

Boys Will Be Men

Discussion Guide

Are you a teacher, parent or community leader interested in moderating a discussion about raising and guiding boys on their journey to manhood? A screening of Boys Will Be Men can be the focus of discussion. This guide outlines topics raised by the program and asks 12 questions that encourage participants to consider the issues in the context of their own lives.

1. The Boy Code

❖ In the program, clinical psychologist William Pollack comments that.. “around the ages of 3 and 4 to 5 and 6, boys are prematurely pushed into what I call the ‘boy code.’ Put most simply, that’s a code that tells boys that they should stand on their own two feet, cut Mama’s apron strings, and be an independent person way before it’s possible to really achieve that.” Boys are conditioned by the “boy code,” to be tough and not to show vulnerable emotions. This can limit their capacity for intimacy and relationships in later life.

➡ What specific examples of the “boy code” can you identify in your own experience or in that of your children?

2. First Grade: “The Game Is Rigged”

❖ When boys enter first grade, most tend to be more physically active and expressive than girls. At the same time they tend to lag behind in reading/verbal skills. Psychologist Michael Thompson observes that a lot of boys look around and say: “What is this school thing? The game is rigged. It’s a place run by women for girls, and the girls are good at it and we’re always in trouble.” He contends that “You have to have places where boys can burn up their energy and run around and not be constantly getting into trouble and not being constantly shamed for just being boys.”

➡ What do you think Thompson means by saying “The game is rigged?” Why are boys “constantly getting into trouble” at this age? What, in your judgment, is “trouble,” and what is normal boy behavior?

3. Language of Emotions

❖ First-grade teacher Jamie Carlson teaches her students the language of human emotions along with reading, writing, and arithmetic. She says, “My job is more than just the delivery of the curriculum. It is to help the children understand themselves and their feelings and that their place in relationship to other people is critical.”

➡ What are some other ways in which parents and teachers can teach the language of human emotions? Why is this important?

4. Culture of Cruelty

❖ Recent studies in the United States show that 80 percent of boys says they tease, harass and sometimes threaten other students. In the program, Brandon, a high school student, observes, “If you can throw balls at another kid and if you can make him feel bad about himself, then he’s almost out of the game, so to speak, that’s one less person you have to worry about being ahead of you. That’s one less person you have to worry about getting a better job than you, getting into the school you want to go to. And we learn that an early age, and it really doesn’t ever stop.” Nick, another student, comments that bullying is a way of “gaining respect.”

➡ Should parents accept bullying as just a natural part of growing up? Why or why not?

❖ Chad, one of the boys in the SUWS Program in Idaho, is confronted by Dennis for bullying another student.

➡ How would you characterize Dennis’ way of confronting and talking with Chad and other youths in the group? Why is it effective? How can we help foster a youth culture in which bullying is not supported?

5. True Discipline

❖ Psychologist Michael Thompson observes that with boys, “We so often punish them, and we call that discipline. That’s not true discipline. The original meaning of discipline is to make somebody your disciple. You actually want to have someone follow in your footsteps and emulate your values. That’s real discipline.”

➡ How is true discipline put into practice by the leaders in the SUWS program? In your experience, what is the difference between punishment and true discipline?

6. Walking the Walk

❖ SUWS Program Director Sue Crowell observes that “All our instructors live exactly like the students do. So what that means is they eat the same food, they dress the same way, and they model what our expectations are of the kids in the field.”

➡ Why is this important? Can you think of instances where adults actions may convey to youth a different message from their words? What are the consequences?

7. What Love Means

❖ In the program, Taylor is rendered silent by a question that Dennis asks him: “When you talk about the people you love, how do they know that you love them?” In this way, Dennis is holding Taylor accountable for his actions (or lack of them) in a relationship with his parents, whom he claims he loves.

➡ What are some non-punitive ways in which you can hold young people accountable for what they say they believe?

8. Effective Support

❖ When the boys are introduced to the ropes course, they are scared. Yet they persevere and succeed.

➡ What role do the adults play in contributing to their success? How can we effectively support youth in the challenges that they face in life?

9. Who He Actually Is

❖ In the program, the narrator says: “Part of growing up is discovering and learning how to express who you are, as a distinct individual. This is hard. Parents often have an idea of who you should grow up to be, while peers have a totally different concept of how you should look, talk, and act.” Later Michael Meade observes, “One of the hardest things for a parent to do is to see the actual nature of their own child.”

➡ Why do you think Meade means by this? In your experience, what is the difference between expectations that provide a positive framework for growth and expectations that actually limit a young person’s self-discovery?

10. Honor His Pride

❖ Michael Thompson observes that when you talk to a boy, “you have to understand that he thinks the whole ‘talking thing’ may not be a masculine undertaking. So you have to ask a question a different way. You have to honor his pride and his masculinity, because he’s trying to present himself as strong. I found the way to do it is to use a boy as a consultant on himself.”

➡ This is, in effect, what Michael Meade is doing through the use of ceremony and poetry in the workshop. Can you think of other ways to engage a boy as a “consultant on himself?”

11. Give Him Space, but Hover Closely

❖ William Pollack comments: “In our society, when [an adolescent boy] says: ‘Leave me alone!,’ we do the worst possible thing we can do. We actually do leave them alone. What they’re really telling us is: “Give us some more space, but hover closely and be around.”

➡ How can you do this? How can you respect a boy’s need for privacy and autonomy while at the same time providing the support and guidance he needs to reach manhood?

12. Power in Listening

❖ In the final scene of the program, a father who has been listening to the boys read their poetry says: “I know that I need to listen more, and I thank you for reminding me that I have a power in listening — not judging, not offering advice, but just to hear what’s being said.”

➡ Why can listening sometimes be more effective than judging or offering advice? What is the “power in listening,” in your experience?