BREAKING FREE FROM BOYHOOD STEREOTYPES:

ACTION STEPS FOR PARENTS & CONTENT CREATORS

INTRODUCTION

Boys receive—and absorb—harmful stereotypical messages about what it takes to "be a man" from an early age. 72% of young men in the US say they've been told that a real man behaves a "certain way"—they are self-sufficient, tough, stoic, attractive without effort, a risk-taker, and straight. If boys embrace these ideas, it can have long-term impacts: they may be less likely to have close, emotionally connected relationships; and more likely to have poorer mental health and to use violence later in life.

We all have a role to play, in creating a gender equal, nonviolent future. We need all adults—including parents and content-creators, and men in particular—to model vulnerability, connection, and respectful relationships, on and off screen.

TIPS FOR PARENTS AND ADULTS IN BOYS' LIVES

1.

CHALLENGE YOUR OWN EXPECTATIONS OF HOW MEN AND WOMEN SHOULD ACT, AND MODEL THE BEHAVIORS YOU WANT TO ENCOURAGE.

If you feel that boys really should or shouldn't do a certain thing because they are a boy, ask yourself, "Why?" The best way to show your son how to grow up to be a respectful, healthy, connected person is to model those qualities.

2.

CALL OUT HARMFUL STEREOTYPES WHEN YOU SEE THEM.

When you see narrow depictions of masculinity on screen, use it as an opportunity for discussion. If you see male characters bullying or being aggressive, ask, "Why is it that so many boys are shown bullying? How else could boys react in that moment?"

3.

TALK OPENLY ABOUT YOUR OWN FEARS, UNCERTAINTIES, AND DISAPPOINTMENTS.

In age appropriate ways, make it clear that you believe everyone has the right to share how they are feeling. Parents can model how to share difficult feelings, in healthy ways, communicating permission to a boy to do the same.

4.

ACKNOWLEDGE THE PARTICULAR CHALLENGES BOYS FEEL ABOUT BEING VULNERABLE, AND THE COURAGE IT TAKES FOR THEM TO BE OPEN.

In those moments when a child opens up to you, listen without judging, and help them to feel safe. Say, "I love you. You can always talk to me, even when you're upset, hurt, or confused."

5.

ENCOURAGE PERSONAL EXPRESSION WHEN IT COMES TO CLOTHING AND TOYS.

Allow boys to experiment with fashion and self-expression—as well as toys, games, and activities—that aren't typically advertised to boys.

6. **SPEAK UP WHEN YOU HEAR DISRESPECTFUL COMMENTS OFF SCREEN.**
If grandparents, cousins, or family friends say something problematic: sexist, racist, homophobic, transphobic or otherwise, speak up in that moment and have a conversation about your values. You could say, "We believe it's important to treat everyone with respect."

7. **IDENTIFY POSITIVE ROLE MODELS ON AND OFF SCREEN.**
Identify role models—of all genders—who exemplify positive, healthy, respectful behavior and emotional expression, and whose interests, jobs, and challenge harmful stereotypical ideas.

8. **BE CLEAR ABOUT CONSENT.**
Let boys know that they have to ask for permission to touch others, and that they also have the right to say "no" if they don't want to be touched.

TIPS FOR CONTENT CREATORS

1. **COMMIT TO INCLUSIVE STORYTELLING THAT REFLECTS THE BROADER POPULATION.**
Review how identities represented on screen (gender identities, races, sexual orientations, ability status, ages, and body sizes) match up to the broader population. Make sure that characters are not tokenized, stereotyped, etc. based on their identities.

2. **AVOID STEREOTYPES ABOUT MEN AND PARENTING; AND ABOUT BOYS AND CHORES.**
Allow male characters to be primary care providers who are competent and involved in the day-to-day lives of children: packing school lunches, driving kids to school, etc. Show male characters of all ages taking on chores, like cooking and cleaning.

3. **ALLOW MALE CHARACTERS TO EXPRESS A FULL RANGE OF EMOTIONS—INCLUDING LOVE.**
Show male characters that model close friendships, family relationships, and healthy expressions of emotions. Also, show boys in a variety of healthy romantic relationships.

4. **SHOW BOYS AND YOUNG MEN ASKING FOR HELP, PARTICULARLY FROM PARENTS.**
Avoid depicting boys and men as solitary or as having to "go at it alone." Allow male characters to maintain social and familial relationships and to seek out support from others.

5. **AVOID GRATUITOUS VIOLENCE.**
Avoid using vulnerable emotions—like sadness and fear—as a catalyst for destructive behavior. Allow male characters to resolve conflict in non-violent ways. This shift is particularly needed for male characters of color, who are less likely to be shown expressing an emotion other than anger, perpetuating a harmful racial stereotype.

6. **PORTRAY POSITIVE EXAMPLES OF MALE FRIENDSHIP.**
Provide opportunities for male friendships to model sharing emotions and supporting each other, as well as calling out peers for bullying or violent behavior, rather than portraying men as bystanders.

7. **SHOW BOYS AND GIRLS PLAYING TOGETHER.**
Boys who have positive, female friendships are building relationships based on respect from an early age. Show boys playing with typical female toys (e.g., dolls) and girls playing with typical male toys (e.g., trucks), preferably in the same narrative.

8. **SHOW MORE NUANCED BOY CHARACTERS AND NOT JUST STOCK TYPES.**
The majority of male characters in kids' TV are smart and active, funny losers (dumb jock or hapless dad), and geeks. Broaden the representation of male characters.

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