

Raising Gender Healthy Kids

Emotionally healthy children who grow up to be emotionally healthy adults are comfortable in their own skin, in the gender God chose for them. These days, when a child shows non-stereotypical gender behavior, people start to freak out, afraid that their child is actually the opposite sex on the inside.

Good news! There are things parents can do to raise gender healthy kids, girls who are content to be girls and boys who are glad to be boys. Without resorting to artificial stereotypes, either.

First, loosen up your expectations of what boys and girls should be like. A friend of mine now in college was recently exasperated when the instructor taught that “Little girls play with dolls and wear dresses.” Carol shot back, “I was NEVER like that!” My friend preferred to climb trees and ride her skateboard, and absolutely hated it when her grandmother tried to teach her to make gravy because “that’s what girls do.” And it really irritated her that her brothers never had to do any kitchen work because “boys don’t do that sort of thing.” Narrow gender stereotypes don’t honor the creativity of the God who makes varieties of girls and boys on a femininity spectrum and a masculinity spectrum (my blog post on [the Gender Spectrum](#) has been helpful to a lot of people; please read it!).

When parents can relax about the kind of boy or the kind of girl they have, it is easier to support and encourage children according to the way God designed them. Some boys are not the rough-and-tumble, athletic type; they are born emotionally sensitive, more relational than most boys, often creative and artistic. I know one little boy who pretty much danced out of the womb, and has been dancing ever since. That’s his gift, his divine design. His family loves it, loves him, and

supports him fully. Some girls just aren't the girly-girl type; they are natural athletes and gravitate toward more classically masculine interests, but God intended them to be more of the tomboy feminine. Like my friend Carol.

Second, cultivate warm, affectionate, respectful relationships in your family—between husband and wife, between mom and children, and between dad and children. Emotionally healthy, gender healthy kids are grounded in the security of parents who love each other and their children. A hurtful relationship with the same-sex parent is the biggest contributing factor to a later development of homosexuality, but there are other forms of brokenness that can also arise from hurtful family relationships.

Third, appreciate the different contributions from mothers and fathers. God created the complementarity of male and female (Gen. 1:27) for our good and for His glory. Moms and dads are not interchangeable, which is why He intended for families to be led by a mother and a father.

Here are some suggestions from Ricky Chelette, my esteemed colleague at Living Hope Ministries, who has been helping parents deal with gender issues for decades, my friend Anne Paulk, author of *Restoring Sexual Identity* . . . and from me:

Fathers and Sons

- Strongly connect with your son at an early age.
- Affirm the son's identity as a boy.
- Take interest in him and his interest(s). Be his #1 fan.
- Demonstrate love by word and deed. He needs to hear you say "I love you, son."
- Love his mother and assure her security and safety.
- Powerful affirmation: "You're good enough, you're strong enough, and you have what it takes."
- Always give affirmation, attention, and affection ([The "Three As"](#))

- Don't feel rejected by the mother/child relationship.
- Draw out your son ("Hey, let's be guys together!").
- Show him what maleness is.
- Do things together. Even a trip to the grocery store or Home Depot counts.
- Cultivate a habit of "thumbs-up" attitude of affirmation. Look for things to affirm.
- When he doesn't get it right, don't dismiss him and send him to Mom.
- Encourage and affirm "be-like-Dad" behavior.
- Be physical. Boys need safe male touch.
- When giving hugs, let kids (both boys and girls) pull away first.

Mothers and Sons

- Push your son towards his father and encourage their relationship.
- Affirm your son's masculinity.
- Point out the differences between you and him, between him and his sisters, etc.
- Allow for emotional distance and independence. Don't try to keep him bound to you like a baby.
- Demonstrate positive, safe touch with him (not just spankings).
- Love and respect his father.
- Bring other boys into the home and encourage connections with other boys.
- Reinforce the father's role.
- Tell him that being a boy is wonderful, and you're glad God made him a boy!
- Build up the similarities to his daddy.
- Refuse to diminish the glory of the father/son relationship; don't get in the middle of it.
- Affirm what is valuable in your son's father so your son can model it.
- Nurture and comfort with empathy, but allow your husband to

nurture differently (aggression nurturing), such as “Hop up, you’re OK.” Boys need to learn to develop a thicker skin from their dads.

- Don’t insist that he look you in the eyes when you’re having a difficult conversation (except when it’s time to apologize). It’s especially threatening and painful for most boys. Take a walk or drive with him where you are shoulder to shoulder, or talk to him in dim lighting (such as bedtime), to encourage him to open up to you.

Fathers and Daughters

- Love and build up your wife, and make sure she feels secure and safe.
- Affirm your daughter’s femininity with words and deeds.
- Be your daughter’s “protector.”
- Tell her she is loved and beautiful 3X more than you think is necessary.
- Love and serve her. Set the bar high for the man she will marry.
- Girls are tactile. Touch is the key to your daughter’s heart. Appropriate touch is SO powerful and necessary.
- Girls are verbal, so words are also very powerful. They need to hear words of affirmation more often than boys.

Mothers and Daughters

- Respect and honor your husband.
- Affirm your daughter’s femininity.
- Show her what strength and nurture together look like.
- Love your daughter, don’t compete with her.
- Do girly things together early and often. She needs to learn to be a girl from you.
- Communicate feelings, not weakness.
- Continually develop and demonstrate a healthy relationship /romance with your husband.
- Be confident so she can admire you.

- Stand up for what is right in godly femininity, in the family and in the world.
- Demonstrate biblical femininity: relational, nurturing, vulnerable, responsive, and beauty (for an excellent article on this, read [A Real Woman: Defining Biblical Femininity](#) on the Living Hope website.
- Pursue contentment; enjoy life where you are right now.
- Model Christlike submission to God, husband, authorities.

And finally: pray, pray, pray for your children!

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Boys Are From Mars, Girls Are From Venus: Raising Gender-Healthy Children

Sue Bohlin begins with the concepts from John Gray's best-seller and applies them to understanding and supporting our child's gender to develop a healthy self understanding. Recognizing the wide variation among children, she is still able to apply biblical truth from a Christian perspective to give sound advice on this important topic.

Gender Differences

John Gray's best-seller *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus*[\[1\]](#) woke up millions of people to the truth that men and women are different, and different is good. The politically correct lie that gender is a culturally bound social construct

was shown to be just that, a lie, because life doesn't work that way.

In this article I look at gender differences in boys and girls, examining the importance of supporting our children's gender to encourage a healthy self-concept as a possible means of preventing the development of homosexuality. (While I by no means wish to oversimplify this very complex subject, there are nonetheless patterns that show up in many people who experience same-sex attraction.[{2}](#))

(Disclaimer: I do realize I am painting these gender differences in broad strokes. Not every boy and not every girl will follow along these lines. However, these generalizations are true for the vast majority of children, as well as adults.)

Boys get their sense of self from achievement. They're wired to be self-reliant. One of my son's first whole sentences was, "Me do it!" They think they get extra brownie points for doing things on their own. For boys, asking for help means admitting defeat, and being offering help means being disrespected. When I used to say, "Let Mommy help you" to my two sons, they would be offended and I never knew why. If I could do it over again, I would tell them, "Let's see if you can do it on your own. If it doesn't work, I'll be glad to help."

Girls, on the other hand, get their sense of self from relationships. Most everything is about people, and asking for help is a way to build a bridge to other people. When a girl is offered help, she often feels loved and valued. So when a Daddy from Mars lets his little girl struggle on her own, because that's what a boy would appreciate, she can feel hurt and abandoned.

Boys are very linear in their thinking; they focus on one thing at a time. Girls are usually multi-taskers, able to juggle several things at once. Both of these are strengths. I

finally learned to show respect for my boys' one-thing-at-a-time kind of thinking by giving them my full attention when they were talking to me. Although *I* knew that I could focus on them even if my hands were busy, they didn't think I was really listening. It's also important for men to realize that girls can do more than one thing at a time without being disrespectful, like simultaneously embroider and truly listen to someone talk.

Boys, being linear, tend to focus on a goal, whereas girls can enjoy the process as well. I frustrated my kids so many times when they'd be dressed and ready for a soccer game and I'd think, "We've got 10 minutes before we have to leave! Let's get the living room vacuumed!" They would be focused on the goal of playing soccer and I'd drive them crazy with my emphasis on the process of running a household.

Boys tend to be competitive and girls cooperative. That makes sense since boys get their sense of self from achieving, and girls get their sense of self from relationships. There has been a definite anti-male bias in many of our schools over the past several years where competition is seen as evil and hurtful, so it's been removed whenever possible. This means educational policy has been directed *against* boys' very nature.^{3} They often achieve more through competition, even friendly competition, and that includes building relationships. Boys (and men) bond best with other guys shoulder-to-shoulder, engaged in a competition or a common task. Girls (and women) bond best face-to-face. We need to support these differences for each gender to be who God made them to be.

Boys are action-oriented. Many little boys naturally throw themselves into a chair rather than sit in it. They are naturally active, which frustrates both parents and teachers, but the solution is not to drug them or try to turn them into girls. We need to change our expectations of what makes for acceptable levels of activity in boys, and provide safe

channels for all that energy.

Where boys are primarily action-oriented, girls are primarily verbal. This verbal nature of females is not a design flaw; God, who defines Himself as “the Word” in the Bible, imparted that part of His own nature to girls and women. Girls’ very wordiness is what allows them to connect with other people, to be the relational beings that God intended.

These differences really show up when kids get hostile. Boys will often get physical when they’re mad or frustrated. The testosterone that flows through boys’ bodies is part of their physical hostility, and it needs to be respected. This very same tendency to hit or kick when angered is usually channeled into the glory of adult masculinity where a man will fight to protect his family or his country.

When girls get hostile, they use their tongues. It’s not true that “sticks and stones can hurt my bones but names will never hurt me.” Unfortunately, more long-term damage can be inflicted with hurtful words than by hitting or kicking. That’s why it’s so important to teach girls what Proverbs teaches about the destructive power of the tongue,[{4}](#) and to work at using their verbal skills to uplift and encourage and nurture.

Follow God’s Rules for Marriage and Family

Although there is no one-size-fits-all explanation for why homosexuality develops, many who struggle with same-gender attraction can identify unhealthy patterns of relating in their families as they were growing up.

One of the ways that the development of a homosexual identity can be prevented is by following God’s rules for marriage and the family.[{5}](#)

First, Both husband and wife have clearly defined roles. Children need to see that mothers and fathers are not interchangeable, and there are distinct roles that men and women fulfill. They need to know that a man shows his masculinity by protecting and providing for his family, using his strength to serve them and not hurt them. They need to see the beauty of femininity expressed in their mother's nurturing and intuitive capabilities.

Second, The father is an involved leader, and is warm and affectionate toward his children. All children, but most especially boys, long for their dads' acceptance, praise and physical affection. When boys don't get it, it creates an emotional void of a sense of intimate connection with a man, and a boy can grow up not comfortable with being male.

Third, The mother loves and nurtures her family without being controlling. Girls need their mothers to show them that being a female is a good and lovely gift from God, and boys need their mothers to love and respect them without smothering.

Fourth, The father loves the mother. In showing love for his wife, the father creates the climate in which a little girl can believe it is safe and good to be a woman, and men can be trusted. When a boy sees his father loving his mother, cherishing and protecting her, he sees a man going beyond himself, the glory of masculine strength. He sees that being a man is a good and wonderful gift from God.

Fifth, The mother shows respect for the father. For the daughter, her mother's esteem for her father again shows that men are to be trusted, that women can enjoy and celebrate men. The mother's view of the father can become her view of him—and her view of men in general. Many lesbians deeply believe that men are idiots or brutes, worthless and repulsive, and something desperately sad shaped that belief.

If a boy's mother treats his father with love and respect, it

says being a man is a good thing. But a weak father who accepts contempt, or a mean father who fights back, can both lead the boy to choose to identify with his mother and against his father. This just confuses his developing gender identity.

Following God's command to love wisely and well usually produces emotionally healthy kids.

Affirm Children's Gender

A wise person once said that it's easier to build a healthy child than repair an adult. The best way to build emotionally healthy children who accept and enjoy their gender is for us as parents (and grandparents and teachers) to affirm boys in their masculinity and girls in their femininity.

Boys and girls are definitely created differently from conception, and we should support those God-ordained differences. Boys who are typically active boy need to hear words of affirmation and acceptance for what makes them boys. A friend of mine recently took her little boy for a walk down to the lake. Along the way she said, "Parker, let's look for frogs and toads. Mommy is so glad God made you a little boy so you could like yucky things like frogs and toads." When they got back to the house, his grandmother asked, "So how was your walk?" and Parker said, "Mommy's glad that I'm a boy because I like yucky things like frogs and toads!"

Boys who are NOT typically boy, those who prefer quieter pursuits like reading and music and the performing arts, especially need to be supported in their masculinity. These boys can grow up to be the King Davids in our world, and we need them! I should also point out that these sensitive, quieter types, when cherished in their masculinity, grow up to be the best kind of husbands, and men with a shepherd's heart. All boys need to hear their parents affirm their existence with comments like "I'm so glad God made you a boy" and "You're going to make a fine man when you grow up." They need

to hear that a boy can be a good strong male whether or not they play sports and like rough stuff.

Feminine little girls need to be admired and cherished for their girlishness. A little girl in a new dress can be praised by her mother and friends all day long, but she won't really believe she's beautiful until her daddy tells her she is. And girls need to hear the "b" word—they they are beautiful. It's a part of the feminine heart. Not every girl or woman is beauty-pageant material, but there are many kinds of beauty, and we all need to hear that we are beautiful. Girls who aren't typically girly, the tomboys and "jockettes," especially need to be appreciated for their particular expression of femininity by praising and encouraging them. They need to know that one can be a soft, feminine lady AND a strong leader or a great athlete.

Every child's heart longs to hear "I'm so glad you're you, and I love you just the way you are."

Understanding Gender Differences

I think it's crucial for us as adults to understand gender differences in children and support them with a sense of humor, not condemnation.

One of my friends tells of an elaborate classroom Christmas craft where the kids were to fill socks with rice, tie them off and decorate them to be snowmen—a craft created by mothers of girls. The boys filled the socks with rice, tied them off and gleefully announced, "Look! A snow worm!"

I remember hearing another friend informing her young boys, "We don't roughhouse. We play quietly and gently." She didn't mean to, but she was trying to teach her boys to be girls. NOT a good plan!

Those who experience same-gender attraction, especially men, are usually uncomfortable and insecure in their masculinity or

femininity. Homosexuality isn't primarily a sexual issue, but an emotional one, and it often starts with not being comfortable or confident in the gender God chose for us. So it's important to be on the lookout for signs that children might be struggling with their gender identity and may be vulnerable to developing a homosexual identity later:

- Kids who don't fit in.
- Kids who lack a close relationship with their father, especially boys.
- Kids who wear clothes and play with toys associated with the other gender.
- Boys who are TOO good, everyone seeing them as "the good little boy."
- Poor peer relationships, not bonding with other children their same sex, often lonely.
- Kids who are bullied and shamed by other kids.

In closing, let me give three suggestions for raising emotionally healthy children with a strong sense of gender:

- Cultivate warm, affectionate, respectful relationships—between husband and wife, and between parents and children. A hurtful relationship with the same-sex parent, whether real or just perceived, is the number one contributor to the later development of homosexuality.[\[6\]](#) Both boys and girls, but especially boys, need a daddy's approval, acceptance and affection. Girls develop problems with gender identity from not being protected and cherished. They need to be encouraged toward feminine things with a close and loving relationship with Mom.
- Cherish and support your child's gender. Understand the God-designed differences and tell them how special it is to be a boy or a girl.
- When you see patterns of inappropriate gender behavior, lovingly correct it. For instance, boys don't wear girls'

clothes or makeup or jewelry. And boys don't play with Barbies the way girls do. However, it's OK to play with Barbies the way BOYS would! That would include physical aggression and sound effects as well as nurturing behavior.

God knew what He was doing when he chose each child's gender, and we would be wise to support His choice.

Notes

1. Gray, John. *Men Are From Mars, Women Are From Venus*. New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 1992.
2. For example, see *Portraits of Freedom*, Bob Davies [Downers Grove: InterVarsity Press, 2001], 9-10. Also, I highly recommend Don Schmierer's excellent book *An Ounce of Prevention: Preventing the Homosexual Condition in Today's Youth* [Word, 1998].
3. Please see my colleague Don Closson's article on the Probe Web site, "The Feminization of American Schools" at www.probe.org/the-feminization-of-american-schools/.
4. E.g., Prov. 18:21, 21:23, 25:23, 26:28.
5. I am indebted to Scott Lively's insight in his online book, *Seven Steps to Recruit-Proof Your Child* at www.defendthefamily.com/pfrc/books/sevensteps/Chapter5/index.html.
6. Lecture by Dr. Joseph Nicolosi, "Prevention of Male Homosexuality," Focus on the Family's *Love Won Out* conference, May 6, 2000, Dallas, Texas.

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Cherishing Our Children's Gender

A wise friend of mine recently took her little boy for a walk down to the lake. Along the way she said, "Parker, let's look for frogs and toads. Mommy is so glad God made you a little boy so you could like yucky things like frogs and toads." When they got back to the house, his grandmother asked, "So how was your walk?" and Parker said, "Mommy's glad that I'm a boy because I like yucky things like frogs and toads."

Parker's mommy is a wise lady because she is supporting and cherishing her child's gender. That little guy is proud to be a boy and glad that he's a different gender from his mother. And you know what? As he grows up, he most probably won't struggle with homosexuality. One of the best-kept secrets in our culture is the good news that homosexuality can often be prevented through healthy relationships.

Homosexuality is really about gender identity confusion. Boys aren't comfortable being boys, and girls aren't comfortable being girls, and they grow up not fitting in because they have trouble accepting the way God made them. One of a child's basic needs is to feel loved and accepted and, well, CELEBRATED for who they are! This includes the fact that God chose little girls to be female and He decided that little boys would be male. As parents, we need to support God's wise choice of gender for our kids. They need to hear us say, "I'm so glad you're a boy! Boys are so neat." Little girls need to be celebrated for their femininity because girls are so special. Every child deserves to know that the gender that they are is a good, good thing, and we're so glad God made them that way.

One of the best ways we as parents can celebrate our child's gender is to understand and support the differences between

boys and girls. Affirm your kids in their maleness and their femaleness. Boys' tendency to be active and physical isn't a pathological problem; we need to channel it with grace, not shame it! Yes, girls are soooooo verbal and emotional—but those aren't design flaws, they're designed!

It's important for dads to support their son's masculinity even if he's not the stereotypical jock. God makes some boys to be artistic and sensitive because we need them! Can you imagine what King David must have been like as a young boy, out in the field playing instruments and composing songs and poetry? Boys like David need their dads to say, "I'm so proud of who you are, son." And girls really need their daddies to love and accept them and celebrate their femaleness. It's one thing for your mother to say you're a pretty princess, but a girl believes it when her father tells her.

One of the greatest gifts we can give our children is the security of knowing that when God made them, He "did good"—even if they like yucky things like toads and frogs.

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