

# Let your boys be a little foul-mouthed. It might help them bond.

 [washingtonpost.com/parenting/2023/03/09/boys-insults-empathy-bonding](https://www.washingtonpost.com/parenting/2023/03/09/boys-insults-empathy-bonding)

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Advice by Amy Paturel

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As a mom of three boys, I've become accustomed to gross and sometimes abrasive language slung around the house. My 9-year-old sings "The Diarrhea Song" while passing gas in his brothers' direction. My 11-year-old twins pummel each other with terms like scrub, dummy and stupe (for stupid). And all three boys delight in sharing "Yo Mama" jokes at my expense.

When I express disdain for their foul language, my sons tell me this is how boys connect; when they insult each other, it's a compliment. And research seems to back their theory. A [2020 study](#) published in the *Journal of Men's Studies* reported that fighting for fun, especially derogatory name-calling, is part of boys' joking culture in schools. [Research](#) dating back to the 1990s suggests that for boys, underhanded remarks are a sign of trust, acceptance and belonging (a rule that does not generally apply to girls). Which explains why my son giggled with delight when he found a note from a friend in his backpack with two words: dip wad. For him, that note from that particular boy was a sign of acceptance and belonging.

"Insults act like glue for boys, bonding them together," says Ylva Odenbring, professor of education at the University of Gothenburg in Sweden. According to Odenbring's research, society creates boundaries around how boys and men can show vulnerability and express affection for one another, which can impact their well-being. So instead of hugs and words, they typically learn to connect in ways that are presumably more socially acceptable: insults, vulgarity and potty humor.

According to Michael Gurian, family therapist and author of "[Saving Our Sons: A New Path for Raising Healthy and Resilient Boys](#)," these bonding strategies aren't just culturally based, they're rooted in biological and neurochemical differences between the sexes. In fact, [research shows](#) that "boys don't have as much activity in the verbal and emotive regions of the brain as girls," Gurian says. "That's why this aggressive form of connecting is a worldwide phenomenon — and it should be viewed as an asset, not a liability." It even has a name in psychology circles: aggressive nurturance.

Younger boys nurture one another physically and kinesthetically through rough-and-tumble play. When they do try to connect with words, they turn first to potty humor. "Fart and poop jokes are one way boys learn to test boundaries, develop critical thinking and establish male

hierarchies,” says Jennifer L.W. Fink, author of the forthcoming book “Building Boys: Raising Great Guys in a World that Misunderstands Males.” “It’s most intense during the elementary school years, but let’s face it, 80-year-old guys still connect over a good fart joke.”

Once boys reach tweenhood, testosterone surges in tandem with frontal lobe development, which makes these years ripe for warring with words. Gurian argues that boys who lob creative insults at each other are verbally expressing their emotions.

“Learning to deflect and handle insults is a critical social skill for boys,” Fink says. “It helps them build resilience and manage verbal abuse without resorting to violent behavior — especially when the quips are doled out by someone they like and trust.”

But the world’s systems, particularly within education, are intentionally built around “empathy nurturance,” which aims to cut down on bullying and increase empathy. As we encourage boys to talk about their feelings — to use their words and get in touch with their emotions — it’s important to remember that they’re also biologically driven to jab each other.

“Most school systems don’t understand aggression nurturance,” Gurian says. “What they’re not realizing is that aggression nurturance is empathic. It’s a nature-based approach that builds respect, maturation and resilience.” This is not to say boys can or should bully, taunt or otherwise cross that line between playful banter and something hurtful. Just like play fighting, aggression nurturance can go awry, and people can get hurt. Kids need to learn that context and target audience matter, and to understand when things have gone too far. After all, you don’t want your kids slinging “Yo Mama” jokes at grandma’s house, detailing their bowel movements at the dinner table or hurling insults at younger, more vulnerable children.

“The position in the peer group is really important,” Odenbring says. “Kids who have a low position in the group are at higher risk of being verbally harassed. They’re also less likely to speak up when an insult crosses the line because they fear being labeled as a snitch, which could increase the risk of future bullying.”

Tossing around racial slurs and derogatory terms that target marginalized groups is another concern. A 2020 survey of teenage boys in the United States found that three quarters of boys were involved in, among other everyday harmful insults, homophobic teasing, which is very different from taunting a brother with potty humor.

“Your job as a parent is to explain why pejorative terms can be hurtful and remember kids often repeat words they’ve heard at school or on YouTube without knowing what they mean,” Fink says. “Even if these conversations don’t immediately result in behavior changes, they plant seeds that will help children develop sensitivity.”

As for terms like jerk face, dip wad and stupid head, they’ve become omnipresent visitors in our home. “This playful banter presents an opportunity for parents to teach kids empathy, to watch for reactions and speak up when they feel uncomfortable,” Fink says. The idea is to

create space for sarcasm and lighthearted teasing, to allow boys to display aggression and nurturance without penalizing them.

(Girls should be equally free to use foul-mouthed bonding strategies, but research suggests that girls are more likely to take insults to heart, which defeats the purpose of using them as a connection tool.)

Gurian tells me that as boys get older and begin to develop an interest in forming romantic relationships, they naturally move away from potty humor and some verbal sparring. In the meantime, I'm starting to toy with not squashing these vulgar tete-a-tetes. Sometimes I'll let a "Yo Mama" roundtable ensue, and when someone inevitably hits below the belt, I'll pipe up with words like "too much" or "that's starting to feel hurtful."

Admittedly, I still struggle with allowing my kids to roast each other, but I also recognize this phase, like all phases, is sure to pass. At some point, I won't have to play referee — they'll know how far they can push their siblings before offending them. My guess is it will be around the time they've moved onto something more mature and I've finally perfected my bathroom humor.