

Bringing up boys is complicated!

By BARRY MacDONALD
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BOYS POSSESS a greater propensity for rebelling against, and engaging in conflict with authority than girls who are more likely to try to avoid conflict and work to preserve harmony.

For many boys, rejection of female authority in particular might be due to a developmental need although they are often very unskilled about how to accomplish this goal. The following story describes how aggression can unfold in a typical home.

Dad has just woken up five-year-old Sam, and has asked Sam to dress for school. Five minutes later Dad discovers Sam playing with his Lego. In a stern voice Dad tells him it's time to get dressed.

Ten minutes later Dad finds Sam in the kitchen in his pajamas looking for breakfast. Dad erupts! This might become the second time this week that he is late for work because of Sam. He marches Sam back to his room and orders him to get dressed. Dad stands at the door repeatedly barking at him to hurry up. Sam ever so slowly dresses and makes mistakes.

Dad is furious and threatens to take away his favourite toy. Sam cries and gets dressed immediately.

While Dad may have won this particular battle, Sam is winning the war. Sam has discovered a special way to get power when he refuses to obey Dad's orders.

Dad's repetition of his orders and demands makes Sam's refusal to cooperate useful for showing Dad who's in charge.

Sam doesn't like being ordered and reminded about what to do, so deciding what he will do in his own time makes Sam feel a cut above Dad.

Until Dad is ready to step outside of the power struggle and teach Sam to be cooperative, he'd better not expect to get to work any earlier. When we understand how we inadvertently feed undesirable behaviours, we can reassess our approach to discipline.

At puberty, misguided bossiness, or lawyer's syndrome - where boys convincingly argue to prove who's boss - only become more challenging.

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Increased testosterone levels can propel a boy with misguided power to become overly aggressive and potentially violent unless taught more socially harmonious ways of living. Youth violence, explains Garbarino in, *Lost Boys: Why Our Sons Turn Violent and How We Can Save Them*, "is often a boy's attempt to achieve justice as he perceives it." The warning signs, he says, are a lack of connection, masking of emotions, withdrawal, silence, rage, trouble with friends, hyper-vigilance, and cruelty toward other children and even animals.

However, we should be careful not to label all aggression as anti-social and recall that often among men aggression can be highly valued and prized behaviour as expressed in the following comment, "He's really aggressive with that account and getting great results!" Aggression is also part of curiosity, exploring the world and trying new things - in short, asserting oneself in potentially positive ways.

look beyond boys' unconstructive behaviour...

For many boys, the challenge is learning how to express themselves in acceptable ways that don't infringe on the rights of others. For parents and teachers, it's learning how to co-opt the aggression for constructive purposes. Some boys may know that they are transgressing, and that they will get caught eventually, but they want to appear as if they are in control.

When heels are dug in, adults need to pull back to avoid escalating the situation. We risk provoking a new confrontation by insisting that children do things our way - one that is often more unpleasant than the original. Is it worth it? Insisting on doing things his own way can be the boy's method of showing he is the boss of himself, which can be productive for him on one level.

When we get ensnared in counterproductive arguments and power struggles, we have to ask ourselves what the boy is really learning. Eye rolling, muttering, and smiling at inopportune moments are meant to provoke us and also to save face. Don't get hooked.

Adults must look also beyond boys' unconstructive behaviour to teach a vocabulary for emotions. For many boys, and men, anger is

one acceptable emotion - the funnel through which all feelings are channeled.

Once a boy gets comfortable using words for what he is experiencing; hurt, anxiety, frustration, disappointment, and shame, for example; he can begin to deal with it, and help himself. Say something like, "Sounds like you may be frustrated," when boys bark, "This assignment is stupid!"

When he hits another person, rather than automatically assume the worst, help him to find words, "Hitting is not okay so I suspect that something must be really upsetting you to react in this way. What's going on?"

As you try to guide boys toward more socially positive choices, remember to let them save face and maintain their integrity.

The preceding excerpt is from ***Boy Smarts - Mentoring Boys for Success at School***, by author and parenting/teaching expert Barry MacDonald of Vancouver.

The book offers 100 guidelines for parents and teachers to help boys be successful at school and life.

MacDonald was recently in Terrace meeting with parents and teachers.