

PSYCHOLOGY

The Good Son

His mother is criticized for keeping her boy close. But he's a better man for it.

BY KATE STONE LOMBARDI ● FROM *The Mama's Boy Myth*

Suppose I told you that I am very close to my son, Paul. That I love hanging out with him, and we have dozens of inside jokes and shared traditions. Even though we speak frequently, I get a little thrill each time I hear his signature ringtone on my cellphone. I confess that Paul is so sensitive and intuitive that he “gets me” in a very special way. Are you starting to speculate that something is a little off? Are you getting uncomfortable about the kind of guy my son is growing up to be?

For generations, mothers have gotten the message that keeping their sons close is wrong, possibly even dangerous. A mother who



Lombardi with her son, Paul, at ages 4 months, 10, and 22.

fosters a deep emotional bond with her son, we've been told, is setting him up to be weak and overly dependent—an archetypal mama's boy. He'll never be independent or able to form healthy adult relationships.

A well-adjusted, loving mother is one who gradually but surely pushes her son away, both emotionally and physically, in order to allow him to become a healthy man.

Somehow, when so many of our other beliefs about the roles of men and women have been

revolutionized, our view of the mother-son relationship has remained frozen in time. We've dramatically changed the way we raise

our daughters, encouraging them to be assertive, play competitive sports, and aim high in their educational and professional ambitions. We don't fret about “masculinizing” our girls.

A father who flouts gender stereotypes and teaches his daughter a traditionally masculine task—say, rebuilding a car engine—is considered pretty cool. But a mother who does something comparable—like teaching her son to knit or even encouraging him to talk more openly about his feelings—is looked at with contempt.

Many mothers are confused and anxious when it comes to raising boys. Should she stop kissing her first-grade son at school drop-off? If she cuddles her ten-year-old boy when he is hurt, will she turn him into a wimp? If her teenage boy is crying in his room, should she go in and comfort him, or will this embarrass and shame him? Anthony E. Wolf, a child psychologist and bestselling author, warns us that “strong emotional contact with his mother is especially upsetting to any teenage boy.”

However, research has shown the opposite: A study of more than 400 middle school boys revealed that sons who were close to their mothers formed stronger friendships, were less depressed and anxious, and earned better grades than their more macho classmates. Another large study found that boys 12 and

under who weren't close to their mothers were more aggressive and hostile later in childhood.

It has been long established that teenagers who have good communication with their parents are more likely to resist negative peer pressure, but new research shows that it is a boy's mother who is the most influential when it comes to risky behavior, not only with alcohol and

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drugs but also in preventing both early and unprotected sex.

Finally, there are no scientific studies suggesting that a boy's sexual orientation can be altered by his mother, no matter how much she loves him.

With all the concern about boys falling behind girls academically, exhibiting more behavior >>

WORDS OF THE MONTH

“Singlism”

Stigmatizing, stereotyping, and discriminating against single adults.

“Matrimania”

The myth that the only route to happiness is through finding and keeping one partner who can meet your every emotional and social need.

Source: *The Atlantic*

COURTESY KATE STONE LOMBARDI (3)

problems, and going to college in falling numbers, why is mother-son closeness still so discouraged?

Boys need and want a close connection with their mothers. But the pressure for mothers and sons to disengage begins at a shockingly tender age, and the pressure escalates at every stage, until a mom actually begins to believe that the best kind of parenting she can offer is to leave her depressed, silent teenage son alone to work out his own problems. Heaven forbid that she threatens his masculinity by giving him a hug and trying to get him to talk about what's bothering him.

I am not the only mother who has rejected this kind of thinking. A great many mothers keep their sons close. For the record, Paul, a young man now, is self-assured and independent. He's more than six feet tall, plays ice hockey, has lots of male friends, and had a steady girlfriend in college. Yes, we have a tight connection, and my son is still OK. I'm tired of making excuses for our closeness, and I'm not alone. ■

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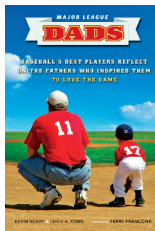


EXCERPT

Dad's Greatest Gift

“He used to start work very early in the morning. This way he could be home by four o'clock in the afternoon, and by five o'clock we were at the stadium working out. That tells you that he didn't have his own life.

He gave up his dreams for us.”



FORMER MAJOR LEAGUE CATCHER BENJIE MOLINA

From *Major League Dads* by Kevin Neary and Leigh A. Tobin (Perseus). Benjie's brothers José and Yadier currently play in the major leagues.

GO FIGURE

58%

Percentage of men who say they experienced love at first sight by age 30. Fifty-one percent of women say they have.

Source: match.com