



## **It's Not Just for Girls: Gender Issues, Males, and Camp**



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## A Word of Caution

**As we talk about stereotypes and generalizations, we need to frame our thinking with the fact that every boy is different. This is not a one size fits all discussion or answer guide. We need to celebrate the uniqueness of every boy we come in contact with and help them individually on their journey toward manhood.**

### **Problem #1**

“...ask ourselves this challenging question: could some of those changes we have embraced in our families, our communities and our schools be driving our sons crazy?”

Instead of unstructured free play, parents now schedule their kids' time from dawn till dusk (and sometimes beyond.) By age 4, an ever-increasing number of children are enrolled in preschool. There, instead of learning to get along with other kids, hold a crayon and play Duck, Duck, Goose, children barely out of diapers are asked to fill out work sheets, learn computation or study Mandarin. The drumbeat for early academics gets even louder when they enter "real" school. Veteran teachers will tell you that first graders are now routinely expected to master a curriculum that, only 15 years ago, would have been considered appropriate for second, even third graders. The way we teach children has changed, too. In many communities, elementary schools have become test-prep factories—where standardized testing begins in kindergarten and "teaching to the test" is considered a virtue. At the same time, recess is being pushed aside in order to provide extra time for reading and math drills. So is history and opportunities for hands-on activities—like science labs and art. Active play is increasingly frowned on—some schools have even banned recess and tag.”

-Peg Tyre, [Struggling School-Age Boys: A new study says parents are right to worry about their sons](#), *Newsweek Magazine* – Web Exclusive, Sep 8, 2008.

### **Problem #2**

#### **Man Code**

The Man Code is the unwritten code of what boys/men follow; it is the measure of a man.

Then	Now
<p>Boys:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Learn to tie knots</li> <li>• Build forts</li> <li>• Explore their surroundings</li> <li>• Pretend play</li> <li>• Learn to fish</li> <li>• Spend all the time they can outside</li> <li>• Ran around without their shirts on and didn't care</li> <li>• Don't care what the girls think</li> </ul>	<p>Boys:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Don't share their emotions</li> <li>• Don't cry</li> <li>• Care about their body image</li> <li>• Care what girls want/think, often doing things they wouldn't normally do</li> <li>• Have to be manly</li> <li>• Don't show that they care about someone</li> <li>• Don't do activities that don't allow them to exert power or win</li> <li>• Get labeled as "gay" if they are doing anything deemed not manly</li> </ul>

### **Problem #3**

#### **Stereotypes that Boys face as a result of the Man Code**

##### *Body Image*

Boys are sent many messages by our society about their bodies. Models and television send the message that men are not hairy and that they are muscular. The common notion of genital size equating to how much of a man they are is still very alive in today's society. With the move toward ultra-privacy (not showering or changing in front of others), boys often do not know where they stand, other than unrealistic methods such as the internet or talking to other guys (which is not very factual). Even male toys such as GI Joes or Superheroes have increased in muscle size and body shape perpetuating the message.

### *Gender Roles*

Boys are still pressured to do man jobs in today's society. They have to make lots of money and be able to show/exert power in their position. Girls are allowed to do whatever they want, including the "traditional male jobs", but when a boy wants to be a flight attendant or a fashion designer, there obviously must be something wrong.

### *Emotions*

Boys are taught that emotions, especially crying, is a sign of weakness. The only time that it is okay to shed a tear is if you have just lost a championship game in a sport. Boys are also taught that anger and aggression is an acceptable display of emotion. Many boys turn to these emotions to cover other emotions such as sadness and grief. It is not uncommon for boys/men to turn to substances to help cover/drown out the emotions that they are feeling.

### *Compassion/Caring*

Compassion and caring about someone is something that is done on the down low or not talked about. Boys don't talk about how they love other males, even if they are related to them. Society teaches our boys that compassion and caring is a feminine trait, something that is not desirable in the male world.

### *Activities*

Activities are very similar to the gender roles issue. There are certain activities/hobbies that are given no value within the manhood circles. Arts and crafts, dancing, horseback riding, and drama are among some of the skill areas that are seen as girly. They don't include physical aggression, activity, and being able to compete/exert power.

***What do we as a camp community do to help boys overcome the pressures that society puts on them and allow them just to be boys?***

## **Activities to Overcome Pressures/Stereotypes**

*Males need Role Models who will break down the walls of stereotypes.*

- Make sure that you hire compassionate male counselors who can talk to campers about their feelings, share personal experiences when appropriate, and show empathy for how they are feeling.
- Have your counselors send the message that crying is just like sneezing. It is a bodily reaction to a stimulus.
- Holding nightly cabin meetings or vespers to talk about struggles that they might face in the real world, get a chance to hear what other boys are experiencing or thinking (often because of the tabooess of the subjects, they don't talk to others about these issues), and practice talking and becoming more comfortable with their feelings and emotions.
- Boys need to see male counselors doing some of the activities that are consider "girly", such as Arts and Crafts, Drama, Horseback, etc. to allow them to take a chance and learn a new skill.

*Body image needs to be addressed in everyday conversation and if necessary, in cabin meetings or vespers.*

- We need to let boys know that bodies and body parts come in all sizes, shapes, and colors and that the way you are is normal for you.
- It is very common for discussions of this or of a curious sexual nature to happen in the cabin. Use these as teaching opportunities to address body image issues.

*Males need more unstructured free time in camp to explore and pretend – regardless of the age.*

- Allow boys to have more of a say in their cabin activities. Be flexible and make sure that you participate in the activities to validate them.
- Give boys choices in activities that are vague – fort building, bush-whacking, capture the treasure, arts and crafts – and let the campers guide the location and activity.

*Teach boys true skills to give them a sense of accomplishment.*

- Competition and beating someone is often the only sense of accomplishment that boys feel. Give them opportunities to make items that they will then use – i.e. fly tying to catch a fish to eat for dinner.
- Boys are victims of our 15 minute society, where if it doesn't catch your interest in 15 minutes, then move on. By adding progression and hard skills, boys will remain interested, especially as they are forced to use them (i.e. catching dinner).

*Find classes that allow boys to return to their roots.*

- Fort building
- Science classes – rocketry, chemistry, etc.
- Exploration, map making
- Woodworking
- Fishing
- Tracking

*Males need to know it is okay to step outside of the manhood box.*

- Encourage males in any activity that they show interest.
- Build them up and talk about it as a group to show them that they can do this at home.
- Have a cabin activity time that introduces a skill that is not traditionally seen as manly – cooking – and turn it into an outdoor cooking adventure where they learn a skill and start to breakdown a wall.
- Tie their camp experience and confidence to the real world in which they are headed.

## **Resources**

Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys by Dan Kindlon and Michael Thompson

Speaking of Boys: Answers to the Most-Asked Questions About Raising Sons by Michael Thompson Ph.d. and Teresa Barker

The Wonder of Boys by Michael Gurian

Boys Adrift: The Five Factors Driving the Growing Epidemic of Unmotivated Boys and Underachieving Young Men by Leonard Sax

Boy Talk: How You Can Help Your Son Express His Emotions by Mary Polce-Lynch and Michael Gurian

The Dangerous Book for Boys by Conn Iggulden and Hal Iggulden