

# Boys of Few Words

Raising Our Sons to Communicate  
and Connect

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## Prologue

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This is a book about the psychology of boys. It has grown out of my clinical work with boys between the age of four and late adolescence over the past decade. I wrote it for parents who want to have a close and loving relationship with their sons and who want to deeply know their minds and hearts. My aim has been to give you a road map to help your son forge healthy relationships, without fear or limitations.

The boys we'll discuss are a diverse group, characterized by communication challenges that threaten to limit their social and emotional development. Most struggle to find the words they need to define their feelings and thoughts and, as a result, miss important opportunities to participate in all that life has to offer. I refer to them as "boys of few words," a reference to the expression "man of few words," so often used to describe someone who expresses himself through actions more easily than language or who may be known for his stoic reserve. The question to consider—at the very heart of this book—is whether this type of social disposition is a viable approach to living a successful life in the twenty-first century. Because this concern is so important, we'll explore how to make meaningful differences in our sons' lives and how we can help them become men capable of being "strong" in multiple ways.

In parenting boys of few words, nurturing their social and communication skills promises the best hope of helping them across the communication divide. This divide represents the gap between stumbling through life with minimally sufficient communication and

building the expressive and social skills required for successful participation in family, school, and community. For parents committed to understanding their sons, this book examines the relationship between the “male brain” and boys’ verbal and social learning challenges. You’ll find strategies that can make the difference between raising a boy who languishes in social detachment or shuts others out in angry frustration and one who flourishes as a well-rounded, confident, and capable person. The stakes involved are high. Crossing that gap is about more than improved language skills. It is about better prospects for being happy, emotionally healthy, and socially competent. Boys who are able to make this critical leap will find themselves more able to assume positions of leadership in our society, because they will have the ability to understand, inspire, and relate to others.

My work with boys has not always followed a clear path. Yet I have learned that if we listen to the quiet voice within us, it will often tell us when we’re on track. It may be only as loud as a whisper, but the message can be so important that it causes us to rethink ourselves, changing the very purpose or calling of our life.

In the 1980s, I was an artist working from a storefront studio in Hoboken, New Jersey, hoping to discover my destiny in the art galleries and museums of New York City. The studio had a grille that rolled up to admit sunlight through the front windows and a door that could be propped open to let in some air. The street was a locus of activity, filled with the raucous sounds of urban life. I lived and worked in this neighborhood, balancing the risks of invasion with the hazards of isolation. I concluded that as an outsider, a “guest” of the neighborhood, I ought to keep my door open. In addition to adopting a large black cat, I was visited by the children who lived in the tenements that lined the block. They were curious and naturally receptive to learning about what an artist does. Before long, they poked in the cabinets, stuck their fingers in the paints, and asked questions about the paintings I was making. Having no other patrons, I welcomed their interest by explaining my intention to create art about how the human mind works. My conversations with these children seemed to spike their own interest in self-expression, and it wasn’t long before I found myself handing out paper and pastels. I was amazed at their eagerness to relate and how well they grasped the idea of art. With some amusement, I noted that my art lessons—proffered as a peace offering I hoped would keep my studio windows intact—provided a source of inspiration. Even more important is that

I discovered the rewards of working with children—the deep satisfaction of the creativity required to understand and nurture others.

Ultimately, I found the time spent teaching and helping these kids to be a better fit for my temperament and life's purpose than the solitary habits of an artist. I had no idea about the journey I was about to embark on, and certainly no idea that the seeds of my work as a family psychologist had been planted. Yet I now know that those days were among the defining moments of my life, and I thank those children for helping me see that my education wasn't finished and that my calling was not what I had originally thought.

Having followed the call to work with children, I'm eager to share with you what I've learned about parenting boys. As a father, I continue to learn much from raising my own son, but the guidance I offer here stems from my experience consulting with parents and schools about the complex and unique challenges boys present. My views have been formed by considering children's development from multiple perspectives, having worked in colleges and schools, in an adolescent psychiatric inpatient unit, and as the clinical director of my own group mental health practice, specializing in the social and emotional development of children.

To understand why your son may be a "boy of few words," you have to delve into the psychological realities of boyhood, and this is the goal of the first section of this book. Part I will help you take a closer look at your son's communications skills, especially in connection with his social and emotional development, and use checklists to identify specific areas of concern. I'll explain why boys are much more often affected by communication problems than girls and why we need to do everything possible to help boys reach their full potential to communicate. It's language, after all, that helps boys understand their own feelings and identify with those of others, and these abilities are keys to successful relationships throughout life. Why *don't* they talk as much as we expect them to? Boys often seem intent on doing quite the opposite, limiting their communication to shrugging shoulders or concrete answers, or getting angry when we press for more information. The many interconnected reasons for this are explored in Chapter 3, and as we'll see in Chapter 4, if we don't help them develop an adequate language for emotion and social interaction, they may grow up lacking the empathy and emotional literacy that are absolutely essential to success in our increasingly communication-driven world.

Yet social convention tells us that it's typical for boys to be less socially comfortable than girls, leaving many parents confused about when their sons' reticence is a problem. You'll meet dozens of boys in these chapters who may remind you of your own son or other boys you have known. Their words, and those of their parents, portray the insights and struggles of families and are drawn from the many hours I've spent talking to parents about how to support and nurture their sons' development. I hope they will show you the different faces of boys of few words and give you a new understanding of what's behind the masks boys so often use.

Boys have inherent differences that make communication skills a little harder (but by no means impossible!) to come by than for girls. And they are also subject to social pressures that discourage self-expression. But some boys have additional challenges, which will be discussed in Part II. Is your son so shy that he withdraws from peers and even your family? I will help you understand what may be making him retreat into his shell and how you can draw him out. Does your son express himself mainly through anger? For some boys, anger and aggression are the bricks that build walls of social separation. We'll explore how boys often use anger to assert power or to deny the self-consciousness inherent in growing up in Chapter 6. The third group of boys we will discuss are those affected by learning disabilities and related problems at school. In Chapter 7 we'll consider the important relationship between reading skills and social comprehension and examine how attention deficits shape the quality of boys' social interaction. Many boys of few words, and perhaps your own son, will have traits of more than one of these three groups.

What can you do to help a boy of few words? Raising a socially and emotionally competent son requires dedicated attention, but there's so much you can do to help a boy with a problem overcome it or to help a less impaired boy reach his full potential for social communication. Part III offers ten principles to guide the child-centered family, and a thorough list of practical suggestions for addressing whatever concerns you have about your son's communication abilities. You'll find advice for boys of all ages, clearly illustrating what can be done to help your son at home and school. Because teachers can be so helpful in fostering your son's self-awareness and social communication skills, and because school is the center of your son's universe for much of his childhood, we will talk about how you can work strategically with schools on your son's behalf. Finally, we'll

consider situations in which your son might benefit from professional help. If you wonder whether professional intervention is in the best interest of your son, you'll find guidance in answering that question, details about the different types of help available, and what will be involved in getting an evaluation in Chapter 11. I hope that these chapters will serve as a resource to which you return many times.

My guess is that you are reading this book because you're concerned about an important boy in your life. Motivated by your love and assisted by your intuition, you can use the tools in this book to help him shine. As we explore how to build the deep, reciprocal relationships that are life's reward, remember to listen to the quiet voice within you. The experiences of your own life, for better or worse, the experiments, accidents, detours, and surprises that make up *your* personal life story will inform and guide you. No matter what path you have taken, or what has brought you to this place, your interest and care are evident. From here, we can find a way to reach out to the boy who concerns you now.

This path we travel together.



# ONE

## Is Your Son a Boy of Few Words?



**F**ive-year-old Jeremy is a small, busy boy with dark hair and a mischievous expression. He's very interested in superheroes and race car drivers. Despite his energy and enthusiasm, he's struggling to adjust to kindergarten. Jeremy's teacher has trouble getting his attention, and he resists joining group activities. Within his first month of school, he pushed one of the other children three times. When his teacher asked him why, he would only repeat, defiantly, "It's not my fault." When his parents made similar inquiries, he "put on his storm face," as his mother calls it, and refused to answer. His parents acknowledge that little things seem to "set him off" and worry that aggression is the primary way Jeremy expresses himself. They wonder if he'll outgrow it or if there's something else they can do—so far, attempts at discipline like time-out only seem to undermine any willingness he has to cooperate or communicate with them.

Aaron is a thin, serious eight-year-old with extraordinary intellectual gifts. Because he reads science fiction voraciously and has a good vocabulary for things related to astronomy or the parts of a "cyborg," his father calls him "the little professor." Despite his strengths, he often seems lost in his own world. His parents wonder if he notices other people and if they notice him. Aaron rarely talks to peers and complains that no one likes him. He looks puzzled when asked to explain the difference between sadness and anger. "He's like the 'invisible' boy. He'll share his thoughts, but not his heart," explained his mother. "When I talk to him about making friends at school or ask him how he's feeling, he immediately changes the subject. The only conversations we have are about facts—what causes a volcano to erupt, how you predict a hurricane, and so forth. I'm proud that he knows about those things, but he doesn't pick up on what other people are interested in. Shouldn't he want more friends?"

Morgan, a tall, heavy-set eleven-year-old, is passionate about fantasy computer games, especially when he can play with someone else. However, his parents complain that other kids don't want to come to the house because Morgan gets so caught up in the game he starts "giving orders," insisting that his peers play the games as he says. When the other kids resist or get bored, Morgan becomes unreasonably frustrated.

Sometimes he acts out, blurring the distinction between the characters in game scenarios and his companions. His mother quietly admits that at times even she feels a little afraid of Morgan. "I think he gets too carried away with the games. He's old enough to realize that a game's just a game and that people matter more, but honestly, if we took away his computer, I'm not sure how he'd react."

Fourteen-year-old Zachary avoids family interaction. He feels excessively self-conscious when asked about his day or anything remotely personal. When his parents try to discuss their concerns with him, he just shrugs and says, "I don't know. Nothing is wrong. Just leave me alone." Zachary is obsessed with building remote control cars and spends hours working on them. Despite his father's hope that this hobby would help their relationship, Zachary works mostly in silence, speaking only when he wants help and only about the cars. "When he's not working on the cars, he lives in his room," complains his mother. "When I ask, 'What are you up to?' he grunts. When I ask, 'What did you do in school?' he says, 'Nothing.' Sometimes it feels like we're strangers to him. I don't know how this happened."

These are just a few examples of how the communication difficulties of boys become manifest in their daily lives. You may see them take shape as withdrawal, indifference, anger, depression, a combination of these traits, or something that looks entirely different to you. Your parental instincts suggest something might be wrong—but what? All you can really be sure of is that your son's communication has become infrequent or unexpectedly distant for someone you feel so close to.

How many times have you wondered what's going on in your son's mind or felt confused or frustrated by his apparent inability to express himself? Maybe you've felt the sting of his disinterest in relating to you. Even within the most loving parent-child relationship, connecting with boys can be a difficult, sometimes thankless task. Yet helping your son across the communication divide is an expression of your commitment to care for his social development and is one of the most enduring gifts you will ever give him.

Your concern demonstrates that you've already started to make that commitment. One of my principal goals is to offer specific interventions—ways to communicate with your son, draw out his self-expression, and create a nurturing family atmosphere—that you can use to help your son cross the communication divide. But your efforts to apply them will be most successful if they are supported by an understanding of why the task is so important and what your son is up against.

## **Why It's So Important to Nurture Communication in Boys**

Communication skills help boys move beyond using speech for merely functional requests (“Can I watch TV?”) or information retrieval (“Can we buy it?”). Our sons cross the communication divide when they begin using communication for self-definition (“I feel . . . I believe . . . I hope . . . I am . . .”). Learning to use expressive communication helps clear a path to a life full of mutually satisfying relationships and paves the way for greater personal and professional opportunities in adulthood. These are the stakes when it comes to talking about the *social communication* skills of boys.

### **Success in School and at Work Depends More Than Ever on Communication**

Although boys today may have better vocabularies and more varied social opportunities than males of generations ago, *the communication difficulties of boys are more noticeable than ever*. This is because the societal demand to communicate and relate effectively is growing progressively stronger—faster than the pace at which the social communication skills of boys are developing. This discrepancy only highlights the communication divide, the growing gap between many boys’ current social and communication skills and the level of ability required for full participation in social and vocational life in the twenty-first century.

The visibility of socially disconnected boys has grown steadily over the last hundred years because there are far fewer nonverbal, asocial lifestyle and vocational options. Socially challenged males are, unfortunately, destined to stick out or seem out of place if we don’t act to reverse this trend. We are already beginning to see how the communication divide has contributed to characterizing the class structures of our time. In this century, your son is statistically unlikely to work the land or be a lonesome cowboy. Success in school, which rests squarely on the presumption that language is the basis of learning, is an expectation that society and most parents insist on. Few vocational options remain that don’t rely heavily on social perception and communication. In fact, the business community has thoroughly embraced the concept of “emotional intelligence” (EQ)—

a new emphasis on the value of emotional awareness that promotes personal health and successful relationships. The business world has learned that it literally cannot afford to ignore the contribution these skills make to organizational life. We live in increasingly complex, interactive, and crowded systems. Whether at home or school, boys are challenged to express what they think and feel, especially if they want their thoughts and feelings to count for something—if they want to be heard.

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As an adult, your son is more likely to negotiate a contract than a mountain pass, to work on the phone than work on the land. Will he be ready?

As a society, are we prepared to gamble that the growth of “technical jobs” and electronic communication will eliminate the need to manage basic social hurdles such as family life, friendship, courtship, and parenthood? The foundation for managing those hurdles is the capacity to use language as a tool for personal expression and social connection. And even the technological jobs that seem to insulate workers from face-to-face contact require skillful communication. How often have you seen an office crisis sparked by an ill-considered, cryptic, or poorly written e-mail?

In part, the communication challenges of boys have become more visible as the result of dramatic social changes in how people interact. In your son’s twenty-first-century education, career, and relationships, he’ll be expected to participate in highly social networks. His success will hinge on how well he can access and join those networks. And we cannot afford to wait until our sons are adults to get concerned about this reality. The demand to communicate and engage socially is happening right now, this very day, whether your son has just started preschool or is graduating from college.

### Authentic Self-Expression Is Limited by the Erosion of Language

In some ways, the difficulty of becoming an effective social communicator stems from the gradual erosion of language, as it is subject to increasing levels of fragmentation. Sentence syntax (organizational flow) has been reinvented by electronic/media culture—not surprisingly, the preferred “input” source for many boys. Although the creativity reshaping how we use language may be extraordinary, it has led to virtual chaos. Parents may get upset when their sons talk

“gangsta,” “techno,” or “jock,” but those language influences ring loudly in your son’s mind because they’ve become highly commercialized and appeal strongly to the emotions and self-absorption of youth culture. Complete sentences have arguably become an endangered species. The glib, cocky nature of commercial communication has contributed to boys’ hesitation to communicate and express themselves more authentically. Their need to use authentic communication is no less, but the supply of safe opportunities to do so has diminished. Ironically, the Internet has become one of the few places that males, boys included, are comfortable being vulnerable. Unfortunately, this type of conditioning is counterproductive to healthy social development, and rationalizing that “talking on the Internet is better than nothing” doesn’t really help.

### Most Boys Don’t Appreciate What They’re Missing

Here’s the catch. Boys are unlikely to recognize the extraordinary life advantages good communication skills confer—at least while they are still children. Most boys would probably smirk at the idea that communication skills are a “gift,” even if you could get their attention long enough for them to consider the offering. For important reasons, boys are generally not well suited to appreciate the benefits of social communication.

For one thing, they are so often on the move, physically and psychologically. When their eyes rarely meet ours, it can lead us to wonder, “Did he hear me?”; “Am I getting through?”; “What does he think about what I’m saying?”; “When did he learn to act like this, and from whom?”

Another reason is that boys are clearly different from girls. I don’t mean “worse” or “better” in any way. But my clinical experience, reinforced by ample investigation and research data on the subject, has shown that there are definite differences in the routes by which males arrive at their communication skills. Boys’ brains work differently in some significant ways, and the thoughts and concerns that fill their minds are distinctly male. Although sometimes these differences can appear subtle, they can dramatically impact the ways that boys behave, especially when it comes to communication. (And yes, communication *is* a behavior.)

Sometimes we *hear* the differences between boys and girls before we *see* them. Adrienne, the mother of two boys and two girls, puts it

this way: “The girls are always tuned in to what’s happening with me, with each other, with the whole family. They’re always talkative and very social. The boys storm in, clear out the snacks, and hit the video games. Major parts of family life bypass them—they’re oblivious! If I want to get one of the boys’ attention or ask him a question, sometimes I have to literally stand in front of him, repeat his name, and wave my arms. Even then, the response I get is barely more than ‘Huh?’ or ‘I don’t know.’ It’s not that they’re unintelligent, but sometimes it’s like talking to a wall. If my girls didn’t respond so differently, I’d think it was me.”

Then there’s the world we live in. In the 1980s, as computers became a way of daily life for the average person, and throughout the 1990s as Internet access became commonplace in family households, we frequently heard about the Information Age, a time when the efficient exchange of information would be of paramount importance. It is not a coincidence that both the design and enthusiasm for such a scenario came largely from males. This is because *for many males, the content of communication is far more important than its form*. In fact, this is one of the ways in which males and females tend to differ. For many, although not all, females communication is a fundamental part of life that is intrinsically interesting and rewarding. In contrast, males often perceive communication as far more functional. And at the extreme end, for some men, communication is not a relational or creative process at all but a utilitarian act aimed at getting something they need or want—information. Although the efficient exchange of information through e-mail, instant messaging, or other innovations has its advantages, we should be concerned about a reciprocal downshift in our expressive capabilities. Yet in working with boys, I’ve noticed how frequently their communication patterns mimic the sparse functionality of mechanical communication. As a consequence, the ability to reflect on their emotions, the capacity to hold opposing thoughts in mind simultaneously, and the social instincts that guide our relationships truly “don’t compute.”

When boys adopt this type of utilitarian approach to communication, they are shortchanged. This is why it’s so important that we recognize and adapt to the complexities of a boy’s communication challenges before his possibilities have become unnecessarily limited. We must accept that we live in a world increasingly bound by the need to communicate and relate to others. Through communication we navigate the maze of experiences and relationships that make up



It's easy—especially for a mother or a sister—to view a boy as uncaring or rude when his conversation seems terse or perfunctory: “Give me the milk.” “Aunt Ellen's spaghetti tastes weird—what does she put in it?” “Hurry up, I'm tired of playing this game.” “Don't say stupid things when my friends come over, okay?” But some boys understand communication as a purely functional exercise, aimed at getting or providing necessary information. Appreciating that your son is probably not aware of how his words are received can help you turn such interactions into a teaching opportunity about the impact of his communication. Does he know that the way he says something is as important as what he might say?

a life—at home, school, and, eventually, work. Communication helps us define and know our emotional selves, making us more well rounded, better prepared to fully participate in the world.

Unfortunately, boys' relatively limited life experience does not give them access to such privileged information. As concerned parents, we should understand the value of communication as an element of self-development that enriches life and contributes to better psychological adjustment. Even buoyed by our convictions about the value of good communication skills, teaching them can be a daunting challenge. In part, this is because boys are often reluctant to work at things that don't come easily, particularly when they don't naturally sense how communication and relationships are so deeply intertwined. Social communication skills begin with a willingness to be expressive and to share a part of oneself with others. Self-expression invariably requires some degree of vulnerability, and as we will see, this is a fearful prospect for many boys.

### The Signs of Problems Are Too Easy to Miss

Whether at home or at school, boys are rarely expected to be as verbal as girls. Because boys often seem to have an innate preference for expressing themselves through action versus language, it can be easy to miss or ignore signs of expressive language problems. Although most of us would likely agree that it is good for boys to communicate, social and expressive deficits may be overlooked in families where boys are more celebrated for their physical development, ath-

letic ability, or skills in mastering more technical tasks. In our culture, the image of a happy little boy is one of a kid running around being busy, playing, jumping, running, throwing things, perhaps getting into a little mischief. If this is your little boy, he may not slow down long enough for you to notice if his expressive abilities are delayed. Yet as such boys mature, language deficits nobody noticed may “take root” and become part of their psychological makeup. Expressive problems lead to the emergence of social and emotional difficulties: boys have impoverished vocabularies for emotions and cannot “put their finger on” how they are feeling. Consequently, they struggle to manage or control difficult feelings and may be at a serious loss to read the emotions of others. In turn, this type of emotional illiteracy limits a boy’s capacity to successfully initiate or sustain relationships. Incredibly, before many boys have even finished elementary school, they have silently concluded that they are socially incompetent. And as is so often true for boys, when they decide they are not good at something, they become disinterested. This briefly described sequence of events is a glimpse of how communication difficulties lead boys to project an attitude of social indifference. When we see the mask of indifference emerge, we can reasonably assume it’s being used to hide a lack of confidence and declining self-esteem, at least with respect to social communication.

Few boys want to show that they’re affected by communication challenges, yet despite their stone-faced expressions and shoulder shrugging, the hurt and frustration are palpable. Think about how exasperating it is to have as much emotion as anybody else, without adequate ability to vent or verbally explore that emotion. If you look and listen closely, you’ll recognize that the hard, stoic front many boys put on is camouflage for a world of unexpressed feeling. Now think about how often you’ve seen boys (as well as men) at play, dressed in camouflage garb! Boys are infatuated with how to go undetected and how that skill can be an element of power or advantage. Whether by clothing or constricted body language, boys explore the application of camouflage in their play and in managing relationships where they feel vulnerable.

Self-constructed defenses are not the only way social communication deficits of boys are shielded from view. Behavioral problems such as defiance, social anxiety, attention-deficit/hyperactivity disorder (ADHD), and learning disabilities—all of which disproportionately affect males—also mask expressive and receptive communica-



tion problems. Untangling the reciprocal relationship of behavioral and learning problems with communication deficits is a classic “chicken or egg” question that can perplex the best of parents and professionals alike.

I believe we need to detect communication problems much earlier in boys’ lives and act to prevent the kind of social standoff that results from these problems as boys get older. As we’ll see, the self-consciousness associated with poor social skills becomes amplified in adolescence, as boys become more focused on how they compare to peers. Having to get through to adolescent boys who have withdrawn into isolation from fear or repeated frustration makes a parent’s job much harder.

### **What Your Son Is Up Against: Key Neuropsychological Differences between Boys and Girls**

Research over the last few decades has shown that neuropsychology—the interaction of the brain and a person’s psychology—is an area of great relevance to the way boys perceive and relate to their social environment. Therefore, learning some basics about neuropsychology will help you understand the uniqueness of boys and how to coach them across the communication divide. Keep in mind, however, that biology is not destiny; the fact that there are brain differences between boys and girls does not give us license to ignore boys’ communication and resign ourselves to “boys being boys.” This perspective defeats the very purpose of exploring this information. There is not a person alive who does not have some type of behavioral liability due to personality, development, or genetics. The real difference between us is how well we manage those liabilities. Where children are concerned, a good deal of the management lies in the choices parents make about how to respond to their children’s needs.

#### **Boys Beware: Greater Risk of Neurological Disorders**

One of the first things to know about the liabilities of boys is that they are much more vulnerable than girls (about 4–5:1) to a wide range of neurological disorders, including learning disabilities, ADHD, autism, and a host of variants of these syndromes. Interesting to note is that *all of these syndromes typically encompass some type of*



The quality of a boy's communication can help you understand his psychological and emotional reality. Before assuming poor communication stems from a lack of effort, consider whether it reflects some kind of neurological difference that requires attention.

*problem with communication.*

Again and again, we'll see that the quality of a boy's communication is a revealing window into his psychological, social, and emotional well-being.

Several prominent theories attempt to explain why males seem to be so

much more vulnerable to neurodevelopmental problems, including gender differences in the anatomy of the brain, the role of testosterone in prenatal development, qualitative differences in how boys and girls are socialized and taught, and the infatuation that boys have with electronic media and games, typically beginning in early childhood. All of these theories seem to hold at least a grain of truth, although no single explanation has been "certified" as the definitive answer. Scientists have established strong genetic links for some of the syndromes I have noted, yet these issues continue to be debated intensely. Luckily, some of the best epidemiologists in the world are working on solving this clinical puzzle and will undoubtedly contribute to our understanding of boys' vulnerability to these problems in the years to come. In other parts of this book, Chapter 7 in particular, I'll help you figure out whether one of these neurodevelopmental problems could be playing a role in your son's communication difficulties.

Like most psychological phenomena, communication problems have multiple causes and effects. This stems in part from the fact that the development of a child's brain is extraordinarily intricate and subtle. Just as each child's life is socially unique, shaped by variables like family life, class issues, or cultural identity, neurodevelopment is also unique, shaped by the quality of a child's learning opportunities and the idiosyncrasies of biology.



Scientists are working hard to understand the causes of the neurodevelopmental differences of boys. But even when we have more answers, we will need to accept that gender-based brain differences are not likely to change soon and that boys will require a helping hand when it comes to developing the communication skills they need.

### Is Your Son Well “Connected”?

Although the brain has many parts, some with relatively well-defined functions, each part relies to some degree on all the others through an elaborate communication network of brain cells called *neurons*. This makes all the different areas and systems of the brain highly interdependent, in the same way that the sound of a symphony depends on all the different instruments and the musicians who play them. Communication is one example of a behavior that depends on a complex combination of activities in the brain. In fact, it's impossible to overstate how important it is to becoming an effective communicator that a boy's perceptual skills (how his senses detect new information) and processing skills (how he organizes and comprehends that information) be fully integrated. For example, if the parts of his brain that handle perception are compromised or underdeveloped, he may not be able to translate or process information very well. When an instrument is removed from the arrangement of a musical score, the sound and feeling will be noticeably different too.

When it comes to receiving communication, our ability to detect visual cues can be just as important as what we hear. Consider how people's body language, for example, their expression or hand movements, might help you understand their feelings or what they're trying to say. In fact, our brains can process large amounts of visual information much more efficiently than we can process a large amount of auditory information. For example, suppose you go into a job interview. Before the interviewer says anything, in a few seconds you've noted that he's looking at you skeptically, leaning back in his chair, has a precise haircut, blue eyes, and is a sharp dresser. Now think about how hard it is to listen to even just two things at the same time. You probably get a little irritated if you're trying to pay attention to someone and somebody else starts talking to you at the same time. This is because we process auditory information in a more linear, sequential manner than we do visual information. Perhaps one of the reasons we frequently hear that “most communication is nonverbal” is that, generally speaking, our brains are more efficient at processing larger quantities of nonverbal information. My point is that becoming an effective social communicator requires boys to make important connections between what they hear *and* what they see. It is in combining these two basic pathways of perception that a person

has the best chance of understanding and staying connected to others. If we are to have a meaningful impact on our sons' communication, we will have to teach them to notice and interpret the visual cues that enrich social interaction.

### Can You Hear Me Now?

In general, girls are better at processing language than boys. This fact alone goes a long way toward explaining why girls overall have better communication skills than boys. In a sense, girls hear language more deeply, using more of their brain to process and understand language than do boys. This expanded processing capability adds up to additional social perception and the versatility to use that knowledge in social communication.

The auditory processing advantages of girls also carry over into the classroom, where girls generally develop better vocabularies and learn to read earlier than boys. A general rule of human nature is that when you have a particular talent, you tend to use it. By extension, most girls learn to enjoy the expressive capabilities of language because they are very effective at using them. Communication simply comes more easily for most girls.

Although the auditory processing skills of girls generally surpass those of boys, we should recognize that some boys are good auditory learners. You'll know who these boys are, because you can tell they rely on listening skills as a primary learning pathway. For example, if you want to teach these boys how to introduce themselves, they'll learn that skill best by listening to what you say and rehearsing the words and phrases themselves. By contrast, boys who are visual learners will be more focused on watching how to introduce them-

■ ■ ■  
When girls hear language, they're better able to make inferences that shape the meaning of what was said. On the morning Vivian was getting married, her sister Theresa hugged her, smiled, and said, "Oh, I'm going to cry." Vivian immediately understood that Theresa was expressing joy, but their brother asked, "What's wrong with Theresa?" In such situations, males of all ages have a tendency to think in more literal terms, sometimes undermining their ability to grasp the full meaning of a person's communication.

selves and committing to memory a sequence of images related to introductions.

Although visually oriented boys may face some auditory learning challenges, they are not usually the boys who struggle with listening skills the most. That distinction belongs to boys who tend to rely on kinesthetics (movement and touch) to process and learn new information. These boys love to be active, exploring and learning about their environment through physical contact and the movement of their bodies through space. You may have met boys who want to handle and touch everything—learning through their fingertips—or who immediately check out or map a new place by investigating its perimeter. Boys with this learning orientation typically love the outdoors and are in bliss when given a new territory to explore. (They are also the boys most likely to push the boundaries of that territory, such as by riding their bikes past points you have designated.)

Because words are a less relevant source of information input for kinesthetically oriented boys, you can imagine what happens when these kids go to school. Nearly everything is auditory or visual, and there are generally strict rules about what can be touched, handled, or climbed on. As a consequence, these boys often feel like fish out of water. Verbal processing is secondary for many of these boys, and as a result, they often present a disinterested face to the process of learning. This unfortunate situation results in all types of misdiagnoses. For example, if verbal learning feels unnatural to a boy, it's highly likely that he'll have difficulty sustaining attention, and as a result, will appear distracted to a teacher. A similar phenomenon can occur



Do you know a boy who needs to handle everything, is uncomfortable with direct eye contact, likes to spread out and make himself very comfortable on furniture, explores a new space by walking or running around it, or needs to show his anger through physical contact rather than words? Could he be a kinesthetic learner who will learn better by doing than watching or listening? Kinesthetic boys are often less inclined toward verbal communication, but they still have important things to say. Parents will do better at inviting their verbal participation when using words that resonate for these boys. Rather than saying, “Do you *see* what I mean?” or “Can you *hear* my point?” try, “What would *feel like a good fit* to you?” or “Your observation really *hit the mark*.”

at home, as boys appear oblivious to the comments of parents or siblings. It's not that being a kinesthetic learner gets a boy off the hook when it comes to succeeding as a communicator. The demands of our society make that an unacceptable option. Still, we cannot be truly helpful to these boys unless we acknowledge their special challenges and incorporate that understanding into our approach to helping.

Interestingly, girls and boys also seem to differ with respect to what *kinds* of sounds they hear most clearly. In their fascinating book, *Brain Sex*, Anne Moir and David Jessel note that while girls are better at imitating the sounds of human speech, boys excel when it comes to replicating machine and animal sounds. This discrepancy seems to speak to each gender's evolutionary path, with males and females having become especially attuned to sounds that dominated their respective daily activities and responsibilities. For males, these activities have often centered on hunting, tool making, and building. Elements of these activities are clearly evident in the play of boys today. I believe many parents of boys would agree that a notable component of boys' play is their fascination with how things work, a trait that can be observed in boys from a very young age.

At least one notable researcher has theorized that boys are fascinated with how things work because they are "systematizers." In his book *The Essential Difference*, Dr. Simon Baron-Cohen, a psychologist and leading autism researcher, suggests that males and females can be broadly categorized as "systematizers" and "empathizers," respectively. In his thought-provoking book he explores how these tendencies explain many of the social differences we see between males and females, particularly why males are less attuned to interpersonal exchange. For Baron-Cohen, these differences also explain why autism is so much more prevalent among males, suggesting that autism can be understood as an extreme form of maleness! Although this theory requires further investigation, my personal experience has shown me that while girls as young as seven can engage in short-duration, talk-based therapy, boys of the same age will predictably require some type of game or activity as a background to talking in order for them to be comfortable.

### Bridging the Gap

It turns out that girls learn language skills more easily than boys in part because girls are uniquely able to use a much larger part of the

brain to process language. While brain imaging studies have shown that boys process language almost exclusively with their left hemisphere, girls can more effectively engage both hemispheres in language processing. In addition, they can share information between hemispheres by virtue of a part of the brain called the *corpus callosum*. This structure is essentially a bundle of fibers that spans the two hemispheres, acting like a bridge over which information can be transferred between the left and right hemisphere. Although recent research shows that the differences may not be as great as was once thought, some studies have found that the corpus callosum is larger (more bulbous) in girls than in boys, facilitating more efficient exchange of information between the hemispheres—just as a wider bridge moves traffic from one side to the other more quickly. The net result is that language processing in boys is more likely to be limited to the processing capabilities of the left hemisphere, while girls are generally better able to apply right-hemisphere capabilities to their symphony of communication skills.

What kind of advantage does this confer on girls? The left hemisphere of the brain is where we process spoken and written language. It is also the part of the brain primarily responsible for reasoning, problem solving, and the skills we need to understand most topics in science and math. In contrast, the right hemisphere has more to do with our creativity, insight, and sensitivity to nonverbal information—in essence, the right hemisphere fuels our social intuition. These right-hemisphere perceptual capabilities are more readily available to girls, helping them to complement the left hemisphere's functional processing of language with the insight and social comprehension ability of the right hemisphere.

This is not to say that boys can't or don't have good right-hemisphere skills. The ability to map out space, largely a right-hemisphere skill, is something that males excel in, for example. Still, if, as research continues to suggest, boys use less of their brains in processing language, they are at a decided disadvantage when it comes to learning and using communication skills. And another disadvantage of boys related to right-versus-left hemisphere processing is that they tend to take a left-hemisphere (systematizing) approach to problem solving. While an orientation toward systematic thinking may help males focus on solutions in a goal-directed manner, it also tends to inhibit awareness of the more subtle information that enriches social perception and communication. This situation probably



In their rush to solve a problem, boys often overemphasize technicalities and underemphasize social considerations. A student in Galen's class complained that nobody ever sat next to her. Galen suggested to his teacher that she devise a rotating seating chart so this student would eventually sit next to every student on at least one class day. Galen didn't get the point that the student was concerned that nobody seemed to want to sit next to her and that her feelings had been hurt. Do you know boys like Galen who are so anxious for solutions that they miss important messages?

doesn't surprise many females—who may have had to cope with this conundrum for decades.

#### “You Never Told Me That!”

With respect to memory, girls are better able than boys to retain random information in short-term memory, while boys excel at retaining information of personal importance. For example, the dates of birthdays, where something was left, an offhand comment, even what to pick up at the store, are often remembered more easily by females. In general, I believe this helps to explain the apparent self-absorption of many males throughout life. Forgive us, but we males are simply more apt to be interested in and remember things that accentuate what we perceive to be our strengths. Perhaps this ex-



As compared with girls, most boys have brain differences that can make learning social communication skills more difficult. These factors include:

- A smaller, less efficient corpus callosum, the bridge that transfers information between our two brain hemispheres
- More challenges with auditory processing skills
- More difficulty retaining random information in short-term memory (an especially important difference when we come to our discussion of ADHD in Chapter 7.)

Remember, these are general tendencies. We should measure our success with boys with respect to how well they fulfill their individual potentials.



plains why boys are so much better at remembering how to win at playing a video game than they are at remembering chores after school, the importance of waving to an elderly neighbor, or getting their homework into a backpack.

### Too Many Disadvantages to Overcome?

If you're wondering how your son will have half a chance to become a good communicator with so many potential neuropsychological obstacles to overcome, I ask you to remember two things:

First, we should measure our success with boys with respect to how well each fulfills his individual potential. Don't be too quick to apply the broad statistical tendencies of an entire gender to an individual as unique as your son! There is enough variation among males to produce brilliant orators, writers, and social communicators.

Second, I have yet to meet a boy whose communication skills could not be improved through a steadfast commitment on the part of his parents to make a difference in his social development. This is the contribution that parents can make, and it has enduring value, as successive generations inherit the love, patience, and time you invest in your son.

## A Family Perspective

An important message of this book is that the communication problems of boys are very much a family affair. To illustrate the extent to which boys and their families can be affected by communication and social development challenges, let me tell you about a family that came to see me for help with their son. In many respects, this family is like many others I've worked with. I hardly think you could distinguish this boy from his peers, at least in some situations. Yet small problems have a way of becoming bigger problems without adequate attention and intervention.

### Jared

Eight-year-old Jared lived with his parents and younger brother, Payne. Jared was fortunate to have loving parents who had worked hard to shape a child-centered family. Family life had flowed along

fairly comfortably until Jared started kindergarten. To his parents' surprise, his progress reports were interspersed with occasional negative comments about his "verbal expression" and "friendship skills." Jared's parents thought little of it, assuming that he was just getting used to being in school and that the problems would work themselves out. Although similar reports persisted into first grade, Jared's parents were still not inclined to consider the comments too seriously.

Yet the reports continued, and by second grade Jared was "disruptive to other students," according to a terse note from his teacher. Making matters worse, Jared's problems in school resulted in a great deal of tension between his parents. They disagreed about how to respond to Jared's difficulties. His mother had begun to see related problems at home and felt he needed to be disciplined more strongly or perhaps get counseling: "I can deal with him on days when he's outside running around, but if he's in the house and has to follow some basic rules, it's just chaos." Jared's father felt that Jared was "just being a boy" and that "people should leave him alone." He could recall acting in similar ways when he was Jared's age and didn't understand what all the concern was about. "If Jared is having a problem, the school should deal with it; that's what they get paid for." Jared's mother frowned and shook her head as she heard her husband state his position.

While Jared's parents were trying to come to an agreement about how to handle him, his teacher had requested that he be evaluated by a school psychologist. In addition to noting Jared's problems with expressive language, the school psychologist believed that Jared might have ADHD. When the evaluation results came home, things really got heated up between Jared's parents. Once again, Jared's mother felt validated by the school's suggestions, while his father only grew angrier. "He's an energetic kid—what's wrong with that?" he said.

Parental disagreement about Jared developed into significant marital tension, because Jared's mother saw many of the traits that frustrated her most about her husband in her son as well. When Jared shrugged his shoulders and limited his communication to an occasional "Huh" or "I don't know," his mother would roll her eyes and think, "A total chip off the old block." She was angry with her husband because she felt that he was minimizing her legitimate concerns and she was being overwhelmed by the challenges of helping Jared with his communication skills and behavioral challenges. Before one session, she asked to speak to me privately and complained,

“He’s just like his father. I know I sound annoying, but I have to remind both of them over and over to do basic things. I want to help Jared with his school problems, but he’ll never talk about it. I’m at the point where I don’t want to take him around with me because he’s so hard to deal with. I try not to judge him, but it’s embarrassing when your child is clueless about what’s going on around him, not to mention me.” His mother had some very good questions for me: How do you parent a child who cannot focus on you long enough to receive instruction, encouragement, or consequences? And what do you do if this is compounded by the child’s inability to express what he is feeling? Although Jared’s father still felt that his wife was too quick to accept the judgment of the school, even he admitted that Jared “was a handful.”

Jared’s parents had brought up a point that arises frequently when families are faced with behavioral challenges in children. Parents often get a lot of advice from well-meaning and critical observers. Because many of us feel that our children are a reflection of ourselves, it can be painful, embarrassing, and lead to a lot of self-doubt when our children behave in less than satisfactory ways. The urgency of some situations can make it difficult to determine if our decisions are based on the best interests of the child or a reaction to the extreme stress of the situation. Jared’s father was very sensitive to this issue, fearing that people might be overreacting to Jared’s behavior. He wanted to make sure that any decisions made were not reactive, but in his son’s best interest. Jared’s mother, who as the primary caregiver was “in the trenches” with Jared each day, was concerned that Jared receive the support and treatment she felt he needed.

When children don’t appear to be following a normal developmental pattern in communication or behavior, parents want to know if their concerns are warranted. For many, it’s a great relief to hear that the best of parents would be overwhelmed by the challenges their child presents. There are some important reasons for this. First, guilt is a perennial parental favorite. When our child seems to lack development or behave in ways we’re worried about, we tend to blame ourselves (though sometimes we shift that blame to a spouse or other caretaker). Second, we may find it hard to “benchmark,” or compare, our son’s behavior with that of other children. You may not have raised other boys or been around boys much in your life. One parent told me, “I thought it was me, but my own mother raised my brothers, and even she says, ‘He’s a nice boy, but I can’t tell if he’s listening or understands

what I say to him. Does he talk to you?' It was amazing to hear someone recognize what I deal with every day of my life."

When Jared's parents decided to seek outside help, it was because his teacher was pushing hard for some type of intervention. She recognized that Jared was probably hurting inside, but she had a whole classroom of students to be accountable to. During my evaluation of Jared, we looked at how his challenges were impacting the whole family. Along with the marital issues, Jared's mother noted how much easier it was for her to be close to Payne, his younger brother. Despite his being several years younger, Payne's communication skills were more advanced in some important ways. As we talked, Jared's mother realized that because Payne was easier to deal with, their relationship was warmer. "If you smile at him, he beams back. It's unconscious, but I think I smile at him a lot more." Payne's receptivity to communication resulted in his mother's initiating more casual conversation, making more jokes, and generally giving more approval for the things Payne did. More than once she thought to herself, "Jared is like his dad, and his brother is more like me."

This family dynamic probably contributed to the intense sibling rivalry between Payne and Jared. When Payne was younger, he tended to idolize his older brother and Jared enjoyed being the mentor, the "big boy" who could show his brother how to do things. As Payne matured, however, he noticed that Jared was often in some conflict with his mother and began to take on the role of "the good boy." He also used his superior verbal skills to taunt and tease Jared, who, unable to retaliate verbally, sometimes reacted physically in anger. This cycle intensified their mother's frustration.

Jared's parents decided they needed to apply some immediate attention to family communication dynamics, which were negatively influencing the course of their family life. It was also clear that Jared needed some individual support to help him understand what he could do to meet expectations and start feeling better about himself in school. To replace his outbursts of rage, we worked on developing an emotional vocabulary (anchored by pictures, because he was a visual learner) to help him discern what he was feeling and develop strategies for coping with those feelings. Jared needed to find effective ways to acknowledge his emotional life.

With boys as young as Jared, play is almost always the focal point for intervention, whether it is in therapy or at home. Play provides virtually unlimited opportunity to explore ideas and feelings

and also facilitates the development of new skills like learning to follow rules, social awareness, and communication. Jared's parents and I talked about how we could model communication skills through play. The hours we all have spent interacting with Jared have taught us to be patient and to be attentive to subtle signs of growth in his social and expressive development.

Like many boys of few words, Jared is exceptionally sensitive to feeling inadequate about his expressive capabilities. We've had to work hard at reinforcing his mastery of other skills so that he perceives us as believing in him, even admiring him in some ways. Fortunately, Jared's strengths with puzzles and motor coordination have provided opportunities to give him the type of supportive feedback he craves. We found that relaxing our expectations for Jared, while also expressing our appreciation of his natural talents, urged him to respond by trying to surprise us with a range of social and communication accomplishments he suspected would please—and he was right.

Families mitigate communication and social challenges when they accept their existence and their potential consequences. Seeing your son with open and honest eyes is a basic requirement for positive change. In Jared's case, his parents' honest concern and effort made a tremendous difference. Even their differing perspectives about the approach we needed to take as a team helped us find the right road. In every case, dedication and hard work are key. Families, schools, and therapists must work together. There's no "magic pill," no shortcut around it.

## **A Brief Assessment**

If my discussion of the communication challenges of boys has validated your concern about your own son or another boy, use the following three checklists to make a more focused assessment. Each checklist reflects a different sphere of communication that shapes social development. These checklists are not a substitute for psychological tests and are intended only to help you sort out your concerns. For simplicity's sake, each checklist is limited to twelve questions. In general, if you find yourself checking more than a few items on any list, there is a strong likelihood that the boy in question could benefit from some family or school intervention to shore up his communication and related social skills.

## Has Poor Communication Become a Liability for My Son's Social and Emotional Development?

- Does he become uneasy when asked opinions or thought-provoking questions?
- Does he dread "opportunities" for self-expression?
- Does he use anger to deflect personal inquiries?
- Does he communicate noticeably less than peers during group interaction?
- Does he actively avoid having to speak in front of others?
- Does he speak so softly his voice is inaudible or sounds monotone?
- Is his nonverbal communication (that is, gestures and expressions) out of sync with his words?
- Is he embarrassed about his feelings, even within the safety of parent-child communication?
- Does he consistently opt for expressing himself physically versus verbally?
- Does he avoid eye contact?
- Does he have to be in the right mood to communicate?
- Does he attribute his communication difficulties to being "stupid"?



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## Are My Son's Communication Challenges Adversely Affecting Family Life?

- Are family gatherings punctuated by uncomfortable silences?
- Do sibling rivalries stem from miscommunication?
- Do you avoid bringing up some subjects you feel he "can't handle"?
- Does he consistently "miss the point"?
- Do you feel "tuned out" even when discussing something important?
- Are you intimidated by his anger?
- Are you and your son comfortable being with each other only when the TV is on?
- Do you avoid asking important questions so you don't have to deal with the "grief"?
- Is he indifferent to the thoughts and feelings of other family members?
- Does he isolate himself from other family members?
- Is basic social conversation a struggle for him?
- Do family conversations unnecessarily become arguments?



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## Does He Lack the Communication Skills Needed to Succeed Socially and Academically in School?

- Does he avoid answering questions in class?
- Does he have reading or comprehension difficulties?
- Does he isolate himself from other students?
- Does he ever act out aggressively to compensate for poor verbal problem-solving skills?
- Could untreated or undertreated ADHD be interfering with his learning and social interaction?
- Is he often ostracized by other students because he “doesn’t get it”?
- Do his expressive language skills inadequately reflect his intelligence?
- Does he always seems out of sync with peers?
- Does he rarely say anything meaningful about his school day?
- Does he typically give short or one-word answers on oral or written assignments?
- Does he take hours to complete homework requiring expressive writing skills?
- Does he hesitate to assert himself even when he knows he should say something?



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Even if you checked many items on these checklists, there is good reason to hope that things will get better. You've taken the time to think and learn about how to help. Keep what you've recorded on these checklists in mind as you deepen your understanding of boys' communication challenges through the next few chapters. Then, when you read about the specific types of social communication challenges discussed in Part II, return to these checklists to clarify your son's difficulties and what type of help he might benefit from.

### **The Power of Acknowledgment**

For most boys, good communication skills are not about status or sounding exemplary to parents and teachers. Instead, being able to communicate effectively opens the door to a more interesting and rewarding social life. Every time I meet with an adult male whose life has been upended by a poor relationship, explosive anger, or deficient parenting skills (among other behavioral problems that plague men in our society), my passion for improving the communication and social skills of boys grows. The price that our society pays for social incompetence is extraordinarily high. Because no one likes to feel incompetent, chronic frustration may turn into withdrawal, isolation, or even rage.

Giving boys the help and permission they need to be expressive is a major contribution to their emotional well-being. This is because being able to express emotions is the path to *congruity*—the degree of similarity between a person's inner experience and outer behavior. Congruity helps us "feel at home" with ourselves, providing reassurance that we are acting in accord with our deepest feelings and beliefs. This concept is entirely strange to a great many boys. In fact, they are often quite invested in doing just the opposite, which is to say learning to hide their feelings.

You may be reading this and thinking of your own child, how he resists or struggles to adequately express what he is thinking or feeling, how he gets angry when you press him to say more, or how frustrated you feel about growing distant as a result of this communication impasse. The boys we'll discuss in this book will, for the most part, probably be highly recognizable within your family, neighborhood, or community. You may have witnessed the strong reactions

these boys can elicit from adults and peers or how they are sometimes ignored; and you may have been puzzled, worried, or tested by these boys—within the course of a single day. But make no mistake, your recognition of these boys is the invaluable starting point. Nothing is so healing as to be seen and understood. It is the beginning of all possibilities.