Mothers and Sons: Raising Relational Boys

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About the Authors
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Abstract
This paper describes the application of Relational/Cultural Theory to a model of Parenting-in-Connection. The natural ebb and flow of parent-child relationships is described through the cycle of connection, disconnection, and new connection. Issues and conflicts specific to boys’ development at four distinct stages are detailed. The mother-son relationship is marked as the important context within which boys can learn how to move from disconnection to even better connection. The focus is on the dominant cultural model for boys’ development. While there are variations based on race, class, and other factors, we believe that this dominant model affects all mother-son relationships.

Achilles, mightiest of the Greeks, hero of the Iliad, was nearly immortal. According to myth, his mother, Thetis, dipped him into the river Styx. The sacred waters of this river that led to Hades, the world of the dead, rendered whomever they touched impervious to harm. But, Thetis, good mother that she was, worried about the dangers of the river, and so she held onto Achilles by his heel. As the story goes, because of that one holding spot, Achilles remained mortal and vulnerable to harm. Thetis would be blamed forever after for her son’s fatal flaw, his Achilles’ heel.

The holding place of vulnerability was not, as the myth would have us believe, a fatal liability to Achilles. It was the thing that kept him human and real. In fact, we consider it Thetis’s finest gift to her son.

Every mother of a son hopes to prepare him for life’s “battles” while also preserving his emotional/relational side. Because mothers value connection, they want to “hold on,” to keep open that place of vulnerability. But faced with cultural pressures that suggest restraint and withdrawal, rather than comfort and nurture, many mothers feel conflicted about their desire to stay connected to their sons. Traditional wisdom cautions that holding on will be damaging and create psychological problems for sons. Faced with this dilemma, mothers often yield to cultural pressures and disconnect from their young sons because they think it’s the right thing to do.

Our work with mothers of sons is based on Relational/Cultural Theory, a view of development for women and men, which grew out of Jean Baker Miller’s 1976 book, Toward a New Psychology of Women. In her book, Miller introduces a new view of women and their development. After many years of listening to and studying women, she concludes that relationship and affiliation are essential to healthy development. She has noted the pejorative attitudes about women and their roles, embedded in the fabric of Western culture, and states that these cultural views...
diminish women’s self-worth.

We highlight the mother-son relationship because we feel that this same devalued view of women affects the mother-son relationship. The culture tells mothers to disconnect from their sons. A closeness with mom has frequently been misunderstood and pathologized. The mother-son connection is ridiculed (“go run to mama, “crybaby”), cautioned against (“you better let him go,” “push him out to the world”), prohibited (“don’t coddle him,” “no more hugs and kisses”), and maligned (“she’s turned him into a mama’s boy,” “he’s tied to her apron strings”). We feel that this disparaging attitude and the resulting early call for separation from mother isolates boys from relationship.

In this paper we are referring to the dominant cultural model for boys in the United States. We recognize that there are many diverse variations of this model dependent upon race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, family structure, socioeconomic class, and other factors. We focus on the mainstream model supported by media images and messages because of the strong negative influence it has on boys’ development. We feel that all mothers, regardless of diverse circumstances, are impacted in their relationship with their sons by this culturally prescribed paradigm of disconnection.

Infant studies show that physical and psychological development is dependent upon a good mother-infant connection. Without such a connection, we see a developmental “failure to thrive” in babies. Ed Tronick, of the Brazelton Touchpoint Project (1998), notes that infant development occurs only within relationship. This is also Jean Baker Miller’s belief about our lifelong experience. In her 1976 book she states that “all growth and learning takes place within the context of relationship.” While the relational presence of mother is essential for babies to thrive early on, it continues to be essential for boys’ emotional and relational growth.

Irene Stiver and Jean Baker Miller (1997) speak of the need for relationship and connection as a human need in their book The Healing Connection. They see this as a universal need, best met through the development of mutually empathic and mutually empowering relationships. But, young boys, if deprived of sufficient opportunities to learn how to make real connections, try to meet these needs in superficial and manipulative ways. They are taught in the dominant “boy culture” to fulfill their desires and get ahead, even at the expense of others. In acting this way, boys and men are simply following established rules of the culture for males. A false bravado model not only deprives boys early on of parental empathy, but also infuses them with a sense of esteem and power devoid of internal resonance. As a result, mutually satisfying connection with others becomes impossible. In our clinical practice, men tell stories of “working the room” in executive meetings, assured that they will, ultimately, sway others and (right or wrong) get what they want. These men complain, however, that they feel no internal gratification in these interactions. All this attention and power fail to gratify, and in fact leave them feeling empty and even more alone. We see in their experience how learned behaviors make it impossible for many men to connect authentically, leaving them with a debilitating sense of internal isolation.

This problematic developmental course may account for what appears to be a predominance of men who are self-absorbed and cut-off from relationship. Perhaps, if we understand more deeply the impact of culture on boys’ and men’s development, we can bring a compassionate and understanding perspective to our male children, partners, friends, and clients as they sort through these difficult, deeply embedded relational patterns. Perhaps, if we create more empathic possibilities, these new experiences can prevent in boys, and heal in men, the wounds of this early disconnection.

A Mother’s Prospective View

We have found, in our work with more than 3,000 mothers of sons, that in spite of the cultural message, many mothers follow their inclination and stay in relationship with their sons. Tentatively questioning established norms, these mothers keep a place of emotionality open in their sons through continued connection. Yet, at the same time, they worry that they will affect their sons’ development in negative ways. Mothers who resist the cultural call to disconnection are in need of validation and support. These courageous mothers are, potentially, the real experts in boys’ development. Keeping a strong connection is the way to teach sons how to navigate the many and complex nuances of relationship. We believe that it is within the mother-son context that relational learning occurs and the groundwork is established for future relationships. Olga Silverstein (1994), in her book The Courage to Raise Good Men, demonstrated that the root of sons’ difficulties as adults is linked to distance and disconnection in the mother-son relationship. Our workshops with mothers and adult sons, as well as our clinical work