



Male socialization: How boys learn to be men

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InfoSheet 11: Male Socialization

A growing body of evidence points to the important benefits of a strong father-child relationship. Among the benefits are higher levels of school performance and increases in healthy behaviors. Children who lack a positive relationship with a father or father-figure demonstrate higher levels of teen pregnancy, increased juvenile delinquency, and lower academic achievement. The link between positive father-involvement and child well-being elevates the importance of educating and socializing boys to become competent fathers.

This InfoSheet briefly explores various societal factors that influence the development of manhood and fatherhood. A list of citations is included at the bottom of page two for individuals who are interested in pursuing more in-depth discussions about male socialization.

Discussing male socialization is, inevitably, a work of generalizations. The influences on masculinity, described below, are often expressed through the mainstream culture embraced by much of Hollywood and Madison Avenue. Yet, male socialization is not a uniform practice across cultural groups, communities, or even within a single family.

Still, too many indicators point to the need for a consensus about what we – as a nation – expect for and from boys and men. Do we accept and expect unhealthy expressions of masculinity that promote violence and shame, or do we seek healthy masculinity and its affirmation of manhood and womanhood?

Promote healthy expressions of emotion

A key barrier to healthy masculinity is a narrow understanding of acceptable male emotional expression. According to William Pollack, author of *The Real Boys Workbook*, mainstream American culture discourages boys and men from expressing emotions that may be perceived as feminine. One example is

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the notion that “real men don’t cry.” However, according to Dr. Harry Brod, crying is a way to heal the hurt. Therefore, Brod explains, stopping the crying doesn’t stop the hurting – it only stops the healing. In other words, men who don’t cry cannot begin healing.

The solution is not to force men to communicate like women, but to allow men to express a full range of emotions in comfortable ways. In order to overcome the barrier of masculine emotional expression, Dr. Glen Palm has embraced new language to talk about emotion. Palm has found that many adult men respond well to the term “EQ” (emotional intelligence) in the place of the term “emotions”. EQ may sound more masculine for men who have been

socialized to shun emotional expression. A father who can embrace and explore his own EQ may be better prepared to pass along healthy emotional expression to the next generation.

Encourage non-violent and non-aggressive behaviors

According to David Baxter, “By the time boys become teenagers, most of them have become so adept at repressing and masking their more tender feelings that they no longer have a vocabulary to identify or describe these feelings even to themselves. The exception is anger – the one ‘acceptable’ male emotion.”

As cited by Jackson Katz, “We are raising generations of boys in a society that in many ways glorifies sexually aggressive masculinity and considers as normal the degradation and objectification of women”. Furthermore, Dr. Harry Brod explains that traditional male socialization has tolerated violence. Therefore, Brod proposes, aggression may be considered over-conformance to an unhealthy societal standard of masculinity (not deviance or non-conformance).

This understanding of violence and aggression may make it easier for men’s groups – both formal support groups and informal gatherings – to engender the expectation of nonviolence in personal and interpersonal behavior. This language avoids “attributing pathology to normal boys” while helping them “understand that the restrictive definitions of masculinity tacitly or expressly promoted by Western society are not the only ways to be male” (Baxter). In the end, healthy masculinity can promote anti-sexist, anti-homophobic, anti-violent behaviors that value the

unique attributes of children, women, and other men.

Seek role models of healthy manhood

Current examinations of male socialization often identify a paucity of healthy adult male role models for boys and a lack of education about what it means to grow up to become a positive man and father. In many ways, mainstream culture fails to provide boys and men sufficient direction and support in order for individual males to define and adopt healthy expressions of masculinity and fatherhood. From an early age, boys benefit when they know healthy men in their daycare centers, schools, homes, and communities.

Dads and Daughters, a Minnesota-based organization, released a report about the stereotypes of male behavior in children’s movies (the “G” rated type). The report, conducted by the University of Southern California, described men as “dominant, disconnected and dangerous.” Men in children’s movies are infrequently nurturing or caring – the roles expected of good parents. Throughout youth and adolescent culture, healthy messages of manhood that help prepare boys for fatherhood and family life are often difficult to detect.

Define positive views of manhood

According to Rob Okun, masculinity is not the problem in itself. As he explains, “gender identity can be redirected into other, more fruitful channels.” He points out as an example a father that was seeking “a suitable form of rough-and-tumble play for his son that didn’t involve toy guns. They hit upon firefighting and outfitted their...little boy with all the accoutrements. The ability to think clearly under pressure, to be physically strong and to take decisive action to protect others offers a useful direction to boys and young men”.

While male socialization “may cause problems such as an impoverished emotional life and lack of meaningful relationships, it is also responsible for some of the most positive aspects of traditional masculinity. Boys are rewarded from an early age for going out into the world, solving problems, achieving, and competing. While competition and ambition can get out of hand, this orientation to the world is associated with good occupational functioning and enhanced self-esteem, especially when it is

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balanced with socioemotional orientations” (Kilmartin). Despite some of the prevalent negative social characteristics of masculinity, healthy manhood has a place in our families and communities.

Promote realistic standards of masculinity

Football coach Joe Ehrmann, a former NFL star, believes that boys are presented unrealistically high standards of manhood. According to Ehrmann, “false masculinity” sets three standards for boys: athletic ability, sexual conquest, and economic success. As boys strive to achieve these standards, they learn to compete with one another. “We compare, we compete. That’s all we ever do. It leaves most men feeling isolated and alone. And it destroys any concept of community.”

To move beyond competition and isolation, Ehrmann proposes two standards for “strategic masculinity”: relationships and having a cause beyond yourself. He explains, “Masculinity, first and foremost, ought to be

defined in terms of relationships. It ought to be taught in terms of the capacity to love and to be loved. It comes down to this: What kind of father are you? What kind of husband are you? What kind of coach or teammate are you? ... Success comes in terms of relationships. And then all of us ought to have some kind of cause, some kind of purpose in our lives that’s bigger than our own individual hopes, dreams, wants and desires. At the end of our life, we ought to be able to look back over it from our deathbed and know that somehow the world is a better place because we lived, we loved, we were other-centered, other-focused.”

Expect healthy manhood

Author and college professor Shira Tarrant believes that we are living “in a world that is struggling to rethink manhood and masculinity.” Dr. Tarrant promotes a message of hope that young men and women are ready to discuss gender, to move beyond the fear of losing power or of accepting responsibility, and to begin living lives of progressive manhood. For the sake of all children, men and women – healthy masculinity should become an expectation in our families and communities.

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Visit www.mnfathers.org/resources.html for links to various resources and reports about healthy masculinity.

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