



bringing up
BOYS

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THE WONDERFUL WORLD OF BOYS

CHAPTER 1

GREETINGS TO ALL the men and women out there who are blessed to be called parents. There is no greater privilege in living than bringing a tiny new human being into the world and then trying to raise him or her properly during the next eighteen years. Doing that job right requires all the intelligence, wisdom, and determination you will be able to muster from day to day. And for parents whose family includes one or more boys, the greatest challenge may be just keeping them alive through childhood and adolescence.

We have a delightful four-year-old youngster in our family named Jeffrey who is “all boy.” One day last week, his parents and grandparents were talking in the family room when they realized that the child hadn’t been seen in the past few minutes. They quickly searched from room to room, but he was nowhere to be found. Four adults scurried throughout the neighborhood calling, “Jeffrey? Jeffrey!” No answer. The kid had simply disappeared. Panic gripped the family as terrible possibilities loomed before them. Had he been kidnapped? Did he wander away? Was he in mortal danger? Everyone muttered a prayer while running from place to place. After about fifteen minutes of sheer terror, someone suggested they call 911. As they reentered the house, the boy jumped out and said, “Hey!” to his grandfather. Little Jeffrey, bless his heart, had been hiding under the bed while chaos swirled around him. It was his idea of a joke. He honestly

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thought everyone else would think it was funny too. He was shocked to learn that four big people were very angry at him.

Jeffrey is not a bad or rebellious kid. He is just a boy. And in case you haven't noticed, boys are different from girls. That fact was never in question for previous generations. They knew intuitively that each sex was a breed apart and that boys were typically the more unpredictable of the two. Haven't you heard your parents and grandparents say with a smile, "Girls are made out of sugar and spice and everything nice, but boys are made of snakes and snails and puppy-dog tails"? It was said tongue-in-cheek, but people of all ages thought it was based on fact. "Boys will be boys," they said knowingly. They were right.

Boys are usually (but not always) tougher to raise than their sisters are. Girls can be difficult to handle too, but there is something especially challenging about boys. Although individual temperaments vary, boys are designed to be more assertive, audacious, and excitable than girls are. Psychologist John Rosemond calls them "little aggressive machines."¹ One father referred to his son as "all afterburner and no rudder." These are some of the reasons why Maurice Chevalier never sang, "Thank Heaven for Little Boys." They just don't inspire great sentimentality.

In an article entitled, "What Are Boys Made Of?" reporter Paula Gray Hunker quoted a mother named Meg MacKenzie who said raising her two sons is like living with a tornado. "From the moment that they come home from school, they'll be running around the house, climbing trees outside and making a commotion inside that sounds as if a herd of elephants has moved in upstairs. I'll try to calm them down, but my husband will say, 'This is what boys do. Get used to it.'"

Hunker continued, "Mrs. MacKenzie, the lone female in a household of males, says this tendency [of boys] to leap—and then listen—drives her crazy. 'I can't just tell my boys, 'Clean up.' If I do, they'll put one or two toys away and assume that the task is done. I've learned that I have to be very, very specific.' She has found that boys do not respond to subtle hints but need requests clearly outlined. 'I'll put a basket of clean laundry on the stairs, and the boys will pass it by twenty times and not once will it occur to them to stop and carry it upstairs,' she says."²

Does that sound familiar? If you host a birthday party for five-year-olds, the boys will probably behave very differently from the girls. One or more of them is likely to throw cake, put his hands in the punch bowl, or mess up the games for the girls. Why are they like this? Some would say their mischievous nature has been learned from the culture. Really? Then why are boys more aggressive in every society around the globe? And why

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did the Greek philosopher Plato write more than 2,300 years ago, “Of all the animals, the boy is the most unmanageable”?³

One of my favorite little books is entitled *Up to No Good: The Rascally Things Boys Do*, edited by Kitty Harmon. It is a compilation of stories told “by perfectly decent grown men” recalling their childhood years. Here are several examples that made me smile:

In seventh grade, the biology teacher had us dissect fetal pigs. My friends and I pocketed the snout of the pig and stuck it on the water fountain so that the water shot straight up out of the pig’s nostrils. No one really noticed it until they were bent over just about to drink. The problem is that we wanted to stick around and see the results, but then we started laughing so hard that we got caught. We all got the paddle for that.

MARK, OHIO, B. 1960

A friend and I found a coffee can of gasoline in the garage and decided to pour some down a manhole, light it, and see what would happen. We popped the manhole open, poured some gas in, and replaced the cover so that it was ajar. We kept throwing matches down but nothing happened, so we poured all the gas in. Finally, there was a noise like a jet engine starting up, and then a big *BOOM!* The manhole cover flew up and a flame shot up about fifteen feet in the air. The ground was rumbling like an earthquake, and the manhole cover crashed about twelve feet away in the neighbor’s driveway. What happened was the gas ran down the sewer lines for a block or so and vaporized with all the methane in there, and blew up all our neighbors’ toilets. I’m a plumber now; that’s how I know exactly what happened.

DAVE, WASHINGTON, B. 1952

I am blind, and as a kid sometimes I played with other blind kids. And we always found just as many, or more, ways to get into trouble as sighted boys. Like the time I was over at a blind friend’s house, and he took me into the garage to show me his older brother’s motorcycle. We decided to take it out for a spin. Why not? We rode down the street feeling for the curb, and at each intersection we’d stop, turn off the engine and listen, and then cross. We rode all the way to the high school track, where we could really let loose. First we piled up some dirt at the turns of the track so we’d feel the bump and know

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we were still on the track. Then we took off, going faster and faster and having a blast. What we didn't know was that people showed up to run on the track and were trying to wave us off. We couldn't hear them over the roar of the motorcycle engine and nearly ran them over. They called the police, who showed up and tried to wave us over too, but we kept going. Finally they got their sirens and bullhorns going and we stopped. They were furious and wouldn't believe us when we explained that we hadn't seen them. We proved we were blind by showing them our braille watches, and they escorted us home.

MIKE, CALIFORNIA, B. 1953⁴

As these stories illustrate, one of the scariest aspects of raising boys is their tendency to risk life and limb for no good reason. It begins very early. If a toddler can climb on it, he will jump off it. He careens out of control toward tables, tubs, pools, steps, trees, and streets. He will eat anything but food and loves to play in the toilet. He makes “guns” out of cucumbers or toothbrushes and likes digging around in drawers, pill bottles, and Mom's purse. And just hope he doesn't get his grubby little hands on a tube of lip-stick. A boy harasses grumpy dogs and picks up kitties by their ears. His mom has to watch him every minute to keep him from killing himself. He loves to throw rocks, play with fire, and shatter glass. He also gets great pleasure out of irritating his brothers and sisters, his mother, his teachers, and other children. As he gets older, he is drawn to everything dangerous—skateboards, rock climbing, hang gliding, motorcycles, and mountain bikes. At about sixteen, he and his buddies begin driving around town like kamikaze pilots on sake. It's a wonder any of them survive. Not every boy is like this, of course, but the majority of them are.

Canadian psychologist Barbara Morrongiello studied the different ways boys and girls think about risky behavior. Females, she said, tend to think hard about whether or not they could get hurt, and they are less likely to plunge ahead if there is any potential for injury. Boys, however, will take a chance if they think the danger is worth the risk. Impressing their friends (and eventually girls) is usually considered worth the risk. Morrongiello shared a story about a mother whose son climbed on the garage roof to retrieve a ball. When she asked him if he realized he could fall, he said, “Well, I might not.”⁵

A related study by Licette Peterson confirmed that girls are more fearful than boys are. For example, they brake sooner when riding their bikes. They react more negatively to pain and try not to make the same mistake twice. Boys, on the other hand, are slower to learn from calamities. They

tend to think that their injuries were caused by “bad luck.”⁶ Maybe their luck will be better next time. Besides, scars are cool.

Our son, Ryan, encountered one dangerous situation after another as a boy. By the time he was six, he was personally acquainted with many of the local emergency room attendants and doctors. And why not? He had been their patient repeatedly. One day when he was about four, he was running through the backyard with his eyes closed and fell into a decorative metal “plant.” One of the steel rods stuck him in the right eyebrow and exposed the bone underneath. He came staggering through the back door bathed in blood, a memory that still gives Shirley nightmares. Off they went to the trauma center—again. It could have been much worse, of course. If the trajectory of Ryan’s fall had been different by as much as a half inch, the rod would have hit him in the eye and gone straight to his brain. We have thanked God many times for the near misses.

I was also one of those kids who lived on the edge of disaster. When I was about ten, I was very impressed by the way Tarzan could swing through the trees from vine to vine. No one ever told me, “Don’t try this at home.” I climbed high into a pear tree one day and tied a rope to a small limb. Then I positioned myself for a journey to the next tree. Unfortunately, I made a small but highly significant miscalculation. The rope was longer than the distance from the limb to the ground. I kept thinking all the way down that something didn’t seem right. I was still gripping the rope when I landed flat on my back twelve feet below and knocked all the air out of the state of Oklahoma. I couldn’t breathe for what seemed like an hour (it must have been about ten seconds) and was sure I was dying. Two teeth were broken and a loud gonging sound echoed in my head. But later that afternoon, I was up and running again. No big deal.

The next year, I was given a chemistry set for Christmas. It contained no explosives or toxic materials, but in my hands, anything could be hazardous. I mixed some bright blue chemicals in a test tube and corked it tightly. Then I began heating the substance with a Bunsen burner. Very soon, the entire thing exploded. My parents had just finished painting the ceiling of my room a stark white. It was soon decorated with the most beautiful blue stuff, which remained splattered there for years. Such was life in the Dobson household.

It must be a genetic thing. I’m told my father was also a terror in his time. When he was a small boy, a friend dared him to crawl through a block-long drainpipe. He could only see a pinpoint of light at the other end, but he began inching his way into the darkness. Inevitably, I suppose, he became stuck somewhere in the middle. Claustrophobia swept over him as he struggled vainly to move. There he was, utterly alone and stranded in the pitch

black pipe. Even if adults had known about his predicament, they couldn't have reached him. Rescue workers would have had to dig up the entire pipe to locate and get him out. The boy who was to become my dad finally made it to the other end of the drain and survived, thankfully, to live another day.

Two more illustrations: My father and all of his four brothers were high-risk kids. The two eldest were twins. When they were only three years old, my grandmother was shelling beans for the night meal. As my grandfather left for work, he said within hearing distance of the children, "Don't let the kids put those beans up their noses." Bad advice! As soon as their mom's back was turned, they stuffed their nasal passages with beans. It was impossible for my grandmother to get them out, so she just left them there. A few days later, the beans began to sprout. Little green shoots were actually growing out their nostrils. A family doctor worked diligently to dig out the tiny plants one piece at a time.

And years later, the five boys stood looking at an impressive steeple on a church. One of them dared the others to climb the outer side and see if they could touch the very highest point. All four of them headed up the structure like monkeys. My father told me that it was nothing but the grace of God that prevented them from tumbling from the heights. It was just a normal day in the life of five rambunctious little boys.

What makes young males act like that? What inner force compels them to teeter on the edge of disaster? What is it about the masculine temperament that drives boys to tempt the laws of gravity and ignore the gentle voice of common sense—the one that says, "Don't do it, Son"? Boys are like this because of the way they are wired neurologically and because of the influence of hormones that stimulate certain aggressive behavior. We will explore those complex and powerful masculine characteristics in the next chapter. You can't understand males of any age, including yourself or the one to whom you might be married, without knowing something about the forces that operate within.

We want to help parents raise "good" boys in this postmodern age. The culture is at war with the family, especially its youngest and most vulnerable members. Harmful and enticing messages are shouted at them from movies and television, from the rock-music industry, from the advocates of so-called safe-sex ideology, from homosexual activists, and from the readily available obscenity on the Internet. The question confronting parents is, "How can we steer our boys *and* girls past the many negative influences that confront them on every side?" It is an issue with eternal implications.

Our purpose in this regard will be to assist mothers and fathers as they "play defense" on behalf of their sons—that is, as they protect their boys from immoral and dangerous enticements. But that is not enough. Parents

also need to “play offense”—to capitalize on the impressionable years of childhood by instilling in their sons the antecedents of character. Their assignment during two brief decades will be to transform their boys from immature and flighty youngsters into honest, caring men who will be respectful of women, loyal and faithful in marriage, keepers of commitments, strong and decisive leaders, good workers, and secure in their masculinity. And of course, the ultimate goal for people of faith is to give each child an understanding of Scripture and a lifelong passion for Jesus Christ. This is, I believe, *the* most important responsibility for those of us who have been entrusted with the care and nurturance of children.

Parents a century ago had a much better “fix” on these long-term objectives and how to achieve them. Some of their ideas are still workable today, and I will share them presently. I’ll also provide a review of the latest research on child development and parent-child relationships. My prayer is that the findings and recommendations gleaned from that body of information, combined with my own professional experience spanning more than thirty years, will offer encouragement and practical advice to those who pass this way.

So buckle your seat belts. We have a lot of interesting ground to cover. But first, here’s a little poem to get us started. It is taken from the lyrics to a song I love, sent to me by my friend Robert Wolgemuth. When Robert was a youngster, his mother, Grace Wolgemuth, sang “That Little Boy of Mine” to him and his siblings. I first heard it when Robert and his wife, Bobbie, sang it to my mother in a nursing home in 1983. It made all of us cry.

That Little Boy of Mine:

*Two eyes that shine so bright,
Two lips that kiss goodnite,
Two arms that hold me tight,
That little boy of mine.*

*No one could ever know how much your coming has
meant.*

*Because I love you so, you’re something heaven
has sent.*

*You’re all the world to me.
You climb upon my knee.
To me you’ll always be,
That little boy of mine.⁷*