



Look who's talking

Raising boys to communicate

By Adam Cox

RICK FAJICA

The first time I held my son, he returned my gaze and grasped my finger with his hand. It felt like a miracle, yet it's an experience known to millions of parents, signaling that a lifetime of communication between parent and child has begun.

Especially in a boy's earliest years, we listen to him closely, trusting his words are a barometer of his psychological and social development. Through communication, families form the deep, reciprocal relationships that are life's reward. But what are we supposed to think about boys who are less than enthusiastic about communication?

Language helps us transform emotions into something more tangible, something we can consider or modify. We use it to think through the things that happen to us. Experiences are organized in our mind by the words that describe them. The development of an emotional vocabulary helps boys cope with the challenges life presents.

Although many boys today have "good enough" vocabularies for

"instrumental communication" — for example, functional requests such as "Can I watch TV?" or "Can we buy it?" — they often have trouble using words for self-definition ("I feel ... I believe ... I hope ... I am"). Learning to use expressive communication clears a path to a life full of mutually satisfying relationships as well as greater personal and professional opportunities in adulthood.

These are the stakes when it comes to the social communication skills of boys. If you think these skills don't matter, consider the near-epidemic levels of problems that disproportionately affect males: attention deficit hyperactive disorder, autism-spectrum disorders and learning disabilities (the latter at a rate five times higher than girls). The common denominator? Social communication problems.

Along with differences in how boys are socialized, recent research points to potential neurological factors contributing to this gender

schism. Neuroimaging technology shows the male brain tends to process language almost exclusively in the left hemisphere, while the pattern is much more diffuse for females. Our right hemisphere is where we make sense of nonverbal communication and detect nuances that provide a deeper interpretation of language.

When boys "don't get it," when we see stone faces and shoulder shrugging, we may not be seeing an attitude problem. It's more likely a processing problem. Imagine if when we heard someone speak, it sounded monotone — like that computerized voice we get on voice mail, absent the subtle cues that define effective social communication. This is how social communication is experienced by many boys.

Boys like this can, and should, concern us. Although boys today may have better vocabularies for things and procedures and more varied social opportunities than earlier generations, the communication difficulties of boys are more noticeable than ever.

The items on this checklist reflect different spheres of communication that shape social development. They may be a useful starting point in assessing whether a boy's communication problems warrant attention.

Does he . . .

- ✓ isolate himself at home?
- ✓ become uneasy when asked opinions or thought-provoking questions?
- ✓ dread "opportunities" for self-expression?
- ✓ use anger to deflect personal inquiries?
- ✓ speak so softly that he is inaudible or sounds monotone?
- ✓ consistently opt to express himself physically instead of verbally?

In school, does he . . .

- ✓ seem indifferent to the thoughts and feelings of others?
- ✓ avoid answering questions in class?
- ✓ seem to be ostracized by other students because he "doesn't get it"?
- ✓ take hours to complete tasks requiring expressive writing skills?

Ways to develop a young child's social and emotional awareness at home:

A range of neurodevelopmental problems disproportionately affect boys. Parents concerned about a child who has been diagnosed with such disorders should consider a professional evaluation.

Still, there are many things that can be done at home. Reading with young children, rehearsing social communication skills such as greetings and modeling empathic communication at dinnertime are just a few ways parents set the table for healthy communication.

- Provide opportunities for self-expression. Acting games are one good option: "Show me with your voice and eyes that you're really a clever spy."
- Verbalize your train of thought, particularly in social situations, so your son can understand the motivations and reasoning behind your actions.

- While he is still young, develop your son's emotional vocabulary. If he can name his colors, he can begin to make distinctions such as "disappointed vs.

frustrated" or "excited vs. nervous."

- Develop your son's phonological awareness through reading, storytelling and music. An ability to distinguish phonemes (a sound unit of speech) can have a surprisingly big impact on his future academic and social success.
- Recognize that leadership is the antidote to apathy, not a reward for compliance. Allowing boys to take on constructive authority propels interest in pro-social communication.

The earlier we intervene, the greater the dividend for our investment. When we build boys' communication skills, we're teaching them how to connect with others and create the relationships that will support them for life.

Adam Cox, BFA '83, is a clinical psychologist in Emmaus, Pa., and author of "Boys of Few Words: Raising Our Sons to Communicate and Connect."

OT For more advice from Cox and an expanded checklist, visit **Ohio Today Online** at www.ohio.edu/ohiotoday.

Hello, neighbor

Can squirrels see color? Can they swim? How long do they live? And just how do they crack open their food? All these questions and more are answered in "Squirrels: The Animal Answer Guide," co-authored by researcher Katie Ferrell, BSJ '96 and MS '00, and Smithsonian curator of mammals Richard Thorington Jr. Here are three quick facts — to share with your kids, maybe? — about the little animal that seems to love our campus as much as we do:

1. Squirrels live on all continents, except Antarctica and Australia, and belong to the rodent family. Evolutionarily, however, squirrels are most closely related to the beaver.
2. There are 278 species of squirrels. The largest are the gray marmots, which can weigh up to 18 pounds and are found in the mountains of Kazakhstan. The smallest weigh a few grams.
3. Squirrels do swim — especially during migrations. In 1990, eastern gray squirrels living near Washington, D.C., were spotted swimming across the Potomac River. More recently in 2005, a kayaker followed a squirrel as it swam a mile to an island on the Great Lakes. (So you just might see your furry friends on vacation!)



KOM WALKER

For many squirrels, home is a leaf nest built high in a tree. But they might also catch a quick nap on a branch, as this squirrel did near College Green.

OT For an interview with Ferrell and more facts from "Squirrels: The Animal Answer Guide" (including a surprising twist on Cinderella's slippers), visit www.ohio.edu/ohiotoday.