

STAYING AT HOME WITH OUR SONS

RESULTS FROM A NATIONAL SURVEY OF PARENTS IN THE US

FOSTERING HEALTHY MASCULINITY IN CHALLENGING TIMES

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KERING
FOUNDATION



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PREFACE: PRESENT CHALLENGES, HISTORIC OPPORTUNITIES.

Gary Barker, President and CEO, Promundo
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Ideas about gender – social norms for how boys, girls, and all children should be – are among the first things children learn. Frequently they keep our children from being their best, authentic selves and undermine the development of critically important human capacities. Boys around the world are often affected by restrictive ideas about manhood that encourage them to repress their emotions – which has the potential to cut them off from their most important relationships; these ideas about manhood often overemphasize competition and achievement, encourage boys to sacrifice their health, and to take risks that endanger themselves and others. Some boys and young men are also raised believing that violence – against themselves, against other men, and against women – is normal.

But a new conversation about how we raise our sons is being heard among parents, as well as among educators, coaches, and policymakers. Even prior to the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic, the #MeToo movement – both a social media phenomenon and broader grassroots initiative – brought necessary and unprecedented questions about men’s behavior toward women and girls.

Around the world, individual women, feminist organizations, and male allies have been demanding an end to harassment and gender-based discrimination and men’s violence against women: the good news is that parents and others who raise boys are joining this conversation. An earnest search has begun for how to nurture boys who are part of creating a just world for all, especially women and girls, and who embrace more caring, nonviolent ideas about manhood.

This new conversation about boyhood and manhood is twofold: it is about calling all men and boys in to being healthy, connected, responsible members of the human community, for their own sake and for the well-being of those around them, as it continues to call men out if they abuse, harass, use violence or don't live up to gender equality.

This moment presents the opportunity to have a new conversation about how we raise our boys: among parents, educators, coaches, and policy-makers.

The global COVID-19 pandemic has caused all of us to feel increased fear, resulting from health risks, social isolation, and economic insecurity. Children and adults in all parts of the world have experienced losses, disappointments, and heightened stressors. And due to stay-at-home orders globally – and school and childcare closures – many parents are spending more time with their children now than before.

While many families are coping in healthy ways, a well-documented global spike in men's violence against women in the home underscores the lack of adequate policies and resources to end violence, the large number of men who fall back on dominance and control over women in times of crisis, as well as the limitations in our systems of protection for women survivors. We know from global research that experiencing or witnessing violence as children, is one of the strongest predictors that boys will use violence against female partners as adults, and that girls will grow up to experience violence in intimate relationships with male partners. It is urgent that we work to break this cycle of violence and part of that involves talking to boys.

COVID-19 also calls us to pay attention to how gender, and ideas about manhood, can hinder health. Men are slightly more likely to die of COVID-19 in the US and globally, for a mix of biological and social reasons. Specific groups of low-income men and women are particularly at risk of COVID-19 in many settings. COVID-19 shines a light on the fact that women are bearing the majority of the responsibility for taking care of their families – and providing care in general; and it amplifies other inequalities, including economic, racial, and gender disparities. Thus, COVID-19 requires all of us to care, and to understand how we can work together to build equitable health and social support systems and to promote gender equality and healthy manhood.

In the midst of the COVID-19 crisis, while parents are facing enormous stresses and doing their best to keep it together, there is an opportunity. All of us, parents and others, can promote healthy masculinity by taking this moment to encourage boys to be emotionally connected, to seek help when they need it, to be nonviolent in all their relationships, and to be part of the cause of gender equality. Promundo and the Kering Foundation are committed to supporting this conversation to promote and achieve healthy manhood.

BACKGROUND: HOW THE MAN BOX SHAPES BOYS

This survey of parents builds on a previous national survey with young men carried out by Promundo and Axe, Unilever's leading male grooming brand. The study, [*The Man Box: A Study on Being a Young Man in the US, UK, and Mexico*](#), was followed by surveys conducted in Jamaica and Australia (among young men ages 18-30). It explored messages young men are receiving about what it means to be a man, and which of those messages they are internalizing. Results from the US, UK, and Mexico found:

- **At least 57 percent of young men have been told that a "real man" behaves a certain way.** The majority of young men reported that their parents taught them to act strong and hide feelings of nervousness or fear – in other words, to "tough it out."
- **More than half of young men say they received the message that a man who doesn't fight back when others push him around is weak,** and about 40 percent of them personally agreed with that idea.
- More than half of young men said they have been told by society that **a real man can't say no to sex.**

- About half of young men say they've received the message that, **"A gay guy is not a "real man."**
- Nearly one-third of young men said that their girlfriends or female partners told them that a "real man" **must use violence to defend his reputation.**
- Between 1/3 and 1/5 of young men reported having **verbally harassed** a woman or girl in the street, workplace, school/university, or internet in the last month.

Importantly, we found that young men who held more restrictive views about manhood – that is, who lived in the "Man Box," this cluster of harmful ideas of what it means to be a man – were more unhappy, depressed and anxious, more likely to have considered suicide, to binge drink, to harass and to bully, than young men who had less restrictive views of manhood.

Indeed, the overwhelming conclusion from this research as well as research by Plan International USA, by the American Psychological Association, and by many others is that the Man Box significantly damages the development of boys, shaping their own identities as well as how they relate to others.

ABOUT THE REPORT: WHAT OUR RESEARCH REVEALS ABOUT BOYS' LIVES.

This report summarizes the findings of a study exploring what parents in the United States (US) want for their sons, their views toward gender norms and pressures, alongside findings from discussions with boys on the topic of masculinity. This report provides new insights on how parents can support healthier and more connected, resilient behavior in their sons.

In the fall of 2019 and early 2020, Promundo and the Kering Foundation commissioned PerryUndem to conduct survey research and interviews with parents and with boys themselves on the topic of masculinity and pressures to live up to certain gender and cultural norms. This research included:

- In-depth interviews with 16 boys ages 8-16 in California and Pennsylvania. The interviews included boys from middle- and lower-income families, of diverse ethnicities, and of diverse political leanings; and
- A nationally representative survey with parents of boys ages 4-14 in the US, conducted among 801 parents (mothers and fathers) from January 2 through 12, 2020 using YouGov's online panel.

KEY FINDINGS FROM THE RESEARCH.

Four clear headlines emerged from these data, each of which has important implications for our children and the next generation of men:

1. When asked what they value most in their sons, parents put strength and living up to traditional ideas about masculinity at the top of the list.
2. Parents recognize that boys are under pressure to adhere to masculine stereotypes.
3. Parents and boys themselves say that expectations around how to behave get even more restrictive for boys as they get older.
4. Parents see that their sons don't feel comfortable showing that they are scared or expressing love.

1 When asked what they value most in their sons, parents put strength and living up to traditional ideas about masculinity at the top of the list.

Strength, grit, and resilience are valuable characteristics for all of us, especially in the midst of a global pandemic. But what makes us strong? From the time they are toddlers, boys are frequently told that strength means never to cry, not to show fear or weakness, and to solve their problems alone.

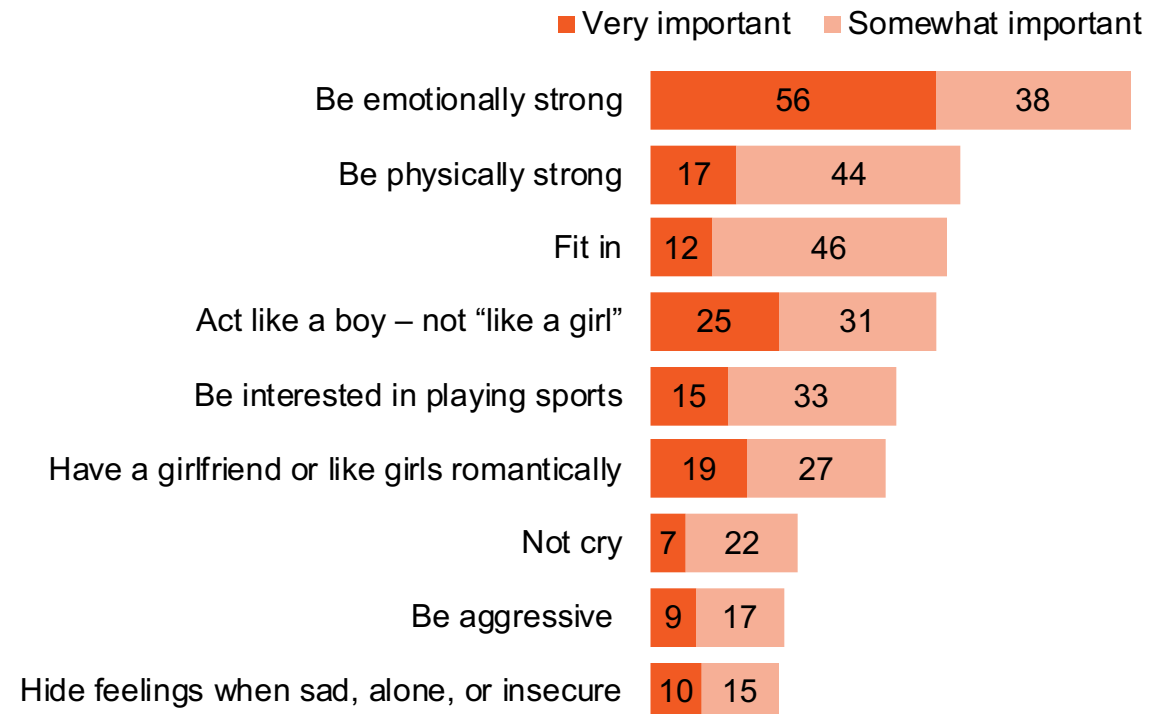
Such stoic performances masquerade as strength and often go hand-in-hand later in life with displays of physical domination, threats and violence, and sometimes depressive symptoms. The truth about resilience and the capacity to stand one's ground in the face of adversity and stress is that individuals are strongest when they are connected to others. Boys fare better when parents, and teachers and others, provide a "relational anchor" that helps boys resist reacting in anger, or turning their fear inward in self-harming ways.

When we asked parents how important they think it is for their boys to have certain characteristics, emotional strength was far and away at the top of the list.

Fifty-six percent of respondents said that this was very important, and another thirty-eight percent said that it was somewhat important, making it the most common response from the list provided. See Figure 1.

Figure 1: Percentage of parents who chose this characteristic as “very important” or “somewhat important” for their boys.

n = 399



But what does emotional strength mean to parents?

Is it the rugged, stoic, go-it-alone man who denies feeling any vulnerability or ever needing help?

Or is it strength that includes healthy emotional expression, connectedness, solidarity, being willing to ask for help when he needs it, and the ability to empathize and show vulnerability?

Our evidence suggests that parents often define emotional strength as fitting into the Man Box. A glance at the next five most common responses suggests parents are preoccupied with their boys "fitting in": Many parents say it is very important for their boys to not "act like a girl."

They also agree that boys should like girls romantically (suggesting a fear that their sons would be anything other than heterosexual) and be interested in sports. As highlighted in Promundo's *The Man Box* study, emphasizing these conformist views of manhood rather than healthy masculinity based on equality, empathy, connectedness, and respect wreaks a terrible cost on our sons, on women and girls, and on our society.

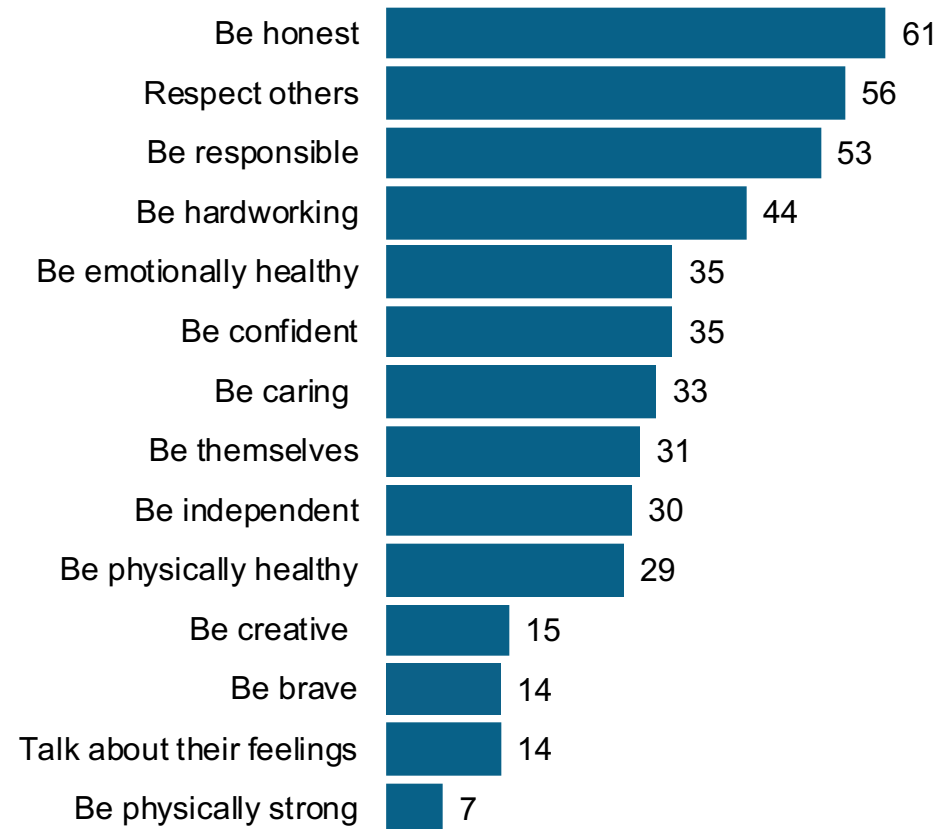


The reality is that boys and girls can be physically strong *and* emotionally vulnerable, athletic *and* honest, confident *and* caring, empathic *and* determined, and many parents seem to value all of these traits.

Indeed, as seen in Figure 2, a positive insight from this research is that when parents had the opportunity to choose up to five qualities they feel are most important for their sons, they overwhelmingly showed they wanted their sons to be both tough and athletic *and* caring, respectful, honest, and responsible.

Figure 2: Percentage of parents who chose certain traits when asked, "If you had to choose, which of these things are most important for your son to learn (choose up to 5)."

n = 399



Parents' preferences for honesty, respect, and emotional health for their sons demonstrate that, despite the persistence of harmful ideas about masculinity, what parents really want for their sons is a *new* definition of strength, and of manhood, that is more flexible, connected, and respectful of others, particularly women and girls.

Parents want their sons to carve out a place in the world where they are true to themselves and good to others. So, what gets in the way?

2 Parents recognize that boys are under pressure to adhere to masculine stereotypes.

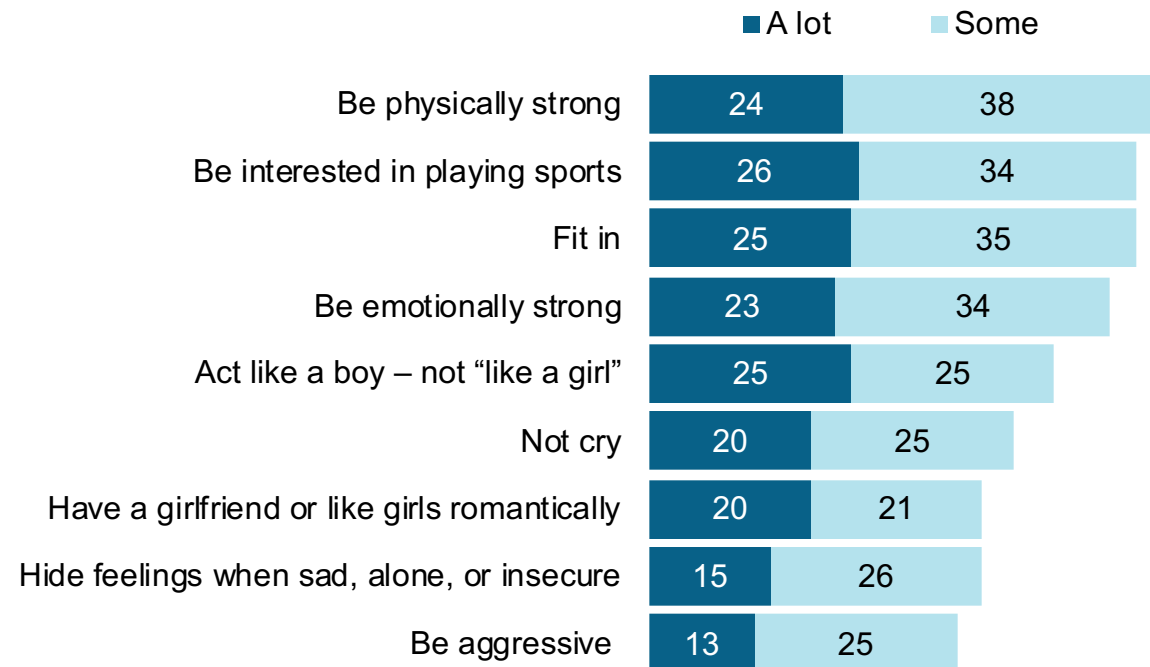
The majority of parents recognize the social pressures their sons face to be physically strong, show interest in sports, and “fit in” (Figure 3). Some 41 percent said their sons face some pressure or a lot of pressure to have a girlfriend or like girls romantically, which speaks to the idea that a “real man” must be attractive and admired for his physical attraction, and should be heterosexual. Similarly, 45 percent said their sons face pressure not to cry.

In other words, parents recognize the unhealthy expectations placed on boys – even as they may be actively or inadvertently reinforcing them (see Figure 1: 25 percent of parents said that it was “very important” for their sons to act ‘like a boy’).

Indeed, what parents say they want for their sons is often aligned with what parents see that peers, teachers, and society expect of boys. Part of this alignment may be due to parents wanting to protect their sons – they know the bullying and ridiculing their sons face when they don’t conform to traditional ideas about manhood. This emphasizes how much it takes all of us – coaches, teachers, media-makers, policymakers, and parents – to promote healthy masculinity.

Figure 3: Percentage responses of parents to the prompt, “Sometimes boys can feel pressure from friends, teachers, sports, or society. How much pressure, if any, do you think your boy(s) feels to:”

n = 402



3 Parents and boys themselves say that expectations around how to behave get even more restrictive for boys as they get older.

Our interviews with boys suggest that boys today have freer, healthier ideas about manhood than previous generations: Many boys reported that being a man is about being kind, helpful, nice, respectful, and emotionally open. **However, boys also said that when they hit early adolescence, around 10-12 years old, they feel more pressure to fit into masculine stereotypes, or the Man Box.** They say their parents, teachers, coaches, as well as their male peers, bear down on them to conform: They are judged, evaluated, criticized, bullied, and humiliated much more than at younger ages, if they stray outside of the Man Box.

Said one 15-year-old boy:

“If you show feelings, it makes you look weak and vulnerable. People will take that vulnerability and use it against you.”

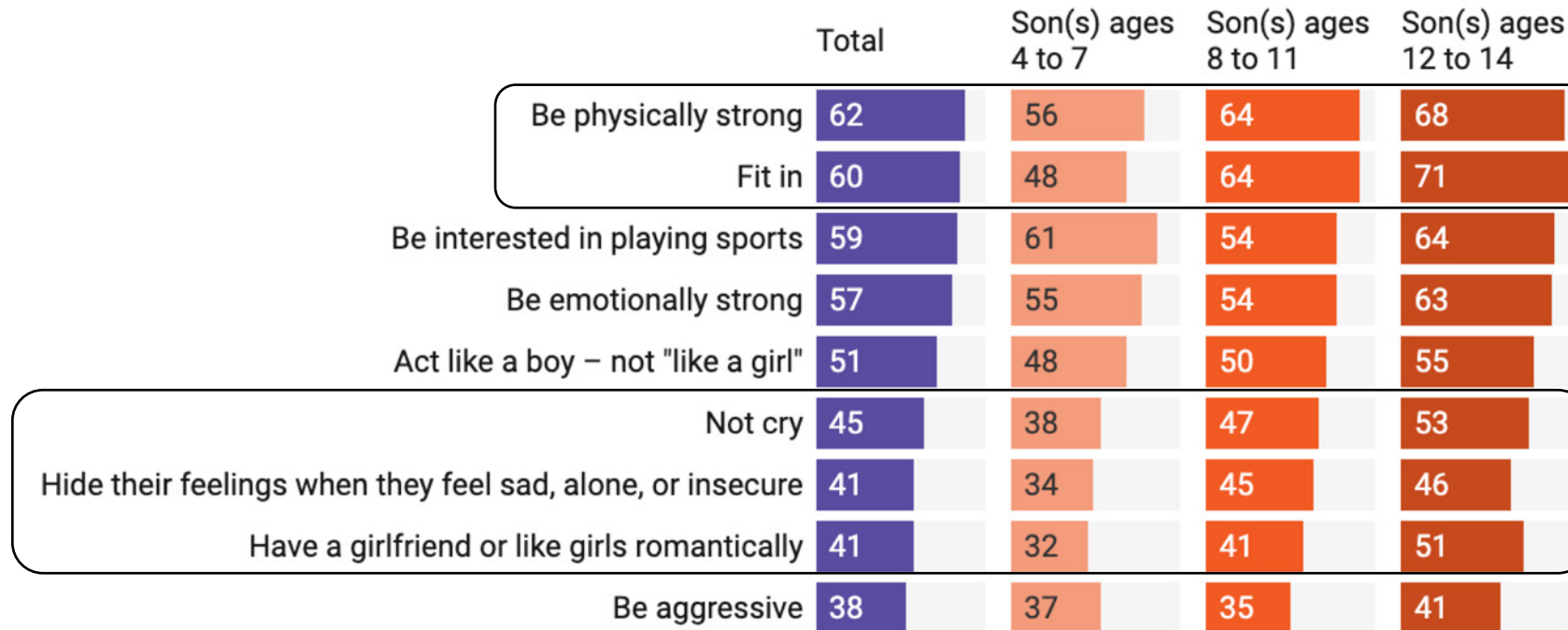
Boys told us they are particularly hesitant to show fear and insecurity because they worry they will be ridiculed – or bullied – by male peers. Many boys told us they have no place or person to whom they can unload their upsets, doubts, and worries. And many boys shared that they feel they cannot talk to their male friends about emotional issues at all.



Parents too are aware that certain stereotypical expectations around masculinity – the Man Box, mentioned earlier – become tighter as their sons reach adolescence. Older boys experience more pressure, parents say, to be strong, to fit in, to not act like a girl, to not cry, and to hide their feelings.

Figure 4: Percentage responses of parents with sons in different age groups to the same prompt, “Sometimes boys can feel pressure from friends, teachers, sports, or society. How much pressure, if any, do you think your boy(s) feels to:” (combined responses of “some pressure” and “a lot of pressure”)

n = 402



4 Parents see that their sons don't feel comfortable showing that they are scared or expressing love.

The survey asked parents which feelings they perceive boys are most comfortable and least comfortable expressing. Unsurprisingly, the vast majority said boys have no problem expressing confidence, excitement, or happiness. But fully two-thirds acknowledge that boys don't feel comfortable letting on when they are scared, sad, lonely, or unsure of themselves. Two-thirds also said that boys feel comfortable expressing anger.

Significantly, nearly half of parents said boys don't feel comfortable talking about love.

This is especially worrisome for how boys are made to feel ashamed of feelings of affection and attraction – romantic or platonic.

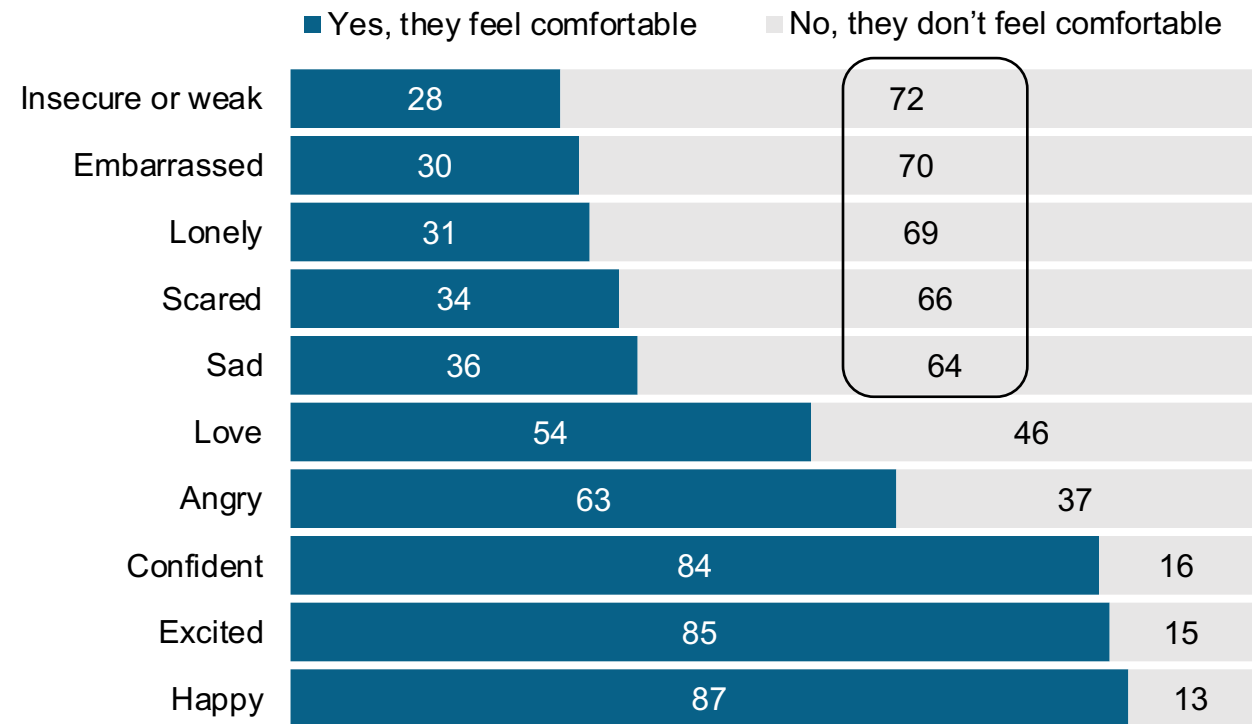
Casting love as a “soft” emotion, unbefitting a “real” man, puts boys in a terrible developmental bind, pressuring them to forswear the urgings of their own hearts and fostering the notion that sex and intimacy are a space for conquest and performance rather than connection and caring.

One 11-year-old boy said:

“It’s absolutely not [okay to share feelings of love]. If it’s a person, no. If it’s a thing, yes.”

Figure 5: Percentage of parents responses to the prompt, “In general, do you think boys in our society feel comfortable talking about their emotions when they feel...”

n = 801



OPPORTUNITIES FOR SUPPORTING SONS AND PROMOTING HEALTHY MANHOOD

When facing personal problems, young men (18-30 years old) in the Man Box study said **their fathers are the last person they turn to for help.**

In that study, young men reported they are more likely to seek help from the Internet or from no one than to turn to their fathers. Many try to turn to their mothers when they feel sad or depressed, but both mothers and fathers can inadvertently communicate to their sons that it is more important to “tough it up” than to express the need for help and connection.

The interviews with younger boys for this study also found the same – boys are more likely to see their mothers as their emotional support, not their fathers.

Fathers or male caregivers, for their part, often believe they have to “teach” their sons to be “real” men at the expense of being compassionate, honest, and vulnerable with them.

Boys often see how uncomfortable their fathers or other adult men around them are with their own feelings, fears, and painful experiences and how quick their fathers are to want their sons to “man up.” Mothers also often face a cultural pressure not to allow boys to be “weak” or turn them into “mama’s boys.”

The reality is that all our children need to see *all* caregivers modeling connection, empathy, nonviolence, and healthy manhood.



Here is the good news: Parents are aware of the challenges presented by masculine stereotypes – this is a critical first step for positive change.

RECOMMENDATIONS:

Seven Things Parents and Caregivers Can Do to Build Healthy Masculinity

Parents can't, by themselves, change deeply-held ideas about gender that are found in schools, the media, the workplace, in our public policies, and in many other realms. But where parents can make a huge difference is in what they say to their sons – and in the behaviors they model – as parents are the primary influence in their children's earliest years. A few suggestions include:

1

Talk openly about your own fears, uncertainties, and disappointments, making it clear that you believe everyone has the right to be honest about how they are feeling. Adults can model how to share difficult feelings, in healthy ways, communicating permission to a boy to reveal what's true for him. The power of honesty will not be lost on any child who is watching.

2

Take advantage of the time at home to talk. Many parents and families are doing their best to balance competing responsibilities with their children at home and are experiencing additional stress and tension. It is important to recognize that children may also feel uncertain and vulnerable; adults can recognize and validate children's feelings, and encourage them to share. The conversation doesn't have to be a formal lecture; in fact, it shouldn't be. Instead, find a time to talk while doing something else. If watching a TV show, playing a game, or watching a movie together, a parent might ask: "Do you ever worry about that?" Or simply: "How are you feeling with all this?"

3

Acknowledge the particular challenges boys feel about being vulnerable, and the courage it takes for them to be open. Parents may even find that it is helpful to introduce the concept of the Man Box directly, or to find another way to help boys understand how a message or pressure they're receiving may be a harmful stereotype, and not reflect how they are expected to act at home. Help to call out and break free from harmful, gender-related pressures together as a family.



4

Reinforce that it's okay to need help and to ask for it. You can model this behavior in your own friendships and intimate relationships in ways that will give the child permission to follow suit. If they can't see it in action, it's less likely they can ask for help themselves. In those important moments a child does open up to you, be sure to practice the remarkably important skill of listening without judging, creating the space and environment they most need to feel safe.

5

Seek help for yourself. Airlines tell us every time we fly to adjust our own mask before adjusting the masks of others. For our physical health and our mental health, this is useful advice. Tensions naturally flare during crises, but tension does not have to lead to fights and violence. Economic and health stresses can bring closeness and mutual interdependence or they can serve as triggers for relationship breakdowns and even domestic violence. Stress must not be an excuse for any man's use of violence against a partner, or any parent's use of violence against a child.

6

Take the threat seriously and demonstrate that it is wise to seek medical care whenever our health is adversely affected. One of the reasons men face higher death rates from COVID-19 and other health issues is that they are less likely to seek health services when they need them, to reach out to get tested, or to follow recommended health care protocols. It is important for boys to see adult men taking risks seriously and recognizing the need to seek health services in response to health issues, big and small.

7

Keep in mind that you are not alone. Know where you can turn for help on issues related to [healthy masculinities](#), childhood mental health issues, and even [family violence](#). Find more advice as well, on how to [raise boys to break free from gender stereotypes](#), and [tips for involved fatherhood](#).