

The New Strategies for Raising a Boy

A book offers a road map for parents of sons at a time when boys face struggles at school and increasing pressures on social media

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It's a challenging time to parent a boy. Moms and dads worry about everything from hypermasculine cultural stereotypes to how to talk about sex in the #MeToo era.

A new book, "How to Raise a Boy: The Power of Connection to Build Good Men," suggests there's good reason for concern. Author Michael C. Reichert cites research showing that boys seek help from health care or school staff at rates nearly twice those of girls; they lag behind girls in social and behavioral skills; and they are the primary recipients of disciplinary sanctions and medication prescriptions.

Dr. Reichert, the founding director of the Center for the Study of Boys' and Girls' Lives at the University of Pennsylvania, aims to provide a road map for parents of sons. A clinical and research psychologist specializing in boys and men for more than 30 years, Dr. Reichert has worked both in the juvenile justice system and with boys in some of the most affluent communities in the country.

Here is an excerpt of a conversation with him:

Are there unique challenges for this generation of boys?

Yes. Media images of boys have exaggerated body types. Studies show that this exaggeration of the male figure in videogames and movies—the Adonis complex—is a relatively new phenomenon. We also see it in the ways that younger males are presenting images of themselves on social media. Boys are aware of the broad audience of spectators on social media viewing them and their relationships. And they are becoming more self-conscious.

Hookup culture is another challenge. Research shows that 62% of young men say they have regrets after a hookup. They wish they had more opportunity for intimacy and romance. But they feel a prohibition to "catching feelings."

There is also a concern about the danger of addiction to technology. Boys put in more hours playing videogames and watching pornography than girls do. And these industries are becoming very adept at creating dependency.

What do we need to change?

It is the role of the adult—the parents, teacher, coach or mentor—to not buy the mask that boys may have adopted, the cool pose or bravado posture. The boy has put that on as a matter of his

survival in his peer culture, the brotherhood. Underneath that is a fully beating heart and human desire for connection. We need to reprioritize this need.

Human minds are wired to connect, so this is important for both boys and girls. But it is important to remember that we are influenced, consciously and unconsciously, by stereotypes of boys. Because of this we have socialized them in a way that leaves them on their own. We need to reinforce for ourselves that they need connection.

How can parents improve their connections with their sons?

I suggest three tools. The first is the tool of deep listening, a form of listening in which parents maintain their focus of attention on their son, and not let themselves get distracted by their immediate concerns or the life lesson they want to teach their boy.

What is the second tool parents can use?

The next is “special time”—carving out a block of time in which you are going to go be with your son one-on-one. This is intuitive but not easy. You are going to pay attention to him and follow his lead and do what he wants to do, whatever that is. Often it starts out with lots of videogames, or shooting baskets, or watching TV shows. We are giving them the freedom to direct the time or play. And that outweighs any concerns about technology or gaming or TV viewing.

What’s the third tool?

It is a way to set limits, premised on the notion that boys who get cut off from their emotions often act their emotions out. A boy who is angry or scared or disappointed or who has experienced some setback acts his emotions out by becoming mean to his sister or disconnected from his family or shut down, angry or surly.

It’s the parents’ job to intervene and help the boy work through the painful emotion. I call this the “listen, limit, listen” model. The first step is to notice the boy is off-course.

Next, the parent steps in and says: “I am not going to let you do this—let you isolate from your family or not do homework or be mean to your sister.” You tell him firmly but not forcefully. A limit set accurately is not about domination or forcing compliance.

The third step is to help the boy confront what he is feeling. What often occurs is a meltdown or tantrum or an effort to withdraw further. It’s the parents’ job now to listen, to be the emotional container. This is where things often break down. What comes out of the boy is angry or disrespectful or frightening, and the parent switches from being the listener to being defensive. You need to bite your tongue and remember your job is to listen without reacting, to continue to offer warm and confident attention even when your son is bitter, angry, resentful, disappointed and crushed.

What about talking with boys about a difficult subject like sex, especially in the #MeToo era?

Follow the boy's lead. The danger of talking to boys about sex prematurely is that they are not really interested and they are going to absorb our sense of urgency and worry. We think we have covered our bases, but mostly what we have done is cause confusion and tension.

How much digital monitoring should parents do?

I recommend that parents only monitor if they are given reason to. I had a young man whose mom became aware that he was compulsively engaging in sexting with girls and viewing pornography. She monitored it. She had talks with him. He evaded her. Finally, it came to a head and I helped them work out a contract where she would stop monitoring when he demonstrated that he could be trusted. The goal is for the boy to be self-governing. We are playing a long game here. We want our sons to be able to make good judgments. We need to remember that this is a process. It won't be perfect.