

THAT'S MY
TEENAGE
SON

HOW MOMS CAN INFLUENCE THEIR
BOYS TO BECOME GOOD MEN

RICK JOHNSON



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INTRODUCTION

*One Foot in the World of Boys
and One Foot in the World of Manhood*

*Having children is like having a bowling alley installed
in your brain.*

Martin Mull

IMAGINE YOU'RE SITTING inside a darkened movie theater. The smell of popcorn fills the air and your shoes stick to the cola-covered floor. Girls huddle together giggling in the front rows while boys make noise and show off in the back. As the lights dim and the movie trailer starts, you hear a deep bass voice booming out of the darkness, "Imagine a world where a teenage son comes home from school and does his homework, always gets good grades, cleans his room without being nagged, has wholesome friends, regularly showers and wears clean clothes, and

willingly attends church.” All the parents of teenage boys in the audience gasp in wonder. A few moms faint at the very thought of such a boy, and even a dad or two wipes a tear from the corner of his eye.

Sounds like a fantasy movie, doesn't it? Some of you might think you entered *The Twilight Zone*. I suppose there are some kids like that, but that hasn't been my reality nor that of most people I know who live with a teenage son. I know some parents whose sons excelled in academics, sports, and every other imaginable extracurricular activity. Some of them went on to attend Ivy League colleges, prestigious military academies, or some other high-achieving endeavor. From outside appearances they appeared to be the perfect kids. Subsequent results proved that not all of them succeeded as well as would be anticipated. But it was enough to make me question occasionally whether or not I was a good parent.

In reality, most of the teenage sons of people I know have struggles and are less than perfect. They act out or rebel by doing stuff like getting body parts pierced, cutting or dyeing their hair into weird looks, getting tattooed, and wearing ridiculous clothing. Many get into their fair share of trouble; some even drop out of school, take drugs, have sex outside of marriage, or lie, cheat, and steal. Frequently when our kids “perform” at a less-than-perfect level, we feel like failures. The teenage years can be a frustrating time in parents' lives. Especially for moms of sons, this time can be confusing, exasperating, and exhilarating all at the same time.

The other reality is that most of the time we are crazy about this boy who holds so much of our hopes and dreams. We love his good habits, like when he does something remarkably responsible without being told. Or when he says,

“Mom, I love you” for no reason at all. His expressions of affection become more treasured as they become less frequent. When he shows courage and honesty, we swell with pride. Our heart melts at the way he looks when the light hits his face just right and we see the handsome man he will someday become.

As parents, we all want the best for our children. We want them to grow up to be healthy, happy, and productive citizens and people. We want them to marry well, have happy children, and live lives of contentment and rich blessings.

The teenage years are a time of incredible growth and change. But this is also a time of incredible opportunity to shape and develop our sons’ character. In a few short years our sons go from being little boys to being men. Biological, emotional, and physiological changes are taking place in your son that seem straight out of a science fiction or horror movie (sort of like when Lon Chaney Jr. turns into the Wolfman). It is amazing the amount of changes that take place in this very short period of time.

I appreciate and enjoy boys—even teenage boys. Boys are fun to raise, to work with, to play with, and to just be around. They attack life with an exhilarating exuberance. Their physicality and the headlong dash in the way they throw themselves at the world is exciting to watch and be a part of. *Healthy* boys are life giving and fun loving.

Our son and daughter, now adults, were born twenty months apart. That means we had teenagers and other creatures going through some form of adolescence roaming around our home for close to a decade (although it sure seemed longer). I remember it as a time of great pandemonium interspersed with brief periods of sanity and calm introspection—probably similar to the enormously

noisy chaos and violent upheavals that occurred during the creation of the earth. Despite all that, it may have been the most enjoyable period of raising our children. It certainly proved to be the most challenging!

At various times throughout the teenage years, one child or the other was involved in the following activities (the names and sexes have been omitted to protect the guilty, and though we have only two children, I'll simply refer to "another" child throughout): While my wife and I were away at a Bible study retreat, one child "stole" my wife's brand-new sports car and went for a joy ride—at age fifteen! Luckily, sibling rivalry was stronger than loyalty and the other child "ratted" the perpetrator out with a quick phone call—prompting us to leave for home early. Another loaded up our minivan with their "posse" and was involved in an auto accident in a seriously bad part of town. Still another was chased down by a baseball-bat-wielding lunatic who smashed out the front windshield of our car. Another snuck out in the middle of the night and walked clear across town to a friend's house—said child was gone when we woke up in the morning.

Then there was the constant fighting between siblings, the mad rush every day and night across town transporting each kid to and from multiple sporting, church, and school events. As expected, there were the problems with coaches and teachers. The kids fought with one another and argued with us (my wife is convinced one of them may have even peed down the heating vent of the bathroom when they were mad at us). All these events and other incidents too numerous to mention were huge tidal waves of upheaval in our home. This doesn't even take into account the stress on our marriage and the complicating financial pressures of having two active teenagers in the home.

Some of you having read that paragraph are probably scratching your head asking, “Why is this guy writing a book on parenting?” The truth is, all things considered, my wife and I were pretty good parents. Those are just the types of situations you should expect to encounter while sharing your home with these hormonal beings.

A certain amount of tension normally occurs between teenagers and their siblings, and their parents. As teens strain toward adulthood, they want to try new things and experiences. Our job as parents is to let them grow and stretch without allowing things that will do them harm. Patrick Morley likens this experience to that of a pet owner and his new strong-willed puppy. During a walk, the puppy tugs on his leash because he wants to explore the neighborhood. Generally the owner allows the puppy some freedom. Sometimes though he tries to run into a busy street and so his owner pulls back on the leash. But the puppy’s not happy and thankful for this safe guidance. He cannot understand why he can’t have his own way.¹ And so it is with teens—they often think parents are being too restrictive when in reality we are just keeping them from harm.

Mom faces the challenge at this stage of “letting go” of her little boy so that he can start becoming a man. At the same time, she has to recognize that in many ways he is still a child and needs loving guidance and boundaries more than ever. If she keeps the leash too tight around her son’s neck, he will start rebelling in order to satisfy that urge he has to grow up by experiencing life. Sometimes parents walk a fine line between *preparing* their children to integrate successfully into the world of adulthood while at the same time keeping them safe enough to grow up to *be* an adult. Success in our parenting comes when we

understand the challenges we face with preparing our teenage boys for adulthood and then develop a strategy to use the influence God has given us as parents.

What to Expect

This book is a follow-up to my popular bestselling book, *That's My Son: How Moms Can Influence Boys to Become Men of Character*. I wrote that book out of my experiences teaching a seminar titled “Courageous Moms—Raising Boys to Become Good Men.” I initially taught that seminar to single mothers with sons, but it unexpectedly struck a chord with women of all kinds, not just single moms. Since then, thousands of women (and men) have attended our seminars on this topic. Teachers, grandmothers, aunts, women with male co-workers and bosses, social workers, criminal justice employees, and any women who live or work with men were attracted to the message of what makes males tick. Many of the women, especially those raised without a father or brothers in their lives, were eager to learn how to communicate with males and how to teach them fundamental traits such as respect, self-discipline, and honor. Most of these women tell me that the information in that book and seminar helped them understand not only their son better but also their husbands, bosses, brothers, and fathers.

Some people commented that my first book was geared toward single mothers, and in fact it did start out that way. This book too will address issues faced by boys who do not have healthy male role models in their lives. The truth is, our country is producing many “fatherless” boys through a variety of family styles and structures. Many married women who would deny that their sons are fatherless are

in reality raising their sons as single mothers—children of men who are workaholics, abusive, addicted, or just plain emotionally uninvolved are just as fatherless as children whose fathers are physically absent. Boys raised without positive male mentors are like ships without rudders, doomed to drift along wherever the cultural winds and waves take them. Not only that, but a son has a propensity to mimic the behaviors that were modeled for him by the men in his life—good or bad.

Getting Down to Specifics

My goal with this book is to help moms understand a vision for raising their sons to not just be men or even good men, but to be great men. Our country desperately needs great men. Families need great husbands and fathers. Our communities need great male leaders. Our government, businesses, and churches need great men to be involved. The litmus test I kept in mind was to raise young men who would meet my standards of approval in order to marry my daughter. However, I realize this is a tall order that would make for a very short list of candidates. Nevertheless, if we do not have high expectations for the kind of men we produce as a society, we will reap what we sow.

That first book lays the foundation of boyhood and masculinity that this book magnifies and builds upon. I didn't want to repeat everything I wrote in *That's My Son* (I hate it when authors do that), so it would be a good idea to read—or reread—my previous book before starting this one.

This new book will help you understand the specific physical, mental, psychological, and emotional changes your son is going through as a teenager. It will help you

understand how best to communicate with him and what character traits he needs to develop in order to become a healthy man who blesses those around him. In addition, it will point out destructive or even dangerous characteristics that your son needs to be aware of on the road to manhood. It will help you recognize the differences between your feminine world and the world of men that your son is about to join. You will better understand the challenges your son faces with his developing sexuality—a factor that will influence every aspect of his entire being for the rest of his life.

From my research and experiences, it seems that there are three main factors (or pillars of success) that contribute most importantly to a boy being raised into a healthy man: education, character, and life skills. Keep those factors in the back of your mind while reading through this book. Most of the material in this book will be encouraging and inspiring to you, but some of the topics may make you a bit uncomfortable. But don't let that discourage you. Remember, just because we don't like something doesn't mean it isn't true. Better to be uncomfortable than to have painful regrets later. People who ignore inconvenient truths do so at their own peril. But at the very least you will have an accurate, if sometimes frightening, look inside your teenage son. You can then take those insights and use your natural gifts as a woman and a mother to help him develop into the kind of man who will make the world a better place just by his presence—a man who a mother can be proud to call her son.