

# TALKING ABOUT GAME VIOLENCE

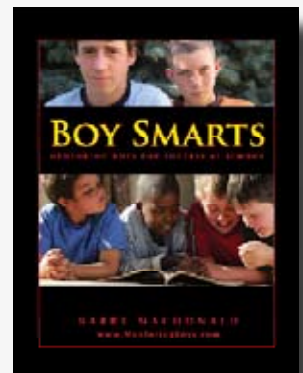
*Hi Barry:*

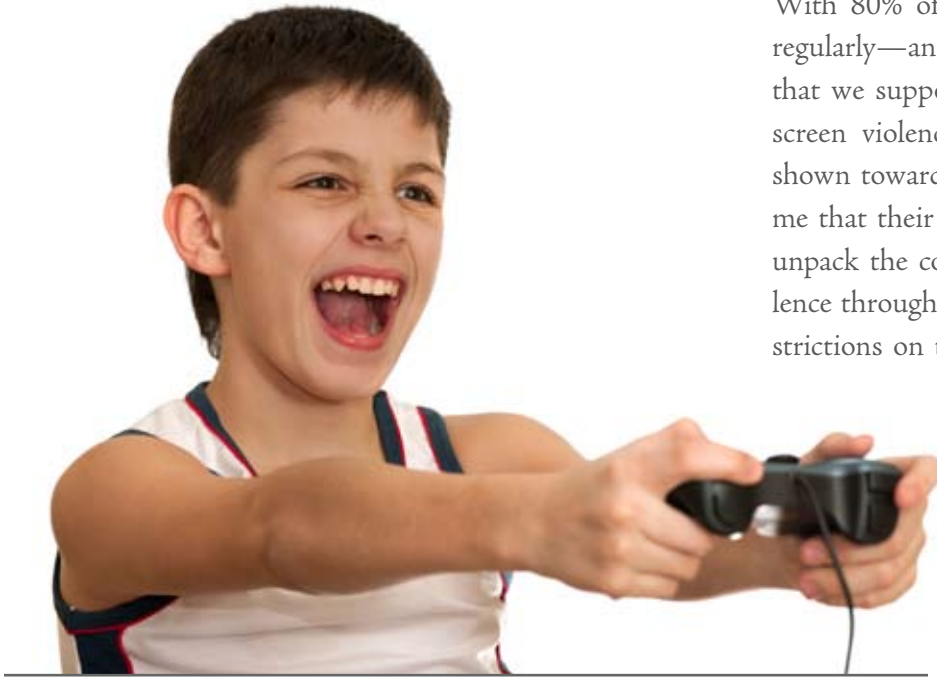
A couple of weekends ago our 10 year old son announced at the dinner table that robotics and artificial intelligence will soon take over most jobs and that his years of playing Minecraft and video games will pay off. Ethan read aloud from an article in the *Vancouver Sun* entitled, "In 10 years, your job probably will not exist," citing the U.S. Department of Labor's prediction that 65% of jobs will be new within the decade. The article said that digital technology skills, and experience in virtual environments in particular, were essential to getting a job. Ethan's a smart kid and used the article as a springboard to vie for a new video game.

As a pediatrician I recognize that technology is essential for our children's future careers, and I also appreciate that the research linking violence in gaming to violence in life is questionable and sways with public morality, but I am concerned boys may view the harsh violence in M-rated games. Even though we monitor Ethan's gaming and he doesn't play M-rated games in our home, I am troubled about their potential to influence him through other boys. Every time I try talking with him about gaming violence, he shuts me down, saying he knows the violence is not real. I'd appreciate your suggestions for talking with my son about video game violence.

*Julie - Richmond, BC*

Barry MacDonald's  
Spring 2015 Newsletter  
MentoringBoys.com





## Hello Julie,

When parents hear that the video game sector is the fastest growing entertainment industry—second only to music in profitability, many worry about pop culture’s ability to normalize impulsive, disrespectful, and violent behaviour. They worry that boys are internalizing confusing and disturbing versions of masculinity such as those represented in the video game *Grand Theft Auto*; and that boys are being conditioned, through dazzling and hypnotic images, to become ever more aggressive.

Many shake their heads in amazement when they learn that within 24 hours of its release, *Grand Theft Auto V* generated more than \$800 million in worldwide revenue, and just three days after release, the M-rated game had surpassed one billion dollars in sales, making it the fastest selling entertainment product in history.

While the video gaming industry claims that it has successfully prevented children from buying mature rated games, many boys play them nevertheless. A 2005 *Kaiser Family Foundation* study found that 65% of children in Grades 7 to 12 had played *Grand Theft Auto*. A more recent study published in the *Journal of Adolescent Health* found that 66% of boys 12 to 14 said they had played M-rated games “a lot in the last six months.”

With 80% of Canadian children playing video games regularly—and 80% of all boys, I strongly recommend that we support boys to reflect on the meaning of the screen violence they consume, especially the violence shown toward females. Disappointingly, many boys tell me that their parents don’t take the time to help them unpack the confusing messages they receive about violence through the media; instead they try to impose restrictions on their game time and choice of games. On

the other hand, parents who work hard to connect with boys on this and other topics of concern express frustration about the ways their sons don the “cone of silence.”

And with digital platforms changing so rapidly, it is not just gaming violence

that many parents worry about. Social networks such as *YouTube*, *Instagram* or *Snapchat* are proliferating. Every minute *YouTube* users upload 100 hours of new video content and *Facebook* users share nearly 2.5 million pieces of content. *Snapchat*, launched as recently as 2011, gained 100 million users by January 2015, with 400 million *Snapchats* flying per day over the internet. While these social media often facilitate positive social connections, they are also bursting at the seams with violent content. And much of that violence is sexualized.

Although there is supposedly a requirement that children be at least 13 years of age before they can use social network sites, in practice much younger children—even as young as 7 or 8—are uploading content. Last week a parent in Calgary contacted me for support when her Grade 2 son’s principal called her about his vulgar *Instagram* account. During our conversation it became clear that she was a loving and engaged mom who had a highly adventurous son who had been spurred on by older children to set up the account.

Admittedly, it can be painstakingly awkward to talk about sensitive matters with boys who have been culturally conditioned to hide any chink in their armour. Many boys have learned that when they feel buffeted by life, they should hunker down, waiting stoically for the winds to pass.

But what happens when the winds of life gather hurricane force? Shamed by defeat and sadness they don't know what to do with, they often externalize their grief through aggression—or self-medicate with alcohol and other drugs. Sadly, a significant percentage of males kill themselves at a rate of about 1 every 3 hours in Canada, a rate that is slightly more than 3 times higher than for females, according to numbers reported by *Statistics Canada*.

The outcome for males living in poverty is even more troubling: A 2012 report published by *Samaritans in Men, Suicide and Society* found that suicide rates are 10 times higher in males of lower economic status than it is for those of higher socio-economic status.

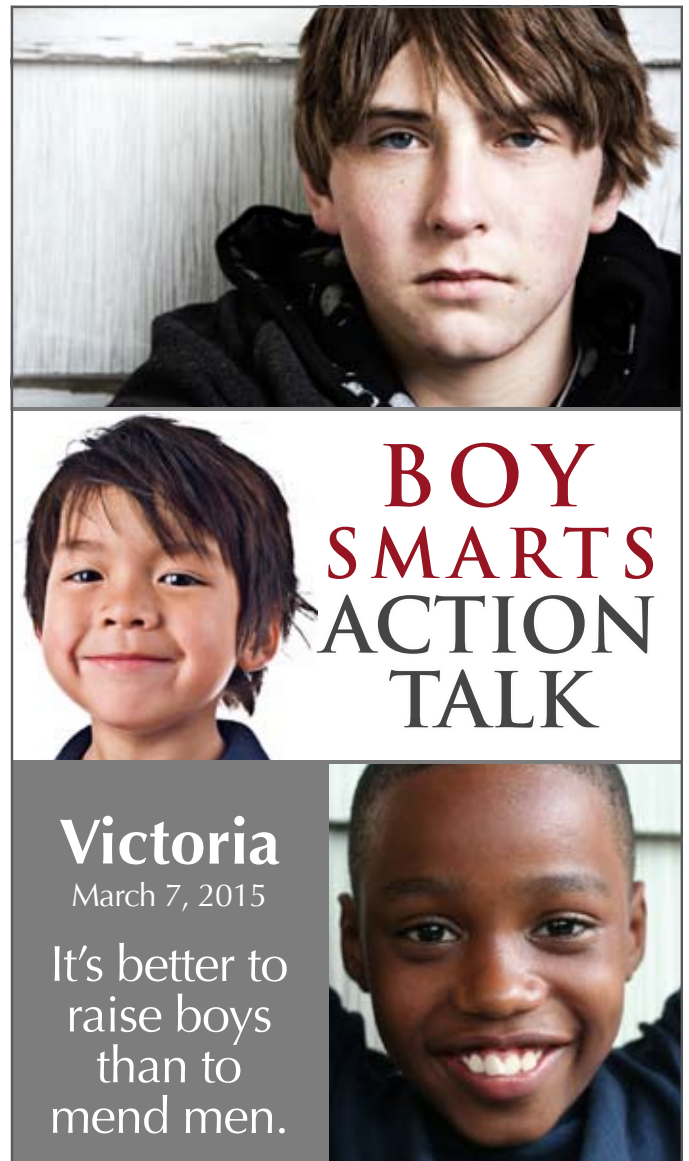
From an early age boys receive subtle and not so subtle messages about how males ought to communicate. Boys are taught that males must not show weakness but must appear stoic, stable, and independent. Deborah Tannen, the renowned professor of linguistics at *Georgetown University*, suggests that boys and girls grow up in different cultures, with girls learning '*rapport talk*' that emphasizes communication as glue that holds relationships together, while boys are taught '*report talk*' that emphasizes the value of maintaining the upper hand in a conversation, along with the need to protect themselves from any perceived attempts to control their independence or put them down.

Boys want to talk about their lives, and about media violence, but they need our time and our interested, respectful attention. Caring communication can only begin with mindful self-awareness of our own reactions that may get triggered by boys' words or behaviour. We also need to listen without prescriptive judgments. Boys need to be able to trust that we will not use what they say against them, manipulating them with our agendas.

One personal story about how transformative it can be for boys to discuss media violence in a safe setting comes to mind. A couple of years ago I met weekly with a classroom of grade 5 boys over a three-month period to discuss their excessive playground aggression with the hope

of ameliorating it. The principal explained that since kindergarten this particular group of boys was notorious for their aggressive behaviour and all attempts to lessen their conflicts had been unsuccessful.

After testing my tolerance for *boy-silly-bathroom-potty-talk* during our initial meetings, the boys slowly warmed up to me and the idea of having a weekly discussion group; "After all," the biggest boy announced cannily, "We get outta class." In the following weeks we discussed the screen violence they viewed on television, movies, and video games. Initially cautious, they gave examples of media consumption they knew to be age-appropriate, but whispered among themselves about R-rated movies or M-rated games such as *Grand Theft Auto*, assuming I was oblivious.



**BOY  
SMARTS  
ACTION  
TALK**

**Victoria**  
March 7, 2015

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

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Initially, I did not respond to their giggly whispers about adult media, but when I sensed that they were ready to go deeper, I asked them what they knew about games like *Grand Theft Auto*. The boys sank into uncomfortable silence, soon relieved when a more impetuous boy offered up a few details about the game—or *GTA*—as the boys knowingly called it—that he had gathered from his older brother. He made it clear to us that he was not allowed to play it on his own. But after another boy confirmed that I would not reveal the content of our discussion to the school principal, he admitted that he played *GTA* regularly. Soon our discussion about violence in the media expanded, and the newly popularized television series *The Walking Dead* became our focus. As I listened to their comments I was reminded that among 10 year old boys, knowledge about what is considered forbidden is a form of cultural capital.

When I asked the boys if they had talked about media violence with anyone else, they fell silent again. Eventually one boy explained how he feared that talk about video games would turn into a trap to control him. Another boy who didn't have a father in the home said that he had assumed he was the only one who didn't talk about

these things. The boys all shook their heads no. Another boy acknowledged that he did not play *GTA* himself, but that his father would let him watch him play *GTA* as long as he agreed to not tell his mother.

Then a turning point moment occurred. The strongest and most athletic 'alpha boy' disclosed that *The Walking Dead* gave him nightmares. Immediately the braggadocio about who-knew-what about media violence stopped, and the boys began to share more personal experiences of discomfort. During this dialogue the boys seemed gentler, more respectful of each other. One insightful boy even observed that the real root of the proliferation of media violence was money.

Eventually, I was able to guide the boys back to the problem of the ongoing playground fights. Together we explored differing styles of emotional reactivity and possible triggers for reactivity. They explained why interrogation in the principal's office was counterproductive, and that it usually stirred up more conflict, especially when one boy would 'rat out' another. Certainly suspensions, expulsions, and other punitive sanctions never touched the root of their conflicts, or helped them learn constructive problem-solving or communication skills.

The boys and I also discussed how they often jumped to conclusions about the intentions of others, and they began to see that they needed to take more time to talk things through, especially to clarify misunderstandings about the rules of a game. They agreed to shout “Rule Break” whenever a potential misunderstanding triggered someone, so they could briefly clarify the rule. As I watched them interact, I couldn’t help noticing that they seemed much more patient with one boy a little on the fringe of the group who had instigated a number of the conflicts.

In *Boys on Target: Raising Boys into Men of Courage and Compassion* I acknowledge that most parents know lectures don’t work, but what does? “When you want to communicate with your son, or make yourself available to him, make sure you are not preoccupied by other tasks, or distracted by the newspaper, TV, or Internet. Let go of any agendas as you turn toward him with a welcoming, receptive attitude. Be sensitive to his subtle cues. If you lean toward him with too much intensity, he may feel overpowered by your intensity. If so, ease off to give him space. Notice whether or not he is comfortable with eye contact, and mirror his comfort level.”

Also be aware that physical indicators such as avoidance of eye contact can tell you that boys are processing thoughts and responses, while actions such as fidgeting or quick outbursts of energy like slamming a door can be ways that boys release feeling. Some of my best conversations with boys, including our boys, have occurred while we were engaged in doing something else—driving, working on the yard, playing chess, hiking, watching television. In these situations, our conversation tends to be more comfortable, natural, and flowing because it isn’t the total focus of our attention. With boys, action-talk promotes closeness and lets them talk on their terms.

I’ve also found that boys tend to feel most comfortable with short, to-the-point conversations. Once a story has been told, that is not the time to launch into a long exposition of it or to underline every lesson. I keep my talk to a minimum, and instead, remain open to the opportunities that boys create. Then, I simply drop a piece of information or an idea into the conversation.

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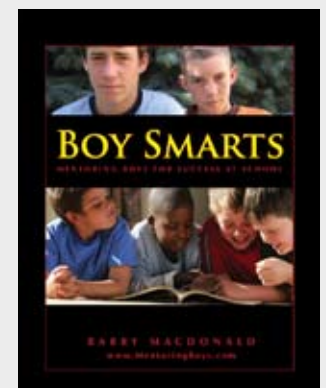
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## Talking Points to Open Up Conversation

Sometimes a list of potential topics can help to get a discussion started with boys. Perhaps the following questions or talking points could spark your imagination as you think about ways to help your son learn to think critically about the media's exploitation of violence.

- What is violence in the media?
- What is gratuitous violence in the media?
- How does physical violence differ from emotional violence?
- How would the people involved in the media violence feel in real life?
- In real life how would the person responsible for violence be made accountable for their actions?
- Why are people often drawn to watch violence in the news?
- What might happen if we became desensitized to violence?
- How often is media violence used to feed stereotypes about gender and people of colour?
- Are females treated differently in the gaming violence? How?
- To what extent do games and other media images link violence and sexuality?
- What games treat female characters with respect?
- What are some of the non-violent ways to resolve the conflicts you view in a game?

## Be Wary of Censorship

As concerned parents and teachers, we also need to recognize when our own anxiety about media violence can be manipulated toward censorship, or a particular ideology. Around the same time that I met with the Grade 5 boys, I sat in with administrators during a two-day *Threat Assessment in Schools* training required by the *BC Ministry of Education*. The speaker showed a video montage of violent video games, highlighting how each of the boys engaged in the horrific school shootings we hear about in the news played violent video games and speculated that their actions were directly linked to their playing of video games.

The connection between video game violence and real-world violence is an open question. The *U.S. Department of Justice* asked the directors of the *Harvard Medical School's Center for Mental Health and Media* to study the effects of video games on children. In 2008 the findings of the \$1.5 million federally funded study were published in *Grand Theft Childhood: The Surprising Truth About Violent Video Games and What Parents Can Do*, indicating that there has been no definitive evidence that playing violent video games leads to any long-term aggressive behaviour. Most studies found a correlation, not a causal relationship, which means the research could simply show that aggressive people like aggressive entertainment. The authors untangled the web of politics, marketing, advocacy and flawed or misconstrued studies that have alarmed many, suggesting that if there is a consensus emerging around the research, it is that violent video games may be one risk factor—when coupled with other more immediate, real-world influences—which can contribute to anti-social behaviour. Studies have shown that the boys who engaged in school shootings have complicated lives, often marked by trauma and serious mental health issues that were not adequately addressed by parents and teachers.

A more recent 2014 study of approximately 5000 children published in *Pediatrics* found that the links between different levels of electronic game engagement and psychosocial adjustment were small. The authors of



*Electronic Gaming and Psychosocial Adjustment* indicate that there are “potential benefits for children who engage in low levels of daily game play and downsides for those who play excessively.... The overall effect are consistent yet small, indicating that both the broad fears and hopes about gaming may be exaggerated.” Rather than jumping to the conclusion that playing violent games causes behaviour problems, parents are encouraged to do what they can to have their sons play games in moderation. If your son seems to be uninterested in doing anything else, talk with him about what he is getting out of playing these games, and explore together whether there might be other ways for him to meet his underlying needs for drama, connection, imagination, or adrenaline excitement.

## Dialogue, Not Lectures

As parents and teachers who seek to promote healthy media consumption, we have to be careful not to fall into the trap of emotional rhetoric designed to frighten rather than enlighten us. At the same time we also need to keep dialogue on this sensitive topic open, and seek opportunities to help boys become alert to the potential of screen violence to harm us as humans—whatever our gender, ethno-cultural group, age, or sexual orientation.

If boys are to grow into men of courage and compassion in our media-saturated culture, we need to understand their attraction to gaming—perhaps by playing by their side, and we need to help them talk about violence. Through timely invitations built after trust has been established, respectful listening and tactful inquiry, we can

help them articulate their questions, confusions, and fears—and yes, sometimes their excitement and curiosity about violence, whether virtual or real life. In our wired world, we cannot really insulate young people from images of media violence they will undoubtedly encounter. What we can do, however, is to help them develop critical thinking skills in media literacy—whether as consumers, or producers. They can learn to make more thoughtful choices about not only what they view, or play, but also what they send over the internet through social media and other digital platforms. They can have a voice. May it also be one that empowers themselves and others. • • •

*Barry MacDonald*

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## Upcoming Events:

- March 7 • Victoria  
Boy Smarts Action Talk
- March 16 • Calgary, Students at Risk
- April 20 • Mission, Get Boy Smart  
see page 30 for details
- May 1 • BCCPAC, Keynote address  
• Cultivating Self-regulation  
to be Calm, Alert & Happy
- June 3 • Delta, Get Boy Smart  
Tickets for Delta event



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# GET BOY SMART



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- How can we help boys navigate today's cultural realities online and elsewhere?
- Why is ADHD overdiagnosed among boys?
- Why are 80% of videogame players boys?
- How can we raise boys into men of courage and compassion?

**BARRY MACDONALD** - author, educator, counsellor, and renowned speaker - says, "It is better to build boys than to mend men". He has presented to thousands of parents at sold-out community events and was identified as One of 25 Influential People to Watch by The Vancouver Sun. His best-selling books, *Boy Smarts* and *Boys on Target* will be available for purchase & signing (payment by cheque). More info at [MentoringBoys.com](http://MentoringBoys.com)

"Barry MacDonald's compelling presentation will indeed make a tremendous difference in the lives of boys. He should be heard by every educator and parent." Dr. Avis Glaze, Former Ontario Education Commissioner

- **Monday April 20, 2015** 7pm - 8:30pm
- **Clarke Theatre** 33700 Prentis Avenue, Mission BC
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# BOY SMARTS



- What are the varied needs of boys?
- Why is ADHD overdiagnosed among boys?
- Why are 80% of videogame players boys?
- How can we help boys navigate today's cultural realities online and elsewhere?
- How can we mentor boys to manage stress to become confident and productive?
- How can we help boys grow into courageous and caring men?

**BARRY MACDONALD** is an author, teacher and counsellor/coach who is a champion for strong families, strong schools—and boys. A sought-after speaker, he has presented to thousands of sold-out community events, and was also identified as one of *25 Influential People to Watch* by *The Vancouver Sun*. His best selling books, *Boy Smarts* and *Boys on Target* will be available for purchase and signing (payment by cheque). Visit [www.MentoringBoys.com](http://www.MentoringBoys.com)



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**WHEN**  
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**Wednesday June 3, 2015 7:30pm - 9pm**  
**North Delta Secondary Theatre** 11447 - 82nd Avenue, Delta

**TICKETS**

**\$10 / person until June 2** Available online only Click [HERE](#) to purchase  
**\$15 / person at door if available (cash only)**

**QUESTIONS?**

Email Lindsay at [schaublettes@gmail.com](mailto:schaublettes@gmail.com)