

Understanding the Boy Code

This article has been adapted from the book "Real Boys: Rescuing Our Sons from the Myths of Boyhood," by Dr. William Pollock.

As parents, caregivers, teachers and mentors of boys we all hope and want the best for the next generation of men. However, recent research has shown that boys are not being given the best, and as a result, are falling behind. How are we letting boys down? Unintentionally, we are fostering an idea of boyhood that represses boys' emotional connections and their ability to be intimate. We have an expectation of appropriate behavior for boys that does not reflect the current needs of our society. To help our sons become whole, we must break the Boy Code.

What is the Boy Code?

The Boy Code is a set of rules and expectations that come from outdated and highly dysfunctional gender stereotypes: the idea that boys need to keep their emotions in check; that violence is an acceptable response to emotional upset; that their self-esteem relies on power; and that they must reject any and all signs of "feminine" qualities. Boys learn the Boy Code in sandboxes, playgrounds, schoolrooms, camps, churches, synagogues, temples, and hangouts, from peers, coaches, teachers, and just about everybody else. Even very young boys report that they feel they must "keep a stiff upper lip," "not show their feelings," "act real tough," "not act too nice," "be cool," "just laugh and brush it off when someone punches you." These boys are invoking strict rules they have absorbed about how they "must" behave -- rules that most of them genuinely fear breaking.

In several fundamental ways the Boy Code affects the ability of boys and adults to connect. First it separates boys from their parents too early, before most boys are actually emotionally prepared for it. When boys encounter some of early childhood's most trying times -- when they sleep alone in a crib for the first time, are sent away for two weeks of summer camp, or separate from their parents for the first day of kindergarten -- they are often being pushed toward pseudo-independence before they are ready.

When boys show their emotions, the Boy Code makes boys feel ashamed of themselves. By the time boys reach school age, years of training teaches them that neither their mother nor their father will respond warmly to their expressions of emotions. By elementary school, most boys know and honor the Boy Code even if it deeply hurts them.

Yet when boys rebel against this push to separate -- when they cry, get injured, or tell friends that they'd rather stay at home than go outside and play -- society's Boy Code makes them feel ashamed of themselves. Shame haunts many boys all their lives, undermining their core of self-confidence, eroding their fragile self-esteem, and leaving them with profound feelings of loneliness, sadness and disconnection. Moreover, it affects our ability to fully connect with our boys.

Four Injunctions of the Boy Code

There are four basic stereotyped male ideals or models of behavior at the heart of the Boy Code:

- **"Sturdy oak":** Men should be stoic, stable and independent, and never show weakness. Accordingly, boys are not to share pain or grieve openly. Boys are considered to have broken this guideline, for instance, if they whimper, cry, or complain -- or sometimes even if they simply ask for an explanation in a confusing or frightening situation. As one boy put it, "If somebody slugs you in the face, probably the best thing you could do is just smile and act like it didn't hurt. You definitely shouldn't cry or say anything." The "sturdy oak" requirement drains boys' energy because it calls upon them to perform a constant "acting job" -- to pretend to be confident when they may feel afraid, sturdy when they feel shaky, independent when they may be desperate for love, attention and support.
- **"Give 'em hell":** This is the stance of some of our sports coaches and of roles played by John Wayne, Clint Eastwood, and Bruce Lee. It's a stance based on a false self of extreme daring, bravado and attraction to violence. This injunction stems largely from the myth that "boys will be boys" -- the misconception that somehow boys are biologically wired to act like

macho, high-energy, even violent supermen. This is the Boy Code requirement that leads many boys to "dare" each other to engage in risky behaviors and causes some parents to simply shrug their shoulders if their sons injure themselves or others.

- **"Big wheel"**: The imperative men and boys feel to achieve status, dominance and power. Or, understood another way, the "big wheel" refers to the way in which boys and men are taught to avoid shame at all costs, to wear the mask of coolness, to act as though everything is going all right, as though everything is under control, even if it isn't. This Boy Code imperative leads many boys and men to push themselves excessively at academic or career-related work, often in an effort to repress feelings of failure or unhappiness.
- **"No sissy stuff"**: Perhaps the most traumatizing and dangerous injunction thrust on boys and men is the literal gender straitjacket that prohibits boys from expressing feelings or urges seen (mistakenly) as "feminine" -- dependence, warmth, empathy. According to the ideal of "no sissy stuff" such feelings and behaviors are taboo. Rather than being allowed to explore these emotional states and activities, boys are prematurely forced to shut them out, to become self-reliant. And when boys start to break under the strain, when nonetheless they display "feminine" feelings or behaviors, they are usually greeted not with empathy but ridicule, with taunts and threats that shame them for their failure to act and feel in stereotypically "masculine" ways. And so boys become determined never to act that way again -- they bury those feelings.

Effects of the Boy Code

Even when boys appear sad or afraid, our culture lets them know in no uncertain terms that they had better toughen up and "tough it out" by themselves. The feelings boys are forced to repress become so troubling that some boys may show apparent symptoms of Attention Deficit Disorder, and serious conduct disorders, become depressed, and -- when they're older -- turn to alcohol or drugs. Indeed, the same kind of shame that silences adolescent girls from expressing their true voice affects boys at a much younger age -- at the age of five or six.

The good news is that neither boys nor the adults who care for them need to live by these rules. Boys can rebel against them and revise the code for boys and girls so that they can experience a broad range of feelings and behaviors. Parents do not have to resist their deepest feelings for their sons or let myths about boys overwhelm the wisdom of their own instincts. Together we can unlearn the Boy Code. Together we can insist on enjoying close, emotionally rich relationships, based on connection instead of disconnection. There is not one single healthy path to mature masculinity. Boys' self-esteem is, of course, essential to their emotional growth and academic achievement, and it is dependent on having their "real" voices heard and genuine selves responded to with genuine understanding.

Tips for Breaking the Boy Code

On the whole, boys tend to seek attachment less through asking for it directly, and more by trying to bring it about indirectly or through actions. Here are some tips for parents who are trying to break the Boy Code:

- **Give your son your undivided attention every day**
This means you're not speaking with someone else, you're not simultaneously trying to cook, clean, read or do some other task. You're listening closely. He's got your attention. While sometimes he may not want to talk -- while he may just want to play a game, get some help on his homework or complain about having to do chores -- showing him this attention, even if he doesn't always soak it up, gives him the message that you're there, that you care, and that he has a daily time and place when he can share things with you. It's not important that he always unload heavy emotions on you. And he may signal that he prefers to talk about things at some later point. He just needs to feel your regular loving presence and know that you're eager to know what's happening in his world.
- **Encourage the expression of the full range of emotions**
From the moment a boy is born and throughout his life, it's important he gets the message

that all of his emotions are valid. Rather than forcing him to constantly smile or laugh, we also need to show him we're receptive to his sadness, fear or other painful emotions. Let him know you understand how he's feeling, and show him with your words, facial expressions and gestures that you respect and understand his genuine feelings. With toddlers and school-age boys, we need to ask questions -- "What happened?" "Are you feeling sad about something?" "What's making you unhappy?" -- and, again, express our empathy -- "Gee, that sounds unfair!" "I'm sorry it hurts so much." We also need to use a broad range of emotion words -- happy, sad, tired, disappointed, scared, nervous -- rather than limiting our discussion of emotions to words such as "anger" that force boys to channel the gamut of their feelings into one word and one emotion.

- **Avoid teasing or taunting your son**

When a boy expresses vulnerable feelings, avoid teasing or taunting him. While it's natural to want to be playful with our sons, and though showing him a sense of levity and good cheer sometimes helps him to overcome unpleasant feelings or situations, by and large it's important that we not "cut off" his painful emotions by teasing or taunting him. So, for example, when he comes home and complains that his teacher told him he needs a haircut, rather than teasing that he "sure looks like a real fuzz ball," ask him how his teacher's comments made him feel, hear him out, and tell him that you too don't appreciate what the teacher said. Ask him if he'd like to talk about it, and if so, listen to what he'd like to share with you and try to mirror back in an empathetic way the feelings you sense he's trying to convey. Teasing and taunting rarely heal the boy. Empathy, however, goes miles to help him learn how to express and cope with a broad range of feelings.

- **Avoid using shaming language**

Research, as well as everyday observation, reveals that parents often -- although unintentionally -- use shaming language with their male children that they do not use with girls. It's important to find ways to talk with boys that do not shame them, and that they can respond to. If a boy does something that surprises or concerns you, a natural reaction is to ask, "How could you do that?" But that implies that the act, whatever it was, was wrong and casts the boy in the role of the evil perpetrator. Rather, you might ask, "What's going on?" or "What happened?" which suggests that you have not formed a judgment about the situation under discussion.

- **Look behind anger, aggression and rambunctiousness**

In so many cases, a boy who seems angry, displays a lot of aggression, or is constantly rambunctious is indirectly asking for our help. If you notice a boy who's acting in such ways, try to create a setting where he'll feel comfortable talking with you and then ask him how things are with him. With a young boy, you might not be able to ask him a lot of direct questions -- and he may not yet be able to talk about feelings in a clear way -- but try your best to get a sense of what he's feeling. For instance, if you notice that your son has seemed angry a lot lately, you might say, "Gosh, you've seemed upset a lot. Is everything OK?" Try to get a sense of what might be deeper, more vulnerable feelings that are motivating his anger or rowdy behavior. You might even tell him that sometimes when we act irritably or show aggression, we might be feeling sadness or other upset feelings.

- **Express your love and empathy openly and generously**

Despite all the messages you might receive about "letting go" of your son, of not staying too attached to him, of not "babying" him, you simply can never show him too much love or empathy. Cutting off your affection and support, to let him "stand on his own" can actually traumatize him. Tell your boy that you love him as often as you like. Give him hugs. Tell him you're proud of him and that you care about him. Stay involved in his emotional life. Seek opportunities to connect with him for moments of playful closeness and emotional sharing. If he asks you to let him alone, give him the space that he needs, but let him know that you love him very much and that when he's ready to spend time together, you'll be up for it. You cannot "spoil" your son with too much love or attention. You will not make him "girl-like" or "feminine" by maintaining a close relationship. There's simply no such thing as too much love!

- **Let boys know that they don't need to be "sturdy oaks"**
So many boys, even at a very young age, feel that they need to act like a "sturdy oak." When there are problems at home, when he suffers his own failures or disappointments, or when there's a need for somebody who's physically or emotionally "strong" for others to lean on and he feels like he has to be that support, the boy is often pushed to "act like a man," to be the one who is confident and unflinching. No boy should be called upon to be the tough one. No boy should be hardened this way. So through thick and thin, let your boy know that he doesn't have to act like a "sturdy oak." Talk to him honestly about your own fears and vulnerabilities and encourage him to do the same. The more genuine he feels he can be with you, the more he'll be free to express his vulnerability and the stronger he will become.
- **Create a model of masculinity that is broad and inclusive**
Despite all the narrow messages about "being a guy" that they may get at school, on television, or elsewhere, you can help boys to create their own model of masculinity. Try to help them develop a model that is broad and inclusive. Try to do for them what we have done for girls by valuing them as people before evaluating them as a distinct (and therefore restricted) gender. This means encouraging boys in all their interests, relationships and activities. It means letting them know that "big guys do cry." It also means exposing boys to people who bend society's strict gender rules -- to men who are nurses, women who are plumbers, girls who are "jocks", boys who cook, and so on. Boys especially benefit from getting to know adult male "role models" that exude masculinity in a genuine and expansive way. When you give your son a sense that there's no one single way of being "manly," you're helping him develop confidence about how he really is. You're letting him know that no matter what he enjoys doing, whom he likes spending time with and what sorts of feelings he experiences, he's a "real boy" on his way to becoming a "real man."