

Q&A with David Thomas

Raising Emotionally Strong Boys: Tools Your Son Can Build On for Life



Q: How vitally important it is to help boys navigate their emotional health?

A: Boys and men lead some of the scariest statistics out there. Research reminds us that males have more difficulty identifying how they feel, resist taking action when they are struggling, are more reluctant to opening up, and engage in more risk-taking behaviors. Unless we create a different direction, the statistics will only get worse. During the global pandemic of 2020, rates of anxiety, depression, and suicide climbed at an unprecedented pace. Existing problems became significantly worse. It served as a harsh reminder that we aren't doing enough to equip the kids we love to navigate the hard seasons of life.

I'm deeply encouraged by the efforts of many to redefine strength and bravery for the girls we love. I'm hopeful we can do the same for boys. What would it look like to raise a generation of boys who see vulnerability as a strength? What would it be like to raise a generation of young men who see prioritizing their mental health as wisdom?

We want to coach boys in the hard work of building emotional muscles. For many boys the muscles are simply weak or underdeveloped. But we know weak muscles can get stronger with work. Building emotional muscles is some of the most important, yet most neglected, work in a boy's journey to manhood. The muscles impact his everyday as a son, brother, student, athlete, and friend. These muscles will define who he is as a husband, father, friend, and coworker.

Q: Why do boys appear to have such difficulty dealing with their emotions?

A: It's not just boys. Getting stuck is a human condition. Men and women, boys and girls, any one of us can get stuck in any moment, and in any space—physically, emotionally, relationally, spiritually. The difference I've observed in my work is that women are more likely to reach out for help when they get stuck. There are certainly exceptions to this rule. I know women who struggle to ask for help and men who are great at doing so. But generally speaking, males struggle more in this space, and I strongly believe it's connected to our definition of masculinity. A definition many have worked to retire for some time now. For years, we've been working to expand the definition of masculinity, and countless individuals have pushed against the cultural messages we are sending boys about what it means to be a man in this world.

Q: What is missing from the traditional definition of masculinity?

A: Tenderness. The longer I study the person of Jesus, the character of Christ, the more I come back to how his strength was founded in tenderness, compassion, mercy, and love. They were

the pillars of his humanity. A foundational part of raising emotionally strong boys includes anchoring them to a clear understanding of the character of Christ and seeing the strength of sacrifice. If we hope to raise boys with relational strength, we need to see a man who walked intimately with a few close friends. As we evaluate his interaction and conversations with the disciples, his closest companions, we see intimacy and vulnerability. We see a man who celebrated and elevated women. We see a man who was constantly challenged and questioned throughout his ministry and somehow never went off the rails.

Q: Isn't it natural for parents to want to eliminate their child's emotional pain?

A: Yes, but we have to move to the emotion before we can help our kids move through the emotion. Being seen and known is something every one of us craves. It's the human condition. To be seen when we're hurting or struggling is an act of love. When children are in distress or discomfort, we want to eliminate the pain. If we can see them and be present with them in the distress, there's an immediate shift in their physiological state. When we move toward our kids in moments of struggle, we are modeling empathy, helping them regulate their nervous system, and expanding their capacity for emotional flexibility.

Q: What is the value of allowing your child to feel discomfort?

A: Discomfort is the cost of being human. It's inescapable. It's something boys work hard to avoid, suppress, or numb. In doing so, boys believe they are demonstrating strength. When in reality, they are simply creating more fragility. The less a boy understands his emotional landscape the more fragile he becomes. Fragile and fractured. More segmented and less integrated.

Helping boys find their way to the full experience of being human and being fully masculine is what we are chasing. Camping out in the stories and places of struggle not only gives them permission to have those but also teaches them skills for how to navigate them. They feel prepared to hit bumps in the road when they encounter them because they know they are coming and the adults they trust faced them as well. They not only faced them, but they shared their experience of how they moved through them.

Q: What happens when boys begin to recognize stress as it registers inside them?

A: We want to train them to observe and pay attention to the body sensations they are experiencing. As important as it is to recognize what's happening, boys need instruction in how to regulate in these moments. If they struggle to do one or both of those vital tasks, they may need to do some repair. It's not easy, and boys have a strong tendency to fall back into emotionally lazy responses. After all, it's not that difficult to melt down like a toddler or to lose your mind like a teenager. Regulation is work. It's effortful. But it yields good growth.

Learning to pay attention to the sirens and signals takes reflection, insight, and awareness. It's much easier to ignore the signs and keep your foot on the gas. However, it isn't safer to do so. Equally so, repairing a relationship is work. It requires a posture of humility and civility, and it's much easier to swing between blame and shame. Blame is nothing more than discharged pain.

Shame is self-contempt. Neither is a satisfying state of being. The work of relationship, though, is deeply satisfying.

Q: How can parents help boys navigate the physicality that connects to their emotions?

A: Learning to do some deep breathing can be a game changer for any young man working with anger, stress, fear, or anxiety. Having a physical release is foundational to navigating strong emotions. I have boys create a Top Five List on a note card or device with the majority of the five strategies involving movement to honor this unique way God hardwired males. The list might include running laps or shooting hoops, pull-ups or push-ups, using a boxing bag or yoga mat, jumping on a trampoline or riding a bike, lunges or jumping jacks, screaming into a pillow or punching it, walking the dog or climbing a tree, and the list goes on and on. I once worked with a twelve-year-old boy who off-loaded stress by riding a unicycle in his driveway, and a sixteen-year-old who washed and waxed his car. I'm open to anything that does involve movement and doesn't involve a screen. Boys often attempt to sell me on how video games or scrolling social media helps them relieve stress. I'm quick to remind them that screens are an escape, not a coping strategy. Boys are instinctively skilled in numbing out, and we always want to be training them toward healthy coping. Technology has become one of the most addictive and accessible forms of numbing out for boys of all ages.

Q: What is the value of teaching vocabulary to help your boy understand their various feelings?

A: This is all about developing emotional literacy, or the ability to identify, understand, and respond to emotions in oneself and others in a healthy way. I'd love every home and classroom across the globe to have a feelings chart hanging somewhere. This concept is no different from having the letters of the alphabet hanging in classrooms across the world. We understand that letters form words and words form sentences, and these are the foundational building blocks of reading. When kids can see the letters, it strengthens the cognitive connection. The same is true if they can see expressions, make connections with the emotions, and learn to identify those feelings inside of themselves.

In this day and age, kids and teens are using bigger and bigger words to articulate their experience—words that aren't necessarily accurate to their experience. I rarely hear teens say, "I feel sad"; they say, "I feel depressed." They don't say, "I feel worried"; they say, "I have anxiety." Some do, many do not. In the past, if kids felt really angry with their parents and wanted to get their attention, they might say, "I'm running away from home!" I almost never hear a parent report a kid saying that anymore. Kids now say, "I'm going to kill myself," or "I should just die." Many times those declarations are wild cards, covering all sorts of feelings. Boys throw out wild cards often, especially those with an underdeveloped emotional vocabulary. They are trying to cue the grown-ups around them to an emotional storm inside of them, and they say the biggest, scariest thing they know to say.

Q: How do boys struggle with finding proper perspective on their life events?

A: Perspective is like the pain scale doctors use. The doctor needs me to accurately describe my pain in order to appropriately treat my pain. I sit with parents every day who describe boys who

haven't developed perspective. They go off the rails over insignificant events. Kids, more than ever, are swinging to ten for any event in life. They can't scale their experience.

They need to learn how to accurately categorize the events of life. Learning that a one in life is losing my car keys and a ten is losing a family member. I don't want to go to ten over losing a scrimmage, though many boys can and do. It's vital that we are moving boys toward the milestone of perspective throughout their development for all the events they will face in adolescence, in young adulthood, and as adults.

Q: How can developing empathy help a boy change the response to their emotions from an inward focus to an outward one?

A: Empathy is the ability to slip into another person's shoes and offer understanding of their emotional experience. However, if I can't read, name, and scale my own emotions, I'll certainly struggle to show up with others in theirs. Empathy is a well-researched, foundational ingredient in all healthy interpersonal relationships—spouse to spouse, parent to child, friend to friend, coworker to coworker. It's the ability to understand and share the feelings of another person. Empathy is a game changer within relationships, and a lack of empathy can tear a relationship apart. Empathy includes active listening and using statements like "What I hear you saying is," or "I wonder if you are needing," or "That sounds really hard."

Q: What does it look like when a boy develops emotional resourcefulness?

A: It's the ability to take the emotion to something constructive. It's the wisdom expressed in Ephesians 4:26: "In your anger do not sin." You're going to feel anger. Just don't hurt yourself or others when you do. Resourcefulness is one of the places where I see boys getting roadblocked the quickest. It takes work to regulate. It takes work to move the emotion in a healthy direction. Most boys fall back on lazy responses, avoiding the work of resourcefulness. They melt down, scream, hit, or throw things. The work feels hard or sometimes just unfamiliar.

Q: How do you use habits and goal-setting to develop healthiness in boys?

A: Physical, emotional, relational, and spiritual health don't just happen. We have to build habits and practices that support well-being. It's of great importance to build habits in all four areas. When I do goal-setting exercises with boys in my office, I always require them to create measurable and manageable goals in each category. During the school year, I'll have boys create academic and athletic goals, and during the summer the goals will be relevant to that season. We discuss not only the importance of making goals measurable and manageable, but also how daily habits and practices move us toward the goals we want to accomplish. I remind boys that we are all capable of coming up with great ideas, but most people don't implement them. We don't think ourselves into new ways of living. We live ourselves into new ways of thinking. Boys seem to attach to this logic because they are action-oriented creatures. They are great problem-solvers. They simply need support in putting those ideas into practice.

Q: What role can parents play in teaching emotional health to their boys?

A: If emotional regulation is difficult for you, it will be almost impossible for him. Kids learn more from observation than information. He has to see this practiced by the grown-ups he

trusts. He needs to hear you using an expansive emotional vocabulary. He needs to hear you articulate your experience and see that adults have emotions. He needs to hear you identify what helps you work through moments when you are emotionally charged, how your body signals you, and what you do to bring yourself back to a state of calm. But he doesn't just need to hear it, he needs to see it. He needs to see and hear this to develop a full, expansive, healthy, accurate definition of masculinity.

Boys need to know their pain can be transformed into something. They need to know they can take the emotion to something constructive. They can't do that unless they know what the emotion is and learn to pay attention to it and move toward something useful. They need to see evidence in the adults around them of how to move the emotion outward and upward.

Q: How can defining masculinity through the lens of Jesus as a man help lay a healthy foundation for our boys?

A: His strength was defined by sacrifice, humility, compassion, and love. He had close relationships with a small group of men. He was a champion of women. Scripture tells us Jesus wept in an encounter of loss, felt anger at injustice, and experienced fear in his last hours. Scripture is full of examples of Jesus feeling different things in his humanity. Despite being tempted, challenged, betrayed, mocked, abandoned, abused, and then crucified—the worst of human conditions imaginable—he navigated each of those emotions and experiences with honesty, humility, civility, and strength. His life serves as the ultimate roadmap for how to be a man in this world.

Despite having such clarity about how Jesus lived, we've managed to move so far from his example. But we can move boys back in that direction. I believe it's key to raising emotionally strong boys as they are bombarded with opposing images. It will be countercultural, but the way of Jesus has always involved living in this world and not of it.

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