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# **Work in Progress**

## **Mothers and Sons: Raising Relational Boys**

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# Mothers and Sons: Raising Relational Boys

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## **About the Authors**

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## **Abstract**

This paper describes the application of Relational/Cultural Theory to a model of Parenting-in-Connection. The natural ebb and flow of parent-child relationships is described through the cycle of connection, disconnection, and new connection. Issues and conflicts specific to boys' development at four distinct stages are detailed. The mother-son relationship is marked as the important context within which boys can learn how to move from disconnection to even better connection. The focus is on the dominant cultural model for boys' development. While there are variations based on race, class, and other factors, we believe that this dominant model affects all mother-son relationships.

*Achilles, mightiest of the Greeks, hero of the Iliad, was nearly immortal. According to myth, his mother, Thetis, dipped him into the river Styx. The sacred waters of this river that led to Hades, the world of the dead, rendered whomever they touched impervious to harm. But, Thetis, good mother that she was, worried about the dangers of the river, and so she held onto Achilles by his heel. As the story goes, because of that one holding spot, Achilles remained mortal and vulnerable to harm. Thetis would be blamed forever after for her son's fatal flaw, his Achilles' heel.*

**The holding place of vulnerability was not, as the myth would have us believe, a fatal liability to Achilles. It was the thing that kept him human and real. In fact, we consider it Thetis's finest gift to her son.**

Every mother of a son hopes to prepare him for life's "battles" while also preserving his emotional/relational side. Because mothers value connection, they want to "hold on," to keep open that place of vulnerability. But faced with cultural pressures that suggest restraint and withdrawal, rather than comfort and nurture, many mothers feel conflicted about their desire to stay connected to their sons. Traditional wisdom cautions that holding on will be damaging and create psychological problems for sons. Faced with this dilemma, mothers often yield to cultural pressures and disconnect from their young sons because they think it's the right thing to do.

Our work with mothers of sons is based on Relational/Cultural Theory, a view of development for women and men, which grew out of Jean Baker Miller's 1976 book, *Toward a New Psychology of Women*. In her book, Miller introduces a new view of women and their development. After many years of listening to and studying women, she concludes that relationship and affiliation are essential to healthy development. She has noted the pejorative attitudes about women and their roles, embedded in the fabric of Western culture, and states that these cultural views

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diminish women's self-worth.

We highlight the mother-son relationship because we feel that this same devalued view of women affects the mother-son relationship. The culture tells mothers to disconnect from their sons. A closeness with mom has frequently been misunderstood and pathologized. The mother-son connection is ridiculed ("go run to mama," "crybaby"), cautioned against ("you better let him go," "push him out to the world"), prohibited ("don't coddle him," "no more hugs and kisses"), and maligned ("she's turned him into a mama's boy," "he's tied to her apron strings"). We feel that this disparaging attitude and the resulting early call for separation from mother isolates boys from relationship.

In this paper we are referring to the dominant cultural model for boys in the United States. We recognize that there are many diverse variations of this model dependent upon race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, family structure, socioeconomic class, and other factors. We focus on the mainstream model supported by media images and messages because of the strong negative influence it has on boys' development. We feel that all mothers, regardless of diverse circumstances, are impacted in their relationship with their sons by this culturally prescribed paradigm of disconnection.

Infant studies show that physical and psychological development is dependent upon a good mother-infant connection. Without such a connection, we see a developmental "failure to thrive" in babies. Ed Tronick, of the *Brazelton Touchpoint Project* (1998), notes that infant development occurs only within relationship. This is also Jean Baker Miller's belief about our lifelong experience. In her 1976 book she states that "all growth and learning takes place within the context of relationship." While the relational presence of mother is essential for babies to thrive early on, it continues to be essential for boys' emotional and relational growth.

Irene Stiver and Jean Baker Miller (1997) speak of the need for relationship and connection as a *human need* in their book *The Healing Connection*. They see this as a universal need, best met through the development of mutually empathic and mutually empowering relationships. But, young boys, if deprived of sufficient opportunities to learn how to make real connections, try to meet these needs in superficial and manipulative ways. They are taught in the dominant "boy culture" to fulfill their desires and get ahead, even at the expense of others. In acting this way, boys and men are simply following established

rules of the culture for males. A false bravado model not only deprives boys early on of parental empathy, but also infuses them with a sense of esteem and power devoid of internal resonance. As a result, mutually satisfying connection with others becomes impossible. In our clinical practice, men tell stories of "working the room" in executive meetings, assured that they will, ultimately, sway others and (right or wrong) get what they want. These men complain, however, that they feel no internal gratification in these interactions. All this attention and power fail to gratify, and in fact leave them feeling empty and even more alone. We see in their experience how learned behaviors make it impossible for many men to connect authentically, leaving them with a debilitating sense of internal isolation.

This problematic developmental course may account for what appears to be a predominance of men who are self-absorbed and cut-off from relationship. Perhaps, if we understand more deeply the impact of culture on boys' and men's development, we can bring a compassionate and understanding perspective to our male children, partners, friends, and clients as they sort through these difficult, deeply embedded relational patterns. Perhaps, if we create more empathic possibilities, these new experiences can prevent in boys, and heal in men, the wounds of this early disconnection.

## **A Mother's Prospective View**

We have found, in our work with more than 3,000 mothers of sons, that in spite of the cultural message, many mothers follow their inclination and stay in relationship with their sons. Tentatively questioning established norms, these mothers keep a place of emotionality open in their sons through continued connection. Yet, at the same time, they worry that they will affect their sons' development in negative ways. Mothers who resist the cultural call to disconnection are in need of validation and support. These courageous mothers are, potentially, the real experts in boys' development. Keeping a strong connection is the way to teach sons how to navigate the many and complex nuances of relationship. We believe that it is within the mother-son context that relational learning occurs and the groundwork is established for future relationships. Olga Silverstein (1994), in her book *The Courage to Raise Good Men*, demonstrated that the root of sons' difficulties as adults is linked to distance and disconnection in the mother-son relationship. Our workshops with mothers and adult sons, as well as our clinical work

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with men and couples, tell us that boys with a secure maternal connection develop stronger interpersonal skills and enjoy healthier relationships as adults.

Although Relational/Cultural Theory originally developed as a way to understand women's psychology, the capacity to create and sustain growth-fostering relationships is equally crucial for boys and men. Traditional views of boys' and men's development are embedded in men's experiences and men's fears. Men, who have grown up in this culture, often feel that the old model is best for their sons. Even men who want to change things may worry about these new directions for boys. Fathers can be pulled unwittingly into a retrospective analysis of present day issues because of old fears based on their own experience. Because becoming a man is closely linked with traditional ideas about being one's own man (individuation), being dominant, and not being a "girl," evolving their thinking into the realm of emotional and relational development about boys can create worry for some men. Some men may be fearful of turning boys into girls. Women, on the other hand, not having grown up in boy culture, may have a clearer lens in viewing the currently evolving possibilities for boys and men. Most mothers *do* keep connection with sons, and sons *are* more aware of the benefits and possibilities open to them in relationship. These newly evolved attitudes and behaviors are actually already much more a part of every day life for boys than is reflected in the media. Just as Jean Baker Miller (1976) insisted that we must listen to women to hear about their experiences, we must listen to mothers of sons to formulate a *prospective view* of the possibility of relationship for boys. It is our opinion that listening to mothers of sons will inform us about current realities and possibilities for boys.

At a recent lecture about middle-school children, a mother asked the speaker how to talk to her 12-year-old son. The psychologist answered, "There's bad news and there's good news. The bad news is that you won't be able to get him to talk. The good news is that it won't last long, just a few years." Most of the mothers gathered at the back of the lecture hall disagreed with this notion. Even though it was difficult, they had managed to stay connected with their sons. As the "keepers of the connections" in our culture, women know about relationship. Mothers hold the hope for change in their sons' relational growth.

New developmental attitudes and directions for boys can change development in many positive ways. Changing cultural expectations to include relational development for boys can change outcomes for both

boys and girls. Valuing relational skills and emotional awareness in boys will increase respect for girls in our culture. By creating a new vision for boys, we modify the course of development for both genders. Both girls and boys are born with the capacity to have responsible and collaborative relationships. It is the work of parents to provide a safe context for boys, as well as girls, through the development of family, community, and social values that support relationship.

### **Boy Culture: What is it? How does it affect boys?**

Invisible forces in the dominant culture take hold in the form of the implicitly communicated expectations of boy behavior we call boy culture (Figure 1). Images of male dominance are projected by the media and modeled daily by older peers in countless ways. These expectations are not consciously taught nor supported in most of our homes, schools, or communities. Rather, they are the insidious behavioral messages boys in our culture receive regarding boy behavior. These occur in the form of put-downs and intimidating threats in every day interactions on the playground and in the halls of our schools. When we do nothing to intervene, thinking "boys will be boys," we implicitly give our approval to and help normalize behaviors that are disconnecting and domineering, which may later lead to what has become a pervasive societal problem of violence.

When we name and question the impact of boy culture we are not critical of boys and men, but rather of the gender straitjacket imposed on boys by the culture. Boy culture focuses on who's in the limelight. It says "be first, win." It is built on a competitive, power-over model in which there are winners and there are losers. Boy culture encourages young men and boys to take pride in expressions of noncompliance and disrespect, to act out, and to pretend not to care about their failings.

Teachers rate boys as problems in the classroom 90% over girls (Boston Public Schools, 1997; Lewis, Lovely, & Yaeger, 1989). Research shows that as the number of boy siblings in a family increases, so does the incidence of acting out, school truancy, and social delinquency (Jones, Offord, & Abrams, 1980). The fact that this is not the case with the increase of girl siblings may speak to the powerful influence of boy culture within families. Behaviors such as bullying, teasing, stealing, noncompliance, swearing, teacher disrespect, and the like, have become serious

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problems, even at the elementary school level. Children, largely boys aged five to ten years, are imitating offensive interpersonal behaviors portrayed by the media and observed in older peers.

Boy culture also says that if you retreat, if you shrink from competing, you risk being labeled “wimp,” “chicken,” “sissy,” “scaredy cat,” “baby,” or even, “girl.”

A group of first grade boys respond to a simple question posed by their teacher by rising up out of their seats and onto their toes, hands waving high, whispering “me first, pick me.” They are so eager to be first; all their energy goes into this quest. When called on they have forgotten the question and have nothing to say.

A third-grade boy creeps along a high wall egged on by his peers. He is terrified, but continues on for fear of being called a “wimp” or “scaredy cat.”

A fifth-grade boy proudly boasts to his friends that he chased another boy down, took his prized art project, and made him cry.

A seventh-grader jokingly brags about not studying and takes pride in his prediction of a poor grade on a math test scheduled for that day.

One eight-year-old explained, “If my friends ever found out that I come home from school and go through my backpack with my mom and show her everything I did in school that day, they’d really make fun of me and call me a baby.”

Our culture’s established standard of individuation and independence moves both girls and boys away from relationship. But for boys, this push is especially difficult because it happens at a very young age and within one of their most intimate of relationships, their relationship with their mothers. This move toward independence and away from mom occurs at a time in development for boys when they are still thinking in concrete ways (Piaget & Inhelder, 1969). Boys’ concrete view of the loss of mom at age five is that they have lost relationship and are on their own emotionally. Gilligan (1996) and others link the increase in Attention Deficit Disorder (ADD) to this early separation from mother. Diagnostic ADD rates are higher than ever and occur predominantly in boys. Boys’ loss creates sadness and anxiety, which may manifest as hyperactivity and inattention. Maybe the first diagnostic criteria to look for in these hyperactive boys should be symptoms of what we call CDD or *Connection Deficit Disorder!*

The development of learning and behavioral

problems in young boys has become alarmingly common. Boys learn that it is “cool” to be distant, inauthentic, and disconnected. They lose their *relational voice*, the voice that reflects authentic feelings and affiliative needs. What replaces real interaction is banter and bravado. Caught up in the expectations of boy culture, imitating behaviors seen in older peers and siblings, boys often become alienated from their own inner world. When boys disconnect from their mothers, they lose access to the relational way of being with others that mothers represent. They may lose the ability to be responsive and receptive (Miller, 1986).

Steve Bergman (1991) coins the phrase “relational dread” as a phenomenon in boys and men that grows out of early emotional disconnection from mom. Boys lose their place within the relational context. Eventually, when faced with emotion and relationship, they freeze. They become immobilized. Isolated in their disconnection from mother, they don’t know what to do or how to be in relationship. Bergman aptly describes this experience of dread and the resulting avoidance of connection that has become an intrinsic part of traditional developmental models for boys. Girls and women don’t always see this dread because men cover it up with avoidance, denial, and bravado (I.P. Stiver, personal communication, November 25, 1998). Its impact, however, is great. This is part of what makes mutually empathic interactions with and between boys and men so difficult.

When mothers move away from young sons and push them toward independence, boys are denied empathic resonance (Stiver, 1986). Without a safe relational context provided by mother, a boy feels alone. He is too young to protest. He knows no alternative. He thinks that disconnection is what is supposed to happen. Nevertheless, he still longs for connection—quite rightly. But now he feels shame and confusion about his inner longings. To deal with his pain and confusion, he shuts down emotionally. He hasn’t yet learned to differentiate and name feelings. Confused, he suffers alone, in silence. The cost of this break in relationship from mother is significant for boys’ evolving relationships with others. They deal with this inner confusion and pain by shutting down access to their emotional world and to relationship. When this happens, relational and emotional development slows down.

From this point on, there are fewer empathic possibilities for boys than for girls. This early loss of parental empathy creates a void in the area of responsiveness to and identification of emerging

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feelings. Judith Jordan (1989) notes that a lack of empathic responding will result in a feeling of personal shame. In the absence of empathy, this inner place of vulnerability and feelings fills with shame. Boys learn early that emotional needs, longings, feelings, or dependencies are shameful. They then have a more difficult time developing a healthy sense of self-empathy. Shame and shaming become the consequence of this empathy void. Emotional needs and longings often become covered-up in boys through angry expressions and aggressive behaviors. Eventually, through continued exposure to boy culture, put-downs, and power-over behavior, boys seem to lose their capacity for empathy toward others.

There is a further twist. We all yearn for a sense of connection; yet, the inevitable disconnections that happen in relationships can be painful and threatening. Everyone experiences this flow of connection/disconnection in life. Because of these repeated interpersonal disconnections, we often pull back from relationship while, at the same time, we yearn for connection. Miller and Stiver (1997) write about this as the “paradox of relationship.” Boys feel this paradox at a young age; they learn early not to fully represent themselves in relational encounters. Shamed for expressions of emotion, they begin to keep important parts of themselves hidden from others. They do this by developing a repertoire of behaviors for staying out of relationship. Miller and Stiver call these “strategies of disconnection.” These strategies keep boys from experiencing the shaming and put-downs of boy culture at the cost of keeping them out of real connection with others. Some examples include silence, smart remarks that discourage conversation, elaborate demonstrations of disinterest, sarcastic humor, and the exchange of glances between boys that convey disrespect for the speaker. Beneath the bravado and banter, boys are hungry for connection and emotional expression. This is the paradox of relationship for them.

Gilligan (1996) describes adolescent girls as sacrificing relationship for the sake of relationships. Boys sacrifice authentic emotional connection with others for the sake of inclusion within boy culture. This accommodation helps them avoid being teased and shamed, gains them the approval of peers, and creates superficial connection at the expense of real relationship.

Bullying, competitive banter, and bravado, these are the hurtful, power-over interactions that pervade boy culture. At the same time, boys learn about the code of silence built into these interactions. You cannot “tell” on another, even if you know their

behavior is damaging and wrong. Boys learn early in life that to survive with peers they have to endure harsh, mean, even hurtful verbal and physical behavior. The dominant culture expects boys to be tough and shames them when they aren't. They can't let on when they've been hurt or humiliated. If they break the “code of silence,” they risk humiliation, peer isolation, and further harassment. Boys plead with their mothers not to intervene. They would rather submit to the bullying than be shamed for turning to someone for help.

Walking home from school, a group of nine-year-old boys stop at the ballpark to hit a few fly balls. Waiting his turn, Max stands behind the backstop, his fingers curled around the metal links. Whack! One of the boys smashes the bat against the backstop and hits Max's finger. Max screams and crumples to the ground in tears, clutching his hand. The group of boys stares at him. Then one says, “Oh c'mon. I don't see anything wrong. It's not bleeding. You're faking.” “What a wimp!” yells another. “Poor baby hurt his finger?” chimes in Andrew, Max's best friend. Bewildered, Max gets up, trying without much success to hold back the tears. His finger throbs. “Maybe you should go over and play with those girls,” taunts Andrew, shaking his head in disgust as he and the others walk off together, leaving Max behind. Max arrives home upset. His mother sees his tears and swollen finger turning black and blue. She offers ice, but it's not the finger that hurts most. She tries to comfort Max and asks what happened. “Nothing mom, it's okay,” insists Max as he retreats to his room in shame.

Mothering can be seen as a political act. It is a form of the political resistance that Carol Gilligan (1992) so eloquently describes for women—they need to speak their truth. In this case it is the truth about boys' code of silence.

The experience of being shamed by the culture, by peers, or by parents because of vulnerable feelings, can have a significant impact. In response to the recent episodes of violence in young adolescent boys (Jonesboro, AR; Paducah, KY; Pearl, MS) we, as a nation, are examining the roots of this behavior. James Gilligan (1996), in his recent book on violence in men, cites the experience of intense shame as an important dynamic in the histories of violent men. Shaming men and boys for exhibiting vulnerable feelings may contribute to their risk of engaging in violent behavior. Shame may be a precursor to the expression of anger,



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an acceptable feeling for men and boys that may lead to aggression.

A liability built into boy culture is the expectation of repeated exposure to violent play, movies, and video games. Boys, eventually, become desensitized to violence. To avoid being teased or shamed, they stifle their natural emotional reactions of fear and vulnerability. Gradually, with daily exposure and practice, boys lose access to their real feelings and normal reactions to violence. Before long they can watch violence, abuse, and horror on the screen, in video games, even in peer interactions without flinching!

### The Ebb and Flow of Relationship

Connection occurs when we experience a sense of mutual engagement, empathy, authenticity, and empowerment within the context of relationship. We have the mutual feeling of knowing and being with the other, immersed in their experience along with our own. Such connections provide a continual source of growth for the individual and the relationship. This form of connection has startlingly positive effects which Jean Baker Miller (1986) calls *the five good things*: zest (vitality), a more accurate picture of oneself and others, increased sense of self-worth, increased desire and ability to act, and desire for more connection. When we are in a disconnection, the opposite happens. We feel cut off from the person, experience the pain of not being understood and not understanding the other, and feel confusion about what is happening. The five outcomes of disconnection are: decreased energy, confusion and lack of clarity, decreased self-worth, inability to act, and turning away from relationship.

Relationships are not static. Figure 2 illustrates the natural movement of all relationships. The cycle of connection-disconnection-new connection demonstrates how working through disconnections can enhance relationships. Understanding this is the key to mutually satisfying relationships. The inevitable disconnections become the signal that work needs to be done in the relationship. When we don't acknowledge this and when we don't try to find a solution together, distance replaces closeness. The relationship suffers. The connection becomes derailed in the confusion and ambiguity of the disregarded issue. On the other hand, when disconnections are addressed, they can become opportunities to work together toward mutual understanding and solutions (Bergman & Surrey, 1992).

Reconnection can be quick and easy, or they can take time, effort, and creativity. This is the

strengthening work of relationship. When we find the way back, it is not just a reconnection, but a strengthened, enhanced, growthful leap for the relationship. Even when sons seem to be disinterested and uninvolved in this process, a mother's efforts are extremely important. This is how we continue to build relationships with sons.

This creative work will differ depending upon the unique characteristics of each family: family structure, values, importance of the issue at hand, temperament, culture, ethnicity, religion, and race. This work provides opportunities to widen the lens for sons. For example, in dealing with a power issue, white mothers can talk with their sons about how various power differentials create disconnection. By raising awareness of the dominant culture's racist views and how they affect relationships, mothers can help boys begin to see and deal with issues of privilege and power early in life. Discussions about social esteem (Jenkins, 1993) can help boys understand how their view of themselves and others is affected by (often negative) stereotypes and attitudes deeply embedded in our culture.

The mother-son relationship is a safe place for boys to learn how to work through disconnection. Boys can learn to view disconnections as cues in their relationships, not to let go, but rather to find creative ways to reconnect. Mothers can then support, guide, and reassure their sons through small and large conflicts in their relationships. Often these conflicts happen first with mom, then with other family members, and eventually in peer and adult relationships outside the home. The following example illustrates how a mother's emotional connectedness to her son enhanced his relational and emotional development.

When 13-year-old Andy got home from school he learned that the dog belonging to his best friend Sam had been killed by a car. His own dog had died the same way just a year ago. Andy, in hearing the news, froze. His body stiffened; his face registered fear. What could he possibly say or do to help his friend at this point? He had no words. He was confused, overwhelmed, and inundated with feelings about his own dog's death. He knew the horrible loss he experienced a year ago was what Sam was feeling now, but he felt immobilized by his own grief and discomfort. How could he possibly approach Sam in this vulnerable state? And what about Sam? Wouldn't he be embarrassed by his own sadness?

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His mom put her arm around him and said, "You know how sad Sam must be. Remember how sad we all were when Trumpet died? Sam could really use a friend right now, especially one who knows exactly how he must be feeling." Andy panicked. "No, Mom, I can't. I don't know what to say. I'd sound really stupid," he said.

"You know it's a really important part of a friendship to go to your friend's side when something bad happens. He needs you now," said his mother. Andy couldn't move. He couldn't go to Sam's. He couldn't call. He was angry with his mother for her suggestion. He started walking out of the room, but his mother said, "Wait, let's do this together. We can write it out and then call him." Andy stiffened further, insisting he couldn't even think, saying, "I'm stupid. I don't know what to say."

His mother wrote the words out for him, encouraging him all the way. "Look Andy, all you have to say is 'Sam, I'm sorry. I just heard about your dog. I'm so sorry. I know how you must feel. You know Trumpet died last year the same way and it crushed me. I'm really sorry.'" Andy backed away from the phone, but his mother dialed and handed it to him. As the phone rang, he mouthed "No" to his mother while dangling the receiver her way. Finally, the answering machine picked up. With a sigh of relief, Andy read the message.

Later his mom was worried about how these two teenagers could make a face-to-face connection. So she offered to let Andy have a beanie baby she had just bought for his younger brother. "You could give this to Sam in memory of Rumpus because it looks just like him," she said. Andy was insulted. "Wow! Step back, Mom! A *beanie baby*? Give me a break!" At this point his mom dropped the idea.

The next day, Sam came over to find Andy who wasn't home yet. He repeated over and over to Andy's mom, "Tell Andy that it was so cool he called me. No one else did. Tell him I said thanks. Tell him I came over. Tell him to come over to my house when he gets home. Tell him that was really great to call." When Andy returned, his mother told him Sam had been there. Andy stiffened in fear. When his mother related how appreciative Sam was for the call, Andy's whole body relaxed. His eyes brightened, he had a burst of energy, and he was out the door to Sam's. His mom was relieved, and then a few minutes later she heard him come

back into the house. As he ran up the stairs he smiled and sheepishly asked if he could give the beanie baby to Sam. On his way out the door his mom gave him a quick hug and told him what a great job he'd done. He smiled as he pulled away saying, "That's because I've got a *buena madre!*" (good mother)

Andy moved from alienation to emotional involvement. He moved from disconnection to not only reconnection, but even better connection with his mom and his friend. When he first heard the news, Andy disconnected and became immobilized. He exhibited all five outcomes of disconnection: lack of clarity or confusion ("I don't know what to say"), decreased desire and ability to act ("I can't"), decreased self worth ("I'll sound stupid"), turning away from relationship (walking away), and decreased energy. With empathy, support, and mutual involvement from his mom, he was able to make the move back into relationship with his friend and with his mom. By the end of the story we see how the individuals and both relationships benefit from the move back into connection.

Andy exhibited all of the five good outcomes. He was motivated to act and did (went to his friend, came back for the beanie baby), he felt better about himself (smiling, joking), he had a more accurate picture of himself and others ("*buena madre*"), he had a desire for more connection (with his mom and Sam), and he had more energy (went to his friend, energized in his interaction with his mom). Andy learned something important about relationship and loss. His relationship with Sam will deepen because the two shared a new awareness of themselves in relation to each other's grief. Furthermore, his relationship with his mother is enhanced as he more fully appreciates her efforts to help him with the difficult work of relationship.

### Parenting-in-Connection

Embracing the natural ebb and flow of relationship is the basis for a model of child-raising we refer to as *Parenting-in-Connection*. The goals are to enhance connection and to circumvent distance and separation. As noted above, disconnections are *opportunities* to deepen and strengthen the relationship. Thus, the inevitable disconnections of parenthood become a signal that work is needed in the relationship. Mothers can teach sons, by example, to move toward reconnection rather than becoming derailed by disconnection. A mother's knowledge and ability can facilitate this learning process for a son and

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enrich the mother-son connection.

In a recent two-year longitudinal study of 12,000 teenagers from across the country, researchers found that a close relationship with a parent is the best predictor of a teenager's health and the strongest deterrent to high-risk behaviors. The study published by the *Journal of the American Medical Association* was apart of a \$24 million project funded by the *National Institute of Child Health and Human Development* and other agencies (Resnick et al., 1997). A strong emotional connection with at least one parent or significant adult figure reduces the odds that an adolescent will suffer from emotional stress, have suicidal thoughts or behavior, engage in violence, or use substances (tobacco, alcohol or marijuana). Feeling that at least one adult knew them and treated them fairly buffered the teens against every health risk except pregnancy. This finding held up regardless of family income, race, education, specific amount of time spent with a child, whether a child lives with one or two parents or in an alternative family structure, and whether one or both parents work. The evidence is overwhelming. Good relationships help create resilience to dangerous, acting-out behaviors in our children.

As parents and educators, we share the painful dilemma of having important family and community values that conflict with the realities of peer culture for boys. Together, mothers and sons can develop new ways of approaching these dilemmas. We help mothers introduce the notion of reparation when dealing with interpersonal violations and injuries. There is a growing need to set limits on emotionally, socially, and physically hurtful behavior toward others. But setting limits for the sake of limits doesn't work. Punishment without a relational context only further alienates boys. They take pride in getting busted. Acting out and noncompliance earns them points with peers. Naming the behavior that we want changed, providing alternatives to the traditional boy culture strategies, and encouraging interpersonal reparation are all essential parts of setting limits with boys. They often love structure and tend to go along with a clearly outlined and defined model that they and their friends are expected to follow. "If you build it, they will come!" Boys need adults to point out that the behavior is hurtful, offer better alternatives, and provide concrete consequences for relational injuries.

We are suggesting a simple, yet powerful change in boys' development: move the emphasis of the mother-son relationship away from separation and isolation toward connection. When we do that, we have a chance to help sons with healthy emotional

development daily in dozens of small but significant ways. We just might change the course of their lives by teaching them, through these everyday interactions, how to develop mutually empathic, mutually empowering relationships.

In reviewing boys' relational growth, we identified four stages in the development of mother-son relationships. Each developmental period has cultural expectations, which influence the mother-son relationship, creating conflicts and dilemmas. We have set relational goals for each stage and defined ways mothers can counter these cultural influences and keep sons on the path of relational development. Each stage is outlined in terms of age, imposed cultural pressures, problems created, and specific methods for meeting relational goals (Figure 3).

- I: The Early Years (3-7 years): The cultural message is the invincibility of the *superhero*. Little boys are besieged by superhero figures that imply that becoming a man depends on independence, strength, stoicism and total invulnerability, and the defeat of all others. The relational goal is laying the groundwork for relationship by naming, demonstrating, and validating relational abilities.
- II: The Middle Years (8-13 years): The cultural message involves banter, bullies, and bravado. Middle school boys are indoctrinated with the competitive ethic of winning at all costs and exploiting power over others. The relational goal is setting limits and offering alternatives by guiding sons toward interactive, fun-filled, authentic, relationships.
- III: The Teenage Years (14-18 years): The cultural message is to shut down authentic feelings and interactions and engage in the "locker room" culture of social, physical, and sexual dominance. The focus is on dominance, not real relationship. The relational goal is maintaining relationships as multidimensional and encouraging mutual dialogue. It also involves viewing conflict and difference as opportunities to stay in connection and learn more about each other.
- IV: College/Adult: The cultural message is disconnection and separation from mother. Adult sons worry about being too "attached." The expectation to disconnect can feel like disinterest and distance to their mothers. The relational goal is to encourage a mutually

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responsive, mutually empowering mother-son relationship.

Parenting-in-Connection provides a new way of understanding and responding to disconnections. It can be teaching a two-year-old to share, helping a nine-year-old to deal with the hurt and unfairness of being bullied, empathizing with a teenager's pain in being rejected by a girl, or sorting through the many decisions of adulthood together.

## The Early Years

One mom recalls how her son, Aaron, went from being the "best boy" in preschool to becoming that "wild boy" in kindergarten. "The kids he sat with on the first day of kindergarten were rambunctious, wild boys," she recalls. He sat at the same table day after day and very soon, "he became a wild boy."

Before entering a traditional school setting, Aaron was an empathic little boy who asked his preschool teacher, "Are your feelings hurt?" when another child snapped at her. He was always the first to step forward and offer a welcome when a new child entered the class. With the move to kindergarten, Aaron entered a larger, traditional setting, which reflected more mainstream boy culture expectations. His new teacher seemed to assume that all boys were rowdy and she didn't really know Aaron. Feeling isolated and disconnected, he sought to establish connection by mimicking the boys at his table. He became loud and boisterous, winning acceptance by succumbing to pressures to join in with "wild boy" behavior.

In the Parenting-in-Connection model, the early years (Figure 4) are the time to lay the groundwork for relational mothering. Noting how essential mutual respect, honesty, empathy, and listening are to every interaction can do this. Mothers can show sons how to put these skills into action, verbally and nonverbally. Mothers often direct boys outside or into the basement to watch a video when company arrives because their aggressive energy feels too incongruent to the occasion. Why not, instead, teach boys to stop, look at, shake hands with, respond to, and initiate conversation with guests that we welcome into our homes. Keeping boys in the picture offers an opportunity for practicing interpersonal skills. Over time, these relational skills will become second nature to boys and possibly replace the high activity behaviors they seem to use to cover their anxiety.

Boys need to be told and shown how to interact in situations that extend beyond family and friends. Mothers can be clear about expecting receptivity and responsiveness to others in the home and community. Early childhood is the time to inculcate values like these. It is also the time to note the importance of being honest in communications with others and of respecting others' feelings, even though we might feel differently. These are the show-and-tell years, a time when children are open to guidance and learning that the culture doesn't offer and even opposes.

Our culture convinces boys early on that invincibility and imperviousness are hallmarks of strength. Little boys are fascinated by stories about Superman and they love to play superheroes. They learn that they have to be able to fix everything and protect everyone from evil forces. There is little room for expression of their vulnerable, dependent side. This inner part of boys can be quickly buried beneath shame if parents let the message of the culture take hold at this age.

Superman is powerful and invincible. But, as the story goes, his survival and strength depend upon his being apart from any trace of his "mother" planet, Krypton. Like Achilles, the underlying mythology presents the allure of invincibility and the dangers of the mother connection for sons. And the price for these illusions of strength for boys is the loss of access to feelings and authenticity in relationships.

In these early years, children are beginning to practice skills of empathy. Being responsive to family members' feelings and expressive of his own can give a little boy the opportunity to learn about mutually empathic relationships. Highlighting and validating the relational part of an activity, not just the activity itself, is another lesson for the early years.

Maria takes her seven-year-old son cross-country skiing for the first time. When they come to a hill, John has a rough time. His mom braces him from behind, to keep him from backsliding. Resting against her, he looks up and says, "You must really hate skiing with me. I'm terrible and you're awesome." "Oh no," says Maria, "I love this. I love being with you and helping you. That's what's important to me." "Really?" says John, smiling broadly.

Another simple way to create a space for relationship at this early age is to make a daily chat a part of a boy's routine. Mothers can designate a time for a private chat. This can be done in the car on the way to an activity. It can be done at bedtime as a way of wrapping up the day. It can be combined with a

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game or other joint activity. A mother needn't pressure a son to speak, but rather let him know that he has the opportunity. As the chat becomes ritualized, this will be a special time together. This sets a relational frame within which he can learn that it's safe to talk about *anything*.

Parenting-in-Connection in the early years is a matter of teamwork. Instead of sending a little boy out to master a two-wheeler without any preparation, mother and son start by peddling a bicycle-built-for-two. Mom is there to help her young son navigate life's inevitable bumps and twists. Working through difficult feelings and problems with mom not only teaches the boy relational skills, but also nourishes and enriches his self-worth and their relationship. These lessons and experiences with his mother give him the confidence to remain in touch with his inner world as he ventures into the greater world beyond family.

### The Middle Years

At this age we see the "playground" influence of teasing and bullying (Figure 5). This behavior can be both emotionally and physically hurtful. Boy culture behavior says: "I'm tough," "It doesn't bother me," "You can't hurt me," "I don't care." As noted above, when we stop responding to boys from an empathic, compassionate perspective, we give them the message that they should be tough and independent, both emotionally and behaviorally.

In the Max story told earlier, the mother went to her son's room and sat with him. Her acknowledgment of, and compassion for, his pain offered both validation and comfort to Max. Left on his own to deal with this experience, Max would learn to avoid the shame he felt by denying his feelings of physical and emotional pain. Mothers sometimes worry about embarrassing sons further by acknowledging and responding to their vulnerable emotions. Yet, it is this very naming of, and feeling compassion for, hurt feelings that offers empathic responding where they otherwise feel shame. This interaction teaches boys alternatives to avoiding shame by denying feelings.

We encourage mothers to jump into their sons' world and react authentically to what they see and feel. Naming their emotional reaction and eliciting their sons' view of the situation creates a dialogue. Mothers and sons can then further this process by sharing differences and exchanging values. While this process doesn't always give immediate answers, being together in a real way can create the connection necessary for them to work toward possible solutions.

A couple of years ago, a weekly yearlong values class became the setting for teaching relational skills to ten, nine-year-old boys. Previous teachers warned about the impossible task of working with this group of boys, stating: "Every one of these boys meets criteria for ADHD. They are impossible to work with in a classroom setting. Let them go outside to run off their energy. This group desperately needs girls to tone it down." Similarly, the boys greeted the new teacher with, "We are powerful! No one can control us! We rule! You have to let us go outside and run around."

The teacher spent the first month reinforcing good relational behavior with pennies and letting the boys trade these for candy at the end of class. She walked around the classroom dropping pennies into paper cups whenever someone was *not* participating in disruptive behavior. She was eventually able to reinforce the new relational behavior as it appeared. Slowly the boys, through the introduction of a new model of interacting, started to engage with one another in a real way. The class brainstormed ideas about old and new models of relationship for boys. As they shared their experience in the old model, they were able to share feelings of isolation and an awareness of how unfair the old model is to boys. One child likened the expectations of boy culture to racism. "It's like racism, you can't even have a friend who's a girl without being called her boyfriend or a wimp for hanging around with her!"

This class created its own new culture and value system for boys. Instead of running wild, they talked about relationship. They interacted honestly and respectfully with one another. They even learned to meditate to the resonance of a meditation bell!

In the same classroom, Nan Stein's "Bullyproof" curriculum (1996) introduced language and concepts for participation with peers outside the group. The boys brought in examples of boy culture from their school life and talked about the dilemma of doing the right thing in the face of peer pressure to do the opposite. Stein's "web of courage" exercise renamed being honest and supportive with friends as bravery and strength. There are countless ways we can praise and build confidence in boys for going against the cultural model. One boy's brave act was calling his friend on the phone. He expressed his hurt feelings to this friend who had joined with other boys mocking him on the way home from school. The boys seemed

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relieved to tell their real stories and talk about feelings in a place that was relationally safe. When we create new models with new values, boys can grow in new ways.

Boys at this age respond well to structure. Mothers can name the relational violations they see, stop the hurtful interactive behaviors, and provide meaningful concrete consequences. We teach the notion of relational reparation to boys. When a behavior is hurtful to the person and the relationship, we call it a *relational violation*. Reparation, through some concrete form of giving to the relationship, is required to move back into connection. Boys are responsive to structured ways of coming back into connection. Making reparation to a younger brother who's been hurt can mean engaging him in his favorite game and having fun together. This can be a quick 15-minute interaction between siblings during which all other freedoms are on hold. Reparation fits with a boy's desire to fix things. The shift is important; move the focus from fixing concrete things to repairing relationship.

Mothers can draw on established family relational rituals to open dialogue and process feelings and interactions with sons. Mothers can share the stories of their lives and welcome their sons' stories. Children are particularly interested in their parents' stories of childhood. Tell them how you struggled at their age. Encourage their daily stories. Show interest in their day-to-day struggles with peers and praise their creative attempts to deal with these obstacles. When mothers do this, they can enhance their sons' relational skills that are otherwise ignored or even put down by peers and the culture at large. By joining with their sons', mothers can widen their sons' views of new possibilities and change.

## The Teen Years

As boys enter the teen years, the cultural message is to get as far as possible from their vulnerable emotions (Figures 6 & 7). The "power-over" model of boyhood is transformed into a model of dominance in adolescence. Social, physical, and sexual dominance replaces authentic interactions. Because they are disengaged from their feelings and are disconnected from their parents, adolescent boys tend to act out rather than talk out their problems and conflicts. This leaves them at risk for forming insecure or abusive relationships. They may experiment with drugs, alcohol, and other risk-taking behaviors. Peer competition and pressure often motivate premature sexual intimacies. This type of quick intimacy is devoid of relational depth; it can often lead to frequent

shifts in their choice of sexual partners.

Confusion about who they are and what they feel extends to their future and their goals. Often this can translate into underachievement in school and a feeling of general discontent with their lives. This path for boys leads to further disconnection and alienation from relationship. They learn to become relationally silent.

Mothers of teenagers often interpret their sons' silence as rejection or as a desire for independence. They retreat from their sons' distance. They are fearful that if they pursue connection, they will be ignored or will increase the animosity they already feel from their sons. They are also afraid of being intrusive. They think they should respect their sons' need for distance.

A group of fifteen-year-old boys responded to the question: "What are the important mother-son issues for you?" One boy went on and on saying, "She should stay out of my room, leave me alone, stop telling me to do my homework and to clean up my room." This same boy when questioned further about whether his mother ever tried to talk with him about important things, responded, "Yeah, but she gives up too easily."

In our work we encourage mothers to work hard at keeping the connection with their sons. Adolescence is a developmental time when sons need their mothers to hold onto the relationship. Even when it seems to mothers that they are "talking to a wall," these efforts mean something to boys and can become the early threads of connection. A mother can raise issues and questions and let her son know what she thinks and feels. As boys mature, mothers can expect increased mutual responsibility for the work of their relationship. Mothers need to remain authentic while interacting with their sons. For example, voicing frustration because she is doing all the work of the relationship and wanting more effort on his part can spark a son's awareness and make connection start to happen. Even if interactions seem to be conflicts and disagreements, the dialogue itself moves the relationship out of silence and distance into connection. Mothers need to make explicit the work of relationship so that boys learn what to do. Boys need guidance and real-life examples.

At the same time the relationship with mother becomes more balanced relationally; it can also become more balanced regarding the concrete work of family life. Mothers sometimes hold onto the role of provider and caretaker in a concrete way because

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that's all they have with their sons. As roles and responsibilities evolve, boys feel better about themselves and their growing mutuality with mom. They learn how to be in relationship in a real way. A mother can share her feelings and perspective while remaining receptive to her son's effort to communicate his viewpoint. Receptivity to a son's initiative is essential, whatever form this may take. Sometimes just being together in silence can create enough connection for sons to share a little bit more of who they are. As the relationship evolves, boys will begin to include mothers in discussions regarding dilemmas they face in the world and with peers. Learning to communicate with parental support gives boys the skills they need to deal with complex and difficult situations in life. As mentioned earlier, when there is a strong connection with at least one parent, teens don't need to turn to drugs, alcohol, or other forms of distraction and acting out.

As boys start to deal with bodily changes and emerging sexuality, mothers can provide a safe place to learn about both physical and interpersonal changes in relation to girls. Mothers can keep the dialogue open by being responsive to questions, initiating concerns, and even sharing their own story. When it comes to teaching and guiding sons through the emotional developmental topography of intimacy, mothers (as well as fathers) can be good resources! Today's teens have few guidelines or structures in place to set the pace of intimacy for them. Dating standards have changed; there are no rules. Teens "hook up" at parties. "Going out" and "hooking up" are loosely defined descriptions of boy/girl partnering that can mean anything from talking on the phone regularly to having some form of sex together. This "no rules" situation creates problems especially for boys. Our culture shames boys for their lack of knowledge about sexual intimacy and for exhibiting any reluctance to initiate it. Boys feel they should know what's going on, be in charge, and take the lead sexually. When sons appear to not want to talk about sexuality, it can be due to their shame of not knowing. If mothers can voice their own feelings about this difficult topic, sons can begin to overcome their shame and feel safe enough to talk. Mothers need to hold this connection with their sons, creating possibilities for dialogue about relationships, intimacy, and sexuality.

### **The Adult Years**

Adulthood is comprised of many developmental stages for men. During this time, an adult son's energy may be directed toward developing an intimate relationship; similarly, a son may need to

invest time and energy in a demanding work schedule, or he may choose to have children. All of these features influence the mother-son relationship. Furthermore, there are many diverse configurations of the adult, mother-son relationship: mothers of single sons, married sons, sons with children, gay sons, divorced/separated sons, to name a few. Essentially, as an adult, the son is developing more interpersonal commitments and career opportunities at a time when his mother may be doing the opposite. He is less available and she is often more available. This juxtaposition of the two can create misunderstandings and hurt feelings if not addressed by mother and son.

The challenge for mothers is to understand their sons' expanding relationships and relational responsibilities, while at the same time to voice an interest in being included in some way. It is our hope to reframe the relational goal of men's development to discover renewed connection with their mothers as they enter into mutually supportive adult to adult-child interactions.

Many mothers of sons feel isolated and alienated. At one of our first workshops, 40 of the 100 participants were mothers of adult sons. There was uniform concern about remaining in connection with sons while they attended college, during their marriages, and throughout their adult lives. We began a session of the workshop by saying the refrain: "A daughter is a daughter for the rest of your life; a son is a son..." and everyone in unison joined in spontaneously "... 'til he takes a wife." The cultural message of disconnection at this stage is the culmination of years of distance between mothers and sons (Figure 8). The cultural stereotypes are always of the intrusive or meddling mother or mother-in-law. There are numerous negative images in the media of close mother-son relationships. The cultural mandate of disconnection we've talked about is fiercely reinforced through exaggerated stereotypes, which mockingly refer to adult men who are close to their mothers as "mama's boys."

At age thirty-seven a young man was reflecting on the anger and distance he had felt toward his mother since adolescence. At this stage in his life he wanted to establish a better relationship with her.

In answer to the question, "What was your early relationship like?" he suddenly recalled, "I remember the wonderful feeling of her sitting on my bed talking with me before I fell asleep every night. Then one night she didn't come in. I called to her, but she said she couldn't come in

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any more. She never told me why and she never came in again.”

A mixture of pain and shame was evident in the telling of his story. Sharing his past experience seemed to bring him greater understanding of his feelings. This clarity motivated him to discuss the incident from the past with his mother.

One way of connecting with an adult son is to revisit past interactions and talk about how cultural pressures affected your mother-son relationship. Many mothers who disconnected did so because the culture told them to, not because they wanted distance from their sons. In opening a dialogue, both mother and son can share their perspectives and their feelings about these experiences. Processing old interactions in an effort to understand each other's point of view creates connection. This can be the beginning of the mutual effort and understanding that is needed in order to heal past hurts and misunderstandings.

One mother of an adult son told us that she had been having concerns about the distance in her relationships with her grown son. When she told him she was attending a “Mothers and Sons Conference,” he suggested that they have lunch afterward to talk about it. It seemed that letting him know about her interest in the conference opened a door for them and had an immediate effect on their relationships. Talking openly and clarifying feelings can help re-establish the connection and decrease the misunderstandings caused by silence.

Mothers and adult sons need to respect and embrace each other's relational efforts across differences in needs, perspectives, and situations. Mothers can value attempts at connection by their sons, even when they feel as if they need more. Being authentic about one's feelings, but responsive to the others' needs and circumstances, is the challenge of the adult years. At this point, the relationship is the mutual responsibility of both mother and son. Being aware of conflicting needs and discussing the natural dilemmas they create can result in an atmosphere of greater acceptance.

Finally, and most importantly, mothers need a strong support network of other mothers and other family members to help them deal with their evolving relational needs. Many mothers of adult sons have voiced the need to talk together about these issues. Joining with others in similar life circumstances can be healing and can help create the kind of connection that is often lacking. This network of connections can empower mothers to find positive solutions to dilemmas with sons.

## Summary

This paper reviews traditional and relational models of boys' development and the impact of these models on the mother-son relationship. It explores the important developmental issues of empathy, self-esteem, and shame in the context of gender, specifically for boys. Traditional theory calls for separation and distance from mother at a very early point in a boy's development (age 3-5). We define problems and outline developmental issues and dilemmas faced by boys and mothers of sons because of this cultural injunction to disconnect. We examine a prospective view of the capacity for relational development in boys. Then we present a model of Parenting-in-Connection based on Relational/Cultural Theory, highlighting relationship as central to psychological health. Further, we define the dominant boy culture and examine its impact on boys' development and the mother-son relationship. Finally, four stages in boys' relational development are detailed, including in each stage an examination of the impact of culture, relational goals, and methods mothers can use to reach these goals. Examples from workshops and clinical work are used to demonstrate this model.



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