

Dear Little Boys

Helping boys shine in the early years

Bonding with boys

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.

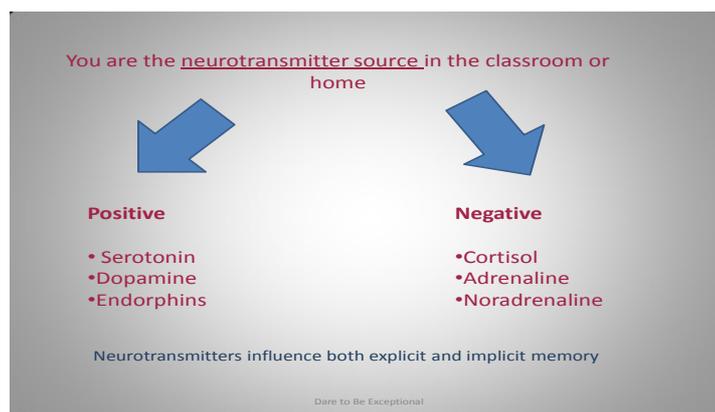
“A child’s parents will generally lead this effort of the parent lead team. In this team each person and organisation is asked to join an educational team, built by parents with children at its centre, whose job it is to educate the child. If this team moves into place, no matter what crisis the boy now faces — and even if he faces none — his chances of being lost to educational crisis diminish significantly. He now has 10 or so trusted individuals to help him outside the school system.” - Michael Gurian and Kathy Stevens, *The Minds of Boys* (2005).

Reducing boys’ stress

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 has been linked to neglect in childhood — this includes a **lack of physical and emotional nurturing**.

Keeping stressors to a minimum and increasing things and activities that calm our little boys’ nervous systems can have lifelong benefits. Safe touch, good food, laughter, quiet, calm environments that don’t overstimulate are just a few things that can help with this.



Boys do not have the same ability as girls to calm themselves down. This is because of the basal ganglia and the fact that they do not have as much oxytocin in their system. Nor do they have as much ability to process serotonin, which tends to make them fidgety. — Ruth Hanford Morhard, *Wired to Move: Facts and Strategies for Nurturing Boys in an Early Childhood Setting* (2014).

Feeling misunderstood or feeling dumb or a failure causes boys stress.

Young boys tend to have:

1. Lack of language skills
2. Less emotional development
3. Physically “unjoined” up and emotions expressed through action.

— Neil Farmer, *Getting it Right for Boys* (2012)

In early childhood research boys have been known to be around six to 12, even 18 months behind girls. This same boy by around eight tends to catch up if he is not forced to do things that he’s developmentally unable to do, nor has he had repeated experiences of struggle. Repeated failure creates mindsets like, “I am dumb. I am stupid”. It is very difficult to change these once they are entrenched and they can become self-fulfilling prophecies; sad but true. This is where my concerns about the push down of formalised learning into the early years starts.

Some boy differences that can help build understanding and connection:

- ✓ Prefer to do — with autonomy i.e. boys like an adventure
- ✓ Single focus — often can’t hear when their attention is focused elsewhere
- ✓ Some reports indicate boys hear less, up to 70%
- ✓ Get ‘information overload’
- ✓ Memory issues
- ✓ Need gentle reminders — preferably visual/ non verbal
- ✓ Have shorter attention spans — dopamine levels drop
- ✓ Need greater stimulation to get involved — is the activity worthwhile?
- ✓ Growth spurts.

Communication tips

- 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.

What boys need:

- to feel part of a team — belonging
- opportunities to explore and investigate how things work
- to kick balls, run races and pit themselves physically against a challenge
- structure and help getting organised
- goals and good coaching

- safe environments and a zero-tolerance attitude to ridicule and shaming
– Ian Grant, *Growing Great Boys* (2006).

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. 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.

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

Model the magic of silence and stillness for boys.

When Boys Muck Up

The damaging effects of shaming — Examples of shaming

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|---|---|
| ○ Deliberately ignoring the child | ○ You naughty boy! |
| ○ Being sarcastic | ○ You are acting like a selfish brat. |
| ○ Walking away as though the child does not exist | ○ Grow up! |
| ○ Rolling one's eyes | ○ Stop acting like a baby. |
| ○ Glaring at the child with disgust | ○ Don't be a sissy. |
| ○ Shouting, yelling and swearing at a child | ○ You're hopeless. |
| ○ Freezing a boy out! | ○ You're not even trying. |
| ○ Saying things like: | ○ Why can't you be more like your brother? |
| ○ You ought to be ashamed of yourself | ○ What are people going to think? |
| | ○ Please avoid telling a boy to "be a man!" |

Helping boys with conflict

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

Recommendations for boy-friendly early years' environments

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

- Larger work space — both inside and outside — that allow for plenty of physical movement. (Outdoor learning opportunities — the outdoor classroom)
- 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!
- Lighting — boys struggle when lighting is poor.
- Help with choice making — to build personal responsibility. Show them how to help, participate or do things that are often easy for girls.
- Allow more transition time between tasks.
- Visuals that help boys learn and remember important things — dot points.
- Use brain breaks often that 'turn the brain on'.
- Music and rhythm — drumming, clapping sticks, songs, clapping games

Extra Recommendations from Maggie

- Ensure each boy has a specific adult ally who develops a caring bond.
- Avoid too many words, too quickly.
- Have daily opportunities for collective adventuresome play outside.
- Develop mastery at something as soon as possible.
- Value lightness and laughter as it calms boys' energy and builds relationships.
- Use non-verbal signs of encouragement and acknowledgement.
- Teach calming strategies and model quiet calm times especially with big angry feelings.
- Allow for safe physical touch — high 5s, squeeze of shoulders, gentle hair ruffle, soft punch on arm, tickle spot.
- 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.
- Help boys build emotional literacy with emotional coaching.

Structure and rules do matter for boys

Steve Biddulph (2013) believes boys need to know the following:

- Who's in charge?
- What are the rules?
- Will the rules be enforced in a fair way?

Boys learn best through teachers who they like or who they think like them.

Despite what they show with their tough masks, ***boys are very much influenced positively or negatively by the perceived absence of acceptance and genuine care.***

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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