dissipate, it will increase your son's sense that he is in charge of his emotions.

6. Meet basic needs for nutrition and rest

Emotionally intense boys tend to be more affected by hunger and loss of sleep than those with more easy-going temperaments. Over the years, several nutritionists and physicians have reported to me that highly active and emotionally intense boys often need more protein to provide them with a slow burning fuel. Consider too that they may have sensitivities to certain foods or their environment that may reduce their abilities—their reserves—to manage their emotions. If your son's reactions seem especially intense, explain to your son that sometimes our bodies just need extra food or a little rest to find a more quieter, calmer place. When emotional storms erupt, if you suggest a calming activity such as going for a short walk or reading a book together—and maybe offer a glass of water, or a light protein-based, healthy snack, he may learn to seek quiet times, and healthy nourishment when emotions go into overdrive.

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7. Be aware of how demanding eye contact can trigger reactivity

People tend to look at others when talking to them, but commonly look away when they are processing their thoughts. When adults are talking, children also need the break in eye contact to process the information being presented, especially when they are emotionally aroused. When parents and teachers insist that a child look at them in the eye to focus their attention, they may actually be sabotaging their intent to get their message across. At the very least they are adding more emotional intensity to an already charged interaction. Children who avoid eye contact by looking away may at times be signalling feelings of stress.

8. Discuss how to manage anger

When emotions have settled, explore with your son the idea that while anger is a normal response to frustration, anger that we can't see and learn to manage will push us around. How can we notice our anger before it gets in the driver's seat and makes us do things that we later regret? Talk about ways that you keep your own anger in check: Stop. Breathe. Remind yourself that you are going to be okay, and that this moment is not an emergency. Shake the tension out of your hands. Take ten more deep breaths. As you breathe deeply, observe the anger that seemed so big and solid and real can actually dissipate, giving way to other feelings—often fear, sadness, or disappointment. Help your son to become aware that all these feelings are part of being human.

9. Interrupt problems that are growing too fast

If you see a child getting so frustrated with a problem that you can see a volcano building, sometimes interrupting a child can help him gain distance on the problem and feel calmer. Explore brief diversions to shift or lighten the mood. Laughter can discharge tension and shift mood. Even forcing yourself to smile sends a message to your nervous system that there's no emergency, and can help you begin to calm down. Movement also helps kids to discharge their frustration physically. Call for a music break, and dance about in a silly way.



Help your son develop a mindset that holds setbacks and mistakes as a part of life-long learning processes.

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10. Get moving

Sometimes a little movement can help boys regulate emotions if they wiggle or dance or run the stress out of their bodies. Taking a walk, running around the backyard with the dog, or simply moving back and forth in a rocking chair can help boys relax their bodies so that they are better able to cope with their emotions. By activating both hemispheres of the brain, movement helps the brain to process emotions. Even simple activities like colouring or drawing are also bi-laterally stimulating activities that facilitate the processing of emotions. No mood lasts forever, and angry scribbling may gradually transform to reflective doodling. As boys identify an emotion that they wish would recede, they can use activity to help them move toward a more positive emotion. Boys might learn to intentionally change gears—the rhythm of brushing the dog, walking around the block, or jumping on a trampoline can help to interrupt the cycle of arousal.

11. Develop a game plan to release stress

Boys often report to me that it can be helpful to develop and follow their game plan to release stress and to relax their body. Here is a 5-step plan that I collaboratively developed with an 8 year-old boy the other day to help him regulate his emotions:

- Do 5 shoulder shrugs, rolling the worrying emotion out of the body as the shoulders roll back
- Make a fist and then let the hand drip water off limp lettuce, 5 times
- Breathe in to the count of 5 and then slowly out to the count of 10, five times
- Slowly count my Pokemon cards while looking at each side of each card
- Say: “I am relaxed and I can handle this.”

12. Encourage a resilience mindset

Help your son develop a mindset that holds setbacks and mistakes as a part of life-long learning processes. When he looks to you 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 with him what he learned about himself during this struggle. You might also reflect yourself about what you did to show support without taking over.



Appreciate the Ups and Downs

As your son gradually matures, he will become increasingly self-reliant, and better at managing his emotional upheavals. He will learn how to identify the difference between his wants and needs, but he will likely confuse the two many times along the way.

Children whose coping skills are strained too far by coming up too hard, too fast, or too often against disappointments and severe frustrations will need to rely on the support of a caregiver or mentor. Even when they have acted out, they need to know that they can lean on someone who cares—a parent, a teacher, a trusted adult who has their best interests at heart. To internalize the feeling of self-love that they need in order to do the hard work of learning self-regulation, they need to know that they are accepted as they are.

Authentic self-regulation is not to be confused with the mask of compliance, or the pose of submission. It is instead the development of core strengths and inner resilience that helps us all, when we feel bowed under, to raise our heads again. Sometimes self-regulation means being quiet and holding back. Sometimes it means expressiveness. Always it means the discipline of conscious choice, learned over time, with the help of trusted mentors. ●●●

Barry MacDonald
MentoringBoys.com



Next month's newsletter will offer 12 more tips to help boys strengthen their emotional resiliency—including how to set limits with video gaming.



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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