

WILD THINGS: A PARENTING PLAN

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The life of every man is built on the foundation of his boyhood, and every boy faces a long and intricate journey on his way to becoming a man. To assist you in parenting your son with passion, purpose, and a plan, we've designed this brief guide, which will help you see your son from multiple perspectives: developmental, cognitive, emotional, and spiritual.

As part of these exercises, we will also ask you to take a look at yourself and how "who you are" plays itself out in your parenting.

Finally, we will help you develop a framework for how best to parent your son.

WHAT YOU WILL NEED:

You will find this parenting plan most helpful if you set aside a place to record your responses to these exercises and questions. Before you begin, decide how you will keep this record—for example, in a journal, notebook, or computer file. We also suggest that you find a place where you won't be distracted (which probably means away from your son).

It will also be helpful if you and your spouse can participate in this exercise together—or individually and then share notes. Also, if you have more than one son, you will want to complete a separate parenting plan for each one.



STEP 1: REFLECTION

We strongly believe that, more than anything, parenting is an emotional and spiritual exercise. With that in mind, take a couple of minutes to quiet yourself and meditate on your son. If you pray, thank God for your son, and ask God for clarity and creativity as you work through this plan. If you aren't sure where to begin with any of this, just sit quietly for a few minutes and relax. (Please don't shortcut this part of the process. Take the time to relax and focus on your son.)

As you sit quietly, picture your son's face in your mind's eye. Let yourself remember a time when he was unmistakably being himself. Briefly write a description of this scene.

Next, journal about your reflective experience.

What are you feeling?

What are you thinking?

What is God saying to you about your son?

What is God saying to you about yourself?

STEP 2: DEVELOPMENTAL STAGES

Using the developmental stages we outline in *Wild Things*, identify which stage of development your son is currently moving through:

- **Explorer (ages 2-4):** He is active, aggressive, curious, and self-determined. He needs boundaries, consistency, and plenty of wide open space to be a boy in this stage.
- **Lover (5-8):** He is tender, desiring to please, and competitive in this stage. He needs a good deal of one-on-one time, and also help directing his competitive spirit.
- **Individual (9-12):** He is searching for his identity and evolving in this stage. He needs outlets to test his strength and his mind, and to feel a sense of purpose.
- **Wanderer (13-17):** He can be arrogant and argumentative in this stage. His body will be in biological chaos. He needs understanding, strong parenting, and mercy as he passes through one of the more complicated seasons in his development.
- **Warrior (18-22):** He is reflective, searching, and ambivalent in this stage. He needs patience and blessing as he moves into young adulthood.

Briefly consider how your son shows the characteristics of his current stage. Make a list of his positive character traits and a list of his character defects and deficits.

Now write a paragraph or two about your son in his current stage.

Where is he struggling developmentally?

Where is he excelling?

How aware is he of his own developmental struggles and achievements?

How aware are you?

Has your son skipped through any of the stages?



STEP 3: LEARNING STYLES

How your son's brain processes information affects so much of his life. From the list below, choose your son's top three learning styles:

Auditory. Some boys process information best by listening. These auditory learners do well with discussions, lectures, etc. Boys with this learning style are often more distracted by ambient noises.

Visual. Boys who are visual learners benefit from a variety of ocular stimulation, such as the use of colors, video, graphs, etc. These boys like images and written information and usually prefer being able to read instructions or the text on their own in order to increase their understanding. These boys are very sensitive to visual distractions, such as peripheral movement.

Tactile. Though most boys learn best with hands-on activities, some boys prosper from it a lot more than others. Boys with this learning style increase their learning potential when they are given the opportunity to do something by themselves.

Linear. Some boys learn best when there is sequential information that provides the objective and logical steps to achieve the desired outcome.

Nonlinear. Some boys prefer being given choices and being allowed to creatively explore options in finding a solution to problems. They mostly learn on their own.

Relational. Some boys really thrive in group learning environments. These boys are referred to as peer learners, and they need relational interaction to best process and integrate information.

Independent. Boys who are independent learners are typically more introverted than others and often have difficulty participating in group activities. They need time to discover at their own pace and in their own way.



STEP 3: LEARNING STYLES (CONTINUED)

Boys may also prefer to learn in a variety of settings. Knowing how a boy's learning style intersects with his preferred learning environment can be useful when helping him at school and at home.

From the pairs below, choose your son's preferred learning environments:

Formal or Informal. An example of a formal setting would be a traditional desk or table and a straight-backed chair. An informal setting would be the bed, floor, couch, etc. Not every boy's brain will function well in the same postural position. So, for example, when you see a boy slouching in a traditional desk or chair, it may simply mean that he would learn better in a more informal setting.

Noisy or Quiet. Some boys find sound distracting, and some find it calming. Depending on your son's preference, he may do his homework in the kitchen or alone in his room. He may need as much quiet as possible, or he may need to be in the middle of the pre-dinner commotion.

Bright or Dim. Some boys may need to sit by a bright reading lamp, whereas others may get a headache when too much light is present. Finding a light level that your son finds comfortable may help increase his learning stamina.

Hot or Cold. It may be surprising, but room temperature plays a significant role in learning. If a boy is too hot or too cold, he will have a hard time concentrating on the task at hand.

Kinesthetic or Sedentary. Many boys move continuously while they are learning (such as tapping their feet, shaking their legs, rapping their fingers, etc). Other boys become almost entranced when they are concentrating. Either preference is okay, but forcing a boy into the opposite preference will thwart his learning potential. For both learning preferences, as a general rule, a boy's body is made to move, and it doesn't particularly like to sit still for long periods of time. Boys need to take short breaks while they are learning or studying. Research shows that optimal learning is achieved in twenty- or thirty-minute learning bursts, with brief breaks in between. Often, a quick "rest" (from thirty seconds to a minute) will help a boy recharge his brain.

Now, take a minute and summarize your choices into a paragraph about your son's learning style. You now have a learning profile for your son.

Next, reflect on what you can do to support him in his preferred learning style and setting. For example, if your son's learning style is auditory, relational, and nonlinear, and he prefers to learn in environments that are informal, quiet, dim, warm, and sedentary, he may learn best by talking about ideas and concepts while reclined on the living room sofa, snuggled under a blanket (as opposed to reading a textbook at the kitchen table).

What are **three** things you can do to better support your son in his learning style?



STEP 4: EMOTIONAL STYLES

Just as boys handle information differently, they can also process their emotions differently. By determining your son's relational style, you can better know how to engage him, discipline him, encourage him, and support him when he is down. From the list below, choose which emotional traits best describe your son.

Just or Merciful
Tender or Strong
Confident or Shy
Extrovert or Introvert
Expressive or Reserved
Confrontational or Avoidant
Relational or Solitary
Anxious or Secure
Unsure or Certain
Talkative or Pensive

Now, with this emotional profile for your son, reflect on how it matches yours or your spouse's. Compare and contrast his emotional makeup with that of his siblings. Briefly record your thoughts.

What are some ways that his relational style serves him well?

How does it get in his way?

What do you need to do to love him well?

STEP 5: SPIRITUAL DEVELOPMENT

It's important to pay attention to your son's spiritual development. This begins by assessing where you are in your own spiritual journey. You can only offer your son as much as you have yourself. What steps do you need to take to continue on your own spiritual journey?

Though as a parent you will play a primary role in your son's spiritual development, it's also important to give him the space and support he needs to establish his own faith journey. There will be seasons—particularly during adolescence—when he will likely question his faith, doubt his faith, and potentially deny his faith. Questioning and doubting are not only normal, but they are also beneficial ingredients in the development of his spiritual faith. Pay close attention to your own responses during these seasons. Meeting your son's questioning, doubt, or denial with panic, hysteria, or anger may only confuse or isolate him more. He needs support and understanding as he questions. He needs to hear you identify questioning and doubting as a normal part of the faith journey. He needs to hear you say that you believe his faith will be more his own on the other side of his season of doubt.

It's equally important that you live a life of faith in front of him. Too often, we encounter parents who are highly instructive in their son's spiritual development but who forget the importance of experiential learning. Your son will learn a lot about a life of faith by watching you engage in worship, wrestle with questions of your own, share your faith, live in spiritual community with others, and live a life of service.

With this in mind, what would you say you are offering to your son's spiritual development in this season of his life?

Where could you be instructing him less and living out your faith more?

How are you supporting his questions?



CONCLUSION:

Remember that every boy's journey to manhood includes challenges—physical, emotional, and spiritual. Use this guide to examine each aspect of your son's growth and to create a personalized parenting plan of specific, practical ways to nurture him through those difficult times. From toddler to teenager, he needs your support to grow to maturity through each developmental stage. As his parent, commit to guiding your son to manhood by staying aware of his unique personality and actively seeking out ways to meet his ever-changing needs.

