

insights



The messages all boys need to hear

by Maggie Dent

Research has shown that parents treat their boys and girls differently right from infancy.

For example, infant boys are touched more frequently and handled more roughly before the age of three months. Also physical punishment is applied more significantly for boys than girls in many Western countries. This is despite the fact that research also shows boys are more vulnerable and fragile.

Why do we do this?

The stereotypical belief that the only way to get boys to do the right thing is by shaming them, hurting them or being hard on them needs to be challenged every day because it is so deeply embedded into our society's psychology. The scars this creates in early childhood fester deep inside and are often the source of future irrational rage and aggression.

This does not mean we do not discipline our boys or make them accountable for their choices and mistakes. It means we need to consciously choose the same warm discipline and communication that we tend to use around girls. We need to take much better care of our little boys — emotionally, psychologically, physically and socially. We need to stop shouting at them, hitting them, shaming them and speaking harshly to them (“Grow up!”, “Be a man”, “What’s wrong with you?”).

Communication for resilience building

We need to make it acceptable for boys and men to express feelings other than anger and this starts with how we speak to them day-to-day.

A good (generalised) example is how some people might respond if a child falls over. When a boy falls, he may be told by someone influenced by the old code: “You’re right mate, up you get.” A girl who’s fallen on the other hand may be greeted with: “Oh no sweetheart, are you OK? Come here. Let me make it better.” And offered a cuddle.

My issue with either approach is that neither child is being offered the opportunity to build resilience. The boy is being told he mustn’t feel anything and not to take pause at all — just get up and move on. The girl is being disempowered as it’s assumed she cannot pick herself up and brush herself off, but rather she needs help to bounce back from this hurdle. A more resilience-building response may be to say to either child: “Oops, you fell over. Are you ok or do you need my help?”

It's a subtle difference in communication but the message our children get is that we expect that they are capable, their feelings are welcome (but not dictated to them) and we are here for them if they need us.

The trouble with boys

It seems when it comes to getting in trouble that our boys fare much worse than our girls. One reason for this may be because boys seem to be naturally more impulsive than girls from a young age and this can lead to them being poor decision-makers.

Michael Gurian, author of *Saving Our Sons* (Gurian Institute Press, 2017), writes about how males and females tend to process emotion differently in the brain. He writes that males tend to move emotions very quickly from their brains into their bodies. They also tend to sense the emotion but then shift it to areas of the brain that will work to solve the problem causing the emotion.

Females, on the other hand, tend to quickly shift emotions into the brain's limbic system and to the 'word centres' of the brain. This could explain why many girls — not all, but a significant proportion — will tend to 'talk it out' when they have an issue but boys may be more likely to spring into action, and have a physical response, hurting someone or something in the process.

It is our responsibility to help our sons realise that they need to respect those around them when they are making these decisions.

A good starting point is for every family to implement the 'three rules': 1. try not to hurt yourself; 2. try not to hurt others; and 3. try not to damage things in the world around you ... this sets an expectation for everyone in the household.

Finally, when boys muck up...

- Try to see the world through his eyes and practise responding, not just reacting.
- Allow him time to cool down and process the situation.
- Gently ask what was his intention?
- Help with work out which of the three rules he broke and what other choices he might have made.
- Forgive him for making a poor choice.
- Reassure him you still love him — 'showing' rather than 'saying'.

Above all, our boys need us (especially we mums) to be firm, fair and fun, and to reassure them we love them unconditionally — no matter what poor choice they may have made.



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