Barry MacDonald's
Boy Smarts Newsletter
MentoringBoys.com
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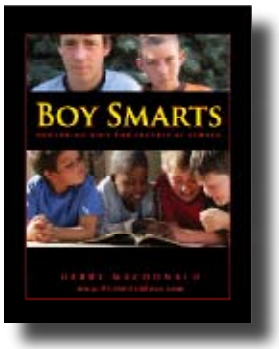
GOT GRIT?

IS MORE GRIT WHAT MY SON NEEDS?

Dear Barry,

At school Ethan, my 6 year old son, gets quickly frustrated. His teacher complains that he fidgets, wanders around the classroom, and reacts emotionally very easily. Because he is the youngest in the class, she says that we need to work harder to help him develop more 'grit' and willpower so that emotional reactivity doesn't hold him back. Each evening we are supposed to review his planner with him and discuss whether he got a smiley face before recess, after recess, and after lunch for being 'a gritty learner'. She suggested that we reward him with 10 minutes of video game play for each smiley face. She has also encouraged us to let him fail, and to be careful to not overprotect him from further frustration if he doesn't EARN the video game play. For almost two weeks the smiley faces seemed to work, but lately Ethan has been complaining about going to school, and saying things like, 'I'm stupid!' and 'I hate school.'



Developing 'grit' strikes me as a worthy long-term goal, but I don't understand how getting 'grit' will remedy Ethan's frustrations at school (I neglected to mention that he is fine at home and with friends in our community, and is even considered a strong hockey player on his team). Isn't telling my son to be tougher and more determined essentially a recast of what my parents told me years ago: 'if at first you don't succeed, try again'? What is the value in teaching a 6 year old boy to be able to sit for hours, and to have the 'grit' to finish a tedious task? I appreciate that Ethan has to toughen up and learn how to work hard in life, but I am worried that something else is needed for him right now, and that pushing him to become 'grittier' misses the mark. I'd appreciate your thoughts about 'grit' and any suggestions to help us tackle my son's learning challenges.

Patrick - a Vancouver dad

Dear Patrick,

At ***Boy Smarts*** workshops parents often lament the confusion stirred up by the latest educational buzzwords they hear in schools, as they struggle to separate what's meaningful from what is simply fashionable. Whether educators are touting the development of grit, a positive mindset, or self-regulation, I encourage parents not only to consider to what degree each new concept—often a re-branding of older ideas—will help them to support their child's development, but also how each approach can be appropriately integrated into a much larger context.

Getting Grit

In a world flooded with uncertainties, where fears of terrorism, climate change, or life-threatening viruses like Ebola seem to swirl about us, we may grab onto any notion we think we can anchor ourselves with. A non-cognitive, nostalgic concept like grit not only evokes the images of charismatic actors in different versions of the classic western ***True Grit***, but seems to promise at least survival...that is, if we can grit our teeth enough to get through the gritty, grueling conditions of life. The ironically named Paul Tough, author of ***How Children Succeed***, asserts that qualities like self-control, persistence, and grit are what matter most. Among these, grit—defined by another well-known advocate, Angela Duckworth, as "the tendency to sustain perseverance and passion for challenging long-term goals"—has recently spread like wildfire in Canada and the United States like none other in recent years. Arguing that children have become too spoiled, these authors believe that what children need most is a return to old-fashioned notions of self-discipline, including willpower and the ability to defer gratification. They contend that overprotective parents and teachers need to stop bubble-wrapping kids, and instead focus on actively teaching children how to resist temptation, manage failure, and to strive for goals with hardy steadfastness. Proponents of grit point out that research on child behaviour in sports shows that kids who have incremental opportunities to push themselves to the limits of their ability are more likely to gain the

confidence to handle daunting physical challenges like a steep downhill bike ride.

Of course, it's hard to argue against the age-old survival value of working hard to overcome disappointment or failure. In addition, many parents tell me that their fears of an increasingly dangerous world makes them hold more tightly to their own kids than their parents did to them. Many also acknowledge that they are more likely than their own parents to do things for their children that they may be quite capable of doing for themselves—driving them to school rather than letting them walk or take the bus, or bringing them a lunch they left on the kitchen table that morning. A concerned parent may fear that a child with no lunch who is already struggling in school will just slip further into apathy and fatigue in class, and go downhill from there. Busy parents also tell me that it's just more efficient to do things for their children rather than take the time to watch them flounder, try again, get frustrated, struggle, give up, and maybe, or maybe not learn to complete a given task in time.

In my discussions with parents, I don't talk about grit, but I do stress that children need to experiment with responsibilities if they are to become responsible.

There are no easy shortcuts on the road to responsibility, however. After all, how can we develop responsibility—understood as the ability to respond in flexible ways to diverse challenges—without messing up along the way?

The Dangers of Over-protecting Children

Excessive protection goes against what we know about the positive role that risk and responsibility play in childhood development. Parents will give up patterns of over-protection when they see how it disadvantages their child.

I invite parents who feel obliged to drive their child to school to consider their son's capability. Is he able to find his way alone? Are there dangerous roads to cross or a gang of aggressive youth waiting harass their son? I also ask parents about how they got to school when they were 6 or 7 years old.

For those parents who are inwardly protesting, I would highlight that there is plenty of evidence that in Canada and the U.S., it has never been safer for children to walk alone to school. Canadian police chiefs tell us that crime in our communities is the lowest that it has ever been, and that the person most likely to assault a child is still, by far, a member of the child's own family. Even the respected epidemiologists at the Centers for Disease Control in Atlanta recently published a report revealing that the real risks to our children aren't stranger abductions or being murdered, but much more commonplace problems like car accidents, obesity, and bullying. Even rates of smoking, sexual activity, and physical fighting among our teens are at their lowest.

Most parents want their child to be absorbed by what they're learning at school, not to be driven by a desperate need to prove their competence or their grit. Research does not support the rather simplistic notion that teaching about grit leads to academic success. Instead we need to take into account the complex interplay of family, school, and classroom contexts, as well as the development of social skills, learning and cognitive strategies. Many social, cultural, and family factors come to bear on students we might consider as having the most grit.

Problems with Grit

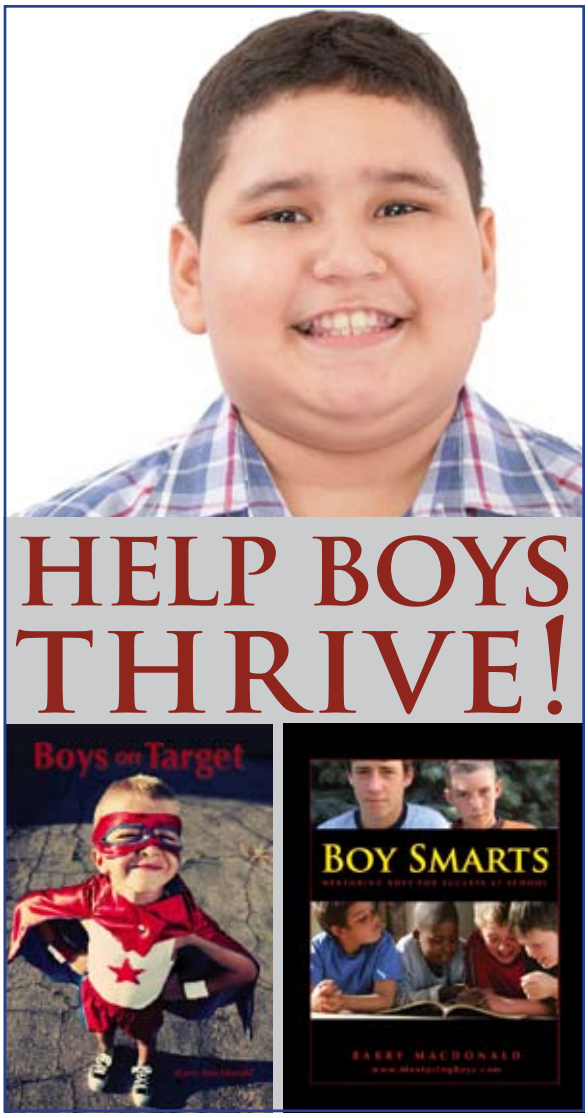
Learning about grit is not the same as developing it. The 2012 University of Chicago report, ***Teaching Adolescents To Become Learners and The Role of Noncognitive Factors in Shaping School Performance***, critically reviews the literature on factors such as grit and concludes that there are few proven clear and actionable strategies for the efficacy of formal classroom practice in so-called grit. It claims that this quality of perseverance through difficulty is a fairly stable individual inherited personality trait, and that students are more likely to display academic grit when they are given practical strategies to successfully manage tasks. The report cautions us about labelling students as lazy or lacking in motivation; or to imagine that if students simply worked harder and refused to give up that they would do better in school, that poor academic performance results from insufficient grit or determination to succeed. Grit is something life teaches, not school. School should teach children to open their minds and become curious.

Temperament Matters

Authors of a ***New Scientist*** opinion article "***Scarred for Life?***" claim that some children who are born into difficult circumstances may be genetically predisposed to handle stress badly. These authors suggest that pre- and postnatal stress affects a complex set of interactions within the brain between the hypothalamus, the pituitary gland and the adrenal glands, each a part of the body's neuroendocrine system that helps us cope with stress. Apparently, when children face excessive stress in early life, the body increases the production of the stress hormone cortisol. Normally, cortisol washes over our organs, including the brain, increasing blood sugar and stopping the immune system from going into overdrive. Increased cortisol levels can suppress the immune system, and impair a part of the brain, the hippocampus, hampering learning and memory. It's as though a child's arousal systems can get stuck on overdrive with the gas pedal on full throttle, and the child's ability to put on the brakes is impaired.

Fidgeting is a Symptom

A child who fidgets is almost certainly not getting enough active movement throughout the day. In order to learn, children need to pay attention, and in order to pay attention, they need to move. Children need engaging classrooms with active learning and regular playtime. Rather than hammering on the need for your son to get grittier, his teacher would be wiser to address his underlying need for physical movement. Many children cannot regulate their emotions because they have to expend valuable internal energy to respond to stressors. It's through freeplay and physical activity that children then replenish or restore their energy levels so they can be ready for the next challenge. Children Ethan's age need hours of outdoor play to establish healthy sensory systems to support the development of higher-level attention needed for learning at school.



Rewarding Grit May do More Harm than Good

Trying to train Ethan to become a 'gritty learner' by rewarding him with smiley faces—a small pleasure, at best, that he will soon outgrow—seems misguided. Evidence suggests that such external rewards as the dispensation of video game playtime sends the wrong message: Do this thing because I deem it worthwhile. It also inhibits imagination, creativity, and the development of internal motivation in the classroom. According to a U.S. Department of Education's 2013 draft report on grit and tenacity, "Persevering in the face of challenges or setbacks to accomplish goals that are extrinsically motivated, unimportant to the student, or in some way inappropriate for the student may potentially induce stress, anxiety, and distraction, and have detrimental impacts on students' long-term retention, conceptual learning, and psychological well-being." In other words, encouraging students to be gritty may, in some situations, do more harm than good.

Addressing Needs, not Fads

We need to consider each child's ability and unique challenges, as we simultaneously support the child's needs and encourage him to grow. It is for this reason that I am concerned about overemphasizing grit in Ethan's classroom as a non-cognitive skill he can learn at the expense of other more pressing matters, such his need for movement, or the developmental challenges he may be facing as the youngest in the classroom.

For students to be truly successful—both in school and outside school—parents and teachers must tune into the quality of engagement when children are learning, not just numbers or grades or scores.

Our classrooms can dance with ideas, questions and wonderings that draw on natural curiosity.

In a world where we can google for information until we are google-eyed, we need to do more than pour information into students. We must build their desire to learn, their imaginations about what might be possible.

John Wooden, one of the most revered coaches in the history of sports has been attributed with saying: "Don't confuse effort with results." He believed that some of us may have plenty of grit but will have little to show for it, and some of us get great results with no grit at all.

Let's remember too that grit is not a new concept, and that it has not been applied only to gun-brandishing western movie heroes. In Mark Twain's classic ***Adventures of Huckleberry Finn***, written in 1885, Huck says admiringly about a girl who showed kindness and spirit to him, even offering to pray for his wayward soul:

She had the grit to pray for Judus if she took the notion—there warn't no back-down to her, I judge. You may say what you want to, but in my opinion she had more sand in her than any girl I ever see; in my opinion she was just full of sand. It sounds like flattery, but it ain't no flattery.

Let's not make a fetish of true grit. True joy may seem even more elusive, but can sustain us longer. • • •

Barry MacDonald
MentoringBoys.com

The challenges associated with being male vary from community to community. I welcome the opportunity to meet you at an upcoming workshop or conference to discuss the needs of your boys.

BOY SMARTS ACTION TALK

HOST OR SPONSOR BARRY MACDONALD'S SATURDAYWORKSHOP IN YOUR COMMUNITY

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"I have seen first-hand how Barry MacDonald's writings and his public presentations to sell-out audiences inspire teachers, parents, and others in the community to reframe and refresh their perspectives on boys who struggle. Wherever he has taken his message, he has struck a chord with parents and teachers who are asking questions that are driving change. Barry is challenging us all to pay attention and revisit old assumptions; his practical wisdom suggests how we can learn to see boys not as an objectified ***problem*** but as whole persons with strengths we can help them to uncover.

Whether you are a parent or teacher or an adult involved with mentoring boys in some other capacity, you will find his books and workshops enlightening and deeply nourishing."

Dr. Sue Ann Cairns, Kwantlen Polytechnic University
Co-author ***Strategies for Successful Writing***

...because it's better to build boys than to mend men!