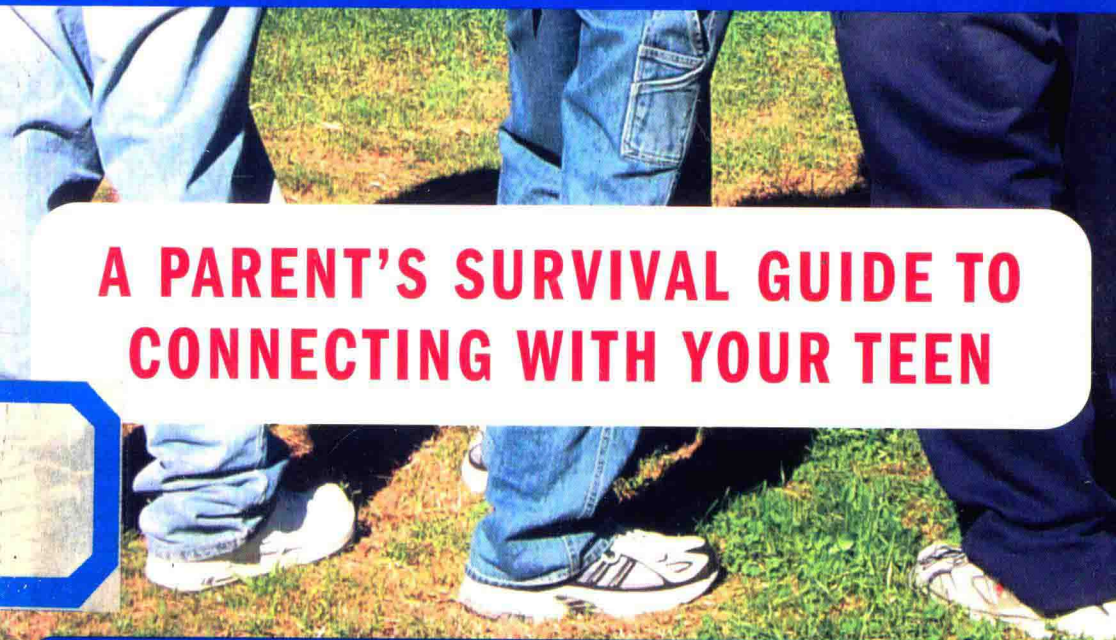




WHY BOYS DON'T TALK

AND WHY IT MATTERS



**A PARENT'S SURVIVAL GUIDE TO
CONNECTING WITH YOUR TEEN**

Susan Morris Shaffer & Linda Perlman Gordon

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SURVIVAL GUIDE
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**Susan Morris Shaffer
& Linda Perlman Gordon**

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WHY BOYS DON'T TALK
—AND WHY IT MATTERS

*This book is dedicated to our sons, Zachary and Seth,
and our daughters, Emily and Elizabeth,
for teaching us the importance of connection.*

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INTRODUCTION

Life in the Balance

This book seeks to answer the question, “Are there better ways to raise our boys?” Our intended audience is the parents of boys. The book is written from our personal experience as mothers of boys and as professionals in the fields of gender, education, and adolescent issues. We are, professionally, an educator and gender equity specialist and a clinical social worker who, together, have more than 30 years of experience working on parenting and gender issues. As mothers of two daughters and two sons, each of us discovered that raising our teenage sons was turning out to be a very different experience from raising their older sisters. We began to have conversations about our shared experiences. We realized through these discussions that the range of emotional expression for boys was limited and discovered that parents are more effective when they understand the importance of broadening their son’s options and experiences. This challenge became especially clear to us as both of our sons progressed through their teenage years.

Throughout the book, we have woven together our own experiences, as well as those of other parents, boys, girls, and professionals in the field in order to provide practical strategies for successfully parenting teenage boys. In addition, we have included a thorough review of current research and information, including statistical evidence; recent studies from the social and scientific disciplines of psychology and biology; information from popular culture; and individual case studies. We provide this research because we believe that it is important to help parents understand the intellectual foundation of the many misconceptions about boys that are prevalent in our society.

Our goal is to present parents with a survival guide, including strategies to increase the emotional dimensions and opportunities for connection with our boys. We know that specific chapters of the book will be of more interest to you than others, but we encourage you to read the book in its entirety, because there are important lessons to be learned in every chapter. Throughout the book we attempt to look at boys from a cross-cultural perspective, acknowledging that the existing literature and research tend to have a white middle-class bias. Our focus groups included representatives from Latino, African American, Asian, and European American communities. From these groups, we confirmed our understanding that many of the issues that adolescent boys face are similar across diverse races and socioeconomic classes. For this reason, we have not identified quotes from boys according to race or ethnicity, except in Chapter 6, where we focus exclusively on a discussion of males of color. However, some issues are unique to one group or are emphasized by the conditions of an individual cultural or racial group. We observed that in some instances diverse groups of boys and parents do respond to issues differently as well. This reality is the reason for our separate discussion of males of color.

Throughout the writing of this book, we have been guided by our understanding of the desire of mothers and fathers to stay close to their sons during the demanding teenage years. After meeting with parents of African American, Asian, European American, and Latino boys, it

became clear that there are as many differences within each group of boys as there are among the groups. Among the sons, some are reserved, others are outgoing; some are good writers, athletes, scientists, computer whizzes, performers; some do well in school, others do not; some are leaders, others are followers. What these parents have in common is that they love their sons and want to know them better. Ultimately, it is our aim to provide parents from a wide variety of cultures with the confidence to find their own voice, trust their instincts, and maintain emotional connections with their sons.

We often speak directly to mothers of boys because they feel the pressure from society to relinquish their emotional connection with their sons for fear of their boys becoming soft and too dependent. Dads or other partners need to reinforce the importance of the relationship between mothers and sons at all stages of development to counter traditional psychology and popular culture's perspective, which is to maintain distance in order to raise strong and independent boys.

We strongly believe that both mothers and fathers need to maintain a healthy closeness with sons and daughters in order for them to become resilient adults. For these reasons, we have also written a book about teenage girls, *Why Girls Talk—and What They're Really Saying: A Parent's Survival Guide to Connecting with Your Teen* (McGraw-Hill, 2005). We have learned from working with both boys and girls that regardless of gender, a close relationship with parents built on trust and honest communication creates independent and emotionally healthy adults.

Mother to Son

*Well, son, I'll tell you:
Life for me ain't been no crystal stair.
It's had tacks in it,
And splinters,
And boards torn up,
And places with no carpet on the floor—
Bare.
But all the time
I'se been a-climbin' on,
And reachin' landin's,
And turnin' corners,
And sometimes goin' in the dark
Where there ain't been no light.
So, boy, don't you turn back.
Don't you set down on the steps
'Cause you finds it's kinder hard.
Don't you fall now—
For I'se still goin' honey,
I'se still climbin',
And life for me ain't been no crystal stair.*

—LANGSTON HUGHES

WHY BOYS DON'T TALK
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WHY BOYS DON'T TALK— AND WHY IT MATTERS

It matters because when boys don't talk, we assume that they don't feel.

It matters because when boys don't talk, we don't get to fully know them; we end up validating only one part of them.

It matters because when boys don't talk, it inhibits intimacy.

When we leave boys alone, we shortchange their emotional growth; as a result, part of boys remains hidden. Just as we were sensitized and motivated to change the landscape for girls, and just as we helped to expand the options available to girls, our personal experiences with our sons and their friends has helped us to understand that the next challenge is to focus on boys. Recently, an explosion of academic research and popular literature has focused public attention on how we raise and educate boys in our society. Harvard researcher Carol Gilligan recognizes that, "Boys feel they have to separate from women, and they are not allowed to feel that separation as a real loss. . . . What we are finding out is how vulnerable boys are. How, under the surface,

We have made so much progress in deconstructing obstacles for girls, and we are really at the earliest stage of deconstructing obstacles for boys.

—Focus Group Parent

behind the psychic shield, is a tender creature who's hiding his humanity" (Norman, 1997).

We believe that boys don't talk because they think it's safer not to talk. When we spoke with boys in the focus groups, it became clear to us that when boys reveal their vulnerability, they fear being perceived as weak. Expressing oneself is risky and exposes a boy to many reactions and interpretations. In fact, in our focus groups with boys, many of them explicitly stated that they do not go to their parents with problems for fear of being misjudged and permanently labeled. Instead, boys protect themselves by frequently trying to solve their issues on their own.

Every parent and teacher has had experience with boys trying to solve problems on their own. This response is their attempt to create a face-saving silence, which takes the form of one-word answers and fools us into thinking that our boys are doing well and don't need or welcome our intervention. When parents experience this behavior, it is difficult to know how to proceed. One father with whom we spoke remarked: "There is more communication with daughters so that I feel like even if I say something 'wrong' on Tuesday, we'll be chattering enough during the week so that we can fix it. With boys, you basically have to do it in three sentences or less and, at the most, that will be twice a week. There is no recovery opportunity. Rather than talking, I find myself trying to figure out the right thing to say." Parents of teenage boys know there is a lot of pressure to say the *right* three sentences. It is, therefore, not surprising that parents so often don't know what to say. To improve our connection with our sons, we must first