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# The New Masculinity: No Better Time for Boys

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Writing a book about boys brings a rich reward: the chance to talk with teachers, coaches and parents from all walks of life and all around the world. In the year since my book first came out, I have received a deluge of email, phone calls, comments and notes. Many who attend my talks queue up after with personal questions. There is a palpable longing among all those who care for boys to get it right.

Certain hard questions always arise. During a talk sponsored by Parents League of New York, a father raised his hand to ask, “What do I say to my son when all he hears about is *toxic* masculinity?” This question in particular captures the uncertainty many parents feel about their sons’ futures. I believe it stems from a growing awareness that something is off about boyhood.

## **Masculinity Under the Microscope**

I said to that father, and repeat every time I speak to parents of boys, that there’s never been a better time to raise a son. The wholesale reexamination of masculinity currently underway represents a remarkable historic turn. For the first time, being honest about the outcomes of boyhood has become possible, allowing those who care for boys to question outcomes that were taken for granted by previous generations. Movements for gender equality and against sexual harassment, including #MeToo, have made the routine losses and casualties of boyhood more visible—and patently unacceptable.

Whether it’s the gender achievement gap in education, or injury and mortality statistics skewed against boys, or life skills

like emotional intelligence, intimacy, fairness and enduring friendship that might seem to lie beyond their reach, generations of males have long suffered from how we raise them. Societies in the past just normalized such losses: *Boys will be boys. Boys don't do feelings. You can't expect a boy to sit still in school. Testosterone makes boys wild and crazy.* What's new today is that we are beginning to challenge these rationalizations in search of more scientific insight.

Honesty is replacing dogma, denial and magical thinking. Families and schools need answers to important questions: Why has the gender achievement gap been so casually accepted for generations? Why do young males predominate on the list of the 15 leading causes of premature mortality? Why are suicide rates for boys, especially those of color, rising? What are the effects of pornography on boys' sexual development? How do we protect boys' brains from concussions and traumatic injuries, too common in contact sports?

In the past, answers often hinged on some version of "Boys are just wired differently." But the myth that biology is destiny when it comes to males is giving way to a deeper consideration of how, as interpersonal neuroscientist Daniel Siegel argues, "experience *is* biology." How we treat boys not only shapes their behavior but actually builds their brains. To raise good men, those who care must ensure that boys receive proper nurturing experiences.

Child development theorists understood long ago that strong adults grow from secure attachments. A child who feels "felt" and "well-held" is better able to resist pressures and to recover from adversities. But the fear of spoiling boys or undermining their masculinity causes caregivers to second-guess their instincts, distance themselves, and push their sons out of the nest. The "mama's boy" myth leaves mothers tied up in self-doubt, while fathers strive to teach their sons to be men and exhort them toward courage, stoicism and self-denial. It is the ultimate irony of boyhood: In trying to strengthen boys, we often leave them weaker, less resilient, and less gritty.

## **A Whipsaw Between Old and New**

When we get it right, boys respond. In the emotional literacy program for 11th- and 12th-grade boys I run at a boys school outside of Philadelphia, our operating premise is that each boy is naturally committed to his own integrity, a faith that has been richly rewarded. A writer for the alumni magazine of the University of Pennsylvania, a millennial father with two young sons, visited a final session of the program and wrote: “[W]hat transpires over the next hour is unlike anything I ever experienced in my youth—or, if I’m being honest, my adulthood. . . . [O]ne by one each young man sits at the head of a long table and opens his heart in front of the group. Some open wider than others, to be sure, and often the emotions that tumble out are still armored with a layer of deflective humor or self-deprecation, but the exercise is frequently remarkable.”

In the group the other day, Connor, a 12th-grade college athletic recruit, volunteered for a turn in front of 40-50 of his peers. Nervous to be the center of their attention, he was nonetheless eager to get some things off his chest. He talked about a recent argument with his father, divorced from his mother, during which his father called him “soft.” As he told the story, tears of hurt, anger and frustration began to stream. “To say that to me means he doesn’t know me,” he explained, “He has no idea what it took to get through the divorce and how it hurt everyone in our family.”

While his emotions flared, all of us noticed how much strength and courage Connor exercised, how determined to be himself. Nothing about him struck his schoolmates as weak. Their respect for him had only deepened. When he stood up to return to his seat, I noticed that he had sweated through his shirt and jacket, sporting a wet stain across his back like a badge of courage.

Millennials and Gen Zers like Connor think their fathers are confused. Like many men and indeed women, this father equated strength with being hard, tough. But Connor fought for something more, the right to be true to himself. He registered his father’s push to squeeze him into a man box as anachronistic, a surrender to stereotypes. He felt he’d lost his father.

A consistent finding in recent surveys of young men is how often they are told to “man up,” even as new dating dynamics and digital norms mean they must play by altogether-changed rules. Boys and young men are being whipsawed between old and new, reeling from what sociologist Barbara Risman calls “gender vertigo.” The young people she interviewed told her that the new relationship landscape is a far cry from the picture painted by their parents. As they struggle to adapt, some embrace equality; some cling to tradition; most feel unsteady. No wonder parents of boys are so uncertain.

Their uncertainty is compounded by the conflicting advice they receive. When the American Psychological Association published new guidelines for work with men and boys, pointing out the negative impact of “traditional” masculinity on mental health, there was an outcry against the guidelines as if men themselves were being attacked. Meanwhile, a book that borrows from Navy SEAL training has become a popular manual for raising a son. And Canadian psychologist Jordan Peterson attracts throngs of millennial males by telling them to stand up straight and defend themselves.

### **A Life of His Own Design**

As an alternative to these myths and misconceptions, parents can draw upon what is known about raising children who are strong and centered. What psychologists call attachment represents the fundamental truth that children, regardless of sex, develop their sense of self in a relationship with caregivers. The child builds an enduring impression of who he is from how well he is loved. His self-concept can be strengthened or modified by subsequent experiences with important figures like teachers and coaches, but these first impressions set a basic frame that can last a lifetime.

In my work with boys, I have witnessed that when a boy dares to be his authentic self and refuses to conform to the norms of his peer group, other boys sometimes react ruthlessly. Sadly, even the most well-meaning adults in their lives may not provide what boys need to resist these pressures. Too often, parents attempt to “manage” the problem, offering unhelpful advice or intervening

out of fear that their sons won't figure things out for themselves. But only the boy himself can navigate his life, and what he really needs are trusted adults in whom he can confide, to let them know what he is up against.

To be known and understood strengthens a boy's self-confidence. And yet, in our culture, boys are encouraged to act like they can handle anything and don't need to rely on others. In truth, trying to keep everything to oneself is a fragile adaptation; in the echo chamber of one's own mind, feelings like shame and fear get amplified. The surest way to empower boys is to enable them to depend on us.

All boys have the ability to imagine a life of their own design. Inspired by their dreams, boys can resist pressures to be something they are not. As they assert who they are and want to become, their trust in their judgment grows. When there is no one to bounce things off or to check in with, though, a boy is left with only his own thoughts and feelings ricocheting around in his mind. When they are too alone, boys can more easily go off track.

## **How We Can Support Our Boys**

The most powerful way parents can support their sons is to listen to them. The gift of a parent's interest and attention is simply invaluable. But while listening to boys may seem quite basic, it is not easy. Many boys respond to the pressures of boyhood with mistrust, disconnection and reticence. They learn to play it cool, showing little of what they feel and acting as if they are indifferent, bored or irritated. Confronted by an off-putting mask, many parents and teachers become confused and discouraged. Some even give up or blame the boy who seems uninterested in opening up. When an adult persists, focusing on the connection without blame or despair, and reaches for the boy who has grown apart or gotten stuck, it can help him find his way back to himself.

There are several strategies I recommend for those who want to help boys experience themselves as known and loved. The strategies begin with deep listening and extend to a routine of spending special time with the boy, even into adolescence.

They also include a framework for discipline aimed at helping boys develop better self-control by confronting, disclosing and resolving difficult feelings that drive their misbehavior.

I recognize this framework requires more of the very things many parents have less and less of: time and attention. For so many, the second shift of home life and the modern miracle of juggling sports, arts and social calendars reduce interactions with children to managing, organizing and schlepping them around. But the joy of knowing and loving a boy works both ways. The most sublime moments for parents are when they truly connect with their children.

In my work, I build on this framework, considering various aspects of boyhood, like emotional development, boys' efforts at friendship and romance, and how boys care for their bodies, deal with violence and navigate digital life. In each developmental domain, the particular way that boys are threatened can be countered with one or more of these strategies for pulling them closer and strengthening the influence our connections to them provide.

The new model for boyhood will take us back to basics: listening, offering the profound validation of our attention, and making time for boys to follow their imaginations rather than someone else's idea of who they should be. This model is the surest way to build good men. If we want our sons to hold onto themselves and their virtue, we must hold onto them.

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