

WILD THINGS

the art of nurturing boys

STEPHEN JAMES and DAVID THOMAS



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Wild Things: The Art of Nurturing Boys

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“David and Stephen have once again demonstrated the beauty and power of fraternal collaboration in their newest book, *Wild Things*. If I didn’t know otherwise, I would assume these two guys were granddads, not young dads, when I consider the depth of wisdom and breadth of practical applications captured between the covers of this volume. How I wish I’d had this book when my son was younger, yet the same principles of loving well are applicable from generation to generation. If you want hope and not hype, buy this book. It is a joy to unequivocally endorse it, and I look forward to putting it in the hands of many dads, and moms as well.”

—SCOTTY SMITH, founding pastor, Christ Community Church,
Franklin, Tennessee

“As a pediatrician, I see parents every day wrestling with how to understand and guide their sons. If you’re looking for practical parenting skills, these pages are filled with sound advice. The authors break down each stage of a boy’s journey, and the book is filled with effective, simple tips that you can implement now. This is one of the best parenting resources I’ve seen.”

— DR. LINDA BRADY, pediatrician, Nashville

“I loved this book! As a single mom for the past seven years, I couldn’t wait to dive into Stephen and David’s timely work. This mom of two wild things and two softer things needed their road map and driving instructions for the dangerous journey we are traveling. Bless you both for the wisdom you have given to me. May all our boys be nurtured and loved until they are the honorable men God intended for them to become.”

— ANGELA THOMAS, speaker and best-selling author of *My Single Mom Life*

“These two men are deep with an honesty that touches the heart without being sentimental. I am many years older, but not wiser; they simply offer truth that transforms my passions so that I walk away wanting to know God and amazed that he knows me.”

— DAN B. ALLENDER, PH.D., professor of counseling at Mars Hill Graduate School and the author of *How Children Raise Parents*

“God has entrusted a unique and powerful gift to David Thomas to understand the complex language of a boy’s heart and to help interpret it for those of us who love and lead boys. This is an important book about a very important subject.”

— STEVEN CURTIS CHAPMAN AND MARY BETH CHAPMAN

“David Thomas is a godsend! I cannot express how valuable he has been to the life of my son. His compassion and love for children is overwhelming. I know that this book will impact parents and children like no other. This is a must-read for every parent.”

— SARA EVANS, recording artist

*To all the boys and men who have allowed us to
travel with them on their dangerous journeys.*



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INTRODUCTION

“Wild Thing!”

*The night Max wore his wolf suit . . .
his mother called him “WILD THING!”*

MAURICE SENDAK, *Where the Wild Things Are*

A friend of ours tells the story of the family dog he had growing up. His name was Midnight (the dog, not our friend), and he was a mutt of indeterminate ancestry from the local animal shelter. From what they could tell, he was part black Lab, part English sheepdog, and part collie. As you might imagine, Midnight was big, black, and shaggy.

As our friend tells it, he and his brother had been assigned the task of repainting the white picket fence that ran around their rather large front yard. It was the first week of summer break, and this chore seemed like unusually cruel punishment by the

standards of an eleven-year-old boy and his thirteen-year-old brother, given that they hadn't done anything wrong.

Their parents had left for work that day with the expectation that the fence would be painted by supper. By late morning, the sun was beating down, and the boys were bored silly with only half the job done. Their frustration had turned into griping about the task at hand and discussing how they would spend the rest of the summer once the work was completed. Midnight, minding his own business, was curled up in the only shade he could find, under the porch.

Shortly before noon, our friend had what he thought was an entertaining idea. "You know what would be funny . . ." he said.

Armed with their paintbrushes and a can of white paint, the brothers ambushed Midnight. Before the dog knew what had happened, he looked like Pepé Le Pew's big brother. "A giant skunk dog," our friend recalls. As the two brothers were admiring their handiwork, their father came home on his lunch hour to check on their progress. What he found was a half-painted fence, a frightened black (and now white-striped) dog running around the yard, and his sons rolling on the lawn in laughter. "There were," as our friend puts it, "great reparations to be paid."

The award-winning children's book *Where the Wild Things Are*, by Maurice Sendak, tells a similar story of a mischievous and imaginative young boy named Max, who one evening storms through his home in a wolf costume, "making mischief." In short order, he builds a tent with a blanket, lynches his teddy bear, chases the dog with a fork, and threatens to eat his mother. As punishment, Max is sent to bed without supper. But that's only the beginning of the story. Off in his room, Max creates a world in which he explores distant lands, encounters strange monsters, and becomes a king. Eventually, he returns home to where he is loved and a warm dinner awaits him.

The themes in Sendak’s classic children’s tale paint a great picture of the world of boys—how they are made, what they are made for, and what they need. Every boy faces a long and intricate journey on his way to becoming a man. This journey encompasses physical, emotional, and spiritual changes, and it takes place as much, or more, on the inside as it does on the outside. The journey is perilous, costly, and fraught with uncertainty.

The Treacherous Journey

Plato, the ancient Greek philosopher, writes, “Of all animals, the boy is the most unmanageable, inasmuch as he has the fountain of reason in him not yet regulated.”¹

Can we get an *amen*?

As a general rule, boys are more difficult to rear than girls. They are tougher to parent. They are tougher to teach. They are tougher to relate with. They are tougher to mentor and coach. The wise and witty journalist G. K. Chesterton said it this way: “Boyhood is a most complex and incomprehensible thing. Even when one has been through it, one does not understand what it was. A man can never quite understand a boy, even when he has been the boy.”²

Though we may never fully understand boys, and it will never be our goal to try to tame them, we can do a better job of coming alongside them and helping them on their treacherous journey to becoming men.

That’s why we’ve written this book. *Wild Things* illuminates the world of boys and the role of the adults in their lives. If you’re a parent, educator, counselor, or mentor, it will give you important insights for guiding the boys you love on their journey toward

manhood. Anyone involved in the life of a boy must take this calling seriously—if you care about boys and their future.

Wild Things is built on a few basic but very important ideas:

- All children are a divine gift. Boys are no exception.
- Boys bear a unique image of our wild, playful, and imaginative Creator.³
- How boys are nurtured directly affects who they will grow into as men.
- How boys are designed often requires a different approach from what we would take with girls, if they are to find their way and mature into noble men.
- Boys are (more than) a little squirrelly—but a whole lot of fun.

There is a lot that goes into the makeup of a boy: physiology, genetics, culture, emotions, spirituality, snips and snails and puppy dog tails, and so on. Boys are very complicated—much more complicated than we often give them credit for being. It would be impossible to exhaustively examine every possible aspect of boyhood, but in *Wild Things* we tackle as many as we can, and enough to give you some solid guidance in your role as parent, teacher, or mentor to boys. We’ve done our best to put together a comprehensive look at boys that will inform and prepare you to engage the boy(s) in your life with wisdom, love, and confidence.

Art and Nurture

We hope you’ve taken note of the subtitle for *Wild Things*—“The Art of Nurturing Boys.” This isn’t just a random phrase or something dreamed up by our publisher’s marketing department.

Instead, it captures, in just a few words, the essence of our approach to working with boys. Though much of our experience comes in clinical settings as counselors—or in our own homes—we’ve learned that raising boys is more of an art than a science. Certainly, there are principles we can apply to the challenge of developing boys into men, but it takes a certain amount of finesse and creativity to do it well.

One of the ways this book may be a bit different from other books about boys is that we approach the material with teachers’ hearts. We don’t offer a black-and-white list of dos and don’ts for rearing boys; instead, we create a framework that will help you engage, guide, and walk with the boy you love throughout his life. Nurturing boys is far too complex to be boiled down to a bullet list of dos and don’ts. It’s much more personal, individualized, and artistic.

That’s why we prefer the term *nurture* over words such as *mold*, *shape*, or *sculpt*. *Nurture* means “to give tender care and protection to a child, . . . helping [him or her] to grow and develop; to encourage somebody or something to grow, develop, thrive, and be successful.”⁴ Nurturing is an important concept when we consider how to engage with boys, as opposed to “instructing” or “teaching”—which are important, too, but not enough. We know it’s nitpicky, but concepts such as “molding,” “shaping,” or “sculpting” suggest that we actually have the ability to *make* boys turn out the way we want them to. That’s arguable. And even if we could, is that what’s best for them? That is why we think “nurturing” is a better mind-set. It first takes into account who a boy is created to be, and then looks secondarily at our role as influencers on that design. In the classic nature vs. nurture debate, we like to say, “It’s our job to nurture the nature.” Boys need us first to recognize who they are. Then they need the help of wise and committed adults in navigating their way from boyhood to manhood.

Three Perspectives

There are many ways to define what a boy is and what a boy needs. Thus, we have divided *Wild Things* into three parts, each one looking from a different perspective at what it means to nurture boys. Together, the three parts offer an integrated, holistic view.

Part 1, “The Way of a Boy,” takes a largely developmental view of boys from conception to manhood. It provides a chronological and topographical road map of the journey a boy must take on his way to manhood. Part 2, “The Mind of a Boy,” looks closely at male neurology and physiology. We touch on areas such as brain development, learning styles, and other key physiological issues that affect the life of a boy. Part 3, “The Heart of a Boy,” addresses the emotional, spiritual, and moral development that a boy needs if he is to become a strong, wise, and good man.

Throughout the book, we have included sidebar articles with helpful tips, important reminders, and excellent resources for parents, educators, mentors, and coaches. We also provide a lot of real-life examples—both personal stories and stories about boys and men we have worked with in our counseling practices.⁵

Your Guides for the Journey

Unless you’ve already read our other books, you might be wondering who we are and why we’re writing this book. For starters, we are both practicing counselors who have made the nurturing of boys a large part of our life’s work. Though we have somewhat different training and areas of expertise, we share a common calling and a profound passion for boys and the men they become.

More importantly, we both have skin in the game—with five sons among the seven children between our two families. So this topic is deeply personal for us as well.

Through his clinical practice, individual therapy, group counseling, and summer camps at Daystar Counseling Ministries in Nashville, David has worked with thousands of boys and their families as they have struggled with the issues and challenges of boyhood.⁶

Stephen works as a private-practice psychotherapist, teaches classes on marriage and parenting, and has served as a pastor.

Much of the content of this book was developed from a class called Nurturing Boys that David regularly teaches. Over the past several years, he has helped hundreds of parents, mentors, and educators grapple with the difficult task of living with boys, guiding them during their formative years, and launching them into manhood.

If you are a parent or a grandparent, we thank you for caring enough (or maybe you're simply desperate enough) to better prepare yourself for what the boys in your life need. If you are a teacher or a youth worker, we applaud you for going the extra mile to continue to grow in your ability to do your job well.

Our combined experience confirms that boys are indeed a different breed. And if we as parents, teachers, and mentors are to serve boys well, we must engage with them—and with the challenge of nurturing them—with as much of our hearts and minds as possible. To do that, we must be willing, able, and prepared to venture into the far-off land that Maurice Sendak dubbed “where the wild things are.”

Part 1



The Way of a Boy

“And now,” cried Max, “let the wild rumpus start!”

MAURICE SENDAK, *Where the Wild Things Are*

One evening, I (Stephen) was giving my three-year-old twins a bath when I stepped out for a second to answer the phone. I was gone for less than a minute when I ran and got the phone. As I was hurrying back down the hall, I heard laughter and then a loud *thump!* When I raced into the bathroom, I was shocked by what I found: a seventy-pound mound of preschool flesh flopping on the tile floor like two mackerel on the deck of a fishing boat. Henry and Teddy were engaged in a no-holds-barred wrestling match. Water and bubbles were everywhere. Walls. Ceiling. Vanity. Mirrors. Light fixtures. Door. From where they lay, the boys looked up at me with delight in their eyes and squeals of joy.

“Daddy, watch!” one of them exclaimed. “We have big fun!”

In the brief moment that I was away retrieving the phone, my twins had created a SeaWorld-quality water park right there in the bathroom.

In *Where the Wild Things Are*, Maurice Sendak captures well the wildness and imagination of boys. Soon after being confirmed as king of the wild things, Max declares an edict to the beasts: “Let the wild rumpus start!” What ensues is a wild dance and frolic, including howling and swinging and prancing, reminiscent of a tribal war dance mixed with a punk-rock mosh pit. Sendak got it mostly right. All that was missing were the bathtub, water, and soapsuds.

What’s Normal

For as long as we have been working with boys and parents of boys, we have been asked the question, “Is this normal?” hundreds, if not thousands, of times. Usually, what is behind the question is a deeper, scarier concern that parents have: “Is *my* son normal?” Most often, the answer is yes, and much of the parents’ fears and concerns can be allayed by good information and education. But whenever boys are in the equation, you may have to broaden your definition of *normal*. (This is especially true for women.) Once you have a boy in your life, things you never dreamed of become normal.

With boys, you will find yourself saying things and hearing things that you never thought needed to be said or heard. Like the night my (Stephen’s) wife had to insist to our two-year-old twins that “sixteen times is really enough washing to get your penis clean.” Or the day one of my sons screamed from the bathroom, “Guys! Come see how big my poop is!” As a caregiver to boys, you

will be blown away by how many thousands of times you will have to say things such as, “Please keep your feet to yourself” or “Don’t lick the floor” or “Hey! Farting is for private.”

Boys are quite their own creatures, yet there’s much about the way they respond to their environment, themselves, and others that can be explained by the various stages of their development. Understanding how boys develop is foundational to our ability to care for our boys well, and it can diminish our worries and concerns as our boys pass through the different stages. (It also can help us sound really smart at PTA meetings.)

The progression of a boy from infant to twentysomething is much more fluid than solid, and far more gray than black-and-white. Even to say that the categories overlap would be too concrete. It’s much more accurate to look at a boy’s development as a spectrum (like a rainbow), with all the colors bleeding into and through the rest.

It’s important to understand male development in these flexible and fluid terms, because what’s present and needed in a boy’s life at age two doesn’t disappear by the time he’s five or twelve; rather, it becomes part of a bigger whole. It’s not uncommon to find toddler-typical behavior present in adolescents (or forty-year-old men, for that matter). Equally so, there are several identity-forming stages within the span of boyhood that are similar to one another.

What a boy needs at age three (boundaries, for example) doesn’t go away as he gets older. It’s just that he might need more of something else at age five (such as redirection) or ages nine or ten (involvement).

The older a boy gets, the more he needs from his caregivers. This perspective is different from that held by other, more traditional, views of child development that assume or suggest a boy needs less from his parents as he becomes a teenager and then

a man. In actuality, the older a boy gets, the more complex and dynamic his needs become. His needs move from primarily physical (birth to age three) to increasingly more relational, emotional, and spiritual.

This is not to say there isn't a progression from one stage to the next, because there is. And it's our job as caregivers to help our boys move from one stage to the next. It's important to understand that what a boy gets, or doesn't get, at one stage of his development will directly affect how well he will transition to the next stage. The reason that so many men struggle relationally, emotionally, and spiritually is not a lack of intelligence or morality. It's the effects of having not reached key developmental milestones; of being rushed through one stage to another; or of simply skipping entire stages altogether. Here's how John Eldredge puts it in *The Way of the Wild Heart*:

Each stage has its lessons to be learned, and each stage can be wounded, cut short, leaving the growing man with an undeveloped soul. Then we wonder why he folds suddenly when he is forty-five, like a tree we find toppled in the yard after a night of strong winds. We go over to have a look and find that its roots hadn't sunk down deep into the earth, or perhaps that it was rotten on the inside, weakened by disease or drought. Such are the insides of Unfinished Men.¹

Sadly, this condition is not uncommon. Every man is unfinished in some form or fashion. To one degree or another, we are all boys in men's bodies, dressed up and disguised with costumes of masculinity—Harleys or pickup trucks or bank accounts or families or careers. For some men, the developmental deficits are more

severe than for others. The danger is that we might become “self-made,” which is really the worst kind of man we could become, because it tempts us to rely on our own paltry resources and inhibits us from trusting others and God.

What Eldredge refers to as “unfinished,” psychologists call “developmental lags.” We believe that these “lags” are better understood as developmental *short circuits*, in which some part of a boy’s wiring gets overloaded and shuts down. Fortunately, most boys find a way to rewire or compensate for the deficits.

Often, these developmental short circuits (when they’re not physiological in nature) are caused by some kind of significant emotional or relational shift. For example, I (David) see a number of boys in my counseling practice whose families are in a shift of some kind. The most common shift is that of parents’ separating or divorcing (which on the scale of shifts is more like an earthquake). I’ve also worked with several boys who have lost a parent to death (which on the shift scale is like California, after the earthquake, falling into the ocean). These are two of the most significant shifts a boy can experience, and the impact can either slow down or halt his emotional development or cause him to skip right over a stage and assume more authority or responsibility than he is prepared to handle.

When seismic shifts occur in a boy’s life, our job as caregivers is to jump-start his development and help him play catch-up for any time he has lost. We may need to help him go back and rewire the important things that he should have experienced or acquired during those “shifted” stages. For some boys, this is a slow and painful process; for others, the journey is not as lengthy or as difficult. A lot depends on factors such as the support of family members, community resources, the child’s level of emotional resilience, the circumstances surrounding the transition, birth order, age, and so on.

A shift doesn't have to be as traumatic as divorce or death to have a significant impact. It can be uniquely significant to the individual boy. For some boys, a move from one neighborhood to another can be a huge transition. For other boys, moving from one state to another doesn't register as a blip on the radar screen. Losing a game can be as traumatic as losing a family pet, depending on the surrounding factors and the boy in question.

A lag in physical growth is another common factor that can affect a boy's progression through the stages of development. Dealing with growth lags often requires the assistance of a physical or occupational therapist as a part of a team of individuals caring for the boy. Early intervention is always best. We have encountered too many parents of adolescent boys who observed some kind of lag early in the boy's life but assumed it would work itself out and never sought help. The outcome could have looked different had early intervention been a part of the equation.

Developmental short circuits and lags can be temporary or permanent. But they should all be monitored closely. If you sense that a boy in your care has slowed down, halted, backtracked, or skipped a stage in his psychological or physical development, get him the appropriate help. You may want to talk with a professional—such as a pediatrician, an educational consultant, or a school guidance counselor—or consider a consultation with a family therapist who specializes in boys and adolescents.

In the next five chapters, we provide some categories for understanding how boys progress on their developmental journeys.

- The Explorer (ages 2–4)
- The Lover (ages 5–8)
- The Individual (ages 9–12)
- The Wanderer (ages 13–17)
- The Warrior (ages 18–22)

What we have outlined here is an amalgamation of many other developmental theories, views, and opinions. We've tried to lay things out and explain them in a way that will provide some clarity. We also hope to offer you some signposts for identifying your boy's progress on his journey to manhood—and maybe help you stay a little saner, to boot.

We have assigned age ranges to each stage of development, but these are only loose parameters. Maybe you should repeat that last clause out loud, so that you're certain to hear it: *These are only loose parameters*. Each boy will take the journey to manhood at his own pace. Some will seem to race through the stages. Others will take it in fits and starts. And a few will meander along like . . . well, like a boy in a toy store, with no intention of ever leaving. It's our job as parents, educators, coaches, mentors, youth workers, and counselors to help our boys along the way by knowing where they are and by giving them what they need.

We're all familiar with boys who seemed mature or exceptional at an early age (emotionally, intellectually, or physically) only to be “average” by the time they reached high school. In our counseling practices, we have worked with boys who developed slowly for several stages and then suddenly “caught up” with their peers. Likewise, we have seen boys reach a particular stage and slow down for a season, only to pick up steam again later. It is far more important for a boy to embrace each stage as fully as possible than to be forced to fit into a fixed age bracket.

To help you make the best use of the information and fully benefit from part 1, we have divided each chapter into four sections:

1. The Lay of the Land
2. Who He Is
3. What He Needs
4. Putting the Principles into Practice

In the first section of each chapter, “The Lay of the Land,” we will give you an overview of the developmental stage and a general picture of what boys are like at that point on the journey. The second part, “Who He Is,” will address some key characteristics and features of boys at that stage of development. The third section, “What He Needs,” will specifically address what a boy at that stage requires from those responsible for guiding him on his journey toward manhood. The final portion of each chapter, “Putting the Principles into Practice,” will give you some practical direction for how to constructively engage with your boy at each stage of his development.

CHAPTER 1

The Explorer

(ages 2–4)

From the ages of two to four, three of our sons attended preschool together. When they were in Ms. Becky’s four-year-old class, Witt and Baker (David’s boys), and Stephen’s son Elijah invented a game that they acted out on the playground. They called it “Star Wars,” but it had nothing to do with Luke Skywalker, Han Solo, or Darth Vader, because the boys hadn’t yet seen the movie series. What it did entail was our three sons terrorizing the other children on the playground—in particular a little girl named Lea. They would taunt her and shoot lasers from their fingers at her until she’d had enough. Then she would chase them, and they would run and hide.

Humorist Garrison Keillor paints an accurate picture of this unique aspect of boys:

Girls . . . were allowed to play in the house . . . and boys were sent outdoors. . . . Boys ran around in the yard with toy guns going *kkssh-kkssh*, fighting wars for made-up reasons and arguing about who was dead, while girls stayed inside and played with dolls, creating complex family groups and learning how to solve problems through negotiation and role-playing.¹

We all recognize that boys and girls are not the same. But what is the basis for these striking differences?

The Lay of the Land

The journey of boyhood actually begins before birth. Even while in his mother's womb, a boy is remarkably different from a girl. And these differences will have a great impact on every aspect of his life.

Dr. George Lazarus, associate clinical professor of pediatrics at Columbia University, points out that the differences between boys and girls are evident even in the blastocyst stage—one of the earliest stages of development.² At the fetal stage, testosterone levels in boys reach adult intensity, which influences the development of the male brain.³ As early as the eighth week of gestation, boys are bigger than girls. On average, full-term boys weigh 131 grams (4.6 ounces.) more than infant girls in the United States, and the disparity just expands from there. By the time boys are a year old, the 131-gram difference has ballooned to almost 800 grams (28.2 ounces).⁴

The differences aren't just physical. It's probably no surprise that, from birth, boys are more active and wakeful than girls. Girls, on the other hand, show a greater aptitude for communicating and are more sensitive to relationships, compared to boys. At birth, all babies born in hospitals are given an Apgar score. This tool, used to evaluate a newborn's well-being minutes after birth, consists of five components: respiratory effort, heart rate, reflex irritability, muscle tone, and color. In preterm infant girls, Apgar scores are significantly higher than those of boys.⁵ This suggests that girls are more sensitive and responsive earlier than boys are.

One study involving two- to four-day-old babies showed that baby boys spent 50 percent less time than baby girls holding eye contact with an adult. It has also been discovered that infant girls cry less often than boys when unhappy and that girls tend to comfort themselves by sucking their thumbs.⁶ Anne Moir and David Jessel report in their book *Brain Sex* that in tests between baby boys and baby girls, the girls were more easily comforted by soothing words and singing. It seems that girls are better than boys at recognizing the *emotion* of speech even before they can understand language.⁷

From birth, both baby boys and girls like to grunt and gurgle. The difference is that girls prefer interacting with people, whereas boys are equally happy to chatter away at nearby toys or abstract geometric designs. The male brain is wired for activity; the female brain is biased toward personal connections.⁸

Before my (David's) daughter was born, some friends hosted a baby shower for us, and we received numerous gifts—everything from a Baby Bjorn carrying pouch to a year's supply of diapers in every size. One of the items we received was a kit containing every item a family would ever need for baby proofing their home—cabinet fasteners, outlet plugs, doorknob protectors, etc. I remember looking at the kit and thinking, *I had no idea our home was so dangerous.*

I remember finding that kit somewhere in the basement about six

months after my daughter came on the scene. I brought it upstairs and then managed to lose it somewhere in the laundry room. (But at least it was now upstairs.) I found the kit again just after my daughter turned one, and I vowed to baby proof our home, as any responsible parent would. My daughter had long been crawling, exploring, and finding her way around the house. By this point, she was walking (or something like it), and what was interesting was that every time she found an object on the floor, she would make her way over to my wife or me to proudly share her new discovery. We called it toddler show-and-tell. It never occurred to her to put one of Connie's ponytail holders up her nose or stick paper clips in her ears. She was content to explore the object and then hand it over to one of us.

She often opened the kitchen cabinets, but she never attempted to drink the antibacterial kitchen cleaner or stick her finger in an electrical outlet. Despite being encouraged in our childbirth education class to post the number for poison control on the fridge, we never quite got around to it. We never mapped out the quickest route to the emergency room, and my daughter has never required a trip there. Though I'm certified in CPR, I've never needed to remember the ratio of breaths to compressions. Parenting my daughter has been a relatively safe and peaceful journey.

Her brothers, on the other hand, are completely different beasts. I don't remember how many months old they were before they learned to climb out of their cribs; I just remember waking to the sound of a loud *thud* followed by screaming. I don't remember which of my twins first pulled the blinds off the wall; I just know I've replaced the brackets on several occasions. I've lost count of how many times they've broken the toilet seat by slamming it down or yanking it off the screws. (I kid you not.) One of my boys had been in preschool only for a short time before the school called to say that he had bashed his head open and would likely need stitches.

I've replaced doorknobs, mirrors, cabinet hardware, clocks,

lamps, stereos, televisions, picture frames, bath faucets, consoles, refrigerator doors, kitchen appliances, dishes, glassware, bath towels, couches, ottomans, and chairs, and I've had the walls repainted—all before they turned five.

Who He Is: The Explorer

About as soon as they can walk and talk with some proficiency, boys move into what we call the Explorer phase. It's a time when they show a greater interest than girls in exploring the edges of their worlds. A boy's greater muscle mass helps him explore and range farther afield than girls. And boys make fewer trips back to the reassurance of their mothers. One bit of research really illuminates the difference between preschool boys and girls. Scientists performed a test in which a barrier was placed across the room separating a young child from his or her mother. The girls tended to stand at the center of the barrier and cry for Mommy to come and get them. The boys moved to the edge of the obstacle to see if there was a way around it. And some boys even tried to knock it down and climb over it.⁹

For my (Stephen's) oldest son, Elijah, this difference was abundantly evident. When he was born, Elijah entered a highly emotional and sensitive culture. He was brought home to parents who are both counselors, and a very caring older sister. But from the time he could toddle, Elijah was more at home in the dirt than on the asphalt. If we were walking on the sidewalk, Elijah would veer off into the mulch or mud that paralleled the pathway. Watching him walk on flowers and climb over mounds of muck, Heather and I joked that Elijah would go "off road" whenever possible.

In the Explorer stage, a boy's ability to form images and ideas in his mind—especially of things he has never seen or experienced

directly—is powerful and fascinating. As Explorers, boys live in their imaginations as much or more than they do in “reality.” Unable yet to separate fantasy from reality, they live in a fairy-tale world.

To his mother’s dismay, all Elijah wanted for his fourth birthday was a laser gun. (Hadn’t we learned that boys shouldn’t play with toy guns?) But after Elijah had demonstrated multiple ways to create guns out of ordinary objects (such as a piece of bread at lunch or a stick in the yard), we acquiesced, and on his birthday he got a Star Wars Imperial Blaster. By the time Eli turned five, his room was full of swords and shields, superhero comic books, a toy bow and arrows, spaceships, laser guns, cannons, and photon blasters. With little encouragement (and sometimes outright discouragement) from his parents, Elijah became caught up in the epic struggle between good and evil, and almost every aspect of his play reflected the hunger for adventure and exploration.

There are some key expressions of a boy in the Explorer stage that make this stage of development one of the most entertaining and challenging for parents. Explorers are simultaneously delightful and demanding. Their moods swing on a dime, and nothing compares to the joy that overcomes them when they make a new discovery. Boys who are in the Explorer stage are *active*, *aggressive*, *curious*, and *self-determined*. Let’s take a closer look at each of these characteristics.

ACTIVE

Explorers are bundles of energy. Like little Energizer bunnies, they keep going and going and going. That cute little infant or toddler you once could hold for hours on end is now a squirmy, fidgety, active ball of motion. As parents and caregivers, we spend much of our time chasing Explorers around, up, down, over, and through.

When it comes to discipline, Explorers are often stubborn learners. There's good reason for this. The Explorer's brain secretes less serotonin than the brain of a similar-age girl. Among other things, serotonin works as an impulse-control agent and is responsible for inhibiting some of the aggressive effects of testosterone.

Afton, the son of one of my (David's) colleagues, is a classic Explorer. When he comes to the office, he climbs the chairs, the cabinets, the couches. During the holidays, he found the Christmas tree and attempted to scale it in an effort to pull off candy canes. One day, while his mom was returning a phone call, he made his way into the waiting room, scaled a chair onto an art table, and helped himself to a bucketful of permanent markers. Before he was corralled again, he painted some fascinating marks across his cheeks, forehead, and chin, like a miniature Apache war chief. When I saw what he had done, I bowed and saluted him like the great Native American chief he'd made himself out to be, and he smiled and laughed throughout the ritual, pleased with his efforts.

AGGRESSIVE

All the activity in an Explorer's life helps to fuel another common feature of this developmental stage: *aggression*. As strange as it sounds, boys in the Explorer stage demonstrate love and affection through wrestling, head butting, and sometimes even hitting. Now that's not to say they don't also hug, kiss, and cuddle, but it does show that aggression as a male form of intimacy starts early. (Ever see two grown men jump up and slam their chests into each other as a means of celebrating a touchdown? Classic residual Explorer behavior.)

The Explorer's aggression can be an emotional response and a means of communication. At times, by being aggressive, Explorers will signal to us that they are overstimulated. It's their way of

telling the adults around them that the environment is simply too much to handle at a given moment—which is why tantrums are common with Explorers. Losing his grip can be an Explorer’s way of saying, “I’m tired” or “I’m hungry.”

CURIOUS

One of the more economical decisions made in my (David’s) household started when my sons turned two. We began wrapping up old cell phones, calculators, and remote controls for them at Christmas and for their birthday. We tried the educational toy route, believe me. But regardless of what fantastic, cleverly designed gizmo we purchased and placed in front of them, my sons always found their way back to those common household objects. They would stare at the colored buttons, examining the various shapes and sizes, and then they’d punch away with force and delight. The exploration was considered a success if they could hit the side bar that changed the tone and volume of the ring.

Explorers are deeply curious. Investigation is the means through which they discover and engage the world around them. In the beginning of their development, boys are kinesthetic learners, meaning they need to touch and feel everything. In this phase, you’ll hear things like “Let me see!” (which means “I want to hold it!”) or the ever-popular “Why?” If you have ever walked with an Explorer through a store, then you have witnessed his need to touch, handle, and study every object he sees.

SELF-DETERMINED

Explorers are self-determined and desire to do things independent of other people. That’s why parents at this stage hear so much of “Mine!” and “I can do it myself.” Explorers need to be given

an opportunity to do some tasks independently. If not, they will become more and more demanding.

Throughout this book, we will discuss a boy's hunger for purpose and power. When we afford him the opportunity to exercise power and control in certain areas that are safe (and minimal, in the big scheme of things), we honor a developmental and emotional need of his. When we deny him some opportunities and turn every exchange into a power play, we function in opposition to some of his basic needs.

Instead of telling Afton to stop climbing all the time, my colleague simply finds safe places within our office for him to exercise his need for being active as well as his desire for self-determination. She's a great mom, who understands that his need to be active, aggressive, curious, and self-determined are all part of his developmental journey.

What He Needs: Space and Structure

At his core, the Explorer has an energetic drive to understand how things work and how his world operates. Because Explorers are marked with specific characteristics (such as being active, aggressive, curious, and self-determined), they also come with a unique set of needs. Most of what an Explorer needs from his parents and his caregivers comes in the form of discipline, structure, and patience. For a boy to thrive as an Explorer, he requires *boundaries, open space, consistency, and understanding*.

BOUNDARIES

"Mine!" the three-and-a-half-year-old screamed. "Mine!" Arms flailing and feet stomping, he pushed and shoved his little sister. Then he fell to the floor, crying, in a full-blown tantrum.

Match an Explorer's activity level and aggression with his curiosity and determination, and you've got a lot on your hands. Because of where he is in his development, an Explorer is incapable of self-regulating. He needs help in setting limits. Perhaps the Explorer's number one need is that of boundaries.

Explorers will push their limits—they're explorers, after all—and this can be a trying part of dealing with boys at this age, but they do need boundaries. Boundaries help a boy feel safe and let him know what he can and cannot do. He depends on the external parameters that come from attentive, caring adults. It's in the context of these loving boundaries that a bond grows between a boy and his caregiver. This responsiveness from his caregiver helps the Explorer's brain develop the capacity for creating and maintaining healthy emotional relationships.

A common mistake that parents make with Explorers is to place unrealistic expectations on them to control their own behavior. Requiring high levels of self-control at this stage only sets up an Explorer for failure. This is *the one part* of the journey of boyhood where we need to expect less from boys and be pleasantly surprised when they self-regulate. We are not suggesting that you have no expectations, just realistic ones.

A common example of an unrealistic expectation is asking an Explorer to be quiet or still for an extended period of time. This is impossible for most Explorers. A more productive and reasonable way to set boundaries for an Explorer is to redirect his energy toward usefulness. For example, rather than say, "Stop hitting," say, "It's not okay to hit your sister, but it *is* okay for you to hit the tree with a bat." Here are a few more examples:

"It's not okay to pound the coffee table with your Lincoln Logs, but it is okay for you to punch your pillow."

“I notice that you seem fidgety. Let’s see how many times you can climb up and down the stairs in two minutes.”

“You can’t be that loud in the house, but you are free to go to the basement or the backyard and be as loud as you want.”

Another unrealistic expectation for an Explorer is asking him to pick up his toys by himself. This is an impossible task for almost every boy at this stage. What an Explorer needs is for the adult to join him in the activity. One suggestion is to try making a game of it or turning it into a race against the clock. With an older Explorer, you can ask him to individually gather up one item—such as his blocks or a stack of loose crayons—and when that chore is complete, give him another task. As Explorers transition out of this stage, they become ready for more individual responsibility, but the primary responsibilities we have toward Explorers is to draw boundaries and guide and redirect their energy.

OPEN SPACE

As we’ve mentioned, Explorers are active and aggressive, which can be the cause of many behavioral issues with boys at this stage of development. As adult caretakers, we can head off a lot of potential problems (or broken lamps) by providing Explorers with plenty of open space. All boys, especially Explorers, need identified stations within the house and yard where it’s safe to run, hit, kick, throw, spit, fart, dig, and jump. Boys need room to run and be wild. Explorers tend to get in the most trouble when they are in a confined space for an extended period of time. Preschool educators consistently say that rainy days are the kiss of death. They understand well the oil-and-water relationship of confined space and young boys.

My (David's) friend Micah is the mother of five. The first four are boys, and her youngest is a girl. Early in the game, Micah realized that in order to maintain her sanity, she needed a strategy for channeling the intensity, aggression, and activity involved in having that much testosterone under one roof. She implemented what she called "race time." Race time took place whenever the need arose—rain or shine, warm or freezing, day or night. She marched her little fellas out the front door to the steps, lined them up, and raised a flag. Then this little pack of boys would start running laps around the house, and Micah would count every time they crossed the sidewalk. When she wanted to mix things up, she placed obstacles on the sides of the house or in back. She could also require them to run backwards every other lap. The boys loved it—and Micah did too.

CONSISTENCY

Explorers are internally unstructured and inconsistent. Most Explorers have an attention span of only eight to fifteen minutes.

Explorers need a great deal of consistency from their parents. They thrive on structure and consistency. Preschool educators understand this, which is why they have children at this stage follow the exact same ritual every day. Music happens at the same time; recess is at the same time; stations are visited at the same time. They even visit the bathroom and wash their hands at the same time every day. This kind of consistency brings order and peace to the internal world of an Explorer.

Another way to be consistent with a boy in this bracket is to appeal to all of his senses. When you address him, make tactile contact (touch his back, shoulder, or the top of his head) while you issue the verbal command (and say his name with

the instructions). Also, make visual contact by looking him in the eye as you speak. For example, “John [touch his shoulder], please go to the kitchen and put this in the garbage.” You may be surprised how much more information sticks with an Explorer when you keep your requests short and make tactile and visual contact with him.

UNDERSTANDING

Last year, just after New Year’s, I (Stephen) held a family meeting with my wife and our older two children to discuss some family changes for the upcoming year. We met during naptime for my twin two-year-old sons and talked about a variety of things, ranging from finances to ministry outreach, that affected our family. During the meeting, it became increasingly more difficult for Elijah (who was four at the time) to maintain focus, so I allowed him to walk around the room at different points and then report back when the conversation more directly involved him.

An Explorer needs for his adult caretakers to understand that his wiring differs from that of his female counterparts. Therefore, our expectations should be different. We’ve already mentioned how the female brain secretes more serotonin, making it easier for young girls to sit still and be less impulsive in their decision making. In chapter 6, we will discuss in greater depth the differences between male and female brain chemistry. But for now, suffice to say that boys need for us to understand the uniqueness of their wiring and to respond to them accordingly. For example, with an Explorer, we must be more concrete and directive in our communication. Boys get lost in a lot of verbiage. We’ve found that Explorers do better when we make our requests very specific, instead of using a lot of words and asking a lot of questions.

Likewise, Explorers are more responsive when we give them a command rather than ask a question. Instead of saying, “Now, where should the dirty clothes go once you take them off? Do they go on the floor or in the dirty-clothes basket?” we should simply say, “Put your dirty clothes in the basket.” This approach sounds somewhat disarming, but it’s actually quite useful. Training a young boy is not much different from training a dog.

Putting the Principles into Practice

Explorers need choices and responsibility, boundaries, and lots of opportunities to succeed. The following are some suggestions for how to put these principles into practice with an Explorer:

TIP 1: Don’t confuse him. Explorers can’t process abstract ideas, so be specific and set clear, realistic boundaries: “You can play on the computer for twenty minutes. I will set the timer on the oven. When it goes off, you have five minutes to finish what you’re doing and turn off the computer.”

TIP 2: Limit his choices. Explorers need a limited selection of things to do that will help them burn energy and give them a sense of success: “We are going to clean for fifteen minutes. Do you want to dust the furniture, sweep the floor, or pick up toys?”

When my (Stephen’s) boys were this age, they loved to clean doorknobs. My wife would give them a disinfectant cloth, and away they would go—happy little guys. With Explorers, the point is not that they have to do a good job with the task at hand (they probably

won't), but that you are setting the foundation of what you will expect at later stages.

TIP 3: Anticipate changes, and announce transitions in the daily routine.

"Today will be a little different. We are going to _____ today."

"You have five more minutes to play; then we are going to read a book and you are going to take a nap."

TIP 4: Set a few straightforward rules that everyone can consistently follow.

"We are kind. We don't hurt people or things."

"We always tell the truth. We do not lie."

"We are helpful and obedient. We are not disruptive or disobedient."

Have your boy define what being "helpful" and "obedient" means to him. Ask him to give you one example for each, to make sure he has a clear, age-appropriate understanding of the terms.

TIP 5: Demonstrate how you would like him to behave.

"Watch how carefully I turn the pages of the book."

"Let's see how gently we can love on baby brother."

TIP 6: Have your discipline make sense. It's important to use logical consequences that boys can connect to their actions: "Remember, I asked you not to throw balls in the living room. You can throw balls only in the playroom or outside. Because you threw the ball in the living room, I'm going to put it up in the closet for the rest of the day."

TIP 7: Give him space to roam. Turn him outside every day, regardless of the weather or temperature, and take him to a park or indoor playground at least once a week.

TIP 8: Model self-control and self-regulation in your words

and actions when you are frustrated or angry as a parent, teacher, or caregiver. An emotionally charged adult only provides more fuel to an already emotionally charged child. Instead of raising your voice to get an Explorer's attention, use a quiet, controlled, confident tone, and make eye-to-eye contact that communicates authority. This will convey that you mean business.

TIP 9: Keep it short and simple. Avoid lengthy instructions, and get to the point with as few simple words as possible: "It is time to put your trucks away, please."

One big mistake that parents make with Explorers is giving instruction in the form of a question. Don't say, "Do you want to eat lunch?" Say, "It's time to go eat lunch." And avoid ending your sentences with the phrase "Okay?"

TIP 10: Praise him like crazy when he does something you like. When you see your Explorer being successful, pour on the positive affirmation. Experiencing success and affirmation is one of the best motivators of future behavior for an Explorer. Select activities that can be successfully completed, and affirm everything positive.

"I saw how hard you were working. I really like that you are a hard worker."

"You were so kind to your baby sister when you gave her the bear."

Hot Topics



SPANKING AND DISCIPLINE



Few topics are as emotionally charged, polarizing, and likely to be controversial as that of spanking. With that in mind, we're simply going to suggest some ideas for you to consider in choosing a form of discipline, and you can decide which side you're on.

1. Boys are naturally aggressive. They don't need any help in being more that way.
2. Always discipline to build character, not simply to punish behavior.
3. Avoid disciplining in anger, whether physically or verbally. Anger creates opportunity for harm, both physical and emotional. It also models a response that isn't useful. At its core, anger breeds a lack of self-control. Boys benefit from being sent to their rooms and waiting while you formulate a consequence that's not steeped in anger.
4. Try to make the punishment fit the crime. We realize this isn't always possible, but most of the time it is. Greater learning takes place when kids experience natural consequences.
5. To have the most impact, discipline should be consistent and administered with as little emotion as possible. Screaming or yelling doesn't create greater impact for learning with kids; it only makes the adult look more out of control.
6. A fantastic guide for discipline is the Love and Logic series by Jim Fay, Foster Cline, and others. They have books and resources for parenting kids as young as six months all the way through adolescence. Their philosophy is extremely honoring to children, and their techniques are highly effective when utilized consistently. Go to www.loveandlogic.com to explore their resources.

SCREEN TIME



Visual stimulants in the media don't help to develop the *limbic* and *neocortical* areas of the brain. The limbic area is the emotive center of the brain, and the neocortical area (or cerebral cortex) controls intellectual functioning and creativity. Too much media exposure actually handicaps the development of these two areas of the brain (playing off their weaknesses) and thus doesn't benefit boys emotionally or physically. Here's what you can do:

1. *Monitor media input.* Limit daily consumption of TV, computer, and video games. A boy should never engage in more virtual reality than real activity; he should never spend more time watching sports than playing them; nor should he spend more time playing video games than playing with friends.
2. *Monitor MySpace, Facebook, and other online communication* until your son understands the dangers. Demand to know his password, and let him know that you can (and will) check his history at any time.
3. *Model healthy limits.* Your words and standards will carry more weight if you practice what you preach and limit the amount of time you watch TV or spend on the computer. Also, your kids notice the kinds of movies and shows you watch, so model responsibility there as well.
4. *Use media to your advantage.* Pick movies and programs that contain topics you want to discuss with your son (money, sex, drugs, family, friends, etc.), and use them to engage in conversation. (See Michael Gurian's book *What Stories Does My Son Need?*)

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We approached *Wild Things* with the hearts of teachers—with an eye turned toward helping parents, educators, coaches, mentors, youth workers, and anyone who has given themselves to the great and wonderful art of nurturing boys on their dangerous journey. Along the way, we became students who gleaned much from the wise men on whom we have leaned so heavily: Michael Gurian, William Pollack, Dan Kindlon, Michael Thompson, Richard Rohr, and John Eldredge—great teachers and writers all.

Between the two of us we have five sons (Stephen has three and David has two), and we wrote *Wild Things* with our boys in mind—trying to prepare a path for them to walk toward manhood. It's a rare sentence that in some way doesn't come from our passion for these great boys.

Similarly, we want to recognize the faithfulness of our wives, Heather and Connie, for facilitating the writing of this book. If *Wild Things* helps anyone, they get much of the credit, because their sacrifice was far greater than ours. We are also grateful for our former agent, Greg Daniel. Thank you for championing this project and running interference on our behalf. Thanks also to David Huffman, our current agent and manager. Thank you for casting a large vision on our behalf and then helping us figure out how it works day in and day out.

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Most importantly, we thank our heavenly Father. We are continually awed and grateful that he shows himself through us, and to us, as we write, speak, and sit with boys and men in our counseling practices.

RECOMMENDED RESOURCES

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John Eldredge, *The Way of the Wild Heart: A Map for the Masculine Journey* (Thomas Nelson, 2006).

John Eldredge, *Wild at Heart: Discovering the Secret of a Man's Soul* (Thomas Nelson, 2001).

Michael Gurian, *Boys & Girls Learn Differently! A Guide for Teachers and Parents* (Jossey-Bass, 2001).

Michael Gurian, *A Fine Young Man: What Parents, Mentors, and Educators Can Do to Shape Adolescent Boys into Exceptional Men* (Tarcher/Putnam, 1998).

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Maurice Sendak, *Where the Wild Things Are* (HarperCollins, 1964).

NOTES

Introduction: “Wild Thing!”

1. Plato, *Laws* (Whitefish, MT: Kessinger Publishing, 2004), 370.
2. G. K. Chesterton, *The Autobiography of G. K. Chesterton* (San Francisco: Ignatius, 2006), 62.
3. Because God chose to illuminate himself through his relationship with his son, Jesus, we believe there is spiritual significance unique to sons, and a boy’s relationship with his parents, and what that relationship can teach us about our relationship with our Father God. This is not to say that daughters are in any way less significant. The biblical imagery is simply different.
4. *Encarta World English Dictionary*, CD-ROM.
5. Aside from the anecdotes about our own children and ourselves, none of the names we use in the stories are real. To further guard the privacy of the individuals involved, certain identifying details have also been changed. Additionally, some of the anecdotes are based on composites of several different people. The basic facts and applications, however, are all true.
6. Daystar is a nonprofit counseling ministry established in 1985 to serve the needs of children, adolescents, young adults, and families. Learn more at www.daystarcounselingministries.org.

Part 1: The Way of a Boy

1. John Eldredge, *The Way of the Wild Heart: A Map for the Masculine Journey* (Nashville: Nelson, 2006), 11.

Chapter 1: The Explorer

1. Garrison Keillor, *The Book of Guys: Stories* (New York: Penguin, 1993), 12.
2. If you don’t remember from high school health class, a blastocyst is the thin-walled, hollow structure in the earliest stages of the embryo. The outer layer gives rise to the

placenta and other supporting tissues within the uterus, while the inner cells are the basis of the developing fetus.

3. Marianne J. Legato, ed., *Principles of Gender-Specific Medicine* (San Diego: Elsevier, 2004), 1.
4. *Ibid.*, 5.
5. *Ibid.*, 8.
6. Barbara Curtis, “The Truth about Boys (and Girls),” *Christian Parenting Today*, January/February 2001, 26.
7. Anne Moir and David Jessel, *Brain Sex: The Real Difference between Men and Women* (New York: Delta, 1991), 55.
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9. *Ibid.*, 58.

Chapter 2: The Lover

1. Arnold Gesell and others, *The Child from Five to Ten* (New York: HarperCollins, 1977).
2. Michael Gurian, *The Good Son: Shaping the Moral Development of Our Boys and Young Men* (New York: Tarcher/Putnam, 1999), 126.
3. Andrés Martin, Fred R. Volkmar, and Melvin Lewis, *Lewis’s Child and Adolescent Psychiatry: A Comprehensive Textbook* (New York: Lippincott, 2007), 271.
4. Piaget called this “objective morality” or “moral realism.” To learn more, see Jean Piaget and Barbel Inhelder, *The Psychology of the Child* (1969; repr., New York: Basic, 2000).
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6. Eleanor E. Maccoby, *The Two Sexes: Growing Up Apart, Coming Together* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University, 1999), 39.
7. *Ibid.*, 39–40.
8. Eileen Bailey, “Successful People with ADHD,” <http://www.healthcentral.com/adhd/understanding-adhd-161681-5.html>.
9. *Ibid.*
10. Dan Kindlon and Michael Thompson, *Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys* (New York: Ballantine, 1999), 49.
11. Gurian, *The Good Son*, 148.