

January 2003

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Thomas O. Menchhofer

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### Recommended Citation

Menchhofer, Thomas O. (2003) "Planting the Seed of Emotional Literacy: Engaging Men and Boys in Creating Change," *The Vermont Connection*: Vol. 24, Article 4.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.uvm.edu/tvc/vol24/iss1/4>

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**Planting the Seed of Emotional Literacy:  
Engaging Men and Boys in Creating Change**

**Thomas O. Menchhofer**

*Men are raised and groomed by a culture that rewards them for “acting like men.” Central to this notion is a lack of emotional literacy and expression. Gender stereotypes lead to a lack of safety and security as boys and men seek to question these unspoken expectations. This paper examines: (a) the gender-norm driven culture in which young boys and men are raised, (b) father-son and mother-son relationships, and (c) the social consequences for boys and the greater society. Finally, this account will provide some initial suggestions for creating a more emotionally inclusive educational experience for boys and men.*

**For Every Woman...There is a Man**

For every woman  
who is tired of acting weak when she knows she is strong,  
There is a man  
who is tired of appearing strong when he feels vulnerable.

For every woman  
who is tired of being called an “emotional female,”  
There is a man  
who is denied the right to weep and be gentle.

For every woman  
who is tired of being a sex object,  
There is a man  
who worries about his potency.

For every woman  
who is denied meaningful employment of equal pay,  
There is a man  
who must bear the full financial responsibility for another human being.

For every woman  
who is tired of acting dumb,  
There is a man  
who is burdened with the constant expectation of “knowing everything.”

For every woman  
who was not taught the intricacies of an automobile,  
There is a man  
who was not taught the satisfaction of cooking.

For every woman  
who takes a step toward her own liberation,  
There is a man  
who finds the way to freedom has been made a little easier.

*Anonymous (as cited in LaCerva, 1996)*

It's really hard being a guy, fifteen-year-old Calvin Branford recently explained to me, because you're really expected not to talk about your feelings. You've got to deal with everything yourself. With girls, everybody expects they'll go off and talk to somebody. When you're a guy you're really not allowed to do that. I guess it is pretty hard being a guy because there are so many things a normal person would probably do, but you're just not expected to! (Pollack, 1998, p. 20)

Boys in the United States are receiving more education today than ever before in this country's history. The average number of years spent in school is increasing; the number of extracurricular activities in which they engage continues to grow. Along with this increased education, young boys are reaching pubescence at an earlier age. However, the question remains: Are we teaching our boys how to be good male citizens? Are we allowing them to live "emotionally literate" lives?

Emotional literacy is defined as "the ability to read and understand our emotions and those of others" (Kindlon & Thompson, 2000, p. 4). Boys often approach their emotions with awkwardness, unable to navigate the sea of mixed messages they receive about the ways in which they should act. According to Kindlon and Thompson, two child psychologists specializing in boy behaviors, "We build emotional literacy, first, by being able to identify and name our emotions; second, by recognizing this emotional content in our voice and facial expression, or body language; and third, by understanding the situations or reactions that produce emotional states" (p. 5). These steps toward literacy can be very difficult to accomplish given the culture within which boys are raised.

The discrepancy between the emotional literacy of boys and girls, men and women, is currently one of great interest. In order to transverse the chasm that exists, we must return to the earliest years of one's upbringing.

Little boys and girls start off with similar psychological profiles. They are equally emotional, expressive, and dependent, equally desirous of physical attention. Studies indicate that girls are permitted to remain in that mode, while boys are subtly—or forcibly—pushed out of it. (Real, 1997, p. 123)

In order to foster continued expressivity and emotionality in men and boys, we must take into consideration the factors that serve to "push them out."

### **Methodology**

This article discusses the role of information received by boys in today's culture about notions of masculinity. Throughout this discussion, I examine the current trends in education, the quandaries in which boys are placed, and the emotional reactions exhibited based on the prescribed set of traditional gender norms. I use data from qualitative research conducted with college-aged men to further illustrate the information shared from the literature.

The pilot study involved experimentation with research and data collection techniques in order to flush out the most productive styles. Two hours were initially spent in unobtrusive participant-observations. The observations led to possible thematic trends that were later discussed in detail through one-on-one personal interviews. These interviews were completed in a variety of ways: the traditional face-to-face note-taking, tape-recorded sessions that were later transcribed into e-chats between two individuals, and e-mail interviews that took place over a number of correspondences. The latter two options were explored after repeated levels of expressed discomfort with talking about male identity issues with other men, face-to-face. I believe that the "blind" forum for discussion allowed individuals to be very free in what they had to say and also allowed more comfort for the participants when there was desired time to think before responding to a question.

### **Literature Review**

*Taking Root*

Franklin and Franklin (2000) assert that “boys learn what it means to be a man in general...from five main sources: (a) what parents teach them, (b) what the peer group teaches them, (c) what they see in the media, (d) what other adult men teach them, and (e) what they observe about how men are treated in society” (p. 125). I will address the impact of parental and peer interactions in a later section of this article. However, with the technological advances of the present and future, the examination of media portrayals is of great and immediate importance.

Male role modeling and mentoring for boys serves as important means of information flow about manly expectations. The media, whether advertently or inadvertently, perpetuates nearly unattainable images of masculinity. Often, the glitz and glamour surrounding publicly visible “role models” can complicate and confuse the emotional growth process of our young men and boys.

[These] stereotypical notions of masculine toughness deny a boy his emotions and rob him of the chance to develop the full range of emotional resources. We call this process, in which a boy is steered away from his inner world, the emotional *mis*education of boys. (p. 4)

Within schools, homes, on playgrounds, and in the media, young men have been socialized throughout their childhood to “act like boys” which merely preempts their “acting like men.” According to Paul Kivel, a researcher on men’s issues of violence, our society has created a very strict set of cultural and gender-based guidelines that have been deemed “masculine.” In Kivel’s work with gender issues, he has devised a tool he refers to as the “Act Like A Man” box (1992, p. 25). Within the confines of this box, a man’s role in society is rather well-defined.

**“ACT LIKE A MAN” Box**

Men...	Men are...
Have no emotions	aggressive
Yell at people	responsible
Get good grades	mean
Stand up for themselves	bullies
Don't cry	tough
Don't make mistakes	angry
Know about sex	successful
Take care of people	strong
Don't back down	incontrol

If what Kivel purports is true, becoming a “man” is merely a game of playing by the rules. If a boy works to exhibit the above characteristics, he should be accepted by his peers. However, we know this is not always the case. Nor would we want it to be so. While there is merit in some of the “Act Like a Man” character traits, there are an equal number in the box that are not constructive and many that are unachievable.

Frank Pittman, a psychiatrist and family therapist, in his book, *Man Enough*, would add that along with remaining in the box in order to be accepted by other guys, a man has to:

1. Play the game;
2. Do the work;
3. Don’t threaten the other guys’ masculinity;
4. Don’t stir up any uncomfortable emotions;
5. Don’t overdo the masculine act; and, of course,
6. Have all the Boy Scout virtues (1993, p. 219).

Unfortunately, the backlash for boys when they deviate from these models can, at times, be harsh and uncomfortable. When boys or men venture outside the confines of this box or stray from the list, they become

subject to ridicule and name-calling. Common verbal attacks include: fag, girl, sissy, queer, mama's boy, skirt, gay, pansy, bitch, pussy, wuss, and homo (Kivel, 1992).

Lacking an emotional education, a boy meets the pressures of adolescence and that singularly cruel peer culture with the only responses he has learned and practiced—and that he knows are socially acceptable—the typically 'manly' responses of anger, aggression, and emotional withdrawal. (Kindlon & Thompson, 2000, p. 5)

Managing these destructive emotional reactions is very difficult. Kindlon and Thompson (2000) appropriately refer to manhood as the "Big Impossible." Inherent in their thinking is the notion that being a real man necessitates something more than simple anatomical maleness. "A boy must rise to a performance challenge that will earn him his manly status" (Kindlon and Thomas, p. 78). Timothy Beneke (1997), an author and activist for gender equality, postulates a key question: "And why is it that manhood is something to be proved" (p. 35)?

## Findings

### *The Acorn Doesn't Fall Far from the Tree*

My father was willing to accept me for who I am. He didn't ever have a problem talking to me about what I am interested in, no matter who was around. He could easily go from a conversation with my brothers about football to talking to me about marching band. Even though I may not have had the same interests as him, he made sure never to discourage me in my endeavors. He didn't seem to care what others would think of him for having me as a son...for not living up to those manly expectations. He was very comfortable with who he was and therefore could pass that trait on to me. (24-year-old participant)

The above excerpt was a response to the question, "Who do you hold as a hero?" This participant's response was typical of many of the responses I received while interviewing college-age men. Interestingly, the responses could generally be categorized into two subgroups: immortal superheroes (e.g., Superman and Hulk Hogan) and father figures. The "men of steel" were mentioned for qualities such as ensuring that "good" prevailed, protecting men and women from evil, and possessing brute strength. These were generally the initial responses to the question as the men dreamed of possessing "super" qualities. But, overwhelmingly, as the men progressed in the interviews, themes of role modeling focused on their fathers.

A boy's father has an enormous impact on his view of manliness as well as that of acceptance. According to Pittman (1993), "our father has an even more important function than modeling manhood for us. He also has the authority to let us relax the requirements of the masculine model: if our father accepts us, then that declares us masculine enough to join the company of men" (p. 114). A boy's father has the capability to add flexibility to the stringent walls of the "Act Like a Man" box. Fathers can create a safe space for young men to find their own sense of manliness, or conversely, they can impede the process. The direction of this process relies on a father's experience with his father and the flexibility and exploration that he was afforded as a young man.

When asked about his closest male-male relationships, one interviewee shared with me: I think [that] relationship would be with my best friend, Nick. We're both very open people and don't mind sharing our true feelings. If something really awful happened, I could show up at Nick's house crying and he'd take me in in a second. I could do that with him. (19-year-old-participant)

Another shared a similar experience,

[The relationship] is special because it is built on commonality and understanding. We are on the same wavelength, yet differ enough to be unique individuals. We draw on each other's strengths and aren't afraid that they will insult us for acting how we feel comfortable. (24-year-old-participant)

Pittman (1993) sums it up best when he states,

Men may or may not need other men for stimulation, but all men need men for acceptance. It is the acceptance of the other guys, the silent, unquestioning, unchallenged acceptance of shared masculinity that keeps us grounded, that keeps us sane. (p. 202)

Whether this acceptance comes from within the immediate family structure or the greater community, it proves to have a dramatic impact on a boy's construction of emotional literacy. This need for acceptance has major implications for men who work in higher education, which I will address in detail in a later section of this article.

#### *Protection Against the Elements*

We see a great number of mothers who want to preserve the closeness, but they don't know how. Women who love their sons fear losing them, yet they feel impelled by cultural messages to "cut the apron strings." A mother who cares about her son and wants what's best for him can easily fall prey to the worry that, if she stays too close, he'll turn out to be a mama's boy, or worse, a sissy. (Kindlon & Thompson, 2000, p. 116)

While the focus of this article is male-male relationships, I do not want to undermine the importance of mother-son relationships. Oftentimes, the bond between the mother and son is the first, and one of the most significant, connections that a boy will make in his lifetime. The mother figure can serve as a source of comfort, unconditional love, and complete acceptance. As a boy begins to explore his world, his mother often provides him with a sense of "home base." □s he grows, a boy must be able to leave his mother without losing her completely and return to her without losing himself" (Kindlon & Thompson, 2000, p. 15).

This process of establishing a balance of support and distance can be one of the most difficult and painful experiences for mothers as they watch their young boys grow up. The little boys who once loved to sit on their laps and read books, or receive goodnight kisses, will inevitably go through stages of defiance as they work to become young men. One thing that never changes, however, is a boy's (or man's) need to be understood and loved by his mother. In this way, mothers play important roles in a boy's journey toward emotional literacy.

#### *Erosion of an Emotional Language*

About 95 percent of juvenile homicides are committed by boys. Boys are the perpetrators in four out of every five crimes that end up in juvenile court. They account for almost nine out of ten alcohol and drug law violations. Suicide is the third leading cause of death among boys in their mid- to late-teens. The vast majority of "successful" suicides are boys. Compared to a girl the same age, a boy in late adolescence is seven times as likely to die by his own hand. (Kindlon & Thompson, 2000, p. 6)

There are abundant reasons to be concerned about emotional literacy of boys and men in our society. The statistics are staggering. Depression, substance abuse, suicide, and violence are predominantly suffered by the men in our culture. Combine these with the rising concerns about body image, educators in particular, should be alarmed about the state in which our boys and men are socialized. Kindlon and Thompson (2000) suggest that "a confused young boy grows into an angry, emotionally isolated teenager, and, predictably, into a lonely, middle-aged man at risk for depression" (p. 7).

#### *Depression*

By the time that a boy reaches adolescence, often he has internalized a romanticized notion of emotional isolation. Again, boys are taught to refrain from sharing their feelings or talking about their problems. These boys are suffering alone, and without being aware of the emotional resources that exist, many of them may begin self-destructive patterns of behavior. □pression carries, to many, a double stain—the stigma of mental illness and also the stigma of 'feminine' emotionality" (Real, 1997, p. 22). Meanwhile, boys are learning to live with internalized psychological conflict—conflict that logically manifests in feelings of depression, anxiety, and confusion.

Unfortunately, recognizing the symptoms of depression in boys and men can be very difficult. Real (1997) states, “one of the ironies about men’s depression is that the very forces that help create it, keep us from seeing it” (p. 22). The most depressed boys may not look depressed or sad. Rather, they may be acting out in bursts of rage, anger, or defiance—the same traits they are taught to emulate as emotionally unattached men. Often, their silent cries for help may be overlooked by loved ones and merely dismissed with a “boys will be boys” or “he is just in a phase” mentality.

However, there is danger in this mode of thinking—for both the boy and others. “Untreated, an episode of depression can last from three to six years—a boy’s entire adolescence—and that carries heavy ‘side effects.’ Negative interaction with the world, or no interaction at all, inhibits important emotional and social maturation” (Kindlon & Thompson, 2000, p. 175). Ignoring this emotional obstinacy is doing the boy a grave disservice and can lead to tragic results. The statistics listed about suicide rates of boys and men should serve as a wake-up call that we are missing something. The complexity of depression can only be appreciated when one considers the variety of symptoms as well as the multitude of triggers of this disease.

### *Body Image*

A condition that is becoming more prevalent in our young men has to do with ideals of body image. Research has focused on women’s body image for years, but is currently shifting to include men. Pope, Phillips, and Olivardia (2000), in their book, *The Adonis Complex: The Secret Crisis of Male Body Obsession*, state:

On the surface, most of boys and men...lead what appear to be regular, well-adjusted lives. But behind the smiling, behind the cheerful athletic bravado, many of these men worry about their looks and their masculinity. Some of them are even clinically depressed, and many are intensely self-critical. Because these men carry a secret that they’re uncomfortable sharing even with their closest loved ones, their self-doubts can become almost toxic, insidiously eating away at their self-esteem and self-confidence as men. (p. 5)

But, it is not in the realm of men to talk about such concerns. Societal taboos exist about even voicing concerns about one’s body image. “Real men aren’t supposed to whine about their looks; they’re not even supposed to worry about such things” (Pope, Phillips, & Olivardia, p. 5).

This lack of gender role flexibility leads men to live lives of pain. Unlike most women who internalize pain and conflict, “boys, and later men, tend to externalize pain; they are more likely to feel victimized by others and discharge distress through action” (Real, 1997, p. 24). More men engage in substance abuse, whether abusing alcohol or alternative drugs, as shown in the aforementioned statistics. Men perpetrate more acts of violence, against both men and women.

There is no time in a boy’s life that is more confusing than the adolescent years. Physically, emotionally, and psychologically, boys (preparing to become young men) are changing rapidly. Often, discussion about these changes does not fit into the code of masculinity. Kindlon and Thompson (2000), allude to this unsteady time in a young man’s life:

The moment you look into a boy’s hopes and fears, you begin to understand the struggle that every boy confronts in his efforts to navigate adolescent sexuality. He is faced with a complex set of internal demands; he wants sex, he wants love, he wants to be manly—and through it all he doesn’t want to get rejected or hurt. (p. 195)

This fear of rejection, in combination with a desire for sex and love and a lack of communication, can place boys in situations where they need to face moral dilemmas. The method in which a boy chooses to react is influenced by the perceived social norms he faces, the role modeling to which he has been exposed, and the past societal responses to his actions and emotions. Without an extensive emotional vocabulary and accessible emotional resources, there is potential for the boy to turn to a life of violence, therein jeopardizing potential relationships with both men and women.

In today's day and age, we see this playing out in school violence, bullying behaviors, familial disruptions, and sexual violence. For many boys, self-image is determined by relationships established in the two environments where a majority of time is spent: home and school. As educational administrators, we now have important roles to play in fostering a boy's creation of self, his moral values, and his ethical decision-making. When a boy lacks support from these structures, his emotional growth can be stunted, resulting in emotionally illiterate young men on college campuses.

## Implications

### *Cultivating the Earth*

We're reading arguments by researchers that girls are shortchanged in the educational system...but from the Department of Education, I've read that boys are getting worse grades than girls, nationwide; they drop out of high school more; they make up the majority of behavioral-problem children as well as academic-problem kids. I know there are unfairnesses to females, but I can't find any way to dispute that the most problems exist with the males—academically, socially, and behaviorally—in all categories. What am I missing? (Gurian, 1998, p. 177)

In *Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys* (2000), Kindlon and Thompson call for a change in the educational practices of dealing with boys. They state, "What boys need, first and foremost, is to be seen through a different lens than tradition prescribes" (p. 240). Often is the case that boys are viewed as disruptive in the educational process. Rather than viewing this behavior as problematic, educators can see his behavior as a different style of interaction, energy, and participation than girls. Many of these differences can be attributed to the societal messages of how boys need to act in order to progress into manhood.

Boys spend half of each day in the school setting. Self-esteem and self-confidence can either be constructed or destructed within this setting. Due to a constant need for validation, if this validation cannot be found within the schools, the process of education becomes aligned with unhappiness. Therefore, educators must work to assist boys to define self and, in turn, find an emotional language with which to interact.

"Our culture co-opts some of the most impressive qualities a boy can possess—their physical energy, boldness, curiosity, and action orientation—and distorts them into a punishing, dangerous definition of masculinity" (Kindlon & Thompson, 2000, p. 15). Rather than criticizing our boys for these above-mentioned differences, educators must learn to embrace, celebrate, and nurture this diversity of perspectives. The research supports a growing need for educators to meet boys halfway. Pollack (1998) has the following suggestions for schools to develop and implement innovative approaches to addressing boy's needs:

- 1) Boy-friendly subject matter. Teachers need to create lesson plans on topics of interest to the students. This task can be as easy as giving them options. In related research, in a fifth-grade woodworking class, the teacher offered students the option to build a model bridge or a catapult. Not surprisingly, most of the boys selected to build a catapult while most of the girls chose to build a bridge. By the end of the project, the boys had learned the importance of teamwork, listening to one another, and patience, much the same as the girls (Kindlon & Thompson, 2000, p. 29).
- 2) Use teaching methods that work well for boys. This merely means that we need to examine the current teaching styles in regards to what interests boys. Obviously, this is no easy task, as boys differ as greatly from one another as they do from girls, yet we must work to try to find a balance. This may mean more hands-on activities, reading stories from men's perspectives (rather than merely about men) and seeking to actively engage boys in the learning process.
- 3) Respect the learning pace of every boy. The research on learning curves of boys and girls generally shows that there are areas of strength that are, in general, gender specific at any given time. According to a study conducted by researchers at the University of Chicago, boys outnumbered girls about three to one in the top ten percent of math and science performers. However, the same study showed that especially in relation to reading and writing skills—those most basic to functioning in our society- "boys are in deep trouble" (Pollack,

1998, p. 233). Educators must take the time to assess each student's aptitude and tailor their teaching approach to accommodate these students. Without doing so, we fail these students and may have grave impacts on their self-esteem.

4) Experiment with same-sex classes. By setting up single sex classrooms, educators can more specifically tailor their teaching style, lesson plans, and pace in a way to reach out to the individual needs of the students in the classroom. Without the presence of girls, many boys feel a lowered need to act in a prescribed way, and therefore feel freer to share, more confident in their abilities, and better able to succeed.

5) Hire more male teachers. During years in which boys are constructing gender appropriate behavior, it is important to give them strong male role models. By entering education and finding a majority of women, boys can begin to align education and learning as something that women and girls do—not men. This male presence can provide validation for boys that it is “masculine” to receive an education—and to even be good at it!

6) Set up mentoring programs. Mentors are great ways to make connections

with boys as they struggle through physical, emotional, and academic challenges. Mentors offer an opportunity for boys to talk through recent difficulties, both within the classroom and in one's personal/emotional life. A mentor can assist educators by throwing up “red flags” when they discover individual learning difficulties or times of personal hardship within a boy's life. Again, these individuals can serve to validate a boy's interests, successes, and struggles.

7) Provide safe “guy spaces.” Whether these spaces take the shape of active study halls, where boys have the opportunity to release their pent-up energies, or peer support groups, where boys can meet to discuss their inner emotional lives, they are important in the growth process of our students. Expecting that the emotional needs of all boys are met at home is deceptively optimistic. We must actively assist our boys as they attempt to gain emotional literacy as well as academic success.

The alternative to working with boys to create a mutually agreeable working situation is to continue dismissing their behavior with a “boys will be boys” mentality. Rather than using this mindset to explain away destructive or disappointing behavior, Kindlon and Thompson (2000) argue,

The truth of those words—boys will be boys—could instead be used to advance the understanding that boys struggle in uniquely male ways at times, and they need ‘boy-friendly’ adult love, support, and guidance to develop a broad range of emotional responses to life's challenges. (p. 240)

### *Fostering Continued Growth*

I think that men have to be challenged to challenge themselves. Too often, we [student affairs administrators] challenge their beliefs for them and don't give them the tools to do the work themselves. For most, processing through this will be intensely personal, something men have been taught not to share with others. So, in essence, we have to support an invisible struggle that may or may not actually be going on. (23-year-old participant)

As boys who embrace the masculine stereotypes enter higher education, they are going to face a new set of troubles. Lacking an early-learned emotional literacy, student affairs administrators must work to help them realize their emotional potential. According to Mohraz (2000), college is a microcosm of society, a laboratory in which students begin to develop, test, and shape the roles they will play in their careers, families, and communities. Central to all of these relationships is a need for emotional literacy.

Much like the suggestions listed in the above section, colleges and universities need to provide services tailored specifically to the needs of their male constituents. This can take place in the form of continued mentoring programs and providing safe “guy spaces” on campus. The notion of a Women's Center on campus has gained popularity over the past few decades on a majority of college campuses. I would suggest that the day has

arrived for us to reconvene our conversation to address the changing needs of men. While culture may not always allow for men to have a Center in which to organize discussions or support groups, the need remains if we are looking for societal change. According to one participant of the research study, “I’m not sure a ‘sensitive’ Men’s Center would work so well. [Yet] I suppose anything men do together helps to build positive relationships—be it sports, residence hall programs, clubs, etc.”

(19-year-old participant). While it may not be the time to create the Center, it is time to create the atmosphere.

Following the true vein of this paper, I urge us all to keep this statement in mind as we work to assist the men in our lives to grow more emotionally literate: “We must recognize the harm in asking ‘too much and not enough’ of them—in demanding more at times than they are developmentally able to give while unnecessarily lowering expectations of self-control, empathy, emotional honesty, and moral responsibility” (Kindlon & Thompson, 2000, p. 240). We must create an atmosphere of understanding and acceptance—a place where boys and men are able to test the bounds of “the box.”

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