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Peggy Drexler

Mothers and Sons: How Close Is Too Close?

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Is your son in danger of becoming a mama's boy? That's the stereotype so many people associate with sons raised by women alone. Like most stereotypes, it simply doesn't hold up to reality. In fact, fostering a close connection with your son actually strengthens and confirms his identity and helps him grow toward independence.

Hugs and kisses

Who says boys don't need hugging? Of course they do. Physical contact is essential in infancy and our desire and need for it develops and varies throughout life. What's important is to take our children's cues and respect them as they grow.

As a small child, Henry* was physically affectionate, even to the point of holding his little sister's hand and carrying her around. Then at Christmas one year, when everyone got to say a holiday wish, Henry's was, "Don't kiss me in front of my friends."

"It's a signal of transition," his mother said. "I can accept that. We are very close, but it's just no longer okay for me to jump out of the car and give him a big kiss when I pick him up from school." They worked out a compromise. Now she is allowed to kiss him when he gets in the car.

Will you make him gay?

A persistent myth tells us that too much closeness with our sons can make them gay or feminine. In fact, most boys turn out to be heterosexual, no matter how their mothers raise them. What boys need is their parents' full acceptance, whether they are gay or straight.

When her son came out, Sharon Rosen knew nothing about gays. "I went to the library and learned. I read propaganda. I read scientific journals," she wrote. Then she ran it all past her son, Roger. "We're a family that communicates. I told Roger that no matter what I read or who I talked to, he needed to be my primary resource, because I can't know about this. I'm not gay."

Margaret,* another mother, is haunted by the memory of a psychiatrist telling her not to hug her son too much. She rejected the assumption that moms are responsible for making boys gay and that boys do not have the same need for nurturing.

"Young boys who learn to be giving and gentle and kind have not lost any of their masculinity," she says. A boy needs tools to experience the world and freedom to grow into a complete person, she believes. "If more adults were accepted for the complete people they truly are, more children in the world would receive the same kind of nurturing."

Building emotional connection

These and other mothers I interviewed for my book, "Raising Boys Without Men", are raising what I call "head and heart" sons-boys who combine strong male identity with an unusual capacity for connection and emotional awareness. These mothers make time, and find creative ways, to communicate with their boys and talk about feelings, including negative ones.

Kenny,* the son of two moms, deals with his anger the way his mother Crystal* does, holding it in for a long time and then spewing it all out. On one occasion, when his anger erupted all over his other mother, Tami,* she was baffled and upset. But Crystal pointed out "how great it was that he told me he felt safe enough to get so angry." While we mothers might sometimes wish our kids didn't feel quite so safe, we certainly don't want the reverse: the boy who won't express his emotions for fear of reprisal and ridicule.

Maintaining a lifetime connection

Being loving and involved, but respecting your sons' choices and boundaries, helps mothers stay close when their children become adults. Jane Snyder* has spent a lot of time pondering her grown son Nicholas's* decision to become a Muslim, but has never tried to dissuade him from it. "All I want is for my children to be well and to do well and have a life that is enhancing to them," she says.

Holly Saxton* says connection became especially important after her son left home and couldn't find a job. Often, she missed her evening yoga class to talk with him as he struggled. "This was a year of parenting that I hadn't planned on, but it was probably the most crucial year of parenting I did," she remembers.

It's time to acknowledge that mothering does not equal smothering. In fact, the truth is quite the opposite. To raise a son who is both strong and sensitive, stay close to him-now and throughout your lives.

*The data I compiled and the patterns I've observed are presented as collective experiences. I have honored promises of confidentiality by changing names and disguising identities.