

# Doing Right by the Future Men of America

By Megan Rosenfeld

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**T**wo decades of study about the sexual stereotyping of girls is now inspiring a new subject for gender research: boys. Our boys are in trouble, say a vanguard of researchers, and it's time to pay attention to how we are raising them.

The case begins with numbers. Boy babies die in greater numbers in infancy, and are more fragile as babies than girls. Boys are far more likely than girls to be told they have learning disabilities, to be sent to the principal's office, to be given medication for hyperactivity or attention deficit disorder, to be suspended from high school, to commit crimes, to be diagnosed as schizophrenic or autistic. In adolescence, they kill themselves five times more often than girls do. In adulthood, they are being incarcerated at ever-increasing rates, abandoning families, and becoming more likely to be both the perpetrators and victims of violence.

Some psychologists and educators studying boys argue that because of the way we parent and educate boys, combined with biology and an overlay of popular culture, male children do not fully develop their capacity for emotional depth and complexity. They are less able than they need to be to navigate the turmoil of adolescence, to develop healthy adult relationships, in some cases to survive at all. While the simple hierarchy of male authority and dominance in our society is becoming obsolete, the men of tomorrow are not being trained for a world in which their traditional survival mechanisms—like physical strength, bluster and bullying—no longer prevail. Meanwhile, traditionally male virtues like courage and determination are too often neglected.

"An enormous crisis of men and boys is happening before our eyes without our seeing it. There's been an extraordinary shift in the plate tectonics of gender; everything we ever thought is open for examination," says Barney Brawer, a long-time educator. Brawer is managing the boys component of the Harvard Project on Women's Psychology, Boys' Development, and the Culture of Manhood, which is headed by Carol Gilligan, whose research helped shape the new understanding of girls. For two years the project has held discussions and lectures, sponsored mothers-of-sons support groups, and de-



BY MICHELLE McDONALD FOR THE WASHINGTON POST

Barb Wilder-Smith's son Oliver chose a pink bike because he likes the color.

signed research projects. The public interest in their work has taken the academics by surprise. "It's almost more than we can handle," Brawer says.

A few miles away in Newton, Mass., psychologist William S. Pollack is also worrying about boys and writing a book about them. So are Michael Thompson and Dan Kindlon, also psychologists, and consultants to all-boys schools in the Boston area. Publishers have forked over six-figure advances for these books, due out this year, hoping to replicate the financial bonanza of Mary Pipher's bestseller on girls, "Reviving Ophelia."

"We've become very clear about what we want for girls," Brawer says. "We are less clear about what we want for boys."

"It's politically incorrect to be a boy," says the mother of an 18-month-old male. Boys are the universal scapegoats, the clumsy clods with smelly feet who care only about sports and mischief. They are seen as "toxic," says Pollack, creatures "who will infect girls with some kind of social cooties." But

could it be they are just as much victims of gender stereotyping as girls have been? As their sisters grow up with more opportunities than they used to have, boys may be feeling the tightening noose of limited expectations, societal scorn and inadequate role models.

"Why is there always a bad boy in every one of my classes, every year, but no bad girls?" a second-grade girl asked Kindlon, who with Thompson is writing a book called "Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys." Thompson jokes that the subtitle of the book should really be "how to raise your son so he won't turn out like your husband."

"Our beliefs about maleness, the mythology that surrounds being male, has led many boys to ruin," writes Geoffrey Canada in the newly published "Reaching Up for Manhood: Transforming the Lives of Boys in America." "The image of male as strong is mixed with the image of male as violent. Male as virile gets confused with male as promiscuous. Male as adventurous equals male as reckless. Male as intelligent often gets mixed with male as arrogant, racist, and sexist."

Says Pollack: "If girls were killing themselves in these numbers we'd recognize this as a public health issue in our society."

A SURVEY ON GENDER BY THE WASHINGTON POST, Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation and Harvard University showed that most parents feel they treat their sons and daughters equally. Still, most parents know that Jack will heedlessly jump off just about anything or pick up a block and make it a gun, while 4-year-old Jill insists on wearing her party dress and wrapping her toy animals in blankets. But while Jill can keep or abandon party dresses as she wishes, Jack is often forbidden a toy gun, or he's told repeatedly to sit down and stop running around.

A 16-year-old boy in Washington, D.C., remembers his elementary school as a place without male teachers, where by sixth grade (age 11 or 12) boys were assumed to be the troublemakers. One day a girl sitting next to him made him laugh

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by sticking a pencil up her nose. When the teacher reprimanded him, the boy blamed his friend. But the girl denied doing anything—and the teacher believed her and not him. She sent him to sit in the hall for lying.

"That kind of thing happened all the time," he says. "It made me not respect teachers very much."

BARB WILDER-SMITH IS A BOSTON-AREA TEACHER who became interested in researching boys after she gave birth to two of them—and realized she didn't know much about them. Three years ago she took her then 5-year-old to buy a new bike. At the time, his favorite color was pink and he wanted a pink bike. She and her husband were content to let him make his own color choice.

"But the salesman said he couldn't have a pink bike, pink was a girl color, and he had to have a red or blue bike," Wilder-Smith says. "My son looked at him and said, 'That's ridiculous, colors aren't boys or girls, and pink is my favorite color.'"

The boy got his pink bike. But he was teased so much by other children, who called this 5-year-old gay, that he put a sign on his bicycle basket. It read:

*I like pink.*

*I am still a boy.*

*I have a penis.*

Now he is 8, and doesn't let anyone know he likes pink. It was the girls who hassled him about it most mercilessly. Girls who wear blue all the time.

Considerable trepidation surrounds this new interest in boys. Some parents are afraid that it's about having their boys grow up "to be sweet and nice and good," as Wilder-Smith put it, and will endanger their sons. Feminists of both genders worry that the hard-won changes that benefit girls will be pitted against newly defined needs of boys, and that the old canards about biology being destiny will come back from the near-dead. Some are resentful that attention is being directed toward boys when girls have had only "a nanosecond in the history of educational reform," as Gabrielle Lange wrote in the *American Association of University Women* magazine *Outlook*. Researchers into boys' behavior fear they will be tagged as anti-female, and they tread cautiously into the politically and emotionally loaded field of gender study.

"For 30 years it has been politically unacceptable to talk about [neurological or biological] differences," says Thompson, who has worked as a clinical psychologist with both coed and all-boys schools. But now, he and others note, the scientific community seems more willing to acknowledge that there are differences between males and females. The question is what the significance of these differences is.

Diane F. Halpern, a psychology professor at California State University in San Bernardino, surveyed studies of differences between male and female intelligence. She found that women do better in tasks that test language abilities, fine motor tasks, perceptual speed, decoding nonverbal communication, and speech articulation. Men are superior in "visual working memory," tasks that require moving objects, aiming, fluid reasoning, knowledge of math, science and geography, and general knowledge. Males have more mental retardation, attention deficit disorders, delayed speech, dyslexia, stuttering, learning disabilities and emotional disturbances.

Girls' brains are stronger in the left hemisphere, which is where language is processed, while boys' are more oriented to the right hemisphere, the spatial and physical center. Recent advances in brain study have shown that the two hemispheres are better connected in females, which may eventually explain why the genders show different patterns in cognitive tests.

"Boys' early experience of school is being beaten by girls at most things," Thompson says. "The first thing we do in school is make them read and sit still, two things they are generally not as good at."

Boys score better on achievement tests, but girls get better grades—another pattern that inspires all sorts of interpretations. Since boys are bigger risk-takers, perhaps they guess more on tests and by the law of averages get enough right answers. Halpern suggests that since most standardized tests are multiple choice, and female strength tends to be in writing, perhaps they lose out that way. Conversely, since sitting still, neatness and studiousness are rewarded in classroom grades, maybe boys are inadvertently penalized in that arena. It also has been demonstrated repeatedly that scores can change with the right training.

Why are so many more boys—six times more—diagnosed with learning disabilities? No one knows for sure, one theory is that the standards for diagnosing LD are so loose that disruptive boys are classified to get them to special help and out

of the classroom. "The system has shaped the definition rather than the other way around," says Ken Kavale, an expert in learning disabilities who teaches graduate school at the University of Iowa.

Douglas Fuchs, a professor at the Kennedy Center Institute on Education and Learning at Peabody College of Vanderbilt, thinks learning disabilities are over-diagnosed and may be related to early language differences. Millions of boys are now taking Ritalin to treat attention deficit and hyperactivity.

No one questions that many boys are legitimately learning disabled—neurologically mis-wired in ways that make traditional learning difficult. But there may be other factors that affect a boy's ability to be successful in school. Pollack's theory, based on years of research and clinical practice, is that many boys' problems are rooted in a too-early separation from their mother's nurturing. While boy babies start out with a wider emotional range—more sounds, expressions and wails—parents tend to give them less adoring interaction after about the age of 6 months, he says. Although boy babies are more physically fragile, he believes that adults tend to see them as bigger and tougher, and also to soothe them into quietness rather than try to understand their noise. Boys are so traumatized by this "disruption of their early holding environment" that they harden up and withdraw, which has repercussions the rest of their lives, Pollack suggests.



Another question is whether we have failed to appreciate the language of boys because so much of it is either violent in imagery or oblique in approach. Wilder-Smith recalls getting a note from one of the 5-year-old boys whose fantasy play-acting she recorded for a year in a Boston school. "Have a Hindenburg Exploding Life!" the boy wrote. Wilder-Smith wasn't sure if this note was meant affectionately; after she thought about it she realized it was. It just wasn't her kind of language. But she believes that what appears to be violent play or imagery to a woman may be a valuable tool to a boy, his way of conquering fear and his smallness in the universe. Removing that outlet make boys more violent rather than less, she thinks.

Barney Brawer likes to use the example of a Vermont farmer working on a broken tractor. His son may spend the day at his side, and yet they may exchange no more than a dozen words. But the son has seen a great deal—perseverance, problem solving (or trying to), engine repair. "We've lost a lot of that kind of communicating," he says.

Boys exhibit different signs of depression, says Pollack, whose book "Real Boys: Rescuing Our Sons From the Myths of Boyhood" will be published later this year. Thus we often fail to recognize them because they are not as evident as the symptoms common to girls—who in adolescence and adulthood are diagnosed with depression at far higher rates than males. "Our view of depression has been feminized," he says. "Boys may have a moody withdrawal rather than tears."

After spending a year observing in a Boston public school, Wilder-Smith is among those who think we may need to reevaluate our attitudes about boys' aggression and action. Too often, she suspects, the mothers and female teachers who statistically spend the most time with young boys believe the key to producing a nonviolent adult is to remove all conflict—toy weapons, wrestling and shoving, imaginary explosions and crashes—from a boy's life. "I've watched teachers who have the rule with creative writing that there's 'no killing in stories,'" she says. "One boy said, 'But the bad guy! He has to die somehow!' Finally the teacher said the bad guy could die, and allowed him to be run over by a truck. . . . They can't draw it [violence], they can't write about it, they can't act it out."

"We do take away a lot of the opportunity to do things boys like to do," says Carol Kennedy, a school principal in Missouri. "That is be rowdy, run and jump and roll around. We don't allow that."

Educator Vivian Gussin Paley once put a running track in her kindergarten classroom. The girls ran around it in laps. The boys chased each other. They all seemed to like it.

Mass media ill-serve both genders, researchers say. Many believe violence on television encourages aggressive behavior in boys and girls, but they have no conclusive proof. There is

more evidence backed up by teachers that television has encouraged shorter attention spans and a need for artificial excitement. While girls are surrounded by television shows and books in which boys are almost always the protagonist, the hero and the main ingredient, boys rarely get a positive cultural message that it's okay to be afraid or sad, to not be athletic, to have a girl for a friend, or to enjoy writing poetry.

It is no secret that modern life has produced a new style of childhood. But there may be particular hardships for boys that are rarely acknowledged by those in authority. For example, divorce in many cases not only removes a boy's primary role model from his daily life, it often brings additional burdens from his mother. He becomes the "man of the family," a role he is generally not prepared to handle. School principals dealing with boys who are sent to their office with behavior problems are finding that many of them are in this situation.

"The responsibilities most of our young boys are having placed on them is different than ever before," says principal Kennedy. "Mother is sharing things with that boy that almost makes him a partner rather than a son. . . . We find that even in elementary school, when a boy is taking on the role of being the major babysitter, he is often paying more attention to what happens at home than at school. It's more of a boy problem because a mother can see the boy as head of household, or man of the family, and doesn't tend to do that with a girl."

Unsupervised play is another issue—the lack of it, that is. Researchers like Brawer suspect that while too many hours are being idled away alone, indoors, in front of a television set, too few are being spent outdoors in time-honored games of exploration, mock warfare, fort building, sneaking around, inventing ball games and so forth. Because many parents are legitimately afraid of criminals and bad drivers careening down neighborhood streets, boys—and girls—are rarely allowed the freedom to investigate and master their home turf in a way that once provided a rehearsal for the real world.

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SO THE QUESTIONS MOUNT. BRAWER, WHO IS writing a dissertation on Attention Deficit and Hyperactivity Disorder, notes that in the 1,700 studies he has found, the word "father" is mentioned only three times. "The neurobiological crowd doesn't believe in Freudian language," he says. "But if you look at the conditions under which kids are more or less likely to have problems, the indicators go way down when the father is in the home. This is an area we need to study."

What messages do mothers inadvertently send when they recoil from their son's wish to have a toy gun or his desire to be a ballerina for Halloween? How do fathers restrict a boy's emotional vocabulary when they say "big boys don't cry"? Should some boys, as Thompson and Kindlon suggest, start school at 8 rather than 5 or 6 years of age?

"It may still be a man's world, but it's not a boy's," Pollack says. "He's been sat on so long he'll push to keep the dominance. Recognizing boys' pain is the way to change society." ■