



Masterminds and Wingmen: Helping Our Boys Cope with Schoolyard Power, Locker-Room Tests, Girlfriends, and the New Rules of Boy World

Rosalind Wiseman

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Books for a Better Life Award Winner

Here is a landmark book that reveals the way boys think and that shows parents, educators and coaches how to reach out and help boys overcome their most common yet difficult challenges -- by the bestselling author who changed our conception of adolescent girls.

Do you constantly struggle to pull information from your son, student, or athlete, only to encounter mumbling or evasive assurances such as “It’s nothing” or “I’m good?” Do you sense that the boy you care about is being bullied, but that he’ll do anything to avoid your “help?” Have you repeatedly reminded him that schoolwork and chores come before video games only to spy him reaching for the controller as soon as you leave the room? Have you watched with frustration as your boy flounders with girls?

Welcome to Boy World. It’s a place where asking for help or showing emotional pain often feels impossible. Where sports and video games can mean everything, but working hard in school frequently earns ridicule from “the guys” even as they ask to copy assignments. Where “masterminds” dominate and friends ruthlessly insult each other but can never object when someone steps over the line. Where hiding problems from adults is the ironclad rule because their involvement only makes situations worse.

Boy world is governed by social hierarchies and a powerful set of unwritten rules that have huge implications for your boy’s relationships, his interactions with you, and the man he’ll become. If you want what’s best for him, you need to know what these rules are and how to work with them effectively.

What you’ll find in *Masterminds and Wingmen* is critically important for every parent – or *anyone* who cares about boys – to know. Collaborating with a large team of middle- and high-school-age editors, Rosalind Wiseman has created an unprecedented guide to the life your boy is *actually* experiencing – his on-the-ground reality. Not only does Wiseman challenge you to examine your assumptions, she offers innovative coping strategies aimed at helping your boy develop a positive, authentic, and strong sense of self.

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From Reader Review Masterminds and Wingmen: Helping Our Boys Cope with Schoolyard Power, Locker-Room Tests, Girlfriends, and the New Rules of Boy World for online ebook

Aimee says

If you have boys you need to read this book. I have two boys, 15 and 7, and I learned so much from this book. The most important thing I learned was that just because boys are more quiet and do not talk to you about their problems does not mean that do not have things going on in their lives that they need help with. Wiseman gives some great advice on how to talk to your sons and get them to open up to you without pushing them.

Another part of the book that I really appreciated was the section on video games. Wiseman really takes a long look at video games, why they are so important to boys, how they learn to interact and communicate with each other through games, and the positives and negatives of so much time in front of a screen. Video games are the number one cause for arguments in our house and I feel like I now have some new insight into why my boys want to play them so much and I am going to make a real effort to talk to them more about them since they are so important to their lives.

I was really impressed with all of the great information included in this book and though I might not agree with all of Wiseman's advice I did agree with a lot of it and plan on using her ideas to improve my relationships with my sons.

Leah says

Much of this book was excruciatingly difficult to digest, either because I disagreed with parenting methods used by the author in her own family, or because it addressed issues facing older teens I would rather not imagine. Yet, I listened to the whole book because I know better than to hide my head in the sand. Cod liver oil is good for us, even if we don't enjoy the taste.

My biggest bone of contention stems from the title of the book, which the author probably had little in the way of control. There is a very short section at the beginning of book that describes the social hierarchy of boys. Her categories strike me as both rigid and limiting. Thankfully, the author only references these roles a couple of times throughout the book. There is much more material here that has nothing to do with this element of boy life.

In writing the book, the author relied on student editors to review her writing and contribute their experiences. Several times, she allows the boys to suggest phrases that would be helpful for parents when addressing a situation. This was the most useful element, one I may look to again for suggestions in the future.

Rebekah Sheppard says

The main points of interest in the book are:

1) What the boys groups look like:

10% fit the ALMB (Acts Like a Man Box with characteristics of having money, confident, funny, good at comebacks, tall, detached, tough, strong, good with girls, always relaxed, independent, good at the right sports, slacker attitude even if he does well in school.)

75% make up the general population - different groups of about 5 to 10 kids each

10% hang out at the bottom but have a strong group - know their social position, know they appear odd to others, and don't care as long as they have at least one strong friendship.

5% are the outer perimeter - these are totally apart from the social system and consist of anarchists, pranksters, politicians, obsessed single-subject or single sport high-achievers, and those seriously lacking in social skills.

2) The roles within the group:

Mastermind - Charismatic and influences others' as to what and who is accepted and humiliated, argues well and yield's absolute power,

Associate - looks like the Mastermind but more talkative and well liked, interested in others' business and what advantage he and Mastermind can gain from it.

Bouncer - Big, tall and intimidating and will sacrifice himself as one of his responsibilities, can't verbally defend himself or read and understand others' motivations.

Entertainer - diffuses tension in the group, good at making others feel comfortable, but has a hard time stopping the jokes when he gets going.

Conscience - worries about getting caught and the consequences; because he's trustworthy, he used as the smokescreen when dealing with parents and authorities.

Punching Bag - he is the one in the group who is relentlessly ridiculed, but if someone on the outside does this, the group will defend him.

Fly - hovers outside the group and doesn't know how annoying he is, if his parents have money he will attempt to build friendships by bragging or buying. He will be tolerated for a while but at some point the group will lash out and there will be no guilt in excluding him because he's seen as bring it on himself.

Champion - he is not controlled by any group and is comfortable with inside and outside the box, he doesn't make others choose friends and won't blow off someone for a better offer.

3) Parenting styles:

The Believer Parent - let their kids talk their way out of trouble, blame kid's problems on others and don't like to dig into problems too deeply.

The Bear Parent - if their kid did someone wrong, he was justified and shouldn't be punished because he was wronged first, escalate conflicts by getting other people involved i.e. petitions, boycotts, alternative dances and parties.

The Dictator Parent - automatically don't trust son's friends or parents if they have a difference background and may investigate them, trust those who share their background or look clean-cut, interrogate their son about what other people did or didn't do at social events with a judgmental tone may leave the child feeling he needs to lie.

The Boys Will be Boy Parent - don't punish their son in a way he takes it seriously, tells his son's friends the dumb stuff the son did, will support a bullying coach as long as he wins, talks in sports metaphors, speaks in slogans, encourages their son to play the right sports i.e. football, hockey and lacrosse.

The Pushover Parent - don't want to acknowledge their actions explains their son's lack of respect, feels guilty for working long hours, travel or aren't the primary parent, feels overwhelmed in the face of an angry son, thinks that if everyone is reasonably healthy that's good enough.

The No-excuses Parent - believes problems should stay within the family, highly concerned about their place in the community and their reputation, surprised when their kid messes up or has serious issues, as a result from the above they can be the cause of more stress than the child already has.

The No-privacy Parent - dismiss or laugh at child's response to stop talking about the subject, dismiss teen's anger by saying "Just kidding" or "Kids are so sensitive" in a way that does not take responsibility for their own hurtful behavior, refuse to talk about their behavior later or admit that what they did was wrong.

The Don't Ask, don't tell Parent - don't see when their son is high, drunk or gay, don't check how their son is doing in school, make statements that reinforce their clueless image.

The Glory Seeker Parent - justify behavior by pushing their son to be his best, can publicly humiliate their son when they lose their temper, usually has a spouse that doesn't confront their behavior or if pushed makes excuses for it, doesn't have the ability to reflect on how their actions push their son to hate what he excels at or to feel that he's nothing without it.

The Bro Dad - uses slang terms that don't quite make sense or makes it look like he's trying too hard, tells his son to have others over all the time, urges son to have a party and be social, tries to tell his son what is cool and what isn't.

The Girlfriend Mom - can't be differentiated from the back from the son's female peers, laughs when son's friend(s) makes a joke about how hot she is, looks the other way when son does something illegal, wants to be best friends with son's girlfriend, want's to go to son's events as a way to gossip with other parents about the kids and other parents.

The Peace Vigilante - thinks that throwing rocks or using sticks as guns will result in violent behavior, not allowing any typical boy games, can be counterproductive as the Boys Will be Boys extreme.

The Rock - good at hanging out with their son without any pressure to make it a bonding experience, take his son over the other's house to apologize when he's done something wrong, good at coming up with effective punishments, don't gossip about their children while watching events, affectionate with their son and have no problem hugging him in public, not afraid to admit when they feel overwhelmed or unsure about how to handle a difficult situation with their kids, know and when to approach their son to talk, make certain that their sons' friends respect the rules of the house.

Julie says

I borrowed this book from the library, didn't get it as a promotion. It was written with the help of some 200+ boys, which I like. It gets stars for talking about race, disability, and being gay, but loses a star for being pretty slanted towards middle class and richer families (doesn't talk about poverty or the realities of violence in poor communities, etc but does talk about lacrosse?!) also it stops short of saying tell your son to get consent before you have sex. That said, it's really got a bunch of great insight & advice. It's already been helpful helping my three yr old deal with a friend who pushes & hits him & other friends.

Molly says

I (very excitedly) received an ARC of this title from Goodreads and the publisher.

I have never read Queen Bees and Wannabees (nor seen Mean Girls), but I'm familiar with the buzz around the author's 'girl' book and was beginning to hear a lot about Masterminds. Given that I have an 8 year old boy, this one seemed important for me to read.

The author's tone is very conversational, which makes this easy to read. Her text is peppered with quotes from guys (preteen and up), as well as girls, parents and teachers. It is easy to see yourself or your son in many of the situations described. I found myself nodding along as I read. Even the parts that apply to older teens were worthwhile reading. I only hope I can remember her advice when my son and I stumble into this new territory.

This book can be helpful to parents of all stripes, conservative to liberal, strict to lenient. Reading through the scenarios (from sports to girls to friends) can help you reflect on what you say and how you guide your son through adolescence.

Recommended for parents of pre-teen boys and any struggling with communication.

Io says

I found this book terribly frustrating, especially for the first half. It is, essentially, a series of cherry-picked anecdotes masquerading as science. The author begins with an unbelievably stereotypical view of boys. While I believe she did genuinely conduct interviews with a cross-section of boys (at least 150 or so), she cherry-picks quotes from one or two of these interviews to bolster her own stereotypes of how boys behave. I (the mother of two boys) found these sections disheartening at best and infuriating at worst. The book also doesn't tell you how *most* boys responded, only how the ones she wanted to highlight responded.

Throughout the book, I struggled to recognize the behavior that she so blithely reported as common among boys--her interpretation just didn't resonate with the experiences of my own sons or their many friends. Perhaps I live in a geographic bubble that makes me lucky, but I found myself thinking she was describing some kind of bizarre alternate universe ruled by basically every stereotype you've ever heard about boys. I would have given it one star, but she did have some sections that made good sense. And just as an aside, she *really* hates lacrosse players. If you needed any more proof that this is basically one long opinion piece, the section on lacrosse players provides it. Overall, this was a terribly disappointing read.

Lucy says

Rosalind Wiseman wrote the well known book Queen Bees and Wannabes, a book that I haven't read but have heard about. When I saw this at my library and read that its purpose was to inform parents about the new rules and realities of Boy World, like her Queen Bee book did for girls, I checked it out.

Then, I missed two nights of sleep due to anxiety. Seriously.

I'm sure the many boys she refers to as her "editors" and whose opinions and experiences she used as proof for what boys' lives are like through middle school and high school are being honest and forthright about what their lives are like. I'm sure Wiseman uses these specific boys and their truths to create her generalities about how they communicate, why they torment, who they accept and what parents need to know with the best possible motives. In a lot of ways, this was every John Hughes film/Friday Night Lights/Glee episode I've ever seen (which isn't a lot. Well...I'm pretty sure I've watched all the John Hughes films). In a nutshell, boys are told from a very young age that Batman, a mono-emotion superhero, is the ideal and straying from this model affects their standing among friends, girls and even adults. We expect boys to be boys: tough, clever, athletic and cool.

In addition to exposing this Boy World, she explains to parents when and how to ask questions, when and how to be concerned about social media/videogames/pornography and what we're all doing wrong by worrying about the wrong things. Queue sleepless nights.

My overall feeling upon finishing this book is that, according to her and her helpful editors, I'm doing everything wrong. I ask too many questions, demand too much and pretty much live a hypocritical life. To summarize some of her points, I put him at a social disadvantage by not allowing violent video games (Rated M) and shows (TV-MA) because those are the things his friends are watching and playing and being able to discuss these things with their peers is vital to them feeling like they have a place in boys world and there has been no proof that exposure to violent media makes kids become violent. Girls are going to sext them so I should provide a smart phone, stop checking it after 9th grade and leave them with the advice that when those girls send them naked pictures of themselves, look at it for a minute and then delete it. I find all of this crazy!

But, I checked this book out for a reason. My oldest child, an eighth grader, struggles to talk to me and after reading the "What kind of parent are you?" chapter, I think I fit into the "Dictator" mold which is pretty much the worst type of parent to be. The disparity between what I want for my children and what I'm probably doing for them is harrowing. I don't know how to be cool or perfect. It sucks.

I don't think that's the point of the book but....it kind of is. I found her writing style to be annoying close to arrogant (she admitted her own problems with her kids but very frequently uses her own parenting as a

model). There was quite a bit of good information and I appreciate her advice but with my religious perspective and my own common sense, there are some parenting suggestions that I think goes beyond bad advice and is harmful. Does that mean my own bias is getting in the way? I don't know. I tried reading with an open mind and I have stopped asking so many questions when my middle schooler gets in my car after school and I have a plan about how to handle homophobic jabs (boys are particularly prone to using them) and potential bad coaching. But, there is an entire chapter about boys playing Lacrosse. Lacrosse! It took that chapter, towards the end, for me to realize that her information is not universal. Still, her book is very eye opening and I'm not going to be naive about the possibilities and probabilities of what my children are facing and are going to face being active, sports-playing, boys. It's going to be tough.

Misty Ray says

Informative and easy to follow; "Masterminds and Wingmen" breaks down the varying levels of power and cultural roles that appear in a young man's life over time. There are no real, concrete tips here on how to deal with and approach a boy from a parenting perspective, but plenty of ways to better understand what he goes through in a day.

Useful for those who want to better understand their child, and a good stepping stone for those who want to find their own path of openness with him.

Received as an advance copy through Goodreads.

Leslie Wilkins says

Interesting and informative. An insightful and, at times, frightening look at how pre-teen and teen boys think and behave. I like that the author had a panel of "editors" that were boys weighing in with real-world experiences. I didn't agree with everything, but will definitely use some of the strategies she suggests. (I probably would have liked it more if the author didn't keep reminding us of her other similar book about girls.)

Laura says

Even though I don't have sons, I picked this book up because I absolutely loved Queen Bees and Wannabes. Wiseman used a similar research style for this book and gives similarly helpful insights into boy world. I especially liked her "act like a man box" activity as it revealed just how narrow worldly ideas of manhood really are. I read enough of this book to get the most important parts out of it: boys do in fact have emotional lives that are surprisingly complex, which is shown by the alarmingly high rates of suicides among boys, the declining supply of qualified male applicants to college, and the increasing incidents of boys with body image issues. I appreciate how Wiseman actually interviews teen boys and runs every chapter by them before publishing.

Aniruddh Bharadwaj says

First of all, let me preface this review by saying that I'm a 17 (soon to be 18) year old high school student (male) studying out of Cupertino. Keyword Cupertino, the land of lore and liberalism, which in itself is a huge indication as to the direction that this review will be moving in.

This book is the holy grail of "guy" problems - a majority of this book accurately and beautifully describes the struggles of teenage boy-ism in the context of a modern high-school, where the backstabbing, lying, and filthily cheating male population has grown aplenty.

I dove into this novel thinking that I was above it all - after all, how could a nerdy, comical, Asian male ever fit neatly into any high-school hierarchy at all? However, as I read through a couple excerpts, I began to realize that I am the "75%", as Wiseman describes us. I fit so perfectly into the bridge between the jocks and the loners, the players and the potheads. I continually and casually hangout with 3 demographically different groups of friends, floating nonchalantly between them without caring about their image, whether they epitomize masculinity, or even if they seem controlled and emasculated. Reading through, it finally dawned on me that I didn't care about what my friends looked like or who they were - I just cared about whether they could crack insanely stupid, but at the same time hilarious, jokes! (partly attributed to my relatively liberal view on societal change)

However, I wholeheartedly disagree with the particulate gender roles that Wiseman has so clearly defined as "The Mastermind and His Minions". As someone that self-identifies as "The Entertainer" (I immediately realized that I was one), I thoroughly enjoy my role as the "court jester" of the social groups that I am a part of - my goal is to diffuse tension by making people laugh, and I don't have to resort to self-depreciation to enjoy being a member of a tight-knit social sub-society. Where I do disagree, though, is that Wiseman the "Act Like a Man Box" forces students into only 1 of these hierarchical roles. In a lot of the groups that I'm a part of, I'm the Entertainer, the Mastermind, and sometimes the Champion as well! I don't think it's possible to clearly define boy-ish roles within larger groups because, during our teenage years, boys will take up any role to fit in (i.e. the entertainer might make himself the punching bag, or sacrifice his reputation as the bouncer).

I do have an interesting question that I'd like to pose to any of the reviewers here, and even to Mrs. Wiseman if she browses this site from time to time: Where are the boys that you received feedback from located (general region is fine)? From my standpoint (as a socially liberal Cupertinian), I've never seen a guy being made fun of for being out of the "Act Like a Man Box", mainly because the people from Cupertino are generally accepting and forward-thinking. However, a lot of the teenagers quoted in the novel seem depressed and relatively angst-y. Thus, can a claim about the regional validity of the book be made (e.g. only useful for "Sun Belt" teenagers afraid to come out to their parents, recommended for parents of socially-lost teenagers, etc.)? I know that, as an author, your job is to make the most "inclusive" or all-encapsulating novel to attract the most readers, but I find it hard to believe that what the novel claims can be adapted to any boy, anywhere (especially since recent social and political movements have left some boys wondering about what to do and what to think).

Regardless, the book is splendidly written, and describes a majority of high-school life perfectly. A great read for anyone looking to delve into the emergence of hierarchy at younger and younger ages.

Gwyneth says

I read about 2/3 of this and stopped - some interesting thoughts in here about how to engage with boys - particularly older boys - but not much that really related to where I am with my sons right now. Maybe I'll pick this up again when my kids are older. But then again, maybe not - being a parent is scary enough, why freak myself out about what else could be going wrong that I don't even know about?

Trudy Ludwig says

Masterminds and Wingmen by Rosalind Wiseman is a great resource for parents and any adult working with kids who want to better understand what is going on in the minds of boys and how they communicate. There are sections that you can read with boys, which I have done with my 15-year-old, but I think it's best for parents and educators to read.

What I love about this book is that Rosalind Wiseman shares the opinions and viewpoints of many teenage boys (middle schoolers and high schoolers) she's collaborated with to help the reader recognize, appreciate, and understand the challenges boys face in their social world. It also challenges adults regarding how our own assumptions (and emotional baggage) can build up or break down our relationships with boys.

David says

A sequel of sorts to the author's Queen Bees and Wannabes. Organized by topic (e.g., homophobia, playing team sports [listen up, parents; know the rules of the game and don't yell at the refs in a way that shows you don't know what you're talking about, or your boy will be mortified], coping with aggressive girls, violent video games.....).

Good advice -- hard to boil it down, as there isn't one particular disciplinary technique being pushed or what have you, but I guess I'd say she comes across as a calm, realistic parent who is understanding of boys' perspectives without being an anything-goes pushover. Her own kids are girls, but she has been a teacher, obviously has read a lot of research, and deftly uses the anecdotes and opinions of the boys ("editors") of various ages she interviewed for the book.

One quibble is that, though many of the topics are universal, there seemed to be a bit of an upper-SES overrepresentation. For instance, there is a funny (to me) section on "laxbros" (who "currently get the prize for being the biggest douchebags in Boy World" per p. 300), but unless I (and the index) missed it, the word "gang" does not appear once. I was not shocked that a magnet public school and Sidwell Friends (where the President and First Lady's daughters go) were the two schools from our DC area listed in her acknowledgements.

CORRECTION: My thanks to the commenter who pointed out my mistake in saying author's kids are girls. They are boys, as noted in the first paragraph of the book. Not sure how I got that wrong; I think I encoded her saying that it's ironic that she has boys given she is perceived as an expert on girls (based on her previous bestseller), and distorted this point by the time I finished reading to be that this expertly written book about boys itself was ironic in view of her personal situation. Whatever the reason, I stand corrected; she has two sons.

Lee says

12/31/13: I've finished reading it, but now I need to go back and work through some parts that seem more appropriate to where my oldest son is. Since I want to take this seriously, I think this requires perhaps taking notes, and some serious thought.

My overall impression is of good work, researching the centrality of video games, the importance of parents and other adult role-models, and the harm that adults who aren't role models can have.

I went into it after reading an excerpt in Time, hoping to learn more about the social organizations of "Boy World." Both my sons are starting at new schools, and watching them work into new-forming groups has been an interesting experience-- any insight would be welcome. Anything about girls and dating would have been welcome, as my minimal experience was so long ago as to be useless in advising my sons.

That the author broke it into topical sections should make it easier to use it as a reference book in the future.

Her use of a lot of boys, from ages 10 to 30 (mostly teens, though), as "editors" and commentators, was definitely what needed to be done.
