



The Mama's Boy Myth

Some people roll their eyes at a mother and son who are just a little too close. But I happen to believe that a strong mom-and-son bond is the best thing that can happen to any kid.

BY KATE STONE LOMBARDI

A couple of years ago I was going through a minor career crisis. My employer had just changed my job description to include duties that I could certainly handle but which, in my opinion, didn't really exploit my strengths. I complained to my son, Paul, then 19. "Mom," he told me, "the problem is that they're playing you out of position."

As usual, Paul nailed it. I happened to mention his comment to a woman I barely knew and she told me that she often discusses work with her grown son—that, in fact, they regularly call each other as they're leaving the office to rehash their workdays. She then went on to say how simpatico they are and how they share the same sense of humor. In fact, she confided, the

time she spends with her son evokes a profound tenderness that she doesn't experience with anybody else.

I was stunned: She could have been describing, almost word for word, my own feelings. Paul, who's now 22, "gets me" like no one else. We finish each other's sentences and share dozens of inside jokes. We can intuit each other's moods without even speaking. And

Society cheers when dads and daughters are tight, but boys and their moms? Not so much.

I confess that I still get a little thrill when I see his number on my caller ID.

As this woman and I continued our unexpectedly intimate conversation, she told me she'd never before opened up to anyone about the intensity of her feelings for her son. I could relate. She and I were talking about a level of emotional connection that is usually associated only with mother-daughter relationships. If I were to tell people how close I am with Paul's older sister, no one would bat an eye. But moms rarely talk about a similar bond with their sons, partly because there seem to be no words, no examples, no context, in which to describe it without raising eyebrows. Many of us have gotten the subtle message that there's something "off" about a close mother-son attachment. So we mostly keep quiet about it, even though this relationship is one of the major delights in our lives.

Let me be clear: My son and I are very close, but we are not each other's best friend. Nor, for that matter, am I my daughter's best friend. (I've gotten that memo from both kids: I am their mother, not their pal.) Also, Paul is

more than six feet tall, plays ice hockey and is a highly independent guy. Why do I feel the need to mention this? Because in this culture, I must reassure everyone (including myself) that our deep emotional connection hasn't compromised my son's masculinity.

The question we should be asking, of course, is why, nearly half a century since the advent of modern feminism, there's still such a double standard.

Think about it. There's practically a small industry that encourages mother-daughter bonding, from spa discounts to hundreds of books on the subject. And father-son camaraderie is all but enshrined in the parenting hall of fame. Dads and sons are inundated with cultural cues to play catch, shoot some hoops or watch a game together.

Fathers and daughters? All systems are go: A father's support, experts agree, is essential to his daughter's self-esteem. And today's dads are strongly urged to be part of their daughters' lives, whether it's coaching their sports teams or escorting them to a father-daughter dance. (Can you imagine a high school sponsoring a mother-son dance? Yeah, me neither.)



Three Moms Weigh In

Everyone always said they could only imagine me with daughters because I'm a total girly-girl. But I ended up with four boys and I've adapted quite nicely. I play football, baseball and basketball in high-heeled clogs and I tell my little men all about Bobbi Brown lippgloss. I teach them about recipes and cakes and cookies and icing and sprinkles. I show them a female perspective because someday girlfriends will be coming through our door, and I want my sons to know something besides "boy stuff."

Audrey McClelland
Providence, Rhode Island

I love all of my children fiercely and equally, but my relationship with my two sons has been more even-keeled, whereas my daughter and I became close only after surviving a rough patch during her teen years. At times she seemed determined to push me away. I actually think that was because she's a girl. She needed to separate from me and figure out her own identity as a woman.

Holly Cookson
Rowley, Massachusetts

I'm close with both my kids but in different ways. My daughter is 15, so I understand what she's going through in adolescence. But I actually have more in common with my son, who's 17. We're both major film buffs; anytime I want to see a movie, he's up for going. My daughter is athletic, and she and her dad bond over softball. (He's her coach.) My son and I bond over a matinee and a bucket of popcorn!

Joanne Hubbard
Omaha, Nebraska

Got a great story
about raising a son?
Submit it at
DivineCaroline.com/LHJ

If a father flouts gender stereotypes and teaches his daughter a traditional masculine task (working on a car engine, for example), he's one cool dad. The electrician husband of my friend Hannah was just named "Hero Dad" by the PTA of his daughter's all-girl middle school after he gave a one-hour workshop on how to rewire a lamp. But a mom who teaches her son a "feminine" skill, like knitting? Uh, what is she trying to *do* to that boy?

Even when a mother helps her son talk about his feelings, she's risking criticism—often from a source uncomfortably close to home. My husband, Michael, is a warm, loving man and a terrific dad—*really*. But I can remember many occasions when he reacted as if I was tormenting our son when, say, I encouraged Paul to open up after a heartbreaking soccer loss. "Stop interrogating him," Michael would chide.

Just the other day, my friend Caitlin reports, her 11-year-old son, Jack, came home from middle school visibly upset. When she put her arm around him and asked him what the trouble was, her husband snapped, "Leave the kid alone." But Caitlin persisted, and it turned out that Jack had gotten into a fight with his best friend, leaving him hurt and confused. He was clearly relieved to be able to sort out his emotions with his mom and to discuss ways to handle the situation.

As women, of course, we know how to put these kinds of feelings into words. Boys and men do not. So the world regards mother-daughter gabfests as therapeutic while thinking it's okay to let sons withdraw into muteness and grapple with their worries alone. I can't count the times I've witnessed people not just accept, but embrace, appalling stereotypes about boys. A respected psychologist speaking at my kids' school a few years ago informed the audience that "Boys don't talk" and told us not to worry if our sons replied simply with grunts. *Please*.



Kate Stone Lombardi lives with her husband and two cats in Chappaqua, New York. This essay is adapted from The Mama's Boy Myth by Kate Stone Lombardi. Copyright © 2012 by Kate Stone Lombardi. Reprinted with permission of Avery, a member of Penguin Group (USA) Inc., New York, New York.

How will these boys get through life if they can't communicate? Besides, in my experience, boys are perfectly capable of articulating their thoughts, given the right environment. (Like many moms, I discovered that the car is a great place to get a son talking. Paul divulged some of his thorniest problems and biggest triumphs on the way to and from soccer practice.)

Boys, we constantly hear, are "in crisis." Small wonder: They're bombarded with mixed messages. On one hand, they're supposed to be cool, tough, stoic and strong; on the other, being overly macho makes them seem clueless, backward and ripe for mockery. And they're expected to respect women while also having to compete with them, first in the classroom and then in the workplace.

Well, I believe one of the reasons boys are struggling is that they lack the emotional intelligence and verbal skills that their mothers could help them develop. We moms are also in the best position to help combat the crudest elements of a culture that sabotages boys' natural sensitivity and empathy.

Moms like me are tired of hearing that we should back off from our sons in the name of manhood. Here's a news flash from the 21st century: By offering our sons an emotional education, we're not creating wimpy men who cling to their mothers—we're helping half the population reach its full human potential.