

# STAFF BULLETIN

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*Boys. Their aggression is hard wired, their testosterone makes them “rough and tumble”. They are impulsive, energetic, kinesthetic, and pushy. They are also wonderful, if you can push through the boy-code to the emotional kid inside.*

## Appreciating The Wonder of Boys

Even before they are born, many of the traits that make boys and girls different can be measured, and Barry MacDonald, who is a district consultant for students at educational risk in Langley, and also runs a private family practice in Surrey, says we have to pay attention to those differences.

More than that, we have to celebrate them. “We need to embrace boys’ sense of adventure in learning and at home,” he told an audience at an evening presentation called *The Wonder of Parenting Boys*, held at Brookwood Secondary School March 31.

The evening was the last in the series put on by Langley School District’s Parents as Partners in Learning Committee (you can find out about Parents as Partners programs at [thinklangley.com](http://thinklangley.com)).

Barry is careful to avoid stereotyping, but research points to biological as well as cultural factors that make boys and girls respond differently to their

environments. While individual boys and girls can be anywhere on the continuum, research is showing that statistically:

- due to a smaller bundle of nerves connecting the right and left hemispheres of the brain, boys need more time to process complex or confusing information;
- the bonding and “nesting” instinct is less pronounced in boys due to a smaller limbic system;
- boys are more adept at gauging and responding to spatial relationships.
- boys tend to be more independent and aggressive than girls.

Added to those innate tendencies is the cultural “strait jacket” boys are expected to put on, unless they want to be “shamed” by their peers, and by society. Barry explained to parents that the Boy Code can be summed up as: don’t be a girl; don’t show your feel-

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## APPRECIATING THE WONDER OF BOYS

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**Barry MacDonald**

*Boys tend to be “kinesthetic” and often do well when they “do what they are learning”*



ings, act tough and dominate.

It’s a code that is not serving boys - or society - well, and dozens of indicators, from boys’ performance in school, to the rates of male suicide, to the predominance of male homelessness, show that there is an urgent need for society to better understand boys and their needs. “If boys’ needs are not being met, then they’re going to be angry,” Barry concluded. He didn’t say it, but the implication is there: you really don’t want to have to deal with angry boys all the time.

His list of boys’ needs makes room for the male experience without giving any ground on issues like bullying and personal responsibility. There are lines in Barry’s sandbox, and being a boy is no excuse for crossing them.

Perhaps the most difficult ‘boy need’ to accommodate is aggression. “Accept their testosterone and ‘rough and tumble’ behaviour. Their aggression is hard-wired,” Barry observes.

He quickly points out that violence is taught, and in mentoring boys we have to help them develop an emotional vocabulary. We have to “Teach boys that courage and empathy are the sources of real strength.” But we begin from where we are, and statistically there’s a pretty good chance that boys are going to be aggressive and assertive. “Boys are more impulsive, energetic, kinesthetic, and pushy. Boys strive for independence.”

Two things boys need when we are trying to communicate complex or stressful information are time and motion. Barry highly recommends walking and talking at the same time. Don’t tell boys to stop fidgeting, or to look you in the eye when you are talking. And don’t lecture. Let them fidget or pace, let them look away, and space your brief comments over time. “Make brief statements and wait... and wait... and wait!” he recommends.

Science backs the method. When boys fidget, they are stimulating the brain and speeding the ‘cross talk’ between the left and right hemispheres. It’s a way of compensating for their smaller corpus callosum. Boys look away because to them looking you in the eye is an act of aggression they want to avoid. When you insist, you raise the stakes. Brief, timed comments allow boys to process the complex information you are delivering.

Another approach Barry recommends is going with the flow, to some extent, when boys’ demand video time, or ‘out there’ music. Video games, in moderation, allow boys to exercise their spatial and kinesthetic capabilities to the max. Let them try out their wings.

Rather than saying “Not in this house!” to raunchy tunes and mind numbing television shows, Barry suggests listening and watching with them, then talking about what the lyrics and plot lines say about important social issues. How are women treated? The disadvantaged? Minority groups? What kinds of consumerist messages are embedded in the themes? When you say ‘No’ too quickly, you exclude yourself from the debate, and send your sons to their peers, where no one is going to question the values in the messages.

To find out more about Barry, visit [www.barrymacdonald.com](http://www.barrymacdonald.com). You will also be able to check out the Summer Institute on Mentoring Boys: Teaching in a Boy-Friendly Manner, which will be held August 24-25 in Vancouver. An outline of mentoring tips can also be accessed on the Langley School District website at <http://www.sd35.bc.ca/parents/tips/040401-mentoring.pdf>