

A Mother's Guide to Raising Boys

As I write, I'm watching a group of high school boys waiting for their bus just across the street from my home office window. It is an early September morning in New England and getting cooler, but still warm enough for an open window. I haven't seen these boys before so they are probably just starting out in 9th grade. Two of them are arguing and one just hit the other one with his backpack. They are using vulgar language and I'm about to go out and walk across the street to issue them a strong warning. Their bus pulls up. I'll catch them next time. If my grandfather was here, he might say that the boys were *feeling their oats* and to leave them alone. This phrase was born in the early 1800's and originally referred to how a horse might kick up and act frisky just after being fed. But this isn't the 1800's and the boys are stepping over a line of appropriate behavior in public where others share the space. Aside from the fact that they are using cuss words, their inappropriate and loud swearing tells me two possible things about the family they come from; there may be weak or no boundaries at home, or they have poor (or no) role models. These factors are just two of the following seven important requirements for parents raising boys.

Allow Appropriate Rough-Housing

I raised two girls and one boy and it was common to see my girls sitting contently, playing together with their tea set or dolls for long periods of time. This is how girls engage in learning development. My son however, would be banging his trucks together or setting up lines of army men to shoot at each other, all while making loud explosion noises and occasionally flipping upside down as a way of physically acting out the violence he seemed to be creating with his toys. The hormone testosterone prevalent in males has been linked to aggression. Learning development for boys is being active and moving about, but that doesn't mean you have to allow them to be jumping on the couch. Create a "jumping" or "tumbling" zone or room for young boys. Respectfully ask rough-housing teenagers to take it outside.

Communicate with Them Directly

Two little girls can sit side by side, talking away and hear every word the other is saying without making eye contact. Because this style of communication is innate in mothers, they get frustrated when they issue a command to their son while washing dishes or shout an order from the next room and don't get the results they are looking for. Successful communication with boys requires getting to their eye level, speaking in a calm tone, and even placing your hands on their arms or shoulders to make a physical connection. One day my wife and I were in the bedroom doing our own thing and she said from across the room with her back to me, "I think we should clean out the closet today." I probably mumbled something like "uh huh," and walked away. She got mad at me that evening because I didn't clean out the closet!

Teach Them to Express Their Emotions

Boys who are able to feel their own emotions and know how to react to them with appropriate behavior are more likely to be understanding and respectful of others and their feelings. These boys develop a higher level of emotional intelligence and are less likely to be driven by their anger when things don't go their way or when someone makes them mad. They also turn out to be great husbands and fathers. Helping your son feel his emotion requires him to feel comfortable expressing what he feels and avoid telling him that "big boys don't cry." Whenever you become aware that he is feeling something, both positive and negative, encourage him to express it by saying, "how does that make you feel." He might think it sounds weird and may even say something like "I hate when you ask me that," but say it anyway. Avoid saying things like "you shouldn't feel that way" and avoid trying to make everything all better for him.

Provide Them with Positive Male Role Models

Boys learn a great deal through what psychologists call *observational learning*. My grandmother use to call it *monkey see, monkey do*. A boy learns how to act like a man through the examples set by other men around him. A single mother raising sons needs to find positive role models for them to watch and emulate from, such as her father, brothers, or uncles. Women are nurturers by nature. Once a boy reaches the age of 8, it is not nurturing he needs more, but examples to learn from as he grows into his adolescent years.

Firm Boundaries

As an adjunct instructor in a local community college, it was not uncommon for me to get a handful of students at the start of each semester who were not well disciplined and arrived late to class, used their cell phones, put their head down to sleep, or talked with their neighbor. The female offenders usually straightened up their behavior with just a quick pep talk, but the males required more convincing. I soon learned that boys needed things in black and white and I began including a fully detailed rule sheet in my syllabus that included consequences for behavior violations. The message here is that boys need clear cut rules that are defined and reinforced. As soon as you relax a rule or boundary, your credibility is shot and they will attempt to bend others. Be firm with them AND respectful.

Find Ways for Them to be Helpful

Anthropologists have been educating us for years on the differences between our male and female ancestors. The females remained in the caves and huts to nurture the young and feather the nests. The males used their innate aggression to leave the compound to hunt and bring home the food. Because of this, males still have internal desires to be self-reliant and achieve accomplishments. Take notice of when your son

achieves something and acknowledge them for it. The younger they are, the more you can make a big deal of it. Tweens and adolescents don't often like the public attention, so for them, keep it low keyed and subtle. Ask for a brief high five or give them a quick thumbs up with a wink.

Discipline Them Fairly

All challenging behaviors are not necessarily misbehavior and don't require firm discipline. Some are absolutely normal but require some gentle and firm redirection, such as teasing others, testing boundaries, and exploring. While making the point that parents should not over react or discipline unfairly to some behaviors in my parenting class, a man revealed to the class that when he was 6 or 7 years old, he was fascinated with his genitals and liked to play show and tell with his playmates. Whenever his mother caught him, she would end the play session immediately and punish him through yelling, spanking, or banishing him to his room. Eventually she was successful and he stopped doing it. But he shared with us that he was now seeing a therapist to help him deal with the dysfunctional intimacy he had with his wife in his marriage. He said the shame he felt whenever his wife turned down his advances was unbearable. A parent's unnecessary reaction to discovery, exploration, or mistakes by their children can create dysfunction and disorders when they become adults.

Oftentimes someone will say to me "What's the big deal about effective parenting? My parents didn't do any of this stuff you're writing about and I grew up just fine, able to live a somewhat normal life." To them I say, "Why allow your child to have a somewhat normal life when he grows up? The world is getting more complex, more competitive, and more dysfunctional. Why not take a few extra measures while he is a boy, to help ensure that he will know how to create and maintain powerful relationships when he is man?"

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