

BREAKING FREE FROM THE MAN-BOX:

TIPS FOR FATHERS TO RAISE BOYS WITH THE IDEA OF HEALTHY MASCULINITY

Society has fixed expectations of what it means to be a man making it difficult at times for fathers to raise their sons. There are societal expectations of what it means to 'act like a man' including how to talk, how to dress, how to look, how to express (or not to express) emotions and these messages play a huge role in enabling the harmful gender stereotypes associated with 'being a man'.

This tip-sheet for fathers, includes suggestions about how to raise boys who will embrace positive masculinity, breaking free from culturally and socially constructed roles they are expected to follow.



- 1 Challenge your own attitudes and assumptions regarding gender:** Sometimes our own assumptions get in the way of raising healthy boys. Think about your experience growing up, did you experience around you messages and gender norms about what it means to be a boy? How will you challenge those? What do you think was the problem? Were you told to behave a certain way because of "being a boy"? (Example: How to dress, which toys to play with, hobbies, career choices)



- 2 Challenge and call out harmful stereotypes as you see them:** Try to call out any stereotypical behavior you see on screen or in your extended family/friends. Talk to your sons about male privilege and why it is problematic. If you hear someone say something problematic, make sure to have a conversation around your values in front of your sons. For example saying something like, "We believe it is important to respect everyone regardless of their gender" would be helpful.



3

Openly talk about failure, disappointment, and other difficult emotional experiences: Teach your child to have the courage to fail. Role model for them by talking about your own failures, disappointments and other unpleasant events. Be open to expressing difficult emotions and experiences and ask for support. This helps break the stereotype associated with men 'bottling up' emotions.

When little boys reach out for help, make them feel supported and that they will not be judged for reaching out for support. Normalize saying, "I love you", "I care about you" and statements like "I am here for you, even when you feel sad or upset". This will help them in connecting and empathizing with others and in maintaining healthy relationships.



4

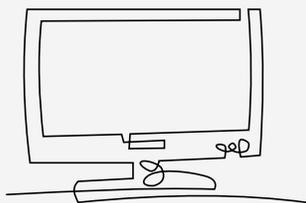
Model the behavior you wish to see in your boys: The best way to show boys how to be gentle, respectful and connected is to model the same behavior for them. It is likely that they are to learn more from practical examples than just being told about a certain way to behave. For e.g. Share the work-load of house chores with your partner, show kindness and compassion, normalize crying and sharing difficult experiences when you are upset.

5

Encourage personal expression and choice when it comes to toys or dressing up: Try to introduce the idea of freedom of expression and choice especially when it comes to toys and dressing. Boys often feel pressured to look a certain way which limits their personal expression and choice in selection of outfits, toys, body image, self-care. For e.g. Let boys wear colors usually assigned to girls by the society like pink and purple. It is likely that if boys are given the same kind of toys that the society approves for them it will be harder for them to think in a more gender-equal context. Offer choice to your sons to participate in activities such as cooking, pretend play, house, painting, arts and crafts and playing with dolls if they wish to.

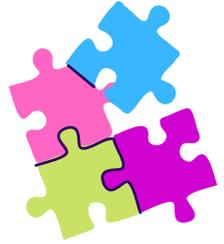
6

Normalize a wide variety of body shapes and types as attractive and appealing: Men are often concerned about how they look, and interestingly this comparison comes from how they will be judged by other men and not necessarily women. Normalizing all body types from the beginning, and teaching your sons to love themselves regardless would lead to better self-image of a man.



7

Talk about role models in your family/friends and media that your sons can look up to: If young boys typically look up to aggressive male characters, it is likely that they will act in a similar way. It helps to identify role models around you, or in the media and entertainment that continue to model behavior that is positive and healthy as a man. For example: a supportive partner, a stay at home dad, an advocate of gender-equality. Prominent names like Trevor Noah, Kumail Nanjiani, Jay Shetty and Justin Baldoni are good role models in the media promoting a positive image of masculinity.



8

Teach your sons about consent: It is important before teaching your sons about consent to respect their consent as well. Ask your sons if they want to be hugged, kissed, or tickled and respect choice if they say “no”. Empowering them with an understanding of consent helps them understand everyone has the right to say no. This leads to less rigid ideas about manhood and masculinity, especially when others say “no” to them.



Challenging gender stereotypes is a difficult task, but it is important to have these conversations. In order to raise healthy boys with positive masculinity, it is needed for fathers to play their part.

Remember actions speak louder than words; this means that walking the walk, along with talking the talk is a crucial part of creating a change when we talk about raising emotionally expressive men and countering toxic masculinity.