

FROM THE DEAN OF BOYS' EDUCATION

BOYS AND RISK-TAKING

Jason Cheers | Dean of Boys' Education

Boys are generally more impulsive than girls. Adolescence, especially, is an important period for boys, as the brain during this period, is far from mature and undergoes extensive structural changes well past puberty. Many boys have well-developed cognitive capacity, but are still developing their emotional maturity. This has led to the period sometimes being referred to as "high horsepower, poor steering."

Just some of the associated neurological aspects to consider during the adolescent period for boys include:

- > The prefrontal cortex is responsible for cognitive processes. It is the last area of the brain to fully mature, with this process occurring later in boys.
- > Serotonin facilitates the neural pathways between the limbic system (emotion) with the frontal lobes (the brain's thinking centre). Levels of serotonin in boys' brains are substantially lower and decline temporarily during adolescence. Compounding this is a surge in testosterone around the age of ten which interplays with serotonin.

Risk-taking is natural for boys and is a normal part of growing up. However, dangerous risk-taking behaviours such as binge drinking, smoking, drug taking, aggressive driving and bullying/aggressive behaviour are examples of the risk-taking desire having serious negative consequences. Associate Professor Susan Towns, Head of the Department of Adolescent Medicine at The Children's Hospital Westmead, reflects on how even though we know many things about boys' neurological development, dangerous risk-taking doesn't just happen. There are signs early on that may show a boy is more vulnerable and usually it's a combination of factors including:

- > developmental issues
- > inadequate parenting support
- > personality traits or developing mental health problems such as depression or anxiety
- > bullying or peer pressure.

Professor Towns also discusses how the best parenting approach to support boys through adolescence is one that is loving, but firm – high warmth, high structure, high supervision and high guidance done in a supportive way. Boys like limits and boundaries, and they respond to structure. During the adolescent years it is common for boys to push the boundaries and Professor Towns regards the key job of parents is to say what's appropriate and what's not. Approaches that can encourage rebellious and negative risk-taking behaviour in boys include *laissez-faire* parenting where there is a lot of love and nurturing but not enough boundaries or structure, and 'authoritarian' parenting, which is low on warmth and nurturing but high on strictness and discipline.

Based upon the work of Professor Towns, some wise boundaries parents can provide for adolescent boys include:

- > Ask them to tell you what time they will be home.
- > Have an agreement where trust develops if they keep to the rules.
- > Have house rules and household chores.
- > Know how much money your son has.
- > Know who their friends are.
- > Be introduced to their friends.
- > Talk to other parents about their sons' boundaries and ideas they have on parenting.
- > Talk to the School when you have any concerns or need support.

For many Middle and Senior School boys, their involvement in next week's Service Week will offer them opportunities for 'healthy risk-taking' and to discover and develop their potential in so many different areas. Adolescent Psychologist Andrew Fuller writes of the importance of parents thinking about how they can help their sons take risks in ways that allows them to safely have a go at new and challenging experiences, particularly during their early adolescence.

We don't want boys to feel as though they can't chase after their dreams, but it's a matter of being safe and supported and knowing how to do this that is so important.



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