***What Our Sons Are Learning From Donald Trump***

By [Claire Cain Miller](http://www.nytimes.com/by/claire-cain-miller)

Oct. 18, 2016

Throughout his campaign, Donald J. Trump has displayed a particular type of hyper masculinity — the man who is proud not to apologize and to have never changed a diaper; who views “loser” as the ultimate insult; who [bonds with other men](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/08/us/politics/donald-trump-women.html) by objectifying women.

It’s especially striking because today’s schools and workplaces try to value something different: empathy, impulse control and collaboration. For three decades, jobs that require these social skills have grown much more than others, [researchers have found](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/18/upshot/how-the-modern-workplace-has-become-more-like-preschool.html). They say one reason that boys are more likely than girls to get in trouble in school and are less likely to graduate is that a narrow definition of masculinity can stunt their ability to develop these skills.

If there is a silver lining to Mr. Trump’s views on manliness, it’s that it has prompted a [national discussion](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/16/opinion/sunday/how-to-be-a-man-in-the-age-of-trump.html) about the “boys will be boys” excuse for things like bullying, boasting or appraising women in crassly sexual terms. That has offered an opportunity for parents and teachers to make clear what behavior is unacceptable. [Michelle Obama, in an emotional speech](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/14/us/politics/michelle-obama-donald-trump-women.html)on Thursday, asked what message Mr. Trump’s words and behavior sent not just to girls, but also to men and boys.

“Like us, these men are worried about the impact this election is having on our boys who are looking for role models of what it means to be a man,” she said.

Even at my son’s preschool, the children’s interest in Mr. Trump led to a circle-time discussion about bullying.

There is reason for concern about the men whom boys might look up to, because boys seem to be particularly sensitive — even more than girls — to social influences and role models, a variety of [research](http://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/22/upshot/a-disadvantaged-start-hurts-boys-more-than-girls.html) has found.

Role models, whether parents or public figures, can help boys overcome disruptive behavior. And boys are much more responsive to this kind of attention and modeling than girls are, according to [a study](http://www.nber.org/papers/w17541) by Marianne Bertrand of the University of Chicago and Jessica Pan of the National University of Singapore.

Melania Trump, in a CNN interview Monday, dismissed Mr. Trump’s words as “boy talk,” and Mr. Trump has called it “locker room talk.” By doing so, they imply that that all men act this way. But the “boys will be boys” excuse, for any kind of behavior, is demeaning to boys, said [Michael Kimmel](http://www.michaelkimmel.com/), a sociologist and executive director of the Center for the Study of Men and Masculinities at Stony Brook University.

“I think we do ourselves a great disservice when we just shrug our shoulders in resignation and say, ‘Boys will be boys,’” he said. “We only say that when boys do bad things. That’s male bashing.”

Boys are already raised with two conflicting definitions of masculinity, Mr. Kimmel said. “If you were to ask men, Republican or Democrat or anywhere in between, what does it mean to be a *good* man, they’ll all tell you pretty much the same thing: honor, integrity, responsibility,” he said. “But ask what it means to be a *real* man, and we’re talking about never showing your feelings, never being weak, playing through pain, winning at all costs, getting rich, getting laid.”

By excusing bad behavior as a boy thing, boys get the message that they can’t improve themselves.

Many [educators assume](http://www.repository.law.indiana.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1085&context=ilj) that boys are hard-wired in certain ways: to be aggressive, active, competitive, impulsive and stoic. The risk of that approach is that boys are raised to think they can’t be anything else. That constrains boys, and particularly harms those who don’t fit the mold — as much as it does girls who want to be active and competitive too, said [David S. Cohen](http://drexel.edu/law/faculty/fulltime_fac/David%20Cohen/), a law professor studying gender and law at Drexel University.

“We have evidence that if you shift the discourse around boys and give them the cultural support they need to solve problems with strategies other than aggression and to express their feelings without being mocked, they respond just like any human being,” said [Juliet A. Williams](http://www.genderstudies.ucla.edu/faculty/juliet-williams), professor of gender studies at the University of California, Los Angeles, who wrote [a paper](http://scholars.law.unlv.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1472&context=nlj) titled “Girls Can Be Anything … But Boys Will Be Boys.”

Boys can quickly learn to recognize and call out bullying, boastfulness and inappropriate sexual language, says [Michael G. Thompson](http://michaelthompson-phd.com/), a psychologist at Belmont Hill School, a boys’ school near Boston, who was a co-author of “Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys.” That’s why Mr. Trump’s behavior can be confusing for some of them, he said: “They think, ‘He’s doing stuff that if I tried in school, I’d get in trouble for.’”

[The Upshot](http://www.nytimes.com/upshot/) provides news, analysis and graphics about politics, policy and everyday life. Follow us on[Facebook](https://www.facebook.com/upshot) and[Twitter](http://twitter.com/UpshotNYT). Sign up for our[newsletter.](http://www.nytimes.com/newsletters/upshot/)

A version of this article appears in print on Oct. 18, 2016, on Page A3 of the New York edition with the headline: What Our Sons Are Learning From Trump. [Order Reprints](http://www.nytreprints.com/) | [Today’s Paper](http://www.nytimes.com/pages/todayspaper/index.html) | [Subscribe](https://www.nytimes.com/subscriptions/Multiproduct/lp8HYKU.html?campaignId=48JQY)