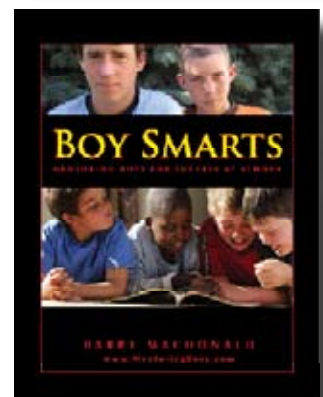




Taming Separation Anxiety

Last month I invited *BoySmarts* readers to comment on boys who get stuck in powerful worry cycles that keep them away from school. I didn't anticipate I would get such a flood of thoughtful responses from concerned parents and teachers. This month's newsletter explores some of the causes of anxiety, ways that it manifests, and ways that we can work with it.

Evidence indicates that our children are becoming more anxious than ever before. Compared to just a half a century ago, today 5 to 8 times as many children meet the criteria for an anxiety disorder—specific phobias, panic disorder, obsessive compulsive disorder (OCD), post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD), generalized anxiety disorder, and separation anxiety. In Canada, approximately 15% of children receive one of these diagnoses—and that rate is 25% in the U.S. Anxiety symptoms are the primary reason parents seek advice from a mental health professional.



Naturally, all children can be subject to worry. Anxiety serves us at times, alerting us to potential dangers in unfamiliar environments. When preschoolers meet new people, visit new places, or watch a safe, familiar caregiver get ready to exit a room, they may exhibit a clinginess that is perfectly normal. The clinginess and crying at these times might even be considered healthy reactions to separation, as toddlers are developing autonomy and a sense that they can survive in a new environment. This clinginess usually ends at around ages of 2 or 3, as toddlers realize that parents who are temporarily out of sight will in fact re-appear.

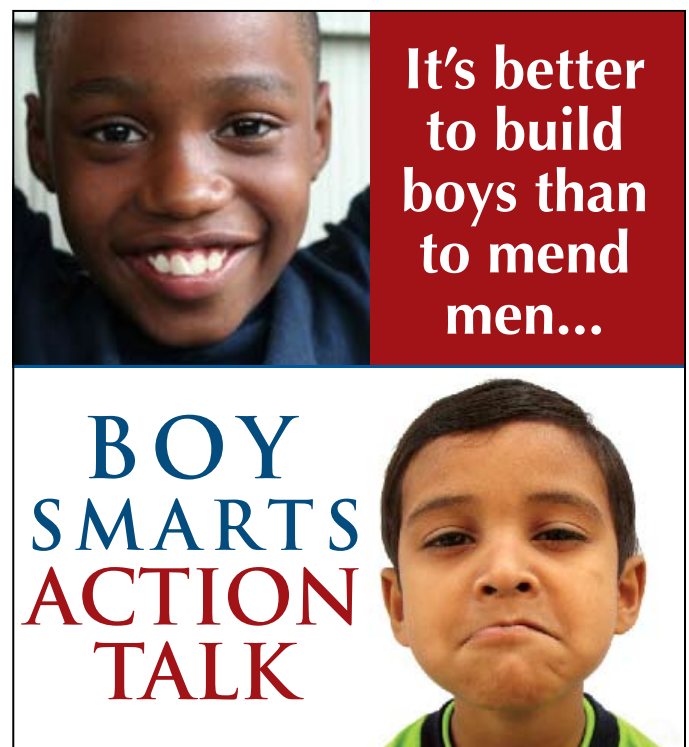
More serious anxiety, however, that interferes with a school-aged child's daily functioning is something we should pay attention to. How do we respond to a child who curls up in a ball on his bed, turns his face to the wall, and refuses to get dressed for school? To an older child who develops stomach aches, headaches, dizziness, or other mysterious symptoms when Monday morning rolls around? How do we respond with compassion without getting so anxious ourselves that we unwittingly reinforce the child's anxiety?

This past month many concerned parents and teachers wrote me compelling stories about how we may ourselves get so anxious about protecting our kids from even twinges of worry that we end up actually rewarding displays of anxiety. These writers questioned whether too much fixation on anxiety might encourage it to become even more consuming. A school counsellor described how "in many families, anxiety is like an endlessly shape-shifting alien, taking different forms, settling around different subjects, and jumping from focus to focus. The more adults encircle it, the bigger and more erratic it grows. In our well-intentioned efforts to create an anxiety-free environment, we can focus on changing the external surroundings that trigger or relieve anxiety, without thoroughly understanding how anxiety operates, or how to live with it. Sadly, children can become stuck in a state of hyper-vigilance against their ever-expanding fears, potentially setting the stage for full-fledged anxiety disorders later in life."

In another email, a school principal remarked on how unrealistic our notions of protecting our kids from all anxiety may be: "We seem to regard a child's anxiety as a kind of disease or infection to be fixed. If the child is afraid of giving his prepared speech to classmates, keep him home. If he's afraid to try something new, don't make him. Don't children need to develop a certain amount of 'toughness' to handle life's ups and downs? Is anxiety something we give in to or take charge of?"

How do we teach our kids to handle the discomfort, vulnerability, and uncertainty that are part of life?

In my own experiences as a parent, teacher and counsellor, I have observed that too much reassurance and comfort of anxious kids can backfire. Naturally these kids don't want to do things that make them uncomfortable. They usually become increasingly reactive, distraught, and even angry when parents are working too hard to coax or even bribe them out of their anxiety.



It's better to build boys than to mend men...

BOY SMARTS ACTION TALK

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If kids keep finding ways to avoid situations that scare them—getting on the bus, sleeping alone in their own beds, seeing the dentist, or going to school—they won't develop the confidence to know they can accept and rise to life's many challenges.

It's tempting for many to imagine that children will feel relaxed while they are overcoming their fears. Yet how many of us feel relaxed when we go through a job interview? Move to a new place? Undergo a medical procedure?

Defining success as the ability to go into scary situations and feel relaxed virtually sets people up for a lifetime of anxiety. How do we teach our kids to handle the discomfort, vulnerability, and uncertainty that are part of life?

Teachers and school personnel, like parents, have a role to play. They need to draw on skills of empathy and work with parents to find practical strategies for easing separation anxiety. Parents who are struggling with this issue need support.

One concerned parent commented that she felt blamed for her son's inability to say an easy good-bye to her. "When I dropped my crying son off at school, I was told by the school principal that children are basically manipulative. He told me to not buy into his drama or else he would forever be pushing my buttons to get what he wanted." Another parent described her pain when school staff seemed judgmental: "When my son's teacher told me to just sneak out and ignore his crying because he was an only child and used to being the center of the universe, it just felt wrong. Her further advice to punish him for not going to school by removing toys and privileges, or alternatively to bribe him with rewards might have worked for some kids but it put my son's anxiety through the roof. Another staff member even suggested that we arrange for a stronger male teacher to hold him while I left the school! Thankfully the school principal intervened, saying that it was against school board policy."

Another parent expressed frustration with an attitude of dismissiveness toward separation anxiety that she saw in school staff: "One of the most difficult things for me was school staff perception that our son was faking it. I can't tell you how terrible I felt. I knew, and our son knew, that he had absolutely nothing to gain and everything to lose by not going to school—it wasn't a vacation for him. He wasn't allowed to play games during the day—he had to do school work—and he was bored and lonely. He didn't want to be at home. He desperately wanted to go to school."

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In contrast, however, several emails emphasized the positive experiences they had with supportive school staff: “The teachers were very keen to work with me to figure out which triggers increased my son’s anxiety. They appreciated how a transition time like recess can be particularly stressful for him and helped him to find ways to ease his transition into recess with preplanned activities.” When a boy in kindergarten reacted anxiously to loud singing in the gym, the teacher suggested that the parent download *O Canada* to listen to it at home in order to reduce the stress her son experienced when the entire school sang the song during an assembly. Another parent described how, when a boy suddenly became aggressive with his teacher, a school counsellor stepped up to the plate, advocating for her son suggesting that he likely was lashing out from a confused, transitional place after his parent’s divorced.

Easing Separation Anxiety in Young Boys

Although separation anxiety is a perfectly normal part of childhood development, seeing it in preschoolers we have nurtured for five years can be highly unsettling.

To manage most separation anxiety, children need to feel safe in their home environment, trust that a parent or caregiver will return when promised, and in time learn to place trust in other caring adults.

Here are six practical suggestions to help young boys, who do not have the language to name or interpret their anxiety, learn to manage separation anxiety:

1. Practice separation. Practice being apart from each other, and introduce new people and places gradually. If you’re planning to leave your child with a relative or a new childminder, invite that person over in advance so they can spend time together while you’re in the room. If your child is starting at a new daycare centre or preschool, make a few visits there together first.

Remember that children are more susceptible to separation anxiety when they’re tired or hungry, so practice separation after they are rested and fed.

2. Follow through on promises. If you consistently return when you promised that you would, your son can begin to build the confidence that he can make it through temporary separations.

3. Develop a calm and consistent goodbye ritual and leave without fanfare. Simple rituals as a special wave through the window or a goodbye kiss are reassuring. Stay calm and show confidence in your child. Tell your son you are leaving and that you will return, then go—don’t keep procrastinating and checking on him.

4. Keep familiar surroundings when possible and make new surroundings familiar in some way. Have the childminder come to your house. When your son is away from home, let him bring a familiar object.

5. Minimize viewing of disturbing or scary media. The movies *ET* or *Wizard of Oz* may summon fond memories for you, but frighten a sensitive child. Most child development experts suggest limiting screen time of all kinds for preschoolers to an hour a day.

6. Read stories that show how common anxiety is. Some possibilities include *The Goodbye Book* by Judith Viorst, *The Kissing Hand* by Audrey Penn, *Even if I Spill My Milk?* by Anita Grossnecke Hines, *When I Feel Scared* by Cornelia Spelman, and *Benjamin Comes Back* by Amy Brandt.





Taming Tears at the School Drop-off

It's not uncommon for separation anxiety to surface when you say goodbye to your son at the drop-off point during his early school years. However, while mild to moderate anxiety will help children who are learning coping skills, intense separation anxiety may carry stronger feelings of sadness and anger. If your son cries or has a tantrum at the point of separation, consider using the following six strategies to help manage his separation anxiety at this threshold:

- 1. Explain beforehand your drop-off procedure so he is completely aware of what will happen.** Then tell him when you'll be back, and where you'll be picking him up. Don't hang around at school or prolong the goodbyes.
- 2. Establish a simple goodbye ritual for the separation.** For instance, you can say, "It's time to wave to each other now through the window." This routine will give your son some feeling of control over the separation.
- 3. Talk about what you will be doing when he is at school.** If he seems angry because he believes that you will be at home alone attending to a new baby while he is cast out on his own, you might explain that you will be working or doing errands.

4. In order to decrease his feelings of uncertainty and give him more sense of control over the overall plans for the day, you could explain what he will be doing. For example, you might say, "After school you will play here on the school grounds for 15 minutes while Grandma watches and then you will walk home together." Because young children have such a limited concept of time, relating the pick-up time to a specific activity works very well for them.

5. Reassure your son by telling him, "I'm sure you'll do just fine." If you demonstrate through your words and actions that you have confidence in him and in the environment, he will more likely feel the sense of safety that will enable him to trust himself in this new situation.

6. Enlist the teacher's help. Skilled teachers are ready to offer compassionate support for your child and have learned ways to gently distract children from their anxiety.



TWO BOOK SPECIAL

- **Boy Smarts: Mentoring Boys for Success at School**
- **Boys on Target: Raising Boys into Men of Courage and Compassion**

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Learning to be Comfortable with Discomfort

Although loving parents tend often to believe that they should keep children from feeling afraid, upset, or vulnerable, children learn to develop skills of functioning with anxiety when they are not in control. When we try to protect them too much, we deprive them of the practice needed to manage in the world. Despite a common perception that separation anxiety mostly occurs among younger children, *AnxietyBC.com* points out that it actually has three peaks: between ages 5—6, 7—9, and 12—14.

Sometimes parents and teachers can overlook an anxious adolescent's cry for help. In *Boys on Target: Raising Boys into Men of Courage and Compassion* I say: "Youth today have much greater exposure to disturbing information, over-stimulation, increased expectations, and accelerated rate of change than we experienced. Boys who are sensitive can pulsate with anxiety in a harsh world where Rambo rules.... While girls are encouraged to relieve their stress by sharing their problems with others, boys are ashamed to disclose and commonly internalize their stress. They are taught to turn their uncomfortable feelings into anger—which we all know contributes to the number of men felled by accidents, suicides, and heart attacks. The male ritual of using alcohol and drugs to manage and conceal strong feelings only adds to the damage."

To help young adolescents learn how to improvise when plans go awry, consider the following suggestions:

1. Normalize anxiety. Because it's normal to worry, we should all expect anxiety to be just around the corner. Say to your son: "You're a human being and that means you're going to have nervous feelings every single day of your life. It's normal to feel nervous. First day of school? Sports tryouts? Math test? Piano recital? We all get the jitters. You're not alone."

If your boy is older and open to discussion about his emotional state, you might read together the chapter *Freeing Boys from Anxiety* from *Boys on Target* to distinguish between reasonable anxiety—a test that he didn't study for enough—and unreasonable anxiety—worry that comes from nowhere. Once your son can determine his level of anxiety about different events in life, he can become more mindful of what he says to himself about his worry. Review the list of examples of typical anxiety on page 93 of *Boys on Target* as well as a list of characteristics of *over-the-top* anxiety associated with an anxiety disorder. Take time to discuss this list with your son and have him indicate on a scale of 1 to 10 where he sees himself.

2. Discuss the ways that our culture promotes anxiety in boys by teaching them that boys need to be strong and stoic, keeping emotions in check. Boys learn that, in order to become *real* men, they should hide any fears or anxiety. As anxiety-prone boys reach adolescence, anticipate that anxiety will go underground unless you talk openly about gendered pressures. Fathers and other significant male mentors have an important responsibility to discuss their experiences with everyday stress and anxiety. Boys need to learn that everyone needs to learn ways to manage anxiety, as it is so much a part of everyday life.

3. Interrupt the physical symptoms that may take on a life of their own. As anxious children often focus on how bad their body feels, even after they've

been cleared medically, it can be hard to convince your son how anxiety can trick his body. Take time to teach your son to shift his attention from his bodily reactions to something else. Learning to interrupt physical symptoms helps children to feel powerful and autonomous—a huge accomplishment for those who feel bossed around by anxiety.

4. Map out the strategies that anxiety uses to control us. Help your son become familiar with how anxiety pesters him and sneaks into his daily life with predictable and annoying demands. Remind him that wherever he is, anxiety might show up to try and take over his life. If your son is open, you might personify anxiety, pointing out how anxiety will even protest the two of you illuminating its tactics, knowing that this discussion will help your son practice a different response to this common vexation.

5. Use laughter to feel powerful. A little-known secret about anxiety is that it can't stand being laughed at, and tends to shrivel up at the first giggle or joke at its expense. When your son understands this concept, you can have fun together, making jokes about anxiety in order to gain distance.

6. Utilize online resources. Visit websites such as Youth.AnxietyBC.com to explore strategies to overcome anxiety. This website offers several categories you could explore together or your son could review on his own: Anxiety 101, Facing Fears, Thinking Right, How to Chill, Healthy Habits, and Common Problems. The site also offers video clips of youth telling their stories and explaining how they face their fears.

Of course, if your son has such elevated anxiety that he seems to be developing an allergy to going to school or even leaving the house, you may need additional support. While most older boys are not too eager to speak to school counsellors, these counsellors and others in

in your community will welcome the opportunity to talk with you and offer support or advice.

At any age, we encounter the challenges of risking vulnerability, of not knowing beforehand how things will turn out.

Yet we also discover that, despite our anxiety, we can fully engage with life only when we learn to tolerate—and even perhaps embrace—places of transition and uncertainty. ■ ■ ■

Barry MacDonald

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