

How to Support Young Men in Their Spiritual Development

There is much concern regarding the lack of respectful behavior by young men in our society. Two popular explanations for this include: 1) massive media exposure to violence showing no regard to virtuous codes of conduct and 2) a sense of entitlement by teenagers to whatever they want, whenever they want it. In response to shootings in high schools, adults demand more metal detectors

Problem solving focused on these symptoms of an unhealthy society and not on the root causes will continue to allow adults to avoid their responsibility as upstanding role models. My experience working closely with young men and their parents has revealed a solution which is based on having mature adults allow young men to create a spiritual perspective. This is achieved through the use of open communication as the way to develop meaningful relationships with themselves, the community and the Universe

The Authority of Mom and Dad

As toddlers, children relate to the world with their needs at the center of the universe. By the age of two, toddler boys already have the influence of testosterone driving their desire to prove themselves by taking risks! When these boys grow into young men, they will act on their innate hormonal need to explore out in the world to test their abilities to be victorious. Young men are competitive and are built to win. When parents live by an authentic philosophy reflected in appropriate codes of conduct that has been modeled to their sons, the young men will draw upon the success of the home when tempted to associate with the wrong people or do the wrong things. This is not to say that they will not make mistakes; they will, just as we did. It is to say that eventually they will return to a caring and effective way of life, just as we did.

Between the time of birth and the age of approximately 6 -- 8 years, parents have the most authority with their sons. When a parent says "yes or no", the boy will usually respond as directed as they are primarily directed by their need of material dependence on the parents resources. Therefore it is the strength of the family values and behaviors that will determine how successful a young boy will be in the transition of relationships where he is dominant to one where there is equal consideration of the family members.

The Authority of the Community

After 6 -- 8 years, a young man must learn he is not the center of the universe as he interacts with other children, parents and teachers. The young man needs to be in a community where he is not shielded from the harsh realities of life. Otherwise, his maturity is stifled and he continues to focus on himself, acting out his life behaving as a child waiting to be cared for. As he is entering the time of life where he will need to prove that he can take care of himself, this will not be possible if he does not experience difficulties and losses while receiving proper mentorship from his parents and others in the community.

In the book, "The Art of Happiness", the Dalai Lama says "in making the distinction between conceit and valid self-confidence, one could think in terms of the consequences of one's attitude -- conceit and arrogance generally lead to negative consequences whereas a healthy self-confidence leads to more positive consequences. One sense of self, or ego, is concerned only with the fulfillment of one's self interest, one's selfish

desires with complete disregard for the well-being of others. The other type of ego or sense of self is based on a genuine concern for others, and the desire to be of service. In order to fulfill that wish to be of service, one needs a strong sense of self and a sense of self-confidence. This kind of self-confidence is the kind that leads to positive consequences". Thus, a disciplined community, one that says "yes and no" while enforcing its high standards by the daily achievement of them by its members, will provide the negative or positive consequences that young men need to define their behavioral boundaries.

When a boy learns that a healthy community expects him to contribute to the common good, he learns to channel his high-energy providing him with rewarding relationships with others. This will be the foundation for him to be receptive in developing a relationship with the Universe, based on the reverence attained by cooperating with others. Young men want to be good and want to contribute, and it is in the community where their self-respect deepens.

The Rite of Passage Initiation

Before a young man can evolve into the next stage of life, where he is ready to give respect and develop intimacy as a member of a spiritual universe, he must go through a formal rite of passage in an environment with mature men, away from the socially correct behavioral standards of the community. In this secluded setting, a young man can safely experience the physically demanding grieving ceremony where he says "goodbye" to the inner directed boy. Immediately following this process is another ceremony which provides an opportunity for the young man to practice developing faith through the communication of prayer. At the Young Men's Ultimate Weekend, we use a sweat lodge as the medium for young men to surrender into a deeper Awareness of their relationship to the Creation.

The rite of passage introduces the concept and performance of Service so that young men learn a simple and powerful way to channel their biologically controlled energies. The transformational healing power of Service is a gallant activity which expands their heart, paving a way for them to be open to Spirit.

The Authority of Young Men

Between the ages of 13 -- 20, young men are immersed in a testosterone filled world where they need to voice their fears and concerns and challenge the authority of others. Just a few hundred years ago, they would be the warriors, protecting the men, women and children. It is best not to compete with them, especially in the form of making them wrong or giving long-winded answers about what you think they need to experience.

They know they have the authority to say " yes and no" in choosing how they will live their life. I have been honored to hear young men soulfully pray with tears in their eyes about wanting to make a positive difference in the world and understand their rightful place in the Universe. Let's give them a world where they can set out on their journey with their natural sense of Awe intact.

Dr. Mark Schillinger is the founder of The World Institute for Human Development (WIHD), a nonprofit organization that produces The Young Men's Ultimate Weekend, a mentoring/leadership program that transforms young men into confident and responsible

young adults. He can be reached at the WIHD office: 4050 Redwood Highway, Suite G.
San Rafael CA 94903; (415) 472 -- 3292.