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# Self Esteem For Boys

Elizabeth Hartley-Brewer

Self-Esteem  
for Boys  
100 Tips

**for Raising Happy and  
Confident Children**  
**Elizabeth Hartley-Brewer**

Vermilion  
LONDON

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## DEDICATION

For my son, Stephen, and his constant friends Danny, Jonny,  
Pete, Dave,  
Greg, Richard and Paul, with whom he has shared so much  
for so long

# Acknowledgments

As someone, clearly, with no direct experience of being male, I have had to check things out with a number of boys, and male friends and colleagues. I have also had help from teacher friends who work closely with boys – and girls – at the educational frontier to give them meaning, respect and personal fulfilment.

I should like, then, to thank Dexter Hutt, Principal of Ninestiles School in Birmingham and Gary Wilson, Head of English at Newsome High, Huddersfield, both of whom gave precious time to conversations and script reading, not to forget their children who had to do without their attention at these times. I should also like to thank Geoff Evans, of the C'mon Everybody project; George Hosking, who works with young violent men to help them understand and calm their souls; Adrienne Katz, who founded the research organisation 'Young Voice', through which growing boys and girls have been able to speak and be heard; Dr Sebastian Kraemer for sight of his paper, 'The Fragile Male', and for responding so promptly to my e-mails; and Joanne Edelman, friend and mother of two boisterous growing boys.

The idea for this book came from Jacqueline Burns, my editor. Had she not been such fun to work with, I would not have written it. I am very grateful to her, for I have learnt much in the process. Finally, I thank my son, Stephen. It has been a real privilege to be his mother. I wish him every happiness as he leaves his teens and embarks on adulthood.



## CHAPTER 1

# Understanding His Challenges and Opportunities

Boys are in the news as having a hard time at the moment. They seem to be struggling, finding it harder and harder to succeed, conform and find a comfortable role in life. Statistics tell us that boys experience more behavioural problems; get involved in more crime and at a younger age; are losing the academic edge they once held over girls; and demonstrate their despair in significantly higher suicide rates than girls. Social, economic and even educational changes seem to be undermining their essential manhood, and some see the future as promising little but constant pressure or failure, or both. Their self-esteem and motivation appear to be at rock bottom.

However, many boys continue to do exceptionally well and enjoy greater freedom, having thrown off the chains of only one vision of masculinity. They thrive on the challenge of living in this new world and find comfort in the permission to think, feel and act in tune with the warm heart within them.

Boys are lovable, amusing, destructive, proud and defiant and come in all possible shapes and sizes. Evidence is mounting that their brains as well as their bodies are different from girls'. It matters a very great deal how they grow up and how much respect society and families give them. It really matters, too, that they don't see education as an all-female province. It is crucial that they are allowed to respond to their male instincts within an understanding environment, so that they may feel true to themselves without following images of manhood that will lead them into trouble. Boys need just as much love, care and

attention as girls in order to become lovable, loving, resilient and well-rounded adults who can make the most of life. Boys' positive self-esteem must derive not only from being happy to be male and having a clear idea of what manhood means, but also from a secure sense of who they are.

Boys are half our future. Given the changes taking place in society, particularly in employment and the family, growing boys will naturally feel confused and uncertain about the future. For instance, what does fatherhood mean? How important are commitment and marriage? How should they manage their sometimes contradictory feelings of sadness, anger, tenderness, competitiveness and protectiveness? Yet, while these changes may be unsettling, they are also potentially liberating, for they offer boys more ways of being themselves and thus of strengthening their self-esteem.

In future, parents and teachers may need to give boys more support and guidance as they navigate their way round the increasing choices facing them. Instead of being able to slip effortlessly into a pre-set stereotype, boys must look to what lies inside them and experiment with ways to express and develop the threads of self that are woven into the fabric of character. As self-knowledge increases, self-esteem deepens.

Boys now stand at a crossroad. They can choose a path leading to diminishing opportunities and greater self-doubt, or one towards self-development and deeper self-worth. Which route they choose will depend on the quality of their self-esteem.

When a boy has a good relationship with an adult who makes him feel understood, valued and wanted; when he feels supported so that he does well in school, becomes competent and confident; and, through his various interests, gains several reliable groups of friends with

whom he learns to socialise and sort out differences, he learns to face the future with confidence and courage. It is vital for his mental health that he avoids becoming isolated and morose, for a world without others easily becomes peopled by demons.

Industrial buildings that house hazardous chemicals carry a warning sign on their walls. Parents should take equal heed when they see their son carrying a label with the three 'I's: 'Isolation', 'Insecurity' and 'Insignificance'. They are explosive, and create an emotional cocktail that can damage someone for a lifetime.

Internal strength is the antidote for these corrosives. In the past, boys had to toughen up emotionally and physically. Partly for survival on the battlefield, skins were thickened and upper lips stiffened, often through bullying, to condition men to hide feelings that could let their country down. Resilience is, undoubtedly, important, but boys - and girls too - also need to be flexible, to be able to regenerate themselves after setbacks, and to develop what we might call 'emotional courage'.

This does not mean denying feelings - far from it. Those who survive in the twenty-first century will have equipped themselves with sophisticated social and relationship skills. They will possess 'emotional literacy', to use a current popular term. Boys must learn how to be in touch with their own and others' feelings and perceptions because technological progress and greater global competition are creating jobs which require creative team work, collective problem-solving, constant communication and joint approaches to risk.

Parents and educators of boys today are challenged to present them with a comfortable male identity without the teflon armour that cuts them off from themselves and others. The non-stick, nonchalant world of macho culture gets males nowhere. Feelings and people should stick. By

helping boys develop inner strength and nurturing their sometimes fragile self-esteem, we can help them to become happy, warm, generous, confident individuals, fathers and contributors to our society in the future - to everyone's benefit, including their own.



## CHAPTER 2

# Meeting His Needs

It is hard to accept that babies start off not knowing what sex they are. They experience themselves simply in terms of their most basic needs. Gender awareness starts about the age of two, and boys' essential needs are the same as everyone else's. Some people consider boys who show they have these basic needs to be 'soft' like girls, and wean boys off needing something from others in case this undermines their capacity to be strong, independent and male.

Yet boys do need. On top of being fed and clothed, all boys need emotional sustenance: to be loved, cherished, appreciated, valued, noticed, admired, understood and accepted. When his needs are left unmet, a boy feels ignored and separate. He may conclude that there's something wrong with him and lose self-esteem. A boy who gets into drugs, crime or violence is possibly reacting, angrily and resentfully, against adults who stopped recognising and meeting his needs before he was ready to become emotionally self-sufficient (if any of us ever are).

# 1 Boys need love too

Boys will often seek love from parents and other adults close to them in roundabout ways. When they are old enough to make sense of what it means to be male, they may decide this means feeling love but not being soft enough to show it or want it.

It can be hard for a boy to accept that being bouncy and boisterous, and sometimes difficult and destructive, sits comfortably with also needing to lose oneself in the warmth and safety of a cuddle. This may be even harder for older boys, particularly if the arms are female. So boys will often use more aggressive tactics to get the love they need than girls, who have far less emotional distance to travel to claim their emotional birthright.

If he's just jumped on you from behind or given you a painful punch, this can mean that he needs your love, so it is better to respond affectionately than to lash out because you feel 'got at'. The aim should be to reduce the parental ties gradually without leaving him feeling emotionally stranded and abandoned.

## ***Parents***

- beware of thinking, 'I didn't get or need demonstrations of love, so he'll be the same'; he is different, and those who

## ***Teachers***

- teachers will not feel parental love for the boys in their class; however, they can make it clear that they enjoy, approve of and accept

don't get can turn this into  
'don't need' to hide sadness

- if you feel strange giving him cuddles, ask before and after if it is all right for you to do so
- blow kisses if kissing him feels intrusive
- love can also be shown by sitting close while watching TV or reading, for example, or sitting on his bed at night
- you can show love by being interested in his ideas, paying attention to and doing things with him and understanding his feelings

the charges for whom they are responsible

- giving special tasks to certain boys who lack confidence can make them feel significant, noticed, reliable and trustworthy

## 2 Show that you understand him

*He came home from school one day more bad-tempered than I'd seen for ages. He was rude and offhand. He used words that sounded like playground talk; then I realised he was probably repeating what had been said to him. He flung his arms round me and cried with relief that I had understood.*

All children find being misunderstood hugely frustrating. It starts as an irritation, but when the mistake persists, a boy will begin to question whether his version of himself is normal, reasonable and justified. When boys consider their wishes are continuously ignored or misinterpreted, they feel not only humiliated but also increasingly resentful, angry and, more damagingly, self-doubting.

Understanding can be shown through anticipating his needs and – carefully – expressing his possible thoughts. You can say things like: ‘I guess you’re feeling a bit left out. Am I right?’ This gives him room to disagree, and stops you coming across as infuriatingly all-knowing – and possibly wrong.

### ***Parents***

- accept how he sees the world; he doesn't have to agree with you, nor you with him

### ***Teachers***

- make a conscious effort to notice patterns in a boy's work that enable you to see him as an individual: ‘You really like painting birds, don't you?’ or ‘You're always

- value his uniqueness; tell him what you like about him
  - look behind his behaviour for possible causes and feelings; let him know that you know
  - repeat what he says to you, to check you've understood: 'So you want me to stay in tonight because you're fed up with me working late so much this week, is that right?'
  - remember his likes/dislikes
  - state what he's likely to feel about something: 'You're not going to like this, but I don't want you staying out all night'
- writing about fishing; it must be your passion!'
- encourage class work that shows boys' likes and dislikes, and try to remember a few
  - for particularly trying boys, list four reasons why this might be so (excluding 'difficult personality')
  - use 'reflective-listening' phrases: 'what I hear you saying is that you did not feel you knew enough to begin this homework. Let's start from what you're sure you know'

### **3 Approve of who he is, even if you hate what he does**

Every boy needs to be accepted and approved for who he is, not just because he has been 'good' or 'successful' and lived up to your ideal of who he should be. If he constantly tries to fill a mould fashioned by you, he'll quickly lose his shape and identity and find it hard to be sure about who he is.

Young boys probably get told off more than girls. They are often more boisterous and noisy; they are more prone to accidents, because they're less well co-ordinated; and less able to explain themselves, because their language develops later. Clumsy reprimands convey disapproval and can do great damage. If you have to tell him off for these things, separate the person from his actions. This will leave his self-worth intact while he learns to manage his behaviour and understand its consequences.

A boisterous boy is often fit and fun as well as tiring. Don't lose faith in him just because you are unhappy about a particular act or attitude. Don't ever make him feel devastated by your criticism.

#### ***Parents***

- think about his good points before you comment on his behaviour, to help you think positively

#### ***Teachers***

- identify something you like in each student, then it's easier to say with honesty that it's his behaviour that's

- avoid using the words 'good' or 'bad' about your son's behaviour, because he'll take them as reflections of himself; instead, describe what it is you approve or disapprove of

- saying: 'Right now, I find your behaviour...' also limits your disapproval to the moment

- hitting him with your hand or an object will make him feel you dislike him

the problem, not the boy himself

- describe in detail the behaviour that is outside the rules and avoid 'You' statements; saying 'I'm finding the way you are tapping your ruler irritating' is less personally offensive and provocative than 'You are being really irritating!'

## **4 Give plenty of praise**

Children love to be praised. It is one of the joys of living and working with them to see them beam with pride and pleasure when they do something well and we notice. Children love to please those they care about.

Praise thrills boys because they need it, but it also teaches them self-discipline. Through praise and encouragement, boys get clear, positive messages about how they should lead their lives – what it is they should do – instead of only hearing about what it is they should not be doing.

Many people, especially men, find it hard to give praise, particularly to boys. Criticising and blaming make them feel in charge and all-knowing. Praising, on the other hand, can make them believe they've lost that powerful edge, which feels dangerous. Some don't know what to praise or what words to use. Others believe praise will make a boy big-headed, or lazy and over-satisfied with work that isn't perfect. But being noticed and appreciated usually makes boys try harder, and it teaches them to appreciate others too.

### ***Parents***

- to show approval, we can say: 'That's great!', 'Brilliant', and 'Well done!' 'Thanks, that was really helpful' shows appreciation

### ***Teachers***

- encourage boys to judge their own work, not to rely on your view
- let them evaluate each other's work, so that praise

- find something to praise, appreciate and notice every day

- boys can be praised for their thinking skills (e.g., choices, ideas, ability to solve problems), social skills (e.g., helpfulness, understanding, sharing and resolving conflicts) and physical skills (e.g., being good with scissors, making things, sport), as well as for good work

- be specific: praise what your son has done rather than go on about how wonderful he is

- praise the effort he's made more than the end product

doesn't always come from people in authority

- help them to feel proud of good work. Assume a boy is proud and say: 'I expect you felt pleased with this piece of work when you finished it'

- find something about them to praise every day, including their humour, sociability and creativity

- for a boy who rejects all praise, showering him with it won't work; select one thing you truly find pleasing, and mention it three times every day for three weeks, so that he begins to believe and trust it is true