

RAISING KIDS

# Boys Will Be the Boys We Teach Them to Be



by  
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*Editor's note: This is the second in a four-part series about teens, sex, and social media. [The first post is here.](#) The next post will provide information about talking with your daughter while the final post focuses on how technology can actually help.*

When we say, “boys will be boys,” what are we actually talking about?

That phrase, repeated on the playground when your toddler throws sand in his buddy’s face, or when your tween son discovers online porn, is a load of horseshit that reinforces a set of low-standard stereotypes that perpetuate dangerously misogynistic values and cause our sons to be ill-equipped for the full human experience.

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 **The truth is, boys will be the boys we teach them to be.** Owning this fact is one of the best things you can do for your son. 1



One of the most important challenges we face as parents is to dismantle traditional notions of masculinity. We need to encourage our sons to experience and express a broad range of emotions, and to seek out loving partners and close friends.

And as it turns out, that’s what they want.

A 2009 survey conducted by The National Campaign to Prevent Teen and Unplanned Pregnancy found that 95% of respondents (1,200 boys, ages 15-22) would rather have sex with a girlfriend or someone he loves than with “a random girl.”

For the purposes of this discussion, can we just call that every boy? And can we just sink in for a moment?

Your son would rather have sex with a girlfriend than with some random girl, which is the exact opposite of the common stereotype of teenage boys. Most sex ed curricula in the U.S. teach to the negative stereotype, talking to boys about erections and ejaculations instead of love and intimacy.

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and attitudes that are not, in fact, the norm.

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Boys will be the boys  
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Illustration: Katrina Weigand

### Stay Connected

If all these boys are longing for intimate relationships, why aren't they talking about it? Why don't we know about this?

The answer, says [Amy Schalet](#), associate professor of sociology at The University of Massachusetts, Amherst, may lie with our cultural tendency to “dichotomize... put all the love side of things on the girls and the lust side on boys.” <sup>1</sup>

This, in turn, informs a lifetime of education — formal and informal, conscious and unconscious — that leads our boys to internalize a fairly specific set of expectations; expectations that I would argue are actually limitations, and can have a dramatic impact on how your son carries himself in relationships and online.

Schalet, whose book, “Not Under My Roof: Parents, Teens, and the Culture of explores differences between American and Dutch attitudes towards adolescent sexuality, explains that American parents tend to let sex “become a wedge in (parent-child) relationships that are often quite close, up until puberty.”

Conversely, if you’re “able to maintain that connectedness with your child,” – remaining open and compassionate – “through this phase, then you can also have more influence and more control, ultimately,” says Schalet.

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## Say This, Not That

There are several things you can do to counteract this pervasive programming. After all, the ways in which our children will perceive the world begin at the very beginning with what we present to them as truths.



To that end, here are three of the most glaringly harmful yet incredibly common ideas we pass on to our sons about sex, sexuality, and generally how to be a boy along with a healthier alternative to each.

It’s a marathon, not a sprint, friends. So if you’re consciously implementing healthier options and not seeing instant results (in the form of a son who won’t hear your thoughts on his latest girlfriend), have faith that your efforts will have an impact in the long run.

### 1 | Harmful: Be the aggressor.

This lesson is often delivered insidiously by way of these four words: “Act like a man.” Its analog stereotype would be the harmful message relayed to girls to be demure and submissive.

Professor Schalet says “there is research showing that men are more likely to embrace rigid stereotypes and masculinity beliefs,” and that boys who do buy into the rigid norms are affected negatively “in terms of their own sexual health.”

The notion that boys are supposed to be the dominant force in sexual situations is bolstered by the porn industry.

This matters because, as I wrote in my first piece in this series, boys are increasingly turning to porn as their de facto source of sex ed. The behaviors

attitudes learned in this sphere can eventually leak into decisions your son is making in his interpersonal relationships and, perhaps more easily with the cloak of anonymity, into his online behavior (pressuring girls for nude photos or sharing photos without consent, for example).

### Helpful: Be the lover.

Boys are naturally loving, as humans are naturally loving. We're born craving touch and intimacy. How terribly sad is it, then, that we teach against this instinct when we pressure boys to "toughen up."

Teach your son (nephew/grandson/friend's son) that it is okay to want love. Schalet discovered in her research that many boys don't know that, like them, their peers are longing for intimate relationships, too. "This is true across socioeconomic, across racial differences. There is a relational interest. Yet, (boys) don't realize this is normal. They don't realize that other boys feel this way," she says.

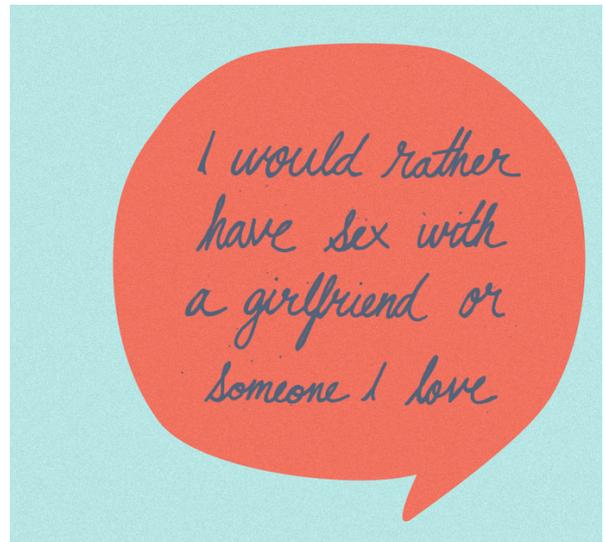


Illustration: Katrina W

Let your son know – from the earliest stage possible – that all boys want to have close friends and, eventually, loving romantic partners. We have to get this message out to our sons, because it's not the one they're hearing from their pop culture, mainstream media, or even their sex ed class at school.

And not for nothing, when it comes to sex, being a lover means paying attention to the needs of your partner. It means empathy.

Spell out, in no uncertain terms, that girls have physical desires and preferences too. (Imagine if your son could be the partner who helps a young girl realize that). Boys should be encouraged to ask questions and to explore the sexual realm with their partner, and to take responsibility for doing so with at least one contraceptive measure in place.

## 2 | Harmful: Anger is okay. Sadness is not.

Boys are told in a multitude of ways that certain emotions are coded as feminine “girly” and should be avoided at all costs, lest your manliness be questioned. So when a relationship ends, or in the case of unrequited love, boys are compelled to express their sadness as anger or hatred. They might even be driven to extreme lengths, such as revenge porn.

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None of these behaviors should be excused, but parents must work to understand that everything is connected. When you told your kid to “man up” on the football field, he internalized that and will apply the message to almost any situation that feels painful. Break-ups are painful. Rejection is painful.

### Helpful: Love hurts.

Tell your son that loss is sometimes part of loving someone, says Schalet. “And it’s also part of the human experience. You’re allowed to be sad when something ends that you wanted to have continue,” she offers.

This message is helpful on multiple fronts. First, it validates the feelings you were experiencing to begin with – feelings of young love that adults are so quick to dismiss. Schalet found that Dutch parents are much more open to the idea that their teens have been or are in love with their respective partners.

“It’s not that (Dutch parents) believe that the feelings that a 12-year-old has are the same as the feelings that a 30-year-old has, but they still recognize that, even from very early ages, people can be deeply moved by other people and attracted to and care about them.”

“What is to be gained by saying that’s not love?” Schalet questions.

What, indeed. Certainly not your child’s trust. People at every age, of every sex, just want their feelings to be validated.

Secondly, allowing your son to experience and express the full range of emotions when it comes to young love helps reinforce the idea that the girl is worthy of sadness. This supports the notion that women are to be respected, even when things don’t turn out the way you hoped, and never violated.

### 3 | Harmful: Girls prefer the strong, silent type.

The strong, silent guy is just a boy who never learned how to communicate. And who can blame him? He was told early on, in one way or another, that boys do the talking thing so much. Boys hang out in man caves and silently play video games. Boys grunt while girls chatter on endlessly about nothing at all.

2.9K Shares    “American parents normalize that boys don’t want to talk. That may or may not be true, but how do you respond to it?” asks Schalet.

#### **Helpful: Let’s talk... often.**

 While it’s completely fair to expect that your son may not always want to chat with you about the events of his day or his current relationship status, you don’t have to accept it. Schalet spoke to one Dutch mom who sits down next to her teen son every evening and asks about his day. The conversation may be one-sided most times, but she follows through with the ritual regardless.



#### Schalet suggests asking questions like these:

- Is there anyone special in your life these days?
- Are there examples of people you see dating where you really feel it’s working out?
- What do you see as some of the problems couples are having?
- Have you ever been in love?

Relating with your teen son on this level, about love and relationships instead of just the classic “Sex Talk,” provides him with a forum in which to practice his communication skills. Schalet says research has shown that “girls get to practice being intimate very early because their friendships tend to take on a more talk-sharing quality.”

Most friendships between young boys, on the other hand, are centered around activities.

“What that means, and this is really fascinating, is that boys often enter into romantic relationships less skilled at doing the kinds of things that they are just eager to do,” but haven’t had as much practice as their female counterparts, sh

explains.

## You Can Be The Best Sex Ed Teacher

I believe that when we all decided to become parents, we entered into an imp agreement that we would do our best to improve the world by raising good p

**2.9k** Shares  Will changing the way you talk to your son about sex, love, and relationships actually change the world? I don't know. But in a culture that is still heavily male-dominated, it's a damn good place to start. 1

 More importantly, your son needs this. He may not be able to express to you how badly he wants your guidance, but in that National Campaign survey, 61% of 15-18-year-old boys said that their parents had “a lot/some” influence regarding their decisions about sex.

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Having the one Big Talk doesn't work. Yes, you still need to tell him about bir control and sexually transmitted infections and why he gets a boner. You also to talk to him about respecting people, opening himself to love, and being responsible in his online interactions. You should tell him that you understand impulse behind sexting, but that it's not the best, most legal way for him to ex those desires.

And all of this should be spread out over the course of your boy's childhood a adolescence, not thrust upon him the day he announces he's got a girlfriend.

If this feels like a big ask, I get it. But you've already got a lot of the informatio you need. You know about sex. If your own sexual health isn't where you'd lik be, all the better. Take this opportunity to educate yourself and your partner, share your knowledge with your son when it's appropriate.

It'll be one of the best time investments you'll ever make, and it will go a long toward holding up your end of that parent agreement.

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I began my journalism career in 2001 at The Week magazine, where I was a researcher and writer. Since 2004 I've been a freelance writer covering a wide range of topics from workplace issues to celebrity profiles for publications including the New York Post, Gotham, Los Angeles Confidential, New You, and KidsVT. My work has included a relationship column called Ms. Monogamy on Blisstree.com, and regular contributions to their sister site, Mommyish.com. I also review children's television shows for Decider.com.



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