

## RESPONDING TO *Masked* ANXIETY



**It's** common for boys to try to draw adults into an argument to scuttle a discipline discussion – especially when they are troubled or anxious. Teachers and parents may become triggered and find themselves reacting instead of responding. During these times it's important to remember that it is the certainty of the response – not the severity or intensity – that makes the impact. It is adult responsiveness and calm follow-through that speaks of commitment and care. Sometimes we can think that boys learn more from a stronger consequence such as being publicly shamed, sent to the office, or suspended, but the results of these tactics usually include alienation and resentment.

Below, you will find my response to a school administrator's inquiry about dealing with a boys' hallway bravado, and suggestions for helping a boy resolve conflict while addressing issues that may underlie a show of toughness.

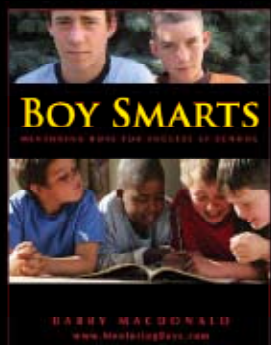
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*Dear Barry,*

As a vice-principal in a large secondary school, I am often called to intervene when students violate our school's code of conduct. Recently, a parent challenged one of our teacher's disciplinary response to her son, who name-called this teacher in the hallway. The parent suggested that the teacher had backed her son into a corner with his authoritarian approach, heightening conflict between them. She claimed that her son had a lot of anxiety and that the teacher had not provided him with enough time to cool down.

The parent requested that we read your book, **Boy Smarts**, and in particular one of your guidelines: **Listen Beyond Bravado**. We did and it makes sense, but now I'd appreciate if you could provide our staff with a specific example of how a conversation might unfold between a troubled student and a teacher so we can put this guideline into action. The more specific you could be the better. Thanks.

*Robert - Winnipeg*



## Boys can try to draw adults into an argument to scuttle a discipline discussion



Overlook a boy's lack of cooperation and focus on a strategy to move forward positively.

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*Dear Robert,*

Recently, a secondary teacher at a school workshop relayed to me a hallway conflict that he encountered with a Grade 9 boy that sounds similar to the incident at your school. Your staff might find it interesting to consider this teacher's story as they strengthen their own understanding of boys who present as anxious, angry, and resistant.

**Consider the following scenario of a typical power struggle between teacher and student:**

"On the way to my classroom after a busy Friday lunch, I overheard a boy named Brad, from my Grade 9 math class. He was "dissing" me, telling his friends that I was an "idiot." I stopped dead. As I looked straight into his eyes, the hustle of the hallway was instantly muted. Rolling his eyes in disgust, Brad turned his back, muttering audibly, "Any teacher who gives that much homework is an idiot." You could hear a pin drop as he began rifling through his locker.

In that instant it seemed that everyone in the hallway was watching me, waiting for me to do something. Several students, another teacher, and the vice-principal had stopped to watch the drama.

Out of the corner of my eye I felt the vice principal's eyes on me. I sensed that he wanted me to discipline this boy, to set an example of him.

I also felt Brad's friends grinning, cheering him on silently, hoping for a showdown.

I cleared my throat. It was time to speak, to show who was in charge. I could issue an edict: send Brad to the office, tell him in no uncertain terms that he couldn't use that kind of language.

Yet I had been struggling to form a connection with Brad, and I knew that this reactivity would cost me in the classroom.

What should I do in such a moment?"

At times 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 boys spout off, we can also consider whether they are only attempting to manage their anxiety and frustration in unskilled ways.

When a boy's heels are dug in, adults need to pull back to avoid escalating the situation. If we insist that students do things our way, we risk raising the stakes in a new, heightened level of confrontation. What do students

## Adults may become triggered and find themselves reacting instead of responding



Sometimes we can think that boys learn more from a stronger consequence such as being publicly shamed, sent to the office, or suspended, but the results of these tactics usually include alienation and resentment.

learn when we get ensnared in counterproductive arguments or aggravating power struggles? Insisting on doing things his own way can be the boy's method of showing he is his own boss, which can be productive for him on one level. It can also be a way of avoiding his anxiety. Eye rolling, muttering, and smiling at inopportune moments are meant to provoke us and also to save face. When a boy like Brad throws the teacher a rope to tussle over, the teacher must be conscious enough not to grab the rope.

Consider how Brad has orchestrated this confrontation, consciously or not, by choosing the stage (the hallway near his locker), the audience (his friends), the issue (quantity of homework), and finally the time (a hectic and stressful time of day and week). A teacher who grabs this rope is sunk. Rather than engaging in a tug of war with Brad, the teacher can take the opportunity to engage with Brad about his deeper concerns – homework and achievement.

### **Immediate hallway response:**

Repeatedly, I see adults who, while trying to impose discipline, lose their connections to boys when they are drawn into games of status. The result is that boys quickly dig in, and revert to tough talk in the attempt to save face.

The best response is to say to Brad, firmly but kindly: "I need to speak with you after class this afternoon." Do not wait for his answer. Turn and walk away. Do not respond to anything he or his friends might mutter at this point. Understand that it's the certainty of your response and not the severity.

### **Conversational considerations:**

Before talking with Brad, give yourself enough time and space to make sure you are calm yourself. Begin with a neutral, matter-of-fact consideration of what happened – the event. Be careful to avoid triggering defensiveness by describing behaviour with negatively charged, accusatory words. "Why were you so rude?" will not invite cooperation, and will only get Brad's back up.

As you talk, recognize that fidgeting and avoiding eye contact are frequently other ways that boys speak with their body to let you know that they are feeling anxious and may need help to process the discussion. Avoid insisting that Brad stand, sit still, or look at you, and you most likely will observe that the fidgeting helps him to relax as you maintain connection while getting information.

Be aware that even though a boy's language is sometimes harsher than we like, we need to listen for what's underneath. It is often wiser to simply wait

## Allow boys to save face and maintain their sense of dignity



Focus on behaviour – not character – by describing events and not evaluating them.

quietly rather than saying something right away. If we are to tap into a boy's motivation for learning and social connection, we must listen for underlying needs. Active listening communicates empathy and caring, while opening up opportunities for problem solving and insight.

### Here's how the teacher might speak with Brad after class:

T: "Thanks for coming in (sits in a neutral chair and not behind teacher desk). I know it's been a long week – it has been for me too – and I appreciate your time."

B: "Whatever" (looks away).

T: "I'd like to talk with you about what happened between the two of us in the hallway earlier today. I'm thinking there's a problem brewing and I want to know how we can work things out" (teacher looking out the window and not directly at Brad).

B: "Yeah, sure" (eyes roll).

T: "You seemed angry with me in the hallway earlier" (mirrors Brad's minimal eye contact).

B: "I wasn't talking to you (face begins to flush). I was talking to my friends. Is there a law about talking to friends about a teacher in the hallway?"

T: "You're frustrated with me."

B: "Yeah" (body stiffens and he looks away). "Your stupid homework!"

T: "You're angry about the amount math homework I assigned."

B: "Yeah. It sucks. How do you expect anybody to do it?"

T: "You don't like the assignment."

B: "Yea. That's what I said, didn't I?"

T: "Brad, this helps me to understand what's going on. You were keeping up with most of the assignments until this unit" (pause). "Tell me more about what you think about this math we're doing."

B: "That other stuff was easier. I just don't get what you are trying to teach us."

T: "This new math unit is tough" (pause). I'm guessing that you're discour-

## Recognize that anxiety is often beneath fidgeting and avoiding eye contact



During these times it's important to remember that it is the certainty of the response – not the severity or intensity – that makes the impact.



aged about not getting because you like to keep on top of things" (pause). "This homework only makes things worse – adds insult to injury, so to speak."

B: "Yeah! Can I go now?"

T: "We're almost done. I just need to know if there is anything else that's bothering you."

B: "You make me feel like just a *retard* when you come over and try to help me in class. If you are such a math wiz, your scorebook will tell you that I'm failing. If you'd teach it more properly, more of us would understand what you are trying to teach."

T: "Sounds as if you're really frustrated by not being able to understand this math" (pause). You also don't like it when I approach you in class to help you. You're uncomfortable about being singled out. By trying to help you in class I am actually making things worse for you."

B: "Yeah. Just leave me alone. Are we done here?"

T: "You might feel like you're the only one struggling so much with this unit, but I know others are having a hard time too. Can you come to my class after school so that I can see exactly where you need some coaching?"

B: "I have plans after school."

T: "What about during Monday's tutorial?"

B: "We'll see."

T: "That'd be great. I'll take a look at your last test this weekend and see if I can figure where you started to get lost" (Brad nods, somewhat reluctantly). "Sounds like we've got a plan" (pause). "I still need to talk about where we got off track in the hallway earlier today. What happened?"

B: "I was frustrated. Your math made me mad. I guess I just lost my cool."

T: "Thanks for letting me know. Losing our cool is easy to do when we get frustrated."

B: "Okay" (a look of relief comes over Brad's face).

## Empathy and care will open up opportunities for insight and problem solving



Only when his arousal level is calmed, and he is willing to converse, can you start explore what happened and begin to problem solve.

T: "See you Monday at tutorial. We'll figure it out."

B: "See ya" (Turns and walks out of room).

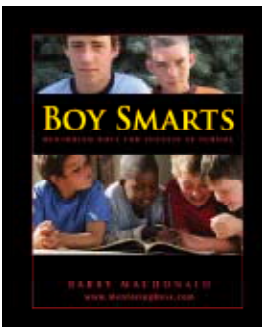
### Constructive outcomes:

During this brief encounter, the teacher managed to turn a potentially volatile incident into a chance for greater connection. He took charge of his own angry reaction to Brad's hallway insult by choosing to discuss the incident later, after they both had an opportunity to cool down. The teacher focussed on Brad's behaviour – not his character – by describing events and not evaluating them. By not demanding an apology from Brad and recognizing that in his own way Brad was acknowledging his part when he said: "I was frustrated...I guess I lost my cool," the teacher allowed Brad to save face, permitting him to maintain his sense of dignity. The teacher took responsibility for his contribution to the conflict: Brad's anxiety about not getting it in class was heightened when the teacher would try to help Brad in front of others. Finally, the teacher modelled respectful communication throughout the encounter by overlooking Brad's lack of cooperation and focussing on a strategy to move forward positively.

When a boy starts to talk about an incident, use simple prompts to encourage his story to unfold. Encouragements such as "I really want to hear what happened from your point of view," or "It's important for me to understand what caused you stress," keeps you outside of his conflict while drawing him out. If the retelling triggers more emotions, allow them to wash through. Modelling calmness yourself is important. Only when his arousal level is calmed, and he is willing to converse, can you start explore what happened and begin to problem solve. • • •

*Barry MacDonald*

MentoringBoys.com



Boy Smarts is a wonderful resource for parents and teachers...and very useful as a conversation starter with boys.

Forward this newsletter to a friend or colleague and encourage them to sign up on the website to automatically receive the **March Boy Smarts Newsletter** - *Initiating conversations with elementary-aged boys who are anxious and reluctant to talk.*