

What boys need: a sense of “belonging”

William J Phillips

If we are to raise healthy boys, we may need to re-examine our values



Many of the studies looking at health in adolescent boys and girls suggest that the fostering of resilience, derived from a sense of “belonging”, is of prime importance.¹ This is in accord with recent endocrinological findings which demonstrate that, being social mammals, humans have a genetically programmed need for “bonding” mediated by the hormone oxytocin, which is generated by touch and sex.² Such bonding is not just to a sexual partner but involves a web of belonging that permeates multiple strata in the total community. The feeling of belonging results from many things, including connections with parents and families, and adult support for independence and competency. Reflecting on my personal experiences as a boy, then a man, teacher, husband, step-father, father, grandfather and general practitioner, I would like to give my opinion of what young men need to help them develop a feeling of belonging.

- Boys need a father (and a mother).** A father has special significance for a boy because of shared gender. Even if the quality of fathering he experiences is poor, a boy deserves to know who his father is, and to be helped to understand (and be reminded) that what he does with his genetic heritage is ultimately his own choice.
- Boys need to be valued by their families.** Boys need families that value them, their input and company from birth to adulthood and beyond.
- Boys need male teachers and male role models.** Boys need the attention, acceptance and approval of men. An involved father is a great asset, but it is not enough. Even boys with fathers appreciate the attention of men outside the family. While we expect the love of our family, the affection of someone to whom we are not related is a special compliment, a boost to our self-esteem. At school, boys need male teachers, in particular male teachers who appreciate boys’ needs and interests and take a personal interest in them.
- Boys need peers to whom they feel close.** Creating close friendships requires time to develop familiarity and trust. Our shifting populations can interfere with bonding and produce superficial friendships based on fashion and peer pressure, which can cause more harm than good.
- Boys need touch.** When most forms of physical contact between men, older and younger boys are banned or discouraged — for fear of injury litigation or because it may be interpreted as being abusive or homosexual in nature — we are also denying boys the feeling of being wanted, loved and valued by other males.
- Boys need risk.** Boys need to feel competent in typically masculine activities such as camping, fishing, sport and other physical activities. Our litigious society, in trying to eliminate injury, is also reducing risk — the very thing that provides the challenge that many boys thrive on. If we fail to provide such activities supervised by caring men with whom boys feel a bond of respect and affection, they may pursue their own, often ill-advised, forms of risk-seeking behaviour in street gangs and vandalism.
- Boys need to be taught how to cope with life.** Boys don’t need protection from the adversities of life; rather, they need help to learn how to cope with them. It is useful for boys to experience adversity in its various forms — it is, after all, nature’s way of providing risk, challenge and experience. If life is made “perfect” for our children, adult life will be a shock. Thus, learning how to

cope with disasters would be more useful than avoiding disaster altogether, and treating a disaster as an irrevocable calamity would be more harmful than accepting it as merely another life experience.

- Boys need discipline.** Boys need to know who’s in charge, and authority needs to be backed with strength. Fair limits consistently enforced are essential. Drug use, sexual assault, alcohol misuse, theft, violence, vandalism and “hooning” all need to be dealt with rapidly and decisively. But there is also no place for victimisation and abuse. Discipline needs to be administered not in anger but with respect for the developing boy.
- Boys need reassurance about their sexuality.** Size of penis is just one of the sexual preoccupations of maturing boys, yet when harmless, non-intimate “locker room” activities are overly interpreted as gay or, unsupervised, become opportunities for victimisation or abuse, boys may turn to the sexual exploitation of women in order to test their sexuality. The need for sexual reassurance is a normal stage of development, which, if frustrated, may increase the incidence of abusive sexual behaviour and paedophilia.³ We need to develop ways to reassure boys about their sexuality that do not involve abuse or exploitation. Boys also need to be shown a sexuality that loves and values its partners rather than treats them as objects for personal gratification — to control sex rather than be controlled by a hormone-driven hunger for orgasm.
- Boys need a proud masculinity.** Boys need to be taught to have pride in, and for, the *constructive* expressions of masculinity — integrity, responsibility, care and protectiveness.

These “boys’ needs” hint at the broader changes our society could make that would bring net gains for us all. We need to place priority not on careers and money as the gateway to “power”, but on valuing families and friends as our greatest asset and source of pleasure. It is a biblical message to look towards each other rather than towards external things — to “turn the hearts of the fathers to the children” (Malachi 4:6). But is our society too materialistic to heed it?*

Competing interests

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