



'Boys will be boys,' right? Not necessarily so!

Boys are violent. Cool guys drink alcohol. Male jocks are dumb. Popular guys get lucky with the ladies. Because our society tends to generalize and simplify everything, we unfairly label and categorize boys. These stereotypes cause us to expect certain behaviors from boys. But more often than not, this is not the case with boys and young men we know.

Nature vs. nurture

An individual's characteristics are due to the influences of both human nature and environment. But whether nature or nurture, research has discovered characteristics that provide us with a clearer understanding of boys. Knowing them is the first step in reaching past labels and generalities and ministering to the boys and young men in our congregations and communities.

- ***Boys disproportionately represent the top leading causes of death: accidents, homicides and suicide.*** Young men are more likely to take risks that have potentially fatal consequences.
 - ***Biological differences of boys and girls don't cause significant differences in behavior and brain activity.*** Studies show that, in general, boys and girls function on the same level but there are some differences in brain activity.
 - ***Boys are aggressive because of their environment.*** By nature, boys are not aggressive. Aggressiveness is societal and environmental, not biological. If a boy grows up in an aggressive environment, is surrounded by relationships based on aggressive behavior, participates in activities that encourage aggressiveness, he will develop aggressive behavior.
 - ***Boys are more active than girls.*** Boys, by nature, need to be active; they need to be doing something. When boys socialize, they often do so while playing a sport or game.
 - ***Boys are slower to mature.*** Because boys and girls mature at different rates, many parents wait to start their sons in school. So remember, when dealing with "hot topics," boys may not be ready to deal with the same issues as girls.
-

Boys and emotions

Like girls, boys are emotional beings. They can display several different emotions at once. When they are angry they may also be sad, embarrassed or afraid. Here are other characteristics:

- ***Often, men don't do hard emotional work.*** From a young age, boys are taught that mom is their go-between when it comes to emotional situations. When father and son quarrel, son goes to mom, mom goes to dad, dad apologizes via mom, and mom talks to son. In this pattern, father and son make up without even talking to one another.
 - ***As a society, we don't often give boys the opportunity to work or talk through emotions and learn emotional lessons.*** When boys cry or are sad, we often tell them to "toughen up." Our task is to help boys cope with, not dismiss, their emotions.
 - ***Boy babies show more facial expressions than girls.*** But over time, through socialization, boys' expressions decrease and those of girls increase.
 - ***Boys have the capacity to nurture.*** Encourage boys to serve as nursery supervisors, Sunday school teachers, babysitters and mentors to children. Affirm their abilities to care for others.
-

Teasing

Boys often relate to one another by teasing. They tease each other about their bodies, their athletic and scholastic abilities, their relationships, and just about anything else they find different in one another.

Teach boys and young men that even if they are "just joking," teasing is harmful. It makes others feel inadequate and angry, and prevents boys from communicating true feelings by enabling them to relate in superficial ways. Teasing destroys, rather than builds relationships.

Masculinity in the media

Boys will only be frustrated if they try to shape their lives after the media's ultra masculine identity. Magazines, TV shows and movies show "successful" men as either muscular or slim and trim. These stereotypic images cause increased eating disorders and steroid use in boys and young men.

The media also equates beer with sports and recreation. TV commercials and movies portray varsity players as first in line for the keg. That portrayal has helped make drinking a "rite of passage" for this culture. Spring Break vacations, parties and concerts sponsored by beer companies imply that heavy drinking is the cool, normal and expected way for young men [and young women] to have fun and socialize. Our challenge is to provide, support and affirm alternative opportunities.

10 things your congregation can do

1. ***Talk about violence, suicide, drinking, pre-marital sex, etc.*** Help boys understand risks and responsibilities by inviting a panel of peers and community role models to tell their stories.
2. ***Don't tolerate aggressive behavior.*** Make community building activities that promote respect and cooperation part of your youth ministry. In discussions, give everyone equal opportunity to be heard and understood. Create community covenants for behavior, respect and mutual care.

3. ***Plan activities that are active.*** Get boys involved by planning trips that involve work and activities that provide for interaction.
4. ***Establish a peer ministry program.*** Encourage young men to serve as role models for other young men and boys.
5. ***Provide boys with emotional challenges.*** Give them opportunities to communicate and talk about how they feel, not letting them settle for surface emotions.
6. ***Dispel media myths.*** Watch and listen to movies, TV shows and music that are popular with young people. Use them in your lessons and discussions, challenging the images they present.
7. ***Recognize boys for their accomplishments.*** Post achievements in bulletins, newsletters and on a bulletin board. Also find ways to affirm boys who are less active and all boys for who they are—not just for what they do. Be aware of achievements that are not traditional or expected.
8. ***Plan events for fathers and sons.*** Host a retreat that helps them communicate and interact in ways other than sitting and watching a ball game. Include active community building activities or challenge course activities.
9. ***Establish a mentoring program for boys.*** Give boys the chance to be with real-life adult heroes who have healthy careers and relationships.
10. ***Don't be afraid to separate boys and girls during discussion time.*** Allow them to wrestle with the issues on their own levels.

In understanding these gender characteristics, we can rise above society's expectations and media images and challenge the boys and young men of our congregations and communities to look out for one another with care and compassion.

Additional resources

- [ELCA Lutheran Men in Mission](#) (resources, program and events for men of all ages)
- [Center for Media Literacy](#) (resources and programs on the impact of TV, movies and other media)
- [PBS' American High](#) (program on teenage youth culture)
- [Boys to Men: Emotional Miseducation](#) (American Psychological Association article)

Contributed by *Heidi Youngquist*. Based on information from Daniel J. Kindlon, author of *Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys* (1999 Ballantine).

Permission to reproduce for local use. Copyright © 2000 [Evangelical Lutheran Church in America](#). [ELCA Youth Ministries](#).
1-800-638-3522, ext. 2447.