

The Emotional Life of Boys: One Size Does Not Fit All

By

John Panepinto, PsyD, LCMHCS, NCC

Emotional intelligence (EQ) has gained a favorable space alongside IQ as findings continue to reveal connections to overall well-being and positive developmental outcomes. The EQ dialogue can now be found at all stages in the lifespan as theories and resources have emerged to “download” emotional competence.

And it starts early.

EQ education can be a worthy endeavor especially given the core of EQ is self and other awareness. The challenge becomes evident when we consider the diverse expression of the emotional life of individuals. While we all have emotions and feelings, they can feel and present differently. Importantly, because of their underlying meaning, emotions and motivation are personal and unique.

When it comes to the emotional life of boys, one size does not fit all. Just as programs for boosting intellect, EQ has not escaped the attempt to package programs. It is not a question of good or bad, but one of approach. Regardless of methods and strategies, allowing the space for developmental principles provides the context for the different emotional lives of boys—*and* girls.

Many studies have established that boys’ development has a different arc than girls. Here are just a few challenges boys face when EQ education and application is presented as a one-size template for emotional life:

Development: From birth, boys typically develop slower than girls in areas of the brain responsible for emotional regulation. In the preschool years, boys can be as much as 20 months behind in executive functions as these areas of the brain develop faster in girls. Further, between the ages of 7 and 12, boys can be up to 2 years behind girls in social sensitivity.

Process: Boys brains tend to have less white matter and they typically process within hemisphere (front of the hemisphere to back, and back to front). Girls, due to higher levels of myelination (white matter) and maturity have better “cross talk” between hemispheres. The right hemisphere, dominant in the first three years of life, is responsible for emotional processing and organizing new learning while the left hemisphere is dominant for language. Thus, girls are much better than boys at the integration required to use words to process emotions. They talk sooner and have a greater vocabulary. Boys still feel and process nonverbally but tend to autoregulate and use words less. It’s important to remember that for boys *and* girls, emotional communication is mostly nonverbal, especially when stress and feelings are heightened.

Stress. Boys can struggle with the richness and variation of emotions and tend towards “autoregulation”—a need to be alone under stress. Under stress girls secrete more oxytocin and tend toward “interactive regulation”—a need to process with friends or caretakers. Importantly for boys, the area of the emotional brain that processes stress tends to mature later than girls.

Personality: While always a work in progress, authors point to a child’s personality being evident in the preschool years. As a critical aspect of personality is how one meets needs, emotional processing plays a significant part. Studies point to the enduring quality of emotional processing and that even as adults the subjective experience of affect differs for men and women. Men tend to be rooted in sensations from the world while women tend to be more attuned to sensations within. This presents in the different expressions of empathy as men tend to be more cognitive and women more affective.

What can we do?

If EQ is the processing of emotional information in self and other, then there needs to be room for different presentations and personalities. Boys can be sensitive and extremely astute at reading emotions, but “how it looks” can be varied. When I consider my experience with some of the most sensitive, empathic, and kind boys, they spoke little but listened—even when you thought they weren’t. Their actions revealed the depth of their heart and emotional life where words may have been limited.

Just as intelligence is not one-dimensional, EQ can look different for boys and girls. Boys hear your words and feel you. Inside the most “boyish” boy resides vulnerable and tender core. Most of our processing of emotional life resides in the nonverbal right hemisphere. In a world of words, this can be hard to “hear.” But, let’s hold this thought when we attempt to create a template for something as complicated as emotional intelligence. Let’s listen and be present and remember that attunement—the quality of feeling “felt”— is powerful and beyond words.

References

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About the Author

John C. Panepinto, PsyD, LCMHCS, NCC, has worked in educational, clinical, and, private settings for over two decades. Presently, he balances roles as a consultant in early intervention, and as Clinical Psychologist for Carolina Developmental Pediatrics. He has maintained a private practice for over 20 years. Dr. Panepinto has written on parenting, development, emotional intelligence, resiliency, and performance psychology. He was the keynote speaker for the 2017 National Stay-At-Home Dad’s convention, and blogs on fatherhood (AFathersPath.net) and performance psychology (AbovetheFieldofPlay.com). Find out more at DrJohnPanepinto.com.

