

Dear Little Boys

Parenting boys through 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 guide to connecting, loving and encouraging

Smile

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!)

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' mask, or defence strategy, is to wear their anger outwardly, as they feel like a volcano building up for an eruption inside them. They are seeking love, appreciation and validation even though they are being so hard to love!

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

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.

Young boys tend to have:

- Lack of language skills
- Less emotional development
- Physically "unjoined" up and emotions expressed through action.
— Neil Farmer, *Getting it Right for Boys* (2012)

Boys are often up to 6-18 months behind girls when they start school.

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).

Boys need from their Dads

- Rules
- Routines
- Ridiculousness — Fun, laughter, jokes, surprise and warmth create safety for boys
- A “you have what it takes approach.”
- Love and affirmation

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.

“Often we place boys in the most terrible situations because we genuinely believe it will be the making of them, not realising how much of them we might be destroying in the process.” — Maggie Hamilton, *What's Happening to Our Boys?* (2010)

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

- | | |
|---|---------------------------------------|
| ○ 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. |

- You ought to be ashamed of yourself
- Why can't you be more like your brother?
- 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.

Boys and Pre-School - 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?

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.***

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

This is why it is so important to teach teachers how to build **rapport** with boys because that helps them feel connected, understood and valued.

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.***