RAISING GORGEOUS BOYS TO BECOME GOOD MEN

A one-day conference

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FEATURING:
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CLARK WIGHT

Presented by
Maggie Dent
quietly improving lives
Please note the title of this event is a very deliberate and respectful nod to the late Celia Lashlie, another wonderful boy champion whose book “He’ll Be OK: Growing Gorgeous Boys Into Good Men” is essential reading for anyone raising or caring for boys. Thank you Celia for all you did for our boys.
About Steve

Steve Biddulph is one of the world’s best-known parent educators. A family psychologist for 30 years, he is now retired but continues to write and teach. Steve’s books — authored with his partner Shaaron, include *The Secret of Happy Children*, *The New Manhood*, *RAISING GIRLS* and his newly released *Raising Boys in the 21st Century* are in four million homes and 31 languages. They have influenced the way we look at childhood and especially the development of boys and men. We are delighted that Steve can join us for this event!

Steve’s shows are world famous for their humour, honesty, and life-changing stories.

How to raise boys in the 21st century

Can you remember that moment? Holding your baby son in your arms for the first time? As you gazed down at his soft little face, I bet you hoped with all your heart for just one thing. That he would travel safely through boyhood, grow to be his best, and become, one day, a wonderful man. It doesn’t seem too much to hope for. Yet we all know of so many boys and young men who have come to grief, and ended up being harmed or causing harm to other people. Compared with a girl, a boy is nine times more likely to end up in jail, three times more likely to use drugs, three times more likely to take his own life or die in a car crash. Those are terrible figures, and we shouldn’t just think “that’s the way it is”. There has to be a reason and a cure.

Twenty five years ago, I wrote an international best-selling book on raising boys, and today I’m pleased to say we know far far more, and raising sons is easier and is getting better. We are making some wonderful men. We know how to do it right. So let me set out some of the most powerful new ideas . . .

The first thing in raising a son is to decide what kind of man you want to make. Sometimes, at my seminars on parenting, I ask my audiences to call out the qualities they think make up a good man. You can guess what they shout – things like kind, gentle, safe, trustworthy, strong, caring. Someone will joke “sober” or “looks like George Clooney”. But I sum it up in just two words: backbone and heart. Strong, reliable, and trustworthy, on the one side. And warm and loving as well. It’s not enough to just have one side, without the other. A friendly drunk is no use. A strong but cold dad won’t win the hearts of his sons or daughters. It has to be both.
Creating that good man means understanding the boy you start with. Are boys different to girls in some fundamental way? Yes, and no. Forty years ago, when I started out, the best thinking was to do away with gender differences altogether. We urgently needed equality, the misogyny that had kept women down and out for centuries had to end. We thought that if we raised boys and girls the same, then we would eliminate sexism. Same clothes, same toys, same games, it was a worthy and admirable effort. I totally supported this and I still do – perhaps the best known take-home message of my books is teach your son to cook. And that girls need to be loud, and messy, and feel free to climb trees and jump in puddles.

**Risk factors**

But we have to do more than that. Those risk factors unique to boys, and to girls, have to be worked on. While we know now that gender is on a continuum, and every child is unique, the science is getting clearer that for most boys, and most girls, there are glaring differences we have to address.

Most boys show distinct patterns of development, even in the womb. Their brains grow more slowly from the moment they start producing testosterone at just a few months’ gestation. And that difference persists – many boys are up to 20 months behind girls in some aspects of brain development at age five. Not only that, but boys vary a great deal within their gender too. Sampling umbilical cord blood at birth shows that some boys are high in testosterone, and some low. And the high-testosterone boys have much more trouble with reading and speaking. Boys overall are three times more likely to be problem readers than girls. And those are mostly high-testosterone boys.

Now the last thing we want to say about that is “boys will be boys” as that is really the weakest of cop-outs. It means we have to say “right, let’s switch this boy on to reading, by telling him stories, reading bedtime books to him, and keeping on chatting to him and listening to him as we go about our day. Don’t just plonk him in front of a TV or screen. The world doesn’t need men who can wrestle buffalo any more, but every boy and man needs to be able to communicate. We can help our sons to catch up with girls, and get along well with them.

We can also make the world, and especially school, more boy-friendly. Most boys at five (and some girls too) aren’t ready to sit still – in fact it harms their brain development if they do. And they aren’t ready for rote learning or being forced to read and write. In countries where children start school at six or seven, they do much better. Moving about a lot, playing, being active, suits most kids but especially those active boys who positively need it.

And that’s only the start.

There are stages of boyhood which girls do not have. One is the “full-on fours”, when luteinising hormone floods their bodies, setting up the puberty hormones far in advance. When I wrote about this in my Facebook community, which has many Irish mums and dads as well as from all across the world, they immediately knew what I was talking about.

**Activity, rambunctiousness and noise**

Parents of four-year-olds notice high levels of activity, rambunctiousness and noise. It’s a relief to know this isn’t naughtiness. (Though any sudden change in behaviour is worth getting to the bottom of in case something bad has happened). But it’s totally normal for little boys (and some girls) to be exploding with energy, and our job is to find ways they can run it off – just as we would if we had a sheepdog in the house, they need their exercise. You can do this through lots of chances to get outside and move about and have adventures. And some gentle but clear help with knowing when to put the brakes on. If we make a boy feel he is bad for being a boy, then we trigger an anxiety about being loved, that usually comes out as anger and the beginnings of a problem man. You can put boundaries on, and ask him to calm down, but do it kindly.
Another stage of boyhood – called adrenarche – was discovered just last year by researchers at Melbourne’s Royal Children’s Hospital in a long-term study of 1,200 children approaching their teens. Adrenarche comes along at eight to nine years of age. It’s a rise in hormones called adrenal hormones, and shows up on brain scans, too. I call this the “emotional eights”, because that describes it usefully. Your son will be more prone to get upset, or anxious, or fly off the handle, and generally not be his usual self. It will bewilder him as much as you. Adrenarche is the first stirrings of puberty, though outward signs won’t show for another three or four years.

Most boys end up larger or stronger than girls. So it’s vital to teach them to never hit or hurt, or even disrespect or be rude to, girls or women.

Girls are so different in this regard. Their emotional phase mostly comes right with puberty, and is often two years sooner than with boys, and (thankfully) is all over by 14, when they reach their full height and are fully fertile. Boys may not catch up in height or maturity until 16 or 17.

But most boys end up larger or stronger than girls, and eventually, larger than their partner. So it’s absolutely vital that we teach them to never hit or hurt, or even disrespect or be rude to girls or women, starting with their mum or their sisters. Dads and mums together have to reinforce this message, sitting down with them and being clear what a good man is like, and that they expect this and will never go along with anything different. Again, not heavy or hard, just friendly, but crystal clear. To turn into a good man, a boy has to hear exactly what that means in practice (and of course, see it carried out by the men he grows up around).

Recently in Australia, something great happened. A champion surfer was attacked by a shark, and disappeared out of sight behind a wave, while thousands watched from the beach and on TV. He miraculously reappeared safe and sound a moment later. But interviewed on the TV his friends were crying, and saying how afraid they had been for him. And how much they loved him.

A big new breakthrough in what we want in men, and have to teach our boys, is how to have an open heart. Affectionate dads who hug and cuddle, show their own feelings easily and can say “I’m sad” or “I was scared” raise mentally healthy boys. The old-style man kept his feelings bottled up, only to explode when he was drunk, or things just reached overload.

In the new version of my book, we explain the whole chemistry of why human beings cry, and how this heals the brain after loss, and prevents violence (as most violent people are actually in fear and grief rather than anger). It’s essential that boys are able to cry at any age, and be vulnerable. As social researcher Dr Brené Brown argues in her excellent TED talk, nothing good ever happens without vulnerability. Love, friendship, parenthood, creativity, learning new things, closeness and intimacy all involve being vulnerable. Making mistakes, and risking rejection. Being brave enough to fail, and not be crippled by shame, is essential to being a dad, husband, or friend.

What if you’re a single mother or in a same-sex relationship?

A word here is important for single mothers, who raise about a third of all boys. Let me absolutely reassure you: mothers can raise wonderful men, and they have done so for thousands of years. The single mothers and women raising children without men that I have worked with extensively over 40 years have taught me two key secrets. They made sure that their sons had good men somewhere in their life – school teachers, grandads, uncles, sports coaches, family friends. They chose these with care.

And these men stepped up so that each boy “knew what a good man looked like”. In my talks, I ask the dads there to think about the fatherless boy among their son’s friends, and be sure to invite him along on trips to concerts, fishing or camping, or art galleries or whatever is your thing.

The other secret of single parenthood? Be sure to have some time for yourself to have fun, rejuvenate, and have friends. Don’t do it in any kind of martyr attitude. Be proud of yourself, and reward yourself for the great job you do.
A story of my own

When my dad was dying, I spend the last couple of weeks at his side. We hadn’t always been close, and now I didn’t want to waste a second. One day, he told me a story of my babyhood. A few days after I was born, my mum was very tired, and so he put me in the pram to go for a stroll. Entering the high street – this was 1953 – he noticed people looking at him oddly, even scornfully, and some children danced along behind him jeering. At this point in the story he paused. I asked him, what were they saying? “Your dad’s your mum.” He remembered it all from 50 years ago. He looked teary. A shy man, it had all proved too much, and he ducked, with me and the pram, down a side street and went home.

Today, dads with prams are a normal as a rainy day. Young fathers are affectionate, and capable.

We know that the genders overlap, and you can have a macho girl and a sensitive quiet boy, and they are both valuable and needed in the world of tomorrow.

We’ve got a revolution happening in fatherhood, and chances are strong that girls and boys will turn out better as a result.

The new understanding of boyhood, and the better kind of man we can create, is going to change our world. We know that every boy is different, and you have to get to know your own unique version. We know that the genders overlap, and you can have a macho girl and a sensitive quiet boy, and they are both valuable and needed in the world of tomorrow. We know that if you embrace the differences, and work with them, then an equal world is just around the corner.

Know your boy, and you can love him the best.

Explaining pornography to boys

There are new things affecting boyhood, especially the teen years, which weren’t around much when we were kids. The worst of these is probably online pornography.

Mums and dads need to sit down with pre-teen boys and tell them: you’ll get to see some yucky stuff from friends or online. You’ll naturally feel curious about it, but some of it is horrible and mean. And it’s not how love really works. Sex is really great when it’s friendly, kind, funny and respectful. Porn sex is different to real sex in four ways:

1. Real lovemaking is personal. Your heart and mind are making love too. In porn you are just a body, with no personality or feelings.

2. Real lovemaking is slow, it takes time to trust, and explore and every part of it feels good. In porn, it’s just a rush to “get it done”.

3. Real lovemaking can be intense, but it’s always kind. You treat someone the way you would like to be treated. Porn is routinely degrading, uncaring, and hurts or humiliates women. In real life, women would not like that or like you if you did that.

4. Real lovemaking feels good afterwards. You get closer, you want to be together. You want to talk and trust and open your heart. Porn is cold and you are disposable. Your feelings don’t count. You end up not liking yourself. You have trouble getting along with real girls.

It’s a daunting thing to talk about this with our kids, but we have to do it. They want our help, and they will be lost if we don’t give it. It’s a big relief to be able to be open about sex, and for our kids to know it’s normal, and great, and able to be talked about.
About Maggie

Maggie Dent is one of Australia’s favourite parenting authors, and an educator, parenting and resilience specialist with a particular interest in the early years and adolescence. A self-confessed and devoted ‘boy champion’, Maggie is the mother of four adult sons, a very grateful grandmother and a passionate advocate for the healthy, common-sense raising of children in order to strengthen families and communities. Maggie has experience in teaching, counselling, and working in the palliative care/funeral services and suicide prevention. She is also a passionate, positive voice for children of all ages. Maggie is the author of 10 books, several e-books and a prolific creator of resources for parents, adolescents, teachers and early childhood educators, and others who are interested in quietly improving their lives.

Introduction

Every child matters

When we are talking about gender it is important to recognise that boys and girls, transgender and intersex people are equally fabulous and they absolutely have more similarities than differences. However, there is no denying that babies are born with a few key different body parts and that makes boys and girls different on some level.

There are also certain predispositions and hormonal tendencies that come into play. Add to that the type of nurturing children receive, the environment in which they are raised, the expectations we have of them, and the unseen influences of the culture and society around them — this is how we shape who our boys and girls become.

As you read these notes, be open-minded that this is not intended to put boys or girls in boxes — it’s important to take from this what resonates for YOUR child. I believe gender identity is not fixed and we are more ‘soft wired’ than ‘hard wired’ into having more ‘masculine’ or ‘feminine’ traits. You may very well have a girl who has a lot of ‘masculine’ tendencies and vice versa. I was very much that kind of girl and who knows whether that comes down to hormones during pregnancy, how I was nurtured in the first couple of years of my life, or how I was conditioned to feel — I fit so many of the characteristics of being a typical boy rather than a typical girl. Nevertheless, I love both girls and boys, and only want the best for every child ever born.
Essentially many boys who have a ‘mother wound’ will struggle in some way with relationships with women later in life — especially if the wound is triggered by something said or done. This can mean women teachers, work colleagues and wives, partners and lovers.

“Unresolved issues in a man’s relationship with his mother are profound sources of trouble in a man’s life.”
– Michael Gurian, Mothers, Sons and Lovers: How a Man’s Relationship with his Mother Affects the Rest of His Life. (1993)

I have become a champion for boys in our homes and schools because I believe that with more understanding we can transform the scary statistics we hear about boys. These statistics tell a story of underachievement at school, increasing school suspensions from inappropriate and aggressive behaviour, increasing school disengagement and failure, accidents and deaths due to poor decision-making, and the abuse of alcohol and drugs alongside random senseless violence on our streets. The rates of family violence are also an enormous concern with the knowledge that in Australia a woman dies every week at the hands of her partner.

In my former work as a counsellor, I met many troubled boys and men who were unable to be the best expression of themselves and often they held a ‘mother wound’. Mothers and mother figures are enormously powerful influences both negatively and positively and I am passionate to help all mums and mother figures learn what matters in the journey of raising our sons, and the sons of other mothers to be the good men they deserve to become.

1. POSITIVE MOTHERING — AVOIDING THE MOTHER WOUND

Mothering can be seen like a triangle:

Warm, fair, firm, fun mother

Cold, distant mother

Smother mother

Boys are influenced not only by their own mother — they are influenced by the mothers of others. So many men have shared how important an older wiser woman was in helping them find themselves and a better way of being in the world. Please invest your love and nurturing of your sons to the sons of other mothers and let the metaphor of ‘it takes a village’ become a reality again.

In much of the most recent research, strong attachment and bondedness can be shown to be the most significant influence on emotional wellbeing.
What helps build strong attachment or healthy mothering?

Tips for connecting:

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

• Use non-verbal messages of connection (such as winking, thumbs up, etc.).
• Parents can give small symbols to hold onto in their absence like kisses in a child’s hands or captured in a container.
• 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’ (not for the sensitive child!).

Six ways to avoid a mother wound:

1. Ensure emotional and physical nurturing under five.
2. Avoid shaming, criticism, ridicule and rejection.
3. Have good expectations of your boys — that they will become co-operative, kind, gentle
4. Improve your understanding of how boys see the world.
5. Acknowledge gender strengths, and accept and support gender vulnerabilities.
6. Support the need to individuate and become a separate grown up — i.e. a man.

The damaging effects of shaming

Shame is the name we give to the overwhelming feeling that we need to crawl under a rock because we see ourselves as unworthy, unpleasant, dislikeable or reprehensible, and because we expect to be judged or rejected accordingly.

In my counselling experience with boys suffering despair, depression or even ideas of suicide, I found these lads often feel overwhelmed by their emotions. Emotions were unresolved, running rampant inside them.

Many of these boys felt deeply flawed and like a failure; they believed that those closest to them did not love them. This deep sense of alienation and feeling separate came up so often when listening to these troubled lads. They were starving for deep, meaningful connection not only with their parents but also with other significant adults in their life. They often felt completely misunderstood.
Feeling unheard and misunderstood makes boys feel angry and hurt and without a way of making sense of these big emotions they can bury them deep. Over time these emotions can become ‘hardened’ and create a form of body armour — that prevents a boy and a man from feeling any feelings — love and affection is harder to show.

Examples of shaming

- Deliberately ignoring the child
- Being sarcastic
- Tsk tsk tsk
- Ridiculing in anyway
- Walking away as though the child does not exist
- Rolling one’s eyes

Saying things like:

- You ought to be ashamed of yourself
- You naughty boy!
- You are acting like a selfish brat.
- Grow up!
- Don’t be so stupid!
- Stop acting like a baby.
- Frowning often
- Glaring at the child with disgust
- Shouting, yelling and swearing at a child
- Hitting, shoving or forcing
- Freezing a boy out!
- Don’t be a sissy.
- You’re hopeless.
- You’re not even trying.
- Why can’t you be more like your brother?
- What are people going to think?
- I am so disappointed in you.

Please avoid ever telling a boy to “be a man!”

2. UNDERSTANDING HOW BOYS SEE THE WORLD

Reducing boys’ stress

“Boys are more prone to separation distress, anxiety and can become emotionally shut down as a result of feeling abandoned.”


We have to challenge the myth that boys are tougher than girls. In one research study both mothers and fathers reported higher rates of hostile parenting practices towards boys and were less confident in parenting them, compared with girls.

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

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 strong, 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 can 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.

Sadness becomes anger.
Fear becomes anger.
Feeling misunderstood becomes anger.
Feeling rejected becomes anger.
Uncertainty becomes anger.
Forgetfulness becomes anger.
Disorganisation becomes anger.
Feeling unloved becomes anger.
Grief can come out as anger.
Feeling ignored, feeling disrespected and invalidated, and feeling dumb becomes anger.
Frustration becomes anger.

The stronger a boy feels emotionally connected to his adult allies, the safer his emotional world becomes and the better his behaviour will be. It is a bit sad that due to the inner warrior our boys often make more mistakes, break more things, forget more things and are often the ones who bear the brunt of our discipline much more than most girls.

The early years for our lads

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. Steve Biddulph in his excellent updated edition of his bestselling book, *Raising Boys in the 21st Century* (2018), argues that we need to seriously consider allowing boys to start school later than five — boys who struggle at five continue to struggle throughout school.

Some boy differences that can help build understanding and connection:
- Prefer to do — with autonomy, i.e. boys like an adventure and to do things their way
- Single focus — often can’t hear when their attention is focused elsewhere
- Some reports indicate boys more likely to struggle with hearing more than girls
- 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.

“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.”

**Temperament matters**

**Roosters — the Alpha males**

You will know if you have a rooster, firstly because they are strong-willed, high-energy children from quite early in life. If most nights you collapse on your couch from exhaustion because of the high energy levels of one of your children, you have a rooster.

### Typical rooster characteristics:

- independent
- stubborn
- argumentative
- selfish
- power-driven
- self-important
- dislike sharing
- impatient, impulsive
- fast learners
- angry
- entertaining
- adventurous.

Rooster children often love challenge, change and adventure. They can get excited when these opportunities occur and can get very frustrated if they have a lamb sibling who struggles with the very same opportunities. Another annoying trait of roosters is that they tend to question your parenting — often. “But why?” is a very common plea out of a rooster’s mouth. If you can, bear in mind that this questioning is not happening because your child wants to annoy you, rather because they are seeking clarification of the choice that you are making on their behalf.

**Top 10 tips for parenting boy roosters:**

- Build positive attachment & reassure them you love them.
- Avoid shouting, shaming or criticising.
- Play card and board games to teach them to wait, take turns and lose graciously.
- *Really listen* to your rooster.
- Avoid conflict with your rooster when angry, tired or exhausted.
- Give them small opportunities to develop autonomy or independence. Let them be your ‘special’ helper sometimes.
- Involve them in team games, individual sports or the arts ... avoid them becoming dependent on competitive online games.
- Get them out in nature for calming and soothing.
- Find other significant adults for them to spend time with to give you a break.
- Get a guinea pig, puppy or a kitten so they can learn how to be kind and gentle.

**Lambs**

Lambs are typically quieter, more patient, more accommodating and generally more content with life. As babies and toddlers, lambs are delightful and they make you look like a fabulous parent.

### Typical lamb characteristics:

- sensitive to discipline
- sleepy
- distress easily
- dislike loud noises
- like solo time
- withdrawing
- shy
- struggle with large social situations
- patient
- like routines
- easy going.
Top 10 tips for parenting boy lambs:

• Build positive attachment & avoid shouting, shaming or criticising.
• Avoid comparing them to roosters.
• Spend time building comforting patterns when they’re little and teach them to take deep breaths when feeling anxious.
• Keep their world predictable and routine.
• Create small opportunities to develop mastery at little things to slowly build confidence.
• Avoid forcing them to do things, such as being in large groups of kids.
• Affirm and encourage their caring side while teaching them to be careful not to be ‘used’ by others.
• Teach the difference between assertiveness and aggression.
• When going out or dropping them off somewhere, assure them you ARE coming back.
• Build close friendships with small groups of kids and avoid sleepovers til they are a bit older (i.e. 8-10).

It helps to keep in mind that children need both rooster and lamb tendencies to grow into being happy, healthy kids. Roosters need to learn empathy and compassion to others or they could become narcissistic bullies, while lambs need to learn courage and confidence or they could become wimps and victims. Temperament does not have to be destiny.

3. COMMUNICATION TIPS FOR MUMS AND SONS

• Build rapport first.
• Keep verbal instructions short.
• Be mindful of tone of voice
• Make eye contact and ensure they are listening to you. They can listen without eye contact and while doing something provided you have 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.
• Show rather than tell
• Remember 45-90 degrees

A boy’s behaviour is his language.

The biggest tips are:

1. Allow cool-down time after moments of failure, poor choices and when they are in a heightened anger-frustration moment.
2. Choose a quiet private space for having a serious chat — bath time, pillow talk, while out walking, shooting hoops and possibly quiet car chat!
3. Know he will need some gentle reminders sometimes.

4. Save Mum letters for serious messages.

**4. NAMES AND TERMS OF ENDEARMENT**

When we use terms of endearment when speaking or texting to our boys — it builds rapport or sends a signal that we love them no matter what/where the conversation goes. They often assume things like “what have I done wrong now?” or “Mum is disappointed in me again”. Remember their special nicknames from when they were little as this also ‘connects’ deeply and reminds them of being little … babe/hon/even spunk … the tone is equally as important as the words we use and our non-verbal cues and body language matter too. When we need to give our boys gentle reminders, they find them easier to accept when there is a warmth that comes with them.

Creating a code that is a gesture of kind connection really helps after a moment of conflict. In our home it was making them a cup of Milo and quietly giving that to them maybe with a piece of toast or a homemade biscuit. No words spoken as they are still processing — what happened may need another day before we can check in with what the conflict was really about.

**5. SAFE TOUCH AND KINDNESS**

Most boys are wired to respond to the world kinaesthetically — via touch and by doing. Often touch speaks much louder than words.

- Winking
- Smiling
- High fives
- Thumbs up
- Tickle spot (at top of the spine/base of neck between shoulder blades)
- Play sport with them/swim/bike/walk dog
- Rough and tumble play
- Read bedtime stories in their bed
- Make yourself look silly
- Know the touch they like the most — head/back/feet

**6. HELPING OUR BOYS WHEN THEY MUCK UP**

Boys as little ‘warriors’

Michael Gurian (*The Wonder of Boys*, 1996) believes that the invisible drive at the biological core of manhood is the pursuit to prove self-worth. No one can give a man his self-worth — he has to give this to himself. To find this place, boys and men seek external ways to demonstrate potency, victory and independence, and this is what helps shape their search for meaning and purpose in life from a very early age. This is the ‘warrior’ unfolding from within. Boys seem to be generally competitive, active and constantly in search of moments to prove their worth and value.
“Boys are not necessarily wrong, bad, disordered or pathological, nor are they tough guys who can succeed in life because they are male. Boys and their brains are quite fragile. Not to realise this is to continue approaching men and boys either as presidents or comic book heroes or as inherently defective — rather than who they are: people who struggle in life like anyone does and who need clear and appropriate aid, from the very early stages of their life.”


When boys are struggling with emotional vulnerability they will do one of two things. They may come out fighting — acting out their emotions through angry outbursts or with irrational behaviours towards other children and their parents. Other boys who struggle with the stress of feeling overwhelmed emotionally may simply withdraw and seek isolation.

**Stop hitting, hurting and shaming our boys**

From time to time I have read messages from people who think that we should bring back caning in our classrooms to improve boys’ behaviour in our schools. It seems their understanding is that by caning our boys we somehow make them behave better. In my experience, corporal punishment gives temporary compliance at best and certainly ignites further anger and rage within our boys. This is another stereotypical attitude that must be deconstructed and ended.

In my counselling rooms I met many wounded men who were hit and shamed in our classrooms by both men and women. Many times they were hit over trivial things and often punished for things they had not done. Those who were the product of certain religious school systems that practiced corporal punishment are often particularly conflicted given that Christianity has strong messages about love.

It is not just men who have been conditioned by these beliefs. Recently I have witnessed women in a playground who were observing a young boy who had made some poor choices saying quite loudly, “He just needs a damn good smack!”

What is definitely to be avoided is the ‘toughen up’ stance of last century and the use of sarcasm and shame-based language, which can have lifelong painful, negative consequences. I can say without a doubt that all the boys and men who I have worked with who have planned, attempted or expressed suicidal ideation all have deep layers of shame. Layer after layer of shame quite simply crushes the life force of our boys and men. For some, the shame just gets too difficult to bear and many have expressed that the ones they loved would be better off if they were no longer around. For some, suicide seems like a way to escape the angst and pain of living with so much emotional pain, especially the shame. For others the shame can surface over a major loss that may have been prevented if the man had made a better choice, or if he’d had the courage to be emotionally honest or of his pride hadn’t been so damn stubborn.

In my counselling experience with boys suffering despair, depression or even ideas of suicide, I found these lads often feel overwhelmed by their emotions. Emotions were unidentified and unresolved, lying buried inside them. Many of these boys felt deeply flawed and like a failure; they believed that those closest to them did not love them. This deep sense of alienation and feeling separate came up so often when listening to these troubled lads. They were starving for deep, meaningful connection not only with their parents but also with other significant adults in their life. They often felt completely misunderstood.

We need to challenge the stereotypical beliefs that suggest that if you want boys to behave well you have to punish them when they don’t. Physical punishment and verbal abuse may bring temporary compliance but it will ruin the relationship and create emotional angst that will need to be expressed at some point in time. We need to stop being mean and cruel to our boys and focus our energies on building supportive relationships that are warm, fair and firm so that we can teach and guide them to make better choices and to be accountable and responsible when they don’t.
Helping toddler boys

1. Pause and take a deep breath – become present.
2. Enthusiastically lean forward to your son and ask, “Did you do that all by yourself?”
3. Now let them know why the choice they made was one you would prefer they didn’t make again (e.g. “we don’t play in the toilet because this is where we do poos and wees and could have germs that will make us sick”; or “we don’t write on the walls, we write on paper”).
4. Finally involve your son in a lengthy clean-up process as that acts as a natural inhibitor or deterrent to avoid doing that experience ever again. Never miss this step.

Helping boys with conflict: 5 steps

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

It is really important to validate boys’ feelings for them when things go wrong because this is emotional coaching, which can help them right through life. It is so much better for a boy to be able to identify the strong feelings he is experiencing, rather than having to default to anger because he is feeling vulnerable and confused.

Practise warm discipline.

7. TEACHING IMPORTANT LIFE SKILLS

A. Play — and why technology is raising our boys INSTEAD OF PLAY

Play in all its forms is an enormously important way that boys in particular learn many of life’s life skills especially the social and emotional ones.

The changes in our playgrounds over the last 20 years are another example of emasculating boyhood (and indeed childhood!) as the opportunities for adventure and risk-taking have been minimised and sanitised.

We removed the monkey bars, the seesaws and the maypoles which were all wonderful opportunities to stretch oneself, hurt oneself when a poor decision was made and learn how to play well with other children. Conquering the monkey bars took persistence, commitment and enormous amounts of effort and this will never happen by playing a game on an iPad, Playstation/XBox or Nintendo DS. When a boy was smacked in the chin by a wooden seesaw he learnt that he had made a poor choice and he certainly never blamed the seesaw.

One profoundly important lesson for every child, but particularly our little warriors and warrior princesses, is that every choice you make will have a consequence. This means that you need to become accountable for the choices you make and if you hurt anyone else or you damage property, you will then need to take responsibility to make it right. This does not happen when a lad is gaming and yet he is getting serious dopamine rushes while he plays — so he’s feeling good without learning about real-life experiences and how his choices can impact others.
Play and managing risk


> “Activities and experiences that previous generations enjoyed without a second thought have been labelled as troubling or dangerous, while adults who still permit them are branded as irresponsible ... society appears to have become unable to cope with any adverse outcomes whatsoever, no matter how trivial or improbable.”

The best way to build emotional and social competence in boys especially is through play with animate creatures who have emotions — play in all its forms including imaginative, parallel, solo, competitive and with plenty of freedom and autonomy. Boys benefit from playing with multi ages of children too as they learn to copy social cues. Obviously be mindful of the older children’s character and personality — an older child who plays unfairly or who is a bully will teach your lad to play the same way. Look up Dr Stuart Brown’s video on the play code on YouTube to hear more about this.

In some early years’, kindy and prep classes there are bans on super hero play, tree climbing, cartwheels, playing chasey and even removing the sand pit to be replaced by more mat time, phonics in isolation, more desk work, less free play and homework for four-year-olds. If I was a five-year-old today, I would be angry too.

Freedom to move and to roam outside

Research shows that high levels of physicality are normal and healthy for all children, especially boys. However, they are becoming more and more passive and this impacts learning on all levels.

Many boys’ lives tend to be micromanaged, over-supervised and hyper-planned, and there is very little freedom and autonomy — especially by well-meaning mums. The increasing depression and mental illness of our young lads in adolescence may very well be the canary at the bottom of the coalmine telling our modern world that there are some very deep instinctual drives in our boys that need to be nurtured in a healthy way, rather than denied and crushed.

B: Fragile friendships

Friendships do really matter to boys even though it might not seem like it from where adults sit. Because boys often have a less competent emotional awareness and poorer communication skills, sometimes friendships can be difficult for boys. Encouraging a close friendship with a little friend or a cousin as soon as you can is really important. **Familiarity and frequency** helps boys to develop friendships. Long-term friendships support our boy’s growth and development on so many levels. Poor friendships or short intermittent friendships seem to cause boys a lot of emotional pain and confusion.

Building other valuable life skills:

Essential life skills involve using manners, etiquette, road rules, practising good hygiene — such as bathing and cleaning teeth, doing up buttons and tying shoelaces.

Every year, take time to teach emotional and social skills as well as practical skills. How to have manners, do chores, cook simple meals, tidy up mess and take responsibility for property are all a range of life skills that take ages to learn and embed. Don’t leave things to chance — **TEACH!**
I have compiled a list of handy life schools for adolescents to have in their kit bag and this is available on my website at: www.maggiedent.com/blog/life-skills-download

8. LIGHTEN UP – BOY HUMOUR?

Laughter and lightness

Essential for healthy relationships on all levels, creates natural endorphins, brings a sense of safety, transforms emotional states.

“Telling a joke, particularly one that illuminates a shared experience or problem, increases our sense of belonging and social cohesion.” – Joseph Richman, Psychiatrist and Professor Emeritus at Albert Einstein Medical Centre in New York.

When humour is inappropriate...

Shed humour, paddock humour, sexist or racist

9. STOKE THEIR SPARK

“Every teenager has a spark – something that is good, beautiful and useful to the world. Sparks illuminate a young person’s life and give it energy and purpose.”


Share and encourage your son’s special interest.

10. BOYS AND SCHOOL/HOMEWORK

Boys and school

Schools can be war zones for boys.

Many experts believe both the curriculum and the pedagogy have been feminised with the shift to contemporary methods of learning such as more group work, less structured classroom practice and continuous assessment which tends to suit girls more than boys.

It seems we have simply gotten used to boys underachieving; it’s often just accepted as normal.

Boys can struggle transitioning into school environments that deny their need to move to both discharge excess energy and to build dopamine that helps them stay engaged and attentive.

Parent tip: Please avoid ‘over selling’ going to big school — saying things like “you won’t be able to do that at school”, “you will have to behave at school” and “you will have to do what you are told at school!”. By the time he turns up, he already dislikes it! So instead, sell him on the idea of playing at lunch and recess with friends — and that he’s learning things to help mum and dad get smarter!
More information: If you go to the Raising Boys section of my website (under Parenting Help), you’ll find my article and some interviews I’ve done on “Little Boys Beginning Big School”.

Structure and rules do matter for boys

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

1. Who’s in charge?
2. What are the rules?
3. Will the rules be enforced in a fair way?

Relationship matters most in our schools

It is important to teach teachers how to build rapport with boys because that helps them feel connected, understood and valued. It is not so much the gender of the teachers as much as the ability of teachers to understand, connect and nurture boys so they feel noticed, safe and valued.

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

Is your son ready for school or is school ready for your son?

Please consider giving your son more time if he needs it by not starting school until he is required to. Whether it’s your son or your daughter actually, if they are obviously socially immature, if they tire easily, have poor self-regulation, have a significant developmental delay or their ability to communicate is weak. There is no rush and no competition and you need to make decisions that suit the unique needs of your son at that time. Waiting another year until they’re ready if you have the option works better than having them repeat a year later in primary school.

11. BOYS ON JOURNEY TO MANHOOD

Boys to manhood

“What is called impingement during the child’s infancy is often called over mothering or a mother’s domination as it continues into the son’s boyhood, adolescence and even adulthood. A mother must realise that if she impinges on her child too much, not letting him find his own way, he will not develop a true self and will risk personality disorders — moving through life unable to achieve intimacy, unable to set appropriate boundaries for himself and unable to find fulfilment.”

– Michael Gurian, Mothers, Sons and Lovers: How a Man’s Relationship with his Mother Affects the Rest of His Life (1993)

All adolescents need lots of support and encouragement to navigate the bumpy ride to adulthood — Lighthouses are essential. For boys the more lighthouses the better.

“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)
12. LETTING THEM GO….

Letting go: The greatest act of love

In my 2010 book Saving Our Adolescents, I wrote about letting go:

The act of leaving home is very symbolic for young adults. It’s a time of great excitement and plenty of confusion. Often, the pre-frontal lobe has not yet finished maturing, which means that impulse control is still developing — especially around novelty seeking behaviours, decision-making, motivation and delayed gratification. Yet, adolescents are anxious to live independently and pursue their dreams.

For my own boys, there were many challenges in their bumpy ride after the safety of home: failed exams, crashed cars, funerals for mates, deaths of cousins, cars vandalised, sporting injuries, knee reconstructions and frequent mismanagement of money. These were life-enhancing experiences because my young men gained wisdom and learned skills, and discovered how to walk through the dark nights of the soul and reclaim life in the sun. There have been many brilliant moments too, such as shared surfing holidays, endless games of backyard cricket, golf, parties — lots of parties — new friends, falling in love, concerts, football games and graduations.

Each of my boys had to work out their own unique way of managing their lives. My extrovert sons were often pushing the edges of life and had weeks eating boring sandwiches because they spent too much on beer over the weekend. My introvert son needed extra support and encouragement through exam time when he lacked self-confidence; however, he never ate boring sandwiches and never ran out of money. These lessons helped develop their characters and the appreciation of a good salary and a worthwhile job to allow them to enjoy a good life.

Letting go of your adolescent happens in two ways. First, we have to let go of each of our children as they cross the threshold to adolescence and start that bumpy ride to adulthood. At this time we wish they could stay children in the sanctuary of our homes away from the harsh reality of the world and that they would keep listening to our good advice. Then, we have to let them go again as they leave home to follow their own path to wherever it may take them.

Letting go is difficult, yet it is the greatest act of love we can give our adolescents. When we let them go as adolescents, at some point we meet them again in a totally different way as adults. Being a mother — whether biological, step or surrogate — always has its moments and I am sharing this with you to remind you to be grateful for every moment in your child’s life while they are still in the family home. Don’t waste time nagging and growling, instead, let go and love them more often. Laugh with them and stand beside them as they discover who they are, independent of you. Above all, when they choose to leave, let them go no matter how much you want to hang on and keep them. It may very well be the hardest and kindest thing you will ever do for them.

CONCLUSION

I believe if we can see the world through little boys’ eyes a little better we will make different choices in the way that we mother them. We can learn to be the safe loving base they seek when the world seems cruel. We can teach them that even though they may feel they need to be fearless brave warriors, that it’s ok to feel fear, pain and sadness just like everyone else. We can teach them the values and morals of being a decent human being and that one of the most precious things you can have in life is a conscience and a good moral compass. We can teach them skills that will help them manage their lives when they leave home especially conquering failure. And we can teach them about valuing and respecting themselves and others especially women and especially the one they choose to commit themselves to. We can teach them about unconditional love rather than the conditional love that many felt. This will help us create the much needed cultural change that needs to happen for boys.
Pre-order Maggie’s brand-new book *Mothering Our Boys* & receive $40 worth of FREE downloads!

*Released October 2018

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From Little Boys to Good Men
Helping Our Boys Shine in a Confused, Chaotic World

NOW AVAILABLE AT COMMONSENSEPARENTING.COM.AU
FUTUREPROOFING OUR BOYS

About Clark

Clark’s seminars are known for their humour, sincerity, real-life solutions and perspective he brings around schools, education and parenting. He grew up in Baltimore, Maryland USA and now lives in Mandurah, Western Australia. He started his teaching career as a 1st grade teacher and has taught at every year level at schools in the US and Australia. He was Headmaster of a Junior School in Perth, Australia and Head of Campus at University School in Cleveland, Ohio. He has worked as a leadership consultant for schools and businesses, and as a conscious parenting advocate and presenter through his Our Boys and Conscious Parenting seminars. Clark is living his passion now as a leader of a preparatory school in Perth and spending his days immersed with kids and deep, slow, purposeful learning.

The goal of this presentation is to convey some of the ways we as parents can listen to boys’ voices — both the loud ones and the unspoken ‘voices’. I want to enable us to give the attention, empathy and support that our boys need and desire; and the space and time to evolve independently and dependently. The aim is to give you more tools to try and understand your sons even better.

“Futureproofing” is about consistently building upon opportunities for growth in our boys. This may be a surprise, but I want them to fail and fail often at an early age. I want them to experience hardship and, most importantly, learn to develop the strategies to get through the ‘muck’ without you. Sorry! That is futureproofing at its most basic ... learning to have difficult times, friendships, teachers, disappointments and learn that they can get through it without you fixing it for them. We support, we listen, we encourage THEIR strategies and we let them experience real life. If we futureproof our boys before they are 18 years old, we set them up for a lifetime of skills to deal with the hardship, pain and amazing opportunities ahead of them in life.

TIPS FOR “FUTUREPROOFING”

1. **Family values** — Most business we know and work with have a clearly articulated set of values. How many families have their values clearly articulated and written for all to see in their homes? If our boys know, discuss, live by (and break — let’s be real here) our family values, then they have a strong base from which to approach life. Try this as a family or if you’re a teacher in your classroom. Get your boys to add their words and discuss what they mean and why they are important to them. Keep the list between five and eight values so that they can remember them. This is a great reference for them with specific praise when they live these values out and also as a reference point for when they are letting themselves or others down.
2. **Strengths** — Our boys get too many messages in life about what they can’t do. Futureproofing our boys means acknowledging areas of growth (aka weaknesses) AND focusing on their strengths. There are excellent free online surveys (I use www.viacharacter.org/ with all our students) that can be used from 8 years old. Character strengths are the pillars they can rely on when things are tough. Take your son’s top five to eight strengths and have him tape them to a mirror. That visual reminder every day is a powerful tool for their development.

3. **Character counts** — Like strengths and values, character is what makes your son(s) uniquely them. Be specific and tell them what their character ‘is’ — who they are when they are at their best. Too often our boys grow into men never understanding what a ‘good’ man is on the inside. They need someone in their life to tell them: “You’ve got what it takes to be a great man because ...” Generations of men have not been told this and we can all see the impact of that gap in our society.

4. **Failure** — This is not easy for us as parents. We actually need them to be unhappy at times, struggle, and deal with hardship, hurt, loss and rejection. We stand by their side and support and listen, but we have to let them try their solutions and see the positive or negative impact of that solution. I know ... I know ... Momma Bear and Poppa Bear want to come roaring out of the cave and strike down in a violent way anyone who dares to ignore, hurt or demoralise our boy. It is our parental instinct. In doing so though, we do not allow our boy to learn for their future ... we just fix (not really) the issue or the problem.

5. **Resiliency 101** — Interestingly, did any of us ever hear the word resiliency growing up? I ask that question of groups often and not once does anyone over 20 years old even remember the word being used when we were kids. Why now? Older parents, less children, more pressure, an uncertain future .... Yes to all, but there is more. Our hyper vigilance in parenting is actually the main cause of this. Our boys need space to roam, play, imagine and be themselves without constant parental interference, rules and oversight. They need a bit of risk, of adventure and of boredom to create something new. Why are our boys not resilient? It is because of us. Hmmmmm.

6. **Futureproofing our boys is also about saying no** — They need to hear “no” often. Delayed gratification (even when they are complaining for hours) is a key to giving our boys the tools to understand that life is not a constant stream of yes and now.

7. **Nature** — Futureproofing our boys means unplugging from the matrix. Games are designed to suck them in for hours and hours. They are fun, but we as parents of boys need to be the ones who teach them balance. Nature is our greatest tool for healthy development of our boys. Weekends of unplugging, school holidays unplugged, week days unplugged .... Whatever works for your family will benefit your boy for the present and his future.

8. **Love yourself** — This is the most important one for our boys. They need to see that we love ourselves. Despite our faults, wrinkles, failures, etc. we love who we are. We take time for us. We value our work, play, time and family. We need our boys to truly see that we can be authentic, vulnerable, loving and compassionate despite all our mistakes and past. That will futureproof them to truly love themselves (not like an egocentric 15-year-old) when they are an adult. This can be the most challenging one for us as parents, but it is the most important. Love thyself!

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**A FEW TIDBITS:**

- By school age 75% of boys are more active than girls.
- Boys lag girls in school-oriented development by at least 12 months and up to 20 months.
- The average Year 11 boy writes like the average Year 8 girl ... despite their teachers.
- If we treat boys like defective girls they will retreat and do less.
- Women — Do not compare them to you.
• Men — Regardless of what you think you were like ... you weren’t. You were probably just like your son is now.

• Have high expectations for your boys, but meet them where they are ... not where they are not.

• If you look too closely at a boy you WILL find faults (if he looks too closely at you he may find some as well).

• Most parents believe their son is either learning disabled, gifted or both. No one is in the middle.

• What happened to phrases like: “late bloomer”, “going through a phase” or “average”?

• Have you ever noticed that report comments have turned into a cross between a legal document and romantic fiction?

• Why does he like video games so much? Because, he is the Hero and the Director. He is in charge.

• School is not a cruise ship for boys. On a cruise ship people want to get to a destination without feeling a ‘bump’, play shuffleboard, smile the whole time and have consistent fun. That is not the role or purpose of school.

• It is our job as educators and parents to equip them with excellent shock absorbers to deal with the trials and tribulations of school life and beyond.

• And lastly, educator Rita Pierson (watch her TED talk) meant it when she said, “Every child deserves a champion — an adult who will never give up on them, who understands the power of connection, and insists that they become the best that they can possibly be.” — that is the purpose of school!

We are raising and educating young boys to go out into the world ... and that future is not what we thought it would be.

In order to be ready they need to be AT SCHOOL...

Happy             Rejected             Angry

Confused         Heartbroken

COLD       Wet       Hungry

Satisfied       Challenged

Dopey            Forgetful       Loving

Silent       Bored

... all of this in Year 4 and every year level throughout school.
LET’S START WITH THE START

What do our boys need to do to be ready for the start of school at 5 years old?

They DO NOT need to know how to read, write, spell or know Pythagoras and his theorem. What they do need to have started to learn is:

1. How to share
2. How to wait their turn
3. That they are not the only person in the room who needs attention
4. How to be curious, inquisitive and be in awe and wonder of the world around them

So, in order to get them ready for school … and this is REALLY important — they need to play. A lot! The need to play with other kids and get dirty, dig in mud, share their toys in a playground with strangers. Ask a ton of questions. Have their own magnifying glass. Have a box in their room full of junk and stuff and knick knacks they have collected. (Try to keep living things out of the box). They need a pet. And they need to be told “no” or “please wait” 10,000 times before they start school.

But, WHY?

Your son’s teachers will teach them to read, write, spell and “do school” at whatever level they are when they start. This is NOT Competitive Parenting 101 – Please do not compare your son’s abilities to walk, talk, count, spell, etc. as a contest against other kids and (even worse) other parents. They are where they are and the school’s job is to take them from there.

Parent tips to help the reluctant, struggling 5-year-old boy

1. The teacher is an ally and has seen 1000s of boys in their classroom. They will help normalise the behaviour.

2. Your son is ‘holding it together’ all day at school. His only big release is when he gets in the car, gets home and is with the people he feels safest with in his whole world. Then he becomes a real little sh&$. 

3. He is so incredibly tired … let him relax and sleep. Play will be his way of relaxing and letting the school day assimilate in his brain.

4. Set up a daily reading routine where a parent, grandparent or sibling reads to your son.

5. Let go of any pressure you as a parent are putting on him to succeed, thrive or “be better” academically. He is 5!

6. Let him bring his interests into the classroom. Share these with the teacher or at story/share time. He will find other students have the same interests.

7. Be incredibly honest with your son’s teachers about your son … they will not judge you. It helps them understand your boy.


9. Love him for who he is; not what your mother-in-law expects. She screwed up her son already.

10. Kiss him. Hug him. And leave him … please do not stick around “just in case they melt down”. They are melting down because you are there (even when you hide behind the classroom door).
“My son has become angry, restless and disruptive. Why?”

But, why is this all happening to these little cherubs? Why are they disengaging and being different? There are a multitude of possible answers, but the key ones are testosterone in his young brain and NDD (nature deficit disorder).

Multiple studies and scientists have revealed that while testosterone provides for growth and energy, it also produces verbal arrears in boys by inhibiting the development of the left-brain hemisphere and stimulating the right. Due to this effect on the brain external communication becomes more difficult for boys and they rely very heavily on physical modes of communication.

**HOW DO BOYS LEARN BEST AT SCHOOL?**

Relationships with teachers (girls learn by subject, boys learn by teachers)

Knowing the boy — making connections

Safe environment — feeling valued

Safe enough to take risks and be prepared to fail

Relevant activities (have to have a point to them — why are they learning this?)

Active and multi-sensory in their learning

Visual learners — colour, movement and creativity

Hands-on learning and play

Need explicit and specific structure and frameworks (i.e. writing frame)

Boundaries, routines, guidelines — clear expectations

Positive, honest, frequent, fair, reflective and instant feedback

Balance between achievable and challenging tasks

Temperatures between 18-20 degrees Celsius (Your classrooms are too hot!)

Enjoy opportunities to express creativity

Role models — teachers with enthusiasm for learning

Nothing without joy — learning has to be fun (plus food??)

A sequential curriculum

The four Fs — fun, firm, fair, friendly

Need to share and reflect (the teachers do too)

Learn best with lots of short tasks rather than long-term projects

Need to know where each task fits into the whole picture

Ownership of their own environment (classroom ownership)

Ownership of their own learning

Need soft areas and hard areas; loud and quiet areas; lots of colour; learning focused areas

Positive classroom environment — warm, safe

Need a large area to work in — sometimes inside, sometimes outside

Physicality in their learning — freedom to move and run
Freedom and choice in learning

Competition — competitive collaboration toward a common goal (team effort)

Short, sharp, focused, snappy chunks of lessons rather than dragging on for ages and losing attention

Allowing ‘failure’ and making mistakes (sometimes due to risk-taking)

Telling your life stories to boys and encouraging boys to tell their life stories (e.g. artefact table)

Teaching them to deal with change (encouraging resilience).

**Engaging boys in the classroom**

If you “do the Google” on the “6 Strategies for Engaging Boys in the Classroom” the list below is the most viewed. It is completely wrong!!

1. Design lessons that end in a product.
2. Structure lessons as competitive games.
3. Require motor activity.
4. Allow boys to address unsolved problems.
5. Combine teamwork and competition.
6. Focus on independent discovery and self-direction.

—Source: TeachThought.com via topmastersineducation.com

**The ACTUAL 6 Strategies for Engaging Boys in the Classroom**

1. RELATIONSHIP
2. CONNECTION
3. MEANING
4. YOU MATTER TO ME
5. OWNERSHIP
6. EMOTIONAL CONNECTION to their learning

**PARADISE LOST: THE 10-YEAR-OLD CHANGE**

We need to rethink strategies and structures to support our son as they move into their own identity, independence and the teenage years.

You may well experience:

- 8-year-old boy - lively & outgoing
- 9-year-old boy - thoughtful & mysterious
- 10-year-old boy - downright wretched

Prior to age seven or eight, most boys are sunny, smiling, exuberant, joyful beings – little angels, for the most part. Around the ninth birthday, however, a tinge of melancholy and self-consciousness begins to
creep in. Up to this time, the boy has lived and learned through imitation, taking the world around and echoing its moods and its patterns. The Easter Bunny is real. Santa exists. My parents are perfect and I can grow up and be Spiderman .... For real! Now, though, the harmonious resonance between child and the world quickly fades. The child begins to separate from the world and finds himself standing apart and alone. It is a sense of “paradise lost”.

“Like Adam and Eve in Paradise, young children live in peace and harmony with their environment, intimately connected to their surroundings, full of trust and confidence in the world. When children turn nine, this trusting, secure, relationship to the world begins to change.”

– Rudolf Steiner

Children at this age often have a quiet, not verbalised, “inner crisis” and question themselves and their purpose in the world, rules & whether they are really justified, whether adults really do know everything, if adults believe in something higher than themselves and how is this expressed.

4 ‘s’ tips

- **Seen** — this is not just seeing with the eyes. It means perceiving them deeply and empathically and sensing the mind behind their behaviour.

- **Safe** — we avoid actions and responses that frighten or hurt them.

- **Soothed** — we help them deal with difficult emotions and situations.

- **Secure** — we help them develop an internalised sense of wellbeing.

**Notice it didn’t recommend...**

- **Solve** - fix all their issues

- **Shoot the messenger** - blame school, another family or other kids for telling the truth

- **Smoother** - overprotect

- **Sarcasm** - laugh or disregard their fears

**What they want from for parents**

After speaking with scores of boys over the years, you will be surprised by these most frequent comments from boys about what they want from their parents.

1. Please follow carpool rules. It is embarrassing for me when you break the rules.

2. Please get off the phone when I get in the car after school, at my games and when we are playing together.

3. Please stop ‘interviewing’ me for pain (what went wrong in my day). “Is your teacher getting your learning style right yet?” I will tell you all the bad stuff because that is what you really seem to want to hear.

4. I am under so much pressure when my day affects you so much. “When you cried and got all upset when I didn’t make the team, I thought I might not try to get on another team so you wouldn’t be upset again.”

5. “Please stop being so scared all the time”.

6. Please take an interest in what I love (even if it is Pokemon).
Boys in Middle School years are just out of sync in body, brain and emotions.

We enter the realms of our boys who are long in hair and short on thoughts. Their brain is under massive reconstruction, pruning and development. What we need to provide for our Middle School-age boys is:

- connectedness
- relational
- meaning
- I am known
- someone knows me

Teachers at this stage must understand that each boy walks into their classroom EVERY time and mentally asks the question: “Do I matter to him/her?” Once a boy at this age feels like they matter to the teacher then learning is a possibility. Without it they often shut down.

If boys are disengaging, coasting or lacking in focus it may often be the case that they don’t feel the relationship with their teacher(s) is important. Please know — they will NEVER admit this to you.

Schools who focus on developing rites of passage for our Middle School boys understand the power of connection and significance. The best teachers at this level know their students not for WHAT they are (sporty, smart, techy, etc.) but for WHO they are (lover of nature, dogs, bmx, etc.). The truly gifted middle school educators give control in order to get control, and their lessons are a wonderful mix of “this could go terribly wrong” and deep knowledge of the subject matter – all with a touch of self-deprecating humour.

If your son is looking like he is heading off the rails in Middle School this is the best time to implement the ‘invisible net’. Speak with your son’s mentor or homeroom teacher without your son knowing. Ask for their assistance and to keep open communication so that your son has the support he needs to get through the bumpy time. This is a crucial stage for your son to start solving their own problems be it school, social and life ... but keep a net below him. Celia Lashlie said it best ... Get off the bridge but stay in sight. They are ready to start the journey on their own.

**A few favours from Middle School teachers for your sons**

1. Please have filter on your internet at home (a must)
2. Limit TV, YouTube and video time to a reasonable amount.
3. Please keep IT and TVs out of their bedroom
4. Have digital free weekends and get outside.
5. Nature (despite their groans) is exactly what they need.
6. They need to have chores and expectations at home (even though they will complain they have too much homework to help)
7. Do not bring their forgotten sport shirt, violin or lunch to school when they forgot it. Let them suffer the consequences.
8. Believe 10% of what they tell you happens at school. But if they repeat the same issue three times it is probably a valid concern.
9. Back the school and the teacher. They both want your son to thrive.
10. Don’t sweat the small stuff, their messy room and their attitude ... they just need your love.
MANHOOD AND CHARACTER

If we want to really worry about our boy ... stuff that will keep you up at night wringing your hands, stuff that you know will actually make an enormous difference in their lives then worry about his definitions of manhood and character. Stop sweating the fear of what university he will attend, the test grade, a teacher issue or a friendship problem and 'sweat' character. We don’t need to reinvent character or manhood, we only need to reclaim it.

What are the shows your son watches on TV or the computer? He picks character and manhood clues from them. What discussions are we having in our homes about character?

Home is the best place to TEACH character

... school is the best place to PRACTISE character.

As a society, we are currently adrift when it comes to knowing precisely what it means to have character—how to describe it, encourage it and avoid the opposites.

Let’s all come to the realisation that our boys will break rules, lie, cheat, steal and hurt others (physically or emotionally). This is all part of growing up. Please do not hide from this—embrace it. As Maggie said also, we need to discuss these with your son and share some of your experiences without shaming them. If your son does one (or all) of these things, or shows lapses in good character or judgment, speak with him about the 5Ws:

What did you do?
What was the result? (usually negative)
What are you going to do differently next time?
What is the result going to be?
What do you need to do now to fix this?

Reframing situations (and they do not always have to be about your son ... they can learn just as much from the experience of a parent or friend) allows your son the opportunity to learn and grow by exploring what he will do differently and not just be told he was wrong and don’t do it again. Often for adolescent boys it is easier to focus on another person and discuss the 5Ws concerning an incident. Ask afterwards to reflect: “Imagine if that had been you in that situation.”

Character counts ... it may be the only thing that really does.

PLEASE – When your son makes a mistake ... and he will – Emphasise that you LOVE him, but you do not love his actions. Often, when parents are disappointed with their sons, they ‘freeze’ them out and show disgust for them. Boys read this as THEY DON’T LOVE ME ANYMORE! Please separate for them that your love for them is a constant, a given, an absolute. Your standards for their behaviour are high and that is what you are disappointed with. They will need time to process this (are you listening Mums?!). They will need at least 24 hours or more before the follow up conversation. Then it is time for the 5Ws.

CAN WE PLEASE TALK ABOUT PORNOGRAPHY?

Research indicates that children and young people are accessing pornography at increasing rates, with boys aged 14-17 years being the most frequent underage consumers of pornographic material.

Current research into the effects of pornography on children comes as a growing number of parents, children, teachers, psychologists and other professionals working with children and young people voice concerns about the ease of access to pornography online, and the proliferation of increasingly violent pornographic content. While pornography is not new, the volume available and the way people
are accessing it have changed. For example, improvements to Internet downloading speeds and the use of handheld “smart” devices have made accessing pornography easier, faster and more anonymous than ever before. The ease of access to pornography online also contributes to the greater likelihood of your son’s accidental exposure.

**But wait … my son would never, has never and will never watch porn.**

We have heard this so many times and unfortunately you are all wrong. He is. He will be. He has. Available studies suggest the effects of frequent and routine viewing of porn and other sexualised images may:

- reinforce harmful gender stereotypes;
- contribute to young people forming unhealthy and sexist views of women and sex; and
- contribute to condoning violence against women.

Pornography consumption by boys has also been associated with the practice of “sexting”, and young women have reported being coerced or feeling pressured to share naked images of themselves online. A recent Australian survey of 15-19-year-old girls revealed 51% believed girls feel social pressure to share naked images of themselves online.

We need to talk with our sons as young as 10 about images and videos available online that are not about love or sex. They are naturally curious fellas so they will want to see what this “sex thing” is all about. There are multiple resources online for you to discuss these topics with your son. Making it difficult for he and his mates to access the material is step 1.

Step 2 is to have very frank conversations with your sons from the age of 13 about the exploitation of women in these videos, that this is not love nor sex.

If you’re raising an adolescent boy, now is the time to talk to him in explicit detail about what interests him sexually. Is he more attracted to females or males? If so, does he have a crush on anyone? Is he willing to introduce you that person? Take time to let him know that his sexuality is nothing to be ashamed of and that you’re going to put a filter on his computer to protect him from images that may be too much for his developing brain to handle. Where social networking is concerned, ask him if you can have access to his site so that you are part of his community of friends. Since sex education is sorely lacking in most schools, you should involve yourself in guiding and educating your son about sex so that he can grow into a healthy sexual adult.

And because such a high level of porn shows violence, and frankly takes the humanity out of the intimate act of having sex, it’s really important that we talk to all of our kids about consent, from an early age, and keep talking to them about it once they are adolescents. There are some great resources online now for helping you to do this but basically we need them to know that they have to talk to their partners about what is ok and what is not ok right and they have to understand what consent IS and isn’t ... silence is not consent for example. An enthusiastic verbal yes is consent. This is really critical in the world we’re living in now.

And PLEASE have a very good internet filter at home. They are run by people who are just slightly smarter than most boys.


A range of resources on this topic is available for children, young people, parents, educators, and other practitioners working with families and children:

- **Love and Sex in the Age of Pornography** is a documentary that follows a group of young people reflecting on the influence of pornography in their lives.
• **It’s Time we Talked** is a community-based project that supports young people, parents, schools, government and the community sector to understand and address the influence of pornography on young people.

• **Love, Sex and Relationships** is a teaching resource from the Australian Research Centre in Sex, Health and Society at La Trobe University. It contains activities that explore relationships, sexual consent, equity, and sexual and reproductive health.

• **Reality & Risk: Pornography, young people and sexuality** is a community education project that seeks to respond to the social and personal implications of increasingly pervasive and hard-core pornography and its impact on young people’s perceptions of men, women and sexuality.

**GAMING… GOOD, BAD OR A SERIOUS ISSUE (IT IS ALL 3)**

Is my son addicted?

Recently, the World Health Organization released a formal diagnosis for gaming disorder. The bible for psychologists, the DSM5, still has gaming addiction on a watch list but suggests that if a person were to be addicted to gaming, this is their criteria for consideration:

“Repetitive use of Internet-based games, often with other players, that leads to significant issues with functioning. Five of the following criteria must be met within one year:

• Preoccupation or obsession with Internet games.

• Withdrawal symptoms when not playing Internet games.

• A build-up of tolerance — more time needs to be spent playing the games.

• The person has tried to stop or curb playing Internet games, but has failed to do so.

• The person has had a loss of interest in other life activities, such as hobbies.

• A person has had continued overuse of Internet games even with the knowledge of how much they impact a person’s life.

• The person lied to others about his or her Internet game usage.

• The person uses Internet games to relieve anxiety or guilt — it’s a way to escape.

• The person has lost or put at risk an opportunity or relationship because of Internet games.

• Based on the expert criteria, true addiction, whether to gaming, social media, or just the Internet more generally, is much less common than we think. It requires tolerance, and withdrawal. And there will also be significant social consequences, or impacts in other areas of life.”

However, absence of a clinical addiction diagnosis does not mean things are not serious. The behaviour is compulsive. It draws our boys in. It hangs onto them. But it’s rarely an addiction.

Why are they so compelled to play?

It can be hard to think like a tween or teen boy. But imagine, if you can, what it is like for them.

1. **It’s fun** — In fact, it’s great fun! Game-playing produces huge amounts of dopamine. This brain chemical makes us feel great and is associated with a variety of addictions. Some researchers suggest dopamine production as a result of game playing is beyond anything the real world can produce.

2. **It’s rewarding** — Not only is playing a game a lot more fun than writing an essay or reading a book (or even kicking a footy with a mate), but the reward schedule of games is designed to provide ultimate positive reinforcement on a cleverly designed schedule. Just when you think you’ll run out of fuel or coins or ammo, another opportunity to keep the game going pops up – just in time.
3. **Playing games is an escape** — When our boys are distressed, switching on the game allows them to forget all about what is troubling them. Unfortunately this is a poor coping strategy (similar to turning to alcohol or other drugs), but it does provide temporary relief.

4. **Social inclusion** — Peer support is a critical factor in the wellbeing of adolescents. Being the only one who doesn’t play can lead to ostracism.

5. **Game ethics** — Some games won’t let you play a mission until you’ve accumulated sufficient status.

6. **Nature abhors a vacuum** – Like adults checking their email, social media or playing a quick game of Candy Crush in a waiting room, boys play games when they have “nothing else to do”.

**Should we get rid of games?**

While research shows that a moderate amount of gaming is positively correlated with wellbeing, games do not make our boys “happy”, help them achieve anything worthwhile, or live well-balanced lives. So it’s up to parents to actively monitor their boys’ game usage and, where necessary, restrict it.

- Talk it through. Be calm – and don’t have the conversation while they’re halfway through a level or a mission. It will end badly.
- Work out why it means so much to them.
- Problem-solve together.
- Minimise control.

You will find that this is harder than it seems. But getting the conversation right will aid you enormously. Even so, your son will still struggle to regulate his behaviour. The following ideas may be helpful:

**Agree ahead of time:**

- how long is suitable on games
- what time games will go off at night
- on a strategy for getting him to switch off when asked
- to keep games out of bedrooms and in public areas
- that text messages, a tap on the door, or the oven timer will be used for a 15 minute warning
- that he must respond to those warnings
- on what the consequences of refusal to get off the game will be
- that schoolwork and other priorities will be completed ahead of gaming

You will note that this approach requires pro-activity, and active parenting.

Consistent, calm, kind conversations with our sons (at the right time and in the right place – not in the heat of battle) are how we eventually beat the game – and take our relationships to the “next level”.

**M AND M15 RATINGS: VIOLENCE**

So, we get it now. Our boys’ brains are in development stage until they are close to 20 (or 65+). What they see has an enormous impact on this development and their personality, engagement in life and future self. If we are going to futureproof our boys, then we must give them the time to develop naturally. Call it old fashioned perhaps, but we do not need our young boys watching *Deadpool*, playing Grand Theft Auto V or other such M and M15 rated games or videos. Please don’t believe this ‘research’ out there that says there are no detrimental impacts of violent games or movies on boys. I see it every day. The impact of desensitisation to the needs of others and a lack of empathy are evident every day across Australia and the world. Let’s protect our boys from this.
Oh, wait. GTA5 isn’t really so bad. Everyone is playing it, right?. It must be okay. Have a read of part of an instruction below for young players new to the game.

Before you read... WARNING: this content may disturb you.

“Like the past Grand Theft Auto games, your character can pick up hookers and choose multiple ways to have sex with her. In GTA 5 gamers can choose oral, vaginal, or anal sex. If young people are confused how to do this, they simply pull out their phones and Google “sex in GTA 5” and they’ll find plenty of helpful YouTube videos where other gamers describe how to pick up hookers and get your thrill. I’ve reviewed 5 of these tutorial videos today, and in every single one of them the gamer kills the hooker when done, that way he doesn’t have to spend his money on her. In this video, for example, he has all three varieties of sex with her, then runs her over with his car three times, backing over her, and finally smashing her up against a fence.”

Let’s keep this really simple for us and our boys. If it is M rated they should not watch it under the age of 15 because it contains content of a moderate impact and is recommended for teenagers aged 15 years and over. M15 is classified material and contains strong content and is legally restricted to persons 15 years and over. It may contain classifiable elements such as sex scenes and drug use that are strong in impact.

And, it is not just in our homes. We need to equip our boys with strategies that allow them to ‘stay cool’ and not watch or play these at their friend’s house. That is why we need to parent in community and not isolation. The discussion around what games and videos are permitted amongst your group of friends and your son’s are very important. Now, more than ever.

Violent images and videos may not make your son more violent, but it will most definitely desensitise him to others in need, reduce his lack of empathy for others and reduce his opportunities to have a childhood and adolescence relatively free from the violent extremes in life (we can only hope).

**FINAL THOUGHTS**

**Why did parenting change from preparing our kids for life to protecting them from life, which means they’re not prepared to live life on their own?**

And lastly, if you thought of your son’s education as an evolution (rather than an education) would you be more patient, willing to wait out the parts of their life they try and then dismiss? Would you see it as a long process rather than one quiz, a grade, a year level? If he is evolving over time, we may take another look at the journey and the opportunities he has to evolve, change, adapt, fail and grow.

We all look forward to the evolution. Stand by their side (not too closely) and please do not hover and protect. We need these boys to be strong, independent and confident men, and they will do so if parents give them time, space and build ‘shock absorbers’ for the road ahead rather than trying to smooth and fix everything. We want them to be parents as well ... please make it look enjoyable. They will take years to know and understand all that you know now ... they just need time to figure it all out like we did.

Futureproofing our boys CAN NOT work in isolation. We need to reclaim parenting in community and not alone behind closed doors. Talk to one another, share the stories, joys and frustrations of your sons. There is no perfect family, perfect parent or perfect son — they simply do not exist (especially that one from school who always look so perfect — they are as wildly dysfunctional as everyone else). In order to truly futureproof our boys we need to do this together. Let today be the start of a conversation so that your sons (and daughters) raise a generation who do not need futureproofing because they deeply understand values, character, resiliency and themselves.

For more information: Clark Wight, Leadership & Education Consultant
cew.compass@gmail.com
AND TO EXPLORE SOME MORE…

Some good reads about raising boys

Steve Biddulph’s books including the latest *The New Manhood; Raising Boys in the 21st Century*

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 *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*

Noel Janice-Norton’s *Calmer, Easier, Happier Boys: Bringing Out the Best in Boys at Home and School*

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); *Mothers, Sons & Lovers*

William S. Pollack’s *Real Boys’ Voices; Real Boys*

John Broadbent’s *Man Unplugged*

Glen Gerreyn’s *Men of Honour*

Maggie Dent’s *Some Things About Boys; Building Children’s Resilience; Saving Our Children from Our Chaotic World; Nurturing Kids’ Hearts and Souls; 9 Things: A Back-to-Basics Guide to Calm, Common-sense, Connected Parenting; Real Kids in an Unreal World;* and *Saving Our Adolescents.*

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

Books for reluctant boy readers

For a full list of great reads for your son (especially if he’s a reluctant reader) please visit www.maggiedent.com/blog/books-inspire-reluctant-readers/

More resources

For other resources on Maggie’s website, visit the Common Concerns page on “Raising Boys” at www.maggiedent.com/common-concerns/raising-boys

In particular check out her key articles:

*Teen Boys and Gaming;*

*Little Boys Beginning Big School*

*OMG What Was He Thinking?*

*5 Tricky Times in Boyhood Every Parent Needs to Understand*

*Dear Mums of Smelly, Unmotivated, Lazy, Moody and Confused 14-year-old Boys*

*The One Question Mums of Sons Should Ask*

... and her video blogs on *Boys & Mums: The Tween Years* and *Boys’ Behaviour is Their Language*

For other resources from Steve Biddulph, visit his website at www.stevebiddulph.com and/or join his *Raising Boys Facebook Community* at www.facebook.com/stevebiddulphraisingboys

For teachers: Please check out our list of programs to help boys shine in our schools at: www.maggiedent.com/useful-resources-for-teachers-of-boys-in-schools
NEED A CERTIFICATE OF ATTENDANCE FOR TODAY’S CONFERENCE?

Please visit our online event portal to download and print your copy:

Visit: www.mdeventportal.com
to login as

Username: RGB
Password: RaisingGorgeousBoys

Login, then enter your name exactly as you wish it to appear on your certificate and download your certificate.