#MENTAL HEALTH

Emotionally illiterate? What we teach when we tell boys not to cry

In many Bangladeshi households, the instruction comes early and often. A boy falls, scrapes his knee, and starts to cry. Before the pain is addressed, the correction arrives; "Boys don't cry." Sometimes it's said gently, sometimes sharply, often jokingly. Rarely is it questioned. Yet, according to child and adolescent psychiatrists, this single sentence can quietly shape a child's emotional, cognitive, and social development in ways that last a lifetime.

Dr Helal Uddin Ahmed, Professor of Child, Adolescent and Family Psychiatry at Faridpur Medical College, explains that childhood development is never just physical. "We usually give importance to physical growth," he says, "But emotional, cognitive, and social development are equally important." When one is disrupted, the others do not remain untouched.

Emotional suppression starts early

From a psychiatric perspective, emotional development depends on one simple but crucial skill: recognising emotions and responding to them appropriately.

"A child needs to understand which feeling is sadness, which is fear, which is joy," Dr Ahmed explains. "If they feel sad, they should cry. If they feel pain, they should cry." The problem begins when that natural response is blocked.

When a boy is told that crying is 'girly' or weak, he learns to suppress his emotions rather than process them. "At that moment," Dr Ahmed elaborates, "his emotional development is hindered, and along with it, his emotional intelligence is hampered."

This doesn't mean the emotion disappears. It simply goes underground. Over time, suppressed feelings accumulate as unresolved stress. As neuroscience confirms, the brain learns emotional regulation through use. When boys are discouraged from naming or expressing emotions, the brain doesn't develop the pathways needed to manage them healthily.

When emotions turn into aggression

One of the most visible consequences of this suppression is anger. Dr Ahmed notes a clear pattern in his clinical work: "Boys who couldn't express emotions in childhood often have those emotions turn into aggression in adult life."

Because they were never taught how to express sadness, fear, or vulnerability, these emotions reappear in distorted forms. "They get angry easily, speak dismissively, sometimes resort to physical violence," he says.

This aggression shows up across personal, family, social, and professional spaces. What looks like a "temper problem" in adulthood is often a childhood lesson left unfinished.

The hidden impact on how boys see the world

The damage doesn't stop at emotional health. Dr Ahmed points out that repeated phrases like "Why are you crying like a girl?" shape a boy's thinking patterns. "A sense of masculinity develops where women are seen as weak," he explains. "As a result, mutual respect for women does not develop properly."

This is where emotional suppression intersects with cognitive development. The child's understanding of gender, strength, and empathy becomes distorted.

"His cognitive development gets hindered," Dr Ahmed says plainly. These errors in thinking then affect social behaviour. The boy may mock others for showing grief, belittle emotional responses, or fail to empathise in situations that demand it.

In a society already struggling with intolerance and public anger, these patterns matter. Emotional illiteracy doesn't remain personal; it becomes cultural.

From suppression to depression

As these boys grow older, another risk emerges: depression and anxiety. "When cognitive errors form and social development is hindered," Dr Ahmed explains, "Interpersonal relationships start to deteriorate."

Unable to understand himself or practise self-compassion, the individual's self-esteem erodes. Frustration builds. "A frustrated person becomes aggressive," he says, referring to the frustration–aggression hypothesis. When that frustration persists, it often turns inward. "That long-term frustration takes the form of depression, and one of the primary symptoms of depression is anxiety."

This explains why many Bangladeshi men struggle silently. They may not recognise sadness as sadness. They may only feel restlessness, anger, or exhaustion.

Can the damage be undone?

The answer, thankfully, is not hopeless. Dr Ahmed stresses that recovery is possible, though not absolute. Psychotherapies such as Cognitive Behavioural Therapy (CBT), Dialectical Behaviour Therapy (DBT), and Transactional Analysis can help individuals identify and correct distorted thinking patterns.

"For someone whose emotional development was hindered in childhood, a 100 per cent turnaround may not be possible," he says honestly. "But it is possible to overcome depression, manage difficulties, and lead a quality life."

The earlier the intervention, the better the outcome.

A message to parents and caregivers

Dr Ahmed's advice to parents is direct and urgent. "A single word, a single tone, even a non-verbal gesture can influence a child's emotional and cognitive development," he says.

He emphasises two things above all. First, recognise that development is not just physical. Emotional and social growth are equally vital. Second, allow children — especially boys — to express emotions freely and appropriately. "They must be allowed to express their emotions correctly," he says, "so they can grow into acceptable people in the outer world."

Letting boys cry does not weaken them. It equips them. Strength is not the absence of feeling; it is the ability to understand and manage feeling without fear or shame. If we want a future generation of men who are emotionally steady, respectful, and resilient, we need to start by changing the sentences we say today, especially the ones we've repeated without thinking.

Sometimes, the most radical act of care is simply allowing a boy to cry and saying, "It's okay."

By Ayman Anika
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