

## **Avery Reading Group Guide**

### **The Mama's Boy Myth Why Keeping Our Sons Close Makes Them Stronger By Kate Stone Lombardi**

#### **Introduction**

In this eye-opening examination of the relationship between mothers and sons, award-winning journalist Kate Stone Lombardi highlights new research to reveal that boys who are close to their mothers are happier, more secure, and enjoy stronger connections with their friends and ultimately their spouses. Drawing on revealing interviews and moving case studies, Lombardi shows the harm in outmoded attempts to push a son away for fear of “coddling” him. With lucid explanations of the historical roots that cause eyebrows to rise if a mother seems “too close” to her son, *The Mama's Boy Myth* outlines the preconceptions that shaped the Oedipus legend and Freud's provocative theory. With wise words for contemporary families, this transformative book argues that the power of the new male—one who is more emotionally intelligent and sensitive without being less “manly”—is attributable to women who reject the mama's boy taboo.

Important reading for mothers and fathers alike, *The Mama's Boy Myth* proposes an enlightened approach that overturns outdated “wisdom.” We hope that the following guide will enhance your reading group's discussion of this illuminating book.

#### **About Kate Stone Lombardi**

Kate Stone Lombardi has contributed to *The New York Times* for the last twenty years. Her work has also appeared in *The Wall Street Journal*, *Reader's Digest*, *Parenting*, *Time.com* and *Ladies Home Journal*. She has won six Clarion Awards for journalism from Women in Communications. A graduate of Williams College with an MS in journalism from Columbia University, Lombardi is the mother of two adult children and lives in Westchester County, New York, with her husband, Michael.

#### **A Conversation with Kate Stone Lombardi**

**Avery Books:** How have readers reacted to *The Mama's Boy Myth*? What responses have surprised you the most?

Mothers have breathed a collective sigh of relief. Many women today are keeping their sons close, but they are still second-guessed and criticized for doing so by family members, school officials and others. These mothers have been gratified to learn that their instincts about the positive effects of the mother-son bond are validated by the research.

But the book did provoke a strong critical reaction from a small segment of men, mostly older ones, which surprised me. They believed that supporting mothers who encourage their sons to express their emotions would “turn boys into girls.” Younger men were far more positive – they had experienced the benefits of that strong mother-son bond, and were far less defensive about it.

**AB:** You're frequently asked how your son felt about being featured in the book (answer: a combination of flattered and slightly embarrassed). How did *you* feel about the process of covering a topic that hits so close to home? How did writing this book compare to the reporting you've done?

Because I wrote a column for *The New York Times* about suburban life that occasionally touched on my own family experiences, getting personal in print was not foreign territory for me. What was different about writing *The Mama's Boy Myth* was that the genesis of the topic was very organic – it absolutely grew out of my own experience. As I mention in the introduction, I had always had such a close relationship with Paul. But there was a part of me that felt apologetic about it. So while our bond felt completely natural, I kept getting all these cultural messages that there must be something off. Being able to explore this conflict in depth was like a perfect storm, but in a positive sense. It married a subject that had great personal resonance for me with good, old fashioned reporting of interviews and research. And I didn't have to confine it to 900 words, which was my column length!

**AB:** Throughout the book, you describe parents' fears of being ostracized. Do you predict that this social pressure will decrease in your children's lifetime? Will their children have more or less freedom to be authentic when it comes to gender roles?

Gender roles continue to evolve. Here's a Facebook post that showed up in my newsfeed from a younger mom during the Super Bowl: "Today, my husband taught our son to sing 'All the Single Ladies.' Tonight, I taught him about huddles, 1st downs and touchdowns. It is possible that the world has spun off its axis." Well, the world isn't spinning off it's axis, it's just realigning to some new realities. Our understanding of what is "masculine" and what is "feminine" has changed dramatically. (It was once considered unfeminine to vote!) The more we understand that a great deal of behavior is simply human, the more freedom children will have to define themselves as individuals.

**AB:** The book is packed with information that overturns conventional wisdom. What were your best sources of information? What was the research process like for topic that has such a complex history?

I tried to braid my two best sources of information – academic research and the actual experience of mothers and sons - through out the book. (OK, that sounds like three sources, but I'm putting "mothers and sons" into one category here.) Researching the science was surprisingly challenging, because few academics were directly studying the mother-son relationship. There were countless research papers on what academics call "mother-daughter dyads," and on fathers and sons, and fathers and daughters. But very few people were exploring the mother-son dynamic. I'm not sure why. I have jokingly speculated that everyone collectively decided that Freud had sorted this all out in 1899 with the Oedipus complex, so there was no need to revisit the subject now. I did end up uncovering a multitude of relevant research, but it was often indirect. For instance, in examining studies on masculinity, I would find a connection on mothers and sons. Ditto with research on boys' physical and mental health.

There was also the cultural piece. It was a real revelation to look at television, movies and literature through the lens of how the mother-son relationship is depicted. Sometimes you have to go so deep for the research, and other times you just have to watch a beer commercial.

**AB:** Ultimately, what would our world look like if the stigma of close mother-son bonds became non-existent?

I think boys and men would be faring much better than they are today. Recently there has been renewed attention to the fact that guys are struggling – from dramatic headlines like “*The End of Men*” to serious concern in the academic community about boys falling behind girls in school. We also know that boys are prescribed medication for attention and behavior disorders far more often than girls.

But the world we’re living in today has different values than it did when males were dominant. Brute strength or top-down “my-way-or-the-highway” management styles are no longer prized in the work place. And the days of “boys will be boys,” when aggressive and insensitive behavior is tolerated, are dwindling. Rather, schools –and ultimately employers – now reward abilities like social intelligence, focus, communication skills, and the capacity for teamwork. These are not inborn sex traits, but aptitudes that can be developed. Girls and women are socialized early on to learn these skills, which is in part why they are thriving today. Mothers of this generation are in a unique position to impart these qualities to their sons, to equip them with the emotional intelligence they will need to do well in school, in work and in life.

If we lived in a society where a close mother-son bond was encouraged instead of stigmatized, we’d be doing a huge favor for our sons – and for that matter, for our daughters. Pitting girls’ achievements against boys’ is not the way to go. The world is a better place when *everyone* can reach his or her full human potential.

### **Questions for Discussion**

1. The book begins by describing Susan’s cautious disclosure. What is the effect of the aura of secrecy that often surrounds situations like hers? How would your family or circle of friends respond to Susan?
2. What was your relationship with your parents like? How did the parenting approaches described in the book compare to those of your mother and father?
3. Chapter 2 highlights studies that show a correlation between weak attachment to mothers and hostility in boys. Have you observed any examples of this in your community? How does this cycle appear to play out when aggressive boys become fathers themselves? What would it take to start perpetuating a cycle of male emotional intelligence on a national scale?
4. How has the recent increase in female breadwinners affected your outlook on men’s and women’s gender roles? Has your family experienced the shift from a man being regarded as the

king of his castle to a girl viewed as a princess who should be pampered? Or is there some middle ground?

5. Discuss the double standard in which tomboys are admired but unaggressive boys are ridiculed. What fear lies at the heart of this hypocrisy?

6. Chapter 2 captures the historical transformation as America began to embrace the artificial dividing line (pink/blue) after World War II. What is the best way to discern what is natural in a child's gender identity? Should any limitations be imposed on children's natural impulses while they play with gender roles?

7. Chapter 3, "Oedipus Wrecks" shares Freud's renowned theory and its origins in ancient Greek legends. What themes emerge from these interpretations (generally disseminated by men) of the mother-son-father dynamic? Are any aspects of these themes—possessiveness, insecurity—the result (rather than the cause) of a weak mother-son relationship?

8. Kate Stone Lombardi includes many examples of cultural norms that perpetuate the fear of mother-son bonding, ranging from Jonathan Franzen's novel *Freedom* to comedians who vilify strong mothers. What makes mothers such easy fodder? When have cultural references like these made you uncomfortable?

9. Discuss the myth of the male role model. Who were your best role models? Did their gender matter?

10. Discuss the parenting conflicts that arise in straight couples with a father adamantly opposes the mother's attempts to soothe their son. What do you think is at the root of Dad's nay-saying? Is he simply jealous or perhaps perpetuating his own experience growing up? Or is social pressure the main factor?

11. Discuss the men you are close to. How are their interactions with you shaped by mother-son relationships?

12. As Lombardi describes shifting gender roles for her son's generation, what benefits emerge for women and men alike? How can you be a part of positive outcomes in our current cultural crossroads?

13. After reading the book's concluding chapters, what do you believe is the best way to define appropriate boundaries in mother-son relationships? Regardless of gender, where is the dividing line between a close, supportive parent and a smothering one?

14. How will your communication style with your son change as a result of this book?

15. How do the findings presented in *The Mama's Boy Myth* fill in the gaps left by other parenting books you have read?

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