

CULTIVATING CAPABILITY: *a source of real* SELF ESTEEM

Dear Barry,

A parent stormed into my office the other day protesting about the grade I gave her son. When I tried to address the underlying issue, she said I was unfair and left in anger. Her son has the academic ability to earn top marks in English, but he is not handing in top assignments and he is also not submitting them on time—they are often 2 or 3 weeks late. I know that my expectations are reasonable, but worry that this parent may just be too protective of her son, enabling him to underachieve. As a parent myself, I know that it's perfectly healthy to advocate for and protect your child. But how far is too far?

Curiously, over my 20 years of teaching, I have observed increasing attention to raising kids' self-esteem while indulging their whims. Just the other day I learned that the majority of our Grade 11 and 12 students do not make their lunches. Interestingly, girls comprised the 20% who did make lunches. Discussion about communal chores seemed to bewilder them. I was struck with how long it took the boys to agree on a definition for "chore." Girls voiced alarm about the privileges they perceived their brothers received at home.

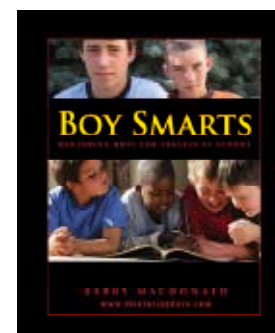
Are we raising a generation of entitled boys who will grow up to become irresponsible adults—clueless about how to survive in the real world?

Marti

*Secondary English Teacher,
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HOW SUPPORT DIFFERS
FROM ENABLING...



At times we may wish to shield children from excessive disappointment...

• • • *Dear Marti,*

Since the earliest of times parents, mentors, and teachers have helped children to develop independence and autonomy by scaffolding or supporting children's learning in appropriate ways, and gradually withdrawing their support as children develop increasing self-sufficiency.

Students benefit when parents take interest in their schooling and assignments, of course, while parents are also mindful not to break one of the cardinal rules of parenting:

Never do for a child that which he can do for himself.

Recently, a father relayed his son's response to losing his new favourite toy at the community swimming pool: "That's okay, daddy. You can buy me another one." When the father indicated that he did not have the money to replace the toy, his son replied with a single word: "Visa."

Parents may be tempted to replacing broken or lost toys immediately, but what does this quick gratification teach children?

Replacing broken and lost toys can more harm than good. It can rob children of the opportunity to learn how to manage loss and disappointment. If we try to smooth out every disappointment, we may also rob our children of gratitude. When we interfere with developmentally appropriate childhood difficulties, it's a little like carrying a one-year-old around all the time: He doesn't learn to trust his own capacity for propelling himself forward, by crawling or walking himself.

At times parents naturally may wish to shield their children from excessive disappointment, fearing perhaps that loss or failure may cause their children to give up altogether. Although it can be difficult for some parents to keep a distance while their children flounder, excessive shielding robs children of the opportunity to develop insight and learn from their mistakes.

We know cognitively that we get stronger from facing disappointment and negotiating challenges, that true self-esteem comes, in part, from learning that we can engage in struggle. Children who test their competencies in safe and caring atmospheres, without fear of humiliation, learn to believe in themselves and in their ability to solve problems. They develop courage to face failure, to pick themselves up when they are down, to take risks and try out new possibilities. Even though we may long to rescue our children when we see them suffer, we know that we learn resilience from dealing with life's adversities. Indeed, when we observe from a distance and inter-



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vene only when absolutely necessary, children learn that we have faith in their ability to manage frustration as they work through life's hurdles.

We ache for our children to be successful at school and life. We long to keep them safe and secure. Ultimately, however, children need to learn how to speak their mind and advocate for themselves. The result of doing too much for our children is that they develop the false belief that they can get what they want, when they want it, and that these desires—often whims—will be met from outside themselves. They may also come to believe that there is something seriously wrong with the universe if their desires are not quickly satisfied. What's worse is that they may come to believe that they do not learn to trust that they can work toward difficult goals.

Standing by while our kids struggle and make mistakes takes faith, love, and courage.

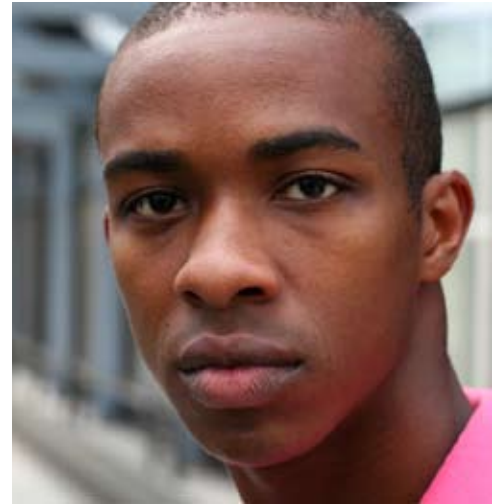
Parents are often overwhelmed by pressures and worries their own parents never experienced. The demands on parents to keep up in this rapidly proliferating digital culture—marked by convenience, expedience, and instant gratification—are astounding. We worry that our children may post photos of themselves, drunk and half-naked, on Facebook for future employers to view. We wonder whether our children's Wii-ing and IM'ing might get them into trouble that we can't even contemplate. Exhausted by the perceived need to keep up ourselves in a variety of ways—measuring ourselves at times by the index of our children's apparent happiness and success—it can seem easier to just grab hold and do it ourselves.

In the age of Facebook and ubiquitous cell phones, parents can be more involved in their children's lives than ever before. Micro-managing, micro-scheduling, and micro-enriching all aspects of our kids' lives can create a generation of children who require continual direction, continual bolstering, and continual micromanaging in return.

As a result, it becomes common for some kids to avoid tackling challenging tasks because they fear discomfort and distress.

Some of the best-intentioned parents and teachers may be tempted to give children's wants and demands priority over the collective good and common sense. When we focus too much on helping children feel good, we may think we are supporting them when we are inadvertently enabling them.

Enabling children—hovering over them to ensure that they do not fail—actually makes youth feel helpless and incompetent. It may also give them power and authority, at home and at school, that they are not ready to handle.



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I believe we can help children the most by fostering independence. Indeed, many of us would rather have a young adult son who could care for himself, whether or not he had advanced education, rather than a son who goes to university but is unable to fend for himself.

Teachers and parents who hover over children with too much solicitude may actually be teaching children to sit back, wait to be served, or even wait to be bailed out. These kids are at risk later of developing resentment when special service and rescue does not arrive. They can have a difficult time adjusting to life's challenges.

Seek a Healthy Balance

Parents who wish to strike a healthy balance with school involvement would be wise to respect the needs of their maturing children who will need increasing opportunities to make decisions on their own—with guidance from caring adults at times.

There is no clear line about how much involvement is too much, as it depends on the needs of the child and the circumstance. Children who are very shy or have legitimate learning difficulties might need a parent to be more involved. However, we need to be discreet and sensitive about our interventions so that we do not take over, and smother these children's efforts, however tentative they are.

Avoid Bubble-wrapping Emotions

One of the positive ways we can support our children is to allow them to struggle and express emotions about stumbling blocks. When a boy returns from school complaining about his teacher or an assignment, don't rush to rescue him from frustration. Instead reflect and affirm his feelings with a brief statement such as "Tough day," or "You seem really angry about that." If he is old enough and receptive enough, you could ask a clarifying question about ideas he might have for possibly solving his problem. Unless he asks you specifically for advice, avoid telling him what you think he ought to do. Even then, rather than dispensing advice, it can often be helpful to express faith in his ability to figure it out, or asking him what he thinks could help in this situation.

If his anger is directed toward you, remember that anger is a powerful emotion that can sometimes be used to manipulate us to give in to demands. The only way out of a power struggle is to remain calm and refuse to argue. Even if your son says "I hate you," remember that not only is he simply expressing his rage of the moment; he may be saying "I hate it when I don't get my way." Respond calmly with a mirroring comment such as "I can tell you're



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Self-esteem comes from the lived experience of feeling capable...

really angry.” In time he will learn that you can maintain your connection to him, even when he is agitated, but that you won’t be manipulated by angry or unkind words. When faced with a calm parent who refuses to engage in a power struggle, your son will be more likely to stop blaming outside forces, and look within.

When we recognize that our children can’t always be happy, we are liberated to listen compassionately, maintaining our connectedness while our children struggle with their disappointments. We learn to appreciate that our children’s unhappiness does not reflect our success and worth as parents.

Encourage Independence

If you are a parent and want to avoid hovering while promoting age-appropriate independence, recognize that if your boy asks to do something by himself, it probably means that he is ready.

If you know he is capable of undertaking a task, but he is not yet asking to do for himself, you could suggest that he give it a try.

If you know that he is capable, but has developed a habit of relying on you, check that you are not enabling him by, for example, waking your son up in the morning; laying out his clothes and doing his laundry; making and packing his lunches; reminding him repeatedly to complete tasks; doing his chores for him; replacing his lost or broken items; and buying too many gifts for him.

If you have been providing these services for some time, don’t go cold turkey tomorrow. Just as it would be unwise to teach someone how to swim by throwing them in the water, you can teach your son to take on new responsibilities by encouraging him to assume more and more age-appropriate responsibilities.

Teachers who encounter students who expect undue attention and special treatment can also foster independence by choosing not to cater to students. Be firm and kind. Ensure that you are assigning reasonable tasks and due dates, providing engaging learning opportunities, and teaching with passion. Attuning to the student—helping him move to the next thing he is ready to learn—is your job, but completing assignments, meeting deadlines, and learning is the student’s job.



Self-esteem and faith in oneself comes not from having things made easy, but from the lived experience of feeling capable, connected to others, and knowing that you have something to offer.

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Self-esteem and faith in oneself comes not from having things made easy, but from the lived experience of feeling capable, connected to others, and knowing that you have something to offer.

Imagining at times that we are bolstering our children by reducing stress in their lives, we teach dependence on others for happiness, but when we pass over responsibilities to our children in developmentally appropriate ways, we foster independence and self-respect. • • •

Barry MacDonald

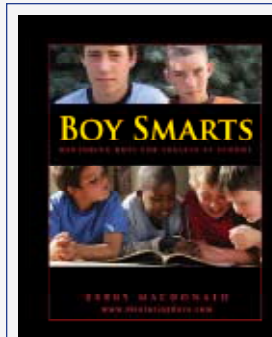
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Stay tuned for part two of this article next month:
Strategies for Cultivating Capability in Boys

Please tell me about your successes & struggles with developing capability & self-reliance in boys, knowing that your insights & questions will contribute to the next newsletter.

Email: info@mentoringboys.com



Also read chapter 3 in **Boy Smarts: Understanding a Boy's Motivation to Learn**