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Boy Smarts:

Mentoring Boys for Success at School,

Barry MacDonald. Surrey, British Columbia, Canada: Mentoring Press, 243 pages.

Whitmire (2006) recently noted with great alarm that boys were rapidly falling behind girls in almost all educational categories. In the early 1990s, it became clear that girls were falling behind boys in math and science; parents, teachers, and school programs were mobilized to address this problem with recent studies suggesting that girls are pulling even—and in some cases, ahead—of boys in these subject areas as well as others. Boys, on the other hand, are falling behind with one obvious reason being that they are far more likely to be suspended or expelled from school

for “bad behavior.” Whitmire goes on to note that high school honor rolls are almost completely dominated by girls. This problem extends well into college life: in some schools (e.g., the University of Maine, Farmington), the girls outnumber the boys by two-to-one.

Is it because there are no role models in education for boys? Well, Whitmire, suggests, that may be part of the problem. There are very few male teachers in elementary schools, and male teachers in middle schools are disappearing at an alarming rate. Further, there are no required college courses that address the

differences in how boys and girls learn. And female teachers almost always teach in ways that “feel” right to them. Indeed, most elementary school teachers are not even aware there is a gender-gap in learning at the pre-K-12 levels in the United States. Whitmire completes his report by saying, “There is only one force powerful enough to make schools start paying attention: Parents of boys!”

Under the assumption that you cannot fix a problem until it can be defined and acknowledged, *Boy Smarts*, Barry MacDonald’s (2005) compelling program for mentoring boys for school success, may well become the first line of offense in the battleground to transform educational institutions and re-engage young men in life-long learning. It is clear that boys learn differently than girls. They are more likely to seek the stories of history than engage in processes addressing human emotions. They are more likely to respond to humor, competition, and challenge than to non-competitive learning activities. MacDonald envisions an inclusive classroom, where none of the gains for girls are compromised, but where high male energy is accepted and rebelliousness becomes an opportunity for inquiry and exploration.

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Changing our schools—and indeed, our parenting—starts with understanding what makes boys tick, how they operate, and what they seek. It is really understanding boys that leads to appreciating them, and mentoring cannot really begin until appreciation is well established. The first four chapters of MacDonald’s book address the gender gap, the biology of growing-up male, implications for schooling, and how to motivate boys to learn. It is here that we discover the heart of the boy-exclusion problem at schools: It is fear. MacDonald notes that schools often become “more concerned with identifying potential bullies than with meeting the learning needs of boys” (p. 7). And it is precisely this fear that is at the bottom of one of the worst experiences young males have in the classroom: The experience of shame.

MacDonald does not advocate masculinity at the expense of meeting the needs of young women. To the contrary, he wants a healthy respect for and incorporation of both masculine and feminine learning processes. When he speaks of teaching healthy masculinity, it is about a masculinity that

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respects women as well as self; it is about a masculinity that includes emotional awareness and expressiveness; it is about a masculinity that is rational, patient, caring, courageous, and cooperative. And teaching this kind of masculinity starts with modeling it: It starts with interventions that focus more on what a child needs to learn than on punishing and controlling misbehavior.

Chapters 5 and 6 address both relationship and structural processes for mentoring boys in schools. In these two chapters are some of the most practical applications of boy-knowledge available in print. Indeed, chapter 6 addresses issues from seating boys together to spatial-kinesthetic learning processes to student-led, classroom meetings. Chapters 7 and 8 address issues related to literacy and active learning.

In the last chapters of the book, an Adlerian approach to discipline is emphasized and defined. I like the incorporation of Lew

and Bettner's (1995) three C's. But the real value is in teaching parents and school personnel how to intervene to help boys discover self-control, not shame them, get beyond indifference, handle aggression, stay out of conflicts, and engage in problem-solving. The chapter on assessing boys' learning is filled with multiple pragmatic and specific ways to see where young men are and help them reach the next goal. The book concludes with recommendations for school-wide planning. In short, this book is a blueprint for parents of boys and for educators who are ready to stop losing half of our human future before elementary school is even over.

If you are a parent or teacher of boys, *Boys Smarts* is smart reading. It may turn out to be the single most important book in your children's early school life. Will MacDonald's methods ensure that more boys will make it to college and be better prepared for life? They just might. They certainly are a giant leap forward from what young men experience at school now. Fully implemented, this book is the foundation for resolving a national and international crisis.

James Robert Bitter, Ed.D.

References

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