

# How to raise boys in the 21st century

Twenty-five years after his first bestselling parenting guide, Steve Biddulph has some powerful new ideas on how to raise happy, well-adjusted young men

By Steve Biddulph



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Can you remember that moment? Holding your baby son in your arms for the first time? As you gazed down at his soft little face, I bet you hoped with all your heart for just one thing. That he would travel safely through boyhood, grow to be his best, and become, one day, a wonderful man. It doesn't seem too much to hope for. Yet we all know of so many boys and young men who have come to grief, and ended up being harmed or causing harm to other people. Compared with a girl, a boy is nine times more likely to end up in jail, three times more likely to use drugs, three times more likely to take his own life or die in a car crash. Those are terrible figures, and we shouldn't just think "that's the way it is". There has to be a reason and a cure.

Twenty five years ago, I wrote an international best-selling book on raising boys, and today I'm pleased to say we know far far more, and raising sons is easier and is getting better. We are making some wonderful men. We know how to do it right. So let me set out some of the most powerful new ideas . . .

The first thing in raising a son is to decide what kind of man you want to make. Sometimes, at my seminars on parenting, I ask my audiences to call out the qualities they think make up a good man. You can guess what they shout – things like kind, gentle, safe, trustworthy, strong, caring. Someone will joke "sober" or "looks like George Clooney". But I sum it up in just two words: backbone and heart. Strong, reliable, and trustworthy, on the one side. And warm and loving as well. It's not enough to just have one side, without the other. A friendly drunk is no use. A strong but cold dad won't win the hearts of his sons or daughters. It has to be both.

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Creating that good man means understanding the boy you start with. Are boys different to girls in some fundamental way? Yes, and no. Forty years ago, when I started out, the best thinking was to do away with gender differences altogether. We urgently needed equality, the misogyny that had kept women down and out for centuries had to end. We thought that if we raised boys and girls the same, then we would eliminate sexism. Same clothes, same toys, same games, it was a worthy and admirable effort. I totally supported this and I still do – perhaps the best known take-home message of my books is teach your son to cook. And that girls need to be loud, and messy, and feel free to climb trees and jump in puddles.

### **Risk factors**

But we have to do more than that. Those risk factors unique to boys, and to girls, have to be worked on. While we know now that gender is on a continuum, and every child is unique, the science is getting clearer that for most boys, and most girls, there are glaring differences we have to address.

Most boys show distinct patterns of development, even in the womb. Their brains grow more slowly from the moment they start producing testosterone at just a few months’ gestation. And that difference persists – many boys are up to 20 months behind girls in some aspects of brain development at age five. Not only that, but boys vary a great deal within their gender too. Sampling umbilical cord blood at birth shows that some boys are high in testosterone, and some low. And the high-testosterone boys have much more trouble with reading and speaking. Boys overall are three times more likely to be problem readers than girls. And those are mostly high-testosterone boys.

Now the last thing we want to say about that is “boys will be boys” as that is really the weakest of cop-outs. It means we have to say “right, let’s switch this boy on to reading, by telling him stories, reading bedtime books to him, and keeping on chatting to him and listening to him as we go about our day. Don’t just plonk him in front of a TV or screen. The world doesn’t need men who can wrestle buffalo any more, but every boy and man needs to be able to communicate. We can help our sons to catch up with girls, and get along well with them.

We can also make the world, and especially school, more boy-friendly. Most boys at five (and some girls too) aren’t ready to sit still – in fact it harms their brain development if they do. And they aren’t ready for rote learning or being forced to read and write. In countries where children start school at six or seven, they do much better. Moving about a lot, playing, being active, suits most kids but especially those active boys who positively need it.

And that’s only the start.

There are stages of boyhood which girls do not have. One is the “full-on fours”, when luteinising hormone floods their bodies, setting up the puberty hormones far in advance. When I wrote about this in my Facebook community, which has many Irish mums and dads as well as from all across the world, they immediately knew what I was talking about.

### **Activity, rambunctiousness and noise**

Parents of four-year-olds notice high levels of activity, rambunctiousness and noise. It's a relief to know this isn't naughtiness. (Though any sudden change in behaviour is worth getting to the bottom of in case something bad has happened). But it's totally normal for little boys (and some girls) to be exploding with energy, and our job is to find ways they can run it off – just as we would if we had a sheepdog in the house, they need their exercise. You can do this through lots of chances to get outside and move about and have adventures. And some gentle but clear help with knowing when to put the brakes on. If we make a boy feel he is bad for being a boy, then we trigger an anxiety about being loved, that usually comes out as anger and the beginnings of a problem man. You can put boundaries on, and ask him to calm down, but do it kindly.

Another stage of boyhood – called adrenarche – was discovered just last year by researchers at Melbourne's Royal Children's Hospital in a long-term study of 1,200 children approaching their teens. Adrenarche comes along at eight to nine years of age. It's a rise in hormones called adrenal hormones, and shows up on brain scans, too. I call this the "emotional eights", because that describes it usefully. Your son will be more prone to get upset, or anxious, or fly off the handle, and generally not be his usual self. It will bewilder him as much as you. Adrenarche is the first stirrings of puberty, though outward signs won't show for another three or four years.

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Girls are so different in this regard. Their emotional phase mostly comes right with puberty, and is often two years sooner than with boys, and (thankfully) is all over by 14, when they reach their full height and are fully fertile. Boys may not catch up in height or maturity until 16 or 17.

But most boys end up larger or stronger than girls, and eventually, larger than their partner. So it's absolutely vital that we teach them to never hit or hurt, or even disrespect or be rude to girls or women, starting with their mum or their sisters. Dads and mums together have to reinforce this message, sitting down with them and being clear what a good man is like, and that they expect this and will never go along with anything different. Again, not heavy or hard, just friendly, but crystal clear. To turn into a good man, a boy has to hear exactly what that means in practice (and of course, see it carried out by the men he grows up around).

Recently in Australia, something great happened. A champion surfer was attacked by a shark, and disappeared out of sight behind a wave, while thousands watched from the beach and on TV. He miraculously reappeared safe and sound a moment later. But interviewed on the TV his friends were crying, and saying how afraid they had been for him. And how much they loved him.

A big new breakthrough in what we want in men, and have to teach our boys, is how to have an open heart. Affectionate dads who hug and cuddle, show their own feelings easily and can say "I'm sad" or "I was scared" raise mentally healthy boys. The old-style man kept his feelings bottled up, only to explode when he was drunk, or things just reached overload.

In the new version of my book, we explain the whole chemistry of why human beings cry, and how this heals the brain after loss, and prevents violence (as most violent people are actually in fear and grief rather than anger). It's essential that boys are able to cry at any age, and be vulnerable. As social researcher Dr Brene Brown argues in her excellent TED talk, nothing

good ever happens without vulnerability. Love, friendship, parenthood, creativity, learning new things, closeness and intimacy all involve being vulnerable. Making mistakes, and risking rejection. Being brave enough to fail, and not be crippled by shame, is essential to being a dad, husband, or friend.

### **What if you're a single mother or in a same-sex relationship?**

A word here is important for single mothers, who raise about a third of all boys. Let me absolutely reassure you: mothers can raise wonderful men, and they have done so for thousands of years. The single mothers and women raising children without men that I have worked with extensively over 40 years have taught me two key secrets. They made sure that their sons had good men somewhere in their life – school teachers, grandads, uncles, sports coaches, family friends. They chose these with care.

And these men stepped up so that each boy “knew what a good man looked like”. In my talks, I ask the dads there to think about the fatherless boy among their son’s friends, and be sure to invite him along on trips to concerts, fishing or camping, or art galleries or whatever is your thing.

The other secret of single parenthood? Be sure to have some time for yourself to have fun, rejuvenate, and have friends. Don’t do it in any kind of martyr attitude. Be proud of yourself, and reward yourself for the great job you do.

### **A story of my own**

When my dad was dying, I spend the last couple of weeks at his side. We hadn’t always been close, and now I didn’t want to waste a second. One day, he told me a story of my babyhood. A few days after I was born, my mum was very tired, and so he put me in the pram to go for a stroll. Entering the high street – this was 1953 – he noticed people looking at him oddly, even scornfully, and some children danced along behind him jeering. At this point in the story he paused. I asked him, what were they saying? “Your dad’s your mum.” He remembered it all from 50 years ago. He looked teary. A shy man, it had all proved too much, and he ducked, with me and the pram, down a side street and went home.

Today, dads with prams are as normal as a rainy day. Young fathers are affectionate, and capable.

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We’ve got a revolution happening in fatherhood, and chances are strong that girls and boys will turn out better as a result.

The new understanding of boyhood, and the better kind of man we can create, is going to change our world. We know that every boy is different, and you have to get to know your own unique version. We know that the genders overlap, and you can have a macho girl and a sensitive quiet boy, and they are both valuable and needed in the world of tomorrow. We know that if you embrace the differences, and work with them, then an equal world is just around the corner.

Know your boy, and you can love him the best.

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