

# **A Time to Connect: Knowing, Loving and Understanding our Boys**

**By Clark Wight**

Why boys? I believe that as boys move through different developmental (and natural) stages that they are constantly changing in front of our eyes. I believe that it is important to try and gain perspective on where they are socially, developmentally and emotionally, where we are as parents and teachers and what we want from students in our school, in our family and in society.

The goal of this presentation is to convey some of the ways we as parents and teachers 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 parents and teachers more tools to try and understand our sons and students even better.

I realise that not all boys are going through the phases I describe at the same age and all may not demonstrate some of the traits I will discuss today. My hope is that at some time and in some place, a few things discussed here will become relevant in dealing, learning and growing with all boys from 6 months to 96 years old.

The thoughts and information presented here are a conglomeration of ideas, stories and strategies developed by psychologists, teachers, parents and boys to help us understand, communicate and assist our small boys all the way through their years of schooling.

## **What happened?**

There is a pattern that repeats itself constantly with mothers and fathers at schools around the world ... “What happened to that beautiful, wonderful, engaged, polite boy I have raised? He has changed, regressed, been influenced by those other kids and become surly, unresponsive and forgets absolutely everything!”

“What happened?”                      **and**                      “Who can I blame?”

This is all part of his genetic code and the beginning of a wonderful, confusing and unpredictable journey that will last until his dying breath.

*Welcome to raising boys.*

**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 sons like defective girls they will retreat and do less.
- Mums – Do not compare them to you.
- Dads – Regardless of what you think you were like ... you weren't. You were like your son is now.
- Have high expectations for your son, but meet him where he is ... not where he is not.
- Parents – If you look too closely at your son 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.
- If your son's school is the centre of your lives ... find another centre.
- 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 for your son.
- When dealing with your son ... pretend you have 6 kids and then re-prioritise their issue (or yours).
- Is it our job as parents to *pave the way* for our sons or to equip them with excellent *shock absorbers* to deal with the trials and tribulations of natural life?

**Remember: We are raising these young boys to leave us. In order to have them ‘ready’ we need them to be:**

Happy	<i>Rejected</i>	Angry	<i>Confused</i>	
HEARTBROKEN		<b>COLD</b>	<b>Wet</b>	Hungry
SATISFIED		Challenged	<i>Dopey</i>	Forgetful
Loving	<b>Silent</b>	Bored		

... all of this in Year 4 and every year level throughout school.

FYI – They will also need to be all these things at home as well!!

## What can parents do?

A boy in the school context would like a few things from his parents. After speaking with scores of boys over the years, you will be surprised by these most frequent comments from boys.

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).

*A 9 year old once told me ...*

"What if I am not remarkable and good at everything? My parents will NOT like that."

... he used the word 'remarkable' and he is worried??"

*A boy in my office one day asked ...*

"Who is grading my parents??"

### **But, WHY?**

But, why is this all happening to my little cherub? Why is he disengaging and being different? There are a multitude of possible answers, but the key ones discussed here are:

1. Testosterone
2. Male masks
3. Emotional uncertainty
4. Manhood and Character
5. Over diagnosis and focus from parents
6. Stillness and silence
7. What boys need

## Testosterone

When looking at problems facing boys it is vital that we examine the factors that make boys the way they are. Boys are often characterised by extremely high energy levels combined with poor communications skills. These facts can be explained by one word – testosterone. Boys always have higher levels of testosterone than girls (around nine times higher), but around the ages of 10 or 11 there is a sudden and huge increase (around 800%) which

produces what some physicians term the “Tarzan Effect”. And it only gets more interesting from there as the influence of that testosterone on the body, nervous system and emotional system impacts your developing son.

The effects of testosterone and gender in the brain are a topic covered in several books by Michael Gurian. Gurian is a well-respected neurobiologist, social philosopher, family therapist, educator and author of 20 books, including the groundbreaking *The Wonder of Boys*, *The Wonder of Girls* and *Boys and Girls Learn Differently*. Gurian explains why boys and girls behave, learn, and feel differently. He points out that many of the tendencies that differentiate how boys and girls behave, learn and feel differently are directly related to the mass makeup, hormones, hormonal level and chemical differences in the male and female brain, and that it is not cultures that make for these differences but rather it comes from brain tendencies.

In his books, Gurian explains how the mass makeup of the brain explains the energy differences between boys and girls. Males have more brain fluid in their brain stems, which allows for the energy created in their brains to flow down through their bodies and make them more active and physical. This transmission of energy through the lower extremities of boys explains why males have a tendency to fidget, move around and have less physical control than females.

Other 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.

***“Behaviours ARE communication from boys”***

Boys can get together and kick a ball around for hours with very little being said, but still they achieve a deep sense of communication and connection. Many educators have experienced the situation where a boy having problems is unable to articulate what it is that is troubling him. However, after “shooting hoops” or kicking a ball around with them, he will, after a while, start to open up and communicate.

As communicating verbally can be so difficult for many boys, the need for physical modalities becomes vital, and it is through physical communication that boys will form a part of their social identity. They look for reflections in the outer world to see who they are and to find respect and confidence. In many ways the outside world is their mirror and it is this outward-looking focus that promotes a need to conform and a susceptibility to peer-pressure.

At times, due to an inability to communicate effectively, boys’ feelings and emotions can be deeply locked away and they need help to find the key to release them. Because they are invariably so active and so busy, they may have little time for meaningful contact with their emotional side. Unless assistance is given, they can be dragged down into a quagmire of social isolation characterised by a growing inability to express feelings of empathy towards their classmates, family and friends.

How can we solve these problems brought on by a boy’s very nature? We must understand that they are different and respect that difference. Boys and girls undergo different development and therefore need different approaches in their education. For example it is

pointless telling many boys to “sit still”, as with levels of testosterone flowing through his system high enough to have him banned from international competition it is simply impossible for him to do so.

## Male Masks

This is an exciting time for your boy(s) because he is more able to try on new ‘masks’. For generations, boys only wore one ‘mask’. I enjoy calling this mask the “*Marlboro Man*” as it conveyed only toughness and solitude. Today, we are lucky that boys can try many masks.

These masks are part of what Joseph Campbell referred to in his book (and others), *The Hero with a Thousand Faces*, which is often cited as Campbell's best book. Campbell juxtaposed myths from Native Americans, ancient Greeks, Hindus, Buddhists, Mayans, Norse and Arthurian legends, and the Bible to elucidate the hero's path of adventure through rites of passage to final transfiguration. Your son is starting the same process by trying on a variety of ‘masks’ to see what kind of ‘hero’ he wants to be. He also tries on these masks to see what reactions he gets from peers and family. They need to try on these different ideas of self in order to figure out who they truly are. As parents, we can watch them do this and give feedback in a constructive way. Focus on the behaviours, not the boy, and you will be amazed with how quickly your son will revert back to a pleasant ‘mask’. Boys will also put on ‘old masks’ and revert back to old behaviours and younger days ... this is a self-protection mechanism as they learn to deal and struggle with change and new demands on them as students, sons and men. It also does not last long as they learn to adapt and grow to meet expectations.

## Emotional Intelligence

“Courage is resistance to fear, master of fear – not the absence of fear.”  
– Mark Twain

The lessons about emotional honesty that a father/mother/teacher/mentor teaches by how he/she responds to his shortcomings and failures are more important than his being an expert in every endeavor.

The media, television and society often paint a portrait of boys systematically steered away from their emotional lives by adults and the peer “culture of cruelty” – boys who receive little encouragement to develop qualities such as compassion, sensitivity, and warmth. The good news is that this does not have to happen. There is much we can do to prevent it. The better news is that we are discussing the many facets of “manhood” and are moving away from a one-dimensional, stereotypical image of the “macho male”.

Emotional literacy is the most valuable gift we can offer our sons, urging parents and educators to recognise the price boys pay when we hold them to an impossible standard of manhood. We need to identify the social and emotional challenges that boys encounter at home, at school and in public and show how parents, teachers and role models can help boys cultivate emotional awareness and empathy giving them the vital connections and support

they need to navigate the social pressures of youth. Fathers (and significant men in their lives) can be a focal point for a boy's development of emotional literacy.

The following is an excerpt from Mark Brandenburg's book, *23 Secrets of Emotionally Intelligent Fathers* on what can we do as mothers and especially fathers to raise emotionally intelligent sons:

- Examine your own ideas and practices concerning how you raise your son. Do you allow him to express his full range of feelings, or do you push him away emotionally if he's showing sadness, weakness, vulnerability, etc?
- Be involved in your son's life enough to know who else might be enforcing the "old school." That could include teachers, coaches, day-care providers, other family members, etc. Since the old school is all around us, have the courage to step in and make change happen even though you'll be judged by others ("You're gonna end up with a wimpy mama's boy").
- Show physical affection to your son. Hugs, kisses, wrestling, whatever you can muster. There is a great deal of research, which shows that boys who receive this from their fathers are happier, healthier, smarter, etc. Show you son that you can hug or put your arm around other men as well to demonstrate your affection. Are you squirming? You're a good candidate for this one.

Let us help to create a world in which boys are able to be both sensitive and strong, and teach them to be both fierce and gentle and to be aware of their own feelings as well as the feelings of others. This is only possible if we move beyond the notion that a boy turns into a man only if he is tough and independent, which has done so much damage to the development of strong, sensitive, and nurturing men.

Luckily there are different ways to be a boy. They are not confined to jock or academic. Those who teach and coach boys need to have a genuine liking, in fact a love, of boys with their scruffiness, noises, in-your-face honesty and surprising capacity for tenderness and vulnerability. These male or female teachers can be quite powerful role models, as these boys do not 'miss a trick'. They see how role models react to situations, to each other and within themselves and this sets up a positive pattern of behavior for the future.

Emotional intelligence is a powerful force driving the market place in the 21st century. Young males need to be emotionally and intellectually equipped for this job market. We prepare our boys for this through the use of reflection, acknowledging emotions and expressing and discussing emotions at school and in the family.

## 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 PRACTICE 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. Discuss these with your son and share some of your experiences. If your son does one (or all) of these things, or shows lapses in good character or judgment, speak with him about the **4Ws**.

**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?

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 4Ws 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 you 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 4Ws. Take a breath, have a glass or seven of wine and don’t freeze them out.

## **Over focus and over diagnosis**

A quote from *The Blessing of a Skinned Knee* by Wendy Mogel:

“For twenty years now, I have watched as well meaning, dedicated parents become ever more deeply enmeshed in their children’s lives. No matter how busy these parents are, the child’s problems remain a central preoccupation.

Instead of enjoying their time with their children, they're busy fretting and fixing. Little Kayla is overtaxed, so her Mum is busy researching the Hopi Indian social studies project while Kayla is at her dance class. Zack's dad is hiring a cricket coach so Zack will feel more secure about playing on the teams the boys form at recess. These are the same parents who refuse to let their children walk to the corner alone or don't permit their children to hand in a homework assignment without a parental edit.

I am not against helping with homework and building skills in sports, but what these types of parents are doing goes far beyond standard support and encouragement. They are trying to **inoculate their children from the pain of life**. We parents go through years of emotional anguish as we raise our kids, but this pain also refers to our children's pain. Without it they cannot grow strong. The message communicated by all this loving protection is that the child doesn't have what it takes to do it themselves."

As a parent of a boy, I encourage you to stop looking for a label, a diagnosis or a reason and just support and watch. This life he has is not a competition ... look at his life as a whole through the lens of 'character' not through the lens of "competition". The ones who truly need a diagnosis will get one and your school will let you know ... they have seen thousands of boys their age.

So please relax and enjoy. Remember that school is not about getting ahead of others and beating others; it is about the difference he will make there and the difference it will make on him.

***Lifeguard Parent – Be vigilant, appear calm and only 'jump in' when they are in REAL danger.***

## Stillness and Silence

Boys need quiet spaces to help sort out their thoughts. I am sure that many parents and teachers overcrowd their boys with too much talk and too many questions. Often boys settle better by playing by themselves outside, especially after a full school day.

"Silence is often an excellent way of letting our sons find their own solutions rather than us imposing our own." – Ian Lillico: *Boys and Their Schooling*, 2000.

In the classrooms where regular relaxation and silent time occur, the most noticeable positive benefit is the improvement in boys' behaviour and co-operation.

In this age of plugged-in sound and constant noise, we need to find ways for our boys to be silent ... he has run out of words for the day. Embrace the silence (and your son).

*"Silence is the medium in which all great things are fashioned"*  
– Proverb

## What else do boys need?

### Play

Play is the core ingredient to emotional, social and physical growth in boys. It is the way boys develop. Give HEAPS of unstructured free play in school and at home. Play is not being plugged in ... play is unplugged and unstructured. If you ever hear your son say “I’m bored.” Then you know you are on the right track. Boredom is the precursor to creativity and fun.

### Time

Adults are usually predictable and organised. We tend to slot kids into our time because it is easier for us if they, too, are predictable and organised. What a boy needs at times (safely of course) is to experience the unknown, the unpredictable and the unscheduled on his own or with his friends. Weekends or holidays where nothing is planned are ideal for this. “Can’t do it.” You say. “Too busy with his schedule on the weekends or holidays.” Hmmm ... Why is that?

### Contact

The sense of touch has become “a touchy subject” in our culture but is absolutely essential for connecting with boys – particularly as far as parents and teachers are concerned. Violent and aggressive boys are often the victims of being under-cuddled as young children and touch therapy is one of the techniques used worldwide for bringing these boys back on track. Even though stranger danger is out there, we have to allow for boys to be given a hug, a pat on the back, a shake of the hand etc. when they have done something well. We must allow males to do this without fear of recrimination to develop a connection with boys who communicate their feelings for each other in a non-verbal way through wrestling and play fighting.

### Problems

When boys approach parents and teachers with feelings we have to allow the boys to share what they are feeling **without jumping in and trying to solve their problems for them**. When we deny boys’ feelings or do not give them the time they deserve, we cause the relationship between us to break down, resulting in increased conflict in our homes and schools.

### Animals

Boys should be given every occasion to relate to animals – both at home and at school. Relating with animals brings out the empathetic, caring side of a boy’s nature. They need to learn that animals have needs that have to be catered for and that they (the boys) are capable of caring feelings. Even the toughest boys can still give a dog a pat – it is crucial for them.

### Arts

Schools must emphasise The Arts and make concerted efforts to get boys into drama, music and movement as this helps them balance their lives and provides an outlet for their emotions. There are many talented boys who do not fulfill their dreams because they consider artistic pursuits as to be weak. (RUBBISH!). Sometimes making these subjects compulsory for a year group allows boys to participate without fear of ridicule.

## **Shaming**

Parents and teachers should never shame boys. The shaming language “How could you!” should change to “What has happened?” so as not to initiate the shame response. Once the shame response is activated, boys clam up and disengage from conversation with a corresponding deterioration of the relationship between them and the adult concerned.

## **Language**

Adults must try to look beyond boys’ anger to give them a vocabulary for what they are really feeling. Anger has become the emotional funnel through which all their emotion is channeled, as anger is the only accepted response by the peer group. Once we can give a boy the words for what he is really experiencing - hurt, anxiety, frustration, disappointment, shame etc., he can begin to deal with it, and help himself.

## **Praise**

Boys and males often react negatively or awkwardly to praise unless it is given carefully. The best type of praise for males (particularly young ones) is called descriptive praise. With descriptive praise you describe with appreciation what you feel and what you see; and the boy can then praise himself. We **do not** need to fill our sense of self with vacuous, frequent and meaningless praise all for the sake of his self-esteem. We are causing damage and not helping him develop when we praise all the little, expected things. (Have a look at <http://sayyestono.org/>)

When you comment on good work completed to a son/student’s individual ability and describe with appreciation what has been done, the skills etc. so praised become stored in the individual’s bank of attributes and builds up his confidence. Furthermore, private praise is far more effective than public praise – which often embarrasses young males in particular.

## **Sport**

Playing sport is one of the best methods for engaging boys and is a valuable way to acquire life-skills that may not be accessible through other avenues. Sports are important to boys because they give them a healthy way to channel their intense physicality and make them feel strong. Sports also help boys develop a sense of confidence and the satisfaction of working as a team. But, the main reason that kids like sports is much simpler: they are fun. Sure it can be fun to surf the Internet or play video games, but the advantage of sports is that your child stays active and physically fit.

Sport should teach our sons:

- How to be a good winner
- How to be a good loser
- How everything improves through practice
- How to give their best and work hard and
- How to work towards personal goals.

When picking a sport for our sons, we should actually pick the coach. A good coach can transform boys from isolated competitors into cohesive team members. Young boys often prefer to work alone, but the right coach can assist them to work with others towards a mutual goal. The coach should be a mentor and teach them the skills of getting on with others and striving for excellence. The wrong coach, however, can turn some boys off sport

forever, or worse, take the fun and real purpose out of playing sport. Coaches who use sarcasm or call them names when they do the wrong thing are to be avoided; as such negatives can seriously affect boys who often internalise this type of criticism.

One of the greatest things sport can teach our students is how to fail or lose gracefully. Boys hate to fail or lose, and a well-constructed team shares that sense of loss when a boy strikes out or misses a catch in football. Learning and growing from failure is a key ingredient to success in later life. Dealing with loss or failure is a problem for males generally, and if boys are taught to reflect and grow from the experience this will help him throughout life.

And please remember that it is his game, not yours. You had your games ... let him play for fun. The odds of playing professional sport are low. The odds of your son having fun playing sports if you take the pressure off of him are 100%.

***The process of child development means  
that you will lose your child over and over and over again.***

**Change:** We must try not to control the process but to work within it to continue the healthy relationship you have with your son. If he doesn't want to read to you anymore at night or have you put him to bed then work within that framework. Visit the room before he goes to sleep to discuss a topic he enjoys. Plan a trip or a day together. He doesn't want you out of his life; he just wants to think that you are on his or equal terms.

**Talking:** The fact is that mums and dads are sometimes 'too close' to discuss the pain, the disappointments and the irrational fears that their son is experiencing. In that case it is perfectly acceptable for someone else to act as confidant. A family member such as an aunt, uncle or grandparent may be especially suitable to perform this role, as may, on occasions, a trusted family friend, a sporting coach or teacher.

Your son wants to talk ... he just may need to be moving to have a meaningful conversation rather than guttural responses. Be flexible – if bedtimes used to be your special talking time and that time no longer works then try walking the dog together, play backyard cricket together or some other physical activity.

Remember that between the ages of 10 and 20 years, testosterone levels can swing violently, sometimes involving sudden surges of 800%. These create rushes of energy within the body, which are quickly capable of precipitating that volcano to an eruption. Your son will also become non-verbal at these times when you feel you need to speak with him the most. Wait and talk with him when he is ready and the volcanic surge has ended.

### **Failure**

Please never underestimate the power of failure in teaching our boys. They may actually learn more from getting things wrong than from being correct. Take video games as an example – What happens when your son plays Level 1 of a new game? He loses or virtually 'dies' within the first 5 minutes. His reaction is to ask himself what he will do differently, and then try again and again and again and again until he wins the game. He just learned through repetitive failure. We need to see failure as an opportunity not as a dead end.

## **Movement**

Boys convert feelings to movement. Research now indicates that movement can, in fact, re-ignite feelings. When mothers or fathers engage in action-oriented activities with their sons, their boys begin to open up and talk. The same applies to teachers and their male students. Do something with him – something he enjoys. In the middle of it, he will often reveal the problem that is concerning him.

When a boy comes home from school, throws his bag into the corner and says, “I hate school”, questioning him will often produce little response. Go for a walk around the block with the dog, kick a football with him outside or engage in some activity he enjoys, and during this time he will often disclose the issue involved.

*“Children need love – especially when they don’t deserve it.”  
– Harold Hulbert*

## **Education**

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 the time to figure it all out like we did.

**A Presentation for the  
“From Little Boys to Good Men” conference**  
<http://www.maggiedent.com/promo/little-boys-good-men>