

HomeWord

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Sharing About

- ▒ The differences between boys and girls
- ▒ Boys need affirmation, discipline, moral training, advocacy, and love
- ▒ Boys need guidance and support from family and community

The Differences Between Boys and Girls by Leif Kehrwald

Boys and girls have biological differences. How's that for naming the obvious? I'm not talking genitals though—I'm talking brain.

In his book *The Good Son: Shaping the Moral Development of Our Boys and Young Men* (New York: Tarcher/Putnam, 1999), Dr. Michael Gurian explains that boys' brains develop differently than girls' brains. In studying over one million children, scientists have found neurological differences between the ways young males and young females process the world and respond to its challenges.

One such difference lies in the *amygdala*, the primary aggression center of the brain. The amygdala in a boy's brain is bigger than that in a girl's brain, meaning a boy is more likely to compete with or one-up another person as a way of relating. A boy is also more likely to be physical in his efforts to express himself, doing such things as designing and building structures. What a boy constructs is an extension of himself.

Another difference between boys and girls lies in the brain's release of hormones. With the onset of puberty, progesterone is dominant in a female, making her more likely to seek bonding outcomes in the intricacies of relationships. The dominant male hormone is testosterone, which, like the amygdala, compels a male to be competitive and isolated. A male tends to develop relational bonds less directly, and may need basic training in empathic skills and

relationship building—actions that come more naturally to a female.

Finally, the male brain is less flexible and adaptable but often more focused than the female brain. Studies indicate that a female uses more of her brain mass than does a male. But this can cause females to have more difficulty making decisions. While the female brain system is geared toward emotional inwardness and relational closeness, the male brain tends to push out into the surrounding world.

What does all this say to us as parents, teachers, ministers, and key adults in the lives of our young men? Boys need different training and socialization than girls. First, we must honor them for who they are. If our boys are active, physical, and aggressive, we must affirm and celebrate those natural characteristics that God has given them.

Second, we must be very clear with boundaries and expectations for how aggression and competition are expressed. An attitude that "boys will be boys" is a cop-out. If we expect problems from them, they will deliver. But if we expect growth toward maturity, they can deliver that instead. Violence is indeed a serious problem in our culture, and 90 percent of it is caused by males. However, not all cultures are as violent as ours. Can we learn from others who are more successful in channeling male aggression?

Third, we must teach and model for young men how to explore their

interior selves. While emotions and feelings are not the first responses in males, emotive and interior feelings are present nonetheless. Can we guide our young men to recognize the relational bonding opportunities that they encounter?

Nobody ever said that growing up is easy. For young men today, it is particularly challenging. But with our affirmation, discipline, and moral training, our young men can succeed. And with our love, they can excel toward greatness.

And so it is to be a boy and to be a man. Nature does not provide him with a blueprint for worth. The boy and the man must be raised to see the possibility of self-worth, then meet a few others who provide the vision of a road toward it, and then spend a lifetime pursuing that worth through action and relationship. One of the greatest tragedies in human life is to be born a male and not be guided toward the value of a man.

... *Once we truly look inside the male mind, we discover that we must, as individual family members and as a caregiving culture, spend a lot more time providing love, discipline, and moral training to our boys.* (Dr. Michael Gurian, *The Good Son: Shaping the Moral Development of Our Boys and Young Men* [New York: Tarcher/Putnam, 1999], pp. 30–31)

Always a Season to Grow

by Jean Buell

The leaves were falling. I'm so lucky to live where Nature reminds me to look inward. We all mature slowly, with many seasons to grow and let go. God is in charge. I am simply a steward, especially of the piece of earth I call my yard and the two boys I call my sons.

I'm so lucky, I reminded myself one afternoon after raking, mulching, and bagging those leaves for three full days. My second grader came home from school sobbing because a sixth-grade boy had just said, "Thanks for getting me into trouble." I didn't know if my little guy needed soothing or scolding; I needed facts. Several conversations later, I pieced together the story. Listening between the lines, I learned a lot about what boys need.

My second grader said: "This morning at the bus stop, my brother and two other sixth graders stuffed leaves inside my sweatshirt. I told them to stop, but they didn't. I asked my brother to help me get the leaves out, but he wouldn't." *Boys need help.*

My sixth grader said: "We thought he liked it. We didn't hear him tell us to stop." *Boys need clear limits.* "I didn't help him because my classmates would have made fun of me." *Boys need a sense of belonging.*

The teacher said: "Your son was crying when he came to class, mostly, I think, because his brother wouldn't help him." *Boys need someone to rely on.* "The principal and I decided that the initial incident was harassment. We want to stop the idea that 'boys will be boys.'" *Boys need to be held accountable.* "I wrote parent notices for the two at this school, and I called the principal of the third boy's school." He was the boy who "thanked" my son; he got detention. "Many parents don't deal with these problems, so the schools have to."

Boys need their families to be involved.

The second boy's dad said: "I spoke with my son. He thought your son liked it. He didn't hear him say to stop." *Boys need clear limits.* "But he realizes he shouldn't have done it."

The third boy's mother said: "I talked to my son. He thought your son liked it. He didn't hear him say to stop." *Boys need clear limits.* "He knows he shouldn't have done it, but he doesn't think he should get detention." *Boys need mercy.* "I spoke with the principal, and she wants you to call her." *Boys need advocates.*

What would I say? Would detention repair the broken relationship, or would it create a debt of anger to be repaid? *Boys need to learn reconciliation.* I called the principal and said: "I agree that this was harassment, because it was a show of power." *Boys need positive leadership opportunities.* "But it was only leaves. I know his mom talked to him. I don't think he needs detention." *Boys need consequences that are logical.*

For my older son's consequence, I listed several play activities for him to initiate with his brother. As I watched them interact spontaneously, I realized that their relationship didn't need mending. The incident was a moment of impulsiveness.

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Boys need understanding. But I had established the consequence, so I felt obligated to follow through. I reminded him of the list frequently. Finally, he balked: "Mom! Puh-lease! Let it go!" He was right. God is in charge. I am simply a steward. *Boys need time to grow.*

The snow is falling now, and my boys are heading for the bus stop. I wonder what this season will bring!

Boys need to learn how to know and respect their own strength, and yet not exaggerate it or flaunt it. They need to learn how to listen to the world and know its power and their own limits: how to listen to their own feelings and respect them, and how to express them, to find their voices, and to know the importance of honesty and of keeping one's word. They need to learn how to listen to and respect the feelings of others; and to know the sacredness of life, and its interconnectedness.

These lessons are all picked up by exploration and by example over time, by doing things with them, or spending time together in non-doing, which sometimes looks like fishing, or playing catch, or hanging out in a field, looking at the clouds; not by lectures or sermons. (Myla and Jon Kabat-Zinn, *Everyday Blessings: The Inner Work of Mindful Parenting* [New York: Hyperion, 1997], p. 269)