

Boys' Mental Health and Well-Being: Key Updates for Child and Family Providers

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Mindful Moment

A Few Questions (we will come back to):

1. What are you wondering about in relation to boys' mental health...or issues facing boys (as a group)?
2. What are you worried about?
3. How do pediatricians and other providers approach boys' issues including mental health?

Stop and Think

- How much awareness do you have about boys?
 - ...about issues facing boys?
 - ...about how to support boys?
- How do you feel about boys (in general)?

Boys Are Diverse



What You Can Expect...

Over the next 75 mins:

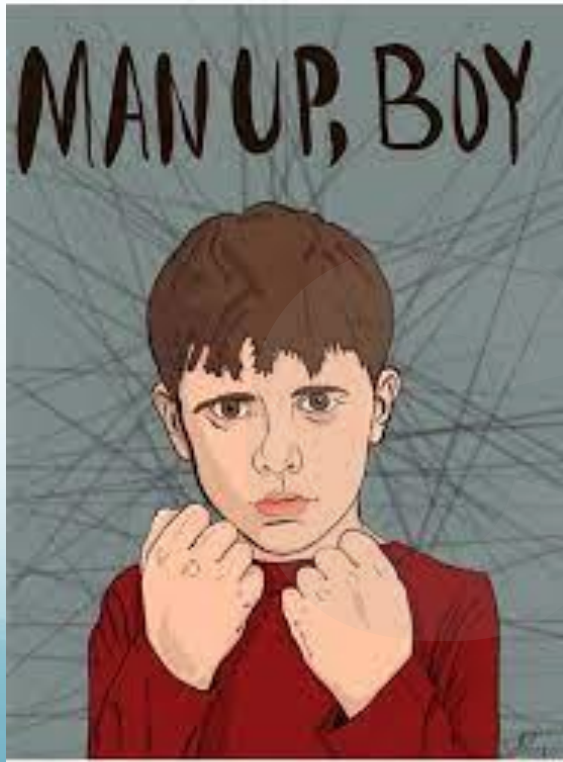
1. Exploration of masculine gender socialization and factors that can contribute to diminished help seeking/mental health for many boys and men
2. Mental health issues facing boys, and other well-being domains
3. What you might do to better support boys?
4. Questions and Discussion



Boys Need Us To Do More on Their Behalf



Topic #1: Brief Masculine Gender Socialization Overview



Seth Rogers



Levi Hastings/BuzzFeed News

2 Key Questions to Hold in Mind

1. Why are boys and men, as a group, resistant to help seeking?
2. Why can boys and men be more difficult to engage when they do make it to a provider's office, including pediatricians?



Masculine Gender Socialization (in brief)

Boys are not born gendered → they cry a lot, are needy and emotionally expressive, are physically affectionate and joyous, and also highly vulnerable (Weinberg et al., 1999).

Masculine norms and teachings typically transmitted by:

- **Parents (earliest influence)** – Farqas & Leaper, 2016
 - Gender reveal parties
 - Toy choices, clothing, differential gender socialization ...
 - Can also be gender egalitarian or neutral → less common (in most parts of the U.S.)
 - “Big boys don’t cry”
- **Media** – Collins, 2011
 - Video games, movies, pornography, children’s books ...
- **Peers (adolescent influence)** – Reigeluth & Addis, 2016
 - Policing of Masculinity



WHEN BOYS BECOME BOYS

Development, Relationships, and Masculinity

Judy Y. Chu

With a Foreword by Carol Gilligan

Strong

In Control

Tough

Sexual

Stoicism

ASCULINITY



Photo credit: not available

Anti-female

Pressures

Pro Sports

Power

Dominance

Provider/Bread
Winner

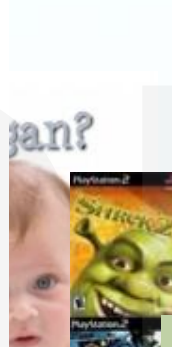
Anti-Gay

Self-reliance

Also known as ***The Guy Code***

*A word on **toxic masculinity***

From Media and Culture



From Peers (and others): Policing of Masculinity (POM)

- Any action that is intended to prevent or punish behavior perceived as insufficiently masculine (Reigeluth & Addis, 2016).
- POM starts in kindergarten or earlier. This along with media becomes a main gender socialization influence as boys approach adolescence (and parents matter less).
- Insults become more explicit for teen boys (e.g., homophobic/misogynistic)



Gender Socialization More Complex for Marginalized Boys, e.g., Boys of Color

- Historical instances of deceit, abuse and exploitation from researchers and society in general → Distrust and danger.
(Suite et al., 2007)
- Can be added pressure to fit in and prove one's self when oppressed and constantly threatened (Majors & Billison, 1993)...Or don't feel embraced and protected by dominant society.
- Can also be cultural nuances and some differences in how masculinity gets constructed and normed.

Words of Boys

[In response to being called a “girl” by an ROTC drill sergeant]

P: At first, like, I thought about when he said that. I **felt bad** in the beginning, but, like, as--as a couple minutes went by, when I was just like holding myself up there, I was like you know what? He's right, **just toughen up, suck it up**. Basically just toughen up if you're cold, suck it up. If you get a cut, I don't go to the nurse, just--just--I'm not going to complain for any little thing.

-15 year old, Latino sophomore
(Reigeluth & Addis, 2016)

Stop and Think

- What was your gender socialization like?
- How do you feel about your gender socialization?
- How do you approach/incorporate “masculinity” into your identity...and into your clinical work?

Topic #2: Mental Health Challenges Facing Boys (during tumultuous times)



Photo Credit: Getty Images

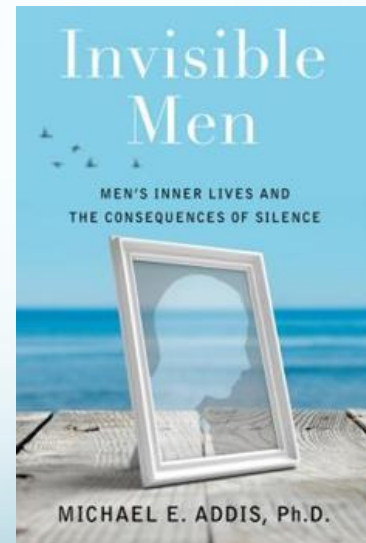
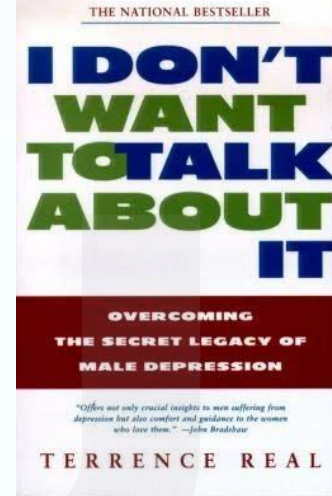
Things to Review About Boys' Mental Health

When they don't receive adequate support/guidance:

- Can experience elevated substance and drug abuse, + other forms of risk-taking (NIDA, 2022)
- Are at heightened risk of death by suicide (up to 4:1), starts in adolescence (CDC, 2024)
 - Lethality of means, emotional restriction, and resistance to help seeking part of the reason.
- Can display depression and anxiety symptoms more externally due to pressures to conceal vulnerable emotions (Addis, 2008; Real, 1997).
 - Lots of boys experience these difficulties.
 - Sx get worse when boys can't talk about/seek help.
 - Depression and anxiety likely underdiagnosed.
- Adverse Childhood Events and trauma (including sexual abuse)

More at risk for:

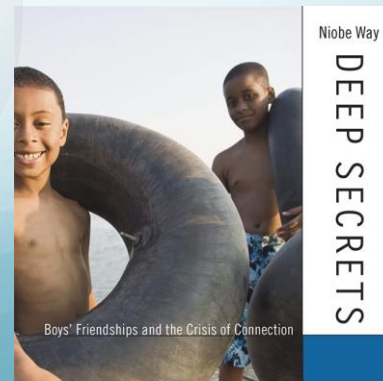
- Autism, ADHD, and Learning Disabilities
- Conduct Disorder, Oppositional Defiance, and Intermittent Explosive Disorder
- Video game dependence



Relevant to Mental Health: Boys' Relational and Social Health

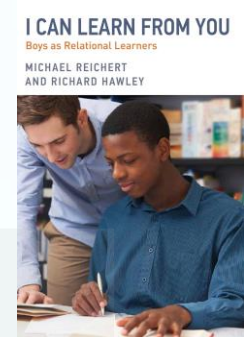
Due to masculinity pressures, boys at greater risk for:

- Diminished emotional connections with dating partners, family members and friends (Henricks, 2023)
 - And, many boys still highly vulnerable and connected in friendships (Way, 2011) and want committed relationships (Smiler, 2013)
- Compromised sense of self due to masculinity pressures to perform and prove selves (Nyak & Kehily, 1996)
- From boys to teens, higher levels of aggression/violence, e.g., sexual, gun-based, verbal, and physical (Amin et al., 2018; Fleming, 2015; Schmall, 2023)
 - At far greater risk for school shootings (Kalish & Kimmel, 2010)
 - Most boys not violent/don't perpetrate





Things to Know About Boys' School Health



When schools don't meet the needs of boys, they can face added challenges during K-12 education and beyond:

- Greater rates of suspension and expulsion starting in Pre-K
- Nearly 20% are diagnosed with Learning Disabilities and make up over 70% of ADD/ADHD diagnoses
- Lower GPAs throughout K-12 schooling
- Lower rates of HS graduation, college attendance, and college graduation

All of these findings worse for boys of color, particularly boys of African-American, Indigenous, and Latino heritage, due to racism, systemic biases, and oppression.

Boys and their caregiver(s) need to be empowered to demand more from schools, so all boys can feel more welcome, supported, and engaged!

Danielson et al., 2018; Institute of Educ. Sciences, 2021; Perou et al., 2023; Peterson, 2022

Words of Boys

P: Um, I think it was about a year ago. Um, my friend--because I was just, like, depressed all the time, and my friend called me a **depressed little bitch**, and, like, it just really got to me because I had just **lost my grandfather**.

P: And stuff like that ... just **started getting to me**.

I: Did that cause you to feel like you needed to change how you were feeling or how you presented to people?

P: Yeah, because when they--when he said that to me, like, I learned to **hide how I was feeling**. Like, I would put on a **fake smile**.

-17 year old sophomore
(Reigeluth & Addis, 2016)

Topic #3: Supporting Boys in Pediatricians' Offices



Thing to Do #1: Be Aware

Be culturally and intersectionally aware including about gender and issues related to boys and men (and from diverse groups)

- Attend talks and trainings (like today)
- Be curious about the boys who walk into your office:
 - Are they higher or lower in conformity to masculine norms?
 - Does their approach to masculinity appear to influence their treatment engagement or contribute to their presenting sx (or how they come across in the room)?

Using Masculinity-Based Observations to Formulate

A few examples:

- It appears that Mika has absorbed a rigid conformity to masculine norms [or a specific norm] as part of his social learning history that is contributing to current aggression difficulties, resistance to help seeking, suicidal risk ...
- As part of his low-self esteem and anxiety, Joe is experiencing bullying for lack of conformity to masculine norms...
- Rico's intense anger outbursts appear influenced by his exposure to a more hyper-masculine gender socialization and serve to mask the actual sadness from his brother's unexpected death...
- Jamal has difficulty putting emotions into words and is consequently less emotionally expressive and aware of his more vulnerable feelings, likely influenced by
- **Question:** Consider whether you have ever formulated/ conceptualized in this way?

Thing to Do #2: Support Mental Health Literacy in Boys

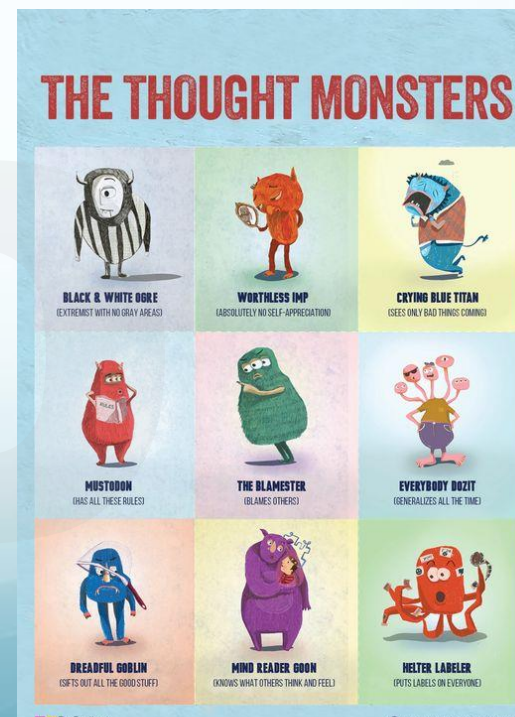
Examples:

- Help to normalize and destigmatize going to see a psychotherapist for boys and provide basic psychoeducation on what they can expect → especially when you have placed a referral. **E.g., “You know lots of boys can be hesitant about meeting with a therapist ...**
- Provide basic psychoeducation on mental health difficulties boys are most at risk for, including depression and anxiety (e.g., false alarms) which are on the rise—These can look different in boys due to societal pressures to externalize or repress. **E.g., “I heard a lot today from your caregiver about how angry you are, and I wonder if actually...”**
- For teens boys, discuss the risky behaviors they are more susceptible to including substance abuse and fighting/aggression, while impressing the importance of safe sex and bi-directional consent. **E.g., “Now that you’re in high school, there are a few topics I want to make sure we get into that can start to become more of a thing...”**
- Important to review suicidal risk signs, symptoms, and safety measures. **E.g., Lots of people don’t know that teen boys are at greater risk of death by suicide, so I thought we could ...”**
- Normalize emotional vulnerability. **E.g., “You know, society does this ...”**

Experiential Interventions

In a few minutes, could teach an emotionally struggling boy a coping skill:

- **Diaphragmatic (aka magical) breathing**
- **Hand squeezes with 3 to 5 Senses**
- The ABC approach (Just notice and then use a skill)
 - Noticing enables staying out of Thinking Trap
- Coping skills box or kit
- Temperature-based interventions, e.g., face dunks in ice water
- Other ideas/examples?



Thing to Do #3: Support Healthy Gender Development in Boys

In addition to inquiring about other cultural beliefs and intersectional statuses, also inquire about gender/masculine identity

- This could include a brief conversation, e.g., “Now that you’re in elementary/middle/high school, guys can start to experience a lot of pressure to [hide their emotions]
- Should be further explored and probed, when it appears that rigid masculine gender norm conformity is contributing to the presenting problem(s) → like we would with any contributing factor and then add to formulation...could even give a measure.

Prompts for Exploring

We've been working together for a bit now, and I've noticed that...

- When I ask you how you're feeling, you don't tend to say much. Hmmm...*
- These fights keep happening and it's almost like you feel like you have no other options.*
- I don't really know what being a guy means to you. Has anyone ever asked you that?*
- When you talk about girls you tend to use insulting words like _____.*
- There some things I've noticed about how you approach being a guy that might not be serving you well. I could be wrong and you tell me.*
- You took more risks today and were a bit more unguarded. I feel like I got to know you better.*

Things to Help Boys Know About Themselves

Boys...

- Are great!
- Have lots of strengths and skills
- Have lots of diversity
- Are naturally emotionally expressive and vulnerable
- For teens, want to be in committed dating relationships
(Smiler, 2013)
- Want intimacy and connection in their friendships (Way, 2011)
- And lots more good stuff.
- They also learn things from society about “how to be guys” and “masculinity” that can be problematic for many of them.

Greater awareness
helps to undermine
Pluralistic Ignorance
(Munsch et al., 2018)

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especially those with children who are out of control."
—EDWARD M. HALLOWELL, M.D., author of *Driven to Distraction*

Ross W. Greene, Ph.D.

and Topics to Encourage Take Up with Their Boys

boys about:

pressures from other boys, e.g., "Don't be
ergarten and throughout elementary sch

approaches to screens, video games, and soc
having adequate parental controls (elementary through

"If you're raising a boy, you need this brilliant book. It is clear, wise, and eye-opening."

—LISA DAMOUR, Ph.D., author of *Untangled*

Decoding BOYS



New Science Behind *the*
Subtle Art of Raising Sons

Cara Natterson, M.D.

- **Ways that Guy Code puts girls/women down and objectifies them**
(age for talks: elementary through high school)

**BREAKING
FREE
OF CHILD
ANXIETY
AND OCD**

A Scientifically Proven
Program for Parents

ELI R. LEBOWITZ, PhD

of expressing all feelings/emotions (age
through high school)

porn (age for talks: middle school through

substances (age for talks: middle school t

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Words of Boys

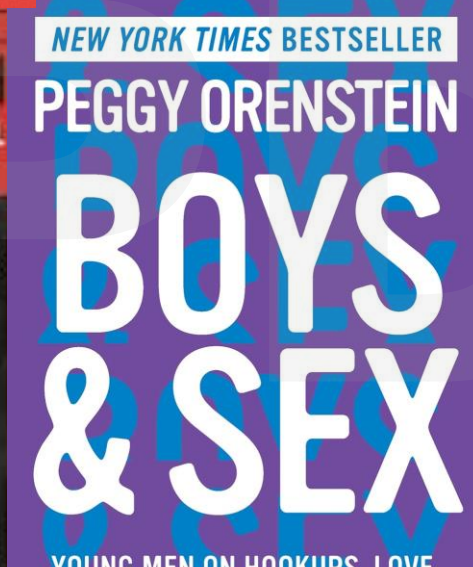
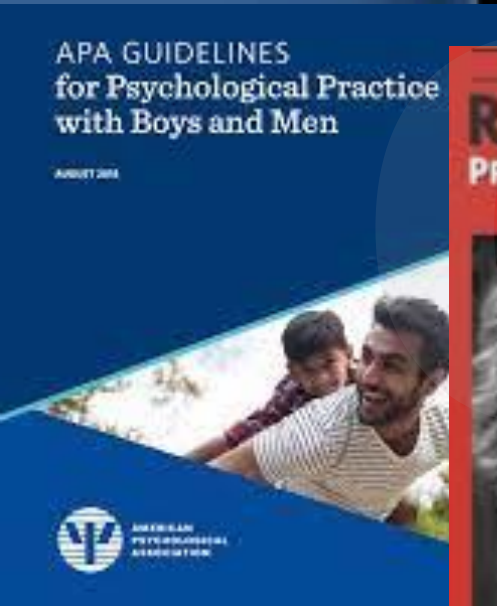
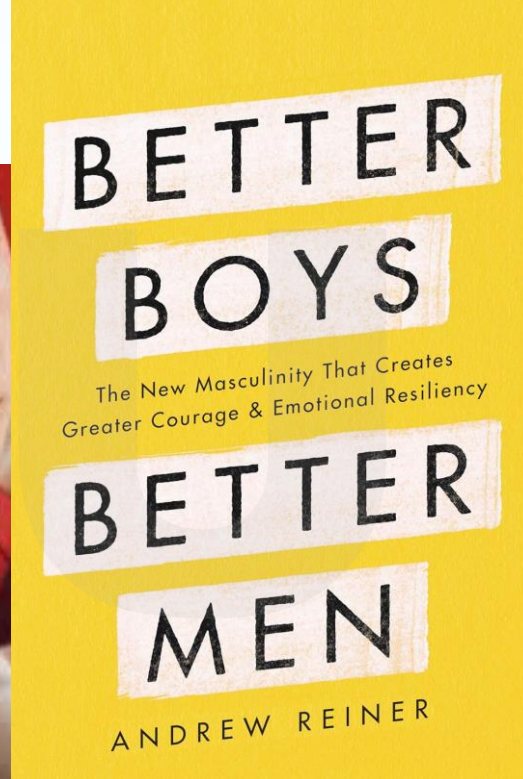
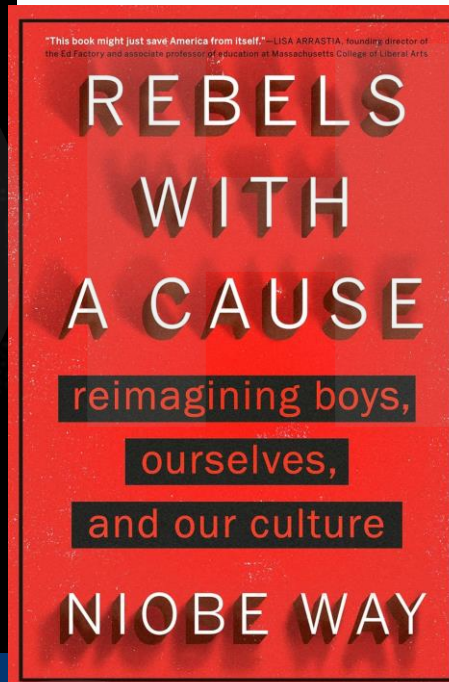
I mean [fitting in] can lead you to stop socializing with certain people, just because other people might see him as uncool. Or, maybe you stop focusing on school because people see that as “Whatever,” and you just wanna be the coolest kid, the toughest, the one that everybody wants to be like. And then I guess you lose, you lose everything that’s going for you. And then you lose a little bit of yourself.

-Luis, a tenth-grader

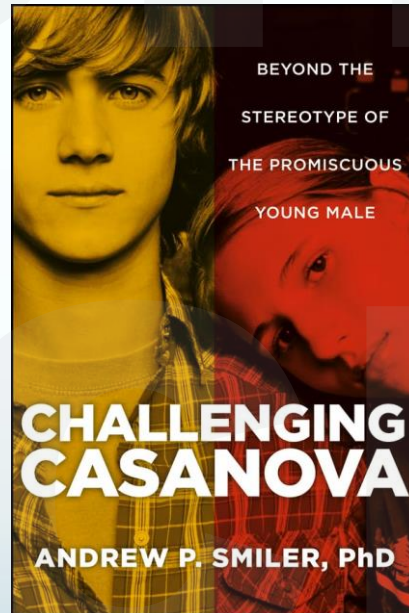
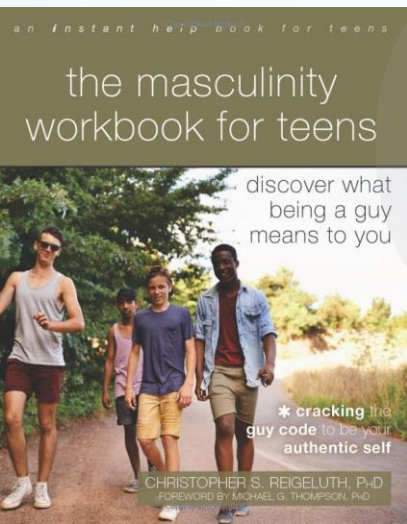
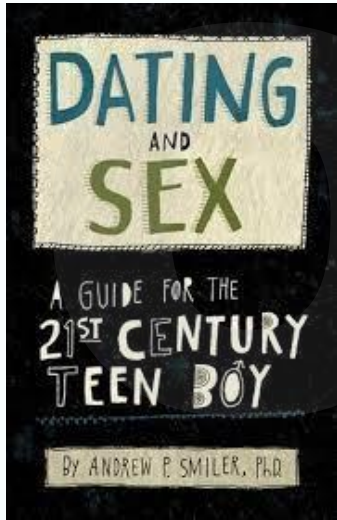
Group Exercise: Pair and Share (5 mins)

- From the talk, identify one or more mental health or other issues facing boys today, and identify ways you could more effectively advocate for/support boys' well-being in your practice.

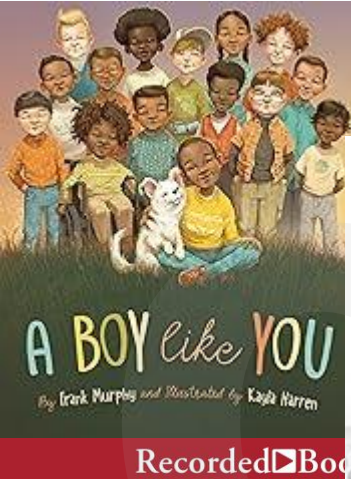
Additional Resources



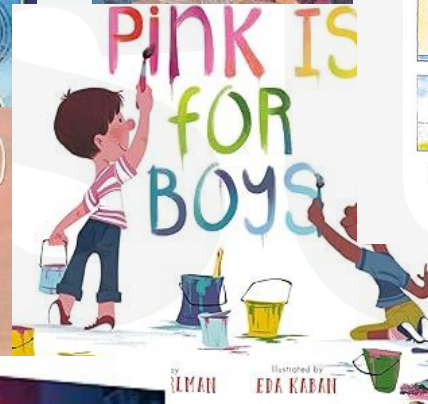
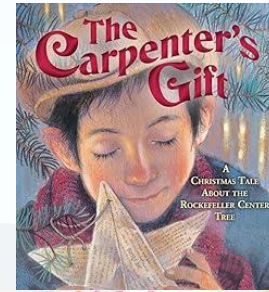
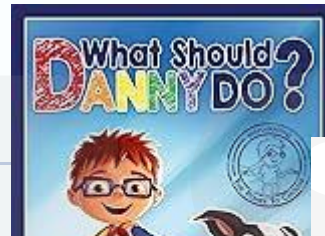
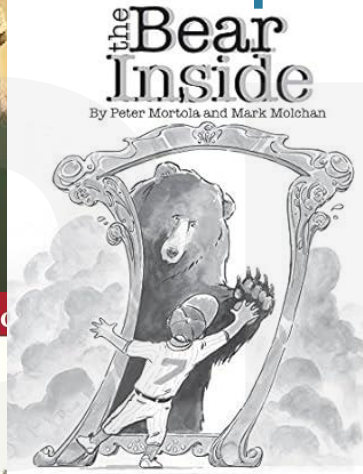
Several More



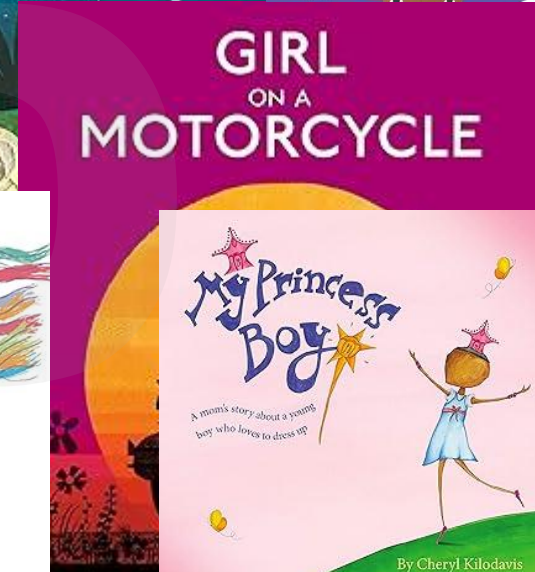
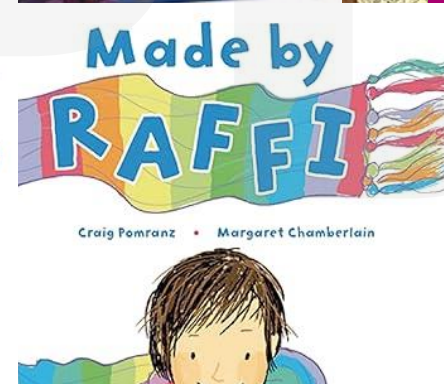
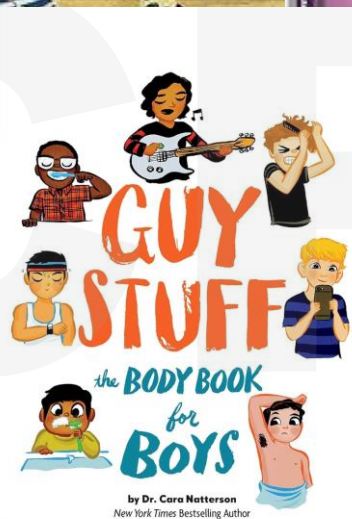
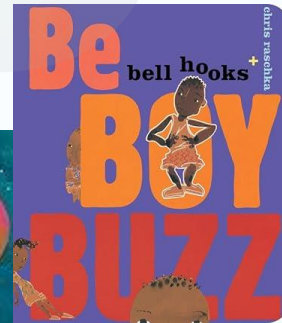
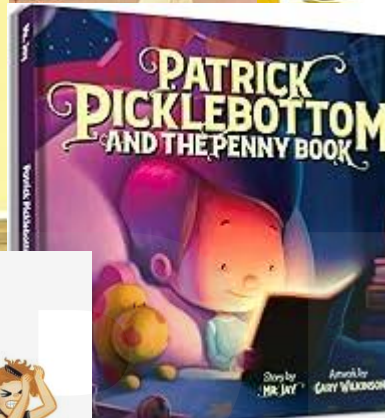
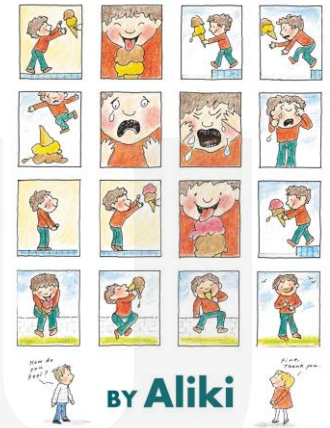
Helpful Books



THE RABBIT LISTENED



Feelings



A Few Questions (we will come back to):

1. What are you wondering about in relation to boys' mental health...or issues facing boys (as a group)?
2. What are you worried about?
3. How do pediatricians and other providers approach boys' issues including mental health?

Group Discussion

A stylized illustration of a group of people sitting in a circle, engaged in a discussion. The figures are rendered in various colors (orange, yellow, green, blue, purple) and are seated around a central table. The background features large, faint letters spelling out 'GROUP DISCUSSION'.



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Thanks!

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