

RAISING CAIN

By:

Dan Kindlon, Ph.D. and Michael Thompson, Ph.D.

“The following seven points have the potential to transform the way you nurture and protect the emotional life of the boy in our life. The points aren’t snappy one-liners, which we feel ignore the complexity of real lives. We are psychologists, therapists, after all; we believe in the substance, not slogans, of emotional awareness and growth. Every boy’s internal life and journey are unique, but in these seven ways, their needs are precisely the same. These are the foundations of parenting, teaching and creating communities that respect and cultivate the inner life of boys:

- 1. Give boys permission to have an internal life, approval for the full range of human emotions, and help in developing an emotional vocabulary so that they may better understand themselves and communicate more effectively with others.** “The simple idea here is that you consciously speak to a boy’s internal life all the time, whether he is aware of it or not. You respect it, you take it into account, you make reference to it, you share your own. There is something of the prophecy fulfilled here. That is, if you act as if your son *has* an internal life – if you assume that he does, along with every other human being – then soon he will take it into account.”
- 2. Recognize and accept the high activity level of boys and give them safe boy places to express it.** “Many parents of boys do embrace the physicality of boys . . . some do not. Most teachers of boys also love boys; some, unfortunately, do not. Boys are tremendously sensitive to adults who do not have a reasonable tolerance level for boy energy, and when they do sense that a person has a low threshold of boy tolerance, they usually respond to it as a challenge. . . .Boys need to learn how to manage their physicality to do no harm, but they need not be shamed for exuberance.”
- 3. Talk to boys in their language – in a way that honors their pride and their masculinity. Be direct with them; use them as consultants and problem solvers.** “Because boys are miseducated to fear excessive feeling and vulnerability, it is important to communicate with them in a way that honors their wish for strength and does not shame them. . . . Is communicating with boys sometimes difficult? Yes, it often is. Is it impossible? Almost never. Only with the most angry, contemptuous, and suspicious boys is conversation impossible. If you are willing to ask consultative questions, put your emotional cards on the table, and not be disappointed by brief answers, you can communicate with boys. Above all, you have to convey your respect for a boy’s psychological defenses, his wish to be strong, and his need to appear stronger than he feels. There is no need to berate him for his desire to be a competent boy, a respected boy among his peers and in his own mind. If you honor that, he can feel that he does not need to be so guarded, and he will talk.”

4. **Teach boys that emotional courage is courage, and that courage and empathy are the sources of real strength in life.** “Popular movies aimed at boys seem to prize only one kind of courage: standing up to a physically larger opponent. The willingness to fight an enemy, to outwit a dinosaur, to defeat an alien monster, to look into the eye of a villain with a gun, is the media’s definition of male courage... Most important, boys need models of emotional courage in their own lives, not just in the media. We need to recognize and identify for them emotional courage in the lives of women and men, in our families and in the lives of children and others around us. In life and art, we need to provide boys models of male heroism that go beyond the muscular, the self-absorbed, and the simplistically heroic. Many adults display emotional courage in their work or personal lives, but rarely do we allow our children to witness our private moments of conscience or bravery. We need to speak of it, and we need to recognize out loud the emotional courage of those people around us who, in small ways daily, exhibit personal courage – to make a class speech, to be active despite handicaps, to learn a new language, to step forward to help when it would be easier to look the other way. When we give emotional courage a face and a form – our own or someone else’s – we leave an indelible impression. Boys can and will respond to the complexity of real courage.”

5. **Use Discipline to build character and conscience, not enemies.** “Sooner or later, everybody gets into trouble, whether as a result of his impulsivity, his activity level, or just because he’s human: it is a normal part of growing up. What happens to boys in the disciplinary encounter will form the moral underpinnings of their later behavior. We believe boys need discipline that is clear, consistent, and not harsh. The best discipline is built on the child’s love for adults and his wish to please. If that impulse is respected and cultivated, children will continue to be psychologically accessible through their love and respect. If they are unduly shamed, harshly punished, or encounter excessive adult anger, they will soon react to authority with resistance rather than with a desire to do better.”

6. **Model a manhood of emotional attachment.** “Boys imitate what they see. If what they see is emotional distance, guardedness, and coldness between men, they grow up to emulate that behavior. ...The loneliness of men has to be addressed in the lives of boys. Boys need to be encouraged to initiate friendships, maintain them, and experience the conflicts that arise in male friendships from different levels of athletic skill, from teasing, and from competition for the attention of girls. Too often boys lack both the resources and the will to resolve those conflicts and preserve friendships.”

7. **Teach boys that there are many ways to be a man.** “Very few boys or men are tall, handsome, athletic, successful with women, endlessly virile, and physically fearless. ...Boys suffer from a too-narrow definition of masculinity, and it is time to reexamine that message... We have to teach boys that there are many ways to become a man; that there are many ways to be brave, to be a good father, to be loving and strong and successful. We need to celebrate the natural creativity and risk taking of boys, their energy, their boldness. We need to praise the artist and the entertainer, the missionary and the athlete, the soldier and the male nurse, the store owner and the round-the-world sailor, the teacher and the CEO. There are many ways for a boy to make a contribution in this life.”