

PARENTING TIPS

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HE'LL BE OK GROWING GORGEOUS BOYS INTO GOOD MEN

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I've already referred a number of times to the bridge of adolescence. Perhaps it's time to explain the idea in more detail.

The Bridge of Adolescence



As I approached the bridge with my daughter, the elder of my two children, I was aware that we were entering a new stage in her life but had a sense it was all right to walk onto the bridge with her.

That wasn't the case with my son. As the bridge of adolescence loomed, I felt I shouldn't be going onto it with him. He was on his way to manhood, a concept I barely understood, and I knew I wouldn't and couldn't understand parts of the journey he was about to undertake. I was proud of the special mother-son relationship I felt we enjoyed, but I knew that if he was to become a man, a good man, we would need to separate for a time. But I wrestled with a problem as we drew close to the bridge: if I couldn't go onto it with him, who was going to? His father wasn't a major feature in his life at that time and although there were some good men in my life, the challenge was to find ways of having these and/or other good men more directly involved in my son's life. I'll talk more later of the challenges faced by mothers raising sons without fathers, but suffice to say that as my son was running towards the bridge of adolescence, far too early in my view and at breakneck speed, I felt obliged to walk up onto the bridge even while recognising at some deep intuitive level that I shouldn't be there.

As we'll see, this is the central issue in the lives of adolescent boys: how to get mothers off the bridge and fathers onto it. Mothers do need to step back; there does come a moment when the level of direct involvement in the lives of our sons needs to ease a little in order to assist their passage into manhood. One thing is clear, however: if there isn't a man clearly visible at the edge of the bridge into whose care they can entrust their sons, mothers will walk onto the bridge. They

won't abandon their boys. The challenge for fathers is to make themselves clearly visible at the edge of the bridge so they can be seen by both their sons and their wives or partners and so there is plenty of time for all involved to adjust to the impending change. And this is surprisingly easy if we just pause and listen to what the boys themselves are saying.

The challenge to mothers is to willingly usher their sons onto the bridge knowing that, for a time, he'll be on a journey they can watch only from a distance. It's not about mothers abandoning their sons; it's about them accepting that for a time they will walk beside the bridge of adolescence rather than on it, or if they can't quite manage to stay off the bridge, that they at least commit to walking on one side rather than marching down the centre line directing traffic, as I spent much of my time doing. This, too, is surprisingly easy if we just pause and listen to what the boys themselves are saying, although in my experience the boys end up having to say it a little more emphatically because of their mothers' perception that they know best what their beloved sons need.

- ◆ The central issue in the lives of adolescent boys is getting mothers off the bridge of adolescence, and fathers onto it.
- ◆ It's apparent to all who work with them that boys like clear boundaries.
- ◆ Let's turn the glass up the other way so that it's expected that most boys will stay at secondary school for six years and only some will leave early.
- ◆ The Year 7/8 boy is interested only in having fun and learning.
- ◆ The Year 9 boy is ten feet tall and bulletproof and everyone else is a loser, a wanker or a dork.
- ◆ Don't go looking for debate with a Year 9 boy but have the conversation if he brings the debate to you.
- ◆ In Year 10 life becomes a little more serious but there's still time to play.
- ◆ In Year 11 there are definite signs that common sense is on its way back.
- ◆ Year 12 boys are gorgeous, wise young men.

Chapter 4 Abridged Extract (with permission)
Celia Lashlie *He'll be OK: Growing Gorgeous Boys into Good Men*