

Express Yourself: What Boys Need to Hear



Social expectations, stereotypes and stigmas are everywhere.

One of the earliest taught stigmas can be damaging to young boys as they grow into their adult years: who is allowed to be emotional and who is not. This stereotype is damaging for boys that are trying to understand their emotions and feelings while being told to keep it together. All humans experience feelings and emotions that can be hard to navigate, but no person should be told that they shouldn't express them.

Lakeeta Watts, a Community Health Worker Network Coordinator in Milwaukee, Wis., has noticed that the boys she works with sometimes have a wall built up during group discussions. Those walls, she explains, are from years of trying to fit societal norms.

"Sometimes boys try to hold back and don't cry and won't open up about their experiences and emotions," Watts said. "You can tell that something there had a wall built up. Males are told that they have to be strong and can't cry, but boys need to know that they are allowed to feel whatever they are feeling. Everybody is human and those feelings matter."

To help children, especially boys, open up about their feelings in her youth program, Watts shares her own trauma experience that impacted her family. Four years ago, Watts' son was hit by a truck which her other children witnessed. That experience changed them.

Watts' children started individual and family therapy, but something was missing: her children weren't being heard. She always encouraged her children to be open about their feelings, but talking to others who understood the pain they went through made a positive difference.

To help her children navigate their grief journey, Watts started a youth program that focused on children who experienced some sort of trauma. Trauma, Watts explains, includes a wide spectrum of experiences. Children who experience trauma may have a hard time explaining what they are going through and what they are feeling, which is why sharing those thoughts are so important.

"My children were consistently having nightmares even though they were in therapy and trying different techniques," Watts said. "My kids were struggling because overall they didn't feel like they were being heard. Sometimes kids feel uncomfortable opening up in our group but once they hear me and my kids' personal experience, they feel more comfortable."

Once kids talk about their experiences navigating grief, then the complex emotions that come with may be easier to handle. However, getting to that point isn't always easy to do. Sometimes acknowledging that the problem exists is the first door to open.

“Nobody wants a label on their child,” Watts explains. This goes for mental illnesses or other labels that come with stereotypes or negative associations from society. Watts goes on, “Some people don’t want their kids to be treated a certain way or they’re afraid for their children or afraid to admit that something is going on. If someone says something is wrong, then they may feel that they’ll get judged.

“But when something doesn’t feel right, it’s important to acknowledge that. Once it’s acknowledged, a child’s voice can be heard.”

Resources

Give permission to kids, especially to boys to express their emotions:

<https://www.dearblackboycry.com/>

Are You Seeing These Behaviors?: <https://uwm.edu/icfw/wp-content/uploads/sites/384/2019/05/ICFW-Handout-Child-Behaviors.pdf>

Promote children’s social and emotional health:

<https://www.naeyc.org/resources/pubs/yc/mar2018/promoting-social-and-emotional-health#books>

Reach out to Lakeeta and her organization (Essentially Empowered):

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