

Building Boys Bulletin 8-2-21

Michael Phelps: The man, not the swimmer

[Jennifer L.W. Fink](#) Aug 2

I have a crush on Michael Phelps.



Not a romantic crush and definitely not a sexual crush. More like a professional crush, touched with a bit of motherly-like affection and admiration.

Phelps is, of course, the most decorated Olympian of all time. He is a legendary swimmer who competed in his first Olympics at age 15, was later photographed inhaling from a bong, and still later admitted to serious depression and suicidal ideation after his last Olympics. Today, he is an **outspoken advocate for mental health**, a **philanthropist** dedicated to promoting water safety (and mental health), and a **father of three boys**.

How could I not love that man?

That Phelps was on hand to provide context and commentary when Simone Biles stepped away from competition to protect her physical and mental health may be the biggest and most meaningful Olympic miracle of the 2021 games. When Phelps signed on as a commentator, I'm sure both he and NBC expected him to talk about swim times and strokes. He did that, articulately, but he also amplified Biles' message. And seeing him sit there, in a full-size chair that seems far too small for his lanky frame, frankly discussing mental health and telling the world that **it's okay to not be okay**...well, that brought tears to my eyes. I'm tearing up all over again writing this.

If someone had said those words to me when I was a teen, what might my life have been like? **That fact that the world is now frankly, openly, and accurately discussing mental health in prime time is a huge cultural change** that I think will benefit us all.

Certainly, there's been backlash. You've probably heard some of the criticism directed at Biles. If you haven't already, I urge you to discuss Biles' decision (and the reactions to it) with your boys. (Pro tip: Start by asking them what they think.)

But back to Phelps for a moment...

This amazing man was once a boy with ADHD. An impulsive teenager who decided to smoke weed despite being on the world stage. A young man who very nearly ended his own life because he was drowning in depression. And look at him now!

ALL of our kids will go through tough spots. All will make bad choices. The challenge for us is to never, ever, every give up on them. Growing and maturing takes a long time, especially for boys, and *especially* for boys with ADHD. **When you feel frustrated with your son's behavior and wonder if he will ever turn into a decent human, think of Michael Phelps.** The man, not the swimmer.

Here's to building boys!

Jennifer

P.S. I know this is a big audacious dream, but **I want to get Michael Phelps on ON BOYS podcast.** I can contact him through his foundation, but if anyone knows anyone who can put us in touch or bridge the distance, I'd be forever grateful!

IN THE NEWS

Does My Son with ADHD Need a New School?

Highlights:

- "Although some people may think your son needs to become more resilient, I would argue that he would benefit from having his path made easier, not harder."
- "Children with ADHD who don't get proper support suffer more with anxiety, depression and addictions down the road; placing your son in an environment where his learning style is celebrated, where he isn't being constantly monitored and controlled, and where he can meet other children who are like him could change his life."
- "Remember that nothing, aside from death and serious injury, is permanent. You have the power — and the right — to change your mind... When you remember that...you can begin to feel a little less burdened."

Could My Child's Clumsiness be a Sign of a Coordination Disorder?

Highlights:

- "About 1 in 20 school-age children suffer from developmental coordination disorder (DCD), also known as clumsy child syndrome; that's at least one kid in every classroom."
- "DCD [developmental coordination disorder] is **three times as common in boys** as in girls and six times as likely to affect kids born before 32 weeks of pregnancy."
- "Klutziness can have serious consequences... Many of these kids struggle with everyday tasks and fall short of their potential because their coordination deficits impact their social, emotional and physical development."
- "Imaging studies show that the brains of kids with DCD are markedly different from those of typically developing children, with evidence of alterations in motor and sensory regions and the corpus callosum, the thinking side of the brain that helps plan and execute motor tasks."
- "'About half of children with ADHD also have DCD... And kids with DCD are commonly misdiagnosed with ADHD.' DCD also tends to coexist with other conditions, such as autism spectrum disorder, learning disabilities and emotional problems."
- "Kids with DCD can come off as disruptive or lazy. They may turn in assignments late or with sloppy handwriting. When teachers ask them to rewrite their work, DCD kids who slogged through their first attempt may shut down because they're overwhelmed."

- “Studies suggest kids with DCD are **two to three times as likely to show signs of clinical depression** as neurotypical kids.”
- “Yet klutzy kids rarely raise red flags for clinicians... Unlike such conditions as dyslexia and ADHD that are easy to recognize and have identifiable treatments and supports, DCD often flies under the radar.”
- “There are treatment programs for DCD. Whether children struggle with handwriting or playing sports, a skilled therapist can tailor a program to enhance kids’ motor skills. There’s even evidence to suggest that practicing things

The “Dark Side” of Bodybuilding and Signs to Look Out For

Highlights:

- “Body builders or weightlifters run the risk of falling into the category of orthorexia, which is when someone is unhealthily obsessed with being healthy”
- “It can be difficult for people to recognize they have a problem with bodybuilding because these body ideals are ‘reinforced by our society that values the appearance of fitness.’”
- “Despite eating disorders being among the **deadliest mental illnesses**, second only to opioid overdose, athletes may be less likely to seek treatment for an eating disorder due, in part, to stigma”
- “If you are foregoing relationships, job responsibilities, sleep, things like that because you feel driven to work out or driven to be at the gym, then that is a sign of a disorder” - Dr. Elizabeth Wassenaar

Perfectionism Can Become a Vicious Cycle in Families

Highlights:

- 1 in 3 children & adolescents now has some “clearly maladaptive” form of perfectionism
- “Research shows that, even when they are trying to help someone else, other-oriented perfectionists often yell at or humiliate others to get them to do things the way they think is best.”

In One House, Two Brothers with Disabilities Had Opposite Pandemic Experiences

Highlights:

- “I want school,” says Lonnie, enthusiastically. “No,” Lincoln responds.
- “Lincoln is the exact opposite of his brother. He doesn’t get excited about mornings. He would rather stay in his pajamas or comfortable clothes the entire day and not suffer the textures that torment him.”
- “School districts should seriously consider allowing more flexible models of education that allow for hybrids of learning at home and remotely for some kids.”

Want Creative, Happy Kids? Put Them on “Kairos” Time

Highlights:

- “On the way to kindergarten, various accounts hold (with slightly varying details), Orville Wright passed a neighbor’s barn where he found an old, broken-down sewing machine. Fascinated, he spent the day taking apart the contraption. For the next month, rather than attend school, he and a friend hid in the barn and reassembled the machine.”
- “Kairos time is measured not by the passing of hours or years, but in experiences: memorable moments of awe”

- “Young children, by nature, live in kairos time, where one day blends into the next; filled with moments both insignificant and momentous, where something new and unexpected can happen. Kairos time allows for openness, an expansion of boundaries.”
- “If we want our children to find true success, to discover a passion — whatever their definition of success and passion might be — we grown-ups need to be a bit more like Orville’s dad, a kairos father, who allowed his son time to make mistakes, struggle and figure things out for himself.”

How Swimming Saved Michael Phelps: An ADHD Story

Highlights:

- Michael Phelps “might not have loved swimming at all, were it not for the ingenuity of his mother, Debbie Phelps. ‘At age seven, he hated getting his face wet,’ says Debbie. ‘We flipped him over and taught him the backstroke.’”
- What a mindset! “ I knew that, if I collaborated with Michael, he could achieve anything he set his mind to.” – Debbie Phelps, Michael’s mom, talking about him as a child

ON BOYS podcast

Troubled Boys (w Kenneth R. Rosen)

On Building Boys

Helping Boys Unleash Their Creativity

...Some kids, though, are reluctant to experiment because they’re worried about the outcome. They are hindered by their fear of mistakes or inability to expertly create. But drawing, painting, building and writing are all about trial and error. Encourage and support experimentation, and provide a bit of structure if you think it will help your son.

...it’s important to not discourage this imitation because it is okay at the beginning. You can gradually encourage them to add their own personal touch or perspective. How can they link an example to the things *they* are interested in and make it their own?