

BOY MOM

What Your Son
Needs Most
from You



**SNEAK
PEEK**



**SAMPLE
ONLY**

MONICA SWANSON

Praise for
Boy Mom

“In *Boy Mom* Monica Swanson offers readers practical advice and resounding hope that parenting our sons well through all seasons is not only possible but also *enjoyable*. This book is like an essential trail guide that I’ll refer to again and again in the beautiful and challenging adventure of motherhood.”

—BECKY KEIFE, author of *No Better Mom for the Job*
and mom of three spirited boys

“Monica Swanson is the friend we all need in our lives: humble, straightforward, warm, full of wisdom, and short on nonsense—and she knows her stuff like no one else. In *Boy Mom* she holds the bar high yet is forthcoming about her own struggles and imperfections. Inside these pages you’ll find deeply rooted biblical and practical advice along with calls to action when you don’t know where to start. The Boy Mom Manifesto at the end will not only inspire you but also make your heart swell.”

—KATE MERRICK, author of *Here, Now: Unearthing Peace*
and *Presence in an Overconnected World*

“Monica Swanson is the ultimate Boy Mom mentor. While her perspective on parenting is grounded in biblical wisdom, each chapter holds excellent practical tools for how to work out that wisdom on a daily basis in our homes. Of course, we know there aren’t formulas that will *ensure* we get it all right, but we also know that gleaned wisdom from women who have gone before us (and are still in the trenches with us) is invaluable in the wonderful adventure of helping boys become all God created them to be.”

—JEANNIE CUNNION, author of *Mom Set Free*

“*Boy Mom* is packed with relevant insights and practical advice to help parents intentionally raise young men of character, honor, and strength. Parents today face unprecedented challenges, and Monica’s heartfelt encouragement as a mom in the trenches is timely for a generation that longs for moral direction.”

—KARI KAMPAKIS, mom of four girls and author of *10 Ultimate Truths Girls Should Know*

“All who are parents, especially Boy Moms, will devour this book! Monica Swanson shares from her experience of raising four boys. Her transparency, candor, tears, and prayers have led to a book full of wisdom and incredible insight into what a boy needs to reach his destiny.”

—STEPHANIE FAST, fellow Boy Mom, author of *She Is Mine*,
speaker, and advocate for vulnerable children

“Every time I told my dad I was pregnant with another boy, he responded with ‘That’s wonderful! The world needs more godly men.’ I couldn’t agree more. Thankfully, Monica has written a guide to help you partner with God to raise these needed men of character. In the pages of *Boy Mom*, you will find a wise mentor who understands the challenge of energetic boys and points you to truth and resources to help you be the kind of Boy Mom you want to be.”

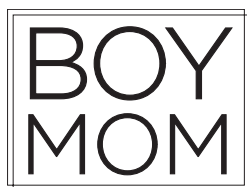
—HEATHER MACFADYEN, mom of four boys and creator
and host of the *Don’t Mom Alone* podcast

“As a Boy Dad, this is the book I’ve been searching for. These are the wise words of a fun friend, written clearly enough to provide a blueprint for success in parenting and accessibly enough that I don’t feel alone in the journey. Through *Boy Mom* Monica is helping me become a better dad.”

—ROGER THOMPSON, author of *We Stood Upon Stars*

“Monica Swanson casts a profoundly inspiring vision for the lives of our boys and the depth of our role as Boy Moms in shaping who they become. Each chapter is well researched, informative, and brimming with invaluable advice, strategies, and insight that left me feeling more capable than ever to help my sons live healthy, curiosity-driven, Jesus-centered lives. Perhaps the most powerful endorsement of this book is my personal testimony: *it works!* In just a few short weeks, I have seen my relationships with my ‘gentlemen in training’ grow in respect, communication, and trust—and the same goes for their relationships with their sister and father.”

—HOKU CLEMENTS, recording artist known for “Perfect Day” and “Another Dumb Blonde,” as well as the album *Called by Name*



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MONICA SWANSON

FOREWORD BY WENDY SPEAKE



WATERBROOK

Boy Mom

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Trade Paperback ISBN 978-0-525-65271-7

eBook ISBN 978-0-525-65272-4

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Cover design by Kristopher K. Orr; photography by Robin Skjoldborg, Getty Images

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Published in the United States by WaterBrook, an imprint of the Crown Publishing Group, a division of Penguin Random House LLC, New York.

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Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Swanson, Monica, author.

Title: Boy mom : what your son needs most from you / Monica Swanson.

Description: First Edition. | Colorado Springs : WaterBrook, 2019. | Includes bibliographical references.

Identifiers: LCCN 2018049426 | ISBN 9780525652717 (pbk.) | ISBN 9780525652724 (electronic)

Subjects: LCSH: Mothers and sons—Religious aspects—Christianity. | Parenting—Religious aspects—Christianity. | Child rearing—Religious aspects—Christianity.

Classification: LCC BV4529.18 .S93 2019 | DDC 248.8/431—dc23

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2018049426>

Printed in the United States of America

2019—First Edition

10 9 8 7 6 5 4 3 2 1

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To Dave:

*Without you, none of this would be!
I've always said I know God loves you
because He gave you four awesome boys.
The truth is, I know God loves me because
He gave me five.*



*To Josiah, Jonah, Luke, and Levi:
Thank you for giving me the best job in the world.
I'm so proud to be your mom!*

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FOREWORD

A few summers back, during a family trip to Hawaii, my husband and I loaded our three young sons into a rental car and drove from Honolulu along the coast to the North Shore of Oahu. We stopped for a break halfway to our intended destination, allowing the boys to get their wiggles out on a sandy beach. Brody, our creative middle child, climbed a nearby tree on a grassy knoll, joyfully singing silly songs over the roar of the crashing waves. Caleb, our oldest, and Asher, our youngest at age seven, splashed in the water together.

It sounds idyllic, I know, but the reality was that my husband and I were wiped out from the tiresome bickering in the car and the constant whining for snacks. That's why we pulled over. Not to give them a beautiful break but because we needed one—desperately!

As the children played, we flopped down beside each other on the powdery white beach and asked the same questions we'd already asked ourselves some billion-trillion times before. "What are we doing wrong? How can we do it better? Why is raising boys so stinkin' hard?" Sadly, we didn't come to any conclusions before loading our sandy crew back into the car.

Forty-five minutes later we veered off the coastal highway and took a right turn up a country road. The green hillside overlooking the ocean was dotted with homes, all landscaped with flowering bushes and tropical trees. We followed the simple directions until we arrived at the house we were looking for. Monica Swanson was outside waiting for us, along with a few of her sons. Her husband, Dave, was out back, building a garden planter from the ancient volcanic rock he'd unearthed from their land.

Over the next few hours, our collective brood of seven boys played together. Our husbands walked around the property, chatting about plants

and life on the island. Meanwhile, Monica and I occupied the kitchen (as moms are prone to do) and talked about raising sons. I remember saying to her that my goal wasn't to raise boys but to raise men—good and godly men. The trouble was, I didn't have anyone telling me how to do it. She nodded and smiled, and then with her signature style of sharing wisdom hewn from real-life experience, Monica told me some of the choices she was making to help her boys prepare for manhood.

Today, it is my joy to invite you into our conversation—a conversation for moms everywhere who are equally passionate about raising their sons to be good and godly men. Monica is a wellspring of wisdom and a generous host to all who visit her at her virtual home online or in the pages of this book. As Monica herself would say, “Aloha. You are welcome here.”

—Wendy Speake, coauthor of *Triggers: Exchanging Parents' Angry Reactions for Gentle Biblical Responses*

What Matters Most?

Keeping the Big Picture in mind is one of the most important things parents can do, and also one of the hardest.

—DR. T. BERRY BRAZELTON

As I pulled my minivan into the cul-de-sac, tears surged up from the deepest part of me, just begging a chance to escape. I forced them back, turned off the car, and got out with a sigh. Opening the back door, I lifted out the baby's car seat and gazed down at Jonah, who had screamed through most of the playgroup and even more during the drive home, only to fall asleep as we entered our own neighborhood. *Typical*. Next I walked around to unbuckle three-year-old Josiah and lift him from his toddler seat. The happy sparkle in his eyes made me smile, but at the same time a single tear snuck out and slid down my cheek. I brushed it away quickly, but not quickly enough; Josiah's smile turned to concern as he asked, "What's wrong, Mommy?"

"Oh, nothing!" I forced a laugh and said something about the sun in my eyes, which must have satisfied him, because he turned and skipped toward the house. I paused a moment before following him and repeated his question out loud: "What *is* wrong, Mommy?" Then I continued the

conversation in my head: *I'm failing at this whole mom thing. That's what's wrong. Failing. I've got the one job I've always dreamed of, and I can't get the first thing right.*

As I entered the house and got the boys settled, the list of my shortcomings ran through my mind again—a list that seemed to grow each week at playgroup. On this day I'd listened to one mom humble-bragging about the baby food she had made and how it “wasn't nearly as good as the last batch.” (I'd never made homemade baby food. What was wrong with me?) Then a boy just a few months older than Josiah plopped down in his mom's lap with a book and started reading to her. A three-year-old. Reading! (It hadn't even occurred to me to try teaching Josiah when he was so young.) When two boys started a tug-of-war over a toy, I watched their moms' opposite reactions. One got right in the middle, refereeing the boys and trying to turn the scuffle into a teachable moment, while the other rolled her eyes and mumbled something about how “boys need to work things out for themselves.” Meanwhile I sat wondering which of them was right (suddenly becoming aware of yet one more thing I felt unprepared to deal with).

My head spun with “shoulds” and “coulds” and opinions and pressure. *So much pressure.* “What really matters?” I asked my husband hours later as we lay in bed and stared at the ceiling fan spinning above us on another humid Hawaiian night. “Every mom I meet, every article I read . . . they're all telling me something different I should be doing.” I wouldn't—couldn't—do it all. If only someone could narrow it all down and tell me what was worth focusing on and what wasn't. I wanted desperately to know what matters most when it comes to raising boys.

More than fifteen years have passed since that scene, yet it remains clearly stamped on my memory. That disastrous playdate happened soon after we moved to Hawaii for my husband's medical residency training, which meant he was gone most of the time. (One night we pulled up to the hospital ER to bring him dinner, and one of the boys blurted out, “Oh yay! We're at Daddy's house!”) I felt lonely and tired and more than a little over-

whelmed. I wanted so badly to be a great mom, but it was a lot harder than I had imagined it would be.

As difficult as I found those years, they gifted me with a humble awareness that I wasn't the naturally awesome mom I had always told myself I would be and the realization that it would take much more than some idealistic notions to fulfill my dream of raising amazing kids.

Not long after the minivan meltdown, I found out I was pregnant with our third son, Luke. I knew I must find a new way to approach my days as a Boy Mom if I wanted to parent with no regrets. I committed to becoming a purposeful, prayerful mom, bravely choosing not to listen to every message that bombarded me but to instead focus on the few things that mattered most. I determined to set my aim on the future men I was raising and on how I might equip them to get there. I also learned to take care of myself, parenting with more dignity and less emotion.

As years went by, I gained confidence and found myself enjoying who my boys were becoming—and liking *who I was becoming*. Seeing the current of culture moving quickly in a direction I did not want my kids to go, I determined to be purposeful in the choices we made about our time and family life. We simplified our schedules. Our days became less hectic and way more fun. My boys were growing up to be thoughtful, kind, and hardworking. We actually enjoyed one another. I knew I had turned a big corner when my husband and I began to consider having one more baby. (“Maybe we’ll get a girl this time!”) Nine short months later, son number four was born.

I started a blog that year, sharing stories and lessons from our family’s life. I met women from all over the world and realized that a whole lot of moms were seeking encouragement for their boy-raising journey. When I wrote a post titled “What a Teenage Boy Needs Most from His Mom,” it struck a chord. That post was shared all over the world, and nearly two million people read it in just over a week. The comments and emails that followed confirmed that a lot of moms want to raise boys to be great men but feel overwhelmed with the task.

People especially responded to the fact that I spoke of enjoying the teenage years with my boys. Apparently, word on the street is that all the fun of raising boys ends when they become teenagers. People tell us that as they move toward adolescence, our boys will pull away and turn to their peers for acceptance and approval. Teenage boys are expected to experiment and rebel, to spend their free time gaming and sexting. We're told to prepare to be left in the cold then, to sit and remember the good old days when we felt so close to our sweet little boys. *Ouch.*

That has not been my experience at all, and I was eager to encourage moms that it didn't have to be their experience either. I have continued over the past few years to write blog posts on all kinds of topics related to raising boys. I have covered sibling squabbles and social media, puberty and pornography. I've shared honest challenges, funny stories, and lessons I have learned.

But there is only so much space in a blog post. And readers have asked me to share more: more specifics, more examples, and more practical help on raising boys to be great men. Moms want a game plan for raising boys who do not conform to culture but stand strong in their convictions. They also want to know, just as I did all those years ago, *what really matters most.*

So I am writing this book to give you, my fellow Boy Mom, the best of what I've learned, insights I would have treasured earlier in my journey. I want to share my personal experiences as well as advice and ideas I've gathered from my readers, friends, and years of study. I want to encourage you in your relationship with your son. I want to say again (and again and again) that, yes, you can raise a great son even in today's culture.

But I also want to say honestly that it won't happen by chance.

In fact, without intentional parenting there is a good chance that all those things people warn you about will happen. Your son is more likely to be pulled downstream by the current of culture if you do not actively engage in upstream parenting.

You'll see as you read the chapters that follow that I'm not suggesting we can control our sons or that their entire futures depend on us. I believe in a

very big God, and I know without a doubt that He is guiding and caring for our sons every step of the way. I also believe, however, that this very big God has given you and me the great privilege and responsibility of parenting with intention and heart. My goal is to help you as a Boy Mom embrace your role with joy and confidence. I want to equip you, encourage you, and inspire you to do that upstream parenting. I promise it's not more work; it's intentional work. It's parenting with purpose.

And it is the most rewarding work you'll ever do.

In the pages that follow, I will share with you what I believe really matters most: equipping boys in twelve areas where they most need our guidance to grow up well. You'll find stories and research, but most of all, you'll discover a lot of practical help. At the end of each chapter, you'll find a bonus resource that offers a practical application or specific guidelines for your son, whatever his age. Some of the principles we cover are likely to feel more natural to you than others, and that's okay. *I feel the same way.* Remember, though we Boy Moms share much in common, we are each unique, and our boys are unique.

My hope is that all moms can benefit from the ideas, tools, and resources we'll be considering. In fact, teachers, grandparents, caregivers, stepmoms, and aunts—all who have a role in raising boys—are welcome here. If you are a single mom, I know you carry an extra heavy load, and I pray this book is helpful to you. If your son has special needs, please know that I'm thinking of you too and that I feel confident you'll find some encouragement here. I couldn't address every family situation, but I promise I had you on my mind as I researched and wrote. I often wished I could turn each chapter into its own book because there was just *so much to say*. Because of this you will find a number of links to my blog, where I have written additional articles or created printable downloads just for you!

If you've read my blog, you probably know that I am a Christian and that my husband and I look to the Bible as our greatest guide in parenting and in life. So you will find my faith and biblical principles woven throughout the

chapters; there is no way to share my family's story without them. Whatever your faith perspective, I think you'll find encouragement to help you in your parenting journey.

As we set out together in this book, I should mention that I have one son in college and another one just behind him. These two are growing up to be amazing young men of God—wise, independent, hardworking, and a lot of fun. They've also maintained a close relationship with our family. This season is so rewarding! But I also have two younger sons at home, so I hope you'll keep in mind that I am parenting each day right alongside you. My job is far from over!

Thank you for joining me on this parenting adventure. It is my heart's desire and genuine prayer that you finish this book feeling equipped and inspired. Whether your son is a babe in your arms or seven or seventeen, I am so glad you are here. No matter our differences, being a Boy Mom bonds us in a special way. We share the goal of giving our sons all they need to be incredible, successful, well adjusted, thoughtful, productive members of society.

So let's dive in, shall we?

A Connection That Lasts

Building a Healthy Relationship with Your Son

There is an endearing tenderness in the love of a mother to a son that transcends all other affections of the heart.

—WASHINGTON IRVING

R*elationship. Bonding. Attachment. Connection.* These are mom words. As women we are wired to be in relationship, and nothing is more satisfying than a strong connection to people we love.

Yet we don't always understand our boys, who sometimes seem like foreign creatures. I hear about it all the time through blog comments and emails, the universal cry of Boy Moms everywhere: there's so much noise, dirt, energy, and stink. *And why is it so hard for boys to just pee in the toilet?*

Women want assurance that their sons love them and need them, but boys tend to be less open than girls about their needs, thoughts, and feelings. Even if they are chatty as little boys, they often grow quieter when they hit their teenage years. Males think differently, process differently, and are wired

differently than we are in nearly every way. Because of this, women sometimes don't "get" their sons. Some of the women I hear from grew up with only sisters or imagined raising daughters. And now they find themselves with a son (or two or three), and they feel lost.

I was raised with only brothers, and still my sons have confused me plenty. My second son was an absolute handful during his toddler years. He was physically rough, impulsive, and seemed to prefer throwing a good fit over all other forms of communication. This caught me off guard because my first son had a more mellow temperament, which led me to the false conclusion that the ease of our relationship was normal or due to my naturally awesome parenting skills. (Ha!) The shocking reality of the Boy Mom life hit me when I still had just two boys and was pregnant with the third. It was our third year living in Hawaii, far away from our extended families, and I was starved for social interaction. I felt trapped in our small home with only our two boys for company. My husband was in his medical residency program, working 110 hours a week, and I had yet to make any real friends on the island. At that time we went to a young but fast-growing church in Honolulu that had a popular pastor. He was funny and talented and kind of a rock star, as far as pastors go.

One day after church I met the pastor's wife, who was equally amazing. I felt like I'd struck the jackpot when she invited me to join her and a handful of women for a Saturday morning Bible study in her home! As a bonus, her teenage daughter offered to look after my two boys during the study. I looked forward to this time all week.

Bright and early on Saturday morning, I drove across the island, parked my car, and walked to the front door, nervous but hopeful. *Maybe I'll make some friends*, I thought. As I entered their beautiful home, I noted a lovely marble table showcasing a delicate porcelain figurine of a Japanese fisherman. I turned to greet all the women, and my two boys walked in behind me.

As I said hello and hugged the pastor's wife, over her shoulder I saw the most horrifying scene. My two-year-old son was toddling full speed ahead,

hand outstretched toward the marble table and the porcelain figurine. I opened my mouth, but as if in a nightmare, words would not come out. The whole world slowed down as I watched my son grab the delicate figurine and hurl it down on the shiny tile-floor hallway.

I gasped as every woman turned to watch the figurine fly (I still picture it in slow motion) and shatter into countless pieces across the tile.

I was mortified. Though the pastor's wife responded with absolute grace, I wanted to disappear. I awkwardly stuck around for the study, then quietly cried on the drive home. *Why does this have to be so hard?* I asked myself. *So much for making friends.*

I'm pretty sure that was the last time I attended the women's study, but it was not the last time my son embarrassed me publicly. After many months of concern over this son's impulsive behavior, particularly in the form of running into things and throwing random objects, I finally arranged for a child psychologist to evaluate him. The psychologist, a kind, older gentleman, came to our home on a Saturday morning. He observed my boys for a time and asked me a long list of questions. Confident he would give me a helpful diagnosis, I finally asked him for some feedback.

He offered me empathy and, in light of my husband's long work hours, suggested I find extra support. But as for my son? He responded that Jonah was indeed a handful but that he appeared to be very much in the normal spectrum and was likely to outgrow his challenging behaviors. With a genuine smile he offered his professional diagnosis: my son was, quite simply, "a boy."

Jonah eventually outgrew his socially unacceptable behaviors, not overnight but over years. I grew as well, developing greater patience and acceptance as I learned to teach and train him consistently. Still I often found myself bewildered by my young boys. Their energy exhausted me, and their attraction to dirt frustrated me. And the noise! I struggled to discern what was ordinary behavior and what was not, and it took me some time to recognize that much of my mental exhaustion was a result of spending so much time alone with my boys. Yet finding extra support, as the kind child

psychologist suggested, wasn't an easy task. After a long search I finally hired a babysitter and was delighted to finally have a date night with my husband. When we came home after the first night out and asked how it went, she said, "Your son wanted me to play with Transformers! I have no idea how to play with Transformers—I grew up with a sister!" I tried to hide my frustration, and I really wanted to remind her that she was *being paid to play with Transformers*. But deep down I understood. I've never really enjoyed Transformers either.

Here's the good news: you don't have to love dirt, noise, or, thankfully, Transformers to have a great relationship with your son. Sure, you might have to endure some of these things (and occasionally you'll be surprised to learn to love them), but your son needs you just the way you are and will continue to need you in every stage of his life.

When he's young and vulnerable, he needs a safe and secure place to rest, someone with whom he can simply be 100 percent himself. He needs your tender hugs and your fresh-baked cookies. As he grows up, he will continue to need you—to celebrate his successes and to love him unconditionally when he fails. And when his voice starts to crack and his hormones start to run wild, he'll need you, perhaps more than ever, to reassure him that he's normal and that the truest things about him haven't changed.

Do not let anyone tell you that boys at any age or stage do not need their moms. Yes, your role will change (and we'll talk about that), but your presence in your son's life is crucial. When a mom has raised her son well, her love will be like a strong anchor, providing security and stability amid the currents of culture and the storms of life.

But love alone will not be enough. To develop a healthy and lasting relationship with your son, you need to nurture an environment of mutual trust and respect. Above all these things, there must be an abundance of grace. Though we'll never get it perfect, being intentional about these four relational qualities—love, trust, respect, and grace—will provide a solid foundation for your son's future.

FIRST COMES LOVE

An inherent, fierce, and protective love connects a mother and son from the very beginning. I remember my baby boys staring up at me, utterly content. My own mom would peer over my shoulder and say, “You are his *whole world* right now.” And everything in my world felt right.

In the early years a mom represents nourishment, safety, and security. When a boy is hurt, sad, or lonely, he longs for his mother’s love. Moms are innately aware of their sons’ needs, often knowing what is wrong before a doctor or an expert can figure it out. This may be hard to explain, but ask any seasoned mom and she will agree.

Then boys begin to grow up a bit, and our love must grow up with them. This shift in the relationship has caught me off guard more than once. Last summer when thirteen-year-old Luke and I were walking down the street, he casually took hold of my hand. Though we’ve held hands countless times through his thirteen years, it had been a while, and I was suddenly laser focused on this moment. *He’s holding my hand! This might be the last time. God, please let him hold on just a second longer!* Though he seemed completely normal about it, I was a bit nervous for Luke’s sake, that his friends might see us and laugh. I pretty much held my breath as we walked on, him chatting away, our hands swinging as we walked. When we got to the crosswalk, he naturally let go of my hand to push the Walk button, and finally I breathed. I smiled to myself then, knowing that I may have just experienced a very sweet “last.”

The truth is that I have lain awake at night, thinking of all the parenting “lasts” that I did not notice, that I *cannot* remember. I don’t remember the last time my older boys held my hand. I cannot remember the final time I nursed any of them or changed a diaper. We often don’t recognize a “last” until it is long gone. Like most moms, I have replayed in my mind a thousand times how it felt to snuggle my boys as infants and what they looked like sleeping in their toddler beds. I’m certain I’ll be reminiscing about hand

holding, little boy kisses, and babies staring into my face well into my old age. And I'm a richer woman for every memory.

A mother's heart is a deep place, and nothing can stir the waters quite like the love of her children. Yet despite our sentimental ways, the love we give must mature along with our sons. We need to pick up on what is no longer comfortable or appropriate for our sons. The hand holding and pet names need to end when your son signals you, not when you're ready. Whereas love for your little boy might have been communicated through snuggles and baby talk, love for your older boy might mean listening to him rattle off sports facts or making him a late-night sandwich or two. A wise Boy Mom is a student of her son, watching, listening, and picking up on cues about how he feels most loved as he grows.

Of course, every child gives and receives love uniquely, as you've probably figured out, particularly if you have more than one child. I've found Gary Chapman and Ross Campbell's book *The Five Love Languages of Children* to be helpful in learning the ways my sons most naturally give and receive love. Chapman and Campbell wrote, "Every child has a special way of perceiving love. There are basically five ways children (indeed, all people) speak and understand emotional love. They are physical touch, words of affirmation, quality time, gifts, and acts of service. . . . You may truly love your child, but unless [he] feels it—unless you speak the love language that communicates to [him] your love—[he] will not feel loved."¹

Knowing the ways your son feels loved will help you support him well as he grows up. This is especially important during his teenage years when you might experience a bit more space between the two of you.

One way to communicate love and support for our sons is to create a warm and loving environment in our homes. Boys appreciate it when we are lighthearted and playful, quick to laugh and have fun, even during stressful seasons. Our sons notice when we make the best of things, and they learn from our example. When times are hard—when appliances break down or the bills pile up—we need not hide our challenges, but we can certainly show

our children what it looks like to face difficulties with positivity and faith. My home is never as organized as I'd like it to be, but I do what I can to make it warm and welcoming. I often have peaceful or upbeat music playing in the background, and I like to fill the home with the pleasant fragrances of candles or something baking in the oven. There is also no doubt that when my home is uncluttered, everyone's mood improves.

We've all heard that the mom sets the thermostat for the family, and I've found that to be true. Your general attitude can fill the home with comforting peace, skin-prickling stress, or anything in between. Be aware that whatever environment you establish will be what your son associates with his home long into his life. If you can create a loving and comfortable environment, he's more likely to want to hang out there.

In their encouraging book *The Lifegiving Home*, Sally Clarkson and her adult daughter, Sarah, talked about the culture of a home. Sarah observed, "Crafting a culture of love—gracious, sacrificial, validating, forgiving love—requires a loving and generous heart. It also requires planning, intention, mature responses, words of life and affirmation, patience, and the investment of endless hours. It also means choosing, again and again, to focus on what really matters in life."²

BUILDING MUTUAL TRUST

The moment your infant son needs something and you meet that need, he begins learning to trust you. When your baby is hungry, you feed him. When he cries, you comfort him. As a boy grows up, trust is still about meeting needs, but his needs become more complex, tangled up with his own developing character and his desire for authenticity in those he looks to as role models. This gets more serious as kids grow older because they begin to pick up on our character, including both our integrity and our hypocrisy.

When my boys were little, I discovered anger issues I never knew I had. (Kids have a way of revealing these things, don't they?) I developed an ugly

habit of losing my temper and yelling at my sons and then feeling deep sorrow and shame. One day, after blowing up at all three boys, I came to them to apologize and ask forgiveness. My oldest son, Josiah, about eight at the time, looked at me with kind eyes and said, “I forgive you, Mom. But sometimes I don’t know why you even ask because I know you’ll just do it again.”

His words hurt my heart deeply, but his honesty convinced me to begin taking my anger problem more seriously. It propelled me to dig deep to decide what kind of mom I wanted to be, to read books about anger, and even to ask for prayer from women who were further along in their parenting journey. As I realized the effect my anger had on my kids, I was motivated to show them authentically what it looked like to make moment-by-moment choices to control my emotions, just as I was encouraging them to do. Though I will personally never forget my worst moments of losing my temper, my boys have told me they don’t remember. I am incredibly grateful for this.

Our sons need to be able to trust that we mean what we say, whether we’re making a promise, asking forgiveness, or teaching them a character trait. Your son’s ability to depend on you will subconsciously shape his view of life far beyond your relationship. In her book *Strong Mothers, Strong Sons*, Meg Meeker said, “You are his world for the first few years of his life, but equally important, you are the prism through which he will see all women. If you are trustworthy, he can trust his sister, his grandmother, his teacher, and yes, his wife.”³

Especially as our sons hit adolescence and become self-conscious (sometimes agonizingly so), we must be aware of ways we might break their trust. If your son thinks you are likely to share stories about him to friends or on social media, don’t count on him opening up to you much. If your son thinks you will laugh at him, scold him, or tune him out when he tells you things, he is unlikely to share his life with you. If you stare at your phone or computer while your son is talking to you, he will eventually quit doing it.

The reverse is also true: If you make yourself available to listen to him share the small daily things of life—whether he’s rattling off what happened

at recess or recalling the movie scene he feels compelled to share *in excruciating detail*—he’s likely to come to you when he wants to talk about the bigger things. A mom who stops and listens to her little boy’s rambling stories is likely to later be entrusted with the news of her teenage boy’s first crush or given a glimpse of his future dreams and fears.

You will never regret the time and energy you pour into your young son. Though there are no guarantees for how he will grow up, you will always know you did your best to lay a firm foundation of trust between the two of you.

As boys mature, they need to know that trust goes both ways; to maintain a healthy relationship with you, your son must also prove himself trustworthy. We need to make it clear that lying or using any form of deception is unacceptable and fractures our trust. I used to tell my preschool-age boys that the truth is always the right thing, and even if what they have to tell me may get them in trouble, they can be sure that lying would get them into much more.

I use the word *trust* a lot these days with our seven-year-old, Levi. I want to motivate him to be a young man of his word, so I look for practical opportunities for him to prove himself trustworthy. Recently, ten minutes before we needed to be out the door, he asked if he could play a game on my phone. My knee-jerk reaction was to say no, but then I saw a teachable moment. Since he was fully prepared to go and I wasn’t, I suggested a little experiment: he could use my phone for the ten minutes before we left, but when I asked for it back, he must give it to me without *any* resistance. I also reminded him that if he held up his end of the bargain, he would be proving himself trustworthy, making it more likely I would let him do this again in the future. He happily began his game, and I ran off to get ready to go. Since it took me a little longer than the ten minutes I’d predicted (it always does!), I was pleasantly surprised to see Levi standing beside the car with my phone when I rushed out. He handed it to me and smiled. He was intent on being considered trustworthy because he wanted another chance to play on my

phone, and in the process of proving his trustworthiness, he learned a bit about the effect of being a man of his word.

I have explained to Levi that his older brothers now get to do so many awesome things because they have proven themselves *trustworthy*. I've also made it clear that if his brothers lose our trust, they will lose some of those cool opportunities. Though Levi may not fully understand this concept, I believe at some level he does, and he is inspired to work toward the same goal.

AN EXPECTATION OF RESPECT

Respect is another building block of a healthy relationship between moms and sons. God commands children to honor their parents. Not only is this pleasing to the Lord (see Colossians 3:20), but, as my husband and I like to remind our boys, it is the one commandment that comes with a promise: "Honor your father and your mother, so that you may live long in the land the LORD your God is giving you" (Exodus 20:12).

Although a son who is secure in his mother's love may naturally feel respect for her, we still need to intentionally instruct our sons in how to show respect in tangible ways. This happens over time through consistent practice and modeling. A son should demonstrate respect for his mother through his words, his body language, and gestures that show honor.

Though love and respect work best hand in hand, many moms seem to feel more natural at one than the other. You've likely observed a mom who smothers her son with a needy or dysfunctional love and allows him to treat her disrespectfully. On the other end of the spectrum are the moms who demand respect yet neglect to show a tender love to their sons. We are wise to try to keep the two in balance.

I am grateful I do not have to choose between being my sons' friend and being their authority. I believe that my boys respect me because we have developed a relationship where they trust that what I do is out of love. Love and respect go together; they complement each other.

When my sons disagree or get frustrated with me in some way (because, obviously, moms *can be* annoying), they know they are still expected to speak to me with respect. I don't tolerate shouting, door slamming, eye rolling, or any rudeness. When a disrespectful tone creeps into a conversation, I am quick to put the brakes on and remind my sons that respect is the standard in our home. This is about me, yes, but also about the broader implications. My son is likely to treat his future wife much as he treats me; I am teaching him to treat me, and all people, with kindness, gentleness, and respect.

While a boy's respect for his mom is part of a healthy relationship, our sons need to feel respected by us as well. In his popular marriage book *Love and Respect*, Emerson Eggerichs teaches that a woman's greatest need is to feel loved and a man's greatest need is to feel respected. Eggerichs suggests that these are innate needs, evident even in early childhood.

This concept came up recently while I was talking to my friend Catherine, who mentored me when my kids were younger and whose sons are a few years ahead of mine. I had asked what she considered the keys were to the respect her now-adult sons show toward her. She said she thinks it began when her sons were young and she deliberately spoke to them with respect. "I felt that I was setting an example for how a woman should speak to them," she said. "I hoped my boys would one day marry girls who treated them with respect, so I wanted to show them what that looks like."

Thinking back to earlier years, I can recall Catherine calling her sons "sir" a number of times. She said things like "Trey, sir, please bring your plate" or "Thank you, Dylan, sir!" She was light and playful about it, yet now I see how that developed over the years. As Catherine raised her sons in an environment of respect, they grew up to reciprocate.

Her approach makes great sense in light of Eggerichs's more recent book *Mother and Son*, in which he wrote, "I am calling you as a mother to become an expert in the language of respect that your son speaks. Not only because it will bless and energize your son but also because it will enable you to show him how to be a respectful person."⁴

When I first read that, I remembered with regret times I have scolded my teenage sons as if they were still children. Now that I understand this, I have begun to be more purposeful about using “respect words” with my growing boys, and I believe it makes a difference. My boys still need correction from their momma at times, but when I give it, I try to offer it in a way that honors their developing masculinity.

THE GLUE OF GRACE

If love, trust, and respect build the foundation for our relationship with our sons, then grace is the glue that holds them all together. *Grace*, by definition, is “unmerited favor.”⁵ Nothing strengthens a relationship like the gift of grace.

As Boy Moms who will inevitably be challenged and stretched by these wonderful, exasperating creatures, we need to be saturated in an understanding of grace. In the introduction to her book *Mom Set Free*, my friend Jeannie Cunnion was speaking to all of us when she wrote, “Friend, to give our kids grace we have to believe and accept God’s grace for us! Because we can’t give what we haven’t received.”⁶ We all live under God’s grace, whether or not we’re aware of it. Our very existence is grace. Every morning that we awake, it is because of His grace that we get another day. And as Christians we are saved by grace (see Ephesians 2:8–9). Those who understand and appreciate grace are more likely to extend it to the people in their lives, including and especially the kids.

Please keep in mind that grace is not going soft on sin or ignoring an issue. Grace does not overlook wrongdoing; rather, it deals with error in an environment of love and support. Grace might involve giving our sons appropriate consequences but doing so without adding shame. Grace means that after dealing with an offense, we offer forgiveness and then move on rather than replaying our sons’ mistakes over and over. Recently, when my youngest son got into trouble and found his way to the corner of the sofa,

clearly feeling down on himself, I showed him grace by snuggling up next to him to read a book. I saw the look of relief on his face, and it reminded me of how comforted I feel when I recognize God's goodness to me after I've blown it.

Grace will come through in our tone, in what we say, and even in our body language. When we know how much we've been forgiven and remember what it was like to be our sons' ages, we will be much more likely to extend grace when they need it the most.

In the chapters that follow, as we consider together all the areas in which we want to equip and challenge our sons, let's keep in mind that the thread of grace must be woven throughout. Because your kid will mess up. *You will mess up.* But a relationship built on love, trust, respect, and grace will be strong enough to stand every test.



MAKE IT PERSONAL

1. What are some ways you have established a loving environment for your son to grow up in? What additional steps could you take to work on that? What is your son's love language, and how might you communicate love to him in a way that really speaks to his heart?
2. Can you think of some ways you show yourself trustworthy to your son? Have you broken your son's trust, and if so, how might you work to repair that? What practical opportunities could you give your son to learn what it means to earn your trust?
3. In what ways does your son show you respect, and in what ways might you teach him how to better show respect? How can you show your growing son the respect that he inherently craves?

4. When you think of God's grace, how do you feel? In what ways have you extended grace to your son, showing him that he does not need to earn your love, nor will he ever need to earn God's love? If you do not think he has received this message, how about making plans for a special date with your son where you can communicate this truth clearly?

Twenty Ways to Make Your Son Feel Loved

1. Stop what you're doing and really listen to him. Every boy has some things to say if we'll give him time.
2. Scratch his back. Nothing says love better than a back scratch.
3. Let him pick an activity the two of you can do together. Then do it.
4. Speak encouraging words of life to him. Name his gifts. Compliment him. The world will tear him down plenty, and a mom's words can make a huge difference.
5. Let him overhear you speaking well of him to someone else.
6. Hug him daily. He may outgrow the habit of asking you for hugs, but he will never outgrow needing them.
7. Bake his favorite cookies (or bread or whatever) for no reason except "because I love you."
8. Sit on the edge of his bed and give him space to talk or just feel the security of having you near for a few minutes. Be relaxed and unhurried.
9. Laugh at his jokes.
10. Find some good jokes to tell him.
11. Spontaneously stop for ice cream or something that might surprise him.
12. Blast some good music in the car and sing together.

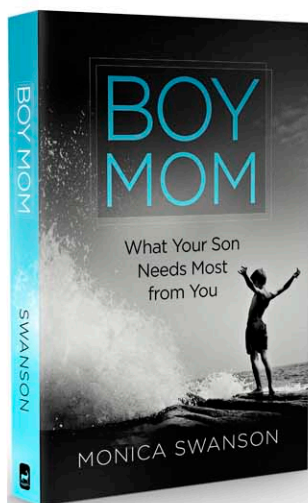
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13. Encourage him to dream about his future and tell him you want to dream with him. Then listen and do not judge.
14. Buy him something that represents his growing up, such as a planner to organize his days or a tie or a good pair of running shoes. Show him that you see the young man emerging from within him.
15. Speak words of confidence about his future. Your sense of security makes him feel secure too.
16. Tell him an embarrassing story about when you were his age. Being able to laugh at your own childhood will help him see his in proper perspective.
17. Hold his hand. Give him a shoulder rub. Give him lots of physical love appropriate for his age.
18. Leave him a note of encouragement on paper, in a text, or in an email—whatever he will connect with most.
19. Take time to help him clean or redecorate his bedroom. Let him choose his own style or theme. It will make him feel grown up and responsible, and he will see your selfless concern for his space and happiness.
20. Put your phone (computer/device) away and just be with him, with no agenda. Your undivided attention speaks love to your son.

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