***Talking to Boys the Way We Talk to Girls***

By Andrew Reiner

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At a Father’s Day breakfast, my 5-year-old son and his classmates sang a song about fathers, crooning about “my dad who’s big and strong” and “fixes things with his hammer” and, above all else, “is really cool.”

Now, there’s nothing wrong with most of these qualities in and of themselves. But when these lyrics are passed down as the defining soundtrack to masculine identity, we limit children’s understanding not just of what it means to be a father but of what it means to be a man — and a boy, as well.

When fathers appear in children’s picture books, they’re angling for laughs, taking their sons on adventures or modeling physical strength or stoic independence. There is the rare exception in children’s books where a father baldly demonstrates — without symbolic gestures — his love for his son (a few are “[Guess How Much I Love You](https://www.amazon.com/Guess-How-Much-Love-You/dp/0763642649)” and “[Oh, Oh, Baby Boy!](https://www.amazon.com/Oh-Baby-Boy-Janine-Macbeth/dp/0985351403/ref=sr_1_1?s=books&ie=UTF8&qid=1497361059&sr=1-1&keywords=oh+oh+baby+boy)*”).*Just as women’s studies classes have long examined the ways that gendered language undermines women and girls, a growing body of research shows that stereotypical messages are similarly damaging to boys.

A [2014 study](http://pediatrics.aappublications.org/content/134/6/e1603) in Pediatrics found that mothers interacted vocally more often with their infant daughters than they did their infant sons. In a different study, a team of British researchers found that [Spanish mothers were more likely to use emotional words](http://journal.frontiersin.org/article/10.3389/fpsyg.2013.00670/full) and emotional topics when speaking with their 4-year-old daughters than with their 4-year-old sons. Interestingly, the same study revealed that daughters were more likely than sons to speak about their emotions with their fathers when talking about past experiences. And during these reminiscing conversations, fathers used more emotion-laden words with their 4-year-old daughters than with their 4-year-old sons.

What’s more, [a 2017 study led by Emory University researchers](http://www.apa.org/pubs/journals/releases/bne-bne0000199.pdf)discovered, among other things, that fathers also sing and smile more to their daughters, and they use language that is more “analytical” and that acknowledges their sadness far more than they do with their sons. The words they use with sons are more focused on achievement — such as “win” and “proud.” Researchers believe that these discrepancies in fathers’ language may contribute to “the consistent findings that girls outperform boys in school achievement outcomes.”

After visits to the emergency room for accidental injuries, another study found, [parents of both genders talk differently to sons](https://academic.oup.com/jpepsy/article/41/2/256/2579803/Parent-Child-Injury-Prevention-Conversations) than they do to daughters. They are nearly four times more likely to tell girls than boys to be more careful if undertaking the same activity again. The same study cited earlier research which found that parents of both genders used “directives” when teaching their 2- to 4-year-old sons how to climb down a playground pole but offered extensive “explanations” to daughters.

Even boys’ literacy skills seem to be impacted by the taciturn way we expect them to speak. In his book “Manhood in America,” Michael Kimmel, the masculine studies researcher and author, maintains that “the traditional liberal arts curriculum is seen as feminizing by boys.” Nowhere is this truer than in English classes where, as I’ve witnessed after more than 20 years of teaching, boys and young men police each other when other guys display overt interest in literature or creative writing assignments. Typically, nonfiction reading and writing passes muster because it poses little threat for boys. But literary fiction, and especially poetry, are mediums to fear. Why? They’re the language of emotional exposure, purported feminine “weakness” — the very thing our scripting has taught them to avoid at best, suppress, at worst.

Women often say they want men to be emotionally transparent with them. But as the vulnerability and shame expert Brené Brown reveals in her book, “Daring Greatly,” many grow uneasy or even recoil if men take them up on their offer.

Indeed, a [Canadian study](http://news.ubc.ca/2014/02/19/study-finds-nothing-so-sweet-as-a-voice-like-your-own/) found that college-aged female respondents considered men more attractive if they used shorter words and sentences and spoke less. This finding seems to jibe with Dr. Brown’s research, suggesting that the less men risk emoting verbally, the more appealing they appear.

Such squelching messages run counter-intuitively to male wiring, it turns out: Guys are [born more emotionally sensitive](http://psycnet.apa.org/journals/dev/35/1/175/) than girls.

For three decades the research of Edward Tronick explored the interplay between infants and their mothers. He and his colleagues in the department of newborn medicine at Harvard Medical School discovered that mothers unconsciously interacted with their infant sons more attentively and vigilantly than they did with their infant daughters because the sons needed more support for controlling their emotions. Some of their research found that boys’ emotional reactivity was eventually “restricted or perhaps more change-worthy than the reactivity of girls,” Dr. Tronick noted in an email. Mothers initiated this — through physical withdrawal.

“So the ‘manning up’ of infant boys begins early on in their typical interactions,” Dr. Tronick said, “and long before language plays its role.”

Judy Chu, a human biologist, conducted a two-year study of 4- and 5-year-old boys and found that they were as astute as girls at reading other people’s emotions and at cultivating close, meaningful friendships. In her book “When Boys Become Boys” she maintains that by the time the boys reached first grade, sometimes earlier, they traded their innate empathy for a learned stoicism and greater emotional distance from friends. Interestingly, they adopted this new behavior in public, exclusively, but not at home or when their parents were around.

Why do we limit the emotional vocabulary of boys?

We tell ourselves we are preparing our sons to fight (literally and figuratively), to compete in a world and economy that’s brutish and callous. The sooner we can groom them for this dystopian future, the better off they’ll be. But the Harvard psychologist Susan David insists the opposite is true: “Research shows that people who suppress emotions have lower-level resilience and emotional health.”

How can we change this? We can start, says Dr. David, by letting boys experience their emotions, all of them, without judgment — or by offering them solutions. This means helping them learn the crucial lessons that “Emotions aren’t good or bad” and that “their emotions aren’t bigger than they are. They aren’t something to fear.”

Say to boys: “I can see that you’re upset,” or ask them, “What are you feeling?” or “What’s going on for you right now?” There doesn’t have to be any grand plan beyond this, she says. “Just show up for them. Get them talking. Show that you want to hear what they’re saying.”

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