

9 TIPS FOR PARENTS

RAISING SONS TO EMBRACE HEALTHY, POSITIVE MASCULINITY



This guide is designed to help parents give their sons the best start in life, by embracing positive masculinity and self-expression. It was produced by global experts at *Plan International* (Plan), an international organisation that advances girls' equality and children's rights, *Promundo*, a global leader in engaging men and boys in promoting gender equality, and *Jesuit Social Services*, a social change organisation.

Embracing positive masculinity

All parents want to give their sons the best start in life. But how can you raise a boy with the freedom to be his true self when society has rigid expectations of what it means to be a boy – and how boys should look and act when they grow up to become men?

While women and girls have been encouraged to challenge harmful gender stereotypes over the years, the messages given to boys and men have largely stayed the same.

This guide is designed to help parents give their sons the best start, by embracing positive masculinity and self-expression. With practical tips grounded in global evidence, there's something in here for everyone.

TIP ONE: Encourage personal expression when it comes to toys.

Introduce boys to a wide range of toys, games, and activities, including those that are gender-neutral or might be traditionally thought of as “for girls”.

Avoiding toys that reinforce harmful gender stereotypes can give boys more breathing space to develop free from socially-constructed ideas of gender roles, encouraging their own self-expression.

[Plan International's recent study of adolescents' views on gender equality](#) found that children who play with more gender-neutral toys (in addition to having conversations about gender equality) **grow up to be more interested in changing the status quo and in creating a more equal world.**

TIP TWO: Use play and imagination as a way to define positive values and qualities.

When role playing with stuffed animals or imaginary friends, use language and scenarios that introduce a full range of healthy emotions and respectful conversations. Ask your son things like: “are they sad? How do you know? How can we help?”

Highlight that being able to express a wide range of emotions, including being afraid, or compassionate and caring is positive for both boys and girls.

We know from Jesuit Social Services' 2018 [Manbox study](#), which was modelled on research by Promundo, that 69% of young Australian men (18 to 30 years old) feel societal pressure to act strong even if they feel nervous or scared inside. Let's make sure that we help boys to recognise and accept these kinds of feelings as positive from a young age, and encourage the expression of empathy.

TIP THREE: Challenge harmful stereotypes when it comes to outfits and self-expression.

One of the best ways to encourage boys to be their authentic selves is to allow them to experiment with fashion and self-expression. According to Jesuit Social Services study, 48% of young men in Australia feel society puts pressure on men to disregard their appearance, in the belief that “a guy who spends a lot of time on his looks isn't very manly.” To break free from gender stereotypes, allow experimentation with things not typically advertised to boys.

This could include clothing, costumes or accessories traditionally targeted at girls, like long hair, pink and rainbow colours.

When boys believe in stereotypes around how men should look and act, it limits their lives and can lead to harmful consequences for us all. Let's help boys realise that their self-expression doesn't need to fit into a box.

Members of the Boys for Change project in Rwanda.
Credit: Plan International / Fiacre Igihozo.



TIP FOUR: be clear about consent.

Empower your boys with a strong understanding of what consent means. Let them know they have the right to say no if they don't want to be touched, and that they must ask for permission to touch others.

Make sure your son feels supported and respected if he says “no” to being picked up, or to hugs and kisses from family members, and that he respects when others say “no” to him.

Jesuit Social Services’ Man Box study found that young men who believed in rigid ideas about manhood were more likely to harass, both physically and online. Help your son question those norms and understand consent.

TIP FIVE: find books, tv shows and media that have good role models.

Read books or choose TV shows and media that break free of gender norms, showing boys and other male figures (adults, animals)—as well as girls and women—whose interests, jobs, and emotional expression challenge gender norms and model values of respect and equality.

Here’s a [recommended list of movies](#) from Common Sense Media to get started, featuring role models for boys.

TIP SIX: Speak up when you hear disrespectful comments.

Other family members and people who interact with your son have a large influence on your child. If grandparents, cousins, or family friends say something problematic, be sure to speak up in that moment and have a conversation about your values (for example, you could say, “We believe it’s important to treat everyone with respect.”)

One of the most startling findings from [Plan International’s survey](#) is that almost half of adolescent boys

hear their fathers or male family members make inappropriate jokes and comments about women.

This is a reminder that boys hear a lot of messages at home that could be giving them the wrong impression about what it means to “be a man.” You can actively counter that narrative.

TIP SEVEN: Identify positive role models.

Identify role models in your family, community, media and entertainment who model positive, healthy, respectful ways to be a boy and a man.

This could be someone who stays at home to support a female partner at work, someone who sticks up for his daughter’s right to be whomever

she wants to be, or someone who has vulnerable, open conversations with his friends and family.

Use these role models as a springboard for discussions about healthy masculinity and expressing a full range of emotions.

Boy takes part in warm up activity at the start of the mixed football (Soccer) tournament in Paraguay.
Credit: Plan International.



TIP EIGHT: Talk the talk.

Help boys feel supported and that they won't be judged for asking you their questions or sharing their concerns. Say, "I love you. You can always talk to me, even when you're upset, hurt, or confused." Make sure to stay away from language that can discourage boys' healthy emotions, such as "boys don't cry."

Encourage boys to connect and empathise with others, consider the consequences of their actions, build

healthy relationships, and express their emotions in healthy ways, rather than ignoring or repressing them.

The Man Box research found that young men are much more likely to go to their mothers for help. All parents should actively keep the lines of communication open.

TIP NINE: Walk the walk.

Challenge your own perceptions of gender roles and model the behaviour you want to encourage. **If you feel that boys really should or shouldn't do a certain thing because they are a boy, ask yourself, "Why?"**

The best way to show your son how to grow up to be a respectful, healthy, connected person is to model those qualities yourself, and in how you relate to others, including the child's other parent.

Promundo's research from more than 30 countries finds that if children see their parents sharing care work more equally—and particularly if boys see their fathers doing their full share—they tend to do the same as adults. Actions can speak louder than words.

Challenging stereotypes about how boys and girls should behave is not easy, but it's extremely important. To create a more equal society, we all need to play our part. Having these conversations—and backing them up with actions—is a crucial part of the solution to countering unhealthy masculinity.

ABOUT Plan International

Plan International Australia is a leading girls' rights agency. We champion girls' rights because we know that there is nowhere in the world where girls are treated as equals. Plan International Australia is the local office of Plan International, which works in more than 75 countries to help create a just world that advances children's rights and equality for girls.



ABOUT Jesuit Social Services

Jesuit Social Services is a social change organisation working to build a just society where all people can live to their full potential. Jesuit Social Services has established The Men's Project to provide leadership on the reduction of violence and other harmful behaviours prevalent among boys and men, and build new approaches to improve their wellbeing and keep families and communities safe.



ABOUT Promundo

Promundo is a global leader in promoting gender equality and preventing violence by engaging men and boys in partnership with women and girls. We believe that working with men and boys to transform harmful gender norms and unequal power dynamics is a critical part of the solution to achieve gender equality. Promundo's formative research and rigorous evaluation, evidence-based programs, and targeted advocacy efforts strive to create change at multiple levels.

Since 1997, Promundo's initiatives—in collaboration with partners in more than 45 countries—have reached nearly 10 million people through programs and training, campaigns and community engagement; and more than 2 billion potential viewers through media, resulting in broader awareness around gender equality and violence prevention, as well as changes in attitudes and behaviours related to intimate partner violence; sexual and reproductive health and rights; and domestic work and caregiving, among others.

