

# Chapter 1

## The Boy Code

Trash talk is just normal with guys. You can't let them know they get you down or it will only get worse.

—A 10th grader

**N**ot long ago I found myself packed into a tiny gym waiting for a basketball game to start. As is common at these tournaments, games were running a bit behind schedule and, due to the small space, the teams and fans waiting were practically on top of the fans watching the teams on the court. Ever eager to avoid a crowd, I backed myself into a corner in the waiting area outside of the gym and opened my book to pass the time. Within a few moments, a coach brought his team of what appeared to be fifth grade boys out for a mid-game chat. The boys filed out of the gym as kids that age do, jumping, joking, and talking over one another until the coach bellowed, “Shut up and sit!” I looked up in time to see most of their heads bow down, eyes to the ground. The next three minutes included phrases like “You’re playing like shit” and “Don’t be such babies” on repeat until they were sent back into the gym for the second half.

This is not an isolated incident in club basketball. There's a culture of "man up" that surrounds the sport, even at impossibly young ages, but high school athletes tell me that attitude exists in a multitude of boys' sports. Yelling, belittling, and publicly embarrassing young athletes in an attempt to toughen them up and get them to perform are common coaching tactics. Boys learn at a young age that the best course of action is eyes to the ground and fall in line, even when an adult yells anger-fueled expletives in frustration over a U11 basketball game. I find the general messaging confusing, if I'm being honest. Does losing your temper and exploding on the people around you qualify as "manning up" or not being a baby? What, exactly, is the definition of a *man* in these scenarios and why do boys have to be emotionally destroyed to achieve it?

## Manning Up

In *APA Guidelines for Practice with Boys and Men* (2018), the American Psychological Association identifies and examines the barriers boys and men face with respect to societal messages about what it means to be a boy or man. With a focus on the potentially harmful effects of stoicism, competitiveness, dominance, and aggression, the APA warns that it's imperative to address the specific obstacles boys face in an effort to protect their mental health and break the patterns of negative behavior.

It's easy to sit back and say that boys and men, particularly white boys and men, hold power and privilege and that sets them up for success. When we look at statistics about gender parity in the workplace and ratios of CEOs at Fortune 500 companies: only 10.4% are women, of which 1.2% are women of color (Women's Business Collaborative, 2024), the power dynamic certainly holds up. It's also worth noting that as of 2024, only 1.6% of CEOs at Fortune 500 companies are Black, 3.2% Hispanic or Latino, and 10% South Asian. White men do hold more positions of social

capital and financial wealth. That's power. The mistake we make when we only look at these kinds of numbers is that we focus on markers of perceived success without considering the barriers individuals face along the way to the top.

Boys and young men receive disproportionate rates of harsh punishment in school settings and experience more academic failure and death by suicide than their female counterparts. In adulthood, it is noted that men have higher rates of physical health problems, public health concerns (including violence and incarceration), and quality-of-life concerns like relational problems (APA, 2018). When we fail to take a deep dive into the systemic and interpersonal hurdles that negatively affect boys and men, we fail our boys as they grow into men. Those men continue to have higher rates of relational problems into adulthood shows us that the emotional lives of boys and men are still not adequately addressed. Meaningful change does not occur in the absence of attention to detail.

## Parent-Teacher Conference

In many countries throughout the world, gender norms about masculinity center power and status. Beginning in boyhood, many cultures value boys as strong (emotionally and physically in some cases), competitive (across contexts), and in control. It helps to take a closer look at how these characteristics are perceived.

- **Stoicism.** A trait long associated with masculinity, stoicism refers to the tendency to be (or appear) unaffected by challenges and suppress emotions. Stoicism is actually linked to decreased overall well-being, so it's really important to avoid promoting this trait.
- **Competitiveness.** Competition can be a fun part of growing up, regardless of gender. Yet boys are consistently

*(continued)*

*(continued)*

pitted against one another, even in activities that have no need for competition. (Did you know that competitive piano is a thing? That one took me by surprise.)

- **Dominance.** To rise to the top, boys are encouraged to show dominance in any given context. This sets boys up to be controlling and powerful in their social hierarchies.
- **Aggression.** Despite “bully-free zone” posters plastered around many schools, boys continue to use aggression to maintain their positions. By way of aggressive communication and physically aggressive behavior, boys can gain and maintain social status and/or avoid victimization.

## Gender Norms

Gender norms are shaped by a variety of inputs. While norming in the family can certainly play a role, it’s also helpful to consider that patriarchal, mixed, and confusing messaging can show up everywhere from literature to history books to religious texts to music. Peers, mentors, and anything watchable or listenable (old school television, movies, podcasts, YouTube and Tik Tok influencers, to name a few) have the potential to share all kinds of opinions, positive/negative/biased/unbiased, and information, some accurate, some not so much, and without well-developed critical thinking skills to counter these narratives, boys run the risk of passive consumption of potentially damaging masculine norms.

In fact, a study of 14- and 15-year-olds in 15 countries, including the United States, found that by early adolescence, young people are already deeply affected by gender norms, including the hegemonic myth that boys are strong and fiercely independent, pubertal boys are viewed as predators and a threat to their female counterparts, and boys are trouble (Blum et al., 2017). The implications of internalizing beliefs like these can be costly. Boys harmed by hegemonic myths without proper support in place to counter these narratives are at a higher risk of both engaging in and being

a victim of violence, substance misuse, death by accidental injury and suicide, and have a shorter life expectancy than females.

Boys learn early on that policing of masculinity is part of a successful journey through boyhood. I see this anecdotally when teen boys give me responses like “this is how it is” when I question the nature of friendships that include hostility, humiliation, and near-constant one-upsmanship both in real life and online. The general rule of thumb is to sit back and take it, whatever “it” is at any given moment, because to stand up to other guys is to open yourself up to potential isolation, harassment, or physical altercations. It’s not worth it.

Research confirms that the socially prescribed rules of masculinity do affect the day-to-day lives of adolescent boys. In a qualitative study that involved semi-structured interviews with adolescent boys ages 14–19, Addis et al. (2016) found that boys engage in policing of masculinity for three primary reasons: masculine norm enforcement, status elevation and preservation, and friendship enhancement. In other words, engaging in this behavior has important social rewards. When researchers flipped the question to gather information about what it feels like to be policed by peers, responses indicated that boys feel one of three ways (in general): unfazed, ambivalent, or troubled-upset. While it’s a good sign that some adolescent boys were able to circle the “troubled-upset” option, I can’t help but wonder how many boys, in general, would feel empowered to do so when clearly the norming in teen boy world continues to perpetuate a suck it up and move on culture. It’s hard to tell your truth when a different truth is consistently told to you.

Jamie was 10 when I first met him. His parents were concerned because of behavioral changes noted both by his classroom teacher and observations at home. This is common among boys in this age group, by the way. “Behavior issues” are the symptoms that land them in therapy, but I always (100% of the time) find unmet needs and/or unprocessed emotions lurking beneath the surface. In Jamie’s case, his teacher reached out to his parents because Jamie was engaging in conflict during recess. That was the story, anyway. After reminding Jamie to be kind and taking away his video games for

two weeks, the reports from school didn't get any better. More rules were imposed and consequences enforced. At school, Jamie endured being benched at recess at the first sign of frustration. Yet, nothing seemed to change. After about a month, his parents called me.

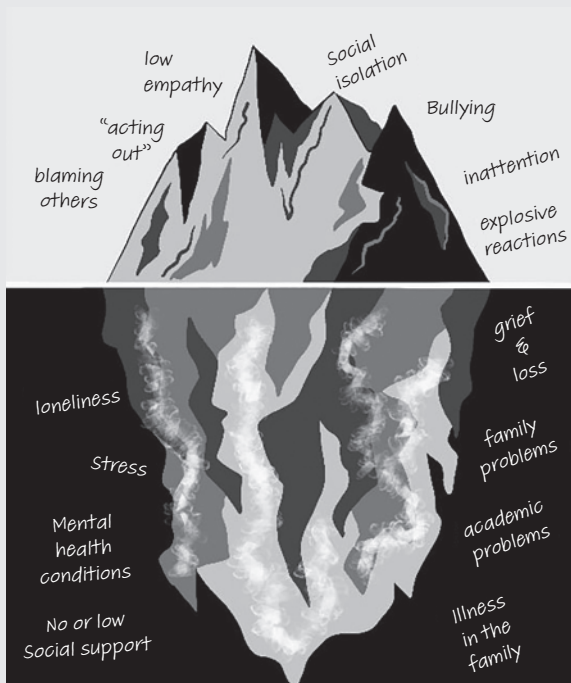
He walked into my office with his head down and fighting back tears. In these moments, I often wonder what was said just before kids walk in. Are they told that I am someone who can help or are they told I'm someone they have to see because they can't seem to behave? I always hope it's the first option, but either way I'll spend whatever time I have with them trying to show that I'm a positive, not a punishment. Instead of peppering him with questions to illicit small talk or jumping into the meaning of confidentiality, I chose to sit with the discomfort and comment on this obvious, "This must feel weird – walking into an office to tell some person you don't know why school stinks and what you're thinking about." He tried to hide a smirk. Then we both laughed and played cards while we told each other funny stories about our families. We didn't "fix" anything that day, but we did begin something: trust building. Getting to the heart of the matter takes time and trust, but offering a brave space to talk about anything is the best gift I have to give to teens and young adults who walk through my door, and talking about anything at all is a brave first step toward healing.

In the coming months, he would ask questions about whether or not other boys come to me for help and why his teachers think he's the "bad one" when his peers were also arguing at recess. Little by little, we found our way to the root cause of his anger and frustration: low self-esteem triggered by teasing and trash talk during play. Yelling at his friends when they annoyed him was a learned behavior – he had seen his friends, his brother, and his dad do the same thing on many occasions – but the bigger issue for him was that he didn't feel like he measured up and he didn't feel good about himself. He didn't know who he was or where he fit. It was a lot for a kid his age to carry, but more common than you might think. Between comparison culture and the pressure to succeed, boys often tell me these feelings start at young ages and stay with

them as they grow. Jamie was one of the lucky ones because he had me. Once he got used to the process of talking about things he would usually keep bottled up, he began to work on them.

## Parent-Teacher Conference

I often encourage parents and young people to use what I refer to as the Iceberg of Empathy to work on identifying the hidden emotions and obstacles beneath the behavior labeled as problematic. As you can see in Figure 1.1, the emotions and behaviors we show the outside world, above the waterline, are often used to mask the emotions and obstacles we keep hidden below the waterline. We humans do this



**Figure 1.1** Iceberg of Empathy.

Source: R. Hurley (2025).

(continued)

*(continued)*

for a variety of reasons, including shame, stigma, and fear of being misunderstood or labeled, to name a few. What tends to happen is that we either push out the emotions we can no longer regulate or we engage in maladaptive coping skills that get us through the distress but not necessarily in the best possible way. By learning to look beneath the surface, both for ourselves and the young people in our lives, we can apply healthy coping skills to work through distress in a healthy way.

A study on adolescent perceptions about stigma showed that teens between the ages of 13 and 17 actually don't feel the same stigma about mental health that previous generations endured, and that they prefer to talk to their parents about their mental health, but they continue to hold back because they worry that they won't be understood, their parents will try to fix the problem without their input, or their parents will jump to solutions without validating and empathizing first (Modi et al., 2025). Let's highlight the good news in this study: our teens actually want to talk to us! But we also need to think about the changes we need to make, including being better listeners and validating emotions.

## **Parent-Teacher Conference**

It might help to take a closer look at the top five barriers to help-seeking teens identified in the Modi et al. (2025) study:

- My parents might not understand me/what I'm feeling.
- I would feel very uncomfortable talking about it.
- My parents would try to solve the problem for me rather than listening to me.

*(continued)*

*(continued)*

- I would rather avoid any discomfort when it comes to my emotions/feelings.
- There was a tie for number five:
  - My parents can't relate to my situation.
  - I don't want to be a burden to my parents.

The themes here are interesting. On the one hand, young people want to seek help for their mental health, but, on the other hand, they would rather not feel any discomfort. They want to talk to their parents but they don't think their parents are equipped to listen, are too quick to try to solve the problem, and likely can't relate. Oh, and they really don't want to burden their parents with their mental health problems.

Despite Gen Z's open-door policy about discussing just about everything (I love them for this, by the way), actually seeking help for mental health remains a sore subject, especially for the boys. In a meta-analysis intended to discover both barriers and facilitators to help seeking among boys, Sheikh et al. (2025) found five key themes emerged in the literature, including the impact of conformity to masculinity norms and self-stigma, social norms, limited availability of information about mental health, and limited male mental health literacy campaigns. Facilitators, however, included meeting the preferences of boys, including formal versus informal and online versus in office treatment, and practicing self-compassion. This study underscores the importance of gaining a better understanding of the unique needs of boys. The "I'm fine" exterior boys are conditioned to build makes it difficult for them to ask for help and to ask for the kind of help they need.

**Quick side note (or side quest, as the young people like to say).** If you're at all like me, you're probably feeling a bit overwhelmed with some of these findings. I get it. I also have teens living in my house and I know what it's like to look at a dizzying set of numbers and wonder what I've even done right. Breathe. Research gives us an overall blueprint, a place to begin building or rebuilding. In some cases, it helps us understand best practices for protecting the mental health of young people, but, more often than not, it gives a starting point for making improvements. In this case, listening with empathy, validating, and avoiding the urge to come in hot with a quick fix are changes we can make. I often say that I'm as guilty as the next parent when it comes to my own kids. I have 75 solutions to every possible problem and watching a teen make a mistake I know they could avoid is not easy. I, too, am a work in progress at times. Aren't we all?

I have found, over and over again, that most young people talk more and feel less overwhelmed by the process of therapy if they are engaged in something while we talk (art, card games, board games, etc.). Boys, in particular, seem to like to play something. I've had UNO games that last months, played basketball for entire sessions (my son will laugh at that one), and taken many, many walk-and-talks to help boys feel at ease when discussing hard topics. One of the great myths about therapy is that always involves a therapist sitting perfectly poised with a notepad and a pen while a client sits on a couch or chair spilling their stories. This is not so. There are all kinds of ways to connect and giving young people a voice in how they use their time is essential.

## What Is the Boy Code?

The Boy Code, as I often refer to it in practice with boys and their parents, encourages young boys to internalize some potentially damaging messages about how boys are *supposed* to handle all kinds of social-emotional stressors. Boys of all ages tell me they can't cry, they need to handle social problems independently, and they have to learn to suck it up. For a boy like Jamie, this messaging feels overwhelming. He doesn't know how to cope with the unkind behavior of his peers, he feels like he can't do anything right at school or at home, and he feels like he's worthless. Yet when he tries to just put his head down and stay out of harm's way, he ends up in therapy for isolating himself. To be clear, therapy is a positive outlet for a kid like Jamie, but it shouldn't be reactive to perceived behavioral shortcomings.

Another study of note that examines perceptions about masculinity in a representative sample of young men between the ages of 18 and 30 in the United States, Mexico, and the United Kingdom (Heilman et al., 2017) revealed that most young men still feel pressured to live in what researchers called the *Man Box*: a rigid construct of cultural ideas about manhood that includes self-sufficiency, acting tough, being attractive, following specific gender roles, being heterosexual, having sexual prowess, and using aggression in the face of conflict. The report also looked at how these rigid gender norms affect the social and emotional lives of young men and found that the bravado required to be a "man" masks deep insecurities, depression, and frequent thoughts of suicide, particularly among young men in the United States and the United Kingdom. Furthermore, young men are more likely to provide support than to seek it and engage in high-risk behaviors like drinking and reckless driving. Also of note, young men in the Man Box in the United States and United Kingdom are six or seven times more likely to report perpetrating bullying (online and/or in person) and six times more likely to engage in sexual harassment than young men who did not fit into the Man Box (Heilman et al., 2017).

## Seven Thematic Pillars of the Man Box

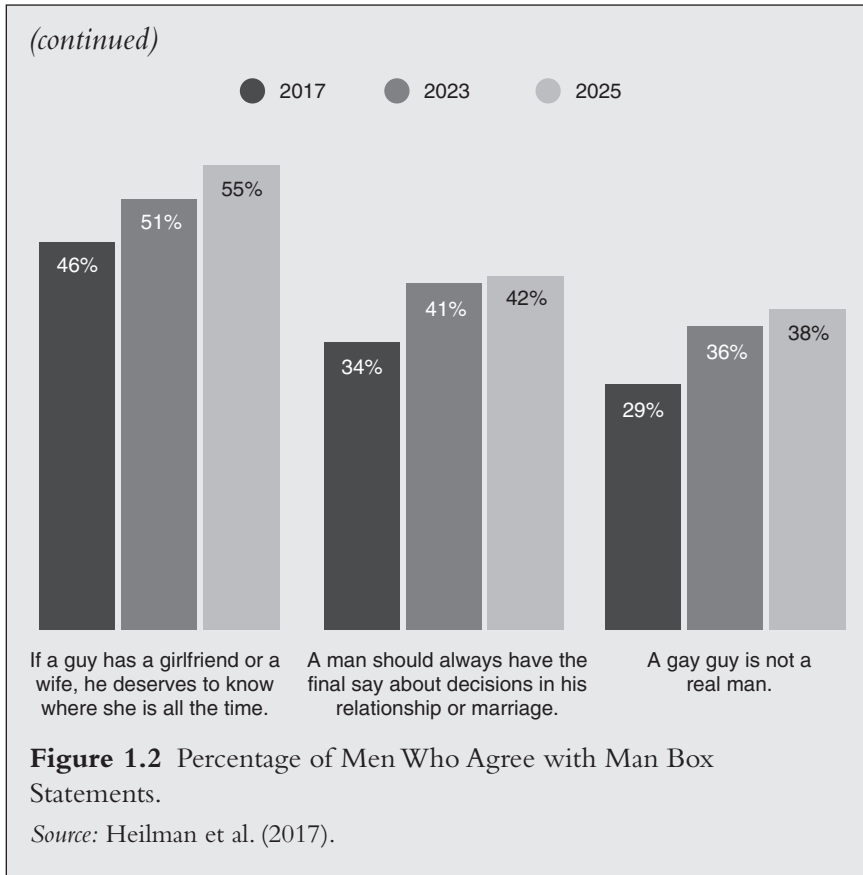
- **Self-sufficiency.** There is widespread pressure for men to be self-reliant across domains of their lives, but particularly when it comes to health and wellness. This contributes to avoidance of help seeking for both physical and emotional health. In fact, 66% of US respondents, 55% of UK respondents, and 49% of Mexico respondents endorsed that men should work out their problems on their own without seeking any help.
- **Toughness.** Not only are men supposed to use physical force to defend their honor but they are to show emotional toughness even during times of vulnerability and/or distress. Acting strong even when feeling scared or nervous was highly endorsed across the board (75% US, 64% UK, 59% Mexico).
- **Physical attractiveness/physical appearance.** Not only are men supposed to look good and be well groomed but they're really not supposed to try too hard to get there. This was a confusing one because many respondents felt that it's hard for men to be successful if they aren't attractive (64% US, 58% UK, 56% Mexico) but, by contrast, a guy who spends too much time on his looks isn't manly (59% US, 51% UK, 49% Mexico).
- **Rigid masculine gender roles.** From serving as the financial provider to taking on less of a role in parenting and taking care of the home, these messages remain static. Side note: a significant change embraced in recent decades is that girls and young women can care for their own financial stability. This is clearly at odds with messaging for young men. In this study, a majority of men in each country (64% US, 56% UK, 53% Mexico) endorsed that men should be the financial providers for families.

*(continued)*

- **Heterosexuality and homophobia.** Real men are supposed to be both heterosexual and homophobic, according to the rules of the Man Box. In a positive statement, a majority of men endorsed that it's healthy and normal for heterosexual men to have gay male friends (58% US, 66% UK, 56% Mexico) but large percentages also endorsed that a gay man is not a "real man" (55% US, 66% UK, 56% Mexico).
- **Hypersexuality.** Not only are "real men" heterosexual but also they are always ready for sex and should have as many sexual partners as possible. There is a lot of pressure in this domain with a majority endorsing that a "real man" should have as many partners as possible (60% US, 52% UK, 42% Mexico) and that men should never say no to sex (63% US, 55% UK, 53% Mexico).
- **Aggression and control.** Violence is used when necessary, specifically to handling conflict, and "real men" maintain full control of relational/household decisions and of women in general. One result of note here is the belief that if a man has a girlfriend or wife, he deserves to know where she is at all times (56% US, 46% UK, 44% Mexico). One thing I hear often from teen and college females: they turn off geo-tracking on Snapchat and FindMy because they feel like they're being watched by their boyfriends.

These seven thematic pillars show how problematic messaging about manhood, which trickles down to boyhood, can be overall, but it's also important to call out the additional harm nonbinary, trans, and LGBTQIA youth experience when these talking points are the norm (see Figure 1.2).

*(continued)*



Like Jamie, Landon also endured negative experiences in middle school. He sailed through elementary school with a good group of friends and plenty of sports to keep him busy. But things changed in middle school. When he made a higher-level club soccer team than some of his friends, they ghosted him in return. When he decided to play on the middle school soccer team for fun, they made sure it was anything but. It started with trash talk on the field. They hissed all kinds of words at him to make it known that they didn't want him there, then they leveled up to attacking his skills in an effort to shake his confidence. It worked. He started to question why he made that club team and wondered if his dad used his influence to make it happen. He lost his joy for

the sport and stopped putting in effort. This landed him on the bench, with very little playing time. He grew increasingly frustrated and snapped at his teammates and family members. That's when he began to question his competence in soccer, his ability to be a good friend, and his place in the family. "Why would anyone like me?" he asked, as he listed off his perceived faults and errors.

## Parent-Teacher Conference

### *Negative Core Beliefs*

Negative core beliefs are deeply ingrained, and often unconscious, assumptions about oneself, other people, or the world that are harmful and detrimental to overall well-being. These beliefs can vary from person to person but share certain characteristics:

- **Profoundly rooted.** These beliefs are often ingrained from early childhood on and can be sticky in the brain.
- **Shaped early.** Childhood experiences can shape these beliefs.
- **Irrational and damaging.** These beliefs are often not accurate and can lead to feelings of worthlessness and/or hopelessness.
- **Negatively affect perception.** These beliefs can influence the way individuals view their own worth and capability, others, and the world around them.
- **Influence on behavior.** These beliefs can interfere with relationship development, emotional responses, and self-esteem.

Not all boys with low self-esteem are walking around with these secret negative core beliefs, but many are, and until they learn to talk about their mental health, they won't be able to challenge and replace them.

Negative self-talk, as Landon displayed when questioning why anyone would like him, is often a result of negative core beliefs and rooted in irrational and dysfunctional thinking. Negative self-talk includes automatic negative thoughts (ANTs), which are thoughts that pop into your head involuntarily, affecting your mood, emotional responses, and overall well-being. ANTs are based on the core beliefs you hold and can result in feelings of self-doubt, anger, anxiety, and depression. Some examples of ANTs include the following:

- I'm a failure.
- I suck at everything.
- Everyone hates me.
- I'm the worst one on the team/in the band/in the class.
- I always mess things up.
- I'll never be good enough.

These thoughts might seem extreme when you read a list of them out of context, but take a moment to pause here and consider whether or not you've ever heard your own son utter something like this. The more I listen for ANTs, the more often I hear them in boy world, and I think I know why: the Boy Code is so ingrained in their thinking from such an early age that to fail to measure up to it at one point or another is to fail as a boy. This further intensifies negative core beliefs and negative self-talk, creating a negative thought loop that feels nearly impossible to break.

## Parent-Teacher Conference

### *Automatic Negative Thoughts*

It's important to consider the consequences of automatic negative thoughts:

- **Emotional distress.** ANTs can result in intense emotional reactions such as sadness, anxiety, anger, and fear.

*(continued)*

*(continued)*

- **Changes in behavior.** ANTs can lead to social isolation (especially for boys who question their ability to maintain friends), avoidance of anything that might trigger distress, and procrastination (particularly for boys struggling with knowing their capabilities).
- **Negative self-worth.** ANTs can reinforce negative core beliefs, intensifying the negative thought cycle.

Looping back to the Boy Code, there is evidence that early adolescence is a time when boys feel pressure from friends, parents, teachers, mentors, and even themselves to adhere to masculine norms (Nielson et al., 2020) such as emotional restriction and strength in the face of adversity, and this can negatively affect prosocial behavior toward other boys. Parental socialization toward more traditionally masculine ideals can also affect how boys interact with their peers. Boys who learn to adhere to traditional masculine norms early on may learn to favor popularity and go to lengths to avoid social embarrassment because social capital is connected to masculine ideals (Nielson et al., 2022).

In Landon's case, when he made the coveted club soccer team, his friends responded by emotional restriction at first (they ghosted him and moved on without discussion of feelings), but they later used verbal aggression tactics to put him in his place. Their adherence to masculine norms may have contributed to their lack of prosocial behavior toward Landon, but research also suggests that social competency plays an important role as well. In a study that examined the relationship between early adolescent boys' pressure (from friends, family, and self) to adhere to traditional masculine norms and their social competency profiles, researchers noted that boys who endured higher levels of pressure to conform were more likely to fall in the socially precarious profile but that boys who fell into the socially confident profile showed the greatest prosocial

behaviors toward peers (Nielson et al., 2023). This study included 260 early adolescent boys (between the ages of 10 and 12) from the Southwestern United States and helps us better understand how being raised in a “tough guy” setting can negatively affect friendships.

The Boy Code socializes boys to withhold expression of emotions, learn to suck it up when things don't go as planned, and pressure other boys to conform to these rigid expectations. Don't feel, don't react, and don't complain and you'll get through boyhood unscathed. That's the theory behind the Boy Code, anyway. But boys tell me that the pressure to just keep going no matter what happens is both exhausting and impossible. Boys are under stress from a variety of sources on any given day and restricting emotions creates inner volcanos of feelings that keep bubbling up until boys lose control and erupt in some way. This can present as symptoms of anxiety and/or depression, but it can also include intense anger, resentment, and verbal and/or physical aggression. Repressed emotion can take on many forms when it finally escapes, and that can be scary for boys. What parents or teachers might describe as a behavior problem can feel overwhelming and out of control to the boy trying his best to survive.

According to the 2023 National Survey on Drug Use and Health (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2024), 18.1% of US teens ages 12–17 (4.5 million) reported at least one major depressive episode in the previous year. Of those teens, just under 60% received some form of mental health treatment, which represents an improvement from previous reporting periods but still leaves a 40% treatment gap. Not only that, 3.3 million teens in the same age group had serious thoughts of suicide, attempted suicide, or made a suicide plan in the past year. Boys are struggling with their emotional health and they don't have the tools or resources to cope. We can raise a generation of boys who know how to express their emotions and tap into empathy and compassion, but we have to start with breaking down the obstacles that hold them back.

## **Modern Boy Toolbox**

In an ideal world, we teach boys to identify and express their emotions beginning the moment they start talking and keep up the emotional learning as they grow. But our world is far from ideal and the truth is that boys internalize messages about what it means to be a boy from all kinds of sources, not just parents and guardians. Here's the silver lining: we can start, and restart, as many times as we need to help boys thrive.

### *Littles, Middles, and Bigs (and Society at Large, as Well)*

#### *Rewrite the Code*

It's essential that we update the Boy Code from the beginning. We can't simply stand by and say, "Oh well, that's boys" in the face of aggression, teasing, and other unkind behaviors. When we let it slide, we sell our boys short. We assume they're incapable of reaching a higher standard. When we change the way we talk about boys and rethink our expectations, we help them work through their obstacles in a healthy way.

To properly rewrite the Boy Code, you need input from your boys. It also helps to take age, developmental levels, and the messages you think they've heard into account. If your preschool to early elementary age boy shares something like "Boys don't cry," you can help him rewrite that to "Everybody cries at times. It's healthy to let your sadness out." If your late elementary school to early middle school boy says, "Boys slap fight and trash talk. It's normal," you can help him rewrite this to "I don't have to do what other guys do. I can surround myself with guys who don't fight with and harass others." High school students can think about their values and surround themselves with people who share their values.

Rewriting the code will take some time and you'll need to keep updating it as new obstacles arise, but the sooner you start, the sooner your son internalizes positive and hopeful messages about growing up boy.

## *Littles*

The first step toward helping boys learn to express and process their emotions is creating a culture of caring in your home or classroom.

### *Encourage Personal Expression*

We can file this one under “easier said than done” for a number of reasons, but primarily because young children quickly fall into norming patterns the moment they enter school and find a friend group. They want to dress like their friends, enjoy the same activities as their friends, watch the same shows as their friends, and read the same books as their friends. It’s a very developmentally appropriate way to begin a friendship. It’s up to the adults to make sure that kids understand that they can maintain their independence while teaming up with other kids.

Personal expression is a vague term that can refer to how a boy dresses, what music he enjoys, how he keeps his hair, what he likes to play, and how he generally shows himself in the world. The tricky part about honoring personal expression is that society creates gender norms for babies from day one. From colors to toys to books to clothes, gender is sold in two distinct aisles in most stores. What does it mean if a shirt from the “girls” clothing aisle catches the eye of a boy? It means he likes the look of it and thinks he might look fetching in it, but the gendering of the clothing department can create discomfort for the adult in that situation.

Kids don’t have a lot of choices in life, but you can offer them the freedom to express themselves in any of the following categories:

- Clothing
- Hairstyle
- Toys/games
- Activities (not all boys love math and science!)
- Books (Judy Moody is a gift for everyone!)
- Content they watch (within reasonable age range)
- Music

This is a short list to get you started, but you can add more as you get to know the inner workings of your unique son.

### *Chores for All*

Families often fall into patterns when it comes to distribution of chores, but it's important to make sure boys know they are capable of the same chores as their female counterparts, and vice versa. And little kids are actually really good at pitching in. In fact, many gain a sense of accomplishment from being "helpers." Try not to overwhelm your littles with too many tasks all at once. In fact, switching up their tasks at regular intervals helps build both flexibility and new skills.

Every family has their own needs in this area, but consider the following:

- Making the bed
- Matching socks to help fold the laundry
- Putting their clothes in the hamper
- Clearing their plates
- Washing dishes
- Cooking with an adult
- Gardening
- Picking up around the house

### *Welcome Their Tears*

Beware of the simplicity on this one, my friends. Though most of us likely know the power of a good cry session to reset ourselves and work through something hard, let's take a step back and think long and hard about whether or not we suggest this strategy to our boys. Some of you are likely nodding your heads, recalling all the times you cuddled your sons while they cried, but some of you might be thinking that you haven't really considered it. That's okay.

One thing that's true of young children, regardless of gender, is that they tend to cry a lot. Make a spectacularly underinformed

decision and jump from a high wall resulting in a scraped knee? Tears. Another boy swipes a toy in the sandbox? Also tears. Hungry? Tired? Over- or under-stimulated? Tears, tears, and more tears. Tears are a very healthy, and common, expression of emotion for young children. Also? “Don’t cry” is often a rallying cry of parents of young children. This is 100% not a blame-the-parents type of situation. When a preschooler cries because their blueberries are too blue, it does feel absurd. But, like our kids, we also form habits, and sometimes our reactions to little kids with big emotions become habitual. Not only that, we create gendered labels to explain their tears. If a girl falls into the frequent crier category, they’re labeled “dramatic”; if boys do, they’re “highly sensitive.” In a nutshell, we parents generally don’t like tears, as they trigger all kinds of emotional responses in us (anxiety, frustration, embarrassment), so we do our best to (1) stop them and (2) explain them.

With boys in particular, we tend to try to subdue the reactions as soon as possible. In fact, a study that analyzed focus groups of Black middle school boys in urban school settings revealed that boys often negotiate tension between emotion expression and emotion control. Participants argued that blunting their emotions in public is important, but that they also desire more emotional freedom (Harris et al., 2020). So here’s my third option regarding handling tears and tantrums in young boys: make like Paul McCartney and let it be. Tears are a healthy expression of emotion. A tantrum is a very normal reaction to overwhelming emotions. Boys don’t come into this world with finely tuned emotion regulation skills (none of us do, if we’re keeping track), and we need to give them the space to grow through their tears. How? Empathic listening. Try some variation of these conversation starters the next time your son comes to you in tears:

- This sounds really hard (sad/scary/frustrating).
- I can see that you feel scared; would you like a hug or a cuddle?
- It’s sad when things don’t work out how we want. I can understand.
- I hear that you are mad right now. I know how that feels.

If you notice that these conversations center on noticing the emotions your son brings to you, you're already well on your way to excellent empathic listening! Looking and listening for cues about feelings, as opposed to investigating the cause of the tears, is the secret sauce to empathic parenting. Sometimes the cause is important and sometimes it really doesn't matter, but connecting with our boys and bearing witness to *all* of their emotions is always essential.

### *Make Feelings Fun*

Different kids need different inputs to learn to identify emotions and develop a solid feelings vocabulary. Building this vocabulary early, and using it often, is a key component of helping boys grow into empathic people and learn how to cope with the emotions they will encounter throughout a lifetime. There are lots of ways to do this, and adapting board games is one. Try some of these slight changes to old favorites to get your son thinking about feelings:

- **Chutes and Ladders.** When you climb a ladder, name a positive emotion and share a time you experienced it; when you go down a slide, name a negative emotion and share an example.
- **Memory.** Create your own memory cards that include feelings (or feelings faces). When you get a match, talk about a time you felt that way!
- **Jenga.** Write one question per block that elicits a particular emotion (e.g., how would you feel if you dropped your ice cream cone?). When you pull a block, read the question and share an answer.
- **Guess Who?** Instead of asking questions about appearance, ask questions about facial expressions to think about how the characters might feel.
- **Fishing for Feelings.** Add some fish-shaped feelings cards to the fishing pond. Write or draw one feeling on each card. When you have to "go fish," take a moment to fish for a feeling as well! Again, name a time you felt it and how you handled it.

### *Feelings Face-off*

Learning to read facial cues is an important part of both empathy development and coping with overwhelming situations. Given that we all experience feelings in our own ways, this can be a tricky skill to develop. I might look unhappy to someone looking at me from afar, for example, when I'm actually just lost in my imagination.

Feelings face-off is a fun way to try to create and interpret all kinds of emotions. I treat it like a game show when I do this in my office. I'll set a timer for 30 seconds and I have to try to guess as many feelings as I can while my client makes facial expressions to show those feelings. Then we swap places. We often end up laughing and comparing notes on how we express different feelings. This also fun to do in teams!

### *Middles*

Middle childhood, which includes youth between the ages of 6 and 12, and middle school age are characterized by steady physical, cognitive, and social growth and development. This is an important time to work on social skills development.

### *Promote Authenticity*

If you have an older elementary or middle school boy in your house, you know the power of groupthink. Norming at these stages of development often means building social systems by way of the following:

- **Blending.** Wear the same clothes, attempt the same hairstyle, talk like the others, and do what the others do. When boys attempt to blend in, they want to follow enough of the trends and behaviors among their peers to be inconspicuous. They're not looking for attention, but they also don't want to be left out.
- **Fitting in.** This involves actively adapting to group norms, rules, and expectations to gain entrance into a specific social

circle. This can include behavioral changes to meet group standards, taking on a different style of dress or appearance, and even changing their values to be accepted.

Blending is expected at various stages of development. Many kids like to try out the latest fashion trends and try new sports or activities because a friend recommends it. But major changes in behavior and values or suppressing talents and interests to fit in are not healthy. This is where authenticity comes in. It's difficult to stick to your values and make the best choices as an individual when groupthink is loud and demanding, but boys can learn to live their values while maintaining friendships.

Following are some useful starting points, but it's essential to remember that authenticity in action takes practice:

- **Model authenticity.** Make sure your boys see you living your values and being yourself, even when it might feel easier to just go along with a group.
- **Create brave spaces.** Make sure your boys know they can talk to you about anything. By listening, validating, and meeting dilemmas with curiosity, you encourage your boys to come to you with tough topics.
- **Practice authentic conversations.** Take an interest in your son's interests and be sure to engage them in conversation by seeking their thoughts and feedback.
- **Encourage self-expression.** Boys in the middle are likely to try out a number of different styles, music preferences, and hobbies. Show your interest in their self-discovery and be open to learning new things from them.
- **Challenge comparison culture.** This is a hard one because comparisons are absolutely everywhere, but we have to work hard to show boys that they will build skills and grow at their own pace and they have their own strengths. One way to do this is to encourage exploration of activities and ideas. Give your son the time to try out new interests instead of specializing in something early.

### *Weather Report*

Metaphor can come in handy when beginning the process of verbalizing feelings. It's hard to discuss things we don't usually discuss. It can feel awkward or intimidating. In the absence of a vocabulary to talk about emotions, it can be downright challenging to find a starting point.

One thing kids tend to understand is the weather. Beginning in preschool, many kids see classroom charts that mention the weather. In fact, many of my teacher friends tell me that weather reporter is a coveted classroom job. Making the connection between weather and feelings is fairly easy, but it is important to give boys a chance to create the pairings that make the most sense to them. Fog, for instance, can be calming for some (me) but sad for others, and lightning can be scary for some but powerful for others. The point is we all make our own associations, so we need to give our boys a chance to make theirs. Here's how this works:

- First, pair weather patterns with feelings – all weather patterns, not just the ones where you live.
- Second, make a weather/feelings chart (you know, in case you're like me and tend to forget stuff).
- Start and end the day with a weather report – you can check in on the weather as often as you want, but always be sure to share yours as well!

**Pro tip:** *I know what you're thinking – there's no way any boy beyond the age of eight will do this. I hear you. But also? They will. For older boys, remove the chart, make it conversational, and start with your own report. There's a big difference between, "Man, I'm feeling stormy today," and "What's your emotional weather report today?" Read the room and proceed accordingly.*

### *Listening Partners*

Getting comfortable talking about emotions and/or hard things takes practice, especially when gender norms consistently

discourage expression of emotion. One conversation cracks the door open, but building new communication habits is a process. Modeling open communication within the family is a great starting point because young boys see firsthand that opening up and sharing is a way to find connection and support.

It also helps to encourage boys to find extra listeners. Pets (in real life or stuffed animal form) make great listeners. Chatting about their day, including the positives and the negatives, with an unconditional listener gives boys a chance to vent and work through some of their feelings in an adaptive way. If you're shaking your head and thinking this sounds a little too ridiculous to be effective, hear me out: not only do I talk to my dog when I'm feeling all the feels but also sometimes I even talk to the plant in my kitchen!

In Gestalt therapy, this is referred to as the *empty chair technique*. A chair is used to symbolize another person, or a memory, or part of the self that a client wants to address. Using role-play, the client confronts conflict, unresolved feelings, or any other unfinished business.

When I talk to my dog, I'm not engaging in Gestalt therapy on my own, but I am role-playing ways to address my stressors and resolve my distress. This can also be applied to kids talking to a stuffed animal or family pet. That companion helps a child practice verbalizing emotions, working through conflict and stress, and resolving overwhelm.

### *Pause, Breathe, Label, React (PBLR)*

It's natural to have big reactions to big feelings. Sometimes adults forget this because we have experience on our side and, in general, we know how to handle stressful situations. But learning to match our reactions to our experiences takes time and practice. And . . . I think we can all admit that even adults don't get it right every time.

The human brain is wired to scan for threats and react accordingly, but there's no rule that people have to react to every threat the moment they occur. There's a value to learning to pause, for all

kinds of emotions, because it gives boys the opportunity to think and assess. A 16-year-old boy said something interesting in a recent conversation about the pros and cons of using AI in education, “We do need to normalize thinking again.” That sat with me for a while. Are we already reaching a point where we don’t think for ourselves? If so, how do we expect to cope with the unexpected if we don’t know how to think through a problem independently? This is, of course, a worst-case scenario situation, but the more we rely on the quick fix or machine learning to give us the right tool at the right time, the less time we spend using and honing our critical thinking skills, and these skills are vital to our functioning in a variety of settings and across the lifespan.

That brings us to PBLR. This will sound simple, I know, but when you grow up in a world of insta-everything, it actually requires a fair amount of practice. Here’s your cheat sheet for starting, and working on, this skill:

- **Pause.** One key to sitting with distress is learning to, well, sit with it. It’s hard to pause on revved up, and potentially negative, emotions, but it’s crucial that boys learn to do this. This can look like “This sucks. I hate this feeling. I know I’ll be okay.”
- **Breathe.** You wanted me to suggest the breathing first, right? I get that. It seems like the natural course of action. Here’s the catch: it can be difficult to engage in mindful breathing when your brain is in a state of emotional chaos. Hitting the pause to name the feeling is a good first step, then we breathe.
  - **Square breathing.** Trace a square in the palm of your hand. Inhale as you trace up, 2, 3, 4, hold across, 2, 3, 4, exhale down, 2, 3, 4, and hold across, 2, 3, 4. Do this twice (at least).
  - **4-7-8 breathing.** Inhale for a count of 4, hold for a count of 7, exhale for a count of 8.
- **Label the problem.** Look at that – you sat through the distress and used deep breathing to calm your system. Now it’s time to shift to solutions! First, it helps to label the problem. This is not the same as naming the feeling that occurred when

you first reacted to the threat. Now that you're calm(er), take a moment to work out what that threat was in the first place. Why did it trigger distress?

- **React.** Now it's time to actually react to the situation. Try to come up with a couple of responses that make sense given your new thinking (post pause and breathe) and choose the best one.

**Pro tip:** *I often coach boys to think of this skill as inside versus outside reactions. Your first instinct might be to act out in anger or say something you might not mean – and that's okay in the privacy of your own mind – but when you're dealing with other people, it's best to hit the pause before engaging in that outside reaction.*

### *Measure the Problem*

Middle childhood marks a period of rapid growth and development, both physically and emotionally, so it's natural to experience some ups and downs during this time. From an academic perspective, kids in this stage of development are inundated with new and interesting information daily. At the same time, their brains are growing and new neural pathways are forming. And then there's social development. Kids learn and practice all kinds of social interactions skills each day, with some successes and some misses. It's a lot to process.

When young boys feel overwhelmed by competing demands, or overstimulated from constant input, it can be difficult for them to accurately assess the size and magnitude of a problem. In other words, everything feels huge. Using scaling questions can be helpful, but with this age group visuals and/or metaphors can be a game changer.

Rulers are an easy metaphor because kids learn to use them early on and know they are used for measurement. Whether you use a physical ruler, one that is drawn or printed, or one conjured in the imagination is not important, but teaching kids to scale their problems, worries, frustration, or some other emotion using a measurement system they understand will help them learn to work

through their distress and figure out what they can do and when they need help. It helps to use this technique regularly so that your boys see it in action and understand how it works in the heat of the moment.

So here's how it works:

- Using a standard 12-inch ruler, talk about how can we gain perspective on the things that upset us by measuring how big they feel to us.
- I often tell this age group that anything above a six is something that might need adult help, but on the zero to five (first five inches) we can often figure out ways to work through what's happening.
- A one might be a sibling taking a favorite hoodie without asking, where a five might be forgetting to do homework.
- Once you rate a number of scenarios that seem to happen often, you can have your son add some potential solutions or regulation skills (see Chapter 8 for coping skills).

Once you get into the habit of measuring your stress/feelings/problems, it becomes part of your everyday conversation. "About how many inches is that problem?" is a calm way to shift the thought pattern from reactive to productive by connecting and engaging.

### ***Bigs***

Teens endure many competing demands on any given day. They are, quite literally, floating in between childhood and adulthood and the pressure to figure out life can be enormous.

### *Use Brain Science*

We don't spend enough time talking about the brain. There's a lot of chatter out there about "dysregulation" and TikTok is full of vagus nerve exercises to help you get through or bypass an acute stress response, but there's far less discussion about how the brain processes and works through stress and why integration of the

systems of the brain holds the key to building a healthy and adaptive stress response system.

If you're looking for good news, you've come to the right place. You don't need a PhD in neurobiology to make sense of talking about the brain and emotional regulation. You can learn a few basics to share with your boys, and this will help them understand what's happening when they experience a stress response. Being able to talk about what's happening when we endure stress is important. It helps us ground ourselves in understanding as we work through the distress.

This is, by no means, a comprehensive description of the neurobiology of emotion regulation, but you can think of it as your brain science 101 to get you started. I find that young people feel relieved when they learn how their brains work and that they aren't alone in these responses. Start here:

- **The amygdala.** Your amygdala is a small part of your brain (the size of an almond!) but it plays a big role in regulation. It's a major processing center of emotions and it puts emotions into context by pairing them with memories, learning, and the senses. We sometimes refer to it as the "smoke detector" of the brain because one its primary jobs is to scan for and detect danger. This is super helpful when the danger it detects is an actual threat, but, like an actual smoke detector, sometimes it sounds the alarm for something minor or goes on the fritz in the middle of the night because of low batteries. In short, we need to learn to work with it and take care of it to avoid emotional overload.
- **The prefrontal cortex (PFC).** Located behind your forehead, you can think of your PFC as the CEO of your brain. It's responsible for higher-level thinking, planning, decision-making, problem-solving, emotion regulation, working memory (holding onto information while you process it), navigating social interactions, and impulse control. Wow. That's a lot. Here's the thing you need to know about the PFC: it isn't fully developed until about the mid-twenties. It's unreasonable to expect

that boys can perform all of the mentioned actions with ease and accuracy every single moment. In short, their brains are a work in progress and mistakes should be expected, inspected, and respected.

- **The hypothalamic-pituitary-adrenal (HPA) axis.** The HPA axis is essential to building resilience and working through high-octane emotions. You don't need to remember that big long name and you can think of it as an information super-highway inside your brain.

When you experience stress, your hypothalamus releases stress hormones – critical for stress management and homeostasis. As a result, neural circuits cue the PFC and amygdala to work together to modulate emotions.

Individuals who show a more efficient regulation of the HPA axis are more resilient – they return to baseline faster after experiencing a stressor, reducing chance of prolonged exposure to stress hormones. Individuals who show less efficient regulation of the HPA axis and prolonged exposure to stress hormones, which actually shrinks the hippocampus, are at risk for mood disorders. It's really important to build HPA axis efficiency!

### *Build Your Internal Locus of Control*

Okay this sounds fancier than it needs to, but it's an important component of resilience building, including learning to respond to stress and other emotions in adaptive ways. In a nutshell, having an internal locus of control means believing that you have control over your life and outcomes by way of your actions. Now this is kind of an old-school definition in a way, so I often update that to include “with resources and assistance” so that boys get that message that help seeking is a good thing and you can both have control over your life and need guidance at the same time. In contrast to this, an external locus of control means believing that your circumstances are the result of luck, fate, other people, or things

beyond your control. And here's the thing, sometimes life is a little bit of both (like when a natural disaster affects a community and all of the individuals in it), but helping boys build their internal locus of control sets them up to work through adversity and obstacles.

If you're wondering whether or not your boy has a healthy internal locus of control, take a look at the following checklist to get a better sense:

- He takes responsibility for his actions and makes efforts to repair when needed.
- He doesn't let other people's opinions change his values or goals.
- He believes that he can influence outcomes by working hard, learning new skills, practicing skills, and seeking help when needed.
- When others mistreat him or someone close to him, he sets healthy boundaries, acts on his values, and helps other people.
- He doesn't get caught up in trying to control others or situations, but he does focus on what he can do to get through something difficult.

Like most things, it takes time to build an internal locus of control. Considering the amount of stress teens endure on any given day, it can be difficult to find what you *can* do when it feels like life is full of *can'ts*. Try a couple of my favorite tools:

- **Know your zones.** You can visualize this or write it down, but I teach teens to think about their three zones: the zone of control ("I can do these things to affect my outcomes."), the zone of influence ("I can do some things but I don't have full control over."), and the zone of no control ("This isn't something I can change."). I put this on paper by drawing three circles and labeling each. The key is to focus on the zone of control and the zone of influence. In the case of a poor grade on a test, for example, a student can't control how that grade will affect overall GPA or grade in the class, but they can

control how they examine what happened and prepare for the next one (zone of control) and seek support from the teacher for additional help (zone of influence).

- **Foster autonomy.** I know, this probably feels like a bad idea given the quick brain science lesson I just gave you, but stay with me. In *The Seven Principals for Raising a Self-Driven Child: A Workbook*, William Stixrud and Ned Johnson (2025) talk about the role of the “parent consultant” in raising competent teens who will one day become adults. They describe the role as having three distinct goals: (1) offer help and advice (but don’t force it!), (2) support young people in making their own decisions (unless that decision is wildly unsafe), and (3) encourage them to solve their own problems. I will say that I am fairly competent in 1 and 3, but I must admit I haven’t mastered 2. Like most parents, I’m a work in progress, and when I know something just isn’t the best choice, it is hard to sit back and play a supporting role. But having confidence in your teen’s ability to make important decisions (even if they need some guidance as they brainstorm) is empowering. When you scaffold autonomy for your teen, you say, “I know you can do life. You got this.”
- **Reflect often.** Self-reflection is a great way to consider what’s working and what’s not and how you’re feeling about your progress toward your goals. When I talk to teen boys about this, they initially groan because no one wants one more homework assignment, but this doesn’t have to be a big deal time suck. Self-reflection is about finding time to evaluate where you started, where you are, and where you want to go. It doesn’t need to be written down or recorded, though it certainly can be. The most important thing is developing the habit of checking in with yourself.

### *Reject Unwanted Input*

Teen boys often tell me that laughing along with the group is generally the easiest path to take, even when the group slips in porn

jokes, microaggressions, and other negative talking points that sit completely at odds with their value systems. It's exceptionally difficult to stand up to this kind of behavior, particularly when it seems to happen near constantly and everywhere (school, sports, social media, video games, out in the community). In Chapter 12, we'll discuss more about digital influence, but we need to recognize that these behaviors are not restricted to the online world. In fact, boys tell me more about face-to-face interactions than online ones when we talk about unwanted input.

What we can do is teach teen boys the power of silent intervention. To reject these negative and harmful behaviors, we can empower boys to log off the game or app, refocus on the work in class, or walk away from the situation without explanation. One message teens don't often get but should is that you don't owe anyone any explanations for your boundaries. You can simply say, "gotta jump" and move on (or some teen-friendly version of that). Rejecting unwanted input is deeply rooted in drawing boundaries around your values. Thinking back to those zones of control and influence, your son might not be able to influence his peer group if they're making jokes that toe the line of sexual harassment, but he can control how he responds – he can take a silent leave of the situation and choose not to participate. When his peers ask him why he left or logged out, he can give them more details later.

### *Try a Malehood Vision Board*

An integral part of rewriting the code and changing the narrative of malehood involves giving boys and young men the space to imagine what they could do, be, and say if they didn't feel stuck in the rigid construct society continues to push. We've spent decades empowering girls and young women to carve their own paths and smash any glass ceilings that get in their way and I can't think of a single reason why we shouldn't use similar messaging with boys and young men.

A college student once told me that he decided against rushing a fraternity not because he didn't think he could get through the process but because he couldn't wrap his head around the fact that

humiliation and degradation were the keys to acceptance. For this student, reimagining what it meant to be a young adult male on a college campus known for its parties helped him find the best match friends and activities to meet his needs. Needless to say, they weren't in the frat houses.

Vision boards can be deeply personal, and for that reason this is one of those times where you want to be a consultant, not a boss. It can help to have a few guiding questions in mind:

- What does malehood mean to you?
- How do your personal values match that description?
- How do you see yourself acting in interacting in the world?
- Who are you now and whom do you hope to become?
- What art, culture, fashion, or music has an impact on you?
- What do you want to learn about?
- Where do you want to travel?

Vision boards are meant to be created over time. It's not a one-and-done project. A partially finished vision board on the wall lends itself to slowly considering goals, hopes, and dreams over time. In doing this a project like this, teen boys can think about their short- and long-term goals and how they want to show up in pursuit of both.

### *Unboxing Malehood*

Teen boys are fully capable of understanding the studies mentioned in this book. In fact, I often find that teen and college age young men come to me with questions about what they're hearing from influencers and peers and how this input is out of sync with their values and goals. Bottom line: they crave accurate information.

Unboxing these strict cultural norms should not be done all at once nor should it feel like a homework assignment. One thing that helps when tackling difficult subjects is to do something side-by-side while talking. In almost three decades of clinical work, I have found, time and time again, that boys and young men feel more

comfortable talking when we are doing something physical (shooting hoops or tossing a football), engaged in a focused activity (cards or checkers), or even while deconstructing TikToks and Reels.

Revisit the seven themes from the Man Box study and think about how and where these messages might show up in your son's life. Work them into conversation one at a time to help your son unpack the dominant messaging ("men should have as many sexual partners as they can") and adapt it to meet your son's value system and social-emotional needs (a healthy sexual relationship is important to me). Discuss how they want to be in response to this messaging. Most important, keep talking.

