

BOYS NEED BETTER ROLE MODELS

AUTHOR, EDUCATOR BARRY MACDONALD
ENCOURAGES PARENTS TO BE INVOLVED

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A weekly talk about sex or the body and the encouragement of more physical activity were among suggestions made by Barry MacDonald during his presentation *Boy Smarts — Effective Strategies for Parenting Boys* at Parksvilles' Community and Conference Centre Wednesday evening.

During the engaging, and humorous talk, MacDonald, a sought-after speaker, teacher and counsellor, said there's some truth contained in the various stereotypes attributed to boys and girls but emerging research points to personalities and dispositions that should be measured along a broad continuum and treated accordingly.

"Boys have different sensitivities, different passions, different interests, just like girls do," he said. "This binary either or gender trap just doesn't wash."

To illustrate he used Barbie and Rambo to exemplify the extreme range of masculine and feminine behaviours and noted, despite parents' best intentions, boys are often left feeling anxious and unable to cope for reasons not their fault.

"We need to find ways to talk with boys so they don't feel backed into a corner. Anxiety is a commonly misunderstood experience among males, and society encourages them to not talk about it," said MacDonald.

He said fidgeting and avoidance of eye contact that might be seen as an evasive attempt to ignore or minimize problem behaviour is more likely due to elements of brain structure commonly shared among males.

"Movement creates bilateral stimulation or 'cross talk' between the two hemispheres of the brain," he said noting the brain structure that facilitates such communication, the corpus callosum, is generally larger in girls than in boys.

"Fidgeting needs to be seen as adaptive and not problematic; often aiding boys to process strong emotions or new information," he said.

Part of the talk focused on the emergence of disturbing sexualized images



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on the Internet and in other media that boys are ill equipped to deal with alone. Fathers and male role models often avoid such topics with boys, isolating them to draw their own conclusions.

“We live in a different world today. We were never our son’s age,” he said. “When boys **Google** about sexual development, or penis size for example, they are bombarded with a lot of insecurity.”

He is critical of the way video games and the media portray woman as submissive and promiscuous, indicating that these images only serve to further bewilder boys about respect between the sexes and hinder healthy development.

“It can be very confusing for boys when today’s culture bombards them with male bravado pumped on steroids. Despite **Grand Theft Auto** becoming popular for its highly spatial game design challenges, I wonder how boys will decode certain rules in the game; like receiving bonus points for killing the prostitute the gamer just had sex with? Who’s helping boys make sense of unhealthy and degrading behaviours and how can we teach healthy masculinities?”

MacDonald said his intent is not to demonize video games; on the contrary he believes video games and emerging technologies actually make kids smarter, but he noted: “This type of seduction is insidious.”

At base MacDonald’s message was a positive one that placed emphasis on what the education system and parents are doing right while still encouraging the audience to reach out to boys and teach that manhood is less about manipulating, dominating, or controlling others, and more about being caring, courageous, and principled.

“This is not about changing boys or changing your spouse, it’s about changing your response to them,” he said. “We all have the opportunity, through the clarity of our actions, to role model and support versions of manhood that are constructive, encouraging, and ultimately loving.”



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