

Fostering Emotional Development Among Boys

Parent Fact Sheet #4

A “boy code” —widely accepted and very rigid gender stereotypes—requires young boys to hide emotion, use violence to solve problems and emotional issues, and disregard anything deemed “girly.”¹ To correct this “boy code” and support healthy development, adults must allow boys to feel supported when sharing their feelings. Young boys must be able to display emotion within their families without fear of harassment. Parents should be role models in displaying emotion and help boys develop and thrive, both physically and emotionally. Families must address the mixed messages boys receive as to what an acceptable role model may be.

Key Facts

- 1. Parents should nurture their relationships with their sons.** The “boy code” suggests sons should be pushed away from their parents at a younger age than daughters. Boys who are not allowed to develop attachments with adults are at a higher risk for depression². Secure attachments with positive adult role models help boys develop emotional health and learn to safely explore feelings and emotion.
- 2. Secure emotional attachments can help boys succeed in school.** Despite perceptions, boys are lagging in academics and have lower career expectations than girls. In addition, 71 percent of school discipline issues involve male students². Parents can help by allowing their sons to communicate distress or trouble at school. Boys who struggle academically might not speak up because they are afraid it will show a weakness. Parents can be better aware of potential struggles at school by keeping in contact with their children’s teachers.
- 3. Boys are given mixed messages².** Boys are exposed to a variety of role models, including some who encourage t tough at all times. Parents should introduce their sons to proper role models, rather than allowing the boys to make poor choices in role models.
- 4. Parents need to discourage their sons’ compliance with the “boy code.”** Parents allow their sons to experience their own emotions and activities. By allowing boys to make their own choices in activities parents can avoid rigid gender stereotypes. Boys are often expected to display emotions on opposite ends of the spectrum—be aggressive with other boys and compassionate with a younger sibling—which can be difficult for them to understand.

Parental anxiety has been identified as a key contributor to the fear about stunted emotional growth among today’s boys³. Most boys end up becoming successful young men. It is important for parents to understand the emotional development issues facing their sons and encourage healthy emotional development. Avoiding gender stereotyping of



activities and emotions will foster healthy development for today’s boys.

Additional Resources:

Books

Gurian, Michael (1998). *A Fine Young Man: What Parents, Mentors, Educators Can do to Shape Adolescent Boys into Exceptional Men*. New York, NY, Penguin Putnam, Inc.

Pollack, William (1998). *Real Boys: Rescuing our Sons from the Myths of Boyhood*. New York, NY, Penguin Books.

Pollack, William with Shuster, Todd, Michael (2000). *Real Boys’ Voices: Boys speak out about drugs, sex, violence, bullying, sports, girls, school, parents, and so much more*. New York, NY, Penguin Books.

Internet Resources

University of Nebraska-Lincoln Families Website * <http://lancaster.unl.edu/family/Parenting/> * “This site features resources on guidance, discipline, child development and building strong relationships. You’ll find topics on subjects ranging from tantrums to teething, cuddling to spoiling, Being a Good Neighbor to Dealing with Family Stress.”

Raising Boys * <http://www.pbs.org/parents/raisingboys/> * This guide helps parents “understand what it is like to be a boy in America today” and offers resources to help with emotional, academic and social development.

¹ Witt, P., & Caldwell, L. (2005). *Recreation and youth development*. State College, PA: Venture Publishing.

² Pollack, W.S. (2006). The ‘war’ for boys: hearing ‘real boys’ voices, healing their pain. *Professional Psychology: Research and Practice*, 37(2), 190-195.

³ Von Drehle, D. (2007) *The Boys are All Right*. *Time International*: 80628(30), 1-23.

Educational programs of the Texas AgriLife Extension Service are open to all people without regard to race, color, sex, disability, religion, age, or national origin.