

Assembly 19 November

Being a Boy

“Babies are babies. Being a boy or a girl is not a concern to a baby. Babies love to be cuddled, to play, to explore, to be tickled and to giggle. Their personalities vary a great deal. Some babies are easy to handle; they can be quiet and relaxed, and sleep long hours. Others are noisy and wakeful, always wanting some action. Other babies are anxious and need lots of reassurance.

“What babies and toddlers need most is to form a special bond with at least one person. Usually this person is their mother because she is the best equipped to provide what a baby needs. Dads can also provide all a baby needs but tend to do it differently. Dads tend to be more vigorous in their playing. They like to stir up children, while mothers like to calm them down.

“Some gender difference between boys and girls do begin to appear early on. Boy babies are less sensitive to faces. Girl babies have a much better sense of touch. Boys grow faster and stronger, yet they are more troubled when separated from their mother. Boy toddlers move around more and occupy more space when they play. They like to handle objects more, and build high building out of blocks, while girls prefer low rise. At kindergarten, boys tend to ignore a new child who arrives in the group, while girls will notice them and befriend them.

“Sadly, adults tend to treat boys more harshly. Research studies have shown that parents hug and cuddle girl children far more, even as newborn babies. They tend to talk less to boy babies. And mothers of boys are likely to hit them harder and more often than they do girl children.

“Under six years of age, gender isn’t a big deal, and it shouldn’t be made so. Mothers are usually the primary parent but a father can take this place. What matters most is that one or two people love this child and make him central for these few years.

“At around six years of age, a big change takes place in boys. There seems to be a sudden switching on of boys’ masculinity at this age. Even boys who have not watched a great deal of television suddenly want to play with swords, wear superman capes, fight and wrestle, and make lots of noise. Something else happens that is really important; and happens in all societies around the world. At around six years of age, little boys seem to ‘lock on’ to their dad, or step dad, or whichever male is around, and want to be with him, learn from him and copy him. They want to study how to be male.

“If a dad ignores his son at this age, the boy often launches into an all-out campaign to get his attention. This sudden shift in interest to the father does not mean that the mother leaves the picture. Boys need to know that they can count on the mother. Things work best if they can stay close to Mum but add Dad too.

“The six to fourteen year old boy still adores his mother and has plenty to learn from her. But his interests are changing – he is becoming more focused on what men have to offer. A boy knows that he is turning into a man. He has to ‘download the software’ from an available male to complete his development.

“At around fourteen years of age a new stage begins. Usually by now the boy is growing fast, and a remarkable thing is happening on the inside – his testosterone levels have increased by almost 800%! Although every boy is different, it’s common for boys at this age to become argumentative, restless and moody. It’s not that they are turning bad, just that they are being born into a new self. They need to find answers to big questions and to learn new skills for living. They want to jump somewhere better and higher, but that place is nowhere in sight.

“Younger teenage boys often fight with their dads and drive each other crazy. In every society before ours – from Eskimo to African – in every time and place that has been studied, boys in their teenage years received a burst of intensive care and attention from the whole community. Mums and Dads are still important but now outsiders are important. In traditional societies, boys were mentored into adulthood by one or more men who cared about them and taught them important skills for living.

“A young teenage boy is far from ready to be on his own. There have to be others to act as a bridge; and this is what mentors do. Finding suitable mentors is extremely important; it might be an uncle, an older student, an alumnus, a sports coach, a family friend.

“Of course, boys are naturally prone to a certain degree of arrogance. In the past, boys were often raised expecting to be waited on by women. In some cultures, boys are still treated like little gods. The result can be an obnoxious boy that no one wants to be around. It is therefore very important that boys are taught humbleness – through experiences such as having to apologise, having to do work to help others, and always having to be respectful to others. Boys have to know their place in the world, or the world will most likely teach them a harsh lesson.

“Boys need structure and order in their lives. In a nutshell, boys always need to know three basic things: Who is in charge? What are the rules? Will those rules be fairly enforced? Boys feel insecure and in danger if there isn’t structure. If no one is in charge, they act tough to cover up their fear. If someone is clearly the boss, then boys will relax. This is why when a teacher is kind and fair, as well as being strict, then boys will stop being tough and get on with learning.”

What each of you has experienced in the past and is experiencing today is all part of being a boy. It is my job and the role of our College to help you in this wonderful journey to adulthood.

J R Kennard

The above excerpts are taken from *Raising Boys* by Steve Biddulph. This excellent book along with his other works, *The Secret of Happy Children* and *Manhood*, ought to be compulsory reading for parents and teachers of boys.

I must offer my apologies to the lady teachers and the two girls in Form 6 for my focusing on boys. However, I would welcome your thoughts and feedback from a female perspective on what I have said today.