

Love: the special ingredient to make a happy boy, and a confident and loving man

All big buildings need foundations. The bigger the building, the bigger the foundation needed.

Boys are a lot like big buildings. We can support them as they grow by giving them the foundation of love, love that is appropriate to their stage in life.

If boys are not given love by their parents or carers, life becomes an unstable, ongoing bad dream. And in the end, they will get something else, not like love from a parent or carer, from someone far less desirable and caring.

Hence, a parent's main role (both mum and dad), ahead of teaching or caring, is to be a love giver! Whilst modern society makes the role of love-giver very broad and includes all those surrogate parents, like step-parents, partners, grandparents, aunts and uncles, and family friends, the important point is that all these people can and indeed must adequately fill the role of lover-giver, if a boy is to receive what he needs to grow.

In our relationships with our boys, throughout their lives, we must make a conscious effort to not only love them, but also to make them aware that we love them. A family that expresses love for each other must be real in that love. Families must be models of the principles they believe to be important. Families, especially the adults in those families, are the living models of honesty, consistency, reliability, mutual valuing and affirmation. Pretending these principles will not do. Boys can pick a phoney, and will see love as shallow and flawed, and not for them.

Is the love of a mum different from the love of a dad? Certainly we do not want to stereotype according to sex, but there are differences between the genders, and there are some broad generalisations about differences between how mums love compared to dads.

Mother's relationships with their sons are unique. They teach their sons about friendships and relationships. They may be the BEST friend a boy will have throughout his life. Mothers teach their sons about emotions and affection. They give unconditional love, affection and acceptance. They can become the one to come to when a boy feels unloved, and wants to talk. A mother's love says, "You are my child. I have always loved you and will always love you."

Fathers give their sons a role model to follow. Fathers teach using masculine love: a love shown through taking leadership of oneself and responsibility, respect and hard work. A loving father shows affection and continues showing physical love, giving hugs and kisses until his son signals no more. Violence, even

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emotional violence associated with shaming and bullying will kill love for a boy. A father's love says, "You are my son, I accept you as you are; I accept the responsibility to teach you to be a man because I love you and you are my mate!"

A father's love must be patient, gentle and never violent. This sort of love will speak loudly against many of the negative forms of masculinity that a boy will observe and experience outside the family. A father's love helps form a healthy form of masculinity that values self care as well as care of others, relationships and emotional maturity.

So how do we love our boys?

Start at the beginning. Mum and dad must initially convey their love without words. Physical bonding with a baby boy makes him more secure. It will tell him he is loved much more than just words can.

As the baby becomes a little boy, the hugs and kisses will continue, but fun activities are essential: reading books aloud, or playing games say, "I love you!"

Time means love for a child. A boy will equate love with being near him and spending time with him. Love for a child is simply the message; *I want to spend time with you.*

As boys grow they discriminate themselves from girls, and although the activities change, time remains a measure of love. People who love us will watch us at sport, let us work and do with them.

Finally after many physical changes, boys reach the beginning of puberty! Sometimes all the things we used to do are thrown out the window...or so it seems.

Physical contact during this time can be taboo in the mind of boys. Bedroom doors become sealed. Communication becomes monosyllabic! Believe it or not, this is the time to *really* love our boys, but just a bit differently!

We now know that not only are boy's bodies growing, but their brains are also undergoing enormous change. And with this change means a 'rewiring' of the brain. An 11 year old can often do menial things that a 14 year old has to learn again.

During adolescence the lack of social skills and occasional surliness indicates that boys need love more than ever. Adults need to realise that boys will often send messages that past parental behaviour is taboo personally and socially (hugs, affection, kisses).

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All teenage boys know without being told, of the existence of a code of have to be's, and an equally long list of must not be's! Breaking this code in front of any teenage male witness will lead to 'torture' and broadcasting of this breaking of the code around his friends and his wider community! The essence of this code is an adolescent perception of what is feminine ('girlie' or worse 'gay') and what is masculine (angry, strong, unemotional).

What does this tell us about loving these boys who may seem at this time to be unlovable males?

Firstly, be wary of initiating public physical affection. A boy will let you know if they want it (they don't!). Secondly do not embarrass him in front of his friends. Do not ask 'What's wrong?' 'What happened today', 'How are you and ...going'? The fact of the matter is they may not be able to explain what is going on, and secondly, parents unknowingly can become intrusive. Thirdly, it may be just too much trouble to explain to you.

The rules mentioned are loving rules because they show sensitivity and respect to the boy when he particularly needs such structure in his life.

So how can you show love if he will not talk to you?

Do it lovingly, but differently. Spend time with him...working...sport...fishing; anything you both like. You are showing love and leaving time for him to decide he wants to talk or not. If he does talk, keep quiet and listen. If he needs a problem solved he will ask. Let him finish talking. When it's your turn, remember to be accepting and flexible, and do not condemn anything until the whole picture is clear and you know the full story.

How else can mums and dads show their son love? When we are reasonable and consistent in our values and discipline our son will feel secure and loved. Sure he may yell, bang doors and not talk for a few days, but he will know you are serious - and he will remember, just like he remembers when you are not consistent.

Loving adolescent boys as suggested here is more passive than at younger stages, so we have to take all the opportunities we can get! We must be observant and find out what is important to him, and take interest. Whether it is school or sport or music or art, we must affirm him. We are saying "this is a part of you; I value it because I love you!" When any big occasion occurs, the affirmation must be a celebration: go out for a meal, see a movie, go bowling...whatever! Make it suit the boy, and make it a memory – a memory of love!

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Finally, in so many small ways our relationship with our boy must tell them we love him. This foundation will assist him to grow into a man and hopefully steer him clear of the dangers faced by many young men.

At the least let the memory of your love be the compass that points to a good place. And maybe this foundation will also give a valuable relationship now and into the future.