

Boy, oh boy!

Glenn Mitchell, managing editor
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I thought it was kind of amusing the response I got from my oldest son when I was taking him home from tennis practice on Thursday and told him that his mom and I were going to a talk that evening on how to raise boys. "Why?" he asked hesitantly. "Do you think you guys screwed up?"

I laughed. Paused for a second. And then I asked him if he thought we had. "Well, I think we're as good as most of the guys out there," he said somewhat self-righteously, defending himself and, touchingly, although maybe not realizing it, yours truly. I assured him I thought he was an even-better-than-average kid in my books and that it's more about just seeing if there is more to learn about this difficult thing called parenthood.

My wife and I weren't alone. There were some 1000 people at the Vernon Recreation Centre Thursday night to hear Barry MacDonald talk about Boy Smarts - Effective Strategies for Parenting Boys.

First of all congratulations to Jeff Jacobi and Pam Hargreaves and all the other volunteers with the District Parent Advisory Council who successfully organized and brought in such a dynamic educator on a topic that obviously struck a chord with so many of us. Well done.

Certainly a significant number of the audience were educators, enough that at times I felt I was at a teachers' convention, and it was good to see them learning even more about the boys we send to them on a daily basis.

But it was even more heartening to see fellow hockey parents and neighbours seeking out strategies on how to ensure our little guys "become caring, courageous and ethical men."

I couldn't help but think back to when our first son was born, and it's still one of the top two happiest days of my life and the feeling of euphoria has stayed with me all these years later to some degree.

But I also distinctly remember thinking that day- "Where's the manual?"- on what to do with this newborn and suddenly realizing what a huge responsibility I had just helped create. However you move on from deliriously happy but painfully clueless on that wonderful day and you buy the books and ask your parents and consult with friends and you wing it and do OK. However, there's so many ways to go wrong, especially with boys I learned last night.

Boys account for 90 per cent of juvenile alcohol and drug violations, and 80 per cent of school suspensions, and are five times more likely to have ADHD.....heavy sign. But Thursday night was about hope, not despair. About awareness and strategies, not giving in to age-old stereotypes. Through the use of humour and studies and anecdotal common sense, not to mention a powerful point presentation that packed punch, we all learned a few things about how to re-connect with our kids in an already hyper-interconnected world.

The fact that boys talk less than girls, value independence more, and struggle to make sense of a barrage of macho and sexually-explicit images on a daily basis, all the while trying to overcome the Boy Code of what one has to do to become a man, makes our jobs challenging. However, I believe, most of them are doing surprisingly well and I'm optimistic. And MacDonald gave us plenty of pointers to help the process along.

Generally he told us try not to "yackety-yack" at them too much (preach less), cut them some Slack (give them more freedom) and "tune into their reality by joining in with what they like to do." MacDonald also said "laughter lubricates learning" and that "you learn more when you're having fun."

So where I got home that night and my son asked how it went, I told him I learned that I should play more video games with my kids. "Cool," he replied. And so it goes.