

What boys need most

You can be that special person who makes things easier.



“ Boys are found everywhere - on top of, underneath, inside of, climbing on, swinging from, running around or jumping to.... A boy is Truth with dirt on its face, Beauty with a cut on its finger, Wisdom with bubble gum in its hair and the Hope of the future with a frog in its pocket.”

— Alan Marshall Beck

This is based on research reported in Richard Fletcher’s book, *An Introduction to the New Men’s Health*. Another writer, Michael Gurian, author of *The Wonder of Boys* and *The Good Son*, explains the male amygdale — the primary aggression centre in the brain — is larger than that of females and creates more aggression in males.

Considering this fact and the massive surges of testosterone boys experience, we can see that boys are more wired to like risky behaviour.

It seems that a boy’s natural impulsiveness could also be rooted in his biology. Boys tend to have lower levels of serotonin, the calming neurotransmitter, and thus it is more difficult for them to manage impulses. Boys definitely benefit from clear rules and boundaries, but not too many. With strong emotional support and bonding, boys can grow into men who are able to manage the uniquely special qualities of being a man.

“Boys in education” expert Ian Lillico states that much of the hostility in homes and schools stems from denial of boys’ feelings. 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 untrained adequately to meet most boys’ learning needs and styles. Unless you can build rapport with a boy, you will struggle in your ability to connect and communicate with him. To build rapport, we need to better understand how boys see the world, what they need and what challenges them.

Boys need rapport to build relationships. Boys learn through their teacher, rather than just learn from what is taught. Indeed boys who feel liked, valued and accepted will perform better in our classrooms. Many boys have gone backwards academically because they have not had a positive relationship with a teacher. Girls cope much better in our schools because of this fact alone.

Why are boys so sensitive to feeling disconnected? The whole emotional domain of feelings, theirs and others, is hard for them 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.

Emotions become more confusing when boys think they are their mask. Many boys bury their anger and rage until this unexpressed anger turns into depression; or just bitterness, sarcasm, irritability or pettiness. Sometimes, boys “armour” their hearts so as not to feel pain. 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. Boys, of course, learn to become selectively deaf 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. Auditory learners make up around 15 percent of the population. In the research by professors Ken and Rita Dunn, from St John’s University, New York, they reported the following:

- Only a third of students remember even 75% of what they hear in a normal class period.
- Tactile or kinaesthetic learners are ▶

Statistics show clearly that boys, and men, are more at risk of the following:

- injury as the result of an accident
- admission to hospital as a result of an accident
- injury during sport
- injury doing risky behaviours
- failure at school
- death or injury in motor vehicle accidents
- offences involving criminal activity
- imprisonment
- being killed as a pedestrian
- AIDS
- death at work
- development circulatory system diseases
- diagnosis with cancer
- death from cancer
- permanent disability from work
- alcohol and drug abuse
- suicide

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 high schools are geared to academic two-dimensional learning styles, that is: linguistic and logical. Many people involved in administration are high achievers in these two learning styles, so to them that environment works best.

Author I. Grant writes in *Growing Great Boys: How to bring out the best in your son* that boys need the following:

- Boys like to explore the natural world in a much more physical way than 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 toward ridicule.

Boys who are highly tactile, or kinaesthetic, suffer most as teaching methods generally use auditory and visual channels of communication. This is especially true in the case of our Aboriginal children in Australia and our Maori and Islander children in New Zealand. Their culture is highly kinaesthetic, using a lot of touch and movement; they can feel uncomfortable with verbal communication, and their auditory processing skills may be weak or undeveloped. I find them to be intuitively strong, and they know almost instantly if a new contact is comfortable with them, or is just pretending. Tactile people can be threatening for an auditory person as they will mismatch in the ways they communicate. Drawing or doodling actually helps a tactile person to stay “online” so that they listen better. This can be disconcerting to people who like eye contact to get feedback and validation during communication. A threat in their immediate environment also stops Indigenous children learning. These

children would be more successful in school if taught by tactile-kinaesthetic teachers, especially in the early years.


In my counselling experience with boys suffering despair, depression or suicidal thoughts, I find they often feel overwhelmed by their emotions. Many of these boys feel deeply flawed and a failure; they believe that those closest to them do not love them. They feel completely misunderstood. Many schools still use shame, sarcasm and strong criticism when dealing with poor boy behaviour and many boys carry these scars right through life. Boys are just as vulnerable as girls in terms of their inner world, and we must change how we discipline boys. An excellent way to help a boy explore an inappropriate way of behaving is to walk him around the oval as you talk about the incident. The movement means he is safe, and it is less confronting and more private, and they will stay engaged with the communication.

Boys need to have significant adults who “see them” and accept them. Sometimes it may be a family member, an aunty, uncle or grandfather. Sometimes it may be a school chaplain or a family friend who is trusted to keep confidentiality; or a sporting coach or teacher the boys believe likes them.

Boys need quiet spaces to help sort out their thoughts. I am sure that 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. Ian Lillico agrees, writing in his book: “Silence is often an excellent way of letting our sons find their own solutions rather than us imposing our own.”

Even though most boys are activity based, they still need turn off times to re-charge their batteries. “Chilling out” in front of TV or playing on computers are ways that boys do this; “tuning out” to conversation is another; and so are day-dreaming and spending time alone in a bedroom. Boys often need separation time to adjust from school to home. In classrooms where regular relaxation and silent time occurs, the most noticeable positive benefit is the improvement in boys’ behaviour and cooperation.

In classrooms, boys need more time than girls to think before answering any questions that require emotional analysis. Boys prefer quiet spaces to think, and yet they often are the ones making the noise. Just like girls, boys learn best when they feel safe and cared for and are in environments with adults who treat them with kindness and fairness. I believe that boys who learn how to bring more silence and stillness into their lives manage the emotional roller coaster of adolescence better.

The constant activity and busy-ness of boys may also lead them to create stress-related illnesses in later adulthood. Heightened cortisone levels, from being in the go-go-go state, can create problems with anxiety and later fear-based mental health problems. Constant activity can also cause sleep deprivation as winding those bodies and busy heads down for sleep is not easy. 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! 

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