

How do we teach our boys  
to be better men?

# SONS

## DISCUSSION GUIDE

USE THIS GUIDE TO PREPARE FOR A SCREENING  
OF SONS IN YOUR COMMUNITY!



# SONS

It's a boy!

March 2016. Justin Simms has just become a dad. But his joy is tinged with unease.

Little Jude enters the world at a time when traditional notions of masculinity are being contested as never before. How can he teach his boy to be a good man?

With **Sons**, eight eventful years in the making, the Newfoundland-based filmmaker confronts the challenge with imagination and creative flair, crafting a big-hearted documentary essay on parenting, patriarchy—and the pain and pleasure of guiding boys through the turbulent cultural waters of the early 21st century.



## DISCUSSION ENVIRONMENT

The film **Sons** may make you smile and even laugh. It may also make you feel sad or a sense of loss or regret. Or it might bring up other feelings that are difficult or painful. Whether you watch the film on your own or watch it and engage in a group discussion, we encourage you to be kind and compassionate to yourself and each other. Give yourself permission to experience whichever feelings you need to. Prior to discussing the film, we suggest brainstorming a list of values or agreements, which could include:

- **Personal stories are not shared outside the group discussion;**
- **There is no pressure to share anything that you are not comfortable with;**
- **Consider how the voices of both men and those of diverse gender identities might be heard in the discussion.**

## LANGUAGE NOTES

### Masculinity

“refers to the roles, behaviours and attributes seen as appropriate for boys and men in a given society. In short, masculinity refers to society’s expectations of males.”

— Michael Flood, *The Conversation*

### Toxic masculinity

“refers to a collection of offensive, harmful beliefs, tendencies, and behaviors rooted in traditional male roles but taken to an extreme. This dangerous idea of ‘manliness’ perpetuates domination, homophobia and aggression and can be harmful to the mental health of all genders.”

— Amy Morin, *Verywell Mind*

# INTRODUCTION



## THE FILM INVITES VIEWERS TO REFLECT ON MANY QUESTIONS, LIKE...

- **Just how do boys learn to be men?**
  - Do they learn from their own fathers/grandfathers/friends or other important figures?
- **What does the media, culture or society at large say about how men should behave?**
  - How can this show up in intimate relationships?
- **How much influence might organized sports, school or even the political climate have?**
- **Is it possible to dispel old stereotypes or attitudes that still may persist unconsciously, like:**
  - Men are the breadwinners;
  - Men use violence to discipline (“Wait till your father gets home, then you’re going to ‘get it’”);
  - Big boys don’t cry / boys who show their feelings are soft?

# STATISTICS TO CONSIDER

## HOW COMMON IS INTIMATE-PARTNER VIOLENCE IN CANADA?

44%

In 2019, 44% percent of women over the age of 15 reported some sort of intimate-partner violence by a male partner (Statistics Canada, 2019).

## HOW MIGHT VIOLENCE BE RELATED TO MEN’S MENTAL HEALTH OR STRUGGLES WITH ADDICTION?

3x

The suicide rate for men is three times higher than women, with men aged 50 to 64 having the highest rate of suicide in Canada (Statistics Canada, 2022).

2/3

From January 1, 2016, to September 13, 2024, men made up over two thirds of all reported overdose deaths (32,632) compared to less than one third for women (14,530) (Statistics Canada, 2022).

## WHAT DOES THE ROLE OF MEN LOOK LIKE IN FAMILIES? HOW MAY IT HAVE EVOLVED?

3/4

More than three-quarters of men in Canada surveyed in 2015 reported engaging in unpaid household work (e.g., meal preparation, laundry, cleaning and childcare), up from 51% in 1986 (Vanier Institute, 2023).

# POST-SCREENING DISCUSSION QUESTIONS

## ICE-BREAKER QUESTIONS

- Did you find yourself thinking about any fathers or sons in your life?
- Is there someone you wish could see this film?
- Is there one word that could express how you felt watching this film?

## UNCOVERING THE HIDDEN BIAS IN OUR SYSTEM

### HOW WAS MANHOOD PASSED DOWN THROUGH THE GENERATIONS IN JUSTIN'S FAMILY?

- Randy talked about leaving home at 17 and how his father before him left home at 14 years of age.
- Randy talked about being brought up with a set of values that "had to be honoured, no matter what."
- How did you feel hearing Randy say, "Well, son, I hope you are a better father than I was"?

### HOW IS THE ROLE OF "PROVIDER" LINKED TO EXPECTATIONS OF MASCULINITY?

- Hasan reflects on his father being "solid," and how he showed love through actions but didn't talk about feelings.
- Is the pressure to provide normal?

### HOW MIGHT MASCULINITY INFLUENCE THE ABILITY TO HIDE OR MASK VULNERABLE EMOTIONS?

- Domingue notes that he and his father were "together" but not close.
  - He remembers that he never saw his father cry.
- Is absenteeism or distance baked into the male experience?

### HOW ARE OUR PAST/UNCONSCIOUS BELIEFS ABOUT MASCULINITY WORKING?

- How can fathers be more present in their children's lives?
- Is it possible to erase old styles and ways of parenting?

### WHY DO DADS HAVE TO BE STRONG, ANYWAY?

- How can children be raised to be comfortable in their shoes if their fathers are not?
- Does being a father prevent you from being your child's friend?
- How do we create a culture where it's safe for men to say that they are sorry or admit fault?

### HOW DO YOU LEARN TO BE A DAD?

- Who do you learn from?
- How do you change the patterns of behaviours you may have learned that you don't want to repeat?
- Can we protect children or sons from all bad influences?

### WHAT ROLE DOES SCHOOL OR EDUCATION PLAY IN SHAPING BOYS?

- Were you surprised to hear that typically boys trail girls in math and reading in every developed country?
- How does our view of masculinity or manhood intersect with our understanding of gender diversity?
- How do you think about the essence of manhood when you are in survival mode?
- How can you reflect on relationships, with yourself, your family of origin, your children, or your partner?

### WHAT CAN WE DO TO BETTER SUPPORT THE CURRENT AND NEXT GENERATION OF MEN?

Justin's final reflections on trying to be a better man include:

- Trying to be more present / giving the gift of time to your family;
- Not losing sight of empathy and kindness; and
- Encouraging his son to write "his own story."

**DO THESE REFLECTIONS  
RESONATE WITH YOU?**

# CLOSING REFLECTIONS



1.

What do the toy soldiers in the film represent to you?

2.

What was your biggest learning from the film and/or discussion?

3.

How will you use this learning going forward?



## WHAT MIGHT PARENTS DO?

- **Take time for true self-care and to reflect on what makes a good parent or role model.**

*What this might look like:* Go outside, if you are able to. Feel the sun or wind on your face, breathe deeply and focus on the sensations: What do you feel, smell, see and hear?

- **Be brave, ask for help: Explore a parenting course or support/parenting group.**

*What this might look like:* Connect with your local community about available programs and resources.

## WHAT MIGHT HELPING PROFESSIONALS DO?

Create more support programs for men and women (both one-on-one and in groups). Men who have attended safe supportive groups with other men have provided comments and feedback such as:

- **“I don’t have male friends that I can talk to about issues of being a man and being a dad”;**
- **“Coming to group provides me the opportunity to learn from other men who have similar experiences and who are dads like me.”**

To build a healthy society, it’s vital that funding exists for programs that create safe spaces to support and teach children, youths and adults about suicide, depression, intimate-partner violence, healthy relationships and communication, and drug awareness and empathy, and that it is okay to express feelings and emotions.

## WHAT MIGHT A COMMUNITY DO?

Call on your local municipal and provincial governments to fund more programs for men as they are currently underfunded.

Examine how we support:

- **men who value women and their contributions to family;**
- **women who value men and their contributions to family.**

# FURTHER LEARNING AND REFERENCES

- **Be More Than a Bystander**  
– Ending Violence Association of BC
- **“Exploring the intersectionality of characteristics among those who experienced opioid overdoses: A cluster analysis”**  
– Statistics Canada
- **“Fact sheet: Intimate partner violence”**  
– Statistics Canada
- **“Father’s Day 2023: Changing Roles, Changing Profiles”**  
– The Vanier Institute of the Family
- **“Fathers Play a Critical Role! Actions to Promote Gender Equality”**  
– Western University
- **Moose Hide Campaign**
- **Standing on the Line**  
– National Film Board of Canada
- **“Suicide in Canada: Key statistics”**  
– Public Health Canada
- **“Support and include dads”**  
– Public Health Canada
- **“‘Toxic masculinity’: what does it mean, where did it come from – and is the term useful or harmful?”**  
– *The Conversation*
- **“What is positive father involvement”**  
– Public Health Canada
- **“What Is Toxic Masculinity?”**  
– Verywell Mind



## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

### SANDI HALVORSON

Sandi Halvorson has spent the past 26 years working in the non-profit sector, supporting parents and kinship caregivers through a variety of volunteer-led programs. Sandi is currently the Family Education & Program Development – Lead at the Parent Support Services Society of BC and a registered facilitator of the Circle of Security Parenting program. She brings to her career her life experience as a daughter, sister, wife and a mother to two adult children, their partners and two awesome grandsons.

### AARON RIVARD

Aaron Rivard is a professional who has spent more than 30 years supporting children, youths and adults in various capacities, including overseeing a teen-suicide awareness program in high schools, working in a women’s transition house as a child-and-youth support counsellor, and working as a “children who witness abuse” counselor and an Indigenous family counselor/consultant, which also includes facilitating ongoing weekly men’s groups at Westcoast Family Centres.

This guide was produced by the National Film Board of Canada’s Impact and Engagement team.  
If you’d like to organize a public screening of an NFB film, please visit: [Community Screenings - Events \(nfb.ca\)](https://www.nfb.ca/community-screenings-events).