

Boys don't learn the same way girls do, expert teaches

Janet Steffenhagen, Vancouver Sun, Front Page,
Saturday, February 25, 2006

Long-time teacher Barry MacDonald has 100 tips for helping boys succeed in school, but the single-sex classrooms that have been touted recently as a way of keeping boys' minds on academics is not one of them.

MacDonald, author of a new book called **Boy Smarts: Mentoring Boys for Success at School**, said there is no one simple answer to a question that has perplexed educators and parents for several years: Why do boys lag behind girls in school?

His book, published late last year, is full of ideas about how schools can help boys succeed but it warns against quick-fix solutions such as segregated classes and drugs to control the rowdy behaviour that is often labelled as attention deficit disorder (ADD) or attention deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). A clinical counsellor and educator in the Lower Mainland, MacDonald notes the concern raised by the World Health Organization in 2001 when it declared the use of stimulant drugs to be at epidemic levels internationally. In an interview, he said it is not uncommon for teachers to have two or three boys in each classroom who are considered ADD or ADHD.

"We must ask whether spontaneity, inquisitiveness, imagination, boundless enthusiasm and emotionality are being discouraged to create calmer, quieter, more controlled environments," he says in the book. Instead of simple solutions, MacDonald offers teachers insight into "boy biology" and suggests ways of engaging boys' brains and channeling their rambunctious behaviour. For example, he said boys need ample opportunities to move, clear

instructions, friendly competition and a sense of independence.

MacDonald says North America is far behind other western countries in trying to understand why boys aren't doing as well as girls in school and why they have more behaviour problems, are more frequently absent, more likely to be suspended or expelled, more likely to drop out of school and more likely to commit suicide.

But he said he has noticed an increase of interest in the workshops he conducts for parents and teachers. For example, a workshop he is delivering today in Surrey was fully booked more than two weeks ago.

Lyn Tretiuk, principal of Pitt Meadows elementary school, became interested in MacDonald's work in 2003 while examining student discipline records for trends. "Some things start to jump out at you -- and I don't think our school is any different from any school in British Columbia. In general, 85 per cent of the referrals to the office for recess and lunch were boys. That's across all grade levels, whether you're talking about little Grade 1s or Grade 7s.

"The school realized it had to do something and turned to MacDonald for advice. As a result of his workshop, the school made several changes, including ordering a "wigggle cushion" for each classroom to help children who need to move. "It's like a whoopee cushion, but without the noise," Tretiuk explained. "It helps these children -- most often boys -- who have trouble sitting still. They can sit on their seats and just be moving ever so slightly on that cushion."

The school has also tried to encourage more visitations by fathers who could serve as role models in a school where only five of 29 teachers are male - a ratio that isn't uncommon in elementary schools. But Tretiuk said that effort hasn't been successful and 99 per cent of the school volunteers continue to be mothers.

"It's not going as well as we would have hoped but then that's just one of the many things that we're working on."

MacDonald can be reached through his website at www.mentoringboys.com.