

# From Boys to Men:

## Shaping young males into grownups requires that parents understand their special needs

Joanne Good, Southam Papers, Calgary, November 19, 2002

Barry MacDonald, a counsellor and former classroom teacher based in Surrey, shares the joys of raising boys in an upcoming Calgary workshop called "Parenting Awesome Boys." In true Canadian style he offers no shocking statistics, nothing about boys and violence and not a single killer headline!

"I don't have anything grandiose to say," he said in a recent telephone interview from his office where he coordinates services for students at educational risk in the Langley School District. "For me, it's about finding balance and meeting the needs of the child, all children, and gender is just one consideration."

MacDonald notes that for the past two decades, girls' needs have garnered a lot of attention. Only a few years ago, research shifted to the interest of boys, with authors such as William Pollock, who wrote the groundbreaking Real Boys. Parents and educators need not be confounded by opposing gender-based opinion, says MacDonald. "My concern about focusing too much on genetic differences and brain differences is that we get back into 'boys will be boys' and 'girls will be girls,' and we're back to stereotypes."

"For me, it's about letting the child's needs drive our response, not research." Parenting Awesome Boys is also about parenting awesome girls. Developing ways to be more effective with boys is also about how to be more effective with girls.

In real life, children live on a 'continuum of gender.' "At one extreme, we have Rambo and at the other end, Barbie. Yes boys tend to lean to one side and girls tend to lean to the other, but, in fact, a lot of children are somewhere on the continuum in between."

Kids are in trouble, the therapist cautions, when boys or girls are isolated, turn inward, rely on television and develop hyper-masculinity or femininity." There are specific needs of boys just as there are specific needs of girls, says the counsellor who will explore the differences at an upcoming workshop.

He will examine effective ways educators and parents can shape boys to men, including how male stereotypes affect development and effective ways to reach boys. "Children who are living in a community of concern, where clear limits are set, are in the best possible place to succeed," says MacDonald.

But clear limits don't mean banning a deriding all that a child or teen faces in current culture. "It's about finding balance and perspective, again," say the counsellor. It's true that both boys and girls are more assertive these days and some are aggressive, he admits. "There has been a giant shift in our culture and our children are only mirroring back what's happening."

"The best way to handle these societal trends and build strong family connections is to accept that there are many influences and talk to children about them. When parents say, 'I'm doing a bad job of parenting, I'd like them to know, they have a certain influence. When children are young, they are for more influenced by the family than culture. But parents and teachers are about one-third of the pie. Genetics play a role. Peers also play a role."

What children need most is a safe place to talk about sexuality, drugs, alcohol, bullying, money, values, grades and their futures. "And they may need to talk with a counsellor, peer or an older cousin, or other relative," MacDonald says. "Of course, what complicates matters, is that some children are attracted more to culture than others. Some want tattoos and if parents are busy speaking so negatively about tattoos, does that really discourage the child from getting one as a teen?" What motivates anyone is a complex puzzle, says MacDonald, who also works with high school students on the edge of dropping out.

"If families are working so hard at being counterculture, then that consumes a lot of their energy. Then I have to ask, if you're spending all your time doing that, what aren't you doing?" Spend time developing a compassionate home and having more fun, offers the counsellor.

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