

The Boston Globe

Going from boyhood to manhood

Rituals, models ease complicated passage

By Barbara F. Meltz, Globe Staff | August 18, 2005

How does a boy turn into a man?

David Qin, 16, of West Roxbury doesn't know for sure, but he doesn't think it has happened yet. "I'm in the process," he says. "It's mostly when you turn the corner and take economic responsibility for yourself, but your mentality changes, too. When you become a man, you don't think just about yourself."

Richard Wilson, 17, of Jamaica Plain, considers himself a *young* man; but his brother, Chris, now he's a real man: "He's 24, he has three kids, two jobs, and he's studying to be an electrician." It's not what Wilson wants for himself -- he hopes to go to college -- but he admires the courage and commitment he sees in Chris.

Renaud Alexandre of Roslindale, also 17, says he became a man at 15, "when I got facial hair." Even so, he knows he has a way to go. "You make a choice to become a man, to do the right things on your own, without your parents telling you what it is. Sometimes my parents still treat me like a little kid. They still tell me to clean up my room instead of letting me clean it myself. They don't give me enough of a chance to prove myself."

What about alcohol and drugs, sex and violence? Aren't they the proving grounds many boys turn to? For some, maybe, but each insists it's not how he defines manhood. "You can be a *boy* and do any of those things," Qin says with disdain.

That these teens have loftier -- indeed, healthier -- ideas about becoming a man isn't a coincidence. They are instructors at Tenacity, a nonprofit tennis/literacy program in Boston that also teaches life skills. This summer, it's serving 3,000 kids ages 7-15 at 27 neighborhood sites. Wilson and Alexandre are also graduates of the three-year program, which is free.

"When most boys come to us, they have a vague notion that being a man involves taking responsibility to have enough money to buy things for yourself," says director Andy Crane.

That's nice, but not enough. For Crane, a boy crosses from boyhood to manhood "when he cares not just for himself but also about others in a meaningful way. It's not

about the gold chain on your neck, it's about the way you treat your girlfriend and your community." He adds, "Class, race, and money is part of the challenge of whether someone makes this transition."

No boy is immune, however. "We live in a culture that glamorizes violence, exploitative sex, and obsession with materialism. It's an uphill struggle for every single boy and parent," says Harvard University gender researcher Barney Brawer.

Arlington child psychologist and best-selling author Michael Thompson ("Raising Cain," and "Best Friends, Worst Enemies") attributes the problem in part, at least, to the lack of a clear-cut path. In an op-ed piece in the Globe last month ("Passage into manhood," July 26), he wrote, "I'm certain that every boy is searching for a test" of manhood.

Dispatches from the road to manhood

Three young Bostonians share insights on the qualities required of a grown man. All three are instructors at Tenacity, a nonprofit tennis/literacy/life-skills program in Boston.



DAVID QIN, 16, West Roxbury Senior, Boston Latin School

What makes you unique? "I'm an only child. Having a sibling would make becoming a man easier because you have the responsibility of taking care of someone besides yourself. Having a sibling shortens the journey."

How his parents can help: "Parents should encourage their children, aid them in the journey of becoming a man but not mold them into what they want him to be. Parents shouldn't reject straight out all the bad choices, but make them see how it will affect his life."

Plans for the future: "Getting a job. Taking on more responsibility, especially for my parents. They're getting older."



RENAUD ALEXANDRE, 17, Roslindale Senior, Brighton High School

What does it mean to be a man? "Becoming a man is a choice that you make, to do things on your own and not rely on your parents; to try to do the right thing and if you don't succeed, then you try to get help."

What about getting drunk or having sex? "For some, maybe. They're not part of my definition."

What makes you unique? "I have a good relationship with my parents. ... What I don't like is that sometimes they still treat me like a little kid. ...They don't give me enough chance to prove myself."

Plans for the future: "Going to Northeastern or BC; owning my own business; becoming a husband and a father; helping people."



RICHARD WILSON, 17, Jamaica Plain Senior, East Boston High School

Are you a man? "A young man. I've grown up in life, but not enough yet to be a man."

What makes you unique: "I live in a foster home. I'm used to having more responsibilities than normal teenagers have. My brother is in a wheelchair, I've been helping him my whole life."

Biggest help in becoming a man? "My older brother [24]. He has three kids and he works two jobs to support them and he's studying to become an electrician. He's accepted his responsibilities. He's a man."

Plans for the future: "To go to college. To be a sports broadcaster or announcer. Something to do with sports." — BARBARA F. MELTZ

GLOBE STAFF GRAPHIC/MICHAEL PRAGER

"If it were up to me," he says subsequently in an interview, "our boys would take a year off after high school to do something challenging, hard, and meaningful, something that would say to them, 'This turns you into a man.' " This test, he says, would happen in the company of peers, under the supervision of men, and in the service of others. The military does it for some boys, but he's thinking more along the lines of Habitat for Humanity, wilderness adventures, hospice work.

Thompson is taking a page out of traditional cultures, of course, where sons are welcomed into manhood through specific rituals by a cadre of adult men who make sure no boy fails.

In contemporary Western society, the closest we've come to that was in the 1950s. "There was a kind of lock-step process of socialization. You left home, got an education, a job, a wife and kids, and it happened in quick succession by 23 or 24. It was a model, a map, and it made it easy to say, 'OK, I'm a man,' " says sociologist Michael Kimmel of State University of New York at Stony Brook. His book, "Manhood in America" (Oxford Press), has a revised edition due in October.

Today, Kimmel is fond of saying, "30 is the new 20."

Not only is the transition to adulthood for men and women elongated ("Forty percent of college graduates go back to live at home, and I don't just mean for the summer," he says), but the moral compass is missing. "The people boys once looked to for ideas of masculinity -- school, church, family -- have been replaced by the media and peer culture," Kimmel says.

Factor into that the whole risk-taking mentality of teenage boys. Thompson argues that that is more than a biological imperative. "I choose to interpret it as boys looking for something dangerous and scary to do to make themselves men," he says.

Child psychologist William Pollack, director of the Centers for Men and Young Men at McLean Hospital in Belmont, says, "When boys don't know how to become a man or even who to ask about how to get there, they resort to the straitjacket definition: that a real man tests himself by doing something dangerous or showing sexual prowess." That often ends badly, leading to depression, accidental death, suicide, or jail. Pollack, in private practice in Newton, is author of "Real Boys."

Parents often unwittingly become part of the problem. Mothers tend to distance themselves because the culture -- and consequently her son -- tells her to; fathers drift away not because they say, "OK, my son's a man," says Kimmel, "but because they say, 'I've done my job.' When a boy calls from college with a problem, dad hands the phone to mom."

If anything, Kimmel says, "Sons need their dads more than ever at this stage. They need their fathers to become friends with them." Moms shouldn't step aside entirely, either, but they do need to figure out a way to not hover, says Thompson: "A mother's job is to stand and be proud, to see your son is in the hands of good and

compassionate, thoughtful, competent men, and to say, 'Son, this is scary but I understand why you have to do it,' " whatever It might be.

Brawer, who is principal of the Michael J. Perkins Elementary School in South Boston, wishes parents would spend more time explaining the world to their sons. "Not just saying, 'I expect you to be a responsible person,' but showing, pointing out, demonstrating what responsibility looks like."

Thompson says every boy wants his father's approval and, at some point, his reassurance that he is a man. "It used to be that sons were apprentices to fathers. They did real work at their father's side. They had real measures of manhood." Not only does that typically not happen today, but boys also don't have a community of men to emulate -- a reason, he notes, why he's a champion of all-boy schools.

In his ideal world, Thompson would have groups of fathers periodically take their sons away from home to do something that involves a physical and mental challenge. Last week, he and his son, Will, 14, enjoyed a variation on that theme. They spent the day hiking in the Berkshires, then saw a production of "King John," the 11th Shakespearean play Will has seen.

"My goal is for him to see all 39 by the time he finishes high school," says Thompson. "Shakespeare has a way of making the life of a man very vivid."

Contact Barbara Meltz at meltz@globe.com.■

© Copyright 2006 Globe Newspaper Company.