

Educator challenges parents to get on their sons' wavelength

BY JAMIE HALL, EDMONTON JOURNAL, OCTOBER 3, 2010

When it comes to boys and literacy, says educator Barry MacDonald, it's time to "shake things up a bit."

Statistics show that boys tend to take longer to learn how to read than girls, are more likely to be nonreaders than girls and are more likely to drop out of school than girls. But it's what these statistics don't show, says MacDonald, that's even more important.

"There are many ways to express intelligence; literacy is not a single thing," says MacDonald. "Parents and teachers need to be wary of over-generalizing about the complex relationship between gender and literacy development."

MacDonald, a Vancouver-based author who wrote the book **Boy Smarts: Mentoring Boys for Success at School**, is one of the keynote speakers at the 2010 Alberta Early Years Conference. The three-day event officially gets underway Monday at the Marriott Edmonton at River Cree Resort, but MacDonald will be speaking this evening at 6 p.m. at the Marriott.

MacDonald does a lot of work with schools. He says many of them have dated notions about literacy and still insist on practising traditional classroom learning in the belief that one teaching style fits all. It doesn't.

"The truth is, a lot of boys read widely -- just not the books we ask them to read," he says. "I also think we have a bias in schools that children should write things down to show what they know. True, it's easier to grade papers, and at one point in time that worked and reflected what was going on. But not today."

Today, MacDonald says, technology is entrenched in our culture and constantly evolving. It makes sense to use it to engage children when it comes to literacy, especially boys. Studies indicate boys are visual learners. They also make up the majority of video-game players. He acknowledges the controversy around video games, both in the content and the time boys spend playing them. Still, the other side of that suggests they're learning skills that extend far beyond hand-eye co-ordination - complex problem-solving, perseverance, hypothesis-testing, pattern recognition, logistics.

"The only way we can lead children is to understand both sides. My work is to help parents and teachers bring balance to this dialogue. I encourage parents to engage in their son's electronic world. It is one of the few worlds where children can be teachers when adults take the time to participate. And as they become more comfortable and more confident in this realm, they're more able to discuss reasonable limits with their children."