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opening extract from

Growing Great Boys

written by

Ian Grant

published by

Ebury Press

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Foreword

Ian Grant has a genuine gift for getting to the heart of what concerns and challenges all parents as they experience the joys, the excitement, the wonder and the worries of parenting in the new millennium. He has a warm and deep understanding of the human condition.

Growing Great Boys is a delightful 'manual' for successfully guiding, coaching, coaxing, disciplining, loving, encouraging and inspiring boys from birth through to their teenage years. Its substance is insightful and challenging and it will be rewarding to all parents who read it.

While firmly emphasising the importance of both mother and father in the parenting roles, and pointing out the different and essential contributions both make to a young boy's life, Ian provides special advice on and encouragement for the father's role. 'Fathers are not male mothers, they have a parenting style all of their own,' Ian says. And, 'Every boy needs a male in his life to download the software of how to be a man.' And, 'You've got what it takes, son!'

The book's format presents logical themes running through each chapter that culminate in twelve cornerstone pieces of advice that parents can leave with their sons and know that they will be successful, positive, contented men. The advice given is based on Ian's lifelong involvement

with young people and family life, his wide reading of distinguished scholars on parenting, and on his bringing up his own daughter and two sons. The book provides guidance, advice, opinions, humour, anecdotes and practical solutions in an inspiring and cheerful manner. It is neither patronising nor judgemental but, rather, heart-warming and encouraging.

Growing Great Boys is a book 'for all seasons' — every parent, every family, whatever age, stage or condition, whoever they are, will find this book fascinating reading. It is a scholarly book which does not trivialise the issues that parents face but shows a deep and warm understanding of the special relationships between parents and growing boys. This relationship and the development of strong, united, caring families is surely one of the most important challenges, if not *the* most important challenge, facing all nations in the years ahead.

Ian Grant's book provides genuine answers to this crucial challenge and adds another chapter to his lifelong contribution to the wellbeing of young people and families in New Zealand and throughout the world.

It is a privilege to have been invited to write a foreword to this important book.

D. J. Graham C.B.E.
Former Headmaster, Auckland Grammar School
Former Chancellor, Auckland University
President, New Zealand Rugby Football Union
Chairman, Parents Inc. NZ

Introduction

Growing boys is better than fixing men

I am convinced that this generation of boys, like those before them, have every reason to grow into young men who give manhood a good name. However, there are some special challenges for boys growing up today, unique to our technological and individualised 21st-century society.

I am well aware of the many books already in the marketplace addressing the issues of boys' successes and failures, and documenting helpful research. However, this little book is of a different genre.

I spend my working days, through seminars, toolbox parenting groups, radio spots and magazines, giving parents insights and ideas for the daily interactions that take place in their homes. I deal in offering parents 'hot tips' that are practical, and that work in real life. It is this user-friendly information that I offer in this book, in the hope that some of the ideas will mean it becomes a valuable 'how to' in raising your sons.

Without doubt, our world needs men who have a healthy and authentic view of their masculinity, strong, courageous and protective, yet also able to live an emotional life that nurtures the inner person. Empathy and altruism are personal qualities that, from the earliest times of societal development, have been considered the building blocks of conscience and character. These attributes are a worthy goal for our sons.

Like any other generation of boys, our sons' futures lie to a significant degree in the hands of their parents. As mentors and nurturers, we have the great privilege of being the 'big people' who set boundaries, create a positive atmosphere and show loving commitment.

Each of our sons is a gift; their personality and DNA are unique to them. When we draw back and study our small sons, as an astronomer studies the stars, we can acknowledge the person each was born to be, then coach him towards his strengths.

Not all boys will be the testosterone-fuelled, physical, sports-mad macho types, but there is a strong likelihood that your son will be somewhere on a spectrum of 'physicalness' that challenges most mothers and needs to test itself against a dad.

For many years, during which we have seen more than 150,000 parents attend our programmes at Parents Inc. in New Zealand, I have been encouraged by how many have grabbed the concept of becoming a parent-coach, identifying with this role of training their children to succeed in the game of life.

My hope is that you, as a parent, will realise that *you* are the builder of your boy's life. Everyone else is more like a subcontractor on your parenting journey.

What an investment! As you see your boy grow into those qualities that Michael Gurian, in his book *The Good Son*, calls 'the true measures of a man' — compassion, self-discipline, decency, honour and empathy — you will know that you have contributed not just to one boy's life, but to the whole community, and to the future.

I wish you well on your journey.

Ian Grant

Chapter 1

The landscape for boys in the 21st century

> A boy is wisdom with bubble gum in his hair . . . the hope of the future with a frog in his pocket.
>
> — *Anon*

I have just returned from a wonderful few weeks visiting my adult children and five special little grandsons, on two continents. To be perfectly honest, I'm a little exhausted, but feeling really good. I have played rough-and-tumble games, fixed toys, replaced a zillion batteries, walked (or, rather, run) beside miniature learning cyclists, kicked balls, pulled kids on blankets around polished floors and told all my favourite bedtime stories several times over (and over) by special request.

In reconnecting with these little boys, I have experimented with some grandparent to grandson 'male bonding'. Armed as I was with perhaps more perspective, time and knowledge about the nature of boys than I had been as a dad, I was conscious about communicating some of the definitive 'boy messages' vital to every little boy's sense of identity.

I ensured that, woven into all the games we played, was the key message every male wants to hear — 'You've got what it takes, son.'

Whether it was a 'high five' as a game began, the granddad's 'thumbs up' code of approval (especially when one of them began to lose it), or the little chat on the sideline that let them know I understood, I consciously built this underlying message into all my interactions. It was amazing how quickly a boy who was affirmed in this way recovered his composure.

I am convinced that, if we wish to recover for boys of this generation a sense of identity and mission, we must parent them with certain things in mind. We cannot turn the clock back and nostalgically re-establish the ways of the past. We must capitalise on what can be positively embraced by sons in their culture, and protect them from the violent and salacious. We must lend them our eyes and our perspective, and give them boundaries until they themselves learn to be discerning and morally strong.

There is something special and magical about boys. Every parent of a boy notices, for instance, that their personalities and wiring are different from girls. Left in the back garden to play, they will think up action games, climb trees or create mock battles. They love action and heroism. They love to be challenged physically and to be part of a team. Boys are the ultimate explorers and adventurers, and often display exuberant energy — creating challenges for parents in our urbanised society.

Although many aspects of our modern world are different from the past, some things never change. One is that boys will always need to be parented in different ways from girls. Of course I'm not referring to the basics, such as what we expect from their character and behaviour. What I mean is that, because of their unique hormonal drives and wiring, there will be challenges that boys face that are different from those faced by girls. These biologically programmed differences have now been thoroughly researched, and reassure us that what parents of boys have observed and concluded over the years, about boys' physicalness and less verbal tendencies, are very real and based in physiology.

Michael Gurian, author of *The Wonder of Boys* and *The Good Son*, explains how the male amygdala, the primary aggression centre of the brain, is larger than that of the female and creates more active aggression in males. He suggests that 'when this fact is applied to male hormonal and cultural life, we find a deep and basic clue as to why boys get involved, so

much more than girls, in morally "at risk" behaviour — more aggressive or violent behaviour. For instance, a boy is more likely than a girl to hit, more likely to curse or otherwise compete with or one-up another person as a way of relating. It's important to remember, however, that aggression and violence are not the same thing.'

The natural impulsiveness that boys tend to display is also rooted in their biology. The lower levels of serotonin, the chemical that pacifies and calms, in a boy's brain mean he has less impulse control than a girl has. This means that a boy must be given clear moral boundaries and firm discipline, and helped to live with this natural tendency by understanding that his actions have consequences. It may mean that we have to be very patient, and display persistence and consistence as he gains the self-control and maturity he needs.

However, I would like to say, right at the outset, that those impulsive and exuberant tendencies that you as parents often find so challenging in toddler boys are likely, in the end, to be the very things you are most proud of in your adult sons. The men who winch themselves down steep cliffs to rescue stranded accident victims, and the good men who provide for the next generation through doctoring, building roads, teaching or coaching sport will, to some extent, be the result of your nurturing and coaching. But their biology will be the fabric with which you work.

Those impulsive and exuberant tendencies that you find so challenging in toddler boys are likely to be the very things you are most proud of in your adult sons.

These 'boy tendencies' towards impulsivity, passion and protectiveness have taken a hammering in the past few decades from a feminist climate that has left many men, along with their sons, floundering for an identity and a role in the post-feminist, sexualised culture.

Doris Lessing, the famous novelist and feminist, recently made an observation on how this radical view was damaging to young boys. 'I was in a class of 9- and 10-year-olds, boys and girls, and this young woman was

telling these kids that the reason for wars was the innately violent nature of men. You could see the little girls, fat with complacency and conceit, while the little boys sat there crumpled, apologising for their existence, thinking this was going to be the pattern of their lives.' We must give our boys an identity they can be proud of, and a valued role in the world.

Parenting boys will challenge our resourcefulness. They will teach us things that we may never have known, and they will explore the world in their own boyish way. However, when a boy is understood and given emotional support, you will see the best qualities of manhood emerge — and be honoured to call this loyal, passionate, stoic, hard-working, sensitive, fearless and strong human being your son.

A recent incident illustrated for me how the physical expression of play is both vital and enjoyable to boys. I had taken my two grandsons to a playground at Palm Beach on Waiheke Island in New Zealand. When we arrived, four boys were playing barbadoor (bull-rush or, if you're English, 'bull dog'). It's a competitive, rough-and-tumble game, involving running through a space trying to avoid being tackled by those in the centre.

As we watched the children play I chatted with a woman who I assumed was the mother of all the boys. When I asked her about her sons, she replied, 'Oh no, I'm only the mother of one.' She then continued to tell me how her family, on holiday from Sweden, had come to the park a few days previously with their young son, who soon made friends and got involved in this game with the local boys. She said, 'It has made such a difference to my son. We have now cancelled part of our touring to stay here a few days longer, because he's a totally different boy. You see, in Sweden, boys don't play rough, competitive games like this.'

We may think that, by protecting our boys from rough and tumble, we will avoid future violence. However, many experts believe that the reverse is true: boys who are not allowed to enjoy the harmless rough-and-tumble games of boyhood actually become violent in other ways.

By capitalising on what we know about the dreams of boys, we can understand those things that motivate them. As John Eldredge explains in his best-selling book *Wild at Heart*, we can respond appropriately to boys' deepest desires. In the heart of every little boy is the longing to be

someone to be reckoned with; to be valiant and strong. He longs for a battle to win, an adventure to live and a heroine to rescue.

That's why my little grandsons, along with all little boys, dress up as Batman, Superman, Buzz Lightyear or The Incredibles — because they know 'there are baddies in the town', and someone needs to 'get' them. The protector and defender in a small boy wants to be assured that he is 'up to it'. These children will not grow into violent adults. It is far more likely that, if mentored with compassion and wisdom, they will grow to become surgeons who work long hours to save lives, or firefighters who rush into burning buildings to rescue people.

Yes, boys will be susceptible to becoming brutalised if we tolerate media violence in our homes, or fail to monitor bullying or gratuitously violent video games, but we must not confuse this type of violence with the little boys in the back garden with the homemade sword and all the paraphernalia that goes with mock battles. Since long before the days of Robin Hood, the 'goodies' winning over the 'baddies' allowed boys to act out their childhood fantasies of protecting their home territory from the bad and the evil.

HOT TIP ✔

THREE VITAL GIFTS PARENTS CAN OFFER BOYS TO HELP THEM THRIVE IN TODAY'S HIGH-PRESSURE WORLD

Security

A boy will feel secure when he knows he is a valued part of the family team.

- Give him tasks, celebrate his milestones and his steps towards achievements, so that he is valued for his contributions.

Self-worth

Self-esteem comes from a sense of progress.

- When your son knows that he is capable of making good choices

by himself, as opposed to just carrying out instructions, self-worth will come from the inside.

- Offer messages that lock-in love such as 'I like it when you think for yourself', or 'It's OK to make mistakes – that's how we learn.'

Significance

Give your son the gift of individuality and choice.

- Ask for and value his opinions. Listen and debrief, in an adult way. When he has had a hard time, offer him your 'adult' perspective.

However, what is new for this generation, as my family is currently experiencing, are the increasingly global world, where families sometimes live on different continents, and the technology-driven, ever-increasing pace of modern life. So much has changed since our own childhoods, it feels as if someone has pressed the 'fast-forward' button and, for that reason, we have to be street-smart with parenting our boys.

Because of the fast pace of change that the world has experienced over the last decades, many experts acknowledge that there are sometimes real challenges to finding a wavelength with our children, who may be better versed in how to programme a computer than how to pitch a tent. Robert D. Strom, Ph.D, an Arizona State University Professor of Psychology in Education, Family Resources and Human Development, has found that there is an ever-widening 'generation gap' between the young and, especially, the elderly.

'When older people of today were children,' Strom explains, 'the world was changing less rapidly. Consequently, in those days, a father might reasonably say to his son, "Let me tell you about life and what to expect. Now, when I was your age . . ." Because of the slow rate of change, children could see their future as they observed the day-to-day activities of parents and grandparents.'

But something happens when the use of technology in a society begins to accelerate. The rate of social change also increases. Therefore, according to Strom, 'Successive generations of grandparents, parents and children have less in common.'

Children today are having experiences that were not even part of their parents' upbringing. And so, says Strom, 'the traditional comment to children — "You're too young to understand" — has been reversed. Today, there are some things adults are "too old" to know, and recalling one's own childhood as the basis for offering advice has become less credible.'

However, amid all this change and pressure, I want to encourage parents that their job is still highly significant, and irreplaceable. We have in our hands the credible tools to launch loving, responsible young men into the world — men who are contributors, not just takers; men who will defend the weak, build teams, provide well for their loved ones and display moral leadership. It seems so much more sensible to build boys rather than to fix men. We really only get one shot at it — so let's make it our best.

In fact, if you don't put the effort into your child's development when he is small, then you will have to later on. When taking the time to discipline and follow-through with a young son, I often joked with my wife that this effort was going to save lots of time on future prison visits!

Seriously though, research suggests that, by the age of seven, future violence and criminality in boys can often be predicted. So if a boy is showing signs of bullying, cruelty to other children or animals or extreme anger it is very wise for parents to give him special attention. This means providing quality time, re-establishing strong bonds with a male figure if possible, and letting him know that he is a worthwhile human being. Setting strong boundaries, giving him strategies to handle his emotions, along with consequences that are logical and reasonable to deal with misdemeanours, will all be important to get him back on track.

We must not settle for less, and we must expect good things of our boys. Let your son know that he is a better person than his current behaviour indicates, while coaching him towards the adult you dream he will become.

I recently read a book about sons of wealthy parents who, in the midst of privilege, had grown into wonderful caring, contributing adults. All the parents interviewed, without exception, said that from day one (many even before their children were born) they had decided to take the time and effort to concentrate on their boys' character; to teach them empathy,

thoughtfulness, care for others and an ethic of giving generously to others in gratefulness for their own circumstances.

They took them to work in soup kitchens, taught them to volunteer and to mentor younger boys. It would be fair to say that Princess Diana modelled some of these activities in a powerful way with her two boys as they were growing.

These parents had struck on a vital truth. Our families need to stand for something. When our boys are born, they should be joining a family that already has its own mission or direction in life. Modern western families too often see children as an end in themselves, and re-orientate everything around this little person. However, for a child, real security is joining a family that already knows what it stands for and has a purpose and vision.

Every boy needs a sense of mission and belonging, and your own family's altruism and generosity will build into that innate sense. Encourage your son by saying, 'I am so proud of you, son, the way you noticed that Max was being left out (or 'the way you let our visitor choose the best bike', or 'the way that you were patient with the little kids while they were learning the game'). That shows real character!'

I was fascinated recently to be a silent witness to an interaction between a small boy and his mother. This adorable child had always been naturally cooperative and, since he was verbal at a very young age, avoided to some extent the common frustration and tantrums of the two-year-old. However, now, as a three-year-old, he has developed a huge personality, with oscillating emotions and big opinions.

After being sent to sit on the 'thinking stair' because of a misdemeanour, I heard him crying and muttering, then calling out at the top of his voice, 'I'm going to grow up to be a baddie.' In his little mind, there was no doubt that the worst way he could hurt his parents was to grow up to be a 'baddie'. You see, everything he had learned and knew was that goodness, kindness and protectiveness were to be affirmed, and badness was to be vanquished.

Sadly, I have to say that I have spoken to many wealthy fathers struggling with their sons' rejection — in some cases, rank hatred — of

them, fathers who thought they were giving their sons everything by providing the toys (big and little), the holidays, the private education and the economic security. But they were never there for their son when he needed a parent-coach to say, 'I'm so proud to have you as my son, but we don't talk like that in this house.'

Your son has to hear from you, his parent, in a thousand different ways, the words 'You've got what it takes, son.' Every problem he faces, every difficulty you help him to own, can be supported by this message: 'You can solve this, because you've got what it takes.'

When he comes home discouraged from a sports event because he didn't play well and the team lost, you could say, 'Get over it, it's only a game,' or you could build resilience and a can-do message by empathising with the result, while affirming progress. 'Well, your skills are certainly improving. Everyone has bad days sometimes. With more practice, you will become more confident. Remember, it's OK to do something badly while you are learning. You'll become a real champion before you know it, because you've got what it takes, son.'

Adversity and lack of success can actually be a catalyst for growth and celebration. In his book *Raising Children at Promise*, Dr Timothy Stuart tells how he turned a high school, in a very low-decile area, around from failure and 'at risk' to one that now has one of the highest graduation and success rates in the USA. By viewing each student's potential as if through a magic-eye picture, and ignoring the obvious or first appearances, he was able to believe that in the soul of each child was a dream that God had planted in their hearts.

Stuart lists seven characteristics that he believes build 'promise' in a child:

- Perseverance.
- Responsibility for our actions.
- Optimism.
- Motivation through identity.
- Integrity.
- Service.
- Engaged play.

Stuart specialised in teaching his students to refuse to allow labels that come from their assets or deficits to form their identity. Adversity, he believes, provides a catalyst for a child's character growth, and that character is dependent on a good mentor. In adversity, a trusting relationship with a caring adult will help a child interpret that adversity and use it as a stepping stone to build strong character.

IN SUMMARY

HOW TO VALIDATE 21ST-CENTURY BOYS

Boys need:

- A sense of belonging. They need parents who have a strong sense of what their family stands for and who are secure enough to take charge.
- A sense of purpose – they need to be involved in family meetings, rules, mottoes and mission statements.
- Affirmation of their deepest dreams.
- High expectations and a high level of support from their parents.
- Lots of opportunities for fun, adventure and physical challenge.