



# From Boys to Men

How we parent young males today can define masculinity tomorrow

BY MATT ALDERTON

**A**n age-old rhyme suggests that the recipe for raising healthy, well-adjusted boys consists of snips, snails and puppy dog tails. However, with daily headlines about sexual harassment and mass shootings — most of which are committed by males — some parental figures are looking for new ingredients that will result in men who cope better with their challenges.

When it came to boys, the focus was often on teaching independence and resilience. However, digital parenting coach Shelley Jefsen is among those who thinks it's time to change that. Instead of leaving young boys to their own devices, she and her husband are intimately involved in their children's lives — including that of their 12-year-old son.

"In the midst of innumerable allegations bringing white-hot attention to the behavior of males, I'm committed to setting my preteen boy up for success," says Jefsen, author of the parenting blog *Mama Duck*. Jefsen sends her son on regular "daddy dates" with his father to nurture a relationship that in another era might have been neglected. "During these dates,

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my husband takes only one child out for focused attention. ... During their time together, my son feels seen, heard and valued. While out together in public, my husband holds his hand, puts his arm around him, laughs with him and gives him 100 percent — providing both physical, as well as communicative evidence to my son that men are not islands.”

It’s not just parents who are changing course with boys. It’s the culture at large. In 2018, for example, the American Psychological Association (APA) issued its first-ever guidelines for treating boys and men. Although critics accused it of politicizing and pathologizing gender, APA Chief of Professional Practice Jared Skillings says that the guidelines were created to help men and boys “embrace their masculinity in flexible ways that can protect their health and enhance their lives.”

Then, in January 2019, shaving company Gillette announced an ad campaign in which it switched its famous tagline to “The Best Men Can Be,” calling on men in the #MeToo era to “strive to be better” and “help each other be better.”

“All of this is part of a groundswell that’s causing us to think about what it means to be male in modern society,” says Matt Englar-Carlson, a professor of counseling at California State University, Fullerton, and co-author of the APA guidelines. “We need to be aware that men have real needs and concerns, and we need to offer services to men that in some way are able to address those.”

But the responsibility for

developing healthy, happy men doesn’t fall on psychologists alone. Mostly, it belongs to parents, who must navigate a complicated and changing world of gender, justice and health in order to decide whether to rear their sons by leaning into or away from “traditional masculinity.”

## A WORLD OF WORRY

Mothers can’t help worrying about sons. But Dionne Boldin — mother of boys ages 8 and 14 — believes she has valid reasons for concern.

“As my 14-year-old gets older and starts spending more time away from home without parents, there are a whole new set of worries I now have,” says Boldin, wife of retired

NFL wide receiver

Anquan Boldin, who is African-American.

“I worry about him being racially profiled. I worry about him properly interacting with his female friends. I worry about him always

being hyper-aware of his

surroundings and protecting himself in a country where mass shootings have become the norm. Those are just a few of my deepest worries — all the what-ifs.”

In the face of so many uncertainties, parents who were raised to believe boys are resilient must instead acknowledge that they’re vulnerable, according to Judy Y. Chu, author of *When Boys Become Boys: Development, Relationships, and Masculinity* and a lecturer at Stanford University, where she teaches about psychosocial development.

“Boys are socialized to be disconnected from themselves and others,” explains Chu, who says traditional notions of masculinity favor stoicism >

## GOOD OR BAD?

Stirring debate with its recent ad campaign, Gillette pledged “to actively challenge the stereotypes and expectations of what it means to be a man.”

## TIPS: PARENTING STRATEGIES

► **Replace shame with comfort:** “We’re socialized to think men are tough,” says Matt Englar-Carlson, professor of counseling at California State University, Fullerton. “It’s important to see boys as boys and not as men. Toughening a boy up through shame just weakens his insides, and that most likely will have ramifications.”

► **Present positive male role models:** “Mothers and women can tell boys it’s OK to express their emotions and have intimate relationships, but boys need to see men do it, too,” says author Judy Y. Chu. “Whether it’s their father, uncle, teacher or coach, the men in their lives must exhibit these qualities in order for boys to perceive them as vital.”

► **Encourage intimacy:** “The single best protector against (adolescent) risks ... is having access to at least one close, confiding relationship,” explains Chu, who says intimate relationships act as “safe spaces” where boys can be authentic. “That could be with a parent, sibling, teacher, coach — anyone, as long as they can rely on and confide in that person.”

► **Be transparent:** Self-described “hyper-communicative” parents Sarah Beatty and Shane Martin believe the best gift they can give their 12-year-old son is context. So, they’ve created an open-door policy wherein he can ask them anything and receive an honest, adult answer. “My biggest fear as a parent is that if I avoid talking about something because I want to protect my kid, what I’ll actually be doing is leaving him with no skills, tactics or strategies for how to handle it,” explains Beatty, who says transparency allows her and her husband — not the internet, media or peers — to educate her son about adult subjects.

► **Offer validation:** Parents should validate instead of dictate their sons’ identities, says Englar-Carlson. “In doing so, you get to know who your son is rather than who you or society think he ought to be.”

### A FEW GOOD MEN

Experts say boys need male role models to help shape their masculinity.



over sensitivity and isolation over intimacy. “That does them great harm in terms of their social relationships, their psychological development and even their physical health.”

The data speaks for itself: Men die by suicide at four times the rate of women. They die younger and are more susceptible to cancer. Men are more likely to drink alcohol at hazardous levels, drop out of high school and be homeless or incarcerated. Males also outnumber females as both victims and perpetrators of violent crime, including homicide, and commit the majority of bullying and mass shootings, according to researchers.

“When traditional masculinity is enacted in a rigid way ... it creates problems, and those problems are both intrapersonal and interpersonal — ‘intra’ meaning things like depression, anxiety and anger, and ‘inter’ meaning things like domestic

violence and aggression toward others,” Englar-Carlson says. “The research on this is clear: Over-conformity to traditional masculine norms leads to distress.”

### POINTERS FOR PARENTS

Because masculinity is not medicine, there is no recommended dosage. Parents who want to raise successful men should therefore let boys decide for themselves how much or how little they want to conform to traditional gender norms, suggests Ted Bunch, founder of A Call to Men, an organization that provides educational programming to help males embrace a “healthy, respectful” version of manhood that transcends the boundaries of what he calls the “man box.”

“Men aren’t given permission to feel sadness, pain or disappointment because they exist outside the man box,” Bunch says. “That needs to

change. Boys need to be able to embrace and express their full range of emotions.”

Parents who validate their sons can still shape them by reinforcing their best instincts, says parent Sarah Beatty, who recalls a favorite memory: When her son was just 4 years old, he helped calm her fussy infant daughter by sensing she was cold and covering her with a blanket. “We praised him when he did that,” Beatty adds. “We try to compliment him whenever he’s showing sensitivity, nurturing and empathy.”

Boldin says being a role model is one of the best ways to teach children how to interact with others. “All we can do is lead by example, in terms of conduct, and explain over and over again why this matters in hopes it will stick. It’s like practicing, practicing, practicing for a terrible game that may never come in hopes that if they’re ever forced to play, they will win.” ■