

## WHAT ARE LITTLE BOYS MADE OF?

Rebecca Coffey

For Vermont Public Radio

January 2000

My boy used to make sense to me. That was when he was one year old and loved to vacuum the rug. “Big noise!” he’d shout as the vacuum roared. Ben no longer does rugs. He still likes big noises, though—much more than I like them. He likes bangs and explosions. He loathes predictability. He wants to make sudden, full-body motions and to hunt big game and fish big fish.

I, on the other hand, detest big noises and love predictability. I want to type small words on a small computer. I don’t even eat meat much less hunt. If I were to fish, I would use plastic bait. So, at age 7, Ben no longer makes perfect sense to me. Quite literally he sometimes seems to be from Mars while I am from Venus. Already.

Ben does make sense to his father, also from Mars. Trouble is, his father is gone a lot of nights and weekends. Then it’s just me and two kids—the quiet, sensible girl and the loud boy. There’s no way around it; that’s how I react on some level, even though I try not to. On good days we laugh about it together.

Ben’s plight in our mother-dominated house has gotten me to thinking about boys in general. An increasing number of mothers are single moms. Do their boys grow up feeling from the get-go like Martians on Venus? If so, how many become toughs and miscreants, just in ego-defense?

Try as I might I can’t find scholarly answers to those questions. I have found studies showing that helping boys feel less alienated can keep them out of jail. The Cornell Consortium for Longitudinal Studies goes so far as to say that the earlier we help

boys feel less alienated, the better—and that the best “boy-saving” programs link overwhelmed parents and children to community resources and supports.

Last Spring I was feeling both overwhelmed and shy on support. Ben was feeling boyish—you know, impulsive, impish, wonderful to watch but difficult to keep up with. And then he wanted to go fishing. He was crazy with desire. See? I said “crazy.” What does that tell you about the intensity of his urge and the rigidity of my perceptions?

Out of blue sky, a community support appeared. The local gun club was sponsoring a fishing derby for kids. I don’t think I have to help you imagine what my let-me-be-alone-with-my-computer, knee-jerk reaction is to ideas like “gun clubs.” But at that point I was desperate to help Ben feel good about being a boy—and I liked the idea that someone from the gun club might bait our hook.

We showed up with a line and reel, my plastic worms, and some live worms of Ben’s. I quickly learned that fish don’t eat plastic but that they do love the rich smell of a freshly impaled member of the genus *Lumbricus*. Ben—whose genetic material, after all, is 50% mine—had some trouble learning that fishing is not the same as hitting “enter” on a computer keyboard. There’s a lot of disappointed waiting involved. In fact, while kids right and left hauled in trout, Ben had to wait to catch one of the last fish of the day. A man I only know as “Mike from the Gun Club “ showed Ben how to kill the fish and clean it. Mike did both the killing and cleaning with respect for the fish and with respect for Ben. And Ben noticed. In those very few minutes my boy saw in Mike that it’s OK to do guy things and that manliness can also be gentleness.

As we left I watched for a moment while one of the gun club volunteers worked patiently on fly fishing technique with one of our school's young toughs. Mind you, that volunteer was a pretty big guy.

By the way, have you ever seen fly fishing? I hadn't. It's fantastically beautiful to watch the line whip and weave. As I watched the big volunteer and his tiny new pal practice their fly fishing I retired a few of my prejudices about fishing—and about gun clubs (though not about guns). I thought, “Thank goodness for men like that big guy and Mike. I even thought, “Long live the Putney Gun Club.”

--END--