Moral development, spiritual growth: resources for intentional schools

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Three Things Boys Need to Learn and We Need to Learn about Boys

by Peter Mortola, Stephen Grant, and Howard Hiton

For the past eight years, we have been leading counseling groups in schools for 12-year-old boys. We call these gatherings "BAM! Groups" —Boys Advocacy and Mentoring Groups. We have become aware through this work of the difficulty boys often face in making good contact not only with their own emotional states, but also with others as they try to communicate those emotions verbally. While it may be easy to frame this as a "boy problem," we have come to think of it differently. Though we do acknowledge that boys face challenges in easily and directly communicating their emotions to others—especially emotions that reflect vulnerability—we have also come to appreciate that, on average, boys have a different kind of contact and relational style that must be honored and addressed if we want to work more effectively with them in educational and counseling contexts.

Around the world, boys and girls share the same emotions, the same capacity for relationship, the same basic cognitive functions, and the same general levels of intelligence. We state these similarities because we do not think that boys and girls should be treated or viewed as different kinds of animals altogether. We do, however, think it is a mistake to treat boys and girls exactly the same because of both cultural and biological influences on their development.

Boys enter the world full of zest and fully "in contact" with the world and with themselves. Most boys, however, at some point begin to learn that their openness is a liability. In contrast to their initial authentic, unedited expressions of their own thoughts, feelings, and experiences, most boys learn to censor aspects of themselves that they fear do not meet the social expectations for "being a man." Young males are faced with conforming to the constraints of the "boy code" (Pollack, 1998) and are therefore subject to challenges such as "boys don't cry" (i.e., men don't show vulnerability) and shaming taunts if they do cry (e.g., "Don't be a girlyman!"). Following the lead of older boys and men, younger boys soon learn to strive for a cool indifference rather than a warm connectedness. Guarding against shame, many boys develop a coat of armor to protect themselves against ridicule and humiliation. The armor boys wear may serve as a defense against what they see as a threatening world, but it also separates them from necessary contact—from their own experience and from the ability to connect authentically with others.

In addition to these social influences that limit the amount of contact a boy is "allowed" to make with others, there are also biological influences that shape the kind of contact a boy tends to make. From the first day of birth onward, for example, infant baby boys show a preference for looking at a mobile hanging over their crib rather than a human face that is gazing back at them. Throughout childhood, adolescence, and adulthood, girls also demonstrate much greater interest in and success with "reading faces" (and the emotions on those faces) and therefore empathize more easily with others. Researchers are now able to show that baby boys who were influenced by higher levels of pre-natal testosterone show lower levels of eye-contact and produce less vocabulary by the time they are walking and talking toddlers (Baron-Cohen, 2003).

This tendency for girls to have a larger vocabulary and be stronger in various aspects of language use has also been demonstrated across the lifespan, and importantly, estrogen is implicated in this strength. For example, when estrogen's influence declines in women during menopause, so does the edge that women have over men in terms of verbal fluency, naming, and articulation. However, when a woman receives estrogen-replacement therapy, her verbal advantages over men returns (Kimura, 1995).

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In addition to using less direct eye contact and fewer words, boys also tend to be more physically active throughout childhood and engage in a "rough and tumble" style of play that looks different from the face-to-face, verbal style of contact preferred by most girls. On average, then, a boy's "contact style" with the world may not look like relational contact at all. That is, in a social situation where you hope to have his complete attention, a boy may tend to squirm and fidget, avoid your gaze, and produce far fewer empathetic statements than you might hope. Spelled out in this way, it is easy to understand how boys are seen as having fewer relational and social skills and less ability to make good contact with themselves and others. Their contact skills are not only limited by their socialization as males, but these contact skills also seem to be particularized by their biological make-up.

> We need to actively construct "boy friendly" environments in classrooms, playgrounds, backyards, and inside our homes. For example, we need to give boys opportunities to romp respectfully by making sure that our schools are providing adequate recess time. But we also need to be actively engaged in supervising those recess activities, teaching boys how to regulate their own behaviors.

We must take into account both biological and social influences on a boy's development to help him make better contact with himself, his peers, his family, his school, and us. Here are the three most important things we have learned that have helped us in our work with boys. Each of our recommendations can be seen as a two-sided coin. That is, each of the three recommendations includes one aspect regarding what boys need to learn and another, complementary aspect of what we need to learn about boys.

1) Learn to embrace a broader view of what it means to be male

What boys need to learn:
Boys need to learn to broaden their conception of what it means to be male. We can help boys "out of the box" by contradicting the limiting social messages they hear.

Boys grow up hearing messages about what it means to be a man. These messages are often limiting and hurtful (e.g., "boy's don't cry" and "boys need to prove themselves through fighting"). We need to help boys learn that there are many ways to be a man, that it is okay to own and express vulnerable feelings, and that there are many ways to resolve conflicts other than through hurtful violence. Help the boys you know to feel valued and respected for who they are, whether they play football or dance ballet, whether they hunt or knit.

What we need to learn:
We need to learn to see being male as something other than a problem. We can help by noticing the good in boys.

We tend to highlight the trouble boys get into and forget to support them for the good things they bring to us. Realize that part of the problem boys have in meeting the world has to do with the way that the world meets them. Take an active interest in what boys find interesting and find a way to value it. Help them to see that the trucks and tractors they love actually help build houses. Help them to see that football is also about being part of a team, caring for your teammates, and doing something challenging and important together.

2) Learn to make contact both directly and indirectly

What boys need to learn:
Boys need to learn direct relational and communication skills. We can help by encouraging understanding and expression of emotions and needs.

If boys tend to pay more attention to things like cars, wheels, and computers than faces, emotions, and rela-

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tionships, they may need support and encouragement to develop and use their relational and communication skills: teach the boys you know to look directly in someone's face to give or receive a compliment; help them understand what someone else is feeling and how their facial expressions show it; discuss how a character in a movie might have felt; help them see how important it is for them to understand their own feelings in order to discover, ask for, and get what they need.

What we need to learn:
We need to learn to respect boys' indirectness. We can help by "shooting baskets" with boys first, and talking later.

Because of both biological and social reasons, boys tend not to be as direct in expressions of certain emotions. Help boys attend to and express their more vulnerable emotions by approaching them indirectly. Let them fiddle with something in their hands while you talk, shoot baskets while having a conversation, tell them about your own experiences before expecting them to tell you about theirs.

3) Learn to better regulate physical activity and aggression

What boys need to learn:
Boys need to learn to regulate their levels of physical activity and aggression.

Boys, on average, are more physically active and physically aggressive than girls. They therefore need to learn two things: to be physically expressive in appropriate ways (e.g., engaging safely and respectfully in "rough and tumble" play) as well as being able to be physically inhibitive at appropriate times (e.g., restraint from running around a classroom during reading time).

What we need to learn:
We need to learn to be actively involved in helping boys both express and inhibit their physicality, providing rich learning opportunities for both.

We need to actively construct "boy friendly" environments in classrooms, playgrounds, backyards, and inside our homes. For example, we need to give boys opportunities to romp respectfully by making sure that our schools are providing adequate recess time. But we also need to be actively engaged in supervising those recess activities. Specifically, this means that we need to teach boys how to regulate their own behaviors. It is not helpful to be either completely "hands off" (e.g., "Oh, boys will be boys") or completely over-controlling (e.g., expecting boys to sit quietly for extended periods of time).

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Editor's Note: This article is excerpted from one chapter of Good Things to Do, Expert Advice for Educators and Parents on Nurturing Goodness, *to be published this winter by CSEE. For a more complete list of references, contact CSEE.*

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