

How Sexism Hurts Boys

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When my daughter was little, my partner insisted on buying her clothes from the boys section of Target. Then when our son came along, he would loudly declare that his favorite color was pink and encourage him to play princess costume dress-up games with his sister.

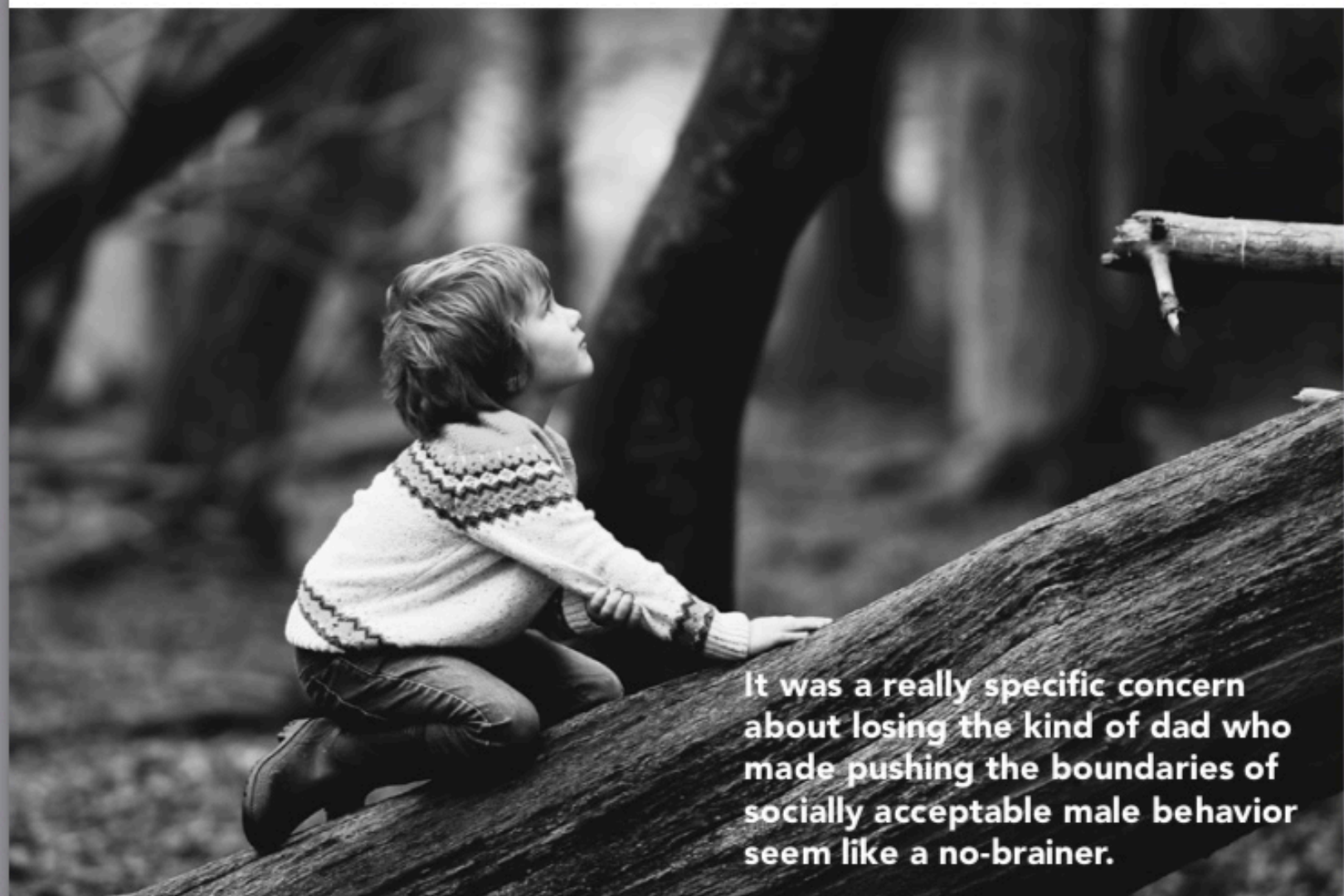
Doing this came pretty naturally to my children's father, a guy who grew up on *Free to Be You and Me*, and in a house where a pride flag flew in the suburban front yard. So when he died suddenly, in addition to the swirl of awful emotions and grief that I was dealing with, I also wondered how his death would impact my kids'—and particularly my son's—understanding of gender roles.

My worry on that front wasn't about boys needing a father, or anything like that. Rather, it was a really specific concern about losing the kind of dad who had made pushing the boundaries of socially

acceptable male behavior seem like a no-brainer.

To be sure, he wasn't the only person challenging long-held conventions. We are living in a time with more gender freedom than at most other points in history. But for a lot of boys and men, even the most basic boundary pushing and gender challenging remains a struggle. In large part, this is the result of an environment where anything perceived to be feminine is deemed inferior, and where boys learn from a shockingly young age that they need to man up, never take no for an answer, and dominate all spaces they inhabit.

The fact that these messages are often being deeply socially and culturally ingrained doesn't mean we can't work to dismantle them. One of the best ways to do that is to understand just how sexism and gender bias impacts boys and where it most likely appears.



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1. CONSTANT SELF-POLICING

A lot of children still grow up with the message that being a boy means distancing oneself from anything seen as girly. As a result, many boys feel compelled to continually check their interests, mannerisms, and emotions for signs of femininity.

For younger boys, this can result in mocking everything from nail polish to ballet. For older guys, it can look like an attempt at projecting the kind of hypermasculinity that comes at the expense of girls, sexual and gender minorities, and ultimately, of their own emotional selves.

Whatever the tactic, there is often a lot of posturing involved and maintaining this facade is exhausting. So one way kids take the pressure off themselves is by trying to draw attention to someone else, often by calling into question the actions of a classmate, a sibling, or even a public figure. It's a clever tactic, sure, but it is also one that perpetuates an awful cycle of vigilance and hyper-monitoring, and which leaves boys of all ages constantly looking over their shoulder lest the gender police catch them in any unmanly act.

WHAT YOU CAN DO:

First off, omit, "You throw like a girl," style phrases from your vocabulary since these make being a girl seem like a bad thing. Plus, think about your everyday messaging. If kids hear from adults that they need to stay in narrow gender boxes ("You don't really want to help grandma make cupcakes, Billy. Why don't you go play outside with the boys and let your sister do it...."), then they are much more likely to act in kind.

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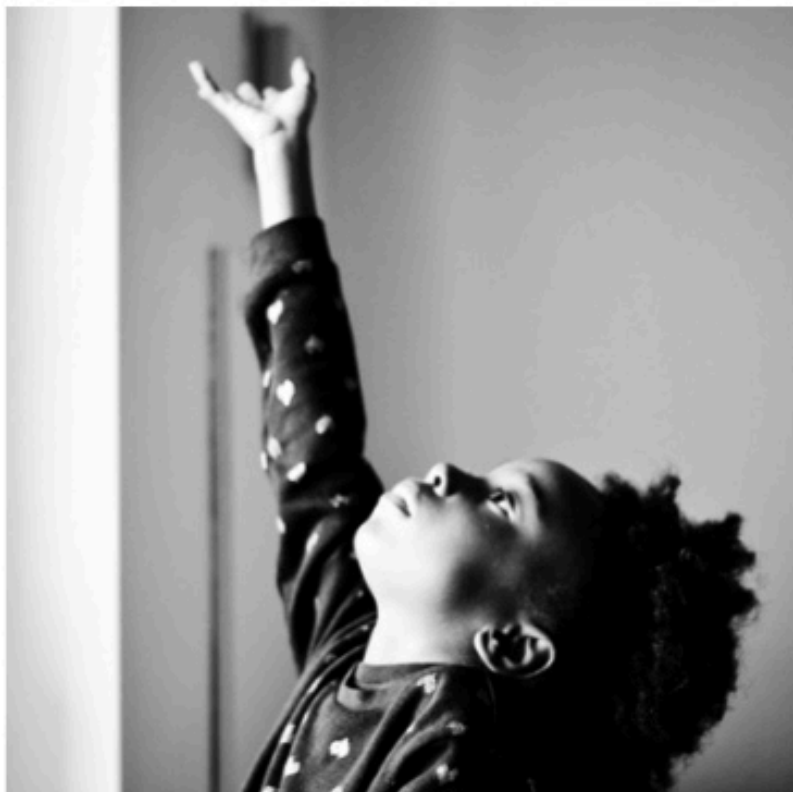
2. OUR CULTURE OF VIOLENCE

Studies have found that while girls tend to learn that there are a range of emotions that they are permitted to express, a lot of boys get the message that their only acceptable emotion is anger.

This message starts the first time they hear, "Boys don't cry," and it is one that is then reinforced in a thousand different ways throughout their lives.

One of the results is that boys are socialized into violence in far greater numbers than are girls. We see this in the fact that men are more likely to die by suicide¹, in the fact that they are the gender most likely² to perpetrate intimate partner violence, and in the fact that they have been responsible for the overwhelming majority of the 150 mass shootings that have occurred since 1966.

There is plenty of speculation as to the specifics of why these sad truths exist, but one thing remains clear: when we teach boys from an early age that feelings of sadness, rejection, isolation, and fear can only be funneled into acts of rage, the results are calamitous.



WHAT YOU CAN DO

The obvious answer is to let boys own their feelings. Let them cry. Let them feel tender, shy, embarrassed, scared and giggly. We need to stop chalking up violence to some inherently male quality and we need to stop equating masculinity with stoicism, toughness, and physical strength. The more complicated answer is to challenge a larger culture of violence. But that is something we can do by advocating for things like restorative justice programs³, consent education in our schools, and by fighting for gun control in our communities.

¹ <https://afsp.org/about-suicide/suicide-statistics/>

² https://www.huffingtonpost.ca/entry/men-killing-women-domesti_n_5927140

³ http://blogs.edweek.org/teachers/classroom_qa_with_larry_ferlazzo/2016/02/response_how_to_practice_restorative_justice_in_schools.html

3. TRANS- AND HOMOPHOBIA

For many boys and men, the threat of being called gay remains the most powerful way to keep them in line. In large part this is the result of a fraught marriage of sexism and trans- and homophobia.

This union is born of a lingering confusion about the difference between sexual orientation (who you are attracted to) and gender (identifying as male, female, trans, or nonbinary, for example). The outcome is a stew of misogyny and homophobia that conflates being a gay man with wanting to be female. This is something that gets further muddled by the idea that any non-hetero sexual orientation is a choice. So gay men, in choosing to be feminine, have made a decision worthy of derision.

This environment compels hetero boys to denigrate anything that could call their sexual orientation into question, it prevents LGBTQ+ kids from coming out, and it threatens the emotional and physical safety of anyone who doesn't conform to a rigid cis-hetero standard.

Plus, it makes it hard for boys and men to form close intimate relationships with each other for fear of being labeled gay, putting imagined barriers between people of all genders.

WHAT YOU CAN DO

Start by checking your own learned bias towards the LGBTQ+ community. Then call out (or in, if that's your thing) prejudice in the larger world. This can be done interpersonally ("Actually, Aunt Lucy, gay men are not a risk to children..."), and also on a systemic level. Speak out against things like abstinence-only education, which reinforces rigid cis-hetero standards, challenge discriminatory religious congregations, and vote for candidates who will fight for LGBTQ+ rights.

Studies have found that men who adhere to traditional social norms around masculinity exhibit significantly worse social functioning and have poorer psychological health than those who don't. Yet, so many boys are still raised on a dangerous diet of old-school messages about gender and what it means to be a real man.

And even as the primary beneficiaries of this system, boys are often deeply harmed by these messages. So understanding that sexism is a double-edged sword, which will cut down everyone in its path, is a crucial step towards ensuring that our kids of all genders thrive and grow into decent human beings. ■