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Bringing Up Boys

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Leonard Sax, *Why Gender Matters: What Parents and Teachers Need to Know About the Emerging Science of Sex Differences* (Harmony, 2017. 2nd ed.).

Meg Meeker, *Strong Mothers, Strong Sons: Lessons Mothers Need to Raise Extraordinary Men* (Ballantine Books, 2014).

When my eldest son was 3, moving from toddlerhood into childhood, I began to try to understand him less as a toddler and more as an emerging child, with certain educational, social, and spiritual needs. I felt like I was standing at the edge of a vast canyon. The landscape of childhood was beautiful but daunting, and there were methods of navigating it completely unknown to me up to that point. Without brothers or even close male cousins in my family of origin, I had no idea what mothering a healthy little boy would look like, and I relied heavily upon the advice of friends who had walked this path before me, as well as broad reading. Now, ten years and four more children later, I find myself experiencing the same sense of vertigo, of standing on the edge of something huge. My eldest son is squarely in the preteen years, and the vista of the teen years is stretching out before me. I have found *Why Gender Matters* and *Strong Mothers, Strong Sons* to be exceptionally helpful resources for charting a path to accompany boys through their teens and into adulthood. *Why Gender Matters* is a heavily science-based book, filled with statistics, studies, clinical results, and supported by Sax's years as a family physician. Discussions regarding gender can be volatile and emotional; Sax's book, by contrast, provides evidence-based explanations while steering clear of moral prescriptions. *Strong Mothers, Strong Sons*, while similar in that it is largely the fruit of Dr. Meeker's many years of pediatric medicine, reads more like an in-depth, experience-based pep-talk from a mom who has walked the path we will walk. Meeker shares anecdotes from interviews, her own mothering, and from her widespread experiences speaking to teens around the country about healthy sexuality. She speaks to mothers who struggle with a culturally-promoted perfectionism, emphasizing that we can and should get off the hyper-obsessive "crazy train" that pushes us to make sure our boys have more and achieve more than their peers. She encourages instead a focus on motherly presence and relationship combined with appropriate boundaries as boys move into their teen years.

I first read *Why Gender Matters* in 2005; revisiting the book's 2017 update was helpful, especially considering how the landscape of gender politics has changed in the last ten years. Dr. Leonard Sax surveys the whole arena of gender differences—from specific ways that boys and men see, smell, and hear differently from women, to the distinct ways that each approach risk, school, sex, drugs and alcohol, as well as social media and video games. He insists that close attention should be paid to the scientific analysis of differences between men and women and remarks that "with regard to gender and the understanding of gender, our culture is going in the wrong direction, and the changes are being driven not by science but by ideology." He is not an extreme traditionalist, however, wanting to lock

men and women in stereotyped boxes. On the basis of neurological studies and evidence, he points out that there are certain norms or typical characteristics of men and women, but as is the case with most statistically quantifiable groups, there are outliers—men who have more feminine brains or traits and women who have more masculine brains or traits. Contrary to current gender politics, this does not imply for Sax that these men and women should assume that they are “gay” or “transgender”—it simply means that the understanding of masculinity and femininity needs to be expanded to incorporate these people and their less-typical traits in certain areas. He does not make morality-based assertions; rather, he relies on evidence garnered from personal and scientific studies. “The contemporary assumption,” he says, point-blank, “that every boy [who enjoys more typically feminine pursuits] will be better off in the long term if we put him in a dress, castrate him, and give him female hormones...does not have a strong basis in evidence.”

In terms of education and child-rearing, the most fascinating assertion of Dr. Sax’s book is that gender-blind treatment and instruction actually serves to reinforce the very gender stereotypes which educators are trying to avoid. Sax explains that small details such as sitting side-by-side with a boy and speaking in a more elevated tone can improve his academic performance, whereas girls can interpret the same instructional methods as both threatening and unfriendly. Girls perform better with a smiling instructor, speaking in a lower tone, sitting face-to-face. These are small but powerful points that can assist not only teachers but also parents in the trenches of after-school homework battles. Sax also highlights how certain material, such as art, math, or physics lessons, can be adjusted to be more appealing to both boys and girls by making changes in the order or method of presenting the material. For example, in art, he notes how young girls overwhelmingly prefer to draw colorful, static scenes of people, houses, animals, and nature, whereas boys prefer monochromatic depictions of moments of action, change, or violence. If a female teacher or parent, misunderstanding the effort or intention put into the child’s work, suggests that the boy who has drawn an all-black and white scene of a stick-figure attacking an enemy has not quite completed the assignment and should add more color or static structures, the boy will eventually feel his attempts at art are pointless and unacceptable, and decide that “art is not for boys,” when in fact his particular approach to art was simply not well understood. When boys’ art is cultivated well for what it is, fewer boys abandon art.

Sax points out that the problem overall, throughout the entire cultural realm, is that while we are breaking down all the gender norms which both nature and tradition offer us, we are leaving children and young adults in a vacuum with nothing to aspire to except an ambiguous sense of “personhood.” While valuing personhood is good, boys and girls don’t aspire to be ambiguous persons; rather, boys naturally aspire to manhood and girls to womanhood, and we must teach them what that means. Sax does not agree with the mainstream cultural consensus that gender is simply a social construct; it is, he says, a biological fact, that can be influenced to a certain extent by environment and experience. He points out the strange situation in which liberal activists consider gender to be entirely a social construct *except* in the case of a “transgender” individual: in their case, the gender they believe themselves to be is “inviolable, hardwired, and impossible to change.” He relates the tale of Dr. Kenneth Zucker, a Canadian doctor and leading expert in gender dysphoria (the phenomenon of boys who say they are girls and vice versa). In over 30 years of experience with such cases, Zucker came to realize that it was best to not “transition” children under age nine who say they are the other gender because in many cases, the child grows out of it; on the other hand, he supported adolescents who requested transitioning through the use of cross-sex hormones. In 2015, he was fired without notice and barred from his office because he refused to swim with the current “gender affirmation” tide which insists that children of any age who experience any kind of gender dysphoria should be allowed to begin the transition process immediately, without investigation into mental health or other contributing factors.

It is worth mentioning that in *Why Gender Matters*, Dr. Sax treats homosexuality as a normal, albeit less-typical, variation of gender expression. He also mentions, however, without expressing his own moral view, that something can be medically normal—he uses the analogy of drinking alcohol in moderation—but at the same time can be considered morally wrong according to some cultures and religions. He sees homosexuality as both genetic and environmentally influenced, pointing to studies of twins in which one member of the pair was homosexual. There was a 25 percent chance of the other twin being homosexual if the twins were identical (sharing the same genetics), yet only a 13 percent chance if the twins were fraternal. If homosexuality were entirely genetic, all identical twins of homosexual persons would be genetic, and yet this is not the case. He encourages parents of children who come out as “gay” to be constant in their support for their child as a person, especially because there are concerning statistics as to their suicide risk. (One study cited by Sax indicates that gay men are eight times more likely to commit suicide than straight men in similar life circumstances.) He emphasizes overall, however, that a same-sex attracted boy or girl remains a boy or girl in most key, neurological ways.

While Sax’s book deals with a wide spectrum of male and female gender experience—from the statistically normal to extreme clinical outliers—Dr. Meg Meeker’s book *Strong Mothers, Strong Sons* is intended to cut through the mists of everyday misunderstanding and miscommunication between mothers and their sons. Sax’s book would provide science-based insight into reasons that most of the parenting techniques Dr. Meeker discusses need to be gender-specific—why there are ways for mothers to relate specifically to their *sons*, rather than to an androgynous or unspecified “child.” It is incredibly useful as a mother to understand, for example, that while abilities to concentrate and focus are generally similar between adult men and women, among children, the average five-year-old boy is, in some respects, more similar in his ability to concentrate and focus, not to his female classmates, but to three-and-a-half-year-old girls. Boys lag significantly behind girls in brain development, and this is important to know if one is a mother worried about why her son isn’t learning to read as fast or as easily as his older sister did.

There is much to admire about Dr. Meeker’s work—from her matter-of-fact approach to discussing sexuality with children from the time they are very young into the teen years, to her insistence that mothers can and should maintain a strong relationship with their boys from birth to adulthood. However, this relationship needs, particularly in adolescence, to focus on providing her son access to good male role models and mentors, including, but not limited to, fathers. As one would assume, the nature of the motherly relationship needs to change as boys age, with successive steps of appropriate letting-go moments that allow her son to grow in wisdom, responsibility, and ability to navigate the world of work and personal relationships by the time he is an adult.

One of the most useful and personally consoling chapters in Dr. Meeker’s book is titled “He’s Got a Bow and Arrow (And the Target’s on Your Back).” Insisting that boys need to differentiate themselves from their mothers in order to achieve successively greater levels of independence as well as a deeper understanding of themselves as male, Dr. Meeker points out that the conflict sons have with mothers should not be taken personally. Often mothers are hurt by their sons’ withdrawal or constant contradictions, particularly starting in preadolescence, but in most cases this push-back is healthy and needed. At the same time, she insists that rules and family standards must remain firm, because “boys naturally need to run into things, and if they aren’t hitting fences erected by their parents, then they will have run-ins with teachers, coaches, or even the law.” She points out that while they may rant and rage, if they have grown up confident in a mother’s love and care, they actually feel more respected with the more reasonable limits they come up against, although they often can’t express this. Such words are encouraging when finding oneself in the thick of battle with a son of any age.

Dr. Meeker offers readers 200+ pages of similarly sensible advice, insisting on the need to teach sons respect for God, prayer, and wisdom, using input from sources as diverse as St. Augustine, Aristotle, John Milton, Father John Riccardo, and a loquacious Texan taxi-driver. While incorporating the need to teach sons about faith and spirituality, this book, like Meeker's many others, is accessible to, and lauded by, a wide audience. Dr. Meeker has a strong appeal across the socio-cultural spectrum. Her website lists endorsements from Oprah Radio, NPR, the Today Show, *Psychology Today*, and Fox Radio, among others. It is refreshing to see how her friendly, professional, science- and experience-based presentation of the dynamics of parenthood and childhood can be useful to so many people. While she needs to tread lightly in certain areas, such as premarital sex, she doesn't sacrifice ground morally while she does this. She points out the medical reasons that teenage sex is unhealthy both physically and emotionally; she leaves the door open for parents to utilize this information as they explain to their son the morality of his sexual behavior and choices. Her ability to speak effectively and well to so many—from middle and upper class “hyper-mothers” to hardened Los Angeles teens, is admirable and worthy of praise and imitation. St. Josemaria Escriva, in a 1967 homily to students and professors at the University of Navarra, exhorted them to pursue excellence in “all the immense panorama of work” and in so doing to “passionately love the world” because “there is something holy, something divine, hidden in the most ordinary situations.” Dr. Meeker's love for the world, and the people she encounters in it, is evident. In her close study of the dynamics of many mother-son pairs, she found that only those mothers able to “let go” of their sons were able to receive them back as men. This “letting go” is essentially the art of detachment, which is not only a practical skill but also an important spiritual practice. Detachment is a prominent Biblical theme, from Abraham's willingness to sacrifice his son Isaac, to Jesus's call for his disciples to leave all to come follow him, to Christ's own abandonment of his will into the Father's hands in the garden of Gethsemane. Although she never mentions such passages, Dr. Meeker's writings witness to the fact that spiritual realities always play out their dynamics in the workings of the everyday world, and lives lived in accord with these invisible realities bear very tangible fruits.

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