

## Understanding Boys is Key to Their Success

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Kim Zarzour, 12.03.09

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If you're a red-blooded Canadian male you probably already know this: growing up is hard to do.

What you may not know is that for boys, growing up is harder than it ever was - maybe even harder than it is for girls.

That's according to Barry MacDonald, best-selling author of **Boy Smarts - Mentoring Boys for Success at School**.

MacDonald wants parents and teachers to better understand their struggles as well as appreciate their strengths.

Studies show boys account for the vast majority of juvenile alcohol and drug violations, school suspensions and expulsions. They are also five times more likely to be diagnosed with ADHD, and make up 2/3 of students in special education.

That, says MacDonald, is an indication something's wrong - and it behooves parents and educators to find out what it is, and fix it.

MacDonald will offer his insight to a sold-out audience at the Richmond Hill Centre for the Performing Arts on April 1.

MacDonald says it all comes down to the interface of biology and society.

While he cautions a "boys will be boys" mentality and the lumping of all boys into one gunnysack, he indicates that MRIs show that boys' brains are wired differently than girls; their processing speed is more dependent on movement and visual stimulation.



Many schools, however, do not reflect emerging technology and a rapidly changing knowledge base, he says.

He points to the high number of boys who are diagnosed with "written output problems" while they are actually "outputting" plenty, just not in the written form - maybe with Lego robotics or computers or camcorders.

"There's a bias toward written output in many schools despite the fact that we know there are many ways to express intelligence. We know these kids are smart and capable, but they end up withdrawing and pulling away from traditional classroom learning."

Parents and educators can help by channeling male energy and testosterone, he says - especially since the skills that are needed in today's world demand it. "Many of

## Engage boys in the community...

us adults were essentially trained to be factory workers - to copy notes from a board and then be tested. It's the lowest order of intelligence - basic recall of facts. We need to get kids more engaged in their learning."

At the same time, he says, adults need to get boys more engaged in their community.

"This is the most pampered and indulged generation in history," he says. He recalls how many parents today grew up homes with just one bathroom, sharing a bedroom and accepting that a blanket hung between the beds could be the only delineation of space.

The contrasting affluence in today's North American world has done a great disservice to our children, he says. "It hampers their development and self confidence. Kids need to struggle with ups and downs. If we monitor everything for our kids and then suddenly release them when they're 19, that's overwhelming and they get into all kinds of difficulties."

The better approach is a slow loosening of the apron strings, he says.

Lunch preparation is a good a place to start. A recent survey in a large Vancouver high school found only 20 per cent of Grade 12 students made their own lunch.

"Children should start making their own lunches as soon as they need one," MacDonald says - and he's not joking. As early as Grade 1, they can begin learning the ropes - but it won't be easy, he says.

"The problem is also with what's in the fridge. We didn't have all the pre-prepared food today's children ingest" and so learned to actually "make" meals. Snacks like chips and pop were reserved for occasional treats.

And then there's the problem of our media-saturated culture, saturating the male world with a "bad boy ethos" that means everything boys do is tinged with an edge of bravado, where good behaviour is not cool; Where responsible boys are "suck-ups."

And if you know a boy, you know about the attraction of video games.

A recent issue of Archives of Pediatrics and Adolescent Medicine reported that 80 per cent of boys, and just 20 per cent of girls, are regular video game players. This may be related to how boys' brains are wired for visual stimulation, and it's not all bad.

MacDonald says some experts believe the games can stimulate the brain, retune it to become more efficient, and give children knowledge that can be transferred to other activities like creating podcasts, or directing Youtube videos - in essence become media creators rather than just media consumers.



But video gaming needs to be done in moderation, he says. There is evidence that the brain can become "habituated to rapidly-moving things."

For most boys, gaming is just a way of relieving stress, to experience "success" after struggling at school.

But for some - who may already have a predisposition to addiction - it can interfere with other activities. That's why parents still need to set realistic limits that have an

element of flexibility.

"It's better to offer a general guideline with some 'wiggle room'. For older boys one hour a day on weekdays, two hours a day on weekends is reasonable," he says. "But you need a wild card, too," - doubling up if he skips a night, for example.

And he suggests parents balance cultural influences with influences of their own by providing lots of opportunity for family activities.

Fathers also should be more engaged. "Men can be fooling themselves when they say things like 'oh I turned out all right'. Boys today have so much more pressure on them."