

## ... INITIATING *Conversion* WITH BOYS

**When** boys are flooded with anxiety and anger, they may find a degree of healing simply by being listened to, attended to, and appreciated.

- But what if your boy doesn't provide you with the opportunity to listen?
- What if you know that he is troubled, but he sits in stony silence?
- How do you initiate conversation?
- How do you listen to his deeper self when he is locked in a silent turbulent world?



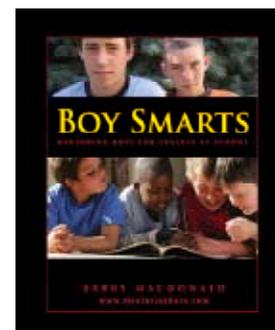
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*Dear Barry,*

Your recent article about boys and anxiety did a great job of describing the potential causes, outward appearances, and cultural factors contributing to anxiety and resulting anger. Now, I'm interested to know more about practical ways to engage my ten-year-old son in talking about his chaotic inner world. When I try to start a conversation, he usually stares off into the distance, shrugs his shoulders, or mutters, "Whatever."

What are good openers to get us started? You see, I understand the problem but I get stuck with my response. Some examples of how to go about it exactly and to make conversation flow better would be helpful.

*Dr. Alice  
Mom & Professor  
Simon Fraser University*



## Boys themselves sense when we are worried and distracted...

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### *Dear Dr. Alice,*

You are wise to be concerned about how conversation flows between you and your son when you have reason to believe that he is troubled and stuck in an emotional spin cycle. Children learn about themselves by the way we communicate with them – particularly when they are agitated. Boys often can mask their strong emotions with a show of indifference or bravado that makes them hard to reach. While I'd like to offer some ideas on how to initiate and strengthen conversations with your son, I first need to stress that encouraging boys to open up is less about getting them to talk, and more about attending to them in a way that lets them feel heard, whatever they say or don't say.

Instead of listening – really listening – it's all too common to focus on what we're planning to say in response, or how we might direct conversation.

Instead of really listening, we might intellectualize or analyze what our child is saying: "Sounds like you have a case of the pre-game jitters to me."

Instead of really listening, we might cut off a child's rambling story to lecture or preach – or even interrogate: "What did you do to make him so angry?"

Instead of really listening, we might leap straight into advice: "You need to stand up for yourself..."

We might even interrupt our children mid-sentence, often in an attempt to relieve our own anxiety rather than providing a safe place for children to express theirs.

And we might go elsewhere in our minds rather than being present for our children.

Boys themselves sense when we are worried and distracted. When they observe us pushing away our own anxieties, perhaps taking refuge in gossip or in chatter about mundane details, they may learn to discount their inner worlds. When boys see us try to numb our own emotions of fear, sadness, and anger, maybe even by using substances—they may conclude that vulnerable feelings should be dulled, deflected, or hidden.

More important than any conversation starter that I can offer you is the conviction that caring communication with your son begins with mindful self-awareness to your own reactions that get triggered by your son's apparent difficulties. In our own parenting, it's hard not to repeat patterns and habits we learned in our own childhood. Our childhood experiences of being loved find expression in our capacity to love our children later.



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## About seventy-five percent of communication is non-verbal...

Our unhappy experiences—perhaps of being criticized, ignored, or yelled at—often get re-played when we are parents.

When we as adults get anxious about what boys are not saying in words, we need to attend compassionately, in the moment, to our own reactions. What stories do we tell ourselves that keep us from being fully present with our children? By attending to our own inner worlds of thoughts, emotions, and even bodily sensations, we can be more attuned to a boy's emotional rhythms, and respect his ways of expressing himself, even through silence.

As you consider your son's stage of development, you might also find it helpful to know that it is typical for ten-year-old boys in our culture to withhold information from their parents. In their developing autonomy, boys will experiment with shrugging off the guidance of loving parents. They want to feel strong and grown-up, and to appear unfazed as if trouble bounces off them. They may have internalized messages from the media and the wider culture that real men hide their feelings. Real men certainly do not cry.

It's possible that a ten-year-old boy may assume that you don't need to be told what's up because you can read his mind. Since you have been caring for him his whole life, anticipating his changing needs, responding to his shifting moods, he may take it for granted that you have a sixth sense about his emotional world. He doesn't need to tell you everything. Perhaps he doesn't need to tell you anything.

But we ought not be taken in by a boy's distancing behaviour or attitude. Your son needs your attention more than he can ever say. He needs you to stay close when he is riddled with anger or anxiety. If he collapses and cries, he needs you to hold him, emotionally if not always physically. He may not be able to tell you why he's hurting, but he needs you to be calm and present with his pain.

### **Listen to What is Not Being Said**

Given that that about seventy-five percent of communication is non-verbal, how we respond to non-verbal messages – silence in particular – is critical. We want to listen to what is not being said as much as we listen to words. We have learned from much recent brain research that the brain attunes to deeper meanings by mirroring non-verbal messages. How often have we sent a silent message, ranging from "I love you" to "let's get out of here," to someone across the room? To understand the full meaning of what your son is saying or not saying, attend to his tone, the inflections in his voice, and especially his body language. By truly listening to what is not being said, we say to our children: "You are a person of worth. I love you, respect you, and want to understand you." Our own mirroring of non-verbal



### **Barriers to Constructive Communication...**

Ordering, directing, commanding, warning, admonishing, threatening, exhorting, moralizing, preaching, advising, giving solutions or answers, lecturing, teaching, giving logical arguments, judging, criticizing, disagreeing, blaming, name-calling, ridiculing, shaming, interpreting, analyzing, diagnosing, reassuring, sympathizing, consoling, supporting, probing, questioning, interrogating, withdrawing, distracting, and diverting.

If you lean toward him with too much intensity, he may feel overpowered...

expressions might not speak to a boy's conscious brain, but it will speak to his deeper brain, helping him to recognize that we are on his side.

### Give Full Attention

Most parents know that lectures, scolding, and advice are generally ineffective. When you want to communicate with your son, or make yourself available to him, make sure you are not preoccupied by other tasks, or distracted by the newspaper, TV, or Internet. Let go of any agendas as you turn toward him with a welcoming, receptive attitude. Be sensitive to his subtle cues. If you lean toward him with too much intensity, he may feel overpowered by your intensity. If so, ease off to give him space. Notice whether or not he is comfortable with eye contact, and mirror his comfort level.

Tuning into a boy's sensitivities is quite different, of course, than doing things for him that he can in fact do for himself. Wise teachers and parents recognize that over-parenting, over-teaching, and over-protection in general can smother a boy's emerging independence. But we do not have to worry that we will make our boys weak by giving them too much nurturance or attention—as long as it is appropriate. Boys who are nurtured in their original families are better able to develop healthy attachments and a sense of social responsibility.

### Acknowledge Your Son's Feelings

When we are anxious, we might at times, from the best of intentions, invalidate our children's feelings. "You don't really hate school" we might say, as if we would convince them their feelings are mistaken. We might follow this suggestion that we know them better than they know themselves with advice drawn from our wealth of useful experience, hardly noticing when their eyes glaze over. When a boy says, "My teacher yelled at me and everybody laughed," we might discount his feelings by quizzing: "What did you do to make your teacher so upset?"

Rather than appearing to take the teacher's side right away, we might simply mirror his feelings: "That hurts when we get laughed at" or even more simply, "That's hard." Less can be more when boys are reticent. Sometimes a simple acknowledgement of a child's feelings with a sincere "Oh ...hmmm.... I see" is enough to help your son settle so he becomes open to discussion or self-exploration. We sometimes may worry that if we show empathy, children will think we're condoning their behaviour; however, acknowledging feelings does not mean we agree with what they did, or failed to do. Rather it shows we care about their experience and their feelings. Once your son feels heard, you and he may be able to collaborate in thinking of ways he can avoid similar problems in the future.



Notice whether or not he is comfortable with eye contact, and mirror his comfort level.

## Movement & action while talking encourage deeper connection...

### Action-Talk

A boy's internal processing of thought and release of feelings often involves action – sometimes seen in his fidgeting, avoidance of eye contact, or quick bursts of energy, like slamming a door. When my mother noticed that I had pent up frustrations, she seemed to know that by just doing something together, I would be more relaxed than in a face-to-face encounter. As my mother recognized, movement helps children – especially boys – process the ups and downs of life, particularly when these carry emotional charge. She understood that for many males, talking is like playing a sport, with bursts of excitement and periods of lull. With boys, action-talk promotes closeness and lets them talk on their terms.

Frequently, when tempers flared in our house, my mother would send me out-of-doors to do a chore I enjoyed. Often she'd seek me out while I was in the middle of the chore, and work by my side, commenting briefly about what she imagined I was experiencing. When she mused aloud about the possible meaning of my non-verbal communication, sometimes I would respond. Sometimes I'd just be quiet. Respecting my need for quiet solitude, she simply planted a seedling thought for me to reflect on later.

In our home the tradition of playing simple games like Crib or Yahtzee at the kitchen table facilitated apparently casual, but deeper communication. I remember that when I was struggling inwardly, but not yet ready to talk, I'd find my way to the kitchen to play a game with whomever was hanging out in the kitchen. As we played and counted our way around the board in a game of Crib, I'd offer the odd comment about my struggle. Even when my internal world motored around like a washing machine stuck on the rinse cycle, my mother seemed to know just when to listen, when to ask a question, and when to offer a comment. I never felt pushed or prodded.

As you read the two dialogues between a parent and a son below, imagine yourself in the parent's place and notice your internal reactions.

Do you feel tempted to use more words to get the boy to talk?

Are you tempted to fix the problem? To offer advice?



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## Are you tempted to fix the problem? To offer advice?

### Dialogue One: Friendship Loss

Son: "Billy moved away (looks forlorn). I had no one to play with today."

Dad: "He moved away? Your best buddy?"

Son: (Eyes become watery) "He was the best friend I've ever had."

Dad: "Hmmm.... That hurts."

Son: "It sucks that we can't play street hockey now."

Dad: "That's really tough. You feel really sad about Billy moving away."

Son: (long pause, then suddenly his energy shifts) "What's for snack?"

Dad: "I'm guessing it's been a long day, and you need some grub...let's see..."(looks in the refrigerator for a few moments)... "We've got apples, cheese, peanut butter..."

(Son grabs an apple and a slice of cheese. He turns his back, heading for the front door. Dad watches him leave, resisting the impulse to say more)

#### Later that day, at bedtime...

Dad: "I've been thinking about Billy—you guys sure used to have a lot of fun together."

Son: (looks down and pauses for several seconds) "Yeah... we did."

Dad: "Remember the time you both went to Laser Tag? I remember watching the two of you run around. You were a great team."

Son: "Yeah...I know" (quickly closes his eyes and pulls the blanket over his head).

Dad: "It can be really hard when someone we like so much moves away."

Son: (silence at first, then begins to cry softly under the blanket)

Dad: "That friendship's meant a lot to you, son."

Son: (still under blanket, crying gently)

Dad: "I'm here. You can talk or not talk, whatever you feel like."

Son: (muffled) "I don't wanna talk."

Dad: "I've had friends move away too, so I can guess how painful this must be for you."

Son: (Silence. Still under blanket, not looking at Dad)

Dad: "If it's okay with you, I'll just stay just a bit longer. Just so you know you're not alone right now."

Son: (silent under covers for several minutes while Dad sits quietly)

Dad: (after five or so more minutes brings closure to conversation)  
"Hey buddy—(touches the top of son's head, lightly stroking his hair for a couple of seconds)— "I guess I gotta get to bed myself. Any chance I could have a hug?"

Son: (Pulls covers down and quickly gives his dad a kiss and a hug, then just as quickly pulls the blanket back over his head)



Only when his arousal level is calmed, and he is willing to converse, can you start explore what happened and begin to problem solve.

Do you feel tempted to use more words to get the boy to talk?

## Dialogue Two: Angry Outburst for no Obvious Reason

Son: Strides into the living room after school, throws backpack down on the sofa, falls onto sofa with look of aversion: "School sucks. Mr. Lucas is such a loser."

Mom: Observes quietly from the doorway, waits for more.

Son: (feels around for the TV remote control under the seat cushion, gives up in disgust) "No one ever puts stuff away in this house. It's impossible to live like this."

Mom: (Waits a few moments, then walks over, perching on the arm of a chair near her son) "Tough day, huh?"

Son: "Like he even knows anything about Geography. He is SUCH a STUPID IDIOT!"

Mom: "You're frustrated with your teacher?"

Son: "No kidding!"

Mom: "I'm guessing you're angry about something that happened in school...?"

Son: (Body stiffens as he sits in silence)

Mom: "I'm wondering if you're disappointed about a grade you got—or whether there's something going on you feel like talking about?"

Son: Silence

Mom: "Seems you don't feel like talking."

Son: (sits with hunched shoulders, looking down in silence)

Mom: "You look like something's on your mind."

Son: (silence)

Mom: "I don't know what's brought you down today, but I'll stay here a while in case you feel ready to talk."

Son: (Shoulders seem to relax as he continues with silence)

Mom: (sits quietly near him while son looks unseeingly out the window for a few minutes)

Son: (After this silence, son gets up and turns on the television manually while asking about the time)

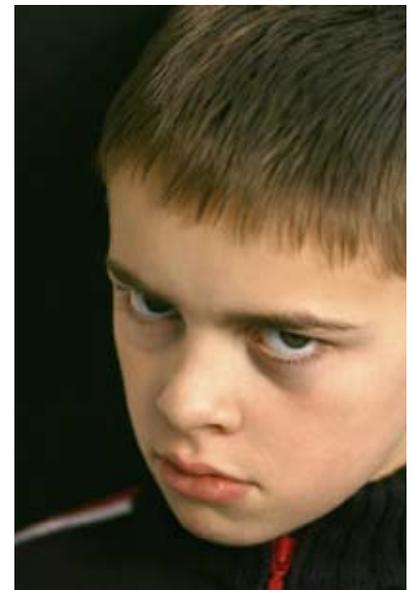
Mom: "It's 5:00. I have to get back to making dinner now. I'd appreciate it if you could set the table during the first commercial."

Son: "Sure, Mom."

Mom: "Maybe we can talk about this later. I'll check back with you" (smiles encouragingly).

Son: (still silent, but glances at her without rancor before returning his gaze to the TV)

We sometimes may worry that if we show empathy, children will think we're condoning their behaviour; however, acknowledging feelings does not mean we agree with what they did, or failed to do.



## Listening is less about following rules and more about being self-aware...

Just as perfect parenting is a myth, so is perfect listening. Listening is less about following rules for evoking particular responses and more about being self-aware and trusting that in your own creative and intuitive way you will be able to connect with your son.

When boys are listened to, they learn, eventually, they don't have to manage their feelings by shutting others out or keeping their own feelings under wraps. Take comfort in the recognition that as your son learns to attend to his own inner world more fully without feeling pressured, he will learn to open up more.

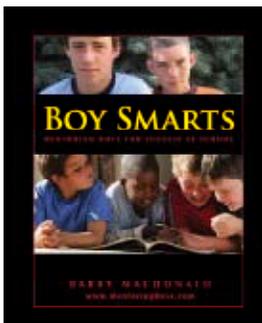


As you and other caring people are able to stay compassionate and present even when you don't know what exactly is going on, he will learn to become more present to himself and thus to others. As Scott Peck says in

his book **The Road Less Travelled**, *“More often than not, the most healing thing that we can do with someone who is in pain, rather than trying to get rid of that pain, is to sit there and be willing to share it.”* • • •

*Barry MacDonald*

MentoringBoys.com



Boy Smarts is a wonderful resource for parents and teachers...and very useful as a conversation starter with boys.

Forward this newsletter to a friend or colleague and encourage them to sign up on the website to automatically receive the next  
**Boy Smarts Newsletter**