

8 Actions to help boys build healthy relationships

These 8 actions are directed at all those people who wish to build open, healthy relationships with their sons, brothers, nephews, students, team members, and in general, with boys from their communities. It is an invitation to reflect on and question our own attitudes and behaviours towards boys, both as adults and as children, and start engaging in new, important conversations.

1 Reflect on our own biases

Often, our ideas about how a boy should behave are influenced by stereotypes and traditions that impose strict expectations about what is considered “appropriate” for him. For example, the idea that “a man must be the breadwinner for the family.” It is important to take a moment to reflect on these ideas and ask, “Why do I think a boy should act this way? Does it benefit him, or does it make him feel bad or put him at risk?”

Before teaching others, we must first work on ourselves and question our own beliefs. This is how we can be a positive role model, asking ourselves “What values do I want boys to grow up with? Do the things that I expect help him learn and own those values?” Being aware of and challenging our own beliefs about boys helps create environments where everyone can be who they are without being constrained by expectations. Changing our perspective is essential to promote a culture of respect and freedom for all.

2 Break gender stereotypes

It is crucial to challenge expectations about how a boy should behave based on his gender. Sometimes, certain behaviours or attitudes are seen as exclusively “masculine”. Talking to boys about values like mutual respect and the importance of caring for others is fundamental. We need to help them understand that they can be strong and respectful at the same time, without conforming to rigid behaviour patterns that can lead to violence or discrimination.

Adults play a key role in shaping these expectations. What types of toys and activities are boys encouraged to engage with? What roles are they given at home? Who are they expected to be friends with? These everyday choices influence how boys see themselves and what they believe is acceptable or not. When boys grow up with strict ideas and stereotypes about what it means to be a man, it can have harmful consequences for everyone. Let's help boys realise that their personal expression does not need to be confined to a box.

3 Talk about consent clearly and understandably

Consent means actively agreeing to something and respecting the boundaries of others. Boys need to know that they have the right to make choices for themselves and how to ask for and give a clear “yes”. Consent is not just about rejecting something, but it is about actively agreeing before doing anything. Boys can say “no” to something they do not want to do, whether in personal relationships or in broader situations, such as events or community activities. For example, just like an adult can do, a boy can say “no” if he does not want to participate in a game or dance, even if his friends or others pressure him. He can also say “no” if someone, even a family member, asks him to do something that makes him uncomfortable.

Sometimes traditions from our families, communities and cultures can become a burden for children or even harm them: even if they are still young, all children can express pain, discomfort, fear, and adults (as well as other children) should listen to them and understand their choice. When someone does not give a clear “yes” or is hesitant, that must be respected as a “no”. Respecting others' decisions helps create a safer and more respectful environment for everyone.



4 Promote personal expression in boys

Encouraging boys to explore different interests, hobbies, and activities is an important step toward building a healthy personality. In many communities, traditions strictly define what a boy or a girl should be and can do. Encouraging boys to actively explore interests and responsibilities that are not strictly related to what is usually expected by their gender, such as cooking, cleaning, and practicing artistic disciplines, helps challenge these limits. Creating an environment that allows boys to grow with a broader view of their capabilities is essential for fostering change in future generations.

6 Identify positive role models

It is important for boys to see examples of positive behaviours among adults and in the community around them. These role models do not necessarily have to be famous people, but individuals who show respect and promote equality. For example, a person who dedicates their time to teaching others something useful, like reading or cooking. Another example could be someone who listens attentively to others, seeking to understand their point of view without judgment. These behaviours show that true strength lies in respect and collaboration, not in violence, controlling others, or brute force.

8 Respond to disrespectful comments

Boys need to learn to recognise when a behaviour or comment is disrespectful, such as making jokes about someone's body or culture. We should encourage them to intervene when they see situations of discrimination or injustice. For example, if a boy hears someone make negative comments about another person, he should feel free to say that this behaviour is not acceptable. As community members, it is our responsibility to stop harmful behaviours towards others. This way, they will learn that true courage lies in respecting others, not in the desire to isolate, dominate, or control.

5 Use play and imagination to define positive values

Organising role-playing games that include situations encouraging reflection on respect, equality, and collaboration helps develop the ability to understand and respect the emotions of others. We can help boys put themselves in other people's shoes by discussing how they might react in conflict or difficult situations, with the goal of solving problems without resorting to violence. When playing roles, whether with toys or imaginary friends, use language and create scenarios that introduce a full range of emotions and respectful dialogues. Ask your son things like, "Are they sad? How do you know? How can we help?" Emphasise that the ability to express a wide range of emotions, including compassion, care, and collaboration, is positive for everyone.

7 Talk openly about emotions and respectful behaviours

There is a perception that boys should not express "weak" emotions, like sadness or fear, due to cultural stereotypes associating strength with emotionally rigid behaviour. However, it is essential to encourage them to share what they feel without fear of judgment. If a boy can express emotions like sadness or frustration without shame, a healthier environment is created to develop relationships. This type of openness fosters empathy and cooperation, helping boys develop relational skills.

Furthermore, being able to talk openly about their emotions reduces the likelihood that boys will resort to aggressive behaviours to manage stress or frustration, as they feel free to approach their emotions in a healthy way. Similarly, this helps them confide in others, seek out help and, if necessary, report situations of discomfort, injustice, or violence they are experiencing. In this way, they learn to better manage these situations and understand the importance of respect and communication in interpersonal relationships.

