

LAURA LEE GROVES

I'm Outnumbered!

One Mom's Lessons in the
Lively Art of Raising Boys

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Introduction

There you sit—the new mom, rocking your little blue bundle while his big brother plays on the floor nearby. It's an idyllic picture. Suddenly, it hits you—you're now outnumbered. One boy plus one more equals two. Multiple boys, one mom. It doesn't seem like such a big thing now; after all, they're just babies, toddlers. But as those little guys grow, they become more male, and interact in a way that is often foreign to a mom. Trust me . . . I know. Four boys, all three years apart, interact in my home.

Did I expect to have four children? Yes. Did I expect they'd all be boys? Well . . . no. At one point, Jonathan was nine, Matthew was six, Andrew was three, and Benjamin was a newborn. Talk about feeling overwhelmed! Don't get me wrong—multiple boys are wonderful, but that sentiment has come only after lessons learned in twenty-four years of mothering.

Along the way, I've gathered some valuable knowledge from a variety of sources. A father can tell you a lot about raising boys from his perspective, and researchers and psychologists have much to add. Dr. James Dobson's book *Bringing Up Boys* brought our sons' unique challenges to the forefront and provided sound advice. But while a number of men have written on the subject of raising boys, a female voice is lacking.

There are certain things only another “boy mom” knows. I’ve had my share of mentors—other boy moms whose boys are older—who forged the way. I made numerous phone calls to one or another of them along the way—and honestly, I still do. We laugh, we wonder, we commiserate. In the following pages, I invite you to laugh, to learn, and to wonder with me as I merge boy mom experience with the words of well-known authorities and the ultimate authority, the Word of God.

As you read this book, you can expect to learn and grow and nod your head at times. You’ll find stories, quotes, true confessions, and the results of research in these pages. Chapters are short and to the point because I know that a mother’s time is precious. When children are around, you grab bits and pieces of a book, rarely a whole chapter at one sitting. You may need to pick and choose chapters in this book, selecting those that speak to where you are at in a particular moment. At best, you’ll learn and be encouraged. At least, you’ll realize you’re not alone in this boy mom adventure, and you’ll find yourself able to smile along the way.

You can also expect to learn more about what makes being a boy mom so unique. Stephen James and David Thomas write in their excellent resource *Wild Things: The Art of Nurturing Boys*, “Mothering a boy will require things of you that mothering a daughter will never require.”¹ The differences in boys and girls are well-documented. Their minds, their rates of development, their learning styles, their hearts are crafted by God in different ways. Because of those differences, many mothers fail to ever really connect with their sons. This book will give you the tools to better understand your sons and will help you find the best ways to nurture them.

You can expect to be empowered. William Pollack wrote in *Real Boys*, “I believe that by empowering the mother you empower the son. . . . Far from making boys dependent, the base of safety a loving mother can create—a connection that her son can rely on

all his life—provides a boy with the courage to explore the outside world.”² So be empowered, Mom, and empower your sons in return.

Although my words are colored by having mothered four sons, I’ve found research that speaks to all types of boy moms, and I’ll be sharing that with you.

- If you’re a mom of “boys plus” (that is, you have a daughter or two in the mix), your experience will be different. You’ll find a section here and there that addresses your situation.
- If you’re a single mom (that is, widowed, divorced, or never married), read on. Even though there’s a husband in my house, much of our experience as mothers of boys will be the same. Appendix C is especially for you, and you’ll find some side notes along the way that are relevant to your unique situation.
- Moms with larger families will find that many of the helpful hints in this book can be adapted to a big brood, regardless of your children’s gender.

So, take heart, Mom—and read on!



1

Great Expectations

You are my lamp, O LORD; the LORD turns my
darkness into light.

With your help I can advance against a troop; with
my God I can scale a wall.

As for God, his way is perfect; the word of the
LORD is flawless.

He is a shield for all who take refuge in him.

2 SAMUEL 22:29–31

All moms enter parenting with some preconceived notions. Most of us hope to have a mix of blue and pink in the household. We may have expectations for our child's behavior or personality. We may be especially baffled by a little boy whose actions and reactions are so different from ours as a child. A valuable lesson for the mother of multiple boys is that expectations can be a trap. Expectations say, "I have this figured out. I know what will suit me, what I want, what is best for my life." Check those verses at the start of this chapter again: "You are my lamp, O LORD; the LORD turns my darkness into light. With your help I can advance against a troop; with my God I can scale a wall. As for God, his way is perfect; the word of the LORD is flawless. He is a shield for all who take refuge in him."

Scripture can help us through the trap of expectations, the snare of "I know best." King David has some reminders for us:

- God is our lamp. He lights our way, no matter how large a flashlight we try to carry.
- God helps us advance against a troop and scale a wall. We can do it, but we don't do it on our own.
- God's way—not ours—is perfect. He gives us what we need, not what we expect or desire.
- If we hide in Him, He will be our shield. He will protect us.

He provides light, help, a shield, and refuge. And His way—not ours—is perfect.

Maybe You Were Expecting . . .

... *a Girl!*

Maybe you were expecting a girl the first time . . . or the second time . . . or . . . !

I know how it is. I had the “girl name” all picked out, too—four times. I haven’t given up hope, though. I’m hanging on to it for the first granddaughter.

The first shattered expectation a boy mom often faces is that she’s outnumbered in this whole thing called family. With two boys and a husband in the picture, the opportunity for female companionship grows pale. Those little blue bundles tend to destroy our maternal expectations fraught with pink ribbons, lace, and tutus.

I tried to stave off those pink expectations the second time by preparing myself for another boy, figuring I’d be ready for the inevitable . . . but pleasantly surprised if a girl came along. That did help me prepare a bit. I’ve continued to repeat the mantra, “The Lord gives us what we need, and no more than we can handle” and I’ve read and reread 1 Corinthians 10:13: “And God is faithful; he will not let you be tempted beyond what you can bear.” But in the face of four boys in the house, I’ve been tempted to throw my hands up and shout, “I give up! I just don’t understand boys.” I’d grown up with one sibling, a sister, so my frame of reference didn’t exactly include this boy thing.

Many mothers face this same dilemma. Dan Kindlon and Michael Thompson, in *Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys*, write that many women are challenged in mothering a son: “They feel they don’t understand boys, because they have never actually experienced the world as a boy or they have expectations about boys . . . which color the way they view their sons.”¹ But we moms can’t afford not to bridge that gap and connect emotionally with our sons. In his landmark book, *Bringing Up Boys*, Dobson calls the disengagement of parents “the underlying problem plaguing children today.”²

Today's mothers, though, face an additional challenge from our culture. James and Thomas write in *Wild Things* that it's all too easy to "absorb cultural messages about 'real masculinity'" and push your two- or three-year-old son away emotionally. But, they advise, "A boy needs a connection with his mother all the way through adolescence. Be sensitive about invading your son's privacy, but separating from him prematurely will do him more harm than good."³

Even though our blue bundles may seem like alien life-forms to us, we still know that children are blessings and the Lord does give us what He wants us to have. We just have to figure out how to raise and nurture what He has given us. Although ultrasound was available to predict my first son's gender, we decided to be surprised. We were thankful for a healthy child, though I did allow myself to think about the little girl who "might come next"—my first big mistake. But I settled in, with all my expectations and preconceived notions, to enjoy my firstborn. Babies are babies after all, and most moms learn to be happy and thankful for a healthy baby. In the beginning, though, you don't know what you're up against. Those little blue bundles differ greatly from the muddy ten-year-old boy with a frog in his pocket!

... or a *Quiet, Calm Baby*

The second set of expectations I dealt with related to my sense of peace, quiet, and motherhood. Perhaps the Lord was preparing me for the next twenty years, because the words *peace* and *quiet* usually don't appear in the boy mom vocabulary. I never considered the possibility that Jonathan would be a colicky baby. In my research for this book, I found no statistics indicating that boys are more prone to colic than girls, but Susan Gilbert's *Field Guide to Boys and Girls* does state that, as infants, girls as a group are more alert and more easily consoled. As infants, boys are more easily stressed. In other words, boy babies cry more often

when upset and have a harder time calming down.⁴ Mothers of boys may be surprised at how much their sons need them.

It never crossed my mind that Jonathan would not be one of those “angel babies”—you know, one who sleeps all the time. Those expectations were shattered. Before long I discovered that he was, indeed, a colicky baby. I remember the afternoon I took him to the doctor and said, “He’s slept fifteen minutes today; that’s all. Something has to be wrong.” The doctor did a few tests and quizzed me, only to pronounce that Jonathan simply had an immature digestive system and most children grew out of it—by three months of age!

Suddenly I flashed back to a chance meeting with a mother and baby months ago. While shopping, I’d stopped to admire her beautiful baby. When I asked how old the baby was, the mom replied, “Three months old, and not a day too soon.” Now I knew what she meant.

That first three months with Baby Boy #1 were the longest of my life. He was not at all the angel baby I’d expected. He cried so much, I told my husband, “I’m afraid he’s not going to be a happy child.” I could just see him frowning the rest of his life. I began to wonder if I could go through this with future babies. At one point, I held Jonathan up in front of my face and asked him, “Don’t you want brothers and sisters?”

The doctor told me I was fortunate because Jonathan slept at night and cried all day. What he failed to realize was that I had no help during the day. At night I had help in my husband, but I didn’t need it because little Jonathan was snoozing away. When my husband left for work in the morning, the wailing began. On some days I’d meet my husband at the door at five o’clock, thrust Jonathan into his arms, and go for a drive around the block or just take a walk.

Then I’d feel guilty! I had a healthy baby but I spent my time wishing away the hours with him because he just wouldn’t stop crying. I began to feel woefully inadequate as a mom. Think

about it—Jonathan cried when he was alone with me but was an angel baby when Dad was there.

I knew other mothers who wouldn't take their newborns to the church nursery until they were two or three months. Not me! I had to have a break. I knew the sweet lady there loved babies and had tons of experience, and I had no qualms about leaving him with her. When I asked her about the wisdom of leaving him when he was so fussy, she replied, "Well, honey, he's gonna cry for you or cry for me. Might as well let him cry for me a few hours and give you a break." Those were wise words—precious words to this mom! At least I didn't need to feel guilty about missing church that first three months; I didn't miss a service!

My expectations had crumbled so much, I couldn't even listen to the stories of those moms who had twenty-four-hour angel babies. Such things just could not be true. Babies who ate and drifted off to sleep without a peep? Surely those mothers were lying. Things could not be so idyllic for them. They had no clue what life was like at our house. And how do you share that with friends? "My baby cries so much that I worry he'll never be happy." "I stand at the door at five o'clock and wait to pass him off to my hubby."

I quickly came to the conclusion that the only person who could understand my life those first three months was someone who'd had a similar experience. For some reason, though, those moms don't go around gushing about Early Life with Baby. That's one reason I vowed to share those hard months with other new moms. Maybe that would make them either appreciate those golden hours with their angel baby or sympathize a bit with a friend whose expectations weren't fulfilled.

If your expectations for motherhood include peace and quiet, keep those verses from 2 Samuel handy. You'll need a shield and a refuge. Although Gilbert's research sounds a bit daunting, remember her statement that boy babies, as a group, are easily stressed. That's not to say that all boys are like boys as a group.

But even if you have a quiet, placid little guy now, don't hold too tightly to those expectations for peace and quiet. Babies grow, and toddlerhood ensues.

... *That Boys Are Boys*

My third big expectation was waiting to trip me up after we added another boy to the picture. When Jonathan hit two years old, we looked at him and said, "Oh, he's not a baby anymore. We need a baby." Several months later, we found we were expecting number two. It was an exciting period. Enough time had elapsed, and Jonathan had turned out to be such a charmer; the memories of colic had faded to oblivion. Besides, hey, we handled that—couldn't we handle just about anything?

We decided against learning this baby's gender; again, we wanted to be surprised. Yes, Daddy did want a little princess, and I thought it would be so much fun to dress a little girl. And like most people, we thought, "A boy and girl would be nice," even though we still intended to add to the family portrait. I tried to prepare myself for a boy. I figured that way I'd be pleasantly surprised if number two was a girl.

But as you already know, another boy it was. We named this one Matthew. He had the same characteristic fair skin and red hair as Jonathan, but the similarities to his brother as an infant ended there. Matthew was the angel baby. It was a whole new world. Now I knew that those other moms weren't lying. Some babies really do eat and sleep and don't cry much at all. That was Baby Boy #2.

I was also pleasantly surprised to learn that two children were, in some ways, easier than one. Baby Matthew had someone to watch, and Jonathan had an instant audience. This proved quite helpful. I could actually get farther than the mailbox before noon, which was unheard of with Baby Boy #1. Of course, my standards for some things likely changed a bit, too. It's incredible how much more quickly one can apply makeup when there's a potential for chaos in the next room.

So far, so good, but the expectation snare was looming. By the time our second son came, we had weathered the terrible twos with the first one. We felt we'd hit upon a successful system of discipline for raising Groves boys. We had read all of Dr. Dobson's books and watched all of his tapes, and I think we felt we had it all figured out. We thought, *Oh, this is the way you handle that. We'll do that with the second child, too.* We knew how to handle rebellion with Boy #1; we'd just apply the same techniques to Boy #2. We expected that he'd react in the same way and all would be well.

We were in for a rude awakening. With Boy #2, we learned there is no magic formula. This wasn't a quick and easy lesson. No, we had to learn it the hard way. Little did we realize that, though our reactions to disobedient behavior remained the same, this child was a different boy. His reactions to us and our discipline would be different. Aye, there's the rub. What to do now?

Looking back, I wonder how I could have been so naïve. I'd taught public school for about nine years, had taught siblings in my classes, and I realized they wouldn't all be the same. I'd taught exceptionally bright students and later their siblings who didn't have the same abilities. But when it came to my own boys, who looked so much the same and were treated in the same way, I just expected their reactions to be the same as well.

There's that word again—*expected*. Maybe part of the problem was a little bit of parental pride. After all, we'd hit upon a successful system and, by golly, it had worked with Boy #1. It was hard to accept that things didn't work the same with Boy #2. A preschool teacher was instrumental in getting something through my thick maternal skull that I should have realized all along. She said to me, "God has made your sons this way on purpose. It's not an accident. As parents, we have to thank God for the children He's given us and ask Him to help us grow them up to be the adults He wants them to be." It finally began to sink in that *different* is not *worse*. It just takes a little more work on Mom's part.

That early lesson became so important later. With a household of kids of the same sex, the temptation is strong to treat them all the same. After all, they're boys. Discovering their differences—their own individual bent—helped me mother them more effectively. You'll read more about that process in chapter 3, "Intentional Parenting."

The Expectation Trap

No matter what our expectations, our infant sons manage to surprise us. Here are some common elements of the expectation trap. Watch out for them!

- *Regularity.* We may expect regular sleeping and eating times from our infant sons. Some babies seem to be born on a schedule while others defy it. Then there are babies who keep to a schedule for two days—just enough to fool you into thinking you have it all figured out.
- *Activity.* It takes a while to figure out your son's activity level, and that it can change with his age. Gilbert notes that after the age of one, boys spend more time "on the move" than girls do.⁵ Although most boys are a bundle of energy, not all are. If you're open to change as you determine your son's activity level, you'll be able to decide how best to structure his active times and sleeping times.
- *Passion.* Some might call this intensity. This is often hard to gauge from an infant, but some little boys seem able to concentrate on one thing, and that ability follows them throughout life. Others are easily distracted. Again, this differs with age, so don't label your son at three months.
- *Responsiveness.* Some infants respond overtly to stimuli, but others are more easygoing. Some boys get more "amped up" in a crowd, while others seem to get wound up in a quiet environment. Be sensitive to your son's responses to different settings.

- *Temperament.* If I had gauged my colicky firstborn by his first three months, I would have believed that he would never smile. He's such a people person today! Don't fall into the trap of labeling your son's temperament or expecting him to turn out one way or another.

So how do we avoid these traps?

Trust Helps Trump Expectations

I'm convinced the answer to the expectation trap lies in trust. If we truly trust the Lord, we know His way is perfect even when we can't see why or how. I couldn't have imagined why He would give me a colicky son, but I had to trust that the Lord knew what He was doing. I've wondered—at tough times—why He gave me four sons. Why not just one little girl to take to all those mother-daughter outings I've had to sit out?

But I've learned I have to let Him be my “refuge and strength, an ever-present help in trouble” (Ps. 46:1). Trusting in Him means staying close to Him. With a houseful of boys, my home does not exactly resemble an ivy-covered chapel. Quiet time has been rare, and reading Scripture can be challenging. Here are some ways I have discovered that can help you look up instead of in, even in a house hopping with boys:

- Try listening to praise music or hymns—that's great for you and the boys.
- Socialization helps, too. When you isolate yourself, you tend to turn inward and focus on your own problems. Get out and take those boys. Take a trip to the library or the park, and enjoy God's creation together.
- Try to get out alone once in a while, even for an hour or two. Call a friend and indulge in some girl talk. E-mail someone supportive.
- Don't miss opportunities to worship.

Remember, expectations blind us to our blessings. It took me a couple more boys to learn that.

Discarding Expectations

As Boys #3 and #4 came along, I became convinced that expectations were, indeed, a trap. I didn't shed them without a struggle, but they had to go. Our third son, Andrew, was due on New Year's Day, but he decided to make his debut on, of all days, Christmas Eve. I had the holiday all planned, and I didn't expect this. I remember my tearful words before we left for the hospital: "I really didn't want to have a Christmas baby," to which my husband nervously answered, "Honey, I don't think we have much choice here, so let's just go." Then three years later our fourth son, Benjamin, made an unexpected and dramatic debut via C-section—after I'd had natural deliveries with the first three. That really upset my apple cart, but this time it was my mother's wise words that helped me pitch my expectations. She said, "Honey, you're just paying a few extra weeks of recovery in return for a healthy boy."

Discarding expectations allowed me to grow beyond my own fixed ideas and see what God, in His wisdom, had for me. In the raising of our four sons, I've discarded expectations time and again. Our first son was quite compliant to authority, a preschool dream. Matthew, on the other hand, had a bit more stubborn nature. Imagine my dismay when I arrived to pick Matthew up from preschool one day. He'd been playing in a big box, and the teacher had called him to Circle Time several times. The last time she encouraged him to do the right thing by saying, "We need to choose to obey." Matthew calmly and matter-of-factly replied, "I choose to disobey." I was appalled, certain that he'd be a juvenile delinquent—then his principal reminded me that stubbornness isn't always a bad quality. She added, though, that we must teach our children to be stubborn for the right things, a lesson that has served me well as my boys have grown.

Discarding expectations is hard, but it results in growth for our sons, for us as moms, and for our relationships with our sons. Our boys need to know that even if much in the rest of their lives is performance-based, our love isn't. We love them because they are ours and they were crafted by the Father and given to us as gifts. As we endeavor to raise our boys to be godly men, we need them to see their uniqueness and their potential. If they're taught to be cookie-cutter boys who fit neatly within Mom's expectations, they'll never find out who they really are and what God's unique purpose for them is.

Beyond My Expectations

As the boys grew and multiplied, so did the noise and the activity—beyond my expectations. Unless you had brothers, you don't really expect the racket, the constant motion, the physicality that comes with a combination of boys. And even if you did grow up around brothers, you likely weren't in charge of them. But noise and activity come with the territory, so one of a boy mom's first lessons is to relinquish those expectations and free ourselves to look at life from a different perspective—a boy's perspective. *What if... I could climb from the top of that tree to the roof of the house? What if... I buried ants in mud; would they suffocate? What if... I could slice a banana with the ceiling fan?*

Most boys will not only ask these questions, they'll experiment to see if they can answer them. In *Wild Things*, James and Thomas discuss the differences between the mind of a boy and the mind of a girl. They note that on the whole, boys tend to be

- *spatial instead of relational.* They understand the lay of the land, for example, and how things are connected.
- *aware of objects instead of faces.* They're more attracted to objects than they are to people.
- *action-oriented instead of process-oriented.* They're oriented to movement rather than to emotions.⁶

You see the differences. Moms relate to faces and emotions; our boys generally relate to things and movement. Armed with this understanding, it may be a little easier to determine why that little boy did what he did. At the very least, being aware of the general differences can make a mom aware that she needs to step back and assess her son through different eyes.

Chaos, Creativity, and Control

My best description of a household of multiple boys would be this: controlled chaos and creativity. Boys do have to be allowed to explore, to try the boundaries, to create—but with controls. All children need creative outlets, but with a boy's penchant for movement and his innate desire to figure out the process (*What makes that toaster glow?*), controls are imperative. I'm not saying that chaos is preferred or necessary; it's simply a foregone conclusion with multiple boys. Perhaps *chaos* isn't exactly the right word. Maybe the word *upheaval* is more accurate. *Upheaval* can indicate anything from change to explosion . . . and both are likely in a household of boys. *Upheaval* and *change* are unsettling words for most moms. We prefer *predictable* and *manageable*.

Boys can be very manageable if you sit them in front of the mesmerizing television all day. But eventually you have to turn it off—and then you pay for it . . . at bed time and later in life. Boys need to be able to entertain themselves safely, and they need to exercise creativity to do that. Provide them with toys that will foster creativity:

- *Manipulative toys.* Your first purchase for your sons should be blocks. Boys need tactile toys, and they love things they can take apart and sometimes even put back together. Toys that teach cause and effect are important—turn this, and that pops out; push this, and something else happens. Remember, they're process-oriented and love movement.

- *Books.* Don't wait until your boys can read to provide books. Start them with cloth and plastic books when they're infants. Look for books with pull tabs and doors that open, or books shaped like trucks with wheels. Try to appeal to what boys innately adore in a creative, interactive way. Reading is a challenge for many boys later, so use these early years to engender a love for books and stories.

What about control? Some moms do more controlling than anything else. If you're guilty of that, you may need to sit back, sit on your hands if necessary, and let your boy try things on his own. You should be present, however, even if you seem to be in the background. Even though my sons are pretty much grown up, I still put on my makeup at the mirror in the front hall. That started when there were two little boys in the den; I could keep an eye and ear on them more easily from that vantage point. When we looked for a house, we planned for the family room to be for the boys, and I wanted an adjoining kitchen. I figured I would be spending most of my time in the kitchen, and I could be there while keeping an eye on the boys. You're the mom, and some control is obviously necessary.

As for creativity, it can be messy—I won't deny that. But keeping boys occupied and productive is worth the mess, at least temporarily. That's why I suggest you keep a few things around for the boys:

- String
- Sticks
- Boxes
- An "art box" full of markers, stickers, paints, and so forth

You have to be careful, of course, and age-appropriate with these things. If you happen to have a boys-plus household, your girls will enjoy creating as well. Whether they work together or on

separate projects, a creative outlet will be good for sons as well as daughters.

My boys still remember some of the masterpieces they crafted from such materials—boxes taped together to build a robot, string used as an imaginary dog (or lion) leash, sticks laid end to end and parallel to form a highway . . . and they all tell the story of the huge appliance box that served as a fort, a pirate ship, a skyscraper. The day it fell apart in the rain was perhaps the most fun, as they slid down a hill on the leftover pieces.

A Healthy Expectation

Although expectations can be a trap, there is one expectation you should hold on to: Greet each new day with the expectation that it will be a wild ride. Then you'll be ready for anything! This is an essential piece of advice for the mothers of multiple boys. If for some reason things are calm at day's end, you'll simply be pleasantly surprised.