

INSIGHTS

Supporting boys in upper primary school



The upper primary school years are the start of big physical changes and boys can struggle more than girls. Even though some of our boys are growing physically, this time can be challenging, unpredictable and full of big emotions and awkwardness.

Some anxiety can also occur as the end of primary school approaches and some boys can fight with their physiology. Parents need to be mindful to recognise that for many pubescent boys, every day at school feels like going into a war zone because it is so unpredictable.

The following ideas will help to guide you through this time.

Have realistic expectations

Create a calm, predictable environment to counteract the stress many boys may experience. Parents can do this by avoiding asking too many questions and placing too much pressure especially around homework. Especially avoid criticism, nagging and lecturing — they won't improve anything.

Keep things light

Boys appreciate lightness and humour, especially when they may be struggling with anxiety or worry. Maybe you could find some funny, goofy cat or dog videos to show them or share some funny experiences that might trigger the beautiful happy neurochemicals in their brain. Be a bit ridiculous – intentionally.

Share developmental changes

Have brief conversations with your son about the coming brain changes, especially pruning, which is a 'trimming down' process in the teenage brain where irrelevant/unused mental connections from childhood are lost. These conversations can help him understand why he may be struggling with organisation and be forgetting things that he used to remember. Once he knows there is a reason, he'll tend to manage it better — indeed many boys are relieved! Help your son to work out ways to remember important stuff.

Make home a welcome base for his friends

Ensure that you make your home a welcome base for his friends, regardless of gender. The hunger to 'hang out together' is still strong even for our digital natives, and they will always turn up to a place where they are welcome and where there is a familiar space to gather. It's really good to give your son's mates the message that 'our door is always open for you'. We never know when a family conflict becomes too painful for a boy or that just having some calm down time is what the whole family may need.

Stoke his spark

Help your son identify his passion whether sport, games or music that will keep him engaged in the years ahead. Disengagement is very common among boys in early to middle secondary school and those who have an interest they love and are capable at, tend to struggle less. In primary school boys should sample many activities so that they can discover their real interests.

Help manage anxiety

Many boys experience anxiety as they move toward adolescence and the end of the primary school years. Some boys display anxiety through silliness, inappropriate behaviour, an increase in aggression (often toward siblings), disrespectful language towards parents, changes in eating patterns and struggles with sleep. If you have ongoing concerns check in with your son's teacher and seek help.

Practise kindness

Even though this sounds counterintuitive if you are experiencing some hot moments with your pre pubescent or pubescent son, kindness especially in small unexpected ways has enormous power. Many boys struggle with low self-worth and when they muck up they struggle even more with feeling acceptable and loved.

Above all, reassure your son often that you love him fiercely and unconditionally, no matter what.



Maggie Dent

Commonly known as the 'queen of common sense', Maggie Dent has become one of Australia's favourite parenting authors and educators, with a particular interest in the early years, adolescence and resilience. She has written seven major books including the bestselling *Mothering Our Boys* and her 2020 release, *From Boys to Men*. Maggie is host of the ABC podcast, [Parental As Anything](#). She is the mother of four sons and a very grateful grandmother. For further details visit maggiedent.com