



## Snips and Snails: Raising Boys

*Boys today are growing up in a world that expects many conflicting things from them. The ideal man is a study in contradictions: sensitive yet not mushy, athletic but not violent, powerful while compassionate. When thinking about gender based biases in our society, most people think about the ones facing girls, when in fact the ones facing boys are much deeper and are not as socially acceptable to break.*

by Brette McWhorter Sember

All of this means that parents of sons face a difficult challenge. There are many issues commonly confronted by people who are parenting boys. While the issues discussed in this article are common, it is important to understand that each boy is unique and no broad statements can apply to all the wonderful and individual boys being raised in our homes. The first step to guiding your son through the minefields ahead is understanding what you will be confronting.

### Emotions

There is a perception in our society that boys are essentially built differently when it comes to having emotions. In fact, boys and girls are created equal when it comes to their emotions, it is society that drives boys to handle emotions differently. Paul Kivel, a specialist in violence prevention and author of *Boys Will Be Men: Raising*

*Our Sons for Courage, Caring and Community*, states that "there is little evidence that psychologically or developmentally they are very different. Boys are trained to Act Like a Man - to be tough, aggressive, in control, not to show feelings, not to cry, not to make mistakes and not to ask for help. This training... means that boys are trained into young men who do not show feelings."

Many parents find themselves conflicted about helping their sons be emotionally open while still being able to be masculine in a way acceptable to society. April Lee Schmidt, a mother of sons from Moundville, Alabama comments that it is difficult to help boys "learn their roles in society without compromising their masculinity".

"It's like society dumped a whole new set of expectations on them, without letting up on the old macho junk," explains mom Beth Corwin from

Pinckney, Michigan.

To deal with this dilemma, parents need to encourage emotional development in their sons. This includes talking about feelings, openly displaying feelings in front of boys and not ridiculing displays of emotions from boys. "Emotional intelligence comes from encouraging boys to read their own and others' feelings and develop capacities for empathic responses," says Michael Kimmel, professor of sociology at SUNY Stony Brook and author of *Manhood in America*.

### Crying

It is uncommon in our society for men or boys to cry as openly as girls do and the stigma of 'big boys don't cry' is still very much alive. Speaking about her son, Andrea Bikfalvy of Dowagiac, Michigan explains, "Crying is human and I want him to feel free to cry or express his hurt in other ways rather

than turning it inward and becoming angry or depressed." It is important for boys to understand that crying is an acceptable and necessary way of coping with emotions. Parents who can communicate this to their sons have begun to fight the prejudice that encourages boys to bury their emotions.

Lynda Johnson of Boise, Idaho faced with this with one of her sons. "My oldest son had a difficult time controlling his tears when he was younger. This caused him to be a magnet for bullies.... It was very tough for him and heartbreaking for us." Many parents believe they must teach their sons to show emotions at home while helping them learn to suppress them around other boys to protect them. Clearly it is difficult to encourage emotional displays in a culture where they can be the subject of ridicule.

### Expressions of Affection

Any type of affection that a parent would use with a girl is appropriate with a boy and no distinction should be made. Some parents believe that if they express affection with boys the same way they do with girls that this will somehow cause the boy to grow up less masculine. "These fears are deep seated and often based on homophobia, fear that our sons will be gay if we don't toughen them up," says Paul Kivel, who specializes in helping men cope with tendencies toward violence and aggression in their lives. "How can boys grow into men who can nurture others, be in intimate relationships and be socially conscious and caring members of a community if they cannot express and show the normal range of human feeling?" asks Kivel.

Professor Michael Kimmel says "Stop worrying. Some of the greatest men in history were obviously sissies - like Jesus, Martin Luther King, Gandhi." Kimmel's point is that qualities we often consider as feminine can in fact be highly prized in men.

### Depression

Depression is becoming recognized as a more common problem in boys. Because "depression in boys can be manifested

in angry oppositional behavior - rather than sitting around and moping - there are still probably many boys whose main problem is that they are depressed but this goes unrecognized because their behavior is more outwardly angry than sad," explains Dr. Anthony Wolf, author of *The Secret of Parenting: How to Be in Charge of Today's Kids Without Threats or Punishment*. Talking with boys about their feelings and their reactions to situations in their lives can help combat the silent nature of depression.

### Maintaining Communication

Most experts recommend that parents keep the lines of communication open with their sons to stay in touch with them. Asking questions about how your son feels and talking about your own experiences and feelings and about the world around you is an excellent way to stay in touch with your son. Some parents find that to do this they must make a greater effort than they do with their daughters. Michelle Pearson of Leaf River Illinois says of her son, "I make an extra effort to try and draw things out of him and let him talk about his emotions, probably much more than I did with my girls."

### Aggression

Many parents interviewed for this article say they have definitely noticed that their sons are very physical in the ways they interact with the world. Throwing, running, kicking, hitting and general rough-housing were described as very common in their son's daily lives. Katie, mom to an eight year old boy in Hampton, Virginia, says of her son, "He is definitely more physical. He told me the other day that sometimes when he's sitting in school he just has to move."

But does a tendency towards being physical have to translate to aggression? Dr. Anthony Wolf says no. "Physical is not bad. Harm to others and property is bad. That is what parents want to emphasize." Physical tendencies should not be suppressed but instead should be channeled.

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