

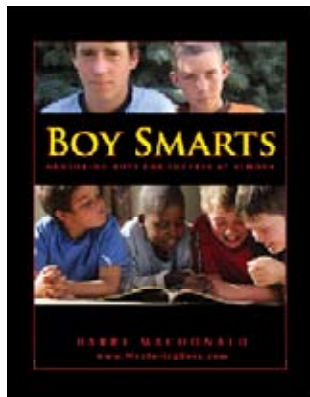
## AWAKENING BOYS THROUGH LITERACIES



*Dear Barry,*

**Day-after-day** my son comes home announcing that he hates school, especially when he has to write. At the parent-teacher conference in late November, after his teacher suggested that he might have a Written Language Disorder, I had him assessed. I discovered that he is average to above average in all areas and is especially good with visual-spatial problem-solving (the block tests, according to the psychologist).

**He** constantly complains that he is not allowed to write about the stuff he likes: video game storylines, sports strategies, detective television shows like CSI, or anything gory. Just last week he claimed that his teacher was from the “olden days” when she offered him “bonus points” or the opportunity to choose a “fun worksheet” if he finished up his science writing project. While I was careful to not display my own skepticism about her offer of “bonus points” or a “fun worksheet,” as I believe that my son needs to know I totally support his teacher, I couldn’t help but wonder if she understands the techno-world my son lives in, or if she is hindered by limited resources.



**Yesterday** morning, Ben was excited about school because his teacher announced that they were going to use PowerPoint, but he returned home totally frustrated. It seems the teacher did not appreciate how he had already learned his way around PowerPoint two years ago when we created a family collage of images and text for my parents' 40th wedding anniversary. Apparently, the teacher said that they could only use the PowerPoint skills that she taught them, one page at a time, week-by-week, and to not to go further ahead than the class.

I honestly don't believe that my son has a writing disability. I do believe that he is disconnected from classroom writing because of what he is being asked to do. When I think about what he does on our home computer, how he constructs with his draftsman father in the workshop, or problem-solves with me online, it is clear to me that he is smart and capable. Ben is the first to navigate new computer programs or video games, program our new PVR, and master a new cell phone platform. Yet I am extremely worried that he is not being challenged at school, and is genuinely bored.

I have two questions: What are the best ways to teach literacy skills to boys in the classroom? What skills does my son need for his future career?

*Erin*  
*parent from metro Toronto*



*Dear Erin,*

**While** teachers have long been concerned with the best ways to prepare all students for the future, recent achievement data has shone a light on boys' declining school performance, particularly their weakening reading and writing skills. In the 2008 report **State of Learning in Canada: Toward a Learning Future**, the **Canadian Council on Learning** indicates that during 2004 and 2005, 13% of boys show signs of delayed development in the area of literacy skills (compared to 7% of girls), and that the number of young males who are dropping out of school, not graduating, and not attending college or university education is on the rise. The report states that "In 2005, 62% of all university undergraduate completers were female and 38% were male—a change from 1992, when 58% were female and 42% were male."

**Beyond** Canada, international PISA data (Program for International Student Assessment) also reveals that in every country they study, girls performed significantly better than boys on reading and writing tests: in top-ranked Finland, girls scored 51 points higher in reading; in Canada, girls scored 32 points higher.

**Of** course we should also be aware that such broad-sweeping achievement statistics can obscure more than they reveal. What our national data does not reveal



is that it is boys in specific ethnic and socio-economic subgroups who are struggling most. We also know that interpreting data about boys as if they were a single homogenous group does more harm than good, and can lead us to gender-stereotyped solutions like single-gender classrooms.

**We** need to remember that not all boys dislike reading and writing, or perform worse than girls on standardized tests that measure literacy.

**While** I caution against simplistic notions of gender and learning, there is ample evidence that a sizable group of boys take longer to learn to read than girls do, read less, estimate their reading abilities lower than girls estimate their own, are more likely to give themselves the label of ‘non-reader’ or ‘non-writer’, and do not value reading and writing as worthwhile activities. Many thoughtful parents with smart and capable boys are worried that their sons are not developing the literacy skills they need for the future.

**When** you consider that the top ten in-demand jobs for 2010 did not even exist in 2004, it is not surprising that our community leaders are also concerned about boys’ weakening literacy skills. These leaders recognize that increasing globalization has put an end to the days when males could leave school with poor and inadequate literacy skills and still command good wages in manufacturing jobs. Many of our cultural leaders want classroom learning to reflect the real world so that children will acquire literacy skills that will help them navigate new technologies, master new digital interfaces, and multitask complex virtual relationships.

**You** also might be interested to note that **Popular Science** recently predicted the most popular jobs for the year 2030. That a *Human-Robot Integration Specialist* would become the top job might boggle some, but remember five decades ago most people believed that colour televisions

were unnecessary. In 1977 the Chairman of the Digital Equipment Corporation said, “There is no reason anyone would want a computer in their home.”

**Here are the “Ten Best Jobs of the Future” as identified by *Popular Science* in their September 2010 issue:**

1. **Human/Robot Interaction Specialist**  
Help robots and people get along
2. **Space Pilot** - Fly shuttles to space
3. **Fetus Healer** - Cure health problems before birth
4. **Forecaster of Everything**  
Analyze data to predict the future
5. **Organ Designer** - Make organs from scratch
6. **Animal-Migration Engineer**  
Create new habitats for critters
7. **World Watcher** - See it all with satellites
8. **Galactic Architect** - Build cosmic outposts
9. **Fusion Worker**  
Manage thermonuclear fusion reactors
10. **Thought Hacker**  
Construct what people are seeing, thinking, and dreaming with neuro-psych mind-reading technology

**Before** you write off these predictions as outrageous or farfetched, consider that children entering today’s kindergarten classrooms have been bombarded with more information than their grandparents were when they graduated from high school; a ten year-old boy can access more digital information on his cell phone today than our government could access fifty years ago. We are preparing children for jobs that don’t yet exist and for jobs that use technologies that haven’t been invented yet to solve problems we don’t even know are problems yet.

**Much** of the forecasted change has to do with new technology—24/7 access to information, constant social interaction, and easily created and shared digital content. Of course, not many of us adults are in a position to help our children with technology, the way the mother of a 14 year-

-old eighth grader in Utah recently did, submitting her son's new App—a physics simulator game called **Bubble Ball**—now the top free game on **Apple** to the iPhone store. In fact, many of us in adult workplaces are scrambling to keep technical skills current, fearing that we'll get left behind. But our kids, like the 14 year-old game creator, need to know that we support their dreams.

As we support our children to take the technological helm, recognize that they also need an attitude of openness, flexibility, and eagerness to learn; desire to embrace change; and the confidence to experiment with new approaches, combinations, ideas. Even the idea of a classroom as only a physical space is changing—learning environments are now often virtual, collaborative, and interdisciplinary.

**Given** that 80% of online video game players are male, we must move beyond blanket criticism of online gaming, and let ourselves be curious about what draws these boys in, and what they are learning through gaming. In a 20 minute TED talk, Jane McGonigal offers an interesting slant on the way that gamers working with virtual problems may help develop the “urgent optimism” and collaborative skills needed to “tackle obstacles” and solve pressing problems in our world; see the link “Gaming can make a better world” —

[www.youtube.com/watch?v=dE1DuBesGYM](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=dE1DuBesGYM).



**Einstein** once said: “The formulation of a problem is often more essential than its solution, which may be merely a matter of mathematical or experimental skill.” Where we once accepted that teachers were the gatekeepers of information and that there was a fixed set of facts to memorize, we have now become uncomfortably aware that digital information is expanding at mind-staggering rates, leaving classroom textbooks to gather dust. In 2006 alone the amount of digital information created, captured, and replicated was 1,288 x 10<sup>18</sup> bits. In computer parlance, that's 161 exabytes or 161 billion gigabytes. This is about 3 million times more information than all the books ever written.

To help you gain perspective on the skill set children need, the **Change Leadership Group** at Harvard has summarized seven core skills that students will need to contribute in a rapidly changing global society:

1. **Critical thinking and problem solving**
2. **Collaboration across networks & leading by influence**
3. **Agility and adaptability**
4. **Initiative and entrepreneurialism**
5. **Effective oral and written communication**
6. **Accessing and analyzing information**
7. **Curiosity and imagination**

As children navigate our hyper-digitalized society, they need to first figure out what questions and problems need attention. We adults need to help children to avoid easy answers and to stay with problems and questions longer as they sift through and weigh information and claims. They need to discern what's credible as they scan numerous sources and formulate questions. They need to analyze patterns, glimpse connections among different ideas, speculate imaginatively about new possibilities and undreamed of alternatives.

**These** high level thinking skills cannot be assessed simply through multiple-choice exams, essays, or standardized tests. Instead they require multiple forms of assessment such as digital portfolios, debating, collaborative investigations, virtual hypothesizing, and real-life experiences. The traditional emphasis on learning as an individual endeavor needs to shift toward a focus on learning with partners and teams. It is vital that children learn HOW to get their message across through speech, text, visual imagery, body language, multi-modal presentations, and other creative ways to participate in collaborative ‘think-tanks.’



In their book, **Comprehension and Collaboration**, authors Stephanie Harvey and Harvey Daniel remind us that **“Smart is not what you are. . . Smart is what you get.”** The resources on the Internet have helped to release boys’ intellectual curiosity, and have given increased opportunities for creating, participating, and finding a voice. Loosely governed and highly self-directed, the Internet provides seemingly infinite teaching and learning activities that exist beyond the sanction or control of formal educational institutions. Some creative teachers are tapping into these learning resources—for inspiration, teachers could check out how a U.S. teacher had students create a **Wiki**-based social network site that parodies a **Facebook** site for Shakespeare’s play **MacBeth**: see “Macbeth Unfriends Duncan” at — <http://charlesyoungs.com/ncte2010.html>.

To respond creatively to boys who are disengaging from traditional literacy, we need to expand our own notions of literacies in the twenty-first century.

What does literacy look like for boys who disengage?

How do classroom practices relate to what these boys are learning?

What do we really know about boys’ self-image as writers?

How can we engage boys in problem-solving and thinking through ideas that matter to them?

How can we tap into boys’ interest in technology and video games while connecting them to other forms of literacy?

Which classroom environments encourage reluctant boys to write?

To what degree do teachers communicate that there are different types of literate men and that we value all of them?

How do we help boys find their own emotional selves within school literacy experiences?

How can we move beyond mile-wide and inch-deep coverage of ever expanding content to meet essential learning skills?



**After** decades of supporting boys who struggle with literacy skills, and collaborating with teachers about best practices that turn boys on to reading and writing, I offer you sixteen core strategies for consideration:

1. **Provide choice:** Variation is the spice of learning.
2. **Entertain intensity:** Take time to savour and enjoy what boys read and write about.
3. **Switch it up:** Respond to varied learning styles.
4. **Make it real:** Ensure classroom experiences reflect real-life literacies.
5. **Get active! Get visual!:** Provide ample opportunities for movement and visual-spatial problem solving.
6. **Avoid misreading violence:** Help boys make sense of popular notions of masculinity.
7. **Engage:** Ensure literacy experiences are doing-centered.
8. **Strategize:** Ensure literacy is inquiry-driven.
9. **Write less to get more:** Eliminate busywork activity.
10. **Laugh:** Ensure learning is collaborative, social, and fun.
11. **Stay on target:** Set realistic expectations that are rigorous but reachable.
12. **Get tech-savvy:** Use digital technology and computers wisely.

**13. Invite men as role models:** Help boys learn there are different types of literate men.

**14. Communicate on a personal level:** Provide frequent timely feedback.

**15. Make assessment authentic:** Employ a range of assessment strategies.

**16. Publish:** Spark initiative and entrepreneurship.

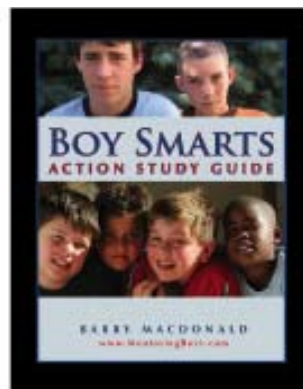
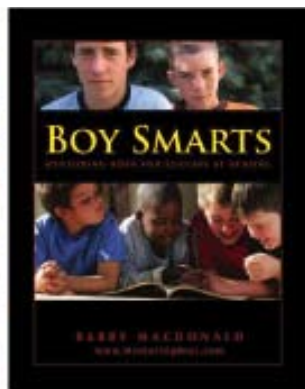
**This** list is not intended to be absolute. Consider it a “work in progress” that needs your input. Whether you are a parent, a teacher, school administrator, staff developer, researcher, or a concerned citizen, I invite you to contribute your experiences and ideas to help expand this list.

**To** promote literacies among boys, especially those who are bored and reluctant writers, let us all—parents and teachers and mentors—brainstorm and share what we have learned.

I am particularly interested in your practical experiences, stories, and opinions.

**Please** email your ideas and stories to [info@mentoring-boys.com](mailto:info@mentoring-boys.com), where they will be forwarded to me to consider for the March or April 2011 Boy Smarts Newsletter. • • •

*Barry MacDonald*  
MentoringBoys.com



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