

Five Tips for Understanding Boys

1. Be aware of social pressures: Help boys out of the box.

Boys grow up hearing messages about what it means to be a man that are limiting and hurtful (e.g., boys don't cry, boys need to prove themselves through fighting). We need to help boys learn that there are many ways to be a man, that it is okay to own and express vulnerable feelings, and that there are many strategies to resolve conflict other than through violence. Help the boys you know feel valued and respected for who they are, whether they play football or dance ballet, whether they hunt or knit.

2. Respect boys' indirectness: Shoot baskets first, talk later.

For both biological and social reasons, boys tend not to express certain emotions directly. Help boys attend to and express their most vulnerable emotions by approaching them indirectly: Shoot baskets while talking about things, discuss how a character in a movie might have felt, share your own experiences before expecting them to tell you about theirs.

3. Encourage boys' directness: Help boys relate to people.

Because boys tend to pay more attention to things like cars, wheels, and computers than to faces, emotions, and relationships, they may need help developing relational and communication skills. Teach the boys you know to look directly in someone's face to give or receive a compliment and to understand what someone else is feeling. Help them see how important it is to understand their own feelings in order to discover and ask for what they need.

4. Encourage regulation: Teach boys to be respectfully active.

Boys, on average, are more physically active and aggressive than girls. They need to be given opportunities to be physically expressive (e.g., active recesses as school, permission to engage in rough-and-tumble play) but they also need to learn to check certain impulses (e.g., physically fighting, running around a classroom). This means we need to be actively engaged in teaching them how to regulate their own behaviors. It is not helpful to be completely hands off ("Oh, boys will be boys") or completely over-controlling (expecting boys to sit quietly for extended periods of time).

5. Notice the good: See boys as something other than problems.

We tend to highlight the trouble boys get into and forget to support them for the good things they bring us. Realize that part of the problem boys have in meeting the world has to do with the way the world meets them. Take an active interest in what boys find interesting, and find a way to value it. Help them see that the trucks and tractors they love are important in building houses and growing crops. Help them see that football is also about being part of a team, caring for your teammates, and doing something challenging and important together.