

Are Our Boys All Right?

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Taken as a whole, how are our nation's boys doing? In his book *The Good Son*, Michael Gurian (1999) shares his experience of working with boys and men in classrooms, in prisons, in community agencies, and in his therapy practice over the past two decades and talks about the "state of moral emergency" that he believes is becoming an everyday part of male life. Gurian shares the following statistics as evidence (pp. 4-5):

- We have the most violent non-war population of children in the world. More people in the United States per capita commit violent acts every day than anywhere else, and 90% of them are male.
- After Russia, more of our citizens are in prison than any other country in the world. Ninety percent of these incarcerated individuals are male.
- Our boys constitute the majority of children who are homeless, murdered, in foster care, neglected, and institutionalized.
- Our rate of mental disorders in the male population per capita is one of the highest in the world. For instance, 90% of the Ritalin used on children in the world is used on ours. Approximately 3,000,000 kids are on Ritalin in the United States—90% of them are boys.
- Our boys and young men also comprise the majority of child-abuse victims and are the less likely victim to talk about and get help for their suffering. In a 1998 study of 7,000 children, 48% of boys, compared to 29% of girls, said they would never tell anyone about the abuse they had experienced.

Gurian believes our boys are in trouble—"some lack basic impulse control; others lack what we would call a conscience; others lack the ability to articulate

right from wrong; others lack empathy" (Gurian, 1999, p. 5); others simply cannot get understanding from a culture that sometimes "unfairly labels boys as morally defective, hyperactive, or undisciplined" (p. 54).

James Garbarino has spent the past 25 years studying violence in the lives of children, youth, and families. Most recently, he has been interviewing boys incarcerated for committing crimes of lethal violence. Garbarino (1999a) shares the following four conclusions about why boys turn violent and how we can save them in his book *Lost Boys: Why Our Sons Turn Violent and How We Can Save Them* (pp. 1, 5-6):

- No matter how effective, motivated, and attentive any of us is as a parent, our children go to school with boys who are lost and who have access to lethal weapons. Thus, violence prevention is everybody's business.
- The problem of lethal youth violence usually starts from a combination of early difficulties in relationships that are linked to a combination of difficult "temperament" and negative experience.
- Research shows that patterns of aggression start to become stable and predictable by the time a child is 8 years old. The most common pathway to this pattern of aggression at age 8 is for temperamentally vulnerable children to be victims of abuse and neglect at home. This maltreatment can be both physical abuse (beatings) and psychological abuse (rejection).
- Troubled lost boys will be as bad as the social environment around them. "Social toxicity" is the presence of social and cultural "poisons" in the world of children and youth, to which lost boys are especially susceptible.

Garbarino likens his term “socially toxic environment” to the environmental movement’s analysis regarding physical toxicity as a threat to human well-being and survival (Garbarino, 1998). The social equivalents to lead and smoke in the air, PCBs in the water, and pesticides in the food chain include violence and the glorification of violence in the media, poverty, and other economic pressures on parents and their children, as well as disruption of family relationships and other trauma (Garbarino, 1998). Just as children are the most vulnerable to physical toxicity in the environment, children also show the effects first and worst as a social environment becomes more socially toxic (Garbarino, 1998).

Popular media are clearly part of the social environment of youth. Boys are especially active users of media, watching hours of television, movies, music videos, and sports; listening to radio and CDs; surfing the Internet; and playing computer and video games (Children Now, 1999). To explore the media’s messages about masculinity and their impact on boys, Children Now, a national child advocacy organization, analyzed messages in primetime television shows, movies, music videos, and sports programming most frequently watched by boys. Included in the research are findings from a national poll of 1,200 young people (ages 10 to 17) and focus groups in which boys offered their own insights into the media they consume.

In a news release to announce the study’s results, Lois Salisbury, president of Children Now, said, “By many measures, America’s boys—urban or suburban, white or minority—are in trouble. Yet they consume more media than ever, often occupying the time that coaches and fathers used to fill. Our study shows that boys are exposed relentlessly to a narrow, confining picture of masculinity in America, one that reinforces anger and violence as the way to solve problems.” Salisbury goes on to say, “Our culture puts boys in a gender strait jacket, channeling their full range of healthy emotions into narrow forms of expression, often aggressive ones. Media legitimates these constraints at a time when we

desperately need to reinvent manhood in America” (Children Now, 1999).

Despite the discouraging cultural landscape for our nation’s boys, Michael Gurian is hopeful that we can provide boys with the direction they need to grow into stable, secure, and motivated men. He talks about the three “families” every boy needs (Dworkis, 1999): (1) the “nuclear” family; (2) the extended family, including blood relatives, close friends, male mentors, teachers, peers, and day care providers; and (3) culture and community, including religious groups, influential community figures, and a child-friendly media.

Gurian also urges us to “respect the male way of doing things” (Dworkis, 1999, p. 19). Our society, says Gurian, values the female model of nurturing, which includes compassionate conversation, shared thoughts and feelings, and tender hugs. Rarely, says Gurian, do we give equal value to the male model of nurturing, which involves competition and testing. “Nurtured competition,” says Gurian, is essential to healthy male development (Dworkis, 1999, p. 19).

Geoffrey Canada, president of the Rheedlen Centers for Children and Families and author of *Reaching Up for Manhood*, offers the following suggestions for raising better boys (Canada, 1999-2000):

- Reach out to boys early on and get them to talk about their feelings, which is easier to do when boys are young.
- Make sure boys can take risks in safe, developmentally appropriate ways, through such things as sports, dance, or horseback riding.
- Give boys more positive messages of self-worth and reduce the number of negative messages from others, which often come through the media and marketing industry.
- Ensure that our boys have male role models who take a personal interest in their moral, intellectual, and emotional development.
- Monitor what boys see and hear on television, the radio, and in movies.

- Find a place for spiritual and moral education.
- Expose boys to different cultures and points of view.
- Know boys' friends and what they do.
- Expose boys to new experiences such as nature walks, sailing, singing, sewing, and dancing.
- Have a multilayered support system—parents, grandparents, uncles and aunts, cousins their own age, coaches, teachers, and caring adults who run after-school activities.

In his commentary for *Time Magazine's* special report "The Columbine Tapes" (December 20, 1999), James Garbarino comments on boys who become violent and parents' responsibility when they do:

"The 'normal' culture of adolescence today contains elements that are so nasty that it becomes hard for parents (and professionals) to distinguish between what in a teenager's talk, dress and taste in music, films and video games indicates psychological trouble and what is simply a sign of the times. Most children are like dandelions. They thrive if given half a chance. Some are more like orchids. They do fine while young enough to be nurtured by loving parents, but wilt as adolescents. Many of us are too ready to blame good parents for how their children cope with a violent and coarse society. Even loving, attentive parents can lose children who are temperamentally vulnerable—if they develop a secret life, get caught up in the dark side of the culture and form dangerous peer alliances. And that's scary for any parent to acknowledge" (Garbarino, 1999b, p. 51).

In his book *The Men They Will Become*, Eli Newberger (1999) likens parenthood to walking a tightrope. "As the rope moves, or your weight shifts the wrong way, you go slightly out of balance" (p. 100). Walking the rope, Newberger says, requires constant vigilance, the flexibility to make unending adjustments, and more than a little nerve. Patience is valuable in raising a boy, says Newberger, "but tenacity . . . and a refusal to give up on him, may be the greatest child-raising virtue of all" (p. 19).

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