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Raising Emotionally Intelligent Sons

By Mark Brandenburg MA, CPCC

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"Mommy, I fell down," said the 5-year-old to his mother during a recent soccer practice. "Were you tough?" asked his mom. "Yeah," he said and walked away with his head down.

I was at this soccer practice with my daughter, and feeling just a bit out of place as the only dad there. When I heard this exchange, it reminded me of the ways we can blindly follow the "old school" concerning how we raise boys. The old school says that boys should be tough, independent and reject feelings of being weak or fearful. When I heard this mother ask her son if he was tough, I wanted to say, "All he wants is for you to ask if he's OK!"

What does raising "tough and independent" boys create?

Men generally haven't received the training in "emotional intelligence" that women have. They have a harder time identifying their own feelings, as well as the feelings of others. They have been trained from an early age to learn that being tough is more important than showing feelings.

When you employ the old school of raising tough and independent boys, you damage boys' ability to feel closely connected to others and their ability to have awareness of their own feelings. Boys learn to "swallow" feelings of inadequacy or weakness.

The problem with swallowing these feelings is that it impacts ones' ability to access other feelings as well. Emotionally intelligent people have access to all of their feelings, not just the ones that are pleasant for them.

The result of swallowing these feelings may be fathers and men who are "successful" (they make a lot of money), but who are not in touch with their own feelings and have difficulty in nurturing themselves or their children. They tend to have tremendous difficulty in developing successful relationships with their loved ones.

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Most of the men walking around today report they either don't remember being hugged by their fathers and/or they have never heard their father say "I love you" to them. It's easy to see why men often struggle in this area. Falling into the trap of the old school for boys is easy because it's been the standard for fathers for a very long time.

It is entirely normal and natural for fathers to have conflicting thoughts about this subject. There will probably be a part of you that wants your son to be tough enough to handle a tough, competitive world.

There may be another part of you that doesn't want your son to divorce three wives—each of whom he blames for the failed marriage—and who buys a red sports car and hangs out at singles bars when he reaches age 50.

Remember that the world is not only moving towards more technological sophistication but emotional

sophistication as well. Those who fully succeed in their lives in this generation will be the people who are able to identify their own feelings as well as the feelings of others. Here are some ideas on how you can help your own son with this:

What fathers can do to raise emotionally intelligent sons

- Examine your own ideas and practices concerning how you raise your son. Do you allow him to express his full range of feelings, or do you push him away emotionally if he's showing sadness, weakness, vulnerability, etc?

- Practice, practice, practice. Catch yourself when you're in the old patterns; try saying more things like, "that must have been hard for you" or "boy, I understand how foolish you must have felt." (These work on wives, too).

- Occasionally share feelings with your son in an age-appropriate way; this will encourage him to feel safe enough to share his feelings with you. Don't be afraid to tell your son that you were afraid at times as a child and that you still get scared today.

- Be involved in your son's life enough to know who else might be enforcing the "old school." That could include teachers, coaches, day-care providers, other family members, etc. Since the old school is all around us, have the courage to step in and make change happen even though you'll be judged by others ("You're gonna end up with a wimpy mama's boy").

- Show physical affection to your son. Hugs, kisses, wrestling, whatever you can muster. There is a great deal of research which shows that boys who receive this from their fathers are happier, healthier, smarter, etc. Show your son that you can hug or put your arm around other men as well to demonstrate your affection. Are you squirming? You're a good candidate for this one.

- Help him to identify and name his own emotions as well as the emotions of others. You can do this by asking him questions like, "Were you feeling angry when you struck out?" Try to judge people less and empathize more—he'll learn these skills from you.

Let's help to create a world in which boys are able to be both sensitive and strong. Let's teach them to be both fierce and gentle and to be aware of their own feelings as well as the feelings of others.

This is only possible if we give up the notion of the tough and independent boy, which has done so much damage to the development of strong, sensitive, and nurturing men.

We owe this one to our sons and to the world.

Mark Brandenburg MA, CPCC, is the author of "25 Secrets of Emotionally Intelligent Fathers" (http://www.markbrandenburg.com/e_book.htm#secrets). For more great tips and action steps for fathers, sign up for his FREE bi-weekly newsletter, Dads, Don't Fix Your Kids, at <http://www.markbrandenburg.com>.

Raising Strong Daughters

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When my daughter was born, I must admit there was a distinctly different feeling to it when compared to the birth of my son. Part of me was thrilled, but part of me was unsure of how to deal with a gender that I still couldn't quite understand.

When my son was born there was a clear sense that this was territory that I knew: there will be wrestling, playing ball together, playing with cars and, he has a penis! There was a sense of security from all of this and a deep sense of knowing.

Raising a daughter creates different issues for many fathers; it is even more challenging considering the cultural landscape that exists today.

To better understand these issues, it is helpful to explore the expectations of girls that we have as fathers, many of which may be expectations handed down from our own fathers.

Some men feel a strong need to control their daughters, and expect them to act "nice" at all

times.

Others shower their daughters with all of the gifts and "things" that they'll ever need, seeing them as weaker than boys (therefore not encouraging strength and discipline in them).

It's easy for fathers to treat their sons and daughters differently. They can be rough-and-tumble with their sons...but treat their daughters with kid gloves. This opportunity to wrestle or to play physically with your daughters is extremely important, because it shows them that you believe they are capable enough to handle it. (If your daughter is eighteen, it's probably not a good idea to start now.)

The cultural messages we get are that girls and young women are valued for being beautiful, thin, talented, etc. Girls should also be happy, agreeable and eager to please. This cultural backdrop may be partly responsible for the alarming statistics concerning rates of depression, anorexia, bulimia, and other disorders for girls when they are approaching or have entered their teen years.

So how can fathers overcome some of these barriers and help create daughters who become strong, secure women?

If fathers want their daughters to grow up to be strong and secure women, it is absolutely essential that they like women and that they respect them.

No matter how negative and pervasive the cultural messages are, your daughter's self-esteem is greatly impacted by your attitude. If fathers think that women are weaker and need protection, they will tend to raise daughters who are weak and dependent.

To a significant degree, your daughter's success in life and in love is in your hands.

As fathers go through the process of raising daughters, they may have to question everything they thought they knew about the sexes and the difference between men and women. How is it that you learn about these things?

You learn by allowing your daughters to teach you about them every day. You learn by not attempting to control or protect your daughters. You learn by opening up your hearts, and not having the answers all of the time for your daughters (or your sons).

If you can allow your daughters to enjoy being female as much as you enjoy being male, you've taken a big first step. If you can also allow your daughter to make most of her own decisions, you will probably enjoy a great relationship with her. You will also know a lot more about women than you did before.

Here are some action points for fathers with their daughters:

- Fully explore your expectations for your daughter. See where you may be too controlling in her life, or are overly protecting her.
- Create special times with your daughter each week, one-on-one, when you can ask her questions about her life and become more fully aware of who she is. Make this time sacred and let her know it's important to you.
- Expect your daughter to be strong and competent; she'll know that you do and will respond accordingly.
- If your daughter is a teen-ager or close to it, explore your attitude about your daughter's sexuality; many fathers are uncomfortable with this and leave their daughters emotionally when they need them the most.
- Be a great model for how men treat women in your relationship with your wife.
- Talk to other fathers who have had daughters,

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and find out how they have dealt with the challenges of raising a daughter.

Your daughter is depending on your healthy attitude to help her to navigate a culture that is not always positive for girls.

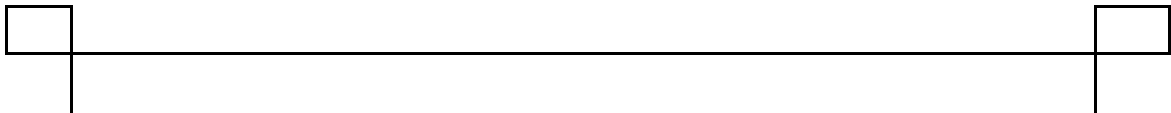
Take a step back and examine your view towards women and girls. Are there changes you want to make?

Your daughter will help you to make those changes if you'll just listen.

Mark Brandenburg MA, CPCC, coaches men to be better fathers and husbands. He is the author of "25 Secrets of Emotionally Intelligent Fathers" <http://www.markbrandenburg.com/father.htm> For more great tips and action steps for fathers, sign up for his FREE bi-weekly newsletter, "Dads, Don't Fix Your Kids," at <http://www.markbrandenburg.com>.



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