

About Health TV with Jeanne Blake
Boys the Men They Will Become, Author Dr. Eli Newberger
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JEANNE BLAKE: Welcome to *About Health* TV. I'm Jeanne Blake. How do boys develop character and how can we help the boys in our lives grow up to be healthy with admirable character? In his new book, *The Men They will Become*, the distinguished professor of pediatrics Dr. Eli Newberger from Boston's Children's Hospital explores these questions and many more. Dr. Newberger, thank you so much for coming in to talk about your new book.

DR. NEWBERGER: Thank you.

JEANNE BLAKE: I guess a basic first question would be, What is character? How do you define it?

DR. NEWBERGER: Well there are many ways to talk about character, but what I'm talking about here has to do with choices. The decisions that we make in the face of moral context, where we need to reconcile our desires, our impulses, against the views and race of others. This characterizes on a moral nexus at which character is dramatic. Obviously, we can say a person is a character, someone who's a delightful individual. But in the world of today, we use the term character to refer to how it is that children come to terms with the challenges of the world and make choices that are good for them and good for others. To do this, they have to be aware of others, they have to approach behavior as if it actually involves choices, and for many males, unfortunately, we can come to believe that it's manly to do what you have to do and, in fact, behavior doesn't really involve choices. It just means going from one thing to another.

JEANNE BLAKE: Along that template, that macho template that we've constructed in our society.

DR. NEWBERGER: Correct. And this is a big problem for males. They may hurt people, and some more sensitive types can be sorry after the fact. But my feeling is that the extent to which we are able to equip children, especially males, with an ability to understand that they are constantly facing choices from life which are replications for them and the relationships with others that obviously descend from the set of values which they learn at home, at school, in society, the better off we'll all be.

JEANNE BLAKE: So you lay out in many different scenarios in the book how to help young people develop that ability to choose well and to be boys and men of admirable character. I'm curious – of course, I first always like to know the genesis of a project. You've written others books, and there are other books about boys that have been written, so I'm wondering how you came to write this book.

DR. NEWBERGER: Well, in fact, I was invited to write this book. I had no thought of writing a book on boys, much less on boys' character, when one day in my clinic at Children's Hospital I was observing an interview with a mother who had been battered in her relationship and then whose two children had been sexually abused by the man who also abused her. I was watching one day in my clinic through the one-way mirrors. One of my colleagues was interviewing her and she was asked how she met this guy, and she said that she met this attractive man at a party and immediately he began to pursue her. And very early on in their dating relationship he indicated his intention to marry her. And she said that her family and her friends were worried that things were going so fast and that, indeed, it looked as if they told her that he was trying to distance her from them. But she said she threw caution to the wind, thinking that this guy could be the man of her dreams, and decided that, yes, she would marry him. She said as soon as he and she were married, he began to abuse her. And right then a light went off in my head, and I said to one of my colleagues behind the mirror – you can talk softly because sound doesn't transmit – I said, "If I've heard this story once, I've heard this story a hundred times, the story about how badly men seduce women through relationships, and hold them and enthrall them," and I said, "Somebody ought to write a book," meaning a book for women about the dangers of being seduced into this kind of a relationship. Anyway, I got home that night and said to my wife, Carolyn, "What do you think of the idea of a book called *Bad Men and How to Avoid Them*?" And Carolyn said, "What a great idea. You've written all these other books that are maybe read by all of 10 or 15 people interested in your take on child abuse and family values. Now you have a really good book. Do it. Seriously. Find yourself an agent, get a proposal."

JEANNE BLAKE: And how long ago was this, so we have some perspective?

DR. NEWBERGER: This was at the end of 1996. And then what happened was, we got a book proposal into the works, and a month and a half or so later I had a call from Perseus Books, from a wonderful editor, a man who, as my Children's Hospital colleague will tell you, to the effect of "Eli, we know you, but we don't like your idea, but we have got an idea for you." She said, "With the success of the book *Reviving Ophelia*, we're going to market for a book on raising boys. Would you be interested?" And I said, "Well, I never would have thought of that myself. Yes, I would be interested." And then she said, "Well, come to us with another proposal." And so I did, with a proposal focused on boys'

character, because I had been so interested and concerned over the years about the very problem that many boys and men look at the world void the people around them, see so many people as having hostile intentions toward them. And I decided that here would be an opportunity for me to learn a lot and possibly to make a contribution.

JEANNE BLAKE: Well, also, if you can help raise boys of good admirable character, then you'll have less bad men for women to avoid, right?

DR. NEWBERGER: Exactly. No question about that, and that was one of my intentions. On the other hand, she also cautioned me at the time that we were talking, she said, "This can't be a book about child abuse and domestic violence. That would be the kiss of death on the market. We're interested in a book that would talk to the experiences of real boys, the kinds of American kids that we find everywhere." And that encouraged me to get outside the walls of the hospital to do a collection of interviews and to keep an eye on it.

JEANNE BLAKE: So when you write for parents, you say that the first important step is to have some self-examination and exploration, to take a look at where you grew up and the messages that you got growing up so that you can decide what you want to carry forth and what you don't want to carry forth.

DR. NEWBERGER: Exactly.

JEANNE BLAKE: How can parents do that? You suggest talking with a spouse or a partner, but for some people it's very complicated. They might not know. They might not even have the awareness to know that was bad. Where does a parent start with that process?

DR. NEWBERGER: Well, I think that it's very important that we all reflect back on our childhoods, think about those things in our relationships with our own parents and families that were productive and positive and those that were not. And there are parental issues that parents really should get straight on. Things about, for example, whether to spank a child. You don't want to have a big fight about that at the point that this inevitably will happen and starts to misbehave. With regard to family religious observance, those are things that also should be gone through with some sensitivity, as well as a whole variety of other things. Help us to deal with children about the realities of your own personal life. Very important and many parents still believe that you should do what I say and not what I do. This can create for many kids a very perplexing, confusing situation, especially when they get to be adolescents.

So there's a lot of preparation, and one of the things I tried to do here is to give the reader an understanding of the basic knowledge both from the world of clinical, which I know as a pediatrician, but also taking advantage of the clinical aspect that comes from psychology, psychiatry, social work, the health professions, and also from the rich yields of the behavioral and sexual sciences. So I read widely and I try to offer it here. It's not a book that's full of jargon, but I really wanted to make my advice based on the foundation of not only ... just let it offer both in some of the text but then in the notes if people want to read more, some science on which my recommendations were based.

JEANNE BLAKE: One of the most helpful parts of the book and the insight that you offer I found to be the levels of parental awareness, because, as I was saying before, many parents might say, "I don't know, I've only been me, I've never been a different parent," and I think it can be a real eye-opener for people to read that, because then I do think that they'll identify themselves at one of those levels. Or maybe on different days at a different level.

DR. NEWBERGER: Exactly. You know I'm married to Carolyn, my wife, Dr. Carolyn Newberger, who is a child psychologist, and when she did her doctoral research at Harvard with Lawrence Kohlberg and Robert Solomon, she extended the moral development research area into the domain of parent-child relationships. It was actually Carolyn who came up with this notion of these four levels of parental awareness, which I think briefly could be summarized here, the sort of bottom level where everything has to be with you and your needs.

JEANNE BLAKE: You call it the "me first."

DR. NEWBERGER: The "me first."

JEANNE BLAKE: Can you give me a concrete example, though, so that folks who are listening can actually picture it in their brain?

DR. NEWBERGER: Sure. I have experience in my work on child abuse from this. As in, when you have a parent of a six-month-old child who thinks that that baby is crying just to make them unhappy or angry or sad, so the baby's behavior is misinterpreted in terms of the parent's perspective. And that's an immature way of looking at children, but unfortunately it's not infrequent, and sometimes it is associated – not always, but sometimes it's associated with really inappropriate responses to the child, to punish him, a six-month-old child, for crying.

JEANNE BLAKE: Or shaking the baby, as you wrote about.

DR. NEWBERGER: Exactly. Big problem, where babies are crying and parents lose control. Sometimes we all know how exhausted you can be, how enraged you can be, and how guilty you feel about those raging feelings, but sometimes parents find it very difficult to protect their children from their anger. The next level --

JEANNE BLAKE: And that's called "follow the rule."

DR. NEWBERGER: Correct. And there the notion is is that there are rules for parents and rules for kids, and that there is basically a script that all parents should follow. Actually, a lot of people function that way, or they default to that way of looking at children and the relationship between a parent and a child, and it needn't be bad, but it's not nearly sufficient to appreciate the particular qualities of a child and to really enjoy the child as an individual.

JEANNE BLAKE: I know that I'm sort of frozen at five years old and my brain is, and I think in a very concrete way, and I think this is so important. Can you give us an example of what the "follow the rules" would be? Is it as simple as "Do it because I'm the mommy"?

DR. NEWBERGER: Well, it's much more, such as, "I told you not to cross the street, and so if you approach that curb I'm going to spank you." The idea is that children have to follow rules like Don't step off the curb or Don't even approach the curb, or I – the mommy or the daddy are going to do what Mommy and Daddy are supposed to do. Now that kind of rule-bound notion can be very rigid and insufficiently appreciated by what's going on in the child's mind, where they may forget or they may be innocently exploring. One of the things we don't want to do is defeat a boy's curiosity. You want to encourage children to explore as long as they're able to be safe, and so there are things that you have to do, for example, if the child is really bent on doing something. Say a three-year-old, or for that matter a five-year-old, you try to divert their attention and you talk to them. You place priority on communicating with them rather than rigidly following the rules.

JEANNE BLAKE: Before we move on to the next one, I think it's so important to talk about the research that you wrote about the importance of, even if a child doesn't understand the words that you're saying, the tone of a calm voice and the impact that that has. I loved that. I thought that was fascinating, and I think that parents really understood that. And it's so much easier. Could you just

discuss the impact of that long term?

DR. NEWBERGER: I think that everywhere in a parent-child relationship one has got to be calm and loving, and most importantly, one should never berate, shame, shout at, insult, or emotionally abuse a child. So in any and every circumstance, it's always well to be cool-headed rather than hot-headed. It's always well to think. You want to be spontaneous, but mainly you want to be loving and comforting in your expression of love and care. And the thing that people have to remember is that you're in this for the long term. Your son or your daughter are always going to be your kids and you don't, while they're kids, want to disrupt those precious qualities. We also never know, when kids get into the larger world, when they start elementary school, when they reach puberty, when they're in adolescence, where there are all of these temptations that lead you off the straight path. Whether it's alcohol, drugs, sex, cheating, criminal behavior. What saves kids is confiding relationships, and to the extent possible we adults who have the deepest and most sustained contact with children want to be those people whom children will trust and turn to when they have choices to make.

JEANNE BLAKE: And if you don't fall into the rigid spank them, which we'll talk about, I hope, during the course of this interview, but if you don't and they're able to hear the tone of your voice and know that that's something that's calm and consistent, they're more likely to come back to you and be open with them.

DR. NEWBERGER: Absolutely. No question about it. You know, we truly can return to the issue of spanking, but one of the important concepts in character formation is discipline. And it's well to keep in mind that the word root of discipline is the same as the word for disciple, which means teacher. And I try here to bring forward an alternative to the notion of deductive discipline, where there are seven rules and if the child strays from the rules you've got to intervene, usually with a punishment, in order that the child is able to deduce the real structure. With an alternative approach called inductive discipline, and there the idea or the magic word is that one works toward agreement with the child on the standards of behavior and sustaining your relationship with the child, a relationship of caring and of love, that's the greatest priority. And it's not that there aren't rules, because there have got to be rules. But when the rules are broken, as they always will be, the task is to make restitution. The task is to realize that you hurt someone else by misbehaving in whatever way and to build into the child a desire to do things better.

JEANNE BLAKE: It just makes so much sense that if your child learns that during the early years that when they have more autonomy, when they are faced with choices to have sex or try drugs or drink

alcohol, that all of that will help to protect them. I mean, it seems to be that they will make better choices, or at least they'll know how.

DR. NEWBERGER: Right. And indeed now there is a body of research that suggests that this approach to discipline does have that longer-term yield, and if anyone is interested and you wanted to buy the book to see this, because I've put on my website the chapter on discipline and punishment, so people can just go to www.elinewberger.com, click on the "Punishment and Discipline" chapter, and they can read it. I find that about 100 people a day are reading that chapter.

JEANNE BLAKE: Fabulous. Well, hopefully they're buying the book and reading the rest of it too. Dr. Newberger, level three – back to your four levels of parental awareness – is "we are individuals," and it seems very much that you've described why not to get stuck at level two, because the rigidity that comes with it doesn't allow number three, for your child to grow up being an individual who can think and make choices in his life.

DR. NEWBERGER: Exactly. There the idea is that – and this is so true – that every child is different. Every child is endowed with a special quality of temperament, how the kid responds to the world around him or her, every child has particular ways of expressing particular likes and dislikes, particular ways of showing affection, particular ways of showing distress. And most parents are able to tune in to this. And also, I want to emphasize that it's not like we're all being graded. The last thing I want to be doing is judging people, but it's well to be aware of these levels. And also, when you're under stress, you sometimes default to a lower, more primitive level, if you will, and what we want to do, I think, is to strive toward maturity of understanding and seeing children as individuals. Knowing, for example, that if a child is sleepy or if a child is hungry or if a child is ill, the child is not going to be able to conform in quite the ways that you might like and is sometimes going to be irritable, angry, aggressive. And so you're always thinking through that child's idiosyncrasies in relationship to all the things that we know distinguishes the child as an individual.

JEANNE BLAKE: And I think the same could be said for yourself. If you're tired or irritable or sick, you're going to respond differently. Your child is going to pick up a different tone from you.

DR. NEWBERGER: Exactly.

JEANNE BLAKE: Bringing us to level four, "living and growing together."

DR. NEWBERGER: Well, there the idea is that it's the relationship that has its own qualities, that just as your child is growing, you are proceeding through your life, and this affects the quality of the reciprocity between you and your child. And you can be sad and you can be full of joy, and this is going to affect how you appreciate your child and how you bring parental care to your child. So there are the ideas. There's this nutrient quality unfolding which also needs to be affecting. So you're constantly sort of tending to yourself as well as to your child and doing what's necessary to adjust to the relationship to your and your child's realities and needs. That, arguably, is the most mature way of contemplating that relationship, and it leads to the most nuanced parental decisions, visibly giving the child autonomy, being more controlling where it's needed, sorting through issues, and in some way saying, "You've got to do this because it's bedtime, and I'm the mommy, and I don't want any more talk about it," and onto other things. When, for example, a child in their early teens is getting a lot of pressure to drink at a party or to do some sexual things, and where you really talk through with the child issues and values and issues of risks and the notion of the implications of their choices, and of course in relationship to your own beliefs. When this is done well, I think when parents strive for more mature thought and understanding, it also pays dividends.

JEANNE BLAKE: Yes, I also think that when that happens the kid is very lucky. I think the majority of parents don't achieve level four.

DR. NEWBERGER: I think that's probably true, but I also believe that there is no harm in trying, and presenting in a book like this what a high level of parental reasoning looks like in order to give parents additional tools with which to understand themselves.

JEANNE BLAKE: Absolutely. I think that if there were more written about what parents could do and if more parents took or had the time to read it, more parents would get to level four.

DR. NEWBERGER: I think that's so. I really do.

JEANNE BLAKE: I was very much struck, and I've heard through the research around connections, but I love what you wrote about Uri Brothenbrenner, who is from Cornell. He argues, you write, that a boy can survive all manner of childhood disappointments and sufferings if there is at least one person in his life who is crazy about him. And I love that. And it's so true. We can all look back in our lives, and I was really blessed to have a good relationship with my mom and dad, and my dad was ... I can say my dad was crazy about me. And I know that the love that I feel even at my age, and he died almost 10 years ago, but I can still feel it. I can still feel what that love feels like. But I can also look

back in my life, and there was an English teacher and a school superintendent who took tremendous interest in my well-being. So I think that if we're able to look back at one person, as Dr. Brothenbrenner says, and as you write about so much in your book, that will carry a young person through a lot of challenges, because not every child is going to grow up in a home where a parent is able to willing to give that. I'm just wondering how ... a lot of times by default the child will find that, because there is some carrying person, but how do you think that we in the community sense can help young people get to that kind of support if they don't have it?

DR. NEWBERGER: Well, I really so appreciate the way that you've put it, Jeanne. Often as can be biological parents, and this is not to blame parents, such are the realities of work and world of today.

JEANNE BLAKE: Or how they were raised.

DR. NEWBERGER: That's certainly so. And it also has ... I mean, it's not just that employers don't give people time to spend with their kids, and that's something that adds tremendous pressure to keep the world from the door, but also boys ... when they get to be adolescents are in a culture where it's seen as desirable to push your family away. So a lot of boys get the misimpression that they don't want adults involved.

JEANNE BLAKE: At a time when they need and want it the most.

DR. NEWBERGER: Exactly so. And one of the things that we've all got to do is persist, we who care about these kids. And then we learn, hopefully early, but sooner or later we learn that this is really appreciated by them. But unfortunately, what I found in the course of the interviewing that I did was that high-functioning boys would tell me about their friends who were really having trouble, whose parents didn't have time for them, who had no one else in their lives. And one wonderful kid in one of the western suburbs here told me how dismayed he was that his friends would turn to him with their stuff. And also, lots of parents know that their kids' friends turn to them because there's no one else in their lives. I really believe that every child, boy or girl, should have in their lives at least one person who, as Dr. Brothenbrenner suggested, is crazy about them, who will always be there for them, who won't abandon them, who will place priority on communicating with them, who advocate for them when needed. And if it's not there in their homes, then the rest of us who care about children have got to get involved, and we've got to encourage programs like mentoring and so forth.

JEANNE BLAKE: Right. Because we know who they are. We're out of time, but I can't let you go without bringing up the issue of spanking. We've brought it up three times. On the issue of spanking, all we have time to say right now is don't do it, right? You have five seconds.

DR. NEWBERGER: In five seconds, that's the answer. Don't do it.

JEANNE BLAKE: Dr. Newberger, I wish we had more time. These 30 minutes flew by. Thank you so much, and I hope people will read your book.

DR. NEWBERGER: Thanks so much, Jeanne.

JEANNE BLAKE: I want to thank you for joining us on this edition of *About Health TV*. I'll see you next time. I'm Jeanne Blake.

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