

The 8 Biggest Mistakes Adults Make with Boys of Few Words



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There are so many things adults can do to help boys, and as you might expect, there are some things we want to avoid. Most parents, and I include myself, fall into these traps sometimes. We're often led by good intentions, but sometimes that's not enough. We also have to be strategic!

Here are some critical pitfalls to avoid and a few suggestions for raising boys who can communicate and connect.

1. ***Mistaking quantity for quality***. Even a chatterbox can be a boy of few words if all he ever talks about are things and systems. Boys can be experts at *instrumental* communication - like explaining how a video game works, or categories of dinosaurs, without really letting you see who they are.

Purpose driven communication like "pass the salt," or "can I have twenty dollars?" may also be plentiful, but it's no substitute for the type of personal expression that helps boys connect with others.

What to do: Model expressive communication every chance you get. Help your son by rehearsing how to give compliments, start conversations, and express opinions in a constructive way. Make this type of verbal exchange commonplace at home and comment on how it helps people to know each other better.

2. ***Asking too many questions***. This well intentioned approach is a conversation killer. Boys often feel self-conscious answering personal questions. Many other boys have no idea how to

answer because the seeds of self-awareness have yet to be planted.

What to do: Pace your questions, giving boys time to ponder and answer at their own pace. If you're hurried, it's not a good time to inquire about important matters. Make questions succinct and obvious. Watch for signs that boys are puzzled and rephrase as necessary. When necessary, make questions multiple choice. At the very least, you'll give boys something against which they can define their own thoughts.

3. ***Tuning in to the wrong channel.*** The majority of boys who struggle with communication are kinesthetic (physical, tactile) learners. One of the primary reasons someone becomes a boy of few words is because of auditory processing challenges. So it may not help if you try to work out a relationship issue with only words. Learning through listening is a learning channel plagued by static for many boys.

What to do: Don't hesitate to get your son or student physically engaged – it literally and figuratively turns a boy's brain on! It's amazing how much better boys retain information shared during a game of catch rather than trying to sit quietly in a chair. (Hint: if a boy is a kinesthetic learner, use words that speak to that learning channel. It's better to say "do you get the *feeling* of what I'm saying?" than "can you *hear* me?" or, "do you *see* what I mean?")

4. ***Misunderstanding a learning/processing problem as an attitude problem.*** If you were totally uncoordinated and as a result refused a friend's frequent request to play tennis, would it be fair if she concluded you didn't like her or that you were a "stick in the mud?"

Something quite similar happens to boys who lack the words to navigate social relationships - they are viewed as oppositional, depressed, and indifferent. Don't be fooled by stone faces –

there is a person inside with just as many emotions as anyone else, and he can't wait to relate given a fair opportunity.

What to do: Have your child professionally evaluated to determine if a learning or speech problem is limiting his communication. Don't accept general conclusions like he has a learning disability or ADHD. Ask for specific information about the particulars of these diagnoses and how they are affecting a boy's social development. There are many, many ways to intervene, but first you have to pinpoint the skill(s) that must be improved.

5. ***Too much eye contact.*** Look deeply into the eyes of your spouse and maybe close friends, but *not your teenage son*. You'll only make him more nervous as he gets the uncomfortable feeling that you're seeing into his soul – yikes!

Your teenager doesn't want you to know that much about what he thinks or feels. He's worried that you know may know more about him than he knows about himself. And he's especially concerned about you noticing him changing, physically and emotionally.

What to do: If you're going to learn something valuable about your son, you'll have to sneak up on it. Try doing something that precludes eye contact – like talking while you take a drive, play catch, or build something. Stay “matter of fact” in your tone and demeanor. Matching the tone and pace of another person's communication (verbal and nonverbal) is a strategic way to express empathy and, more often than not, builds a sense of safety.

6. ***Missed opportunities.*** Watch out for being driven by a conversational agenda that misses the mark for boys. In the hectic flow of daily life it's easy to miss important clues about your son's interests. It's better to connect about something than nothing, and usually skilled parents can find ways to expand

almost any topic in ways that build social awareness and expressive skills.

What to do: When your son gets excited about something – a new experience or activity – take the opportunity to connect with him about it. It doesn't matter if you're talking about Power Rangers, soccer, or chess, let him see you share his enthusiasm.

Moments of enthusiasm and exuberance are the best times to ask questions because you are on terrain where a boy likely feels most confident, and where he may be more than happy to provide answers to your questions. Especially when he can show off his knowledge a little!

7. ***Believing that a lack of expression means a lack of feelings.*** Boys of Few Words are often *dyslexithymic* – which means they have limited words for describing their feelings. Consequently, the feelings stay stuck inside – and it can be lonely in there!

Remember, even talkative boys may have difficulty with self-expression. Don't assume that boys who only talk about things and systems don't care about the emotional side of life. They do care but don't know what to do with that confusing jumble of thoughts and feelings.

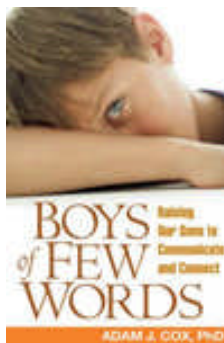
What to do: When boys seem withdrawn or unexpressive we need to respond by building those skills. Don't be put off by resistance. Just as you would never give up trying to teach a child to walk, the same goes for social skills and interpersonal communication. Start by building a child's emotional vocabulary. Teach him to tell the difference between emotions: how is sad different than bored, how is angry different than annoyed.

8. **Lack of collaboration.** By the time boys begin school, there are many influences shaping their social behavior. Only through active involvement in your son's education can you truly understand and filter these experiences. Sometimes we forget to ask for input from our kid's teachers, or perhaps find it hard to believe the feedback we get.

What to do: Multiple sources of information help you make the most objective assessment of a boy's social skills. Your son's teachers are an excellent source of information because they observe your son in context, and can confirm or correct your own perceptions. Collaboration also helps with intervention. Working with others to build your son's expressive abilities insures he is prompted in a variety of contexts, and receives consistent messages of guidance and support.



The suggestions in this article are adapted from hundreds of practical tips provided in *Boys of Few Words: Raising Our Sons to Communicate and Connect*.



Good luck with the boys in your life!

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