
Dear Barry,

My boy is mostly shy in social circumstances and avoids sport activities. He's in Grade 4 and gets teased by the boys for being smart. He is bright, loves classroom learning, is nuts about reading and is highly verbal. In fact he started talking with reasonable clarity before he turned one year old, has great eye contact, and notices everything around him.

The school is very good about ensuring that no bullying occurs and is just super about playground supervision and providing lots of activities to channel the rambunctious boys, but he's so sensitive that he notices even the tiniest of slights and focuses on them as though they were a big deal. He's overly sensitive about a lot of things and he typically cries when I try to discuss things with him. My husband says we need to toughen him up if he is going to make it in this world. He wants to put him in a sport that will teach him to be more masculine. I know that would be a disaster for my son. What do you suggest?

Jane, Vancouver

Dear Jane,

Putting your son in a team sport will only broaden his cultural experiences if he so desires to participate. To force him risks alienating him from you and perhaps could even become a shaming experience. Perhaps your husband is afraid that your son might have an easier time growing up if he wasn't so sensitive, which is understandable, however his desire for him to become more masculine is misguided.

To begin, I would encourage you both to consider Guideline 20 in Boy Smarts – Mentoring Boys for Success at School. This guideline is called Teach Healthy Masculinity and offers 15 masculinity traits that have been proven as the basis for male strength that is caring, courageous and ethical, as opposed to manipulation, domination and control. Your son appears to have some of the classic symptoms of unique aspect of masculinity – SPIDER SENSES.

Spiderman's predominant skill as a superhero is his ability to tune into his environment and perceive subtle changes. While Spiderman is a mature man and manages his Spidertingles well, your son is young and although he also takes in an abundance of cues from his environment, he becomes tangled in their web of conflicting messages. On the other hand, boys who are oblivious to subtle environmental and social cues struggle to read non-verbal communication and take longer to understand social morays.

My
BOY is
shy



BOYS
who are
sensitive
have
SPIDER
SENSES

Most
BOYS
get clear
speech by
4.5 years

See the
strengths
of his
approach
to life



You can't medically remove *SPIDER SENSES!*

In the womb I suspect that your son was calmer, and likely had higher serotonin levels. Once born, it is predictable that he had the ability to gaze for longer periods of time and was also able to distinguish another baby's cry from background noise. He most likely was also able to recognize faces of people in photographs. As he got older I anticipate that he continued to attend to people and his surroundings in a manner that warranted comments about how pleasant and polite he was. While most boys achieve speech clarity at age 4.5, your son began talking early and likely achieved speech clarity by age 2 or 2.5 years. At the same time as boys in kindergarten were building tall structures and knocking them down, your son probably shared his blocks with others and built things cooperatively – likely with other boys with SPIDER SENSES or girls who also were sensitive – and he basically enjoyed collaborative play from an early age.

These are aspects of his personality that are highly desirable in the adult world but because he is more sensitive than many boys he feels at odds with them – and I suspect them with him at times. Remember that children proceed with development in tune with their own inner drumbeat. While he stood awaiting an invitation to play, many of boys in Grade 2 would have barged in past him and grabbed the toy he wanted to play with. He is at risk of misinterpreting their behaviour and returning home to complain, “No one likes me.”

The best gift you can give your son is to accept him where he is at, and develop an appreciation for his SPIDER SENSES. This may involve simply understanding the Boy-Code (see Guideline 14 on page 54 of Boy Smarts), and gaining practice with reframing your perspective of his SPIDER SENSES. Essentially, this means seeing the strengths of his approach to life.

In my numerous years of consulting with parents about their boys I have observed that when boys feel understood and appreciated for who they are their resiliency is activated. They begin to thoughtfully consider their perceptions of the world around them and in time develop inner dialogue or self-talk to maintain perspective and achieve their rockets of desire. While a boy who relaxes into his SPIDER SENSES will generally become more self-aware and self-accepting, he will also develop practical coping skills to respond effectively to other boys who are aggressive or unkind.

When I converse with boys who are sensitive they tell me that adults provide a haven of support and understanding. While others might tease them for being different, adult

Some tips for you and your husband to maintain this **connection** with your son include:

- Listen to him
- Support his preferences
- Respond to bullying behaviour
- Support social activity
- Be in regular contact with the teacher
- Show faith in him

Listen to him – Give him the attention you'd give a friend and respect his ideas and conjectures about life. Remember that he likely has limited opportunities to express many of these viewpoints at school, so your listening attentiveness really counts.

Support his preferences – Ensure that he pursues things that interest him. Leave your worries and judgments behind and instead show your faith in his choices.

Teach him how to respond to bullying behaviour – Take time to role-play and act out different responses to anti-social behaviour. Rehearsal is the preferred strategy of Olympians!

Support social activity that he is comfortable with – Consider a church youth group, or a summer camp that emphasizes talents such as music or other interests of him. Consider a family camp. Support weekend activities with other like-minded children. It will give him something to look forward to during the week if he finds himself alone reading on the playground at recess.

Be in regular contact with the teacher – who will observe him in playtime and be able to comment on his stress level and self-soothing abilities. Also, make sure that the school supports activities for boys who are sensitive and not just sports teams. Chess, robotics, music, dance, and drawing are a few examples.

Show faith in him – Feeling sorry for him is disrespectful and doesn't help instill a sense of confidence in his abilities to manage life. Say, "This is indeed difficult and I know that you managed before and will use your SPIDER SENSES to manage this new situation.

It is important that over time you mentor your son to develop an appreciation for his SPIDER SENSES. In time he will be able to use them in his chosen career where he will be respected and appreciated for is responsive and caring ways.

