

# Why Building Young Boys' Mental Resilience Is So Important As A Parent (And How To Do It)

'There's a struggle around feeling trapped by the perception of the Alpha-Male.'

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For hundreds of years, young boys have been brought up with the belief that to be a "real" man, you have to be tough.

The notion of having physical resilience as a way to get by in life seems to have overshadowed the equally important need for mental resilience.

Artist Grayson Perry summed this up perfectly in his latest book on masculinity, 'The Descent of Man'. In it, he describes a time when he rode past a young boy who was struggling to cycle up a steep track in a forest.

The boy sobbed and called for his dad. He refused Perry's help.

Perry looked over to the boy's dad, who was stood arms crossed in the distance, and said he "looked angry, with a face that said: 'Toughen up, don't whine, be a man!'"

And that's where the problem begins.



The latest ONS figures on suicide revealed that the number of males aged 10-29 who died by suicide has levelled off to 10 per 100,000 in the past two years. This figure hit its peak in 1998, where there were 17 recorded suicides per 100,000.

But the real issue lies when figures show the highest suicide rate in the UK is for men aged 45-49. With such high figures of older men debating suicide, addressing the issues facing men and their mental health early on in life could not be more important.

“Childhood and teenage years are when mental health is developed and patterns are set for the future,” explains Jo Hardy, parents services manager at YoungMinds.

“A child with good mental health is much more likely to have good mental health as an adult, and to be able to fulfil their potential.”

And the statistics match. According to YoungMinds, half of all lifetime mental health problems begin before the age of 14, and 50% adults with mental illness were diagnosed as teenagers but 75% of them received no help.

Over the past year, the charity has noted an increase in boys self-harming, an increase in boys with eating disorders and have received calls from parents with older sons who have been violent towards them.

“Building emotional resilience is key,” adds Jo Hardy. “It’s vital to act early.”

### **The issues facing young boys**

Society should not underestimate the huge amount of pressure young boys face today, Hardy explains, some of which are often assumed to only affect girls.

“Family breakdown, stress at school, body image issues, early sexualisation, 24/7 online networking, bullying on and offline and uncertainty about the future after school are all piling on the stress for boys,” she says.

School seems to be high on the agenda, as Place2Be found boys are more likely to access the Place2Talk service due to being worried about school issues (such as changing schools or classes) than girls.

But Fiona Pienaar, director of clinical services at Place2Be, a children’s mental health charity points out much of the pressure comes from boys feeling that they need to fulfil a “stereotypical male role”.

“The concept of ‘staying strong’, ‘not crying’ and ‘getting on with it’ are often associated with being male,” she says.

“This means that from a young age boys may not feel comfortable with showing any signs of not coping, for fear it may be a sign of weakness.”

The charity has found this pressure results in boys acting out, being disruptive or, in some cases, withdrawing as a way of managing their struggles.

“We need to remain particularly aware of those children who become quieter, as they are often the ones that are missed,” Pienaar adds.

Simon Howarth, suicide prevention advisor at POPYRUS charity, an organisation that focuses on the prevention of young suicide, says boys call up their helpline for a similar range of issues.

These include exam pressure and expectations put upon them by teachers and parents, feelings of isolation from experiencing bullying, friendship and relationship difficulties, sexuality and gender issues as well as anxiety, depression and self-harming behaviour.

However, Howarth agrees with Pienaar that one issue sticks out.

“For many boys and young men, there is a struggle around feeling trapped by the perception of the ‘Alpha-Male’, the male as the stronger gender,” Howarth explains.

“Sadly, there is still a stigma around men talking about how they feel, about their hopes and fears and this is something experienced by men of all ages.”

Howarth notes a worrying trend that only 30% of their callers identify as male, and he believes many boys may be suffering in silence.

“Despite it now being the 21st century, the stigma associated with the ‘boys don’t cry’ attitude is still perpetuated,” he adds. “A stigma that is contributing to the significant number of deaths by suicide of men of all ages.

“Young men need to be shown and need to be reassured that asking for help is never a weakness.”

### **Why addressing these issues is so important**

Understanding the root cause of the issues boys face will better equip them for their own futures. More importantly, it will build their mental strength and identify areas where they may be struggling.

But mental resilience takes practise, Howarth explains, and cannot be acquired in a short period of time.

“The younger this is developed the better,” he says. “Like anything that needs practise, the sooner the learning starts the more developed it can become.”

Pienaar agrees.

“It is incredibly important that from a young age we support boys to feel comfortable with expressing themselves and developing their mental resilience,” she says.

“While boys and girls may be different and can communicate in different ways, it is vital that we encourage boys to seek support when they need it in a way that is most comfortable for them.”

## **What can you do as parents to build your son's mental strength?**

Helping your son speak openly about their feelings is just one way parents can help build their mental resilience.

There's a lot more than can be done.

### **1) Be a role model**

"One of the most important ways parents can help is role modelling," Pienaar suggests. "This can help to reduce the stigma so often associated with expressing feelings."

"If boys can see from an early age that it's not a sign of weakness to seek help when it's needed, they are more likely to feel comfortable doing the same."

"Sharing not only how you have felt, but what you did to cope with stressful situations in your life can be a really great way of helping your children to develop their own positive coping strategies."

### **2) Encourage kindness**

Although it's important to allow boys to make mistakes and learn from them, Howarth says parents should also encourage their sons to be kinder to themselves in such scenarios.

"Young people experience frequent expectation put upon them by other people – acknowledging what they have done well is essential, however small that might seem," he says.

"Encourage them to see their strengths, acknowledge their achievements, find the good in themselves and recognise the qualities that make them unique."

"Resilience comes from taking risks and learning from what went well – and not so well, from learning through experience, not from being told."

### **3) Keep an open conversation**

Parents should be supportive and encouraging when talking to their sons about how they feel. Sometimes it's as easy as just making sure they know you're there.

"Be honest about your feelings, too," adds Hardy.

"And just talk to your child. Even very young children can understand about feelings and behaviour if you give them a chance to talk about it."

### **4) Help them find their ways to relax**

From a young age, parents can help their sons find their own way to relax - whether that be in front of the TV or outside running around.

“Help them find ways to relax, positive ways of coping that work for them, at the same time as supporting them in being assertive, in finding ways to express themselves clearly,” says Howarth.

“Asking for help can be much harder for young men, but this is made much easier when they are used to being assertive, used to speaking out about what they feel and what they need.”

#### 5) Support their physical health

Eating well, sleeping well and being active can be a positive first step as they are known to reduce stress, adds Howarth.

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