

# HOW TO DEVELOP POSITIVE STRATEGIES FOR MENTORING BOYS



**Boys are faced with many challenges along the road to adult life. Being better equipped as a mentor with the right tools, attitude and patience can facilitate growth, confidence and greater self awareness in your mentee.**

Boys moving through primary school to secondary education are dealing with puberty, peer relationships, expectations of their family, teachers and society, along with the hope of appearing cool and in control around girls. All this is going on whilst testosterone surges through their developing bodies, increasing the likelihood of making risky decisions.

Your pivotal role can help your mentee develop the confidence to steer his moral compass and create a future that he is excited about.

## GENDER DIFFERENCES

Challenges facing boys today include:

- With increasing divorce rates and low numbers of male teachers, boys have less available male role models in their life than girls.
- Boys have lower levels of literacy levels than girls.
- Boys are more likely to struggle with the traditional educational environment. They prefer education that prepares them for employment.
- More boys than girls are diagnosed with ADHD.
- Boys are three times more likely than girls to die from all causes combined especially accidents, violence and suicide.

Gender differences between boys and girls means your approach to mentoring boys should be different:

- Boys are much more likely to have poor auditory processing (making/interpreting meaning out of words). If this is an issue, slow down and use shorter sentences. Wait until you feel you can progress.
- Boys' bodies have 30% more muscle bulk than girls, and as such need to exert a lot more energy.
- Boys usually go through puberty later than girls. During puberty high levels of testosterone can impact boys' behaviour, from being disorganised, energetic or angry.
- Adolescent boys are more likely to engage in risk-taking behaviour than girls.

- The part of the brain which links the left and right side is proportionally smaller in boys. However, the right side of the brain has more connections specialising in movement, emotion and space and reasoning.
- Boys speak fewer words a day than girls.
- Boys are competitive by nature; girls are more concerned about relationships.

## TIPS FOR FEMALE MENTORS

The role of an older male is important and extremely beneficial, however each mentee's needs must be taken into consideration and the most appropriate match regardless of gender should be selected.

Cultural sensitivities and parental involvement may influence this issue as well.

- If you are a female mentor, do not bring your prejudices about males to the relationship.
- Keep communication short and to the point, do not overwhelm him with questions and words.
- Consider the role of your relationship; it will provide your mentee with an experience of a respectful and productive partnership with a female outside of his family.

## COMMUNICATING WITH BOYS

- Genuinely listen. Be present to what your mentee is saying when he speaks, don't be preparing your reply. Watch out for the non-verbal cues and read between the lines.
- Use questioning carefully, don't probe. Before asking questions provide time and space for him to share his thoughts and feelings.
- Silence is not always a bad thing; it may suggest that he feels comfortable.
- Follow his lead on the amount of eye contact to use.
- Fidgeting can help boys deal with stress and anxiety, better not to expect them to sit still.
- Allow him time to process information/feelings.
- Acknowledge his feelings, do not dismiss them.
- Use verbal (oh, yes, mmm) and non verbal (nod head, lean forward) cues to show you are listening, while providing space and time for him to share.

## STRATEGIES TO BUILD THE RELATIONSHIP

- Boys need structure. Work together to develop a schedule, routine or rituals for the length of your formal relationship. Take on his ideas and work as a team to keep on track.
- Provide an environment in which he feels safe to open up about feelings. Rather than asking a general question about feelings, try using a rating scale as a tool to share his intensity of feelings. E.g. 1 = slightly upset, up to 5 = very angry.
- Reject the traditional view of men as tough, strong and being disconnected from feelings, and embrace masculinity as courageous, empathetic and sensitive.
- If asked for advice offer options and guide your mentee through the problem solving process so that he can be empowered to make his own informed decision.
- Problem Solving: identify the problem, brainstorm solutions, decide on a plan and follow up.
- Instil confidence in his strengths, using them to overcome his weaknesses.
- When matched with a boy with ADHD try and reframe challenging behaviour. Their unique strengths can be embraced and developed.
- Encourage fun and laughter in the relationship.

### TIPS FOR SUCCESS

#### TIP

- Treat your mentee as a young adult not a boy.
- Provide lots of specific praise; focus on effort and use descriptive words. "Sam, the career mind map you developed was very organised and insightful".
- Show your feelings and encourage him to express his.
- During your time together try and under take an activity (go for a walk) where possible, this type of environment is more likely to lead to conversation.
- Rather than negatively criticise, provide constructive criticism with the aim of building him up.
- Be an advocate for his learning and education.
- When possible meet at a time of day when your mentee is at his best; mornings may add an extra challenge if your mentee is still asleep!



## REFERENCES & FURTHER INFORMATION

- Mentoring Boys – official website of Barry MacDonald author of Boys Smart  
[www.mentoringboys.com](http://www.mentoringboys.com)
- For boys with ADHD, useful information is available at  
[www.adhd.org.nz](http://www.adhd.org.nz)
- Raising Boys by Steve Biddulph (Finch Publishing, Sydney)
- Manhood by Steve Biddulph (Finch Publishing, Sydney)
- He'll be Okay by Celia Lashlie (Fishpond.co.nz).