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# Emphasize Emotional Intelligence

When a boy is cut off from being aware of his own feelings, he is less able to relate to others. . . . Unconstrained by empathy, he is more capable of hurting others.

—Michael C. Reichert, *How to Raise a Boy*

When my boys were young, fighting was an everyday occurrence.

Bouts of roughhousing and wrestling occurred on the regular. Rolling around on the floor with their dad, they reminded me of baby lion cubs grappling with the king of the jungle. They flailed, jumped, and screamed, but their little boy strength and strategy were no match for their father. So the boys turned toward each other, practicing their moves and jockeying for power.

A lot of moms would have intervened and put a stop to the “violent” behavior, which, admittedly, sometimes (okay—often) ended in tears. And I’ll be honest: the constant bickering, verbal one-upmanship, and physical fighting bothered me. I wrote in my journal, *Peaceful play is alien to them; fighting, second nature.*

I planned to raise boys who appropriately manage emotions and respect others’ thoughts, opinions, possessions, and personal space, so the constant fighting—daily evidence of my *failure* to

instill respect and teach my boys emotional control, as I saw it—got on my nerves.

I was convinced that I needed to put a stop to what I viewed as antisocial behavior, so I tried to intervene. “*Stop that!*” I’d say, or “*Enough!*”

It didn’t work, at least not long term. The boys would stop and separate for a moment, but within a few hours, they were back at it. Bicker. Fight. Wrestle. Repeat.

What I didn’t realize then is that my boys were honing their emotional intelligence via wrestling, roughhousing, and bickering.

“If you watch two boys wrestling, most of the time they are paying such close attention to one another’s bodies and facial expressions,” says Tom Hobson, aka “Teacher Tom,” a preschool teacher at Woodland Park Cooperative Schools in Seattle, Washington. “Half the time, they’re looking into each other’s eyes as they’re wrestling. It’s a beautiful thing to see.”<sup>1</sup>

Deep in the parenting trenches and ignorant, at the time, of traditional male approaches to emotional development, I tried to smother my boys’ inclination to fight. I didn’t see beauty; I saw little boys in danger of becoming violent men.

Many people make the same mistake.

“One of the things some female teachers struggle with, compared to male teachers, is that they see boys’ physical-ness as violence. It is not violence; it is the opposite,” Teacher Tom says. “When boys start wrestling around, that’s an act of love.”<sup>2</sup>

## WHY EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE MATTERS

The Oxford English Dictionary defines emotional intelligence as “The capacity to be aware of, control, and express one’s emotions, and to handle interpersonal relationships judiciously and empathetically.”<sup>3</sup>

That’s what I want for my boys. And yours.

Think about it: You *don’t* want your son to be violent; to sexually harass, assault, or intimidate others; to experience loneliness or despair. You *do* want him to experience intimacy, connection, and contentment. Emotional intelligence is at the root of it all.

According to research by Dr. Jean Greaves and Dr. Travis Bradberry, authors of *Emotional Intelligence 2.0*, 90 percent of top career

performers scored high in emotional intelligence, and those with a high degree of emotional intelligence earned an average of \$29,000 more annually than those with a low degree of emotional intelligence.<sup>4</sup> Children with strong socio-emotional skills, including perseverance, impulse control, and the ability to delay gratification earn higher grades, stay in school longer, and make healthier choices than children with weaker socio-emotional skills.<sup>5</sup> Emotional intelligence is also linked to mental health: children who learn how to identify and manage emotions, feel and show empathy, and establish and maintain supportive relationships are less likely to suffer from anxiety and depression.<sup>6</sup>

Lack of attention to male emotional development contributes to sky-high suicide rates (in 2019, the suicide rate among males was 3.7 times higher than among females, according to the National Institute of Mental Health)<sup>7</sup> and may contribute to domestic violence, sexual assault, and crime, including school shootings and mass murder. A 2017 study<sup>8</sup> examining twenty-nine school shootings committed between 1995 and 2005 found that most school shooters were the targets of bullying, which triggered feelings of shame and humiliation. More than half of the shooters had recently experienced female rejection, and most struggled with anger control. Lacking effective means to deal with shame, humiliation, and rejection, these boys turned their anger outward with devastating results.

## OBSTACLES TO EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE<sup>9</sup>

The ability to express one's emotions and respond empathetically hasn't always been valued.

For generations, boys and men were expected to be stoic, and that expectation influenced (and still influences) parenting norms. As Andrew Reiner, author of *Better Boys, Better Men*, wrote in a June 2021 *NBC News* article, "We fear that giving boys access to the full range of their deeper emotional lives will make them less successful in a harshly competitive world."<sup>10</sup>

Which brings us to . . .

### Obstacle 1: Shifting Gender Norms

Culturally, we are *just now* entering an era where it may be safe—and advantageous—for males to share their emotions. Not that long ago, emotional vulnerability was a luxury not afforded to most males. Enslaved Black men were not permitted tears when their wives were raped and their children sold. Subsistence farmers focused solely on survival, and soldiers under orders continued to fight despite the horrors swirling around them. Valued primarily for their bodies and brawn, males locked away their emotions and did what must be done.

The “strong and stoic” model of masculinity is increasingly out of sync with modern society. To succeed in the twenty-first century, children of all genders need to develop self-awareness, self-restraint, emotional resiliency, tolerance, and empathy, as well as strong collaboration and communication skills.

And yet male self-restraint, tolerance, and empathy aren’t necessarily prized or rewarded. Donald Trump was not elected president of the United States in 2016—or ranked thirteenth in a 2021 world’s most admired men survey<sup>11</sup>—because he demonstrates self-awareness, restraint, or empathy. Vladimir Putin, Russia’s president from 2000 to 2008 and 2012 to the present (and #9 on the same list) is known as a “strongman”; bare-chested photos of him atop a horse and holding a gun are widely circulated on the internet. In 2018, Barry Diller, chairperson of IAC, an American media company, said that Microsoft cofounder Bill Gates (#2) “had the emotional quotient of a snail” when the duo first met.<sup>12</sup>

At the top of the 2021 list of the world’s most admired men, Barack Obama *is* recognized for self-restraint, empathy, and interpersonal communication skills—as are a number of the other men on the list, including Pope Francis (#16) and Bollywood actor Amitabh Bachchan (#15). But the inclusion of so many men who adhere to the strong and stoic model of masculinity points to a global truth: male strength and power is still respected and rewarded. Underscoring that truth is the fact that one-quarter of the list—one in four “most admired men”—is professional athletes.

Despite a societal push toward a more well-rounded version of masculinity, athleticism and physical and mental strength still give boys and men status. Displays of kindness, emotion, and understanding may not. That fact creates a conundrum: parents want

their boys to experience the joy, freedom, and potential benefits of emotional expression, but they don't want their sons to face harm in the here and now. Dads, especially, know that boys who are perceived as "weak" become targets, so even progressive fathers (and mothers) sometimes struggle with boys' tears. As writer Rebecca Ruiz observed in her 2020 *Mashable* article, "How to Raise Boys So They're Comfortable with Their Emotions," "Parents want to raise emotionally intelligent boys who can be their true selves, but none of them want to see their child bullied, ostracized, or beaten as a result."<sup>13</sup>

Some people currently are working to expand the "man box"; others are fighting to maintain the status quo. Trying to raise an emotionally intelligent son in an environment that doesn't consistently value male emotion is a challenge.

## **Obstacle 2: Dismissal of Traditional Male Responses**

Stoicism as defined in popular culture—the endurance of pain or hardship without the display of feelings and without complaint—has gotten a bad rep. It's been linked with so-called toxic masculinity and blamed, in part, for high rates of male suicide and self-harm. (Stoic philosophy, on the other hand, is enjoying a bit of a resurgence.)

But the human ability to function despite physical and emotional pain has helped humanity persist. It's not healthy to continually suppress emotion, yet, at times, it's expedient and necessary to do so. Similarly, males' tendency to connect with others via physical activity rather than intimate conversation is considered by some to be part of a "traditional masculinity ideology" that "discourages men from being intimate with others and is the primary reason men tend to have fewer close friends than women," according to the 2018 "APA Guidelines for Psychological Practice with Boys and Men." However, connection via mutual activity is an effective means of literal and metaphoric community building, with the American Psychological Association also noting that "the majority of boys and men indicate that they have close male friends with whom they share secrets [and] are emotionally intimate."<sup>14</sup>

Many well-intentioned parents, teachers, and even counselors dismiss traditional male responses as inadequate or subpar. They

assume that boys (and men) who do not cry, weep, emote, or discuss openly after experiencing a loss are emotionally deficient. But the truth, says therapist Tom Golden, is that many males use activity to cope with strong emotion.

He recalls a mother who brought her teenage son to him after the boy's father died.<sup>15</sup>

"She was all upset because her son hadn't talked about his father since his death. He hadn't cried about his father," says Golden, author of *Swallowed by a Snake: The Gift of the Masculine Side of Healing*. "'All he's been doing,' his mother said, 'is playing basketball.'"

Golden advised her to shoot hoops with her son the next time she saw him playing in the backyard. She did.

"She went out and played with him, and it was magic," Golden says. "The first thing he said was, 'Mom, you suck. You can't play like Dad could.' And then tears started coming down his face. He told his mom that his father always wanted him to make a three-pointer. He'd tried and tried but had never done it. He was out there working to make that shot. And when he finally made it, he said, 'Dad, I did it' and crumbled in tears."

Traditional and indigenous people "almost always give men a task after a death," Golden says, citing cross-cultural anthropological research. The task moves men to action, and physical activity, biology has shown, improves mood and stabilizes emotions.<sup>16</sup> Studies in mice have even found that physical activity increases activity in the part of the brain that processes emotions.

Golden suspects that males' traditional tendency toward action may be a socio-biological adaptation to differing physiology. Testosterone, the so-called male hormone that's present in large quantities in men and boys, inhibits crying, whereas prolactin, a hormone that's present in larger quantities in women, may promote crying. Women's tear ducts are also smaller than men's, so they're more likely to shed tears and experience the release of oxytocin and other feel-good endorphins that occurs after a good cry.<sup>17</sup> Males can't as easily access that biochemical relief via tears, but physical activity also releases endorphins.<sup>18</sup>

"If you feel sadness and don't have the physical release of tears, activity is another way to release," Golden says.

In our eagerness to expand boys' opportunities, we must be careful to not belittle or dismiss traditional male responses. It's okay

for boys to cry. And it's okay for boys to *not* cry. Connection via conversation is great, so is connecting via a game of hoops.

### **Obstacle 3: Ignorance of Physical Approaches to Emotional Development**

Human beings are driven to control and harness their emotions. None of us likes to feel out of control, and none of us likes to experience unpleasant emotions.

Like many well-meaning adults, I didn't initially realize that things like roughhousing, wrestling, adventure, and risky play are venues for the development of emotional intelligence. Because of my social conditioning, I didn't see the potential benefits of these activities; I saw only the potential for hurt and harm. So I attempted to steer my sons toward more socially acceptable forms of play.

That was a mistake.

According to a 2017 article published in *Behavioral Neuroscience*, rough-and-tumble play "is thought to both require and entrain emotional regulation and empathy."<sup>19</sup> Wrestling and play fighting often involve tickling, poking, and tumbling—behaviors that the article's authors note "would be hostile in many circumstances." In the context of play, however, these actions are welcome. Mammals of many different species indulge in rough play, and researchers have found that this style of play aids in brain maturation and the development of social competence.



## **THE DAD DIFFERENCE**

Human fathers engage in more rough-and-tumble play with their sons than with their daughters—a finding that may be linked to socialization, to dads' exposure to elevated levels of testosterone before birth, and to the fathers' responsiveness to their sons' cues.<sup>20</sup>

In contrast, dads whistle and sing more often with daughters than sons, leading researchers to the "intriguing hypothesis" that "there are multiple routes for the augmenting the development of empathy and emotional regulation."<sup>21</sup>



Roughhousing is a unique kind of reciprocal play that requires exquisite attention to interpersonal cues, including facial expressions, body language, and vocal tone. Participants carefully watch and listen to one another to determine if another tickle or poke is welcome or not. The game is over when one participant starts crying, gets hurt, or opts out.

Because play fighting involves some of the same gestures that occur during real fights—and a slight risk of harm—most schools and childcare centers do not allow roughhousing or rough-and-tumble play.

Parents who are determined to raise kind, well-rounded men may even prohibit play fighting at home because they fear that allowing “aggression” will nurture additional aggression. It’s easy to understand this point of view: at first glance, allowing your son to leap off the couch and tackle his brother seems like, well, tacit approval of an unprovoked assault, and unprovoked assaults are exactly what most parents of boys are hoping to avoid. But researchers have found that play fighting may teach participants “to keep calm when confronting unexpected, potentially dangerous situations.”<sup>22</sup> What looks like violence to you may be a child’s way of developing attention, impulse control, and emotional regulation.

Similarly, adventurous and sensation-seeking play—activities like jumping off a moving swing and climbing to the very top of the monkey bars—teaches children about uncertainty, coping, and emotional arousal.<sup>23</sup> Adults who hope to avoid child injury often limit such play, which may inhibit child development by depriving children of opportunities to manage their emotions and test their physical capabilities. Some researchers even hypothesize that engaging in adventurous play may decrease a child’s risk of developing chronic anxiety.<sup>24</sup>

Boys do not have to engage in rough-and-tumble, adventurous, or risky play to develop emotional intelligence, but we adults must be aware of the ways in which we may be unconsciously limiting child development. There is zero evidence that play fighting leads to increased real-world violence, but a mountain of evidence suggests that mammals of many species use rough-and-tumble play to develop social awareness and internal regulation. Remember



that fact the next time you see a boy wrestling with his siblings or friends.

## BUILDING BOYS' EMOTIONAL INTELLIGENCE

By age four or five, many boys “suddenly start walling off their emotions,” says Teacher Tom. Surrounded by mass media images of superheroes, they know it’s far better to be the hero than to need help. Many have been told, multiple times, to “stop crying,” so they begin stuffing their tears.

You can’t stop the torrent of mixed messages boys receive regarding masculinity, but you *can* help them build emotional intelligence. Here’s how.

### Hone Your Emotional Regulation Skills

Maggie Dent, Australia’s “boy champion” and author of *From Boys to Men: Guiding Our Teen Boys to Grow into Happy, Healthy Men*, once said that “Our main job as grown-ups, especially as parents, is to be the big safe people that our children need to lean on during times of stress and uncertainty.”<sup>25</sup>

That’s easier said than done because most of us still struggle with emotional reactivity. No one taught me how to recognize or process my emotions as I was growing up. In fact, emotions were mostly unacknowledged in my family of origin. I couldn’t count on others to share my excitement, happiness, or pride, and feelings like sadness, anger, or disappointment were ignored or dismissed, so I learned to avoid conflict and keep my emotions to myself. These lessons didn’t prepare me to teach my boys how to effectively manage emotions. They didn’t prepare me well for adult relationships, either, and they did not teach me how to constructively respond to a screaming toddler or a sullen tween.

Early in my parenting career, I frequently viewed my toddlers’ screams (and my tweens’ moodiness) as disrespect. I felt that “disrespect” in every fiber of my being—my heart rate increased, my breathing became shallow, and my muscles clenched. In hindsight, I can see that I was experiencing a classic “fight-or-flight” response. My brain and body, wired by the lessons I learned in my childhood, responded to a stressful stimulus by dumping a load of

adrenaline into my bloodstream so I'd be ready to fight or flee. My child didn't need me to battle or run, but with adrenaline running through my veins, I frequently yelled and made rash, impulsive decisions. I might swiftly and not-at-all tenderly pick up the crying toddler and deposit him, none too gently, in his room before closing the door harder than necessary. I might stomp away from the tween while muttering angry, hurtful words not quite under my breath.

In the peace and quiet of this page, you can probably clearly see exactly how unhelpful those responses were. I was frustrated and overwhelmed—and responded with an emotional outburst. I inadvertently modeled the exact behavior I wanted my boys to avoid.



### DEPRESSED? GET HELP

Parents who are depressed find it more difficult to feel empathy for their own children.<sup>26</sup> Depressed parents are also more likely to engage in indifferent or hostile parenting practices—and parental depression can negatively affect a child's physical, social, and psychological development.<sup>27</sup>

One study found that women who give birth to boys are 70 percent more likely to experience postpartum depression,<sup>28</sup> and other studies have found that male infants are more vulnerable to negative effects of parental depression.<sup>29</sup>



Eventually, I realized that I couldn't expect my boys to manage their emotions effectively when my emotional management techniques were limited to "ignore" or "explode." So I started seeing a certified mental health counselor, who helped me untangle my family history and learn to reframe thoughts and feelings. I began journaling regularly, which helped me identify and process my emotions. I learned positive parenting techniques, including empathizing, and realized that building my emotional intelligence was the absolute best way to boost my boys' emotional intelligence quotient, or EQ.

Adults who parent or work with boys must get comfortable with uncomfortable emotions. We must learn to tolerate unpleasant emotions and learn how to regulate our emotional temperature when faced with anger, fear, frustration, and loneliness. Many women find male anger, fear, and sadness scary and threatening, even when expressed by young boys—often because we’ve experienced emotional or physical abuse at the hands of males. It is absolutely critical to unpack your emotional baggage so you can respond to each boy as a unique, vulnerable human being, rather than yet another male who may hurt you.

Fathers and other men who work with boys may struggle with their own emotional upbringing, as most did not grow up in families or environments that allowed free emotional expression. Many guys instinctively respond to boys’ tears with stock phrases such as “don’t cry,” “man up,” or “want me to give you something to cry about?” because that’s what they heard growing up. It takes deliberate effort (and time) to break ingrained habits.

Couples may be able to support one another as they learn healthier ways of expressing and responding to emotion. Be prepared for some conflict, though.

“My husband used to tell our boys, ‘Don’t cry!’” says Gemma Gaudette, an Idaho mom of two sons. “I took him aside and said, ‘Don’t you ever tell them not to cry. If they want to cry, they can cry.’ He struggled to accept that concept. The sounds of the boys’ crying triggered an intense emotional reaction inside him, and he wasn’t at all sure that allowing boys to cry freely was a good idea.

Because the sound of their boys crying drove her husband “crazy,” Gaudette suggested he ask their sons to move to another room, if needed. Together, Gaudette and her husband discussed their goals for their sons. Both want to raise emotionally healthy, socially adept men who treat others with respect, so they are working on their own emotional regulation skills and attempting to make space for their boys’ emotions.

Professional counseling can help you identify and heal emotional wounds, if needed. If counseling is not an option for you, you may find journaling, making art, or talking with friends helpful.

Self-care practices, including a consistent sleep schedule, regular physical activity, and time engaging in activities you love help you manage stress and make it easier for you to respond calmly and deliberately, rather than reactively, to life’s challenges. Modeling

self-care also increases the chances that your son will engage in healthy self-care activities throughout his life.

Honing your emotional regulation skills is a lifelong practice. There are no quick fixes, but here's one tip you can immediately implement: pause and breathe. When your kid (or anyone!) says or does something that bothers you, pause and take a deep breath before doing anything else.

### Notice and Name Emotions

"One of the most helpful things parents can do to help their sons retain the innate emotional vulnerability with which they are born is to teach them how to put a name to what they're feeling," said Dr. Cara Natterson, author of *Decoding Boys: New Science behind the Subtle Art of Raising Sons*.<sup>30</sup>

You can begin by role modeling. Say you get disappointing news at work or via an email or phone call. Feel free to say, aloud and within your child's earshot, "Ugh. This is so disappointing." If the washing machine breaks, instead of cursing or hiding your emotions, try saying something like, "This is so frustrating! I'm really busy this week and I'm upset and overwhelmed because I'm not sure how I'll find the time to deal with this." Or "Ugh! I was saving money for a vacation, and now I'm sad and disappointed that we have to spend some of it to fix the washing machine."<sup>31</sup> Your son will learn the names and characteristics of various emotions *and* understand that feelings are a normal, natural part of life.

You can do the same thing when your child expresses emotions. If he starts screaming or throwing things because he can't get his shoes on, you can say something like, "Wow, honey, you seem frustrated and angry right now." (You can also reiterate any applicable family rules, such as "no name-calling" or "treat other people's possessions with respect.")

Tanisha Henderson, a mom of five in North Carolina, uses a Feelings Wheel developed by psychotherapist Gloria Willcox<sup>32</sup> to expand her boys' emotional vocabulary. A rainbow-hued, emotion-based version of the color wheel, the Feelings Wheel is composed of three concentric circles. At the center are six basic emotions: sad, mad, scared, joyful, peaceful, and powerful. The next circle contains more specific words—hurt, hostile, rage, and hateful, for example, are in the circle outside "mad." The outermost circle suggests other

variations, such as “jealous” for “hurt.” The wheel is arranged so that complementary emotions—sad and joyful, for instance—are opposite one another. (You can find the Feelings Wheel online by searching for “Gloria Willcox Feelings Wheel.”)

When Tanisha noticed her ten-year-old son crying, she said, “I can see this is causing you stress. I’m hoping I can help,” and pointed him to the Feelings Wheel, which she’d previously introduced to her family.

“Can you find a word on here that describes what you’re feeling?” she asked.

Her son scanned the wheel then pointed to “confused.” Tanisha showed him that “confused” is part of “scared” and then directed her son’s attention to the opposite side of the wheel. “Peaceful’ is opposite ‘scared,’” she said. “I wonder what we can do so you can feel peaceful and relaxed?”

Her son paused and took a few deep breaths. His body relaxed.

“It was beautiful to experience,” Tanisha says. “My son felt heard, supported, and empowered, and we broadened his emotional vocabulary. I’ve now got copies of this wheel in every room of my house and in the car because I’m determined to raise emotionally intelligent men.”

The Henderson family also use the wheel to play what she calls “emotions charades.”

“I’ll have one child pick a word and then act it out,” she says. “The rest of us can look at the Feelings Wheel and try to figure out what word, what emotion that person is acting out.” Learning to recognize and name emotions from nonverbal signals is a helpful life skill for all children, and little effort historically has been devoted to helping boys develop this skill.

Ian Thomas, a former elementary schoolteacher in Australia, noticed that his male students “would often return to class from breaks, upset and overwhelmed by emotionally charged playground experiences,” he says. “These incidents frequently impacted the boys’ abilities to take part in teaching and learning activities throughout the rest of the day. But because the boys didn’t have the vocabulary to express themselves, it was a serious challenge to determine what had actually happened.”<sup>33</sup>

So he created handmade cushions with different facial expressions (which he dubbed Moohsuns) to help his students learn to recognize and name emotions. Boys who don’t yet have the words

to describe their feelings and experiences can point to or grasp the “moody cushion” that represents their emotional state.

When my sons were teens, my family received a free Kimochis Mixed Bag of Feelings—a cloth sack of tiny stuffed pillows labeled with various emotions and corresponding facial expressions—from Ellen Dodge, a speech-language pathologist who serves as education director and curriculum author for Kimochis. My boys were too old for emotional education via soft, stuffed objects, I thought, so I simply dumped the pillows into a small basket in our family room, expecting little to no emotional growth or learning. But the pillows caught my boys’ eyes and a few days later, I noticed that they *were* using them to express and discuss emotions. One picked up “frustrated” and tossed it at his brother after losing a game; another rummaged through the basket and suggested “embarrassed” might be a better choice. A few weeks later, I discovered that one of my boys wrote “horny” on one of the included Make-Your-Own-Feelings pillows—a feeling that’s certainly relevant in the world of teenage boys.

Such lighthearted approaches are a wonderful way to help boys explore emotions. (Trust me, “Let’s sit and talk about feelings” rarely works.) If you have a Nerf gun in the house, you can use a washable marker to write “feelings words” (happy, mad, scared, proud, frustrated, etc.) on a white board (or wall of your shower) and then ask your son to “shoot” the one that best represents his feeling. A boy who’s reluctant to talk about his feelings may be happy to “shoot” them.



Thank you for taking the time to read this *Building Boys* excerpt!  
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Together, let’s help our boys become good men.  
Here’s to building boys!

Jennifer