



Cultivating Compassion in Boys

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I love to visit Josh, my four-year-old nephew who lives in California. Toward the end of one visit, I was sitting on the floor when I felt something soft tickling my nose. Josh was walking around me, draping his blanket over me as he went. “What are you doing?” asked his perplexed mom. Josh replied, “I’m casting a magic spell so when Judy goes back to Portland she can feel my hugs and kisses anytime and she’ll feel better.”

Boys are compassionate. Boys are kind. Boys are caring. Boys have big hearts.

As boys grow older, it often looks otherwise to the casual observer. Many boys appear angry, withdrawn, mean, non-caring, distant, or unkind.

The Search Institute (www.search-institute.org) has identified 40 developmental “assets”, building blocks that young people need in order to grow up healthy, caring and successful. “External assets” include such things as family support, adult role models, and creative activities. Internal assets include integrity, honesty and a sense of caring. The Search Institute found the percentage of boys with the “caring” asset drops significantly between elementary school and high school, with only 25% of 12th graders still having the “caring” asset.

What happens to transform a boy with a compassionate, gentle soul into a teenager who appears uncaring? Boys get hurt in a multitude of ways. They may be left alone, isolated, teased, humiliated, criticized, shamed, judged harshly for their exuberance, taunted, bullied, hit, sexually abused and much more. Many get targeted for showing feelings and learn to act tough. They receive countless messages about what it means to be male, and many of those messages are lies. Many boys have the added burden of racism and class issues bearing down on them.

Boys work very hard to hold onto their true compassionate and kind nature in the face of these and other obstacles. As caring adults, we can do a lot to cultivate the seeds of compassion that are inherent in every boy.

Above all, we need to treat boys by with respect, kindness and compassion.

- **Listen to boys.** My nephew Josh loves to talk to any adult who will listen. Boys naturally want to connect with others and share their ideas and feelings. Josh has a lot to say, but sometimes adults don’t listen very well. When we *do* listen well – without criticizing, interrupting, or rushing to share our own thoughts - Josh knows someone cares, and that he is important and not alone.

Sam, an eleven-year-old, attended a two-week overnight camp last summer. Early in the session, his parents heard that Sam wasn't happy and wanted to come home. They wrestled with what to do. After a mid-session visit to the camp and after listening to their son for a long time, they decided the camp wasn't a good place for Sam. He came home with them, had a great rest of the summer, and learned his parents would truly listen and respect his thinking.

- **Help boys show and understand their feelings.** As a culture, we often deny that boys have certain emotions. If they show sadness or fear, or even if they show too much exuberance, we sometimes become uncomfortable and try to get them to stop. "Big boys don't cry" is a message most boys have heard. Each time we minimize, ignore, or criticize a boy for showing feelings, that boy becomes a little more cut off from himself. That, in turn, will eventually make it more difficult for a boy to have compassion for himself and others. Listen to a boy when he makes any attempt to share his feelings, don't abandon him, and help him talk through those feelings.

It's helpful when adults – men in particular - model a range of emotions. When men show sadness, fear, joy or other feelings, boys learn their own feelings are normal and not shameful, and they learn to accept those feelings in others

- **Find ways to stay physically close and affectionate with boys.** Boys want and need hugs, affection and other physical closeness. Some adults, especially women, become uneasy in the presence of energetic, physical boys. We may need to push past our fears to learn new ways of being physically close. We can learn to play wrestle, shoot hoops, and have pillow fights. There are many ways to play hard, stay connected, and have fun with boys.

- **Remember that boys are good and magnificent human beings. Celebrate boys!** When your son prances around the house with a make-believe sword, remember his goodness and what a wonder he is. His play is normal and not an indication he's going to become a rapist or murderer. Look for ways to let boys know how much you like them and that you believe in them. Encourage their passions and appreciate their strengths.

- **Help boys learn to pay attention to their bodies.** Boys feel physical pain when injured, but our culture teaches them to ignore their bodies. Help boys learn to pay attention to their bodies when they are sick or injured. Messages such as "you're not really hurt", "it doesn't hurt that bad" or "only girls cry when they are hurt" distract a boy from what is happening and cut him off from his own intelligence. Not only are these messages harmful to a boy's own well-being, but these messages make it easier for a boy, in turn, to ignore or disrespect what's happening to other people and *their* bodies.

- **Eliminate anti-male comments from your vocabulary.** This includes such comments as "you know how boys are", "they just think with their penises", "boys can't be trusted", and "men are jerks" When boys are given messages that maleness is "bad", it makes it harder for them to know and act on their own goodness.

- **Never shame or humiliate a boy.**

Last summer, a ten-year-old boy riding in a bicycle race rounded a corner too fast and fell down hard on concrete. I saw he was conscious but very shook up. Although nothing appeared broken, he was bruised and bleeding in several places. I stayed close and listened to him while he cried softly

Several adults soon came over. They told the boy to stop crying, paid little attention to his injuries and discounted his pain. One woman who knew the boy asked him repeatedly whether he wanted to continue the race; three times, he answered, "No." Finally she shamed him with the taunt, "Your sister would never be a sissy and give up like this." The adults thrust the bike into the boys' hands and he had no choice but to keep riding. That day, one boy got a big lesson in lack of compassion.

- **Involve boys in community service.** Enlist boys' help in projects that involve being kind to others. They can take a meal to a sick neighbor, help plant a community garden, or donate old toys to a shelter. Hands on Portland (503-234-3581) is a great community resource that offers family-friendly volunteer opportunities.

- **Help boys learn problem-solving skills.** Find teachable moments to help boys think through and solve problems non-violently. Some organizations offer programs that teach kids mediation and other problem-solving skills. These skills help boys learn "emotional literacy" that will prepare them for situations that call for compassion and clear thinking.

- **Minimize boys' exposure to television and other media that present meanness and violence as normal or humorous.** If your son watches these shows at all, watch with him and then engage him in conversation about the difference between fantasy and reality, and the implications of meanness and violence. Contact the Northwest Media Literacy Center (503-452-7333) for more information.

- **Be an advocate for boys.** Work with schools, community centers, coaches, and others to ensure that boys are treated with kindness and compassion in their communities.

My nephew Josh's spell continues to work magic. I can feel his hugs and kisses anytime I want. Even more importantly, his magic spell is a constant reminder of his goodness and the importance of cultivating compassion over the coming years as he faces new challenges that every boy inevitably encounters. Nothing could be more important in his life - or mine.

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