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A Los Angeles Psychotherapist: Individual, Couple, Child and Family Therapy

From Boys to Men, Girls to Women:

How Our Culture Shapes Our Children

The culture we live in is having a huge impact on our children. Our daughters are influenced to judge their bodies and begin dieting in 4th grade – already striving for the air-brushed perfection offered in glossy magazines and TV programs. Our sons are getting lost behind masks that tell us they are okay. As they grow older, our sons enter into the “boy code” where they need to be, as one boy puts it, “tall, cool, and tough.”

In my work with children, too often boys recount moments of angry outbursts coming from their sadness and depression. According to the “boy code,” it is more acceptable for boys to express themselves with anger, rather than tears. They are concerned about the consequences of tears shed in the faces of adults and peers. They are vulnerable to teasing if they show the tears. In my years as a child/family therapist, I have heard so many parents of boys asking me to help them, help their boys to “express their thoughts and feelings.” The request feels gendered. I hear it less when they speak of their daughters.

The specter of body judgment emerged as my own two daughters entered middle-school, 15 years ago. Since I was beginning to give presentations on Eating and Body Image Issues for Women, their stories from school became more fascinating. Their friends would routinely refer to their own skinny thighs as fat, causing my nicely formed, hardly thin, daughters to wonder as they viewed their own changing shapes. The important thing that happened between my daughters and me during this time is that we had a conversation about cultural expectations concerning girls, women, and body shapes. They carried these ideas forward in their lives and conversations with friends thru college. Together, we scrutinized and talked about the glossy magazine images. It opened their eyes to the often taken-for-granted cultural influences.

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I believe that the single most important way to combat the “gender straightjackets” boys and girls are invited into is through conversation. This is the door that parents need to open with their children. The following are some tips to spark your own thinking and creativity about this conversation:

- Join with your children in developing an awareness of cultural messages –in books, magazines, television, adult/peer conversations
- Discuss struggles you may have or had re: eating, body image. You are the model for your child, and can show the courage to discuss these things
- Talk up empathy and masculinity. Speak of the men you love and why you love them – the qualities of empathy and sensitivity you appreciate
- Develop awareness of your own gender-straight jacketing. Share parenting roles in a gender neutral way, where Dad models and emphasizes empathy and Mom takes on roles more traditional for Dads
- Talk about feelings, explore sadness and disappointment. This is the process that expands emotional expression and is the antidote to the “boy code.”

Please begin the conversation to both invite in their critical thinking about the culture and its effects on them and enrich your own relationship with them.

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