

# Boys: The Magic of Silence and Stillness


By Maggie Dent

**I**t is a risk being born a boy. Statistics (1) show clearly that boys and men are more at risk of the following:

- Injury as a result of an accident, sport or risky behaviours
- Failure at school
- Offences involving criminal activity
- Being killed as a pedestrian, in motor accidents or at work
- Alcohol and drug abuse
- Suicide.

As a mother of four sons, whose ages at that time ranged from seven to fifteen, I felt sick to my stomach! How was I going to keep them alive? I also knew from my counselling work that troubled boys seldom seek help, or even acknowledge they may need help.

*Continued overleaf*



*“Emotional literacy is the most valuable gift we can offer our students, and urging parents and educators to recognize the price boys pay when we hold them to an impossible standard of manhood is important in today’s modern world.”*

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### Boys and Emotions

More and more boys in our schools are becoming aggressive and violent. This is happening at younger and younger ages. Many boys are in emotionally-charged situations that challenge and confuse them. Many boys are frustrated in school systems that are conditioned against boys, or that have teachers inadequately trained to meet the learning needs and styles of most boys. Unless you can build rapport with a boy, you will struggle in your ability to really connect and communicate with him.

The whole emotional domain of feelings, theirs and others, is pretty hard for boys to understand. Irrational feelings that are hard to control cause much angst and confusion. The need for boys to mask their emotional state causes even more uncertainty and confusion. Many boys bury their anger and rage over many years until this unexpressed anger turns into depression, bitterness, sarcasm, irritability or pettiness. Unfortunately, they freeze out the positive feelings at the same time, which makes it difficult for them to maintain loving relationships. Adults who try to give advice to boys often unintentionally inflame emotions. If you wish to control boys' behaviours, overtly or indirectly, then watch out! Nagging and questioning boys will only add to the volatility of relationships. Boys, of course, learn to become selectively deaf very early in life and sometimes do this unconsciously; in classes they miss valuable learning opportunities.

I have noticed that the boys who cope best in school have strong auditory processing abilities. However, very few boys are natural auditory learners. Auditory learners usually only make up about 15% of the population. Professors Ken and Rita Dunn (2) reported the following:

- only a third of students remember even 75% of what they hear in class;

- tactile or kinaesthetic learners are the main candidates for failure in traditional school classrooms;
- tactile-kinaesthetic learners often drop out of school because they cannot focus well when forced to sit down, hour after hour;
- many people in schools are high achievers in linguistic and logical learning styles, so to them, that environment works best;
- most underachievers are motivated by their peers to be so.

Boys naturally like to be able to 'fix' things that do not work properly. I believe boys need extra reassurance that they will be able to cope and that they will get better and better at managing the seemingly irrational emotional challenge of life. Also, we need to let them know that asking for help is a sign of strength and not a sign of weakness. I just pray that there is someone who is non-judgemental, older and wiser that they can share the confusion of their lives with; that this person (possibly a teacher who the boy believes likes him) will not try to take the boy's problems from them or offer unsolicited advice.

The newer therapies like NLP (see **TEX** Issue 9) are great for boys. They can diffuse intense anger and rage without having to talk about it much. In my experience with boys in schools, I have discovered that they need quiet spaces to help sort out their thoughts. I am sure that too many parents and teachers overcrowd their boys with too much talk and too many questions. It took me a while to realise that my boys settled better by playing by themselves outside, especially after a full school day. "Silence is often an excellent way of letting our sons find their own solutions rather than us imposing our own (Ian Lillico: Boys and Their Schooling, 2000).

All too often a boy is sent to detention, and told to "go and think about what you have done!" NLP suggests that this strategy may increase the likelihood of the boy repeating the experience as it anchors it in his visual memory. When there is a conflict that ends in an inappropriate response like shouting, hitting or yelling, we need to be aware that the boy will be functioning from his hind brain or brain stem. This is where our survival instincts are buried and much of our instinctive behaviour comes from. To move to the frontal lobe where we can process from a higher level of intelligence, where we can make choices and consider outcomes, we need time and also the removal of threat. Giving time out to calm down and reflect is a valuable thing to do, however the following request will bring a much more beneficial outcome: "Go and think about a different choice you could have made, that would cre-

ated a more positive and appropriate outcome for all concerned". How often do we as parents or educators try to resolve conflict at the moment it occurs? It is almost impossible for the children concerned to do this without some quiet time to calm and reflect.

Empathy is an extremely important emotional intelligence skill. It can help boys make better decisions when they meet personal conflict. I firmly believe that boys respond to physical violence because they know no other way of 'fixing' the problem. One of the benefits of Jenny Mosley's circle work with children is the way that it builds empathy and creative problem-solving. This helps especially boys to develop these aspects of the frontal lobe in the brain in a safe environment and well before puberty hits!

In the classrooms where regular relaxation and silent time occurs, the most noticeable positive benefit is the improvement in boys' behaviour and concentration. Boys prefer quiet spaces to think, and yet they are often the ones making the noise! I believe that boys who learn how to bring more silence and stillness into their lives, manage the emotional roller coaster of adolescence better than those who have no idea how to become quiet and still.

In the quieter moments the unconscious mind has a better chance to make sense of experiences, create more positive solutions to problems and allow boys to feel less overwhelmed. The constant activity and busy-ness of boys may also lead them to create stress-related illnesses later in adulthood. The magic of silence and stillness for boys must be taught as well as modelled, because it is not a normal activity for most boys. The earlier the better! Stress-related illnesses later in life account for over 75% of all illnesses and this stress busting method can help reduce anxiety and tension in the nervous system. As boys do less emotional debriefing with friends than girls, they are more at risk of emotional overwhelm, that many numb with alcohol, drugs and risk-taking behaviour.

Clark Wight a principal of a private junior school in Western Australia believes that:

***"we as teachers and parents need to listen to boys' voices. It is an opportunity to de-construct the 'boy code' – old rules that favour male stoicism that make boys ashamed about expressing weakness, vulnerability and their own emotions. It is about giving boys an opportunity to use their 'voice', to enable us to give the consistent attention, empathy and support they truly need and desire, as well as to give parents and teachers some tools to try and understand our sons and students even better."***

A TIME TO CONNECT: BEING 10 AND MOVING FORWARD" (2005).

When boys are met with big emotional challenges, how you support them at this time is critical. They need lots of time to work out how to deal with the problem, quite often alone and usually somewhere safe. Tell them you are there for them but take guidance from them on what you can do that helps. Do not assume anything! Ask them whom they would prefer to see for advice or help.

Latest brain research has explained the "paper bag" stage of adolescent boys between 14-18. Many teachers and parents will know that many boys seem to lose the ability to speak clearly and they sound like they have a paper bag over their head and they respond only in grunts. This is also a time when they seem to be less motivated about manners, cleanliness, effective empathetic communication, school work and how to be a sociable being! The brain apparently does a pruning of its unused parts at this stage and so they actually can go backwards and you may wonder where they have gone! They struggle with decision-making, self-motivation and are prone to making very risky decisions. The good news is that the brain has two other significant growth spurts, one being around the age of 18 when they start to speak in sentences again and wash their hair a little more often. This is an age where boys make better decisions about work opportunities and education.

The next growth takes place in the frontal lobe and around 22-24 and this one is when you suddenly discover that your parenting was not a complete failure. They become more emotionally mature, sensitive and much better at forming life-enhancing relationships. Many young men decide to plan for their futures, and start thinking of others and often re-connect to their siblings! Please hang in there until this age – and pray often. They will come out the tunnel of adolescence and over 80% become decent human beings! Of course these stages of brain development can be seriously impaired by excessive use of marijuana, speed and amphetamines and binge-drinking.

Yes raising boys is a risky business. However consider how dull would our world be if not for boys – with their energy, their cheeky sense of humour and their lust for life and adventure. Even though they do make most of the noise in classrooms and homes, they benefit enormously from silence and stillness, less questions and less commands, and more space – physically and emotionally! **TEX**

Adapted with permission from 'Saving Our Children from Our Chaotic World' by Maggie Dent 2003. ISBN 0-9751258-0-X.



## References

1. *An Introduction to the New Men's Health*, Richard Fletcher 1995 (Men's Health Project, University of Newcastle).
2. *The Learning Revolution*, Ken & Rita Dunn 1997 pp349-355

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Find out more about Maggie and her work with teachers at [www.esteemplus.com](http://www.esteemplus.com).