

BOYS, BOYS, BOYS

Understanding, Nurturing & Connecting With Today's Boys

Many of our boys are struggling. Some in the early years, some who start well start 'turning off' in middle primary and then there is the massive disengagement and demotivation in early adolescence. Another new statistic is happening — more of our brightest, school-successful boys are failing at university. And more and more boys in men's bodies are struggling to find ways to live worthwhile lives in our chaotic, rapidly changing world.

"Men's mental health issues play out at a high level right across society. Statistics of suicide, premature death, accidents, violence, crime and addiction are dominated by men. Then there's the domino effect. Men who have been victims themselves tend to hurt others in the form of physical and sexual violence, other crimes and antisocial behaviour, marriage breakdowns, alcohol and drug abuse and moral bankruptcy." — Georgina Barker, 'Lost Boys', *Scoop*, (Vol 65, Spring 2013).

"Boys are more prone to separation distress, anxiety and can become emotionally shut down as a result of feeling abandoned." — Steve Biddulph

Male adolescent violence is now linked to neglect in childhood — *lack of physical and emotional nurturing*.

Strong bondedness and feeling loved and valued is the best way to keep boys feeling happy, secure and safe. Having a circle of caring adults — a parent lead team — can make a huge difference in building healthy attachment and bonding.

Connecting and loving — encouragement and acknowledgment: A guide for parents

- ✓ Winking
- ✓ Smiling
- ✓ High fives
- ✓ Thumbs up
- ✓ Rough and tumble
- ✓ Read bedtime stories in their beds
- ✓ Small secret gestures of kindness

- ✓ Listen deeply
- ✓ Lighten up with novelty, fun facts and riddles
- ✓ Make yourself look silly
- ✓ Share common interest often
- ✓ Focus on their strengths
- ✓ See the world through their eyes

Building love bridges with our children — doing little things often!

- Wink at children, make funny faces, give them high fives or thumbs up — non-verbal messages of connection.
- Parents can give small symbols to hold onto in their absence like kisses in the child's hands.
- Create a unique bedtime ritual... "I love you more than..."
- Send them rainbows when you are away.
- Create an imaginary giant protector/guardian angel to watch over your child.
- Have a picture of you with your child in a locket or plastic sleeve they can keep in their bag.
- Record readable stories or messages on smart phones if you're away.
- Take small bites out of their toast or a bite out of their sandwich.
- Leave notes or funny pictures in their lunch box or on the bathroom mirror.
- Hide special messages around the house when you go away.
- Spontaneously join them in drawing or colouring in.
- Join them on the couch randomly to watch their favourite show.
- Engage in spontaneous hugs, cuddles and tickles.
- Launch a 'surprise bedroom attack' (for older children!)

Some boy differences that can help build understanding and connection

- ✓ Prefer to do — with autonomy i.e. Like an adventure
- ✓ Single focus — often can't hear when their attention is focused elsewhere
- ✓ Hear less, up to 70%
- ✓ Get 'information overload'
- ✓ Memory issues
- ✓ Gentle reminders — preferably visual/ non verbal
- ✓ Have shorter attention spans — dopamine levels drop
- ✓ Need greater stimulation to get involved – is this worthwhile?
- ✓ Growth spurts

“Boys learn by doing — and often do not see the risk until after the event — boys are more compulsive, non-cautious, eager and liable to take risks. Girls on the other hand are more controlled, logical and analytical.” — Neil Farmer, *Getting it Right for Boys* (2012)

Communication tips

“Boys speak their first words later than girls and their speech does not become 99% comprehensible until they are four years old a full year later than girls. A preschool girl has a large vocabulary, has better grammar, and forms longer sentences than a boy of the same age.” — Ruth Hanford Morhard, *Wired to Move* (2014).

- Build rapport first.
- Keep verbal instructions short.
- Make eye contact and ensure they are listening to you. They can listen without eye contact and while doing something provided you made the initial connection.
- Use non-verbal communication especially encouragement.
- Use gestures to help them connect to what-where-when.
- Give time warnings/suggestions.
- Give choices and ask rather than demand.
- Don't sweat the small stuff.

Emotional vulnerability

Boys struggle emotionally on many levels and this is partly due to the inner struggle between hormones, brain chemicals, slower and poorer verbal and emotional processing, social conditioning and the pressure for boys to appear powerful and successful often at any cost. There is a mistaken perception that boys and men don't feel emotions as much as women — they do. They just process them and often communicate them very differently. It seems that boys need more time to be able to work out what big ugly feelings are really all about, whereas girls tend to move from experiencing the emotion to interpreting the emotion much quicker. When boys feel emotionally vulnerable they tend to have a default setting that takes them straight through to anger, which is a very acceptable warrior emotion but often not acceptable in everyday settings.

Self-regulation is a key to succeeding at school and life.

Boys need help to build self-regulation — to manage themselves better

What helps?

Music, drama, sport, time in nature, self-calming strategies, mindfulness, safe touch, reading, real play, loving relationships with consistent caregivers.

What doesn't?

TV, ipads/tablets, video games, too much pressure and stress on children, poor food and not enough sleep.

– Source: Dr Stuart Shanker

Boys need the following:

- Boys like to explore the natural world in a much more physical way than many girls.
- They need to investigate how things work.
- They need balls to kick, things to climb and to pit themselves against a challenge.
- They need structure and boundaries.
- They need goals and coaching in how to persist.
- They need a safe environment and a zero tolerance attitude towards ridicule.

— Ian Grant, *Growing Great Boys* (2008).

When Boys Muck Up:
Stop the Shaming of our Boys

Helping boys with conflict

1. Help them know what went wrong.
2. Help them to work out how to make it right.
3. Then forgive and forget.
4. Acknowledge the valuable learning experience — growth and awareness.

Boys and school

Schools can be war zones for boys. Experts believe both the curriculum and the pedagogy have been feminised...

Boys learn best through teachers who they like or who they think like them.
Relationship is the key.

Recommendations for boy-friendly early years' environments

From *The Minds of Boys* by Michael Gurian and Kathy Stevens

1. Larger work space — both inside and outside — that allow for plenty of physical movement. (Outdoor learning opportunities — the outdoor classroom)
2. Blocks, books and karate kicks — 'aggression nurturance' — it's mainly a safe way for boys to show intimacy and bonding with other boys — often needed to form lasting bonds of affection, that help with friendship, in a non-verbal way!
3. Lighting — boys struggle when lighting is poor.
4. Help with choice making — to build personal responsibility. Show them how to help, participate or do things that are often easy for girls.
5. Allow more transition time between tasks.
6. Visuals that help boys learn and remember important things — dot points.
7. Use brain breaks often that 'turn the brain on'.
8. Music and rhythm — drumming, clapping sticks, songs, clapping games

Extra recommendations from Maggie:

1. Ensure each boy has a specific adult ally who develops a caring bond.
2. Avoid too many words, too quickly.
3. Have daily opportunities for collective adventuresome play outside.
4. Develop mastery at something as soon as possible.
5. Value lightness and laughter as it calms boys' energy and builds relationships.

6. Use non-verbal signs of encouragement and acknowledgement.
7. Teach calming strategies and model quiet calm times especially with big angry feelings.
8. Allow for safe physical touch — high 5s, squeeze of shoulders, gentle hair ruffle, soft punch on arm, tickle spot.
9. Avoid poor food — especially preservatives, highly processed foods, too much sugar and 'junk' food as it can create poor gut flora which can cause energy spikes and crashes.
10. Help boys build emotional literacy with emotional coaching.

Structure and rules do matter for boys.

Boyhood to manhood

“Our adolescent boys are struggling with the modern world and its massively stimulating environments full of distractions and mixed messages about how to be a man.” — Maggie Dent, *Nurturing Kids' Hearts and Souls* (2005).

“There were moments when their vulnerability washed over me and I was wondering how we actually manage to get so many of them safely through to adulthood... Their childlike naivety... their dependence on their peers to define their behaviour, their desire to live in the moment and their associated unwillingness to plan all combine at a time when male hormones are raging through their bodies and the blood appears to be going down rather than up.”

Celia Lashlie, *He'll Be OK: Growing Gorgeous Boys into Good Men* (2007).

What we can do is support them by:

- setting the right example,
- giving them key life skills,
- identifying and acknowledging their individual gifts and talents,
- helping them find their own values,
- and loving them for who they are.

— Dr Arne Rubinstein, *The Making of Men* (2013).

Rites of passage are powerful pathways to enabling boys to become good men.

Good reads

Steve Biddulph's books latest *The New Manhood; Raising Boys*

Ian Grant's *Growing Great Boys*

Dr Arne Rubinstein's *The Making of Men*

Prof Bruce Robinson's *Fathering in the Fast Lane*

Dr Tim Hawkes' *10 Conversations You Must Have with Your Son; Boy oh Boy*

Richard Fletcher's *The Dad Factor*

Celia Lashlie's *He'll Be Ok*

Neil Farmer's *Getting it Right for Boys*

Kathy Walker's *Parenting Boys*

Ruth Hanford Morhard's *Wired to Move: Facts and strategies for Nurturing Boys in an Early Childhood Setting*

Christina Hoff Sommers' *The War Against Boys*

Michael Gurian's *The Wonder of Boys; The Minds of Boys* (with Kathy Stevens); *The Boys and Girls Learn Differently Guide for Teachers* (with Arlette C Ballew)

William S. Pollack's *Real Boys' Voices*

John Broadbent's *Man Unplugged*

Glen Gerreyn's *Men of Honour*

Maggie Dent's *Some Secrets for the Modern-Day Mammoth Hunter: Becoming and Being a Good Man*

Maggie Hamilton's *What's Happening to our Boys?*

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