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Connecting with boys

by Michael Grose

Teaching and raising boys has long been a fascination of mine. As a primary teacher it was boys who provided me with the most joy and the most headaches.

As a father of a boy and two girls it was my son who provided the most sleepless nights, although all gave me my fair share.

As a parenting educator I always field more queries about raising boys than girls. Questions about boys have usually focused on learning, lack of confidence and poor or aggressive behaviour while queries about girls have often had a relationship or mental health or focus.

Fortunately there have been some great boy champions in this part of the world who have shown the way for parents, teachers and other professionals. Steve Biddulph, Dr Tim Hawkes and Maggie Dent are personal favourites. While each comes from a different background and offers a diverse perspective, they each share the same belief that adults must form deep connections with boys if they are to influence them, especially in adolescence.

The need for approval

Retired psychologist and esteemed parenting educator and author Steve Biddulph emphasises the importance of adults liking boys and feeling comfortable in their company. Teachers in particular will experience success, he maintains, if the boys believe that they genuinely like and approve of them. Conversely, boys shut down and won't try for teachers who don't understand or like them. Approval is at the heart of successfully teaching and raising boys.

The place of banter

Esteemed educator Dr Tim Hawkes, author of *Ten conversations you must have with your son*, maintains that banter and small talk are essential elements in conversations with boys. He busts the myth that 'boys don't talk' wide open and says that fun, trivia and jest are the foundations for more serious, significant conversations that a parent will have with their sons.

Dr Hawkes encourages parents to have serious conversations with boys about the things that really matter such as values, health and sex, rather than hope that their sons will develop their own ideas by osmosis, or worse, from peers and social media.

Dr Hawkes revealed a communication gem in his book. He wrote that family banter is the secret ingredient that allows parents to hold meaningful conversations with teenage boys. He's on the money, as fun and laughter provide parents with permission to take their children to some serious spaces for enlightenment and learning.

Avoiding shame

Parenting author and educator, and former teacher and counsellor Maggie Dent reminds parents and teachers that many boys battle both their physiology and a sense of shame when they move into adolescence. Contrary to popular opinion, teen boys crave connection with significant adults. Our clumsiness and unease in their company often becomes a barrier. Dent's experience of raising sons, as well as her professional work with teen boys has taught her that adults need to show compassion, commitment and communication smarts if they are to connect with boys.

Ask what they think to find out what they feel

In my many years of experience in teaching and parenting boys, I've learned that if you want to find out how a boy is feeling, ask him what he is thinking. For instance, if he experiences rejection at school and he is obviously unhappy, ask him what he thinks about the situation rather than how he feels. He will actually tell you how he feels in the process. It is important that parents understand this and put this knowledge to good use if they want an entry point into their son's emotional life.

In closing

Helping tween and teen boys navigate the world is challenging parenting territory. It's tempting to put off the conversations that we need to have because they seem too hard to initiate. As the experts above state – each in their own way, the key to communication lies in our ability to form deep connections with the boys in our lives.