

Jon Katz's article "How Boys become Men"

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Boyhood, Maturity, and the Social Construction of Manhood

The most significant moment for any boy is when he enters the phase of maturity and becomes a man. It is a crucial transition in human development, marking the shift from childhood innocence and dependency toward adulthood, responsibility, and independence. This transition is not only biological but also deeply social and psychological, shaped by cultural expectations and societal norms. In American society, specific traditional standards have been attached to the stereotypical roles of a boy and a man, which influence how masculinity is defined and understood. The expected attitudes and behavioral patterns of a boy are often different from those expected from a mature man. Society generally expects a boy to grow into a man who is self-sufficient, independent, emotionally controlled, strong, and often emotionally restrained. This essay analyzes the causes and stereotypical expectations that shape the process of a boy becoming a mature man, particularly in the context of socialization and cultural influence (American Psychological Association, Boys and Men Guidelines Group, 2018).

There are several reasons and circumstantial factors that contribute to the maturation of a boy into a man. These influences are not limited to biological age but are strongly connected to environmental, psychological, and social experiences. Two of the most influential institutions in this process are the home and the school. These environments play a foundational role in shaping identity, behavior, and emotional development. At home, male figures such as fathers and older brothers often act as primary role models. A boy naturally looks up to these figures and learns from their behavior, communication style, and attitudes toward responsibility and life challenges. The father's role, in particular, is often seen as a symbol of authority, discipline, and strength, which indirectly sets expectations for how a boy should behave as he grows older.

In many households, boys are often encouraged—either directly or indirectly—to adopt traits associated with masculinity from a young age. They are expected to be strong, assertive, and emotionally controlled. Unlike girls, who may be allowed more emotional expression and nurturing behavior in certain cultural contexts, boys are often discouraged from showing vulnerability. This difference in treatment can have a strong impact on how boys perceive emotions and masculinity. As a result, many boys begin to suppress emotional expression early in life, which is often interpreted as a step toward maturity. However, this form of social conditioning may also create internal pressure, as boys may feel compelled to meet expectations that do not always align with their emotional needs (American Psychological Association, Boys and Men Guidelines Group, 2018; Way, 2013).

Schools, Peers, and the Reinforcement of Masculine Expectations

Schools also play a significant role in shaping the development of boys into men. In educational environments, teachers, peers, and institutional norms contribute to reinforcing ideas of masculinity and maturity. Boys are often encouraged to be competitive, disciplined, and physically strong. In some cases, academic or behavioral success is linked with traits such as dominance, confidence, and resilience. Peer groups also influence behavior, as boys often learn social expectations through interaction with classmates. If a boy expresses pain, fear, or emotional distress, he may be ridiculed or discouraged by peers, reinforcing the idea that emotional vulnerability is unacceptable.

In such environments, boys are often taught, either explicitly or implicitly, that expressing emotions such as sadness or fear is a sign of weakness. Instead, they are encouraged to tolerate pain silently and demonstrate toughness. If a boy cries or shows emotional distress, he may be criticized by peers, teachers, or even family members, which reinforces the belief that emotional restraint is a necessary part of becoming a man. Over time, these repeated experiences shape behavioral patterns and contribute to the construction of masculinity as something associated with strength, silence, and endurance rather than emotional openness (Way, 2013).

Media and cultural expectations also contribute significantly to shaping the idea of masculinity. Boys are often exposed to portrayals of men in movies, television, and social media who are strong, independent, emotionally controlled, and sometimes aggressive. These representations create an idealized image of masculinity that many boys feel pressure to achieve. As a result, boys may internalize the belief that becoming a man requires adopting these traits, even if they do not naturally align with their personality or emotional disposition. This can create a gap between authentic identity and socially constructed expectations.

Additionally, societal expectations regarding gender roles influence how boys are treated in relationships and social settings. For example, boys are often expected to be leaders, protectors, and providers, even at a young age. Girls, on the other hand, may be socialized differently, often being encouraged to express emotions and seek support. In many cases, girls are also influenced to admire boys who display traditionally masculine traits such as toughness, confidence, and dominance. This reinforces the cycle of masculinity expectations, where boys continue to develop behaviors that align with societal approval rather than personal emotional authenticity.

Emotional Expression and Changing Models of Modern Masculinity

However, it is important to recognize that these traditional expectations of masculinity are

increasingly being questioned in modern society. There is a growing understanding that emotional expression is not a weakness but a healthy and necessary part of human development. Psychological research suggests that suppressing emotions can lead to long-term mental health challenges such as anxiety, depression, and stress-related disorders (Addis & Mahalik, 2003; American Psychological Association, Boys and Men Guidelines Group, 2018). Therefore, redefining masculinity in a way that allows emotional openness and vulnerability is becoming an important topic in contemporary discussions about gender and identity.

The process of becoming a man, therefore, is not simply a biological transition but a socially constructed journey shaped by family, education, culture, and media. While traditional expectations emphasize strength, independence, and emotional restraint, modern perspectives encourage a more balanced understanding of masculinity that includes emotional intelligence, empathy, and self-awareness. This shift is important for promoting healthier psychological development among boys and allowing them to grow into men without feeling restricted by rigid stereotypes (American Psychological Association, Boys and Men Guidelines Group, 2018).

In conclusion, Jon Katz's discussion on how boys become men highlights the complex interplay of social institutions and cultural expectations in shaping masculinity. Home and school environments play a central role in defining how boys learn to behave, while societal norms reinforce specific ideals of manhood. Although these influences traditionally emphasize toughness and emotional control, there is an increasing recognition of the need for more flexible and inclusive definitions of masculinity. Ultimately, becoming a man should not be defined solely by societal pressure but by a balanced development of emotional, psychological, and social maturity.

References

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