

A young boy is shown from the chest up, wearing colorful swim goggles and has his right arm raised in a fist. He is surrounded by splashing water, suggesting he is in the ocean. The background is a bright, slightly hazy blue sky.

Foreword by Sissy Goff
David Thomas, *LMSW*

RAISING EMOTIONALLY STRONG BOYS

*TOOLS YOUR SON CAN
BUILD ON FOR LIFE*

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David Thomas, LMSW



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To Lily, Baker, and Witt.
Being your dad has been my greatest joy in this life.

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Foreword

Boys are bewildering creatures. They're adorable, hilarious, wild, and completely puzzling. It's why I have watched literally thousands of parents—moms, in particular—sit transfixed, listening to and learning from my friend David Thomas. Yes, at first they're transfixed. And then I can see deep, hope-filled relief flood over them. *My son is normal.*

It is truly life-changing for every mom and every grown-up who loves a boy to hear David—who has been counseling boys and their families for almost three decades—say that their little (or big) guy is active and aggressive and curious because he's supposed to be. That, indeed, he *does* act before thinking. That it's all part of how God designed his brain to develop. That there are ways we can interact with him that speak specifically to that design. And that might even help him listen, too.

I have had the honor of working alongside David since 1997. We have practically grown up together in this amazing yellow house called Daystar, where we both have the great privilege of counseling kids and families. (We both

started when we were six . . . just kidding; we were in our early twenties.) Since that time, we have spoken together in front of thousands of parents all over the world. We used to joke that he was the Donny to my Marie, until parents in our audiences were too young to know who Donny and Marie are. We've been doing this that long. If you're one of those post-Donny and Marie parents, suffice it to say that we've been great friends who are like brother and sister for perhaps longer than you've been alive. Which means I have had a front-row seat to watch this man deeply impact not just boys of all ages, but their parents and grandparents, as well. And now I get to listen to and learn from him in a whole new way.

As this book is coming out, I have a three-year-old nephew and another little guy on the way in just a few months. I come from a girl family, and I, obviously, am a girl. Just like every mom at our events, I am transfixed hearing David talk about boys. I am in awe, not just at how God designed boys in a way that is profoundly different from how he designed girls, but also at the way David speaks directly about and to the heart of boys.

I also love that, when David was asked about writing a book on anxiety for boys after my book, *Raising Worry-Free Girls*, was released, he said no. Or at least, no to a book that's just about anxiety. Girls are twice as likely to struggle with anxiety as boys are. David knows boys and where they're struggling. He sits with them every day in our counseling office. He knows boys who do suffer from anxiety, but maybe even more struggle with self-regulation, with a surplus of energy and sometimes anger, with difficulty listening, and with a tendency to go outward with their emotions rather

than inward. And the boys who do suffer from anxiety often look like they're struggling with something entirely different . . . which is why we need David. David wanted to address where boys are, where specifically they tend to struggle, and what we can do to help.

Bring on this book—for me and for the thousands of parents who get to lean in and learn from the wisdom of David Thomas. I can't wait to help raise emotionally strong boys. And I'm grateful to have an emotionally strong and wise friend to lead the way, someone who has been in the trenches doing so day in and day out for almost thirty years. So grab your highlighter and a cup of coffee, and get ready to learn and laugh about these wonderful, bewildering creatures from a man who I believe is truly the leading expert on raising emotionally strong boys.

Sissy Goff, MEd, LPC-MHSP

Traps and Tricks

I grew up in the seventies, and from 1977 to 1982, *The Incredible Hulk* television series ran on CBS. You'd find me glued to the TV each week, awaiting the adventures of Dr. David Banner, a brilliant scientist whose laboratory experiment goes terribly awry. From that moment forward, whenever he is under extreme stress, he undergoes a massive change and morphs into the Incredible Hulk—a tall, muscular, bright-green monster. After destroying whatever threatens Dr. Banner, he morphs back to normal human form, left with his broken memory, tattered clothing, and evidence of destruction. These transformations are quite troubling for Dr. Banner, and he begins a long journey of trying to reverse his condition.

Decades later, I have taken my own sons to the theater to watch the many reimaged versions of this classic story. Each time I watch an interpretation, I'm struck by how it mirrors

the work I do as a therapist who counsels boys. I think many boys relate to the Incredible Hulk because they understand the tension of wanting to do good in the world while battling a monster inside. They know the impact of stress and what it's like when it comes out sideways. They understand emotion evolving into a transformation with an undesired outcome.

I've even had parents describe their sons as being like the Hulk. They report sending one guy to school and ending up with a monster at bedtime; these boys regulate with teachers and coaches, and then come unhinged at home with their parents. Recently a mom shared that reminding her son he had five minutes of screen time left resulted in his yelling, throwing the remote, and sobbing uncontrollably on the floor. She laughingly said, "He didn't turn green, but I kept waiting for it to happen."

When we get angry, our nervous system goes into higher states of arousal. We experience sensations in the body from increased heart rate, dilated pupils, adrenaline release, increased respiration, skin perspiration, and blood flow moving to the larger muscles. Sounds a bit like turning into the Hulk, doesn't it?

The Three Rs

Our job is to help boys learn to recognize stress as it registers inside them. We want to train them to observe and pay attention to the body sensations they are experiencing. As important as it is to *recognize* what's happening, boys need instruction in how to *regulate* in these moments. If they struggle to do one or both of those vital tasks, they may have a "Hulk moment" and then need to do some *repair*.

Despite the body's sounding alarms and sending signals, boys often ignore the signs and push forward until they find themselves in tattered clothes and full of regret. I've talked with thousands of boys over the decades who've described what it feels like on the other side of a Hulk moment. Boys share stories of yelling at their mom, shoving a younger sibling, or breaking an object in their home. I've heard adolescent boys describe unloading on a girlfriend, getting a technical foul in a game, or punching a hole in drywall.

The stories often involve blaming others for their mistakes, struggling to take ownership, and swimming in shame and regret. The image of Dr. Banner walking the streets teary-eyed and wondering what just happened comes to mind.

When I track through these stories, boys can often trace the events and identify where they got a signal they ignored or coaching from a parent they bypassed. They might even remember being told they were about to make things worse for themselves, and yet somehow the Hulk emerged.

Teaching the three Rs is something I've believed in for as long as I've been practicing as a therapist. It's the kind of work I believe creates good growth. It's not easy, and boys have a strong tendency to fall back into emotionally lazy responses. After all, it's not that difficult to melt down like a toddler or to lose your mind like a teenager. Regulation is work. It's effortful. But it yields good growth.

Learning to pay attention to the sirens and signals takes reflection, insight, and awareness. It's much easier to ignore the signs and keep your foot on the gas. However, it isn't safer to do so. Equally so, repairing a relationship is work. It requires a posture of humility and civility, and it's much easier to swing between blame and shame. Blame is nothing more

than discharged pain. Shame is self-contempt. Neither is a satisfying state of being. The work of relationship, though, is deeply satisfying.

Recognize—notice how your body signals an emotional response

Regulate—employ calming strategies when the nervous system goes into higher states of arousal

Repair—take ownership and do any needed relational work

Understanding and practicing the three Rs may be the most important coaching we do with the boys in our care. These are the benchmarks of raising emotionally strong boys. As simple as they sound and as necessary as they are to his emotional and relational health, we are somehow missing the mark.

Traps

Stuck. I've used this word in my office for decades. I think getting stuck is part of the human condition. We're all vulnerable to getting stuck in life—physically, emotionally, relationally, spiritually. Sometimes we get ourselves unstuck, and sometimes we need help to do that.

I have a giant Yeti water bottle in my office that serves as a reminder to me to drink eight glasses of water each day. I can get busy and forget to stay hydrated. Some days I fill the Yeti up repeatedly and hydrate like an athlete in training. Other days, I get stuck and forget to drink and refill, ending up with a headache around three in the afternoon, wondering what happened.

I grew up running and swimming competitively. I carried those passions into my adult life, and I've competed in everything from 5Ks to marathons. I've gone for long seasons training like I was headed to the Olympics, and other seasons like I'd never owned a pair of running shoes. I've been stuck in exercising, eating well, praying, friendships, marriage, parenting, vocation, and about every other aspect of life. I've been able to jump-start myself in certain seasons, and in other seasons I've needed help—a coach, a counselor, a friend, a pastor, or my spouse.

Getting stuck is a human condition. Men and women, boys and girls, any one of us can get stuck in any moment, and in any space—physically, emotionally, relationally, spiritually. The difference I've observed in my work is that women are more likely to reach out for help when they get stuck. There are certainly exceptions to this rule. I know women who struggle to ask for help and men who are great at doing so. But generally speaking, males struggle more in this space, and I strongly believe it's connected to our definition of masculinity. A definition many have worked to retire for some time now. For years, we've been working to expand the definition of masculinity, and countless individuals have pushed against the cultural messages we are sending boys about what it means to be a man in this world.

I hope this book can add a brick to the building of something new. I don't believe the traditional definition of masculinity includes tenderness. The longer I study the person of Jesus, the character of Christ, the more I come back to how his strength was founded in tenderness, compassion, mercy, and love. They were the pillars of his humanity.

A foundational part of raising emotionally strong boys includes anchoring them to a clear understanding of the

Jesus's strength was founded in tenderness, compassion, mercy, and love.

character of Christ and seeing the strength of sacrifice. If we hope to raise boys with relational strength, we need to see a man who walked intimately with a few close friends. As we evaluate his interaction and conversations with the disciples, his closest companions, we see intimacy and vulnerability. We see a man who celebrated and elevated women. We see a man who was

constantly challenged and questioned throughout his ministry and somehow never went off the rails.

Jesus, in his humanity, was full of emotions. He wept with his dear friend Mary at the loss of her brother, Lazarus (John 11). When he encountered the tax collectors using the temple for purposes never imagined, he felt anger (Matthew 21). In the garden, as he was wrestling with his impending death, and his closest friends fell asleep after he'd asked them to stay awake with him, we're told he felt fear (Matthew 26).

Boys will experience every one of those emotions—sadness, anger, fear. Our job is to help them identify what they feel and what to do with those emotions. Recognize, regulate, and if necessary, repair.

Trick Shots

For years, I've talked with boys about their fascination with Dude Perfect. If you aren't familiar, it's a group of former

college roommates, a sports and comedy group, who have one of the most-subscribed sports channels on YouTube. These guys created a whole new genre in sports and trick shots. I love building on this fascination by talking with boys about a different kind of trick shot. If stress is part of the game of life, let's develop some plays to move through it. If the typical guy struggles with off-loading stress, what could it look like to develop some trick shots in this space? I routinely have boys leave my office with a list of things that trigger stress for them and ways to manage it.

We talk about the ultimate trick shots of breathing and movement. Learning to do some deep breathing can be a game changer for any young man working with anger, stress, fear, or anxiety. Boys have a lot of physicality to their emotions. Having a physical release is foundational to navigating strong emotions. I have boys create a Top Five List on a note card or device with the majority of the five strategies involving movement to honor this unique way God hard-wired males.

The list might include running laps or shooting hoops, pull-ups or push-ups, using a boxing bag or yoga mat, jumping on a trampoline or riding a bike, lunges or jumping jacks, screaming into a pillow or punching it, walking the dog or climbing a tree, and the list goes on and on. I once worked with a twelve-year-old boy who off-loaded stress by riding a unicycle in his driveway, and a sixteen-year-old who washed and waxed his car. I'm open to anything that does involve movement and doesn't involve a screen. Boys often attempt to sell me on how video games or scrolling through social media helps them relieve stress. I'm quick to remind them that screens are an escape, not a coping strategy.

**Screens are
an escape,
not a coping
strategy.**

As we'll discuss more throughout this book, boys are instinctively skilled in numbing out, and we always want to be training them toward healthy coping. Technology has become one of the most addictive and accessible forms of numbing out for boys of all ages. I'm not opposed to boys having screen time with good limits, but not for the purposes we're discussing. The only exceptions I've made in this space would be for boys who are highly skilled in practicing healthy habits and who choose to add in some breathing and mindfulness apps. This can be a great resource and tool, but apps won't be a starting point.

A Different Direction

Years ago, I came across a viral video of a little boy in the driveway with his younger sister.¹ He looked to be about five years old. She might have been three. He was teaching her to shoot a basketball into a small Fisher-Price goal.

He moved aside to cheer her on. In her first attempt, she not only missed the shot, but the ball bounced back and hit her in the face. She burst into tears and her brother ran to her and hugged her immediately. "It's okay. You're strong," he said, and then he put his hands on both sides of her face and asked, "Do you want me to carry you?"

She agreed to that plan.

He then ran to get the ball, handed it back to her and said, "Now I'm going to carry you." He picked up his little sister to make the shot easier, and she gave it another try. This

time she experienced success as her father and her brother cheered.

I watched the video a dozen times, smiling and weeping at the sight of this supportive big brother. I found myself wondering many things about him.

I wondered what his parents are like, and how they nurtured this kind of empathy and compassion.

I wondered how his little sister will be shaped by having a brother who cheers her on throughout life.

I wondered if he'll stop being supportive at some point and become more hardened by the world. I wondered why this instinctive response in boys seems to go away as they travel through development.

A decade ago, I coauthored a bestselling book on boys called *Wild Things: The Art of Nurturing Boys*. I defined five stages of development in the first third of the book. This young boy in the video looked to be in the Lover stage. If I could freeze a boy in one stage of his development, I'd freeze him in the Lover stage. I describe young men here as tender and obedient, relational and compassionate. Obviously he can't stay in that stage forever. He can't stay more than a few years before it's time to move into the complicated stages of pre-, mid-, and late adolescence. He then moves into the vulnerable space of young adulthood. Each stage leading him further away from boyhood and into manhood. What if the journey could look different?

Boys and men lead some of the scariest statistics out there. Research reminds us that males have more difficulty identifying how they feel, resist taking action when they are struggling, are more reluctant to opening up, and engage in more risk-taking behaviors. Unless we create a different direction,

the statistics will only get worse. During the global pandemic of 2020, rates of anxiety, depression, and suicide climbed at an unprecedented pace. Existing problems became significantly worse. It served as a harsh reminder that we aren't doing enough to equip the kids we love to navigate the hard seasons of life.

I'm deeply encouraged by the efforts of many to redefine strength and bravery for the girls we love. I'm hopeful we can do the same for boys. What would it look like to raise a generation of boys who see vulnerability as a strength? What would it be like to raise a generation of young men who see prioritizing their mental health as wisdom?

Emotionally strong males are

***Resourceful**—having the ability to name and navigate emotions*

***Aware**—having a rich interior world, including strengths and weaknesses*

***Resilient**—having the capacity to cope and feel competent*

***Empathetic**—having an ability to understand and share the feelings of another*

How could we push against the images boys see and offer a new definition of masculinity? How could we anchor boys more strongly to the character of Christ and the qualities of tenderness, compassion, mercy, and love? I believe it's possible. It's much like what we discussed earlier—it will be hard work, but it leads to good growth. I believe it's not only possible, but it's what boys deserve from the grown-ups who love them.

Let's take that journey together.

INTENTIONAL PRACTICES

1. **The Hulk.** Find a cartoon or live movie version of the Hulk you could watch (in full or in part) with a boy you love that illustrates both the transformation and the regret. Talk about the tension between the desire to do good and the capacity for destruction in an age-appropriate way to set the stage for more understanding.
2. **Define the three Rs.** Discuss and define each one. Talk about the goal of becoming skilled in only needing the first two most of the time and about using the third R when we make mistakes.
3. **An example.** Invite boys to identify males in their lives (grandparents, teachers, coaches, pastors, and friends) who seem to have strong skills in the three Rs.
4. **Scripture.** Read John 11:17–35, Matthew 21:12–13, and Matthew 26:36–46 as reminders of how Jesus felt different feelings throughout his time on earth. Read Luke 19:41–48, a back-to-back account of Jesus weeping out of his love for Jerusalem in approaching the city and then right after his cleansing of the temple. Talk about when different emotions happen in close proximity to one another.
5. **Emotionally strong.** Come up with your own definition of what it means to be emotionally strong. Identify characters in books, films, and moments in history in whom you've seen evidence of this kind of strength.