

# How to Build Boys' Self-Confidence

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Boys face their own set of gender-based challenges. Here are some ways to help

Beth Arky

When it comes to discussing self-confidence in children and teens, the focus is typically on girls. After all, they're battling expectations that they should be impossibly thin and unfailingly nice. But experts say boys' self-confidence is also at risk because of gender stereotypes, which leave them, too, feeling inadequate when they believe they don't meet expectations, and gives them few outlets to express their feelings. "There's this myth that boys don't have as many feelings or they're not as emotional," says Rachel Busman, PsyD, a clinical *psychologist*.

"These are misperceptions. We need to be more nurturing of our boys, as well."

But how do the adults in boys' lives do that? We examine some of the challenges facing boys and experts' advice on how to address them. Our panel includes Dr. Busman; Michael Thompson, PhD, coauthor of *Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys*; and Catherine Steiner-Adair, EdD, a clinical psychologist and school consultant.

## School is harder for young boys

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Boys are more impulsive and have a more difficult time sitting still and paying attention than girls do, says Dr. Steiner-Adair. Meanwhile, many schools aren't designed for short breaks throughout the day that would help them — that would help all kids, in fact. "So when boys can't sit and wait their turn and the class is too big, what happens is they become disruptive; they shout out the answer," she says. "And because they are disrupting, the fact that they got the answer right and just couldn't hold on to it and wait their turn, doesn't count."

What does count is that they interrupted, and when they're criticized repeatedly about it, it diminishes their self-esteem. Not only that, "it also diminishes their love of academics and learning," Dr. Steiner-Adair says.

Dr. Thompson agrees, pointing out that many school tasks can shame a boy, and that shame often turns to anger. "And then everybody says, 'We've got such an angry little boy,' as if there's nothing to set off his anger," he says. Then, if a boy

can't read in kindergarten, "He says, 'I hate this. I hate reading.' What he means is, 'I am ashamed that I can't read better."

## How to help

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- **Give praise.** If a child is struggling in school, teachers should go out of their way to look for opportunities to compliment him when he *does* do something right, even if it's something small. Not only does a steady influx of praise make kids feel happier and more confident at school, but psychologists say that "catching kids being good" can help positively shape their behavior, too.
- **Challenge boys and allow them to develop skills.** Dr. Thompson used to teach at Outward Bound, which instills survival skills. "You throw boys as a group into a very challenging situation, and let them figure it out and find their own leadership," he says. "They'll come back thinking, 'We did it. We did it.' You'll see a ton of confidence." But it doesn't have to get as extreme as that. While boys may be behind girls, they can and should be expected to learn skills, right down to making their own sandwich. "It involves creating a situation in which they can develop a skill and as a result will have self-esteem," Dr. Thompson says.

## Constant competition

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Boys are forced into a strict hierarchy in which they compare themselves mercilessly to other boys. "Boys are always asking themselves 'Who's the tallest? Who's the fastest? Who's the biggest? Who's the king of the hill?'" Dr. Steiner-Adair says. "And within that come some real struggles. What if you're not? What if you're not athletic? I think that is a huge vulnerability for boys."

## How to help

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- **Talk about different, not better.** It's important to emphasize the child's unique qualities, Dr. Busman says. Boys need to know that we all have different abilities and grow and learn at different rates.
- **Make your kid media literate.** Busman suggests watching TV with your child or discussing what they're doing on the internet. "Maybe you see something on TV that's portraying boys in stereotypic way," she says. "Then you can say, 'Wow, that's interesting, not all boys are like that. Some boys are really great at sports and some aren't.' And if you see a particularly good role model, that's also a nice opportunity to call out his attributes: 'That guy's so great. He's super smart, well-respected by the people around him, and he's kind.'"

- **More varied role models.** Thompson notes that showcasing alternatives to the athletic culture with male role models – say, artists, teachers, chefs, musicians – shows boys there are different, legitimate ways they can follow their talents and still be valued. “If you want to give boys confidence, then you give them the feeling that the skills they have are going to win them the respect of other men and boys.”

## Boys are expected to “buck up”

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Even today, societal norms often dictate that boys aren’t supposed to cry. “So what boys are taught is when you are sad, when you are upset, do not get sad but get mad,” Dr. Steiner-Adair says. “We’re making some progress, but by and large the situation is still such that by the age of 8, a boy has to learn how not to cry.”

She notes that we ask this of boys just at the age where they’re developing the capacity for “really deeper, more meaningful emotions and empathy to disconnect from their own sadness and vulnerability.” Later, these boys-turned-young men have to learn how to communicate their thoughts and emotions “without feeling that it’s somehow a violation of their masculinity.”

## How to help

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- **Let them cry.** You can let boys know that they shouldn’t be ashamed of tears — you’re not embarrassed if they cry — and that expressing feelings doesn’t mean they’re weak.
- **Be open about feelings.** Parents can also validate their boys’ sadness or anger by encouraging them to talk about their emotions. Bedtime can be a great chance to check in with younger kids, and with teens you can often get them to open up in the car. “It doesn’t even have to be a deep conversation, just taking stock,” Dr. Busman says. “It’s about opening dialogue.” Parents should also support their boys’ emotions, telling them that they’re okay and that everyone has them. She adds that books can be helpful in that department. For example, she has one for her son called *Tough Guys Have Feelings, Too*, with characters like a losing wrestler and a homesick astronaut feeling sad. Books like this show boys that sad or negative feelings are normal and nothing to be embarrassed of.
- **Modeling.** “I would hope that we would also model a more healthy view of being a boy who can express emotions,” Dr. Busman says. “I think the father and the other men in boys’ lives can model being expressive about emotions and showing boys how they handle disappointments.”

## Teasing or bullying

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Bullying isn’t healthy for either the bully or the victim. “When you have a gender code that says there is only a spot for one at the very, very top, then boys define themselves and make themselves better by pushing somebody else down,” Dr.

Steiner-Adair says. “So we see a lot of subtle, and sometimes not so subtle, lateral aggression and we see a lot of teasing.” Any sign of weakness is fair game, including not being good at sports or even being too smart.

## How to help

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- **Encourage friendships and activities with girls.** Playing with girls and interacting with them in school and in co-ed activities can cut down on competitiveness with other boys and give boys a chance to develop interests that are not traditionally masculine with less fear of ridicule.
- **Emphasize empathy.** From a young age, parents can encourage boys to be aware of how others think and feel, and take those feelings into account. Busman says that a lot of elementary schools have some sort of social emotional curriculum, which teach conflict resolution, and she notes that it's good for parents to know about them so that they can follow through.
- **Don't allow trash talk in your home.** Let boys know that insulting other kids by calling them weak or wimps or losers (or worse) is not acceptable from them, or their friends, and make sure the adults in your family don't do it, either.
- **Teach kids to advocate for themselves.** While adults may need to intervene when bullying happens, Dr. Busman says kids should be taught to try to handle these situations for themselves. Parents can talk to their sons about bullying in advance and role-play strategies for handling it. For instance, it can help to come with a few lines a child can say if someone targets him to deflect what's going on. You can also strategize together to make a list of a few adults or friends he could go to for support.