

# WEEA Digest

## What About the Boys?

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You've probably heard there's a "war against boys" in America. The latest book of that title by Christina Hoff Sommers claims that men are now the second sex and that boys—not girls—are the ones who are in serious trouble, the "victims" of "misguided" feminist efforts to protect and promote girls' development. At the same time, best-selling books like William Pollack's *Real Boys* and Dan Kindlon and Michael Thompson's *Raising Cain* sound the same tocsin. Writing from the therapists' point of view, they warn of alarming levels of depression and suicide, and describe boys' interior lives as an emotionally barren landscape, with all affect suppressed beneath postures of false bravado. They counsel anguished parents to "rescue" or "protect" boys—not from feminists, but from a definition of masculinity that is harmful not just to boys, but to girls and other living things.

In part, both sides are right. There is a crisis among boys. But the discussion in the popular media misdiagnoses

the cause of the crisis. Consequently their proposed reforms would make it even harder for young boys to negotiate the difficult path to a manhood of integrity, ethical commitment, and compassion. At least the therapists get that part right. But in part, both sides are also wrong, because on most measures boys—at least the

middle class white boys everyone seems concerned about—are doing just fine, taking their places in an unequal society to which they have always felt entitled. However, the unchecked crisis among boys has real consequences for all of us.

The current empirical discussion about where the boys are and what they are doing encompasses three phenomena—numbers, achievement, and behavior. These three themes frame the political debate about boys as well. The prevalent data on boys seem to suggest that there are fewer and fewer boys in school compared to girls, that they are getting poorer grades, and that they are having increasing numbers of behavioral problems. We hear about boys failing at school, where their behavior is increasingly seen as a problem. We read that boys are depressed, suicidal, emotionally shut down. Therapists caution parents about boys' fragility, warn of their hidden despondency and depression, and issue stern advice about the dire

consequences if we don't watch our collective cultural step. According to these critics, the salutary effects of paying attention to girls have been offset by increasing problems related to boys. It was feminists, we are told, who pitted girls against boys. Though we hear an awful lot about *males*, we hear very little about *mas-*

### About This Digest

Traditionally, we associate the term "gender equity" with equalizing the playing field for girls. However, as this *Digest's* title indicates, gender equity by definition applies to both genders. In the best possible scenario, gender equitable education provides equal opportunities and enables each student to reach his or her potential. It reduces the gender disparities that are detrimental to classroom interactions and in testing; it encourages all students to pursue a variety of school subjects, putting no limit on what they can accomplish; and it gives students the opportunity to participate in all aspects of school sports and clubs. Boys need to know that gender equity increases their options, and benefits them, too. The success of boys and girls in school, and beyond, depends on gender equity in education.

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### Guest Editors:

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culinity, about what that biological condition actually means. Addressing the issue of masculinity will, I believe, enable us to resolve many of these debates, and move forward in a constructive way to create equity in our schools for boys as well as girls.

### What Do Boys Need?

Introducing the concept of masculinity into the discussion addresses several of the problems associated with the "what about the boys?" debate. For one thing, it enables us to explore the ways in which class and race complicate the picture of boys' achievement and behaviors. For another, it reveals that boys and girls are on the same side in this struggle, not pitted against each other. Further, challenging those stereotypes, decreasing tolerance for school violence and bullying, and increasing attention to violence at home actually enables both girls and boys to feel safer at school.<sup>1</sup>

For example, when Thompson and Kindlon describe the treatment that boys need, they are really describing what children need. Adolescent boys, they inform us, want to be loved, have sex, and not be hurt.<sup>2</sup> Thompson and Kindlon counsel parents to use the following guidelines for their sons allow them to indulge their emotions; accept a high level of physical activity; speak their language and treat them with respect; teach that empathy is courage; use discipline to guide and build; model manhood as emotionally attached; and teach the many ways in which a boy can be a man.<sup>3</sup> It becomes clear that what they advocate is exactly what feminist women have been advocating for girls for some time.

Focusing on masculinity allows us to understand what is happening to boys in school. Consider again the parallel for girls. Carol Gilligan's astonishing and often moving work on adolescent girls describes the extent to which assertive, confident, and proud young girls "lose their voices" when they hit adolescence. At the same moment, William Pollack notes, boys become *more* confident, even beyond their abilities. One might even say that boys *find* their voices during adolescence, but they are the inauthentic voices of bravado, constant posturing, foolish risk-taking, and gratuitous violence. The "boy code" teaches them that they are supposed to be in power, and thus they begin to

act as if they are. They "ruffle in a manly pose," as William Butler Yeats once put it, "for all their timid heart."

What's the cause of all this posturing and posing? It's not testosterone, but privilege. In adolescence both boys and girls get their first real dose of gender inequality: girls suppress ambition, boys inflate it. Recent research on the gender gap in school achievement bears this out. Girls are more likely to undervalue their abilities, especially in the more traditionally "masculine" subjects of math and science. Only the ablest and most secure girls take such courses. Thus, their numbers tend to be few, and their grades high. Boys, however, possessed of this false voice of bravado and often facing strong family pressure are correspondingly likely to *overvalue* their abilities and, unlike girls, to remain in programs in which they are less qualified and less able to succeed. Consequently, their grades and other assessment scores may be negatively affected.

This difference, not some putative discrimination against boys, accounts for the fact that girls' mean test scores in math and science are now approaching those of boys. Too many boys who overvalue their abilities remain in difficult math and science courses longer than they should, thus pulling the boys' mean scores down. By contrast, the few girls whose abilities and self-esteem are sufficient to enable them to "trespass" into a male domain skew female data upwards.

A parallel process is at work in the humanities and social sciences. Girls' mean test scores in English and foreign languages, for example, also outpace those of boys. Again, this disparity emerges not as the result of "reverse discrimination" but because the boys bump up against the norms of masculinity. Boys regard English as a "feminine" subject. Pioneering research in Australia by Wayne Martino found that boys are uninterested in English because such an interest might call into question their (inauthentic) masculine pose. "Reading is lame, sitting down and looking at words is pathetic," commented one boy. "Most guys who like English are faggots." The traditional liberal arts curriculum is seen as feminizing; as Catharine Stimpson recently put it sarcastically, "real men don't speak French."

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Boys tend to hate English and foreign languages for the same reasons that girls love them. In English, they observe, there are no hard and fast rules; rather, students express their opinion about the topic, and everyone's opinion is equally valued. "The answer can be a variety of things, you're never really wrong," observed one boy. "It's not like math and science where there is one set answer to everything." Another boy noted:

*I find English hard. It's because there are no set rules for reading texts. . . . English isn't like math where you have rules on how to do things and where there are right and wrong answers. In English you have to write down how you feel and that's what I don't like.<sup>4</sup>*

Compare this with the comments of a girl in the same study:

*I feel motivated to study English because . . . you have freedom in English—unlike subjects such as math and science—and your view isn't necessarily wrong. There is no definite right or wrong answer and you have the freedom to say what you feel is right without it being rejected as a wrong answer.<sup>5</sup>*

It is not the school experience that "feminizes" boys, but rather the ideology of traditional masculinity that keeps boys from wanting to succeed. "The work you do here is girls' work," one boy commented to a researcher<sup>6</sup> "It's not real work."

### Cultural Expectations for Boys

Some of the recent books for boys do accept the notion that masculinity—not feminism, not testosterone, not fatherlessness, and not the teaching of evolution—is the key to understanding boyhood and its current crisis. Thompson and Kindlon, for example, write that male peers present a young boy with a "culture of cruelty"<sup>7</sup> in which they force him to deny emotional neediness, "routinely disguise his feelings," and thus end up feeling emotionally isolated. Therapist William Pollack calls it the "boy code" and the "mask of masculinity"—a kind of swaggering posture that boys embrace to hide their fears, suppress dependency and vulnerability, and present a stoic, impervious front.

What is that "boy code"? Twenty-five years ago, psychologist Robert Brannon described the four basic rules of manhood.<sup>8</sup>

1. **No sissy stuff.** Masculinity is the repudiation of the feminine.

2. **Be a big wheel.** Masculinity is measured by wealth, power, and status.

3. **Be a sturdy oak.** Masculinity requires emotional imperviousness.

4. **Give 'em hell.** Masculinity requires daring, aggression, and risk-taking in our society.

Different groups of men—based on class, race, ethnicity, sexuality—express these four rules in different ways. There are as sizable, in fact greater, distinctions among different groups of men as there are differences between women and men. What it means to be 71-year-old black, gay man in Cleveland is probably radically different from what it means to be a 17-year-old white, heterosexual boy in Iowa.

Despite biology and the traditional cliché "boys will be boys," there's plenty of evidence that boys will not necessarily be boys everywhere in the same way. Few other Western nations would boast of violent, homophobic, and misogynist adolescent males and excuse them by virtue of this expression. If it's all so biological, why are European boys so different? Are they not boys?

We therefore should not speak of masculinity in the singular, but of *masculinities*, in recognition of the different definitions of manhood that we construct. By pluralizing the term, we acknowledge that masculinity means different things to different groups of men at different times.

But at the same time, we can't forget that all masculinities are not created equal. All American men must also contend with a singular vision of masculinity, a particular definition that is held up as the model against which we all measure ourselves. What it means to be a man in our culture is defined in opposition to a set of "others"—racial minorities, sexual minorities, and above all women. The sociologist Erving Goffman once wrote:

*In an important sense there is only one complete unblushing male in America: a young, married, white, urban, northern, heterosexual, Protestant, father, of college education, fully employed, of good complexion, weight, and height, and a recent record in sports. . . . Any*

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*male who fails to qualify in any one of these ways is likely to view himself—during moments at least—as unworthy, incomplete, and inferior.*

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I think it's crucial to listen to those last few words. When we don't feel we measure up—or more accurately, when we feel that we do not measure up—we are likely to feel unworthy, incomplete, and inferior. It is, I believe, from this place of unworthiness, incompleteness, and inferiority that boys begin their efforts to prove themselves as men. And the ways in which they do it—based on misinformation and disinformation—cause problems for both girls and boys in school.

Underlying many of these anti-feminist complaints may be the most depressing and widespread assumption that “boys will be boys.” This accompanies a defeatist posture, a hopeless resignation: boys are this way and will not change. And the way these boys “are” is violent, predatory beasts; uncaged, uncivilized animals.

Personally I find such images insulting; yes, I'd even use the term “male bashing.” And when we assume that the propensity for violence is innate, the inevitable fruit of that testosterone cocktail determined in utero, that only begs the question. We must still decide whether to organize society so as to maximize boys' “natural” predisposition toward violence or to minimize it. Biology alone cannot support the claim that boys will be boys, and by helplessly shrugging our collective shoulders, we abrogate our social responsibility.

Besides, one wants to ask, which biology are we talking about? Therapist Michael Gurian demands that we accept boys' “hard wiring,” which, he informs us, is competitive and aggressive: “Aggression and physical risk taking are hard wired into a boy.”<sup>9</sup> Gurian claims to like a kind of feminism that “is not anti-male, accepts that boys are who they are, and chooses to love them rather than change their hard wiring.”<sup>10</sup>

That's too impoverished a view of feminism—and of boys—for my taste. Simply accepting boys and this highly selective definition of their hard-wiring demands far too little of us. Feminism specifically asks us *not* to accept those behaviors that are hurtful to boys, girls, and their environment—because we can

do better than this part of our hard wiring might dictate. We are also, after all, hard-wired toward compassion, nurturing, and love, aren't we?

I'm reminded of a line from Kate Millet's pathbreaking book, *Sexual Politics*, published 30 years ago:

*Perhaps nothing is so depressing an index of the inhumanity of the male supremacist mentality as the fact that the more genial human traits are assigned to the underclass: affection, response to sympathy, kindness, cheerfulness.*

The question, to my mind, is not whether or not males are hard-wired, but rather which hard-wiring elements we choose to honor as a society, and which we choose to challenge. In this way we can further expand the opportunities for boys by removing the limitations imposed by traditional masculinity standards. We can also make school a safer place for all students to learn to the best of their abilities. ♦

### Author's Note

*This article began as the keynote presentation at the 6th annual K-12 Gender Equity in Schools Conference, sponsored by the Wellesley College Centers for Research on Women, January 12, 2000. It has subsequently been presented in the course “Gender and Education” at the Graduate School of Education at Harvard University, and various versions have been published in Michigan Feminist Quarterly and TIKKUN magazine (November, 2000). I am grateful to Susan Bailey and Carol Gilligan for the initial invitation to think about these issues.*

### Notes

1. S. McGee Bailey and P. B. Campbell, “The Gender Wars in Education” in *WCW Research Report, 1999/2000*.
2. D. Thompson and M. Kindlon, *Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys* (New York: Ballantine Books: 1999) pp. 195–6.
3. Thompson and Kindlon, pp. 241–256.
4. W. Martino, “Gendered Learning Practices: Exploring the Costs of Hegemonic Masculinity for Girls and Boys in Schools” in *Gender Equity: A Framework for Australian Schools* (Canberra: Ministerial Council on Education, Employment, Training, and Youth Affairs: 1997) p. 133.
5. Martino, 1997, p. 134.
6. M. Mac an Ghaill, *The Making of Men: Masculinities, Sexualities, and Schooling* (London: Open University Press, 1994) p. 59.
7. M. Thompson and D. Kindlon, p. 89.
8. R. Brannon and D. David, eds., *The Forty-Nine Percent Majority* (Reading: Addison Wesley, 1976).
9. M. Gurian, *The Wonder of Boys* (New York: Tarcher / Putnam, 1996) p. 53.
10. M. Gurian, p. 53–4.