

# When Sitting Still is Not Enough

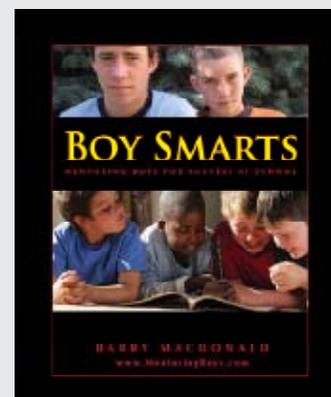
Resiliency-Building Strategies for Active Learners



*At* one time in traditional schools, teachers were rewarded for classrooms filled with the sounds of silence and stillness. Some students learned to perform the act of attention, but sitting with head bowed did not always mean that they were learning. Now we know that learning involves the body as well as the mind, and that kinesthetic learners in particular learn best when they can use movement. Creative teachers can capitalize on some students' high energy levels by seeing energy as a resource, and helping to channel it in appropriate, and sometimes helpful ways. Students will develop more connection to their own needs and more internal self-control and to monitor their own impulses if they are given simple supports such as *Take a Break* cards, described in this month's article.

*Barry MacDonald*

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## My son fidgets, struggles to sit still, and becomes easily distracted...

*Hello Barry,*

**EVEN** before my son Logan started school, I was aware that his activity levels would challenge most adults he encountered. Logan fidgets, struggles to sit still, and becomes easily distracted by anything that moves or makes a sound. When something is bothering him, he prefers to hop on a bike rather than sit at a table and talk. He has no desire to read step-by-step instructions on assembling a new toy, but will, for better or worse, delve right in.

**LOGAN** isn't a visual learner who thinks in pictures, reading a teacher's body language and facial expressions in order to fully understand the content of a lesson.

**LOGAN** is also not an auditory learner, preferring to listen to verbal instructions and talk things through while considering what others have to say.

**LOGAN** needs physical action. He is a kinesthetic learner who needs to move, do, and touch whatever he is learning.

**AS** a primary student, Logan would frequently get into trouble for cutting up erasers and paper, shredding whatever he could find to keep himself busy. I struggled to help him find his way without my interventions, but it was obvious to me that teachers needed to adapt traditional approaches to classroom learning if they were to meet Logan's kinesthetic needs.

**AS** a special education teacher and a mother of a son diagnosed with ADHD, I completely agree with the **Boy Smarts** assertion that **Boys Need Movement**. I am particularly sensitive to the pressures on parents to seek a medical diagnosis for what is considered hyperactivity and then to medicate their child. I am aware of the potential side effects of ADHD drugs and know that drug intervention for highly distractible students is viewed differently around the world; that approximately 90% of the world's Ritalin is prescribed in the United States (visit the Website of Dr. Peter Breggins to learn more).

I recognize that a small percentage of students may indeed benefit with drug intervention that can help them to focus, learn, and develop much needed confidence. But educators and parents are not qualified to advise drug interventions for ADHD, and I believe that it is shortsighted to rush to medicate children. What are some **drug-free strategies** that we teachers can use to support kids who are more distractible and kinesthetic?

*Elizabeth - Grade 7 Teacher, Toronto*



Ninety percent of the world's Ritalin is prescribed in the United States.

## What are non-distracting ways that students can be active while working?

### PARENT-TEACHER QUESTION CHECKLIST: Collaborating For Active Learners

**WHEN** boys are striking out, it is essential that parents be consulted as partners. Parents and teachers may look at children's learning from different perspectives, but they share a common goal—making sure that children receive the best education possible. Communication between home and school takes advantage of both perspectives to provide children with the kind of care and education that will help them thrive.

**CONSIDER** the following checklist of questions for parents and teachers to collaboratively determine what will work best for a particular child:

**1. WHAT** are non-distracting ways that students can be active while working at their desks?

- Do students have active-sitting devices, allowing for gentle and quiet side-to-side movements at their desks; a large ball, a small inflatable cushion, or even a single-legged stool?
- Are students permitted to stand while working at their desks?

**2. ARE** students permitted fidget toys (for example, transformer toys, or squeeze balls) to keep in their pockets and use quietly as needed?

- Are students encouraged to doodle constructively to improve their attention level?

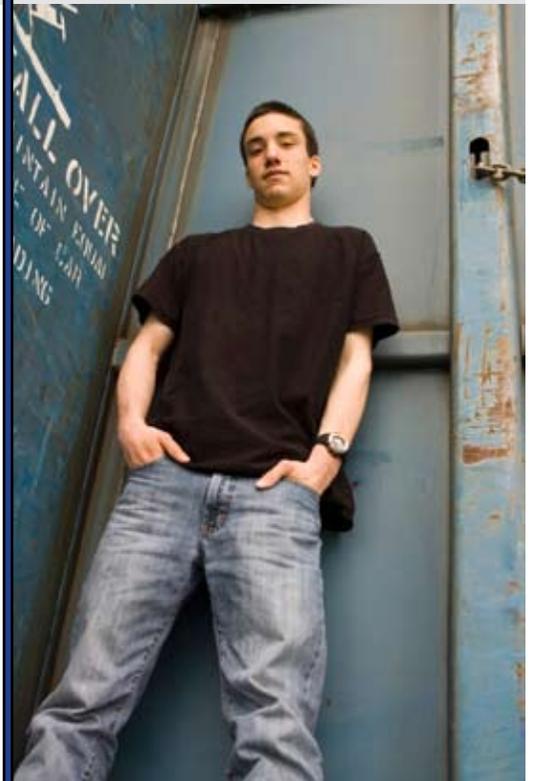
**3. WHERE** is the student sitting in the classroom?

- Is he seated near high traffic areas, or near the least distracting location?
- Does he find it calming to sit near the teacher, or does this location seem punitive?
- Is it helpful to surround the student with constructive role models?

**4. IS** the student's seating placement isolating, or does it seem integrated in a natural way in the classroom? Certainly sending students into the hall can communicate to other students that he does not belong.

**5. HOW** does the child respond when given the opportunity to move back and forth between two seating locations in the classroom throughout the day – perhaps one location with a group of other students, and another quieter and less-distracting location?

- How can he be empowered so that the alternative location is a choice, not a punishment?



Are kinesthetic learners held in at recess or lunchtime when they need the activity most?

## Active learners need to go outside at recess to blow off steam...

### CHECKLIST CONT'D

**6. MIGHT** playing soft music —without lyrics—in the classroom help to reduce background distractions made by air circulation fans inside or machines outside the classroom? What about listening to his Ipod?

**7. HOW** frequently are movement breaks built into the classroom routines?

- Where can students independently move to in the classroom without distracting others?

**8. ARE** kinesthetic learners ever held in at recess or lunchtime when need the activity most?

- Regardless of classroom misbehaviour, are active learners allowed to go outside at recess to blow off steam and participate in physical activities?
- Do you notice that these students are more attentive and productive after they run off excess energy and restlessness?
- If they return to the class and struggle with settling down, what transitions might be used to help them refocus to the learning activity?

**9. WHEN** transitions are difficult for some students, is it helpful to give advance warning that a transition is about to take place?

- How do students react to other transition cues, such as dimming lights, playing music, or finding novel ways to signal an activity change?
- Which students benefit when they are prompted about the transition before the rest of the class?
- Is it possible to integrate a transition activity that helps others, perhaps going to the library, gym, or buddy class a few minutes early to ensure that the next teacher is notified that class will arrive soon?
- How might a particular student respond if he is invited to exit a minute or two early to complete a task that helps others, such as posting a sign on the adventure playground about which students get to use the equipment that day?
- How can classroom routines be organized so that students who have difficulty handling the stimulation of exiting for recess or lunchtime with the rest of the class receive additional transition time?

**10. HOW** does the active learner respond to doing errands in the classroom, such as passing out papers or putting materials away, so they have



## CHECKLIST CONT'D

legitimate options to move about the classroom in appropriate and helpful ways?

**11. ARE** students permitted the option to **Take a Break** when then need one?

- For example, after notifying their teacher, the student may leave the classroom and present a **Take a Break** card to librarian or the resource room teacher. The student then spends the next five minutes engaging in a prearranged activity such as working on a puzzle or looking at a favourite book. When the time is up, the supervising adult thanks the student for visiting and instructs the student to return to their classroom. Note that the **Take a Break** strategy addresses a student's genuine need for movement and should not be linked to misbehaviour.
- The **Take a Break** strategy can also be expanded to help students plan their breaks throughout the day. For example, the student might begin the day with a set number of **Take a Break** cards and be responsible for planning how they will use them throughout the day.

**12. TO** what degree are students given opportunities to use active responses as part of instructional activities? For example, students may turn and talk with a partner, stand up to indicate agreement, or move to different parts of the room to use materials.

- Are students permitted to work at different stations such as at a large table, the board, an easel, or chart paper on a wall?

**WHILE** the questions here do not address all dimensions of kinesthetic learners, it is my hope that they will uncover how the rhythm of the school day structure can help and hinder the easily distractible and kinesthetic student. Collaborative inquiry between parent and teacher will foster understanding about the needs of a particular high-spirited learner and identify ways to channel his rambunctious energy in constructive ways. • • •

*Barry MacDonald*

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email your story or your question to  
**info@mentoringboys.com**



## Boy Smarts Action Talk

January 30 in Vancouver is 90% full

March 6 in Toronto is rapidly filling

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