

Emotionally Connected Relationships with Adolescent Boys

We, as a society, have participated in socializing boys and treating boys as if they are not emotionally able or willing to participate in relationships with others. William Pollack describes this clearly in his book, Real Boys: Rescuing Our Sons from the Myths of Boyhood. He shows how, throughout the ages, society has established the Boy Code and used this code to regulate our expectations of how emotionally committed boys should be. Boys are pressured to follow the rules of this code, which severely limits their ability to not only express themselves, but also to participate in intimate relationships. In spite of this code, Pollack and others have found that boys are very capable of expressing their emotions and of being emotionally committed. Those of us who do couples therapy and challenge men to be expressive are fully aware of the fact that, as grown men, we are fully capable of intimacy and emotional connections. It is time that we increase our understanding of this boy code and how family members perpetuate it, discover ways to fight it and break it down, and raise the bar for our boys, demanding that they express themselves and participate in emotionally fulfilling and connected relationships.

Boys have been socialized with an unwritten code that extends across generations, cultures and socio-economic levels and that strictly dictates how they should think, feel and act. All of us contribute to perpetuating and maintaining the code. The prevailing themes of the boy code include the pressure to not show weakness, to act as if in charge, and the notion that boys are biologically wired to act macho, behave with high energy, and be aggressive and violent. Boys are simultaneously pressured to be in relationships with others and to be warm, empathic and caring, egalitarian, interdependent in their relationships, sensitive, and to share their feelings. Boys are hence split between how they believe they should behave publicly and how they feel inside. This can present as a no-win situation for boys and may cause them severe difficulties in their attempts to create relationships with others. Pollack refers to this as placing a Gender Straightjacket on our boys.

There is a tendency to cater to boys because of this straightjacket but not to push boys to break out of it. That fathers, mothers, sisters, brothers, peers, teachers and psychologists don't expect more from boys emotionally sets boys and men up to be viewed as emotionally inept and sets girls and women up to cater to them emotionally. This is the issue that will be addressed in depth in the workshop in October. When we can help adolescent boys and their families expect emotional commitment from boys, we will see major improvements in long term relationships and marriages.

Adolescent boys often enter psychotherapy with and without their families because they are having trouble in relationships and/or they are perceived as the main problem in a relationship. There, we often hear that the adolescent boy won't talk, gets mad, and/or gets verbally or physically aggressive and sometimes violent. We, as clinicians, often decide to separate the adolescent boy from the family to see him alone, as if we can only get him to be emotionally expressive with us. There are benefits and reasons for seeing

adolescents alone, but to do it because we think we can connect better one-on-one is a mistake. This is treating the adolescent out of the context of his family and social environment. In the long run, we want them connecting with their family members and those they are close to, not us. There are usually some major problems within the family that need to be addressed with the adolescent boy and family members present. Restructuring the family and helping them understand the pressures and influences on the adolescent boy is a better answer in the long run.

What we need is to give our boys the responsibility to be intimate and emotional with us and to respect their ability to do so. We need to find ways families can hold them accountable for the expression of their feelings, making them do the hard emotional work they can do. When men take a stand emotionally with partners and hold on to what they believe, they experience deeper intimacy and more committed relationships. We want these boys to see this.

Jay Haley, the founder of Strategic Family Therapy, said that a good ending to therapy requires a good beginning. We can begin the connection with our adolescent boys and their families by making sure that we have joined with them before we start hearing what the problems are. When we begin with the presenting problems or allow the parents to start pathologizing the teens, we shut down emotional expression. We are trying to open up emotional expression and can do that best by joining with each family member and observing how they connect with each other.

This presentation teaches therapists about the intricacies of adolescent boys to enable them to deepen the connections between them and their family members, their peers, and the significant others in their lives. Participants will also learn interventions that work to help boys and families balance the two opposing views of masculinity. Participants will learn ways to help family members connect with adolescent boys and establish an honest, respectful, and therapeutic rapport. Participants will learn how to help family members challenge their own views of masculinity and emotions to expect more from their boys in relationships and to grow more emotionally connected boys. Finally, participants will learn ways to maintain these connections as adolescents attempt to change their behaviors and make positive decisions for themselves.

References

- Haley, J. (1987). *Problem-Solving Therapy*. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass Inc.
- Pollack, W. (1998). *Real Boys: Rescuing Our Sons from the Myths of Boyhood*. New York: Henry Holt and Company.