



**Discussion Questions for *Real Boys*:
Rescuing our Sons from the Myths of Boyhood by William Pollack**

1. One of the issues raised by Mary Pipher in her foreword is that comparison of girls' and boys' suffering is unproductive. How can the unique problems of adolescent boys be addressed in ways that avoid segregation while making sure that their unique needs are met?
2. Pollack's most controversial claim is that the emotional pain of boys stems from premature separation from their mothers. Are issues such as the use of shame in our culture and the premature separation of mother and child really different for boys than for girls? Pollack qualifies his assertions throughout *Real Boys*. What do you think are the most useful distinctions to keep in mind?
3. As Pipher points out, Pollack empathizes with "mothers who are expected to push sons away and yet are still held responsible for their sons' emotional health and behavior" (p. xviii). Think of instances in which you have seen this double bind in operation.
4. Pollack asserts that fathers play a unique role in the emotional health of their sons by imparting to boys a feeling of empowerment in changing their environment, in the management of emotions, and in the exploration of novel circumstances (p. 115). Despite these claims, are there ways in which the book perpetuates the custom of relying more on mothers than on fathers to fill the emotional needs of their sons?
5. Pollack cites the results of studies showing that mothers "are particularly resistant to recognizing their [infant] sons' negative emotional states" and "often without realizing it, take steps that squelch their young sons' emotional expressiveness" (pp. 41-42). In light of this research, is it reasonable to suspect that mothers simply don't relate as well to boys as to girls?
6. Several anecdotes in the book describe fathers' objections to mothers nurturing their sons. Why do you think such objections are so common among fathers? What can account for the implication that fathers seem out of touch with their own memories of the need for nurturing that Pollack says is so alive within boys?
7. Pollack claims that the Boy Code is being revised "as society begins to put a premium on 'emotionally intelligent,' verbally capable, empathic, loving men" (pp. 88). Do you see evidence of this?
8. Urging mothers to try and dispel the atmosphere of gender straitjacketing by serving as a "new breed of coach" for other, less open-minded adults, Pollack remarks that single mothers are often the best coaches (pp. 88-95). Do you agree? What qualities, gifts, or experiences might single mothers bring to the job of educating others about the unique needs of boys? How might any mother begin to incorporate these "gifts" into her relationship with her son?
9. Pollack surveys the historical role of mothers in Western society, mentioning Freud in particular (pp. 111-12). How do you think traditional esteem for the "potency of maternal

connection” has gotten lost (or do you think it has)? Expand on Pollack’s brief discussion using your own experience and cultural perspective.

10. To become effective fathers, men have their own socially imposed conditioning to deal with. Pollack notes that “many men feel a ‘wound’ when it comes to the memories of the fathering they received” (p.128). How do you think men can become better fathers by examining their childhood relationships with their own parents?
11. Use the anecdote about saving face (pp. 162-63) to explore your group’s opinions and responses to a common “boy” situation. (The anecdote concerns a boy, Scott, who first resists but eventually decides to give in to a classmate’s provocation to fight.) What are the implications and consequences of approving or disapproving of the measures Scott took?
12. Pollack has found that reactions to the story of Tommy, his father, and the ice rink (pp. 286-88) vary widely. Discuss these reactions and perspectives without trying to single out a right or wrong response.
13. Understanding the unique situation of boys requires understanding how and why social roles in general have evolved. Widening the frame of reference beyond the unique situation of boys might help to deepen this discussion. Do you think ambivalence exists about all social roles, not just gender? What can parents do to deal with the influence that media stereotyping has on their sons? Are parents, for example, less likely to fulfill their role as parent in an effort to be a friend or confidante?
14. Discuss another book with a different or contrasting point of view alongside Pollack’s, such as Deborah Tannen’s *You Just Don’t Understand* (New York: William Morrow, 1990).

Using *Real Boys* In The Classroom And In Parent-Teacher Groups

Using William Pollack’s anecdotal material in discussion groups may provide the easiest access to the issues he raises. As hypotheticals, his anecdotes might lend perspective to a discussion of, for example, how parents can distinguish danger signs or plain orneriness from a child’s normal wish to separate or to celebrate his differences. In student groups, Pollack’s illustrative stories could encourage reluctant contributors.

1. Pollack recounts a classroom forum and discussion on gender roles in which a female airline pilot and a male makeup artist are invited to explain their unconventional occupations. A boy in the class describes having to be “two different people” in the essay he was asked to write in response to the forum (pp.147-49). Later, Pollack explains that the Boy Code tells boys how to furnish the “supposed to” answers in surveys designed to assess their self-esteem (p. 236). In student groups, boys might recount their own similar experiences. For classroom teachers, how might such surveys be redesigned or prefaced differently to elicit more honest responses? Or is the issue perhaps one of ambivalence rather than honesty? Pollack describes his experimental blending of two tests, one measuring traditional male role attitudes and another that measures boys’ progress toward gender equality (p. 166). The boys tested responded equally strongly in both traditional and egalitarian categories, revealing to Pollack an “inner fissure” and “inner unconscious confusion about what society expects of them as males.”

2. Empathy is one of Pollack's main themes. Although empathy is a natural human response, using it to connect with boys (or girls) does not always come naturally to parents or teachers, not because they don't feel it but because its expression becomes mingled with other agendas. (It may be particularly difficult for a parent focused on providing guidance for a troubled child. Empathy sometimes gets lost between sympathy and guidance.) Any discussion of the subject should help parents and teachers remember that empathy is an intellectual skill as well as an emotional response. It is about sharing someone else's experience.
3. Pollack observes that the Boy Code has become more complicated in our present social climate, where boys are prompted to be tough and, at the same time, more sensitive. Taught to protect what our culture has defined as the core of their masculinity, boys resort to silent stoicism or "hyperactive" behavior that only confirms the stereotype. Pollack finds compassionate solutions in "action love," in analysis of the myth of masculinity, and in honest confrontation of the strong influence of the Boy Code and its mixed messages.
 - His basic advice should be useful in any parent-teacher group discussion:
 - Take feelings seriously.
 - Be aware that get-tough messages can be humiliating instead of fortifying.
 - Acknowledge the mythic component in social and gender roles.
 - Acknowledge the double standard.
4. If Pollack is right that boys are in crisis in part because they are confused about what is expected of them, discussing the range of possibilities is surely more productive than endorsing one role or another. He mentions a few films that realistically depict the ways boys compete and interact: *War of the Buttons* (p. 189) and *Stand By Me* (p. 196). Compile a list of films that show realistic boy behavior. Discussions centered on film or program viewing would be equally useful in the classroom or in a parent- teacher group.
5. Studies show that boys are at their greatest academic disadvantage in writing and reading (p. 246). It is reasonable to suggest that any program addressing boys' issues should include a reading and/or writing component. Do you think this "sedentary" work would defeat the purpose by squelching "active" boy-style communication and learning? How might adjustments be made? Would storytelling groups, improvisational groups, or boy-specific reading groups are more effective?
6. Pollack tells the story of a team writing project that he found to be structured around the way girls like to work, putting boys at a disadvantage (p. 241). How could such a project be made to work better for boys in a coed atmosphere? Discuss Pollack's suggestions for incorporating boys' learning styles, like finding the right tempo (p. 245), moving around (p. 246), taking frequent breaks (p. 251), and encouraging shared lessons (p. 254). Come up with some other suggestions for making these projects more adventurous, such as acting out ideas before or while committing them to paper.
7. Pollack says that the "very structure of most coeducational schools tends unwittingly to favor female students" (p. 239). His description of boy-style learning and his advocacy of the adjustments that need to be made to accommodate boys present challenges to the way many classes are conducted; teachers who value orderly classroom procedures will anticipate problems. Are Pollack's suggestions for classroom reform practical? What changes might your

school find possible? (Many coed schools are making certain classes, like math and freshman English, single-sex; others offer single-sex sections as an option in more courses.)

8. *Real Boys* contains many descriptions of the action-oriented ways boys like (and need) to learn, and equally as many in which boys' acting out is described as "masked emotional pain" (p. 255). How can educators tell the difference? Is Pollack implying that in a "guy-ified" learning environment, acting out would eventually dissipate?

About the Author

William Pollack, Ph. D. (www.williampollack.com), a clinical psychologist, is the codirector of the Center for Men at McLean Hospital/Harvard Medical School, an assistant clinical professor of psychiatry at the Harvard Medical School, and a founding member and Fellow of the Society for the Psychological Study of Men and Masculinity of the American Psychological Association. He and his family live in Massachusetts.