



Boys Will Be Men: Guiding Your Sons from Boyhood to Manhood

by Paul Kivel

Sometimes we may not take seriously what our sons are learning and doing, telling ourselves that “boys will be boys.” At other times we may take what they do too seriously and tell them to “Grow up and act like a man.” Raising sons today, with our concerns about the violence they are vulnerable to and the controlling and abusive male roles they may grow up to inhabit, is a challenging occupation. How do we guide them from boyhood to manhood with their strength, creativity, caring, and lives intact remembering that they are boys, but inevitably boys will be men?

Many of us operate out of a tug-of-war theory of parenting with our sons tied to the middle of the rope. We see ourselves as pulling against the media, peer pressure and the temptations of modern society for our son's attention and allegiance. This approach can lead us to feel constantly embattled and trying to save or protect our sons from the evil influences out there.

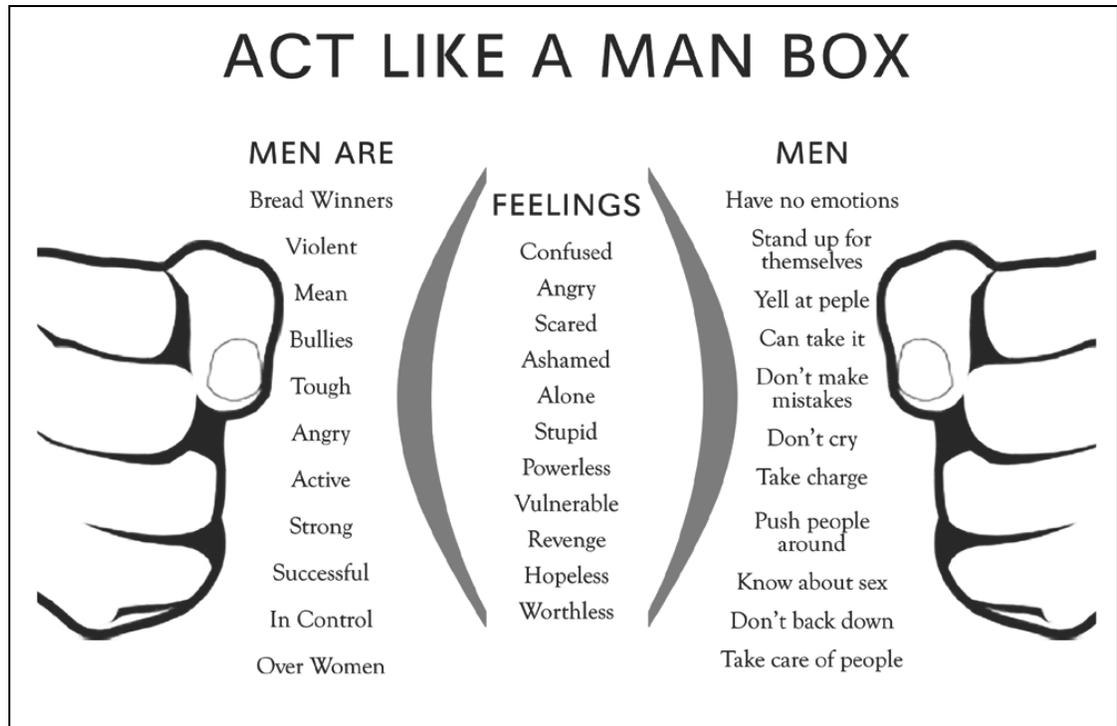
Our sons are not unthinking and gullible people tempted by horrible (but tantalizing) fates. Boys have feelings, thoughts, ambitions, dreams, and the capacity to make their own decisions. We need to realign ourselves so that we are on their side, instead of trying to get them to be on our side and accept our values. This involves working to help strengthen their ability to make good choices about their lives. We need to trust that they will pick their own best directions, activities, friends and future given the options they see. We can help them expand those options.

Of course they will make mistakes. Few of those mistakes will be fatal and most of them will be necessary for them to grow and learn how to be mature adults. Our challenge is to help them make their own choices, and their own mistakes, rather than have them simply carry out the traditional male role training in violence and control.

How are boys trained? At a very early age boys are told to "Act like a man". Be tough, be aggressive, don't back down, don't make



mistakes, be in control, take charge, have lots of sex, have money, be responsible, don't show any feelings, and don't cry. I have come to call this the "Act Like a Man Box" because it feels like living in a box. One reason we know it's a box is because every time a boy tries to step out he's pushed back in with names like wimp, sissy, mama's boy, girl, fag, nerd, punk, and others even more graphic. Behind the names are the fights. Most men were in a fight sometime in their youth to prove they were in the box.



There are lots of cultural variations on this theme, but the similarity of male expectations across cultures in the United States is striking. Boys themselves have different strategies for trying to survive in the box, or sneak out of it at times, but the scars from living within the walls of the box are long lasting and painful.

As parents we've been taught to pass on to our sons the importance of being in the box. Even though we may fervently want them to get out of the box, there are probably subtle and not so subtle ways we reinforce this training.

Have you ever not held, hugged or kissed your son because you were afraid it might make him too soft? Have you discouraged him from crying, or have you ever been uncomfortable in the presence of his feelings?



We may also think of our son as too soft, weak, or a wimp for not standing up for himself more aggressively. We may become fearful for his safety and offer lukewarm support if he shows interest in activities that are not traditionally male or are not as aggressive as we've come to expect boys to be. We may encourage him to participate in athletic or other competitive programs because we think it's good for him, without questioning the values he learns from these activities. There are probably ways that all of us sometimes give up and say "boys will be boys" and then fail to challenge the messages and training boys receive from TV, movies, books, sports and their peers.

Perhaps most important of all, few of us talk to our sons about the gender role training they are receiving. We don't point it out, notice with them the consequences for themselves, women, and other men. We don't challenge them to think critically about that training and to develop communication and problem solving skills for getting out of the box.

WHAT DO BOYS NEED FROM US?

What do boys need from us to get out of the box, to become the healthy, creative, intelligent, compassionate, interdependent members of the community that we know they can be?

Practice expressing feelings

Boys cannot be in touch with themselves or close to others if they cannot express their feelings. To help them we can regularly ask them how they feel. When we read stories and watch videos with them we can ask them how the characters feel, and how they would feel if they were in that situation. We can also help them find ways to express their feelings besides words, such as through art, music, writing, and dance.

A chance to nurture

Besides lots of healthy nurturing, boys need the opportunity to become nurturers. We should assume that boys can and naturally want to nurture others. We can give them plants, animals, dolls, stuffed animals, and younger children to take care of. Commensurate with their age and abilities we can enable them to practice the skills and learn the joy, satisfaction and responsibility involved in nurturing activities.



Someone to talk with about the hard subjects

Don't wait to talk with them. Many of us postpone talking with our boys until they are adolescents because we are uncomfortable talking about sexuality, drugs, violence or other difficult issues. The best time to begin talking with them, at a level appropriate to their age, is when they are in elementary school. At that age they are still listening to us, and they are not yet ready to experiment with different kinds of behavior. We can use books, videos, TV programs, news items and political events to talk about sex, violence, drugs, the media and other difficult issues.

Talking about sex or drugs does not encourage young people to experiment. In fact it lessens their need to. If we wait until they are teenagers they may already have so much confusion, fear, or misinformation that they will not listen to us.

A chance to participate and make a difference

We know that boys have a tremendous sense of fairness, concern for others, and that they want to make a difference. Community service projects are a wonderful way to take them into the community and participate. We can take them to a homeless shelter, to a program for feeding the hungry, or to work on an environmental cleanup project. This gives them a sense that they are part of a community and that in a community people care for each other. They get to see through their actions that they can make a difference in other people's lives.

When I ask people at a workshop to name some of the wonderful qualities of boys they throw out words like,

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| energetic | challenging | curious |
| intelligent | caring | rebellious |
| creative | artistic | expressive |
| dramatic | pushing the limits | wild |
| passionate | loving | clever |
| ambitious | hardworking | experimental |
| fun loving | sexual | vital |



Today, when boys and young men are often portrayed as violent, drugged out, underachieving sexual predators and the cause of many of our social problems, it is easy to forget the wonderful qualities of boys and young men. However, if we stay grounded in our love, caring and high expectations for our sons, we can help them stay safe, develop strong and caring relationships, and achieve their most creative and visionary dreams.

Please send comments, feedback, resources, and suggestions for distribution to paul@paulkivel.com. Further resources are available at www.paulkivel.com.