

# When Role Models Fall: Talking to Boys About Heroes Gone Bad

Posted: 01/16/2013 10:08 am EST Updated: 03/18/2013 5:12 am EDT

In my first book, *Raising Boys Without Men*, I noted the importance of actively seeking out male role models for boys growing up in homes without fathers. But we know that even boys with dads at home benefit from having a variety of personal heroes. That's because boys will pull from the different people in their lives the traits and qualities they need and admire (which is why role models for boys needn't, and shouldn't, be exclusively male). Viable role models can include babysitters, tutors, coaches, scout leaders, camp counselors, friends and neighbors. Role models can also include men and women boys will never even come into contact with: sports superstars, inventors, authors, musicians, artists and leaders in the fields of business and politics, and even characters in novels like Harry Potter.

But what happens when a child's heroes break the law, hurt others, make terrible choices or otherwise disappoint?

In most cases, the misdeeds of a role model who is far removed will have far less impact than those of one close to him. That is, the fact that Tiger Woods had an affair (or many) is likely to be far less jarring to a boy than hearing the same about his favorite math teacher or, of course, his own father. At the same time, boys place great stock in their public idols. These idols often help inspire and motivate. They represent hope and possibility. In many ways, they influence the men that boys become.

This Thursday on television, Lance Armstrong [will admit](#) to Oprah Winfrey that he used performance enhancing drugs during a long and celebrated cycling career. Perhaps he will address [allegations](#) that he bullied teammates into doping as well, and admit to having lied to many people, for many years. And while it's easy for parents to get angry at men like Armstrong for letting kids down, situations like his present a great opportunity to talk to kids about dealing with disappointment. And about what it means to admire someone for a particular talent or skill versus what it means to consider a person a role model. Because the two are often very different.

**First, make no excuses.** Don't sugarcoat the offenses. If a role model cheated or lied, say that. If he hurt others, say that, too. Give kids the facts, and explain why an action is wrong. As in, "Barry Bonds used performance enhancing drugs to be better at baseball. That's against the laws set by his country and his sport, and since it's a form of cheating, it's also unethical." Talk to them about how a person's actions had an effect on others: his family, his teammates or co-workers, his community.

**Offer perspective.** Help kids realize that athletes and other role models are not infallible. Heroes are real people, and people are flawed. Like most of us, heroes will usually require forgiveness at some point in their lives. But also let them know that lying, cheating and disappointing others, no matter how famous a person is or isn't, is not normal, or excusable, behavior.

**Let them know it's OK to be angry.** Of course, just because human beings are fallible doesn't mean we can't have high expectations for them. The people we choose to look to as role models -- whether a sports hero or a favorite uncle -- are different from everyday people. We're allowed to expect better of them. And if they don't meet those expectations, we're allowed to look elsewhere for inspiration.

**Talk about the need for honesty.** Most fallen role models not only do something wrong, which is bad, but lie about it, which is worse. Use the opportunity to teach kids how to handle mistakes. Take them through the steps: Accept responsibility, express remorse, ask for forgiveness, make amends and don't make the same mistake again. Let your child know that whether or not he decides to forgive a role model is up to him, but that how a role model behaves in the wake of his mistakes can, and should, play an important part in that.

**Be truthful and frank about the consequences.** When Michael Phelps was caught smoking pot in 2009, he **was suspended** and lost a lucrative contract. In the case of Armstrong, of course, he was stripped of his Tour de France titles, may be required to return sponsorship money and may face criminal prosecution. Talk to kids about the very real consequences of bad decisions. Emphasize careful thought before action.

**Help your son identify what characteristics he admires in others.** Ask your son what he feels makes someone a hero. Sure, an athlete who can score 18 touchdowns in a single game may be worthy of adoration. But what else makes him a man? Does he treat his teammates with respect? Does he donate his time to help others? Is he a good father? If he wasn't a gifted

athlete, would he be someone your son would want to know, and why? Show kids that the best role models are worthy of adulation not just because of what they've accomplished, but how they've accomplished it.

**Be proactive in helping him choose other role models.** It's key for kids to recognize that no one role model will ever be perfect. Which is one reason it's wise to encourage boys to look up to a range of heroes, both close to home and at a distance. And keep in mind that not every male in your son's life needs to be role model material. Ask your son often what he thinks of others and their actions, and he'll learn to tell the difference between someone to appreciate and someone to admire.

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