

THE ACT-LIKE-A-MAN BOX

Paul Kivel

How are boys trained in the United States? What is the predominant image of masculinity that boys must deal with while growing up?

From a very early age, boys are told to "Act Like a Man." Even though they have all the normal human feelings of love, excitement, sadness, confusion, anger, curiosity, pain, frustration, humiliation, shame, grief, resentment, loneliness, low self-worth, and self-doubt, they are taught to hide the feelings and appear to be tough and in control. They are told to be aggressive, not to back down, not to make mistakes, and to take charge, have lots of sex, make lots of money, and be responsible. Most of all, they are told not to cry.

My colleagues and I have come to call this rigid set of expectations the "Act-Like-a-Man" box because it feels like a box, a 24-hour-a-day, seven-day-a-week box that society tells boys they must fit themselves into. One reason we know it's a box is because every time a boy tries to step out he's pushed back in with names like wimp, sissy, mama's boy, girl, fag, nerd, punk, mark, bitch, and others even more graphic. Behind those names is the threat of violence.

These words are little slaps, everyday reminders designed to keep us in the box. They are also fighting words. If someone calls a boy a "wimp" or a "fag," he is supposed to fight to prove that he is not. Almost every adult man will admit that as a kid, he had to fight at least once to prove he was in the box.

The columns on either side of the box show the expectations our society holds for men. The abuse, pressure, and training boys receive to meet these expectations and stay in the box produce a lot of feelings. Yet they have to cover over those feelings and try to act like a man because one of the strictures of being a man is not to show your feelings.

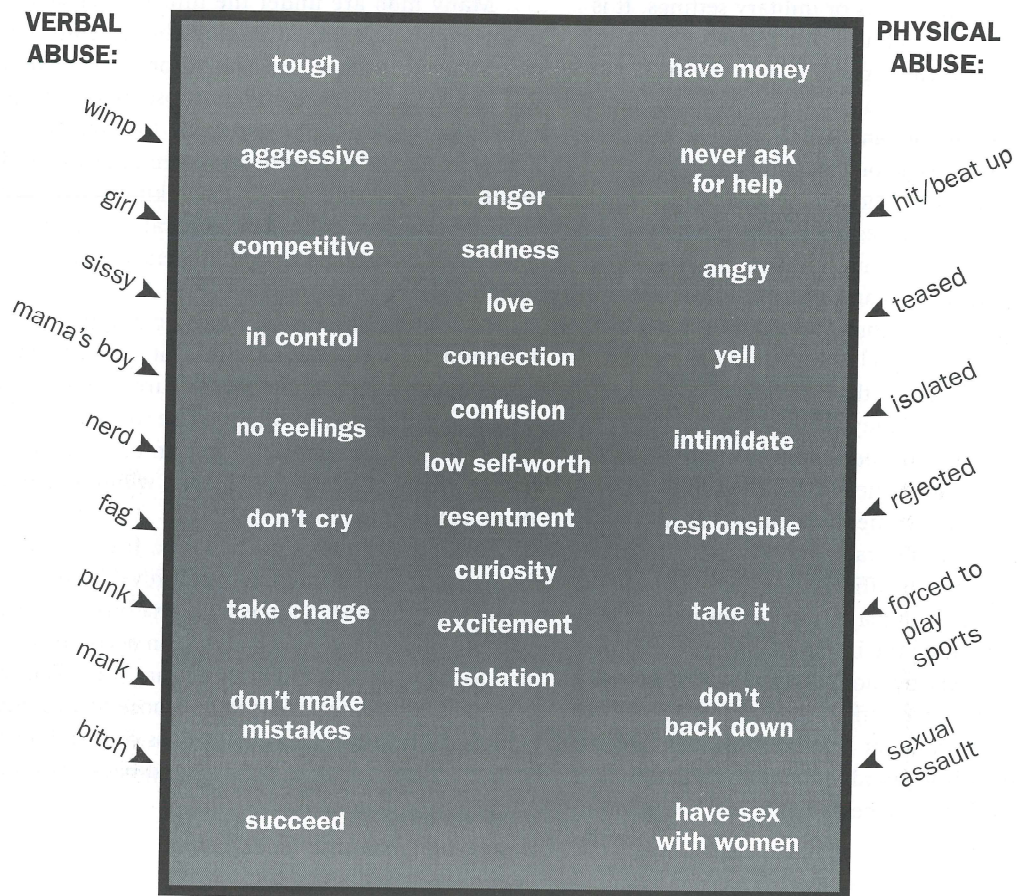
Notice that many of the words we get called refer to being gay or feminine. This feeds into two things we're taught to fear: (1) that we are not manly enough and (2) that we might be gay. Homophobia, the fear of gays or of being taken for gay, is an incredibly strong fear we learn as boys and carry with us throughout our lives. Much too often we try to relieve our fears of being gay or effeminate by attacking others.

There is other training that keeps us in the box. Besides getting into fights, we are ostracized and teased, and girls don't seem to like us when we step out of the box. Many adults keep pushing us to be tough, and that process begins early. They seem convinced that if they "coddle" us, we will be weak and vulnerable. Somehow, withdrawal of affection is supposed to toughen us and prepare us for the "real" world. Withdrawal of affection is emotional abuse. And that's bad enough. But it often does not stop there. One out of every six of us is sexually abused as a child. Often, the verbal, physical, and sexual abuse continues throughout our childhood.

There are many cultural variations of this theme, but its prevalence in Western cultures is striking. All boys have different strategies for trying to survive in the box. Some might even sneak out of it at times, but the scars from living within the walls of the box are long-lasting and painful.

Paul Kivel, "The Act-Like-a-Man Box." Adapted from *Men's Work and Boys Will Be Men*, Copyright © 1984. www.paulkivel.com

"Act-Like-a-Man" Box



If we pay attention we can easily see the box's effects on boys. Just watch a group of them together. They are constantly challenging each other, putting each other down, hitting each other, testing to see who is in the box. They are never at ease, always on guard. At an early age they start to hide their feelings, toughen up, and will make a huge emotional effort not to cry. They stop wearing colorful clothing or participating in activities that they think might make them vulnerable to being labeled gay. They walk more stiffly, talk more guardedly, move more

aggressively. Behind this bravura they are often confused, scared, angry, and wanting closeness with others. But being in the box precludes closeness and makes intimacy unlikely.

The key to staying in the box is control. Boys are taught to control their bodies, control their feelings, control their relationships—to protect themselves from being vulnerable. Although the box is a metaphor for the pressures all boys must respond to, the possibility that a boy will have control over the conditions of his life varies depending on his race, class, and culture.

Being in control is not the same as being violent. In Western societies hitting people is frowned upon except in particular sports or military settings. It is deemed much more refined to retain control by using verbal, emotional, or psychological means rather than physical force. Financial manipulation, coercion and intimidation, and sexual pressure are also condoned as long as no one is physically injured.

Clearly, the more money, education, and connections a man has, the easier it is for him to buy or manipulate what he wants. Wealthy and upper- or middle-class white men are generally promoted and celebrated for being in control and getting what they want. Poor or working-class men and men of color are usually punished for these same behaviors, especially, but not only, if they use physical force.

Why are boys trained to be in control? Most boys will end up with one of three roles in society—to be workers, consumers, or enforcers. A small percentage of boys are trained to give orders—to be bosses, managers, or officers. The box trains boys for the roles they will play, whether they will make decisions governing the lives of others or carry out the decisions made by those at the top. The box prepares boys to be police officers, security cops, deans, administrators, soldiers, heads of families, probation officers, prison guards—the roles that men, primarily white men, are being trained to fill. Men of

color, along with women and young people, are the people more often being controlled.

Many men are under the illusion that being in the box is like being in an exclusive club. No girls allowed. All men are equal. For working- and middle-class white men and for those men of color who aspire to be accepted by them, the box creates a false feeling of solidarity with men in power and misleads many of them into thinking they have more in common with the corporate executives, political and religious leaders, generals, and bosses than they have with women.

Nobody is born in the Act-Like-a-Man box. It takes years and years of enforcement, name-calling, fights, threats, abuse, and fear to turn us into men who live in this box. By adolescence we believe that there are only two choices—we can be a man or a boy, a winner or a loser, a bully or a wimp, a champ or a chump.

Nobody wants to live in a box. It feels closed in; much of us is left out. It was a revelation to realize how I had been forced into the box. It was a relief to understand how it had been accomplished and to know it didn't have to be that way. Today, it inspires me to see adult men choose to live outside the box. It is a choice each of us can, and must make—to step outside the box and back into our families and communities.