

Parenting Boys

The “nature – nurture” debate is as active these days as it ever has been: some believing that a boy is born a male and behaves in a way that is driven solely by his biology. Others believe that essentially boys and girls are born as very similar human beings and that the environment is the strongest influence on the development of “maleness” or masculinity and ‘femaleness’ or femininity.

However, more commonly in the 21st century an interactionist perspective is being adopted and supported by research findings. Research has shown comprehensively that while there are many similarities between males and females there are also **differences that distinguish the male and female sexes. These differences are the result of a complex mix of biological and socio cultural influences.**

This interactionist perspective helps us to understand that both biology and environment are important contributors to the development of young boys. Thankfully we have moved a bit further along the continuum of not stereotyping the sexes. In particular we have moved away from stereo typing boys in ways such as ‘Boys will be excessively active and enjoy rough play’ or ‘Boys love trucks, cars, Lego and Super heroes.’

The environment a boy grows up in can provide an ideal opportunity for him to thrive and flourish, but unfortunately some environments can send a general pattern of thinking for young boys as they grow up that leads to the adoption of the more stereotypical male of a past era.

For example:

“From the time he is old enough to understand, a boy is taught to 'behave like a man.' If he is hurt, he is told not to cry, for that is what girls do. If he wants to play with dolls, they may be taken away from him and he is given building blocks or toy trains instead. If he wants to play games with girls instead of playing baseball or football with other boys, he is sneered at and called a sissy. He is praised for being strong, for enduring pain without whimpering, for being brave. If challenged, he is told to 'fight for his rights.' He is taught to assert himself and not give in to others easily lest he be thought a pushover. He is discouraged from showing 'soft' emotions like tenderness, lest he be ridiculed by his friends.”

The biology of the sexes is determined by the different genetic makeup of boys and girls, which is then expressed by differences such as hormone secretion, physical development, some aspects of brain development and some aspects of behaviour. Parenting boys requires the acceptance that boys and girls have some biological differences.

What are some tips that may be helpful with our young boys to ensure we set appropriate expectations and interactions?

- Keep verbal instructions short.
- Make eye contact and ensure they are listening to you.
- Surround boys with reading material they will enjoy, such as real life nonfiction.
- Expose boys to a variety of male mentors from many walks of life that illustrate different ways to be successful (i.e. not just football players but musicians, writers, artists).
- Be aware that some boys will continually test their manhood by risk taking and that they overestimate their abilities.
- Be aware of the video games boys play and limit screen time and aggressive role models.
- Stress tends to cause boys to choose isolation; ask boys about their lives when they want to be alone.
- Show an interest; eat meals together regularly and find out what is going on in their lives.
- Teach them the social skills to carry on a balanced conversation. Encourage them to ask about the other person.
- Give clear and consistent discipline to boys. Always follow through with consequences.
- Ensure they have active and physical time outdoors.
- Encourage them to share in the household chores. Make it an expectation that everyone shares in the running of the house and avoid gender stereotype roles.
- Encourage their friends to come over to your house. Make it a happy welcoming place for them. Get to know their friends.
- Provide strong role models for boys who are reluctant to read.



- When they are 7 or 8 years of age join a club or sporting activity.
- Encourage emotions and self-expression (this is extremely important for young boys as they grow up).
- Encourage and model the use of “reflective listening”
- Encourage the development of a strong and positive sense of identity that is not based upon a stereotype male.
- Support them to be able to communicate effectively with others.