

# BOYS' LEARNING NEEDS COLLABORATION OR CONFLICT

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Dear Barry,

There is a lot of hoop-la brewing in our school about boys doing poorly. While some say the girls are working harder and deserve their grades, others say that teaching and testing favours girls and disadvantages boys.

One mother was particularly vocal about her discontent when she discovered 80% of the honour roll students on last term's report card were girls. She's really stirring the pot and is even trying to drum up support for a lawsuit. My boy was one of the boys who earned his place on the honour roll. But I wonder where the other boys are? Are boys doing as poorly some people say?

*Kevin - a proud father of an honour roll student  
Mississauga, Ontario*

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Dear Kevin,

Many thoughtful people are worried about boys' lagging academic achievement. Sometimes they notice boys' apathy and disengagement with learning at school; at other times alarming headlines blare at them: "Boys are Flailing and Failing in Schools." Others read carefully documented reports such as a 2004 report from Statistics Canada called *The Gap In Achievement Between Boys and Girls* that underline ways in which boys' achievement has fallen behind that of girls, particularly in literacy.

Boys' behaviour and underachievement is a loaded topic in many communities – contentious, complex and confounding – eliciting a wide range of ideas and perspectives. Some hold on to the idea that boys will be boys. Others view each boy as unique. In any case, our diverse perspectives should not blind us to the reality that gender is one of the great organizing principles in child development.

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Even the 2004 document from Statistics Canada shines a light on the relationship between gender and grades:

“On a number of counts, the evidence suggests that more young men than women are experiencing difficulties with school. Young men, particularly male dropouts, appear to be less engaged in school and they continue to drop out of high school before completing the requirements for graduation at a higher rate than girls.”

You are no doubt aware that there are many more health and education indicators warranting consideration – as outlined in *Boy Smarts – Mentoring Boys for Success at School* – each drawing attention to a trend indicating that some boys are disengaging from and underperforming at school. Parents who hear claims that all boys have inferior academic scores often worry about boys' futures while feeling powerless to intervene.

Parents naturally feel alarmed when they generalize from national statistics and studies to explain the achievement of boys at their local schools. Sometimes, as people forget that statistics point to relative tendencies only, a heated atmosphere, fed by fear, creates misunderstandings, over-generalizations and positional conflicts. Understanding why fewer boys than girls are on the honour roll in your community requires thoughtful exploration.

Parents and educators find it satisfying to pool their experience and wisdom as they reflect on the trends they observe among different groups of boys – in the classroom, on the athletic field, at homes, and in the community. Of course, including boys' perceptions of their achievement and support networks in these discussions can only serve to expand understanding.



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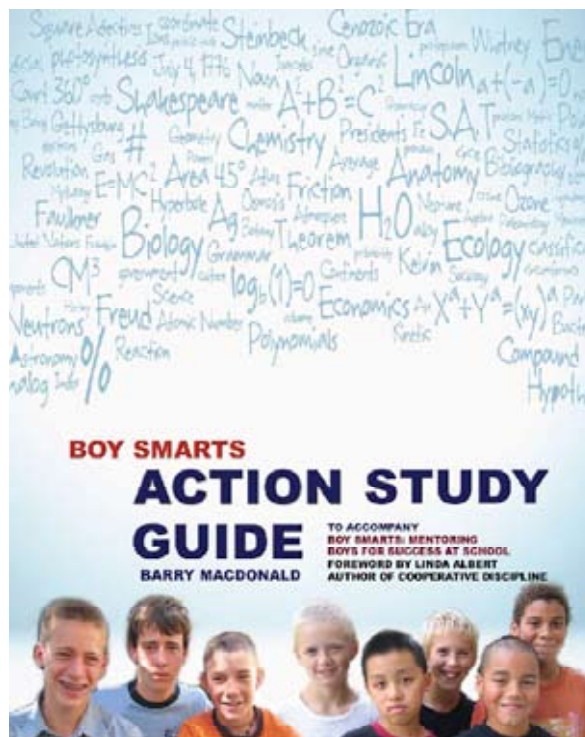


# Just as there is **no single cause** of the underachievement of some boys, there is **no single solution**.

To encourage thoughtful and balanced discussion about boys differing needs I recently published a discussion guide to accompany *Boy Smarts – Mentoring Boys for Success at School*, inviting readers to think critically and imaginatively about ways to help struggling boys.

The *Boy Smarts Action Study Guide*, a 143 page electronic document that has been downloaded across Canada and in other parts of the world, will form the foundation of my keynote address at the May 2008 Canadian Principal's Conference in St. John's.

Because a one-size-fits-all approach simply will not work, the guide offers over 600 questions or talking points that consider a broad range issues that lead to action research.



THE **BOY SMARTS ACTION STUDY GUIDE** PROVIDES THE FOLLOWING KEY IDEAS TO HELP KICK START THOUGHTFUL **CONVERSATIONS ABOUT BOYS** (2007, PAGE 12):

1. Many students struggle with learning, but the learning problems of boys have become increasingly hard to ignore.
2. Efforts to raise the achievement of boys must be made without threatening the gains made by girls.
3. We need to avoid over-generalizing about causal links between gender and achievement.
4. As boys are not a homogeneous group, the use of statistics about boys as a group can at times be limiting or misleading.
5. Since it has been noted that there is more overlap between the achievement of boys and girls than difference, we need to be careful not to exaggerate small discrepancies in academic assessments.
6. Brain differences should be understood as relative tendencies only.
7. Gender becomes part of the process of differentiation. Some boys and girls may learn differently.
8. Boys' academic underachievement should be considered in its social context.
9. Just as there is no single cause of the underachievement of boys, there is no single solution.
10. Each school community needs to consider gender and achievement in its own context and tailor strategies that fit their circumstances.
11. To teach boys effectively, we need to understand and appreciate boys' gifts and talents.
12. Effective parents and teachers focus on finding solutions rather than accentuating the problems.

Take a look inside the guide: [http://www.mentoringboys.com/boy\\_smarts.html#actionstudyguide](http://www.mentoringboys.com/boy_smarts.html#actionstudyguide)

# We need a **holistic approach** that does not pit educators & parents against each other...

With these key ideas as a starting point small group of concerned parents and school district employees can successfully address their concerns about boys' education in a positive and strategic manner to find mutually agreeable terms of reference, and eventually find consensus to plan courses of action.

Clearly, we need a holistic approach that does not pit educators and parents against each other – or others in the community – but maintains a clear focus on finding positive plans of action. The following questions will provide you with a sampling of the varied topics offered by *Boy Smarts Action Study Guide* that will inspire and keep your discussion group moving forward:

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- How can discussion side-step paralysis by analysis in an attempt to make sense of the gender gap?
  - How can collaborative inquiry find solutions rather than accentuate problems?
  - What does over-generalizing about causal links between gender and achievement mean?
  - To what degree does a boy's brain organization differ than a girl's?
  - What can teachers and parents do to help boys relax the boy-code and loosen the gender straitjacket so that boys are able to feel okay as they achieve their potential?
  - How can schools make learning more active and kinesthetic – for both boys and girls?
  - What kind of literacy skills do students need to face in a rapidly changing and increasingly technological world?
  - What are ways that your school community can reach out to boys who are culturally marginalized?
  - What are consequences for misbehaviour that are restorative and not punitive?
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More than any other group in our society, it is parents who care about making schools, classrooms, and learning work for their boys. When boys are striking out, it is essential that parents be consulted as partners. Parents and teachers may look at young children's learning from different perspectives, but they share a common goal – making sure that children receive the best education possible.

Mutual respect and communication between home and school takes advantage of both perspectives to provide children with the kind of care and education that will help them thrive. In an atmosphere of mutual respect, we can discuss highly charged issues around boys and learning and work together for success.

How can collaborative inquiry find **solutions** rather than accentuate problems?

