

Boys' relationships with their teachers

By Ian Lillico



Steve Biddulph ('Raising Boys', 'Manhood', 'The Secret of Happy Children') asserts that boys learn teachers and not subjects. Girls are able to connect directly with subjects, but a boy can only connect with a subject via the teacher. The psychological background to this phenomenon is complex but is based on the need for boys in their puberty years to believe that a teacher cares for them as a person, before they will allow them to impart knowledge or skills to them.

I am sure we all remember talking to our own children about low grades on their reports. The same applies even more directly to discipline. The approach to boys' discipline has been masked by the threat of the cane or corporal punishment until the last decade. It is believed that the removal of corporal punishment about 15 years ago has been a factor in the deterioration of boys' behaviour in schools - as is attested to by the boys themselves.

The first step in effective learning involves setting definite limits in the room, explaining the class rules clearly to students and (most importantly) showing that any repercussions to students breaking the rules are carried out consistently and fairly. The second step involves letting the real person behind the teachers' "mask" show through.

The third (and most important) ingredient for success at teaching males is for the teacher, in some small demonstrable way, to inform their male students through actions or words that the teacher respects them as an individual and acknowledges them in the class as a person they respect and care for rather than just an anonymous "class member". Truly successful teachers of boys throughout Australia achieve this by finding out a little about each student's background, family, work, sporting achievements etc. and feeding back that knowledge to the boy.

It is unfortunate that Australia has become paranoid about teachers "touching kids" because many boys simply need a hand on their shoulder, grip of the arm, pat on the back or handshake for the teacher to make that connection, without a word needed. Males are increasingly being told never to make contact with each other except by shaking hands and, even in families, male children are often denied that feeling of closeness and reassurance from very early ages to "toughen them up". Parents are their child's greatest teacher and the techniques I have outlined also apply to us in our parenting role.

