

With its spotlight on the ‘manosphere’, Adolescence begs the question: how do we raise good men?

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Courtesy of Netflix

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Michael Flood

There is intensified attention in Australia at present to the messages about manhood, good and bad, that boys and young men grow up with. TV series such as [Adolescence](#), media attention to [sexist “manfluencers”](#) like Andrew Tate, and community concern about [“toxic masculinity”](#) all raise the question of how to raise good boys and men.

What can parents do to help raise boys who will become positive members of their community, men who treat the people around them with respect and fairness?

‘Real’ men: how are masculine norms changing?

For parents to be part of the solution, we first have to learn a little about the problem. [“Masculinity”](#) refers to the set of behaviours and roles associated with being a boy or a man. Traditional norms of masculinity tell males that they should be tough, aggressive, risk-taking, stoic, heterosexual, homophobic, emotionally constipated, hostile to femininity and dominant. These stereotypical expectations [have weakened in Australia in recent decades](#). There are growing emphases on male emotional expressiveness and nurturant fathering, a blurring of the boundaries between straight and gay, and increasing acceptance of the ideal of gender equality.



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Traditional masculine norms do, though, still shape boys’ and men’s lives. For [about one-fifth of boys and young men](#), strong endorsement of stereotypical manhood plays out in behaviours that harm themselves or harm others. Some young men face harm to themselves: they lack close friendships and support, consider suicide, take risks while drunk or high, or drive dangerously. Conforming to some aspects of traditional definitions of manhood can also bring rewards, such as success at work or status in male peer groups.

More widely, boys and young men in general experience “gender policing”, efforts by others to encourage behaviour in line with influential norms of gender and to punish behaviour that strays away from these,

including through verbal and physical abuse. This policing comes particularly from male peers, and parents, but also others.

Boys and men who do not conform to dominant models of masculinity, whether because they are unable or unwilling to do so, pay a particular cost. They may suffer violence, abuse, marginalisation or stigma.

Some boys and young men harm others. Most would never use violence against a girlfriend or other girl or woman. But a minority – again, a larger minority than many parents want to recognise – do perpetrate violence, particularly those who agree most with sexist norms of disrespect and male dominance.

[Australian data tells us](#) that most young men support gender equality and most reject violence, dominance and control in relationships. But a minority – one-quarter to one-third, depending on the issue – [do endorse aspects of sexism](#). And although the evidence is only anecdotal, it is possible that we are seeing an increase in more hostile, misogynist forms of sexism among some cohorts of boys, whether prompted by pornography, anti-feminist social influencers, or something else.

There is also profound diversity among boys and young men. Different groups have very different levels of access to resources, power and status, because of other social inequalities, depending on their economic position, ethnicity and other factors.

How do we raise good men?

It is not fair to look only to parents to address the harms that boys and young men suffer and cause, when schools, social media platforms, governments and communities can play a role. Still, parents can be powerful influences on the kinds of men their boys will become.

Parents can encourage strong norms of gender equity among their children, model shared decision-making and [challenge rigid gender roles and stereotypes](#). Parents can encourage empathy and kindness. We can teach our sons how to deal safely with anger and aggression, developing their emotional intelligence or literacy.

Parents can ask boys about how they want to be seen and about the values and morals they aspire to live by, to help motivate them to invest in positive ways of being. Talk to sons about the messages about manhood they notice in media, music and elsewhere. What is positive about them and what is negative, sexist or limiting? Note the value of some stereotypically masculine qualities, such as courage, leadership and strength, and of stereotypically feminine traits such as caring and empathy, and how these can be put into practice.



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With teenage boys, parents should [talk about sexual consent, rape and healthy relationships](#) as part of regular chats about life, love and growing up. Talk to them about positive, pleasurable sexual involvements and relationships, noting that these are based on consent and mutual respect. Show boys that men can be considerate lovers and loving husbands and partners.

Fathers can play vital roles, given the evidence that [sons learn their models of masculinity particularly from their dads](#). Try to provide a positive example, to “walk the walk”. Be a fair and supportive partner. Inspire your kids with a sense of fairness and respect. And when you get it wrong, as all of us will at times, acknowledge your behaviour and make amends.

Talking to boys about masculinity will go better if we take a positive and empathetic approach, focused on supporting boys to build healthy, equitable relationships and friendships. Avoid unhelpful language that prompts defensiveness, like referring to men as “toxic”. Understand that boys may have had lengthy exposure to harmful messages about masculinity. And be patient and supportive in exploring these issues.

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