

Getting Beyond “Get Over It”:

Supporting the Emotional Development of Boys

By

John C. Panepinto, PsyD, LPCS, NCC

Considering the idea that boys, as opposed to girls, “get over it” in terms of relationship conflicts, things not going their way, disappointment, and the associated feelings, there is a process reinforcing this myth that needs to come to light. The process both overtly and covertly points boys in the direction of “it doesn’t matter” when the emotionally challenging experiences are left disconnected in terms of skills and personal narrative. In the important formative years of childhood, we can’t teach when boys are unavailable because of the intensity of the moment. This scaffolding has to be done proactively not reactively. In other words, we can’t teach meaning and vital skills in the heat of the moment for the emotional context of stress begs for safety and stability—not reasoning or raising awareness.

Generally, we assume that we have to talk about feelings and while this is true, context matters. To talk about emotions you have to *have* them rather than be *immersed* in or *consumed* by the energy of them, and these represent distinctly different situations. Early on because of innate wiring and developmental trajectory, girls are better able to cross between the feeling, global right brain and the verbal, linear left brain. Further, for girls language is not lateralized like it is for boys. Girls possess more white matter, responsible for integrating diverse brain structures, which provides a better capacity for processing emotions in a timely manner. And, as opposed to boys, under stress more of girls’ emotions connect from limbic regions to the areas of the brain that process, regulate, seek social support, and create a narrative from the emotional content.

Not so easy for boys. The stress of conflict and strong emotions often fires the connection between the limbic system and the brainstem. Fight, flight or freeze may follow, but the areas of the brain associated with a calm, composed dialogue are not readily available in these hot button moments. And here we find the beginnings of the process of *getting over it*.

In these hot button moments, adults do what adults do: reason, seek resolution, and determine culpability. And when boys stare quietly ahead or down and have no reason, logic or words for the adult inquisition the process of *getting over it* is nearly there. Boys need time and scaffolding to process emotions and their distinct messages, and even *more* time to make sense of how the situation relates to their sense of self both in the present and the future. They are not ones to vent or enlist a friend. While girls tend to seek connection under stress, boys often find a space away from it all.

The last pieces in the *getting over it* process are time and space. When we allow time to pass and do not make the consistent space to revisit, coach, teach, and reflect in order to make meaning and sense of emotional moments, then the meaning and sense boys *do* make is: *it must not matter*. The acknowledgment of the emotional moment is replaced by the conditioned avoidance of getting over it.

So what is the “it” in getting over it?

1. Acknowledging the emotions and their message
2. Noticing the subtleties of feelings and the connection to meaning
3. The process of reflecting and making sense of changes in physical state
4. An understanding of the cycle of emotions from a primary awareness to emotional expression to resolution and its accommodation in development
5. The impact emotions have on choices
6. The impact emotions have on relationships
7. The impact emotional literacy has on maturity and development
8. The impact of the lack of depth in emotional development on a boy’s sense of self, others, and relationships

As the father of two boys and as a practitioner, I have witnessed the cultural pressure of this process over two decades. All around is the message to move on, mistaking a boy’s not knowing in the moment for not caring. Boys care, at least until they perceive the permission to discount the emotional content. But they cannot speak this caring and this is a reason why boys look away: *they don’t know or have access to what they are supposed to know in the moment*. They only know how the situation *feels* and how it feels to be expected to know more than they can express. And when we don’t give boys the structure for understanding feelings, their meanings, and what to do with them, we stunt the development of emotional intelligence (EQ) at the core.

The consequences upstream of underdeveloped EQ are many. We witness one such expense in decision-making. Adults say to be rational—think with your head and not your heart as if this is possible. All choices and beliefs emanate from values and principles. As clean and logical as we wish to believe is possible, all choices derive from subjective motivation and the underlying motion of emotion. Cut off from a deeper sense of importance, boys mature to men who struggle with the meaning aspect of choices.

This becomes a steep price to pay when we consider the responsibility to family, work (particularly if they are employers or bosses), and fathering their own sons—and daughters. Is it any wonder that uninvolved fathers and absent fathers are plenty, and emotional intelligence declines in relationship to management level in the corporate hierarchy? Strikingly, in the male-dominated positions of CEO, a study (n= 500,000) found that on average CEOs possessed the lowest level EQ in the workplace with senior executives (another male dominated role) close behind.

Reflection and process take time and boys need the opportunity to make space between the experience and the meaning. Developmentally, making sense and making meaning are primary. To internalize and move from an external sense of *doing* to a psychological sense of *being*

requires support and challenge to facilitate development. Sensitive young men *feel* but they do *process* differently. To move the experience to a coherent narrative requires the time and space afforded by the holding environment of caring adults. But when all you have heard is boys get over it and move on, the meta-message is that *it* doesn't matter. Over time the developmental leap of having feelings about feelings, and thoughts about thoughts becomes secondary to the temporary relief of moving on.

Well-intentioned men become unavailable not having the experience of reflection on making meaning and making sense. Intelligence and effort *are* readily available, but their emotional life is stuck in either an instrumental or scripted manner of meeting needs (consider the executives mentioned above). The opportunity to self-author or have a clear emotional center is lost in the social typecast of masculinity. As a result, a boy's sense of power and being strong may lack an emotional connection, presence, and resilience. And his steely stare may lack empathy and courage in the face of disappointment, frustration or despair.

At the core of a boy's emotional life we might find the simple sense of not knowing any better from living the script of *getting over it*. How do we change this script? One relationship at a time, one connection within your own inner circle, one boy at a time. Start early and with the 8 *points* outlined above in mind.

References

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About the Author

John C. Panepinto, PsyD, LPCS, 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 also 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. More at DrJohnPanepinto.com.

