

## **PARENTING BOYS**

Educators and child psychologists are beginning to pay attention to the effect that our society is having on boys. The educational system was revised to benefit girls, but we are now seeing that the changes have had a detrimental effect on boys. On college campuses today, for example, approximately 60% of the students are women, and in 2004, 60% of the masters degrees were earned by women.

Boys are indeed different from girls and so have different needs. Their brains were bathed in testosterone early in their fetal development. Because of the influence of testosterone, the structure of boys' brains is actually different – they have fewer connections between the right and left hemispheres. So, boys have behavioral tendencies that need to be acknowledged. Please understand that this handout includes broad generalizations that will not apply to every boy, but we hope these few hints will help you parent your son and enjoy his masculinity.

### **AS INFANTS**

1. All infants need cuddling, touching, tickling, but parents often spend less time cuddling and hugging their sons. So – make sure you spend time enjoying touching and playing with your son. And...continue to provide physical affection throughout his life.
2. Boys especially benefit from the more vigorous play that fathers often provide. A note to moms – don't be upset when dad or another man lifts baby high over his head and plays "airplane". This helps your baby develop his sense of balance.
3. Boy infants tend to focus less on faces, so take a little longer to gaze at your son. Change your facial expression and see if he will copy you.
4. Parents tend to talk less to baby boys – so make sure you talk a lot to your newborn.

### **AS TODDLERS**

1. Boys play differently than girls – no matter how they are raised. Boys usually take up more space and move around more when they play. Allow them plenty of room!
2. Boys like to handle objects, manipulate tools, construct tall buildings, investigate how things are put together. Provide blocks and pretend tools for your toddler.
3. Boys may have a more difficult time learning to read. Read to your son every day. Slow down your speech. Point out objects in the book. Ask him to tell you what he sees.
4. Boys may have a more difficult time identifying their feelings. Use emotion words every day. "I am feeling disappointed I can't play with you right now." "Are you feeling sad?"

### **AS PRESCHOOLERS**

1. Boys need to spend a lot of time running, jumping, climbing, and playing outdoors. Don't expect your son to want to sit still and learn to write his name or color.
2. Allow "rough and tumble" games (like wrestling) with his father, other male role models, and other boys. Intervene only if someone is getting hurt. Teach your son how to express when he wants the rough housing to end and how to listen when another says "stop".
3. Continue to read daily to your son.
4. Boys often have a more difficult time interpreting facial expressions. Point out people's emotions – in books and in real life – so your son can learn how others are feeling.

### **AS ELEMENTARY AGE CHILDREN**

1. Boys are often not ready for kindergarten at 5 years of age. They still need to use and develop their big muscles, so they need to run and play. They may learn better with "hands on" learning, manipulating objects rather than reading. Their fine motor coordination used in holding a pencil and writing is not as well developed as that of girls.
  - a. As kindergartens become more "academic," children are asked to focus on their writing skills and spend more time sitting still – tasks that are often more difficult for boys than for girls.
  - b. So, some child psychologists recommend allowing boys to wait one year and begin school at 6 years of age. This is controversial, so remember that you know your child better than anyone else.
  - c. Encourage your son's teacher to allow more "wiggle time" – time to stand up, jump, or clap hands in between academic activities.
2. Boys often need more structure in their lives – routine and rules are very important
  - a. Boys need to know: Who is in charge? What are the rules? Will those rules be fairly enforced?
  - b. If there is no one in charge in their environment (school, for example), boys will struggle with each other to determine their leader or pecking order.
  - c. If structure (fair leadership and rules) are in place, boys will feel more secure, can relax and can learn.

(Gangs often form to provide boys with structure and leadership not found elsewhere in their environment.)

3. Boys need male role models and mentors especially during this time.
4. Boys learn a lot from working around the house. Teach your son how to plan and cook a meal, how to do the laundry, how to mow the lawn, and take out the garbage.
  - a. Remember – self-esteem comes from learning how to do a job and doing it well
  - b. Boys are not as verbal as girls. You may have more meaningful conversations while working together.
5. Boys need competition – and, in fact, thrive on it. Competition fosters learning for boys, and they do best in an academic environment that provides competition. (Many schools today have eliminated competition to accommodate girls’ learning styles.)
6. Boys also learn by repetition – another method of learning that many schools have eliminated.
7. Boys continue to need time to play outdoors. Nature provides an outlet for boys that allows them to learn life’s lessons, problem solve, think creatively. Building a fort, investigating pond life, developing the rules for a game – these activities provide the opportunity for boys to learn important skills. Boys (as girls) also need quiet time as well as time to run around and goof off – so don’t over schedule them.
8. Organized sports can be an excellent way for boys to learn:
  - a. the rules of the game
  - b. how to be a good loser and how to be a gracious winner
  - c. how to give your best; how to work hard for a long-term goal; how to make sacrifices
  - d. how to be a part of a team and how to develop close friendships
  - e. how to master his body – how to gain control over what his body can and cannot do; how to perform BUT...be careful of an environment that is too competitive, too abusive or violent
9. Boys need verbal affirmation of their skills and knowledge. They also need physical affirmation – especially hugs from their parents. They need to see parents demonstrating affection for each other.
10. During elementary years, boys need
  - a. A “cause” to live for – help your son find a meaningful purpose for his life. Consider volunteering together
  - b. A chance to be the “hero” – boys want to fight the “good fight” and win at something
  - c. An opportunity to be adventurous – to explore and to conquer. Out door activities often provide this.So...help your son find opportunities to experience all of these *in the real world*. **Limit time spent on video games.** Video games are more addicting for boys than for girls because they provide the opportunity to have adventure, to be the conquering hero, and do so while stimulating the pleasure center of the child’s brain.
11. Boys need less “screen” time. Boys become more aggressive after watching television, especially violent programs. Television also portrays inaccurate sexual messages (even during “family hour” and in commercials), and teens who watch more television are more likely to become sexually active at an earlier age.
12. Boys naturally want to be leaders and protectors. You can help your son learn the qualities of a good leader - humility, serving others, compassion, demonstrating respect for others.

There are many books now on parenting boys. Leonard Sax, in *Boys Adrift – the Five Factors driving the growing epidemic of unmotivated boys and underachieving young men*, lists the following as concerns:

1. Video games. Studies show that some of the most popular video games are disengaging boys from real world pursuits, allowing them to experience adventure and become the hero in an unreal manner.
2. Teaching methods. Changes in education have discouraged boys from enjoying school (as noted above)
3. Prescription drugs. Over use of medication for ADHD may be causing damage to the motivational center in boys’ brains
4. Endocrine disrupters – from environmental contaminants
5. Devaluation of masculinity. Shifts in culture have altered male role models.

Leonard Sax also wrote *Why Gender Matters*, a compilation of research documenting the differences between boys and girls.

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