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Mothers, Sons And Mysteries

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A friend told me that she asked her 13-year-old son what is the most important thing about being a boy. He said: "Taking care of others."

She asked how I would interpret that answer. (As a psychologist, I get that a lot.) And like any psychologist, I answered with a question: how did *she* interpret it?

She was proud that a boy so young was so concerned with others. But she was worried that kindness could be weakness. It's a fine line, she worried, between protector and nurturer. And if he was more nurturer than protector, was that a problem. And if it was a problem, was it something she did as a mother that made him that way.

Welcome to the labyrinth of mothers, sons and rampant uncertainty over what, exactly, is a man.

Does too much motherly love and protection make a son soft? Does not enough make him cold? Is artistic sensibility any more or less valued than sports stardom? Are we happier with a son who walks away from fights or one who starts them?

As a mother of a son and someone who has spent most of her career studying mothers - and the children they raise - I have found that, as in much of life, it's a matter of balance.

And balance is often precarious.

I remember when my son was a second grader and played for the neighborhood baseball team. He took the field with rabbit's feet on his belt for good luck.

I arrived at a game when he was already out in center field. As soon as he saw me, he waved enthusiastically and had a big grin that said: "Look at me. I'm playing baseball!"

The mother in me loved that. The developer of a manly sense of purpose did not. Thinking, "keep your mind on the game," I didn't respond.

I felt terrible immediately. I felt even worse when he came up to me deflated, confused and fingering the rabbit's feet. He said: "I waved at you. Didn't you see me?"

Maybe I should have waved or applauded and pointed to the batter. Maybe we could have had a discussion about the importance of doing your job when others depend on you. Maybe I should have done exactly what I did.

Within a day, he had forgotten all about it. Twenty years later, I haven't.

No matter how evolved we are as parents, mothers still carry around with them that same nagging uncertainty. "Daddy's girl" is a term of endearment. "Momma's boy" is something quite different.

Part of the confusion is the residue of so many myths. It wasn't all that long ago that some thought a fault in the mother-son relationship caused schizophrenia and autism.

The weight of responsibility continues to pile on study by study - mothers influence their son's ambition; mothers influence a son's marital satisfaction; mothers influence the timing of a son's first sexual experience; and, whether through biology or influence, mothers determine a son's sexual preference.

That is a heavy load - especially when fathers seem to get off with being a role model and teaching how to throw a spiral. Although, the flood of working mothers and the apparent dawning of a more family-centered father is starting to spread responsibility a little more equitably.

Personal and professional experience tells me that making a well- rounded, caring and happy son is not like making a perfect omelet. The search for rules and recipes will be confounded by the very individuality you would hope to foster.

Celebrate their victories, but soften - not excuse - their failures. Demand their independence, but never close their safe harbor. Give them the responsibilities they can handle, but make them honor the responsibilities they have. Teach them to respect others, but show them that respect must be returned. Be demanding; but don't demand perfection.

And remember: A mother's love helps infinitely more than it can ever hurt. It's not a science. And you're not perfect.