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Edmonds Kind of Play: Sharing tips for helping boys thrive

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Jennifer Marx with Richard Sherman's parents, Beverly and Kevin, who spoke at the Edmonds event.

Last week, when I posted I would be attending Saturday's "Helping Boys Thrive" summit at the Edmonds Center for the Arts, co-founded by *New York Times* best-selling author Michael Gurian and Edmonds-based psychologist Gregory Jantz, PhD, founder of The Center for Counseling and Health Resources, the replies varied from friends wishing they had something like that near them, to "see you there," to "please report back on what you find."

The all-day event started with a packed house, and the knowing laughs and nods were almost immediate. The teachers, counselors and parents of boys were in a safe place where the boys in their life were celebrated for all of their pencil-tapping, sword-wielding, risk-taking hijinks.



A capacity crowd gathered at the Edmonds Center for the Arts to hear Gurian speak. (Photos by Scott Berg and Jerry Berg)

I saw another Edmonds mom on our way into the last event of the day and we agreed that we felt overwhelmed by all the information. She said she was trying to figure out a way to get a break once she got home, cause you know, asking for a break when you've been gone all day never goes over well. I left the conference in a place I didn't think I'd find myself — defensive of the behaviors that usually get my boys into trouble — by me.

I am excited to share with you some of the

great stuff I learned, though it will be just the tip of the iceberg — a loud, worm-holding, truck-loving iceberg.

I'm a mom of sons who grew up in a house with no little boys, so the following quote gave me a tremendous amount of relief, and then concern:

"Boys get unfairly labeled as morally defective, hyperactive, undisciplined, or 'problem children,' when quite often the problem is not with the boys but with the families, extended families or social environments, which do not understand their specific needs as human beings and boys." — Michael Gurian, *The Good Son*

The quote is included in a video called "Boys in Crisis," which is full of some pretty alarming facts, such as "Boys make up 80 percent of school disciplinary referrals" and "77 percent of children expelled from public elementary and secondary schools are boys." The relief came in knowing that my little dirt-covered, toy-breaking wrestlers are perfectly normal. The concern is that now that I know that, how can I explain it to others, especially without sounding like the ever-unpopular, over-permissive, my-kid-can-do-no-wrong mom.

During the question-and-answer panel, Gurian explained he believes the biggest challenge for boys today is the "misunderstanding of boy energy." I would go so far as to say that this misunderstanding is the biggest challenge in my life as well, not just from others but also from myself.

During Gurian's keynote, he broke down the difference between aggression and violence, explaining that aggression is wanting to manipulate or control; for instance, to win a game. Violence, on the other hand, is used to destroy. He said — and I confirmed this with him — that boys can show "love" by "hitting and wrestling." This is not punching in the face in order to cause injury — that is violence — but more the tumbleweed of chaos that happens when my boys are within a certain range of each other and smash together like goofy magnets.



Boys nurture each other by urging a kid who has fallen down in a soccer game to get up; girls nurture by running over to that kid and asking if he is OK. Gurian says both are useful and both are nurturing, and that the female way is currently overvalued. When I read my notes back, it sounds scary, as if to imply we're going to "release the hounds" on each other. However, this info

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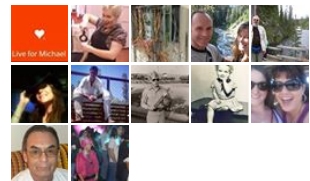
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The biggest challenge facing boys, Michael Gurian says, is the "misunderstanding of boy energy."

education. However, the line didn't feel as if it was meant to confirm an old-school "walk it off," "boys don't need feelings" mentality, but more of a "let's not pathologize" the physical way in which boys relate and learn.

I will say, that while I 100-percent believe Gurian, it is still hard to understand because I don't want to wrestle with my friends. I want to talk about my feelings in my 20,000 words a day versus a man's 7,000.

As the keynote continued, an important thing was explained about boys, who have a more active cerebellum so therefore move more. When they destroy a doll or an animal/character in a video game (in moderation), they really do consider it an object. I have looked on in horror as my sons smashed a toy depicting something with a brain and feelings.

Boys and girls have different brains and Gurian urges anyone who disagrees to head to his website— MichaelGurian.com — and find 1,000 brain-based studies that show they do.

On top of an eye-opening keynote from Gurian, the day was filled with other interesting speakers offering insight and information:

- Jantz spoke about the technology, video games, phones and social networks for the "igeneration." He explained that the average age for exposure to pornography is 11; I double-checked this with him mostly because I didn't want to believe it. Jantz believes that there need to be conversations and rules in place with technology. In his house, the smart phones are not allowed in the bedrooms overnight, not only due to content but because studies are showing easy access to these devices are interrupting sleep patterns.
- Seattle Seahawk Richard Sherman's parents, Kevin and Beverly, also spoke during the summit. Having raised three children in Watts and Compton, not exactly locations where you'd expect to produce a Stanford grad, the Shermans believe a community of parent involvement — along with discipline — is the key to success. You would think that having two sons, one of which is "the best corner in the game," that when Mrs. Sherman lovingly described one of her children as "Mama's thorn" it would be Richard. As it turns out, "Mama Sherman" was referencing the daughter she "begged God for." "Papa Sherman" interjected with a crowd favorite, "Be careful what you wish for." During the question-and-answer panel, Beverly Sherman said she believes peer pressure is boys' biggest challenge today.
- Dakota Hoyt, Executive Director of The Gurian Institute, shared some great information she's learned in her 30 years of working in education. She explained that you need to be direct with boys and should "keep it simple." Boys are "wired to move" and need a "hand fidget" (a type of toy that helps children regulate sensory input so they can concentrate), she said. They also need to get outside and to be allowed to move in class and at recess. If there was anything reiterated Saturday, it was that boys should never lose recess as a punishment. Hoyt also told us that humor is a stress reliever for boys, suggested that boys drink water when they are being emotional because it reduces the stress hormone cortisol, and that failure is often the best teacher.

The resources given yesterday were really endless and you can access all of them, even if you didn't attend. Great places to visit include The Helping Boys Thrive Facebook page, www.GurianInstitute.com, www.MichaelGurian.com, or Dr. Gregg Jantz's Facebook page. Michael Gurian has 26 books to choose from; I am going to go with "The Wonder of Boys."

— By Jennifer Marx

Jen Marx, an Edmonds Mom of two young boys, is a traffic reporter by dawn and writer and PBJ maker by day. She is always looking for a fun place to take the kids that makes them tired enough to go to bed on time. You can find her trying to make sense of begging kids to "just eat the mac n cheese" at SnackMomSyndrome.com. If you have a kid-friendly event you'd like to share, email her at play@myedmondsnews.com.

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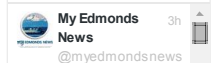
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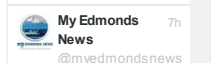


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