

The Importance of Fostering Emotional Diversity in Boys

<https://www.scientificamerican.com/article/the-importance-of-fostering-emotional-diversity-in-boys/>

You're given a choice: Would you rather spend your day feeling happy versus happy interspersed with some moments of sadness, frustration, and anxiety? Most of us would choose the first option in a heartbeat. Psychologists, too, long championed the [importance](#) of cultivating positive emotions as one path towards optimizing well being, resilience to stressors, and salutary physical health outcomes. Not surprisingly, when people are asked what emotions they [want to feel](#), we place a heavy emphasis on wanting to feel primarily positive emotions.

However, research suggests the choice may no longer be a straightforward one. Recent work by psychologists reveals the once hidden benefits of experiencing a *diversity* of emotions, both positive and negative. Just as physical environments flourish through a biodiversity of flora and fauna, this new work on [emodiversity](#) likens the human mind to an abstract and internal psychological ecosystem that may also benefit from experiencing a wide diversity of emotions. Although still a new idea, the yield of emodiversity is apparent: adults who report experiencing a greater diversity of both positive and negative emotions report fewer symptoms of depression and fewer days spent in a hospital. This is consistent with what we have long known about emotions; namely, that [emotions serve as a guidepost](#) on the map of human experience, drawing our attention to the important markers in our environments—the warning signs, or things that need to be noticed, changed, or processed and understood. So the emotional ingredients underlying well-being might be more 'diverse' than just feeling good or positive emotions. In addition, adults who experience a [wider range of positive emotions](#)—for example, calm, amused, excited, and proud—exhibit lower markers of inflammation, suggesting that even happiness isn't the *only* positive feeling that confers well-being benefits.

If having lots of different emotions is good for our health as adults, then shouldn't we be fostering the experience of a diverse range of emotions in young children as well? And yet the research suggests we are not fostering emotional diversity from a young age, especially when it comes to raising young boys. As early as infancy, boys' and girls' emotional landscape differs. [One study](#) reported that when watching an infant being startled by a jack-in-the-box toy, adults who were told the infant was a boy versus a girl were more likely to perceive the infant as experiencing anger, regardless of whether the infant was actually a boy. Gender differences in the diversity of emotion words parents use in conversations with young boys and girls also emerge. [Another study](#) examining conversations between mothers and young children, mothers interacting with daughters employ emotion vocabulary of greater density and depth, whereas conversations with sons tended to focus primarily on a single emotion—you guessed it, anger. Regardless of whether gender differences in adult behavior arise from conscious or unconscious psychological processes, one thing is clear: boys grow up in a world inhabited by a narrower range of emotions, one in which their experiences of anger are noticed, inferred, and potentially even cultivated. This leaves other emotions—particularly the more vulnerable emotions—sorely ignored or missing in their growing minds.

This is all the more concerning given that [research](#) from Harvard Medical School shows that boys are in fact *more* emotionally expressive than girls. This begins as early as infancy and lasts through early childhood. So it is possible that boys might actually begin with at least comparable, if not more, intensity and range of emotional expressions. This suggests that something is happening in

these early years, when children are the most receptive to messages their parents give them about emotion displays, that might very well have a longer-term impact on their emotional development.

Indeed, a lack of fostering emotional diversity in youth may have long-term problematic consequences. As early as elementary school, the avoidance of strong emotions (besides anger) results in academic underperformance in [boys](#). [Psychologists have found](#) that children who deny emotional vulnerability are also more likely to become adolescents who engage in health-risk behaviors, such as substance use. Later in development, [men suppress](#) (i.e., do not openly express) their emotions more than women; and men, in turn experience greater depressive symptoms, and resort more often to physical violence. Scientists [speculate](#) that trouble regulating emotion may explain the link between restricted emotions and aggressive behavior towards others in men. This seems likely, given that the skills to regulate emotion are gained through practice, which boys may be less likely to have if they do not have permission to experience the full range of emotions.

Unfortunately, men's restriction in emotion expression extends to the home—men are also less likely to share their own vulnerable emotions with partners and are less open to these experiences in their partners, a point made clear by University of Houston social work professor [Brené Brown](#) in her qualitative research on shame. And [emotion suppression](#) can have consequences for physical, as well as psychological and relational, health—these men may be at greater risk for stress-related cardiovascular problems in the long-run. A lack of emotional diversity is not just important for young boys but continues to be so as emotionally restricted young boys mature into adult men with more rigid emotional repertoires. Experiencing the full range of emotions may not only benefit young boys' psychological health but have far-reaching benefits for society at large.

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