



Clarus Arc

The Parent's Guide

How to Raise Emotionally Intelligent Boys

7 Phrases That Program Your Sons
(And What to Say Instead)

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Introduction: The War You're Creating Without Knowing It

Every day, well-meaning parents program their sons for a lifetime of emotional constipation. Not through abuse or neglect, but through phrases that seem helpful—even loving—on the surface.

The problem? Children don't hear what we mean. They hear what we say, filtered through their developmental understanding. And more importantly, they absorb what our body language, tone, and timing communicate unconsciously.

This guide reveals the seven most damaging phrases parents use, what children actually internalize from them, and exactly what to say instead. These aren't theoretical—they're based on developmental psychology research and the real voices of adult men who are now unpacking this programming in therapy.

Remember: You're not a bad parent if you've said these things. You're likely repeating what you learned. But now you can choose differently.





PHRASE 1: "Big Boys Don't Cry" (or "You're Too Old to Cry About This")

What You Think You're Saying: "You're mature enough to handle this better. You have coping skills beyond crying."

What Your Son Actually Hears: "Crying makes me not big/not grown up/not good enough. To be valued as I grow, I must shut down this feeling. Men who cry are babies. I am bad for having this emotion."

Real Voices from Men Who Heard This:

From Reddit r/AskMen:

"I'm 31 and haven't cried since I was 8. When my grandpa died, I stood at his funeral feeling nothing. Not because I didn't love him—I loved him more than anyone. But my dad's voice saying 'big boys don't cry' is literally louder than my grief. It's like being emotionally constipated—everything's stuck and it hurts but nothing comes out." - u/blocked_tears

From Quora:

"Age 6, crying because my dog died. Dad: 'You're too old for this nonsense.' I'm 44 now. Haven't cried since. Not when divorced. Not when diagnosed with cancer. My therapist says I have 'emotional constipation.' Perfect term. Everything's backed up and toxic but nothing comes out." - Anonymous

The Unconscious Programming: His nervous system learns that the natural release of sadness threatens his identity. By age 5, he'll start converting sadness into anger (more acceptable for boys) or numbness. By adulthood, he literally won't be able to cry even when he desperately needs that release.

Say This Instead: "That really hurts, doesn't it? Crying helps our body release big feelings. I'm here with you."

Why This Works: You validate the emotion, normalize the release, and provide security without judgment. You're teaching him that feelings are temporary visitors, not threats to his identity.



PHRASE 2: "Man Up" / "Be a Man" / "Toughen Up"

What You Think You're Saying: "You're capable of handling this. I believe in your strength."

What Your Son Actually Hears: "Right now, I'm not a man. I'm failing at my gender. There's something fundamentally wrong with how I'm responding. My masculinity can be revoked based on my behavior."

Real Voices from Men Who Heard This:

From Reddit r/mensmentalhealth:

"Every time something was hard, my dad would say 'man up.' Failed a test? Man up. Dog died? Man up. Girlfriend dumped me? Man up. Now I'm 28 and my therapist asks me how I feel about things and I literally don't know. I just know how to push through. I'm exhausted from manning up." - u/tired_of_armor

From a suicide note shared by a grieving father:

"Dad always said 'man up.' I manned up through depression. Manned up through addiction. Manned up until I couldn't anymore. Tell my son it's okay to be soft sometimes. I never learned that." - Tyler, 22

The Unconscious Programming: This creates the "revocable masculinity" complex—the exhausting belief that manhood must be constantly proven and can be lost at any moment. Every future challenge becomes a test of his worth as a male, not just a problem to solve.

Say This Instead: "This is really challenging. What do you need right now to work through it?"

Why This Works: You acknowledge the difficulty without making it about his identity. You're teaching problem-solving rather than identity-based performance. You're showing him that asking for help is strategic, not weak.



PHRASE 3: "Don't Be a Girl" / "You're Acting Like a Girl" / "Only Girls Do That"

What You Think You're Saying: "Your behavior doesn't match social expectations for boys."

What Your Son Actually Hears: "Girls are inferior. Anything associated with femininity is shameful. Half of humanity is 'less than,' and if I show any traits associated with them, I become less than too. Emotions equal feminine equals bad."

Real Voices from Men Who Heard This:

From Reddit r/offmychest:

"My dad's go-to insult was 'stop being such a girl.' I'm 40 now and just realized I've spent my entire life terrified of anything coded as feminine—including tenderness, vulnerability, and emotional connection. I've been running from half of human experience because I was taught it would revoke my man card." - u/awakening2024

From a therapy session (shared online with permission):

"When I was 7, I was playing with my sister's dolls with her. My dad walked in and said 'What are you, a little girl?' The shame was so intense I never played with her again. She's 35 now and we barely talk. That moment didn't just shame me—it broke my relationship with my sister."

The Unconscious Programming: This is perhaps the most damaging phrase because it programs both misogyny AND emotional suppression. He learns to fear and devalue anything coded as feminine—including empathy, vulnerability, and emotional expression. This doesn't just damage his relationship with himself; it damages his future relationships with women.

Say This Instead: "I can see you're having strong feelings about this. All people feel [scared/sad/upset] sometimes. What would help you right now?"

Why This Works: You normalize emotions as human, not gendered. You avoid teaching him that half of humanity is a cautionary tale. You preserve his ability to respect and connect with all people.



PHRASE 4: "You're Okay" / "You're Fine" / "Shake It Off"

What You Think You're Saying: "This isn't serious. You're resilient. You'll recover quickly."

What Your Son Actually Hears: "My assessment of my own experience is wrong. I shouldn't trust my feelings. When I feel hurt/scared/upset, I should pretend I don't. Adults know my feelings better than I do."

Real Voices from Men Who Heard This:

From Reddit r/CPTSD:

"Every injury: 'You're fine.' Every disappointment: 'You're okay.' Every trauma: 'Walk it off.' Now I'm 37 and literally CANNOT tell when I need help. Stayed in an abusive relationship 10 years because I thought I should 'walk it off.' Worked through pneumonia, nearly died, because I was 'fine.' My programming almost killed me." - u/cantfeelit

From an emergency room nurse:

"Had a man come in with a heart attack. Said he'd been having chest pain for WEEKS but thought he was 'fine.' His last words before surgery: 'My dad always said I was tougher than I thought.' He died on the table. 'You're fine' kills men." - @ERNurseReality

The Unconscious Programming: This teaches him to disconnect from his internal signals. By adulthood, he won't know what he's feeling because he learned to override his emotional GPS system. This disconnection contributes to higher rates of addiction, rage disorders, and suicide in men—they literally can't feel the warning signs.

Say This Instead: "Tell me what you're feeling. Where does it hurt?" or "That looked scary. Are you hurt or just startled?"

Why This Works: You teach him to check in with his body and feelings rather than automatically dismissing them. You're building emotional literacy—the ability to identify and name what's happening internally.



PHRASE 5: "Stop Being So Sensitive" / "Don't Be So Emotional"

What You Think You're Saying: "Your reaction seems disproportionate to the situation. You need perspective."

What Your Son Actually Hears: "My emotional responses are wrong and bad. Feeling things deeply is a character flaw. To be acceptable, I must feel less or hide what I feel. My authentic reactions make people uncomfortable."

Real Voices from Men Who Heard This:

From Reddit r/emotionalneglect:

"Called 'too sensitive' whole childhood. Solution? Became emotionally dead. Not less sensitive—just built armor so thick NOTHING gets through. Including love. My kids say 'love you dad' and I feel... nothing. The wall I built to protect from pain also protects from joy. I'm successful and dead inside." - u/numbnotcold

From Twitter/X:

"Thread: Was called sensitive like it was cancer. Now I'm a 'successful' 45yo who: Can't cry at funerals. Can't feel joy at births. Can't say 'I love you.' Can't ask for help. Can't connect with my kids. Sensitive wasn't the problem. Teaching me to kill it was." - @numbman45

The Unconscious Programming: Sensitivity becomes shame. He learns to armor himself against feeling too much, which means he also can't feel joy, love, or connection fully. He develops a narrow emotional range—limited to anger and numbness—because those seem safer.

Say This Instead: "You're really feeling this deeply. Your feelings make sense to me. Let's talk about what's happening for you."

Why This Works: You validate his emotional intensity as a normal variation, not a defect. Some people feel things more deeply—this is actually correlated with leadership ability, creativity, and empathy. You're teaching him to manage intensity, not suppress it.



PHRASE 6: "I'll Give You Something to Cry About"

What You Think You're Saying: "Your reaction is overblown. You need perspective on real problems."

What Your Son Actually Hears: "My pain isn't valid unless it meets someone else's threshold. Expressing emotion leads to more pain. The person who should protect me will hurt me if I show vulnerability. Emotions are dangerous."

Real Voices from Men Who Heard This:

From Reddit r/EstrangedAdultChildren:

"Those words still make me physically sick. I'm 45 and haven't spoken to my father in 10 years. Not because of the threat itself, but because it taught me that vulnerability leads to violence, even from those who claim to love you. I can't be vulnerable with anyone now, not even my own kids." - u/nocontact10years

From Twitter/X:

"My dad: 'Stop crying or I'll give you something to cry about.' Me at 38: Unable to cry at my mom's funeral, destroying my marriage because I can't show vulnerability, raising sons I'm terrified I'm damaging. That threat didn't make me stronger. It made me broken." - @genXdad

The Unconscious Programming: This is emotional terrorism. It teaches him that vulnerability leads to attack, even from those who claim to love him. By adulthood, he'll be incapable of emotional intimacy because his nervous system codes vulnerability as literal danger.

Say This Instead: "I can see you're really upset. Your feelings are valid even if I don't fully understand them. Help me understand what's going on for you."

Why This Works: You separate his emotional expression from punishment. You model that it's safe to feel and express, even when others don't immediately understand. You're building trust rather than fear.



PHRASE 7: "Be Strong" / "Stay Strong" / "Boys Are Strong"

What You Think You're Saying: "You have inner resources. You can handle this. I believe in your resilience."

What Your Son Actually Hears: "Strength means not showing struggle. If I'm having a hard time, I'm not strong, therefore not a good boy/man. Asking for help means I'm weak. I must handle everything alone."

Real Voices from Men Who Heard This:

From Reddit r/SuicideBereavement:

"My brother killed himself last year. His note said 'I'm tired of being strong.' Our dad raised us on 'boys are strong' and neither of us ever learned it was okay to not be okay. I'm in therapy now, learning at 33 what we should have known at 3: strength includes knowing when you need help." - u/survivingbrother

From a widower's grief group:

"Lost my wife 6 months ago. Haven't cried once. Not because I'm not devastated—I am. But 'boys don't cry' is so deep in my programming, I literally CAN'T. Grief counselor says I'm having a 'complicated bereavement' because I can't access my sadness. 'Boys don't cry' is killing me from inside." - Robert, 67

The Unconscious Programming: This creates the "lone wolf" complex—the belief that needing others is weakness. It's why men are less likely to seek medical help, therapy, or support until they're in crisis. They've been programmed to see independence as the only acceptable form of strength.

Say This Instead: "This is really hard. Being strong sometimes means asking for help. What support do you need right now?" or "The strongest people know when to rest and when to reach out."

Why This Works: You redefine strength to include wisdom, strategy, and interconnection. You teach him that strength isn't about suppressing struggle but navigating it skillfully—sometimes alone, sometimes with support.



The Daily Practice: Emotional Check-Ins (10 Seconds That Change Everything)

Every night at bedtime, ask these three questions:

1. "What was your high today?" (best moment)
2. "What was your low today?" (hardest moment)
3. "What are you feeling right now?"

Don't judge, fix, or minimize. Just listen and reflect: "That makes sense" or "Thank you for telling me."

From a father who tried this:

"After 6 months, my withdrawn 9yo became a kid who could say 'Dad, I'm frustrated but also proud of trying.' That's emotional intelligence most adults don't have. Those 10 seconds every night rewired both of us." - Reddit r/Daddit

This simple practice:

- Normalizes emotional awareness
- Builds emotional vocabulary
- Creates safe space for feelings
- Takes under a minute
- Rewires the programming over time

For Fathers and Male Caregivers: Your Special Role

Your son watches how YOU handle emotions more than he listens to what you say.

From Reddit r/Parenting:

"My 8yo asked: 'Dad, if boys don't cry, and I'm a boy, but I want to cry, does that mean I'm broken?' That question broke ME. I said: 'No buddy. It means the rule is broken, not you.' Then I told him about every time I've cried. His relief was visible. He hugged me and said: 'So we're both not broken?' No son. We're not broken. The system that told us not to feel is broken." - u/breakingthecycle_dad

Every time you:

- Say "I'm frustrated" instead of punching a wall
- Say "I'm sad about that" instead of going silent
- Say "I need a minute to calm down" instead of exploding
- Say "That hurt my feelings" instead of attacking back

You're rewriting his program. You're showing him that real men feel, process, and respond rather than suppress, explode, or withdraw.





The Bottom Line: Raising Whole Boys

You're not trying to raise "sensitive" boys or "tough" boys. You're raising WHOLE boys— young men who can:

- Feel without drowning
- Be strong without being rigid
- Connect without losing themselves
- Lead without dominating
- Protect without destroying

Every phrase you change, every moment you validate rather than dismiss, every time you model emotional intelligence—you're literally rewiring generations of programming.

The software your son runs will determine whether he becomes a man at war with himself or a man at peace with his full humanity.

Choose wisely. Speak carefully. Model courageously.

Because the words you say today become the voice in his head forever.

Next Steps:

1. **Print this guide** and highlight the phrases you use most
2. **Practice the alternatives** when you're calm (they won't come naturally during stress at first)
3. **Share with co-parents** to ensure consistency
4. **Forward to other parents** raising boys—this revolution requires all of us
5. **Join our newsletter** for weekly scripts and strategies at clarusarc.com

Remember: You're not perfect. You'll slip up. When you do, model accountability: "I shouldn't have said that. Your feelings are valid. Let me try again."

That teaches more than getting it right every time ever could.

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