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BBFA PEP Summary

Mothers and Adolescent Sons: The Unique Role of a Mother in the Life of Her Adolescent Son Suzanne M. Haynes M.S.

Tuesday, February 12, 2008

February's Parent Education Program ***Mothers and Adolescent Sons*** was presented by Suzanne M. Haynes, M.S., a professional parent counselor and Professor of Psychology at Baker College. A capacity audience of almost 150 attended the morning presentation.

Ms. Haynes began her presentation with a short overview of the history of gender roles, noting that until relatively recently women occupied narrow roles that made them dependent on men. They were expected to be emotional, sensitive, and in need of assistance to navigate the world. Men were seen as the strong, unemotional heads of households. During the 1970s and 1980s, Ms. Haynes noted, the liberation of women went too far, denying the natural differences between the sexes. Balance has returned in the early 21st century, leading to recognition that these differences can be positive and can lead to healthy interdependence between men and women.

Ms. Haynes noted that, among all of the parent/child relationships, the one between mothers and sons has received the least attention and study. She has concluded that the reason for this relative lack is the fact that the relationship is so fundamental that we take a mother's support for her son for granted: of course all mothers love their sons without conditions. The truth is that the relationship between mothers and sons is complicated and fraught with difficulties, Ms. Haynes asserted, especially during the adolescent years. She pointed out that recent changes in social expectations have added urgency to the fundamental questions many mothers ask themselves: how can a mother help her son to be strong but sensitive, tough but emotionally available, understanding of himself and others, and able to face the myriad temptations of the world around him?

Ms. Haynes spent a few minutes emphasizing the importance of mothers to their sons from the time of infancy ("a boy's first love is his mother"). Using a story about sons showing off for their mothers at the swimming pool, she noted that this importance is continuing. She then explained that the mother's unique role is to keep track of her son's emotional well-being; to provide love, safety, and comfort; to serve as his emotional home base; and to help him learn to experience and express his feelings. A mother's ultimate task is "to help her son leave her without losing her and return to her without losing himself."

In the next portion of her talk Ms. Haynes discussed the special qualities of boys, including warmth, playfulness, spontaneity, energy, and physicality. She noted that a mother who was not raised around boys herself might be intimidated and even alarmed by the way boys behave. It's all perfectly normal, however, and a healthy expression of natural feelings of power, aggression, and competitiveness. Interestingly, Ms. Haynes said, research shows that boys actually need more one-on-one emotional support than do girls. She warned that adolescence can come suddenly, with radical and unexpected changes in behavior. Unlike teen girls (who are sassy, argumentative, and hyper-emotional), Ms. Haynes explained, teen boys tend to be brooding, edgy, withdrawn, and distant.

Significantly, Ms. Haynes pointed out, this new behavior reflects the fact that boys must strive for independence during adolescence despite their feelings of ambivalence about their continuing tender feelings for their mothers. While most mothers instinctively react by their sons' sudden withdrawal by trying to reestablish a close emotional bond that is a mistake. The separation is normal and necessary,

not a personal rejection. She also mentioned that, for many boys, distancing is a mechanism to avoid expressing intense anger and thereby jeopardizing their relationships with their mothers.

Ms. Haynes then provided some additional specific advice. Mothers, she said, should remember that they remain their sons' emotional base and use listening to signal that they remain available for emotional support without being pushy. For example, the advice that typically follows listening should be offered in a nonthreatening fashion, perhaps in the form of questions that encourage teen boys to use their judgment in difficult situations. An important element of this process, Ms. Haynes emphasized, is to parent authoritatively. This means setting out clear rules (for example, civility and empathy) and expectations while simultaneously providing a high level of support and understanding. Linking privileges with responsibilities is a major part of such an approach, as is trusting sons while also remaining aware and vigilant.

Ms. Haynes concluded by encouraging mothers to continue to offer tender support to their sons even in the face of some discomfort given their growing physical maturity. Mothers should remember, she noted that they will serve as "Ambassadors of Women" for their sons, helping them to understand and respect women (including in their early sexual encounters), setting positive patterns they will carry into their own relationships and marriages.

Ms. Haynes provided a short list for further reading:

Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys
By Michael Thompson and Dan Kindlon (2000)

Strong Mothers, Strong Sons
By Ann Caron (1995)

Get Out of My Life, But First Could You Drive Me and Cheryl to the Mall
By Anthony Wolf (2002)

**A copy of Ms. Haynes' handout containing her PowerPoint slides is available on the BBFA website, www.bbfaprevention.org.
(click on the "PEP Summaries and Information" tab)**