

# BARRY MACDONALD'S BOY SMARTS NEWSLETTER

MARCH 2013 - MENTORINGBOYS.COM

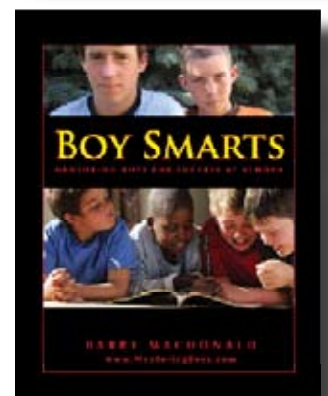


This month I offer a perspective on boys' challenges in school from the Toronto-based writer and psychotherapist, Liza Finlay, who speaks to moms' groups about marriage, motherhood, and corralling her own two young sons. This remarkable article explores the plight of boys' education and whether boys are failing school or schools are failing boys.

I am taking this opportunity to share Liza Finlay's article in part, I must confess, because I have been distracted – and depleted – by the time and energy I have been spending on completion of the very drawn out process of restorative work to our family home. After our move-in date, originally estimated to be 8 weeks, stretched to 8 months, and we moved from place to place 7 times this past year, I have found my energy wearing down. As for all of us, when our best laid plans go awry, and we find ourselves stretched too thin, perhaps longing for sleep in the middle of the day, we need to listen to signals from our bodies and minds, and take the time to shore up our own inner resources. Many of you who have visited my office or attended a workshop during the past year have, after generously listening to my living-out-of-a-suitcase stories and the saga of the 'green tape' deficiencies, have generously offered your own encouraging stories about overcoming damage to your home. I, like others, have found comfort in knowing that I am not alone in my particular struggles with legal bureaucracies and the frustrations of repeated setbacks. As we share our stories, we may find communities in unexpected places.

Well, I am pleased to report that the interior work has just been completed and we are at last back home. It is my hope that whatever stresses you may encounter this month, you too may find safe spaces of refuge that feel like "home" wherever they are, and help you to come back to center. Meanwhile this month's newsletter offers you the chance to take in the wisdom of another voice on the challenges that boys face in school.

*Barry MacDonald*



# Is modern education setting boys up to fail?

By Liza Finlay

Late last spring I sat under a canopy of tender green leaves, eavesdropping on the conversation of a group of pre-teen boys as they compared their final report cards. “I got four Cs,” guffawed one. “Dude, you only got four, I got five,” boasted another. This group of Grade 6 graduates had expertly taken their inferiority feelings and twisted them into badges of honour. Of course it was a façade, an utter sham, a decoy designed to throw anyone – everyone – off the trail of hidden shame. They were protecting their threatened egos with all the sad swagger of discouraged youth.

They have a right to feel disheartened. The numbers paint a rather bleak picture: boys achieve lower scores than girls in reading and writing and have a higher high school dropout rate. Specifically, several standardized tests show boys trailing behind girls quite significantly in reading literacy (math and science performance varies only marginally). In the Toronto District School Board, standardized tests show a six to 12 percent performance gap in Grade 3 reading and writing assessments. So how does that bode for the future? Well, in 2004-2005, 12 percent of teen boys dropped out of high school compared to seven percent of teenage girls. And here’s the kicker: this isn’t a new trend, but rather one that researchers have been documenting for over three decades.

There’s something seriously wrong here. In fact, I first started writing about “the lost boys” almost five years ago, when the eldest of my two sons started showing signs of *reading reluctance*. At that time, scientists and school administrators alike were abuzz about brain science and how anatomical differences between boy brains and girl brains might account for what was, and still is, a disturbing performance gap. There’s still much to recommend

applying brain science in the classroom and many teachers are beginning to embrace the notion that boys and girls are different in more ways than the obvious one. But, as Barry MacDonald, Surrey, B.C.-based, founder of *MentoringBoys.com*, points out, “anatomy is not destiny” and to reduce such a complex issue to basic hardwiring is reductionist at best. Divergent learning styles, differing interests and even cultural stereotypes all play roles. And that begs the seminal question: are boys failing school, or are schools failing boys?

## The Growing Gap

I’m not the only one who worries about boys. A recent online poll conducted by Edutopia.org revealed that 50 percent of respondents believed that boys are falling behind girls academically; another 35 percent agreed that there is a growing gap, but think that gender is only one factor among many. They may be on to something. Barry, along with Dr. Serge Demers, chair of Ontario Association of Deans of Education, blames reliance on a single teaching style – like the oral lecture favoured in most Canadian classrooms – for leaving many kids behind, a lot of them boys.

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“When you have one model of delivery it does not allow many opportunities for access,” says Barry. “You simply cannot personalize the learning experience with a sage-on-the-stage teaching style.”

Of course not every teacher relies solely on this ‘sage on the stage’ methodology, but too many do. A study conducted by *The National Institute of Child Health and Human Development* in the United States found that typically, over the course of a 20-minute instruction period, only one mode of instruction was used. Arguably, those are American numbers, but according to Barry, who consults with Canadian schools on a regular basis, the data on this side of the border are sadly similar.

What does that have to do with the gender gap in learning? While not all boys are kinetic in their approach to learning, many more boys than girls are wired for movement. They can’t keep still – and nor should they. “The movement we see in active – sometimes rambunctious – boys is often about seeking stimulus,” says Barry. “That stimulus is what allows the child to interact with his environment.”

In other words, auditory instruction alone won’t cut it for the highly active kid; movement and interactivity are playing a part in the encoding so central to learning. Yet, points out Serge Demers, “in traditional school settings movement is not encouraged and this creates a barrier for boys.”

Homogenous teaching style isn’t the only factor researchers and educators are watching; using mostly written performance measures also tips the scales in a girl’s favour. And the deleterious effect of this reliance on “written outcomes” can’t be overstated, says Barry. Think about it, he challenges, “Eighty percent of video game players are boys. They are completely adept. They can program the PVR and upload videos to YouTube with great skill. But they won’t get graded based on those skills. It doesn’t make sense that their knowledge will be measured solely by what they can write down.”

This bias towards written measures (even today’s math has a written component), says Serge, is entirely surmountable. “Historically, all that’s ever counted is the written record because it leaves a trace that we as educators and administrators can keep track of.” And, he points out, for an overburdened system, written measures are an effective use of time – having all pupils accomplish the same task, in the same way, at the same time makes it easier on teachers.

DETAILS COMING SOON!



# ENGAGING BOYS!

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Addressing the challenges  
of making learning  
relevant for all boys

Easier on teachers, perhaps, but tougher on that group of boys, like mine, for whom writing is tantamount to torture. Serge and Barry don't deny the importance of the written word, but point out that a system that relies too heavily on writing discriminates against learners of other stripes. At the very least, Barry would like to see boys set up to succeed in writing. How? With a little more prep work.

"You've got to *prime the pump* before you ask boys to sit down and write," he says. "Front-end-load the exercise with discussion, role-playing, games, and activities. You've got to engage them before you send them off to write." Barry cites the example of a B.C. teacher who, in preparation for a Remembrance Day writing assignment, had the class enact trench warfare on the playing field, hauling themselves through mud and grass on their bellies while faux-shots fired overhead. This teacher was applying the motto Barry often repeats: by requiring boys to write less, they will write more.

## Let Boys Be Boys

Barry recalls being called in to consult with a principal who was having trouble getting through to some of his boys. "I was walking down the hallway with one of the boys and this kid spontaneously broke into karate moves," he remembers. "As we passed the drinking fountain he executed a very impressive roundhouse kick that completely cleared the fountain. Just then, the principal came around the corner with a very stern look on his face. I thought we were both in trouble."

Do the words *boy* and *trouble* fit too comfortably in the sentences of school administrators? Perhaps. Some – like Barry, Serge and any number of parents of sons – believe that (over) concern for safety has given characteristic boyish behaviour a bad rap. According to Barry, he too frequently exits a principal's office to find a lineup of boys sitting outside. Their crimes? "Most of the time they've been running too fast, chasing someone, shoving someone."



Though well intentioned, experts like Barry worry that the cautious culture of schools stamps out boyishness and that rules and regulations designed to keep order inadvertently discourage boy energy. Of course complete lawlessness on par with *Lord of the Flies* is equally unconstructive, but what advocates of boys are arguing for is a middle ground where, well, boys can be boys. The paradox that has many parents of boys scratching their heads, though, is how to encourage their sons to thrive in what is essentially a sit still, stay focussed, don't run and for-god's-sake-don't-roundhouse-kick environment.

Case in point: while current school culture encourages children to raise their hands and ask for help if material presented in a lesson is unclear, many boys simply won't. "Boys place a high value on independence and autonomy," says Barry. "They feel they lose status when seeking assistance. They've grown up with the expectation that they should each be Superman – strong and self-reliant."

So how do we get *Superman* to participate fully and enthusiastically in the process of learning? "The vogue in education right now is differentiated instruction

that engages each student in the classroom and gives each student a voice,” says Serge. But that personalized approach is tough to accomplish in classes that can have upwards of 25 kids. So, he, like Barry, advocates for project-based learning in which children come together in smaller groups to tackle a piece of curriculum and present their findings to fellow classmates and teachers. “It’s the way of the future,” says Barry, who points out that this is just one strategy that allows children to acquire and then express their learning by varied means.

Something’s got to give, says Serge, who points out that there has been little progress made in cracking the boy code for many years. As I watch my son doodle in the margins of his writing journal, periodically checking the clock with all the furtiveness of an expert procrastinator, I wonder, will it be another three decades before boys feel they truly belong in the world of letters? ■ ■ ■

Liza Finlay’s article was first published in *Parents-Canada* magazine, August/September 2012, and can be viewed at <http://www.parentscanada.com/school/is-modern-education-setting-boys-up-to-fail>. Liza Finlay is the relationship expert for *Today’s Parent* magazine and authors the couples’ advice column for *TodaysParent.com*. Her articles on depression, anxiety and eating disorders won national awards. Liza’s website is [LizaFinlay.com](http://LizaFinlay.com).



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