

BREAKING FREE FROM BOYHOOD STEREOTYPES:

ACTION STEPS FOR PARENTS

INTRODUCTION

Boys receive—and absorb—harmful stereotypical messages about what it takes to “be a man” from an early age. 72% of young men in the US say they’ve been told that a real man behaves a “certain way”—they are self-sufficient, tough, stoic, attractive without effort, a risk-taker, and straight. If boys embrace these ideas, it can have long-term impacts: they may be less likely to have close, emotionally connected relationships; and more likely to have poorer mental health and to use violence later in life.

We all have a role to play in creating a gender equal, nonviolent future. We need all adults, including parents—and fathers in particular—to model vulnerability, connection, and respectful relationships.

TIPS FOR PARENTS AND ADULTS IN BOYS’ LIVES

1.

CHALLENGE YOUR OWN EXPECTATIONS OF HOW MEN AND WOMEN SHOULD ACT, AND MODEL THE BEHAVIORS YOU WANT TO ENCOURAGE.

If you feel that boys really should or shouldn’t do a certain thing because they are a boy, ask yourself, “Why?” The best way to show your son how to grow up to be a respectful, healthy, connected person is to model those qualities.

2.

CALL OUT HARMFUL STEREOTYPES WHEN YOU SEE THEM.

When you see narrow depictions of masculinity on screen, use it as an opportunity for discussion. If you see male characters bullying or being aggressive, ask, “Why is it that so many boys are shown bullying? How else could boys react in that moment?”

3.

TALK OPENLY ABOUT YOUR OWN FEARS, UNCERTAINTIES, AND DISAPPOINTMENTS.

In age appropriate ways, make it clear that you believe everyone has the right to share how they are feeling. Parents can model how to share difficult feelings, in healthy ways, communicating permission to a boy to do the same.

4.

ACKNOWLEDGE THE PARTICULAR CHALLENGES BOYS FEEL ABOUT BEING VULNERABLE, AND THE COURAGE IT TAKES FOR THEM TO BE OPEN.

In those moments when a child opens up to you, listen without judging, and help them to feel safe. Say, “I love you. You can always talk to me, even when you’re upset, hurt, or confused.”

5.

ENCOURAGE PERSONAL EXPRESSION WHEN IT COMES TO CLOTHING AND TOYS.

Allow boys to experiment with fashion and self-expression—as well as toys, games, and activities—that aren’t typically advertised to boys.

6.

SPEAK UP WHEN YOU HEAR DISRESPECTFUL COMMENTS OFF SCREEN.

If grandparents, cousins, or family friends say something problematic: sexist, racist, homophobic, transphobic or otherwise, speak up in that moment and have a conversation about your values. You could say, “We believe it’s important to treat everyone with respect.”

7.

IDENTIFY POSITIVE ROLE MODELS ON AND OFF SCREEN.

Identify role models—of all genders—who exemplify positive, healthy, respectful behavior and emotional expression, and whose interests, jobs, and opinions challenge harmful stereotypical ideas.

8.

BE CLEAR ABOUT CONSENT.

Let boys know that they have to ask for permission to touch others, and that they also have the right to say “no” if they don’t want to be touched.

LEARN MORE AT: WWW.BOYHOODINITIATIVE.ORG

