

Act Like A Man

“Come on, act like a man.” This is a statement said to most growing boys, teens, and emerging adult men. It is a loaded statement that perhaps has done more damage than good to individuals and society. Sometimes males are told to act like a man because they are behaving in a way that is traditionally thought of as unmasculine. When males are constantly exposed to such a demand, they are being given certain messages that can impact them throughout their lives.

ACT-LIKE-A-MAN BOX

What are these messages? First, boys are being raised to keep in a box, a box of expectations. This box includes the traditional and often false concepts and behaviors of manhood. It is called Act-Like-a-Man Box. When they come out of the box, they are called “sissies.” Writer, Paul Kivel, author of “The Men’s Work Workbooks,” identifies these messages that keep men in a box. He writes: “Act like a man” means that real men “yell at people, have no emotions, stand up for themselves, don’t cry, don’t make mistakes, know about sex, take care of people, don’t back down, push people around, can take it.” Kivel explains further what’s in this box. He says men are “aggressive, responsible, mean, bullies, tough, angry, successful, strong, in control, dominant over women.” Most, if not all of these behaviors are considered normal for men in our society. They force men to keep in the box. There is a high demand to stay in the box. When boys are not tough enough, or strong enough, we often call them names. If someone is called a wimp or a fag, he would get into a fight just to prove that he is in the box—tough and strong.

Sadly, boys are pushed by adults to be tough from a very early age. We stop hugging and kissing them as soon as they start to walk or around ages four to five. We tell them: “Boys don’t cry.” “Boys don’t walk on their toes.” “Boys don’t cook.” What we are actually doing is setting up our boys to become bullies or being bullied. Yes, in this modern day, the 21st century, there are boys who are still being raised this way. Joining the pressure to remain in the Act-Like-a-Man Box, far too many of our boys are being shamed and blamed by their parents and those around them more than praised and encouraged.

In my 2007 article titled, “Family and Crime Reduction in The Bahamas,” I wrote about authoritarian parents who rule with a rod of iron and not love and forgiveness. I stated: “In fact, one of the typical characteristics of the authoritarian style of leadership is that of shaming and blaming. Parents who often feel that their authority position is being threatened usually intentionally or unintentionally wound with their mouths and their hands. It was all about the misuse and abuse of power.” Shaming and blaming is one of the major predictors for the lack of empathy in children and adulthood. In his article, “Violence and Parenting Education,” Paul Jay Fink states: “Some children growing in today’s society appear to have little or no empathy for others. They have no sense of social responsibility and no sense of the importance of such values as respect, courtesy, decency, and morality. The most notable thing that leads some kids to be violent, brutal and murderous is the lack of empathy.”

Lack of empathy, which can be precipitated by forcing our boys to remain in the box, has been too long a recipe for violence in our society. Unknowingly, gangs, violent, and angry men thrive on these toxic notions of masculinity. They can fuel their drive for revenge, pain, murder, and taking advantage of people who seem weaker than they are or those who did them wrong.

Nobody is born in this box. Paul Kivel writes: “It takes years and years of enforcement, name-calling, fights, threats, abuse, and fear to get us in and keep us in this box. By adolescence we believe that there are only two choices: We can be a man or a boy, a winner or a loser, a bully or a wimp, a champ or a chump.”

TEST YOURSELF

If you are a pre-teen, teen, or young adult male reading this article, here are ways you are being trained to be a violent man. I will state them in the form of questions as presented by Paul Kivel:

- Have you ever worried you were not touch enough?
- Have you ever been hit to make you stop crying?

- Have you ever been called a wimp, queer, or fag?
- Have you ever been told to act like a man?
- Have you ever been forced to fight or been in a fight because you felt you had to prove you were a man?
- Have you ever seen an adult man you looked up to or respected hit or brutalized a woman emotionally or physically?
- Have you ever been physically injured by another person?
- Have you ever been physically injured and hid the pain or kept it to yourself?
- Were you ever sexually abused or touched in a way you didn't like by another person?
- Have you ever stopped yourself from showing affection, hugging, or touching another man because of how it might look?
- Have you ever been arrested or done time in prison?
- Have you ever gotten so mad that you drove fast or lost control of a vehicle?
- Did you ever drink or take other drugs to cover your feelings or hide pain?
- Have you ever felt like blowing yourself away?
- Have you ever hurt another person sexually, or were you sexual with another person when that person didn't want to be?

Were these questions real for you? Parents, I hope you have a better understanding how we are setting up our boys to become violent, verbally, emotionally or physically. I encourage you to stop shaming and blaming your boys and start loving them. I encourage you not to keep your boys in a box. Help them to feel comfortable and natural to wash the dishes, sweep the house, and study well in school.

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