

# Today's superheroes send wrong image to boys, say researchers

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Watching superheroes beat up villains may not be the best image for boys to see if society wants to promote kinder, less stereotypical male behaviors, according to psychologists who spoke Sunday at the 118th Annual Convention of the American Psychological Association.

"There is a big difference in the movie superhero of today and the comic book superhero of yesterday," said psychologist Sharon Lamb, PhD, distinguished professor of mental health at University of Massachusetts-Boston. "Today's superhero is too much like an action hero who participates in non-stop violence; he's aggressive, sarcastic and rarely speaks to the virtue of doing good for humanity. When not in superhero costume, these men, like Ironman, exploit women, flaunt bling and convey their manhood with high-powered guns."

The comic book heroes of the past did fight criminals, she said, "but these were heroes boys could look up to and learn from because outside of their costumes, they were real people with real problems and many vulnerabilities," she said.

To understand how the media and marketers package [masculinity](#) to boys, Lamb surveyed 674 boys age 4 to 18, walked through malls and talked to sales clerks and came to understand what boys were reading and watching on television and at the movies. She and her co-authors found that marketers take advantage of boys' need to forge their identity in adolescence and sell them a narrow version of masculinity. They can either be a "player" or a "slacker" -- the guy who never even tries - to

save face.

"In today's media, superheroes and slackers are the only two options boys have," said Lamb. "Boys are told, if you can't be a superhero, you can always be a slacker. Slackers are funny, but slackers are not what boys should strive to be; slackers don't like school and they shirk responsibility. We wonder if the messages boys get about saving face through glorified slacking could be affecting their performance in school."

Teaching boys early on to distance themselves from these images and encouraging them to find the lies in the messages can help, said Lamb. "When you crowd out other types of media messages, you promote stereotypes and limit their options."

Boys seem better adjusted when they resist internalizing "macho" images, according to a researcher who also presented at APA's convention.

Researcher Carlos Santos, PhD, of Arizona State University, examined 426 middle school boys' ability to resist being emotionally stoic, autonomous and physically tough — stereotyped images of masculinity — in their relationships. He also looked at how this would affect their psychological adjustment.

Santos looked at whether boys could resist being tough, emotionally unavailable, and detached from their friends as they moved from sixth to eighth grade; whether ethnicity made a difference; whether their relationships with their families and peer group fostered this resistance; and whether resisting these images affected their psychological health.

Participants were from different racial/ethnic backgrounds: 20 percent were African-American, 9 percent were Puerto Rican, 17 percent were

Dominican-American, 21 percent were Chinese-American, 27 percent were European-American and 6 percent were of another race or ethnicity.

Boys from diverse ethnic and racial groups were equally able to resist these masculine stereotypes, going against the common belief that certain ethnic minority boys are more emotionally stunted and hypermasculine, said Santos. Few differences were detected and most tended to dissipate over the course of middle school.

He found that boys were more likely to act tough and detached from their friends as they got older. But boys who remained close to their mothers, siblings and peers did not act as tough and were more emotionally available to their friends compared to those who were not as close. However, closeness to fathers encouraged boys to be more autonomous and detached from friendships.

"If the goal is to encourage boys to experience healthy family relationships as well as healthy friendships, clinicians and interventionists working with families may benefit from having fathers share with their sons on the importance of experiencing multiple and fulfilling relationships in their lives," Santos said. He also found that boys who were depressed had a harder time not acting macho in their friendships.

Interestingly, levels of emotional stoicism tended to remain stable throughout the middle school years and boys who did not adopt these macho behaviors had better psychological health in middle school, he found.

The results show that being able to resist internalizing these macho images —especially aggression and autonomy — declines as boys transition into adolescence and this decline puts their mental health at

risk, said Santos. "Helping boys resist these behaviors early on seems to be a critical step toward improving their health and the quality of their social relationships."

Provided by American Psychological Association

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