

Family Living Connection

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Boys In Trouble

You may have noticed American boys are in the news lately and it's not an upbeat story. New books such as Raising Cain, The Minds of Boys, Why Gender Matters and a recent cover of Newsweek all focus on why boys are struggling in school, more likely to be diagnosed with ADHD/ADD, and plagued with behavior problems at school. Teachers are flocking to seminars focused on single- sex education and sex differences in the brain, in hopes of improving the learning environment for boys that can't seem to engage in school. Parents across the nation are turning to single-sex classrooms in hopes that their sons will find success in school.

Moviegoers may laugh at the thirty-something man-boy (played by Matthew McConaughey) who won't leave the nest in the movie, *Failure to Launch*, but my guess is we all know similar male characters in real life. They are those uninspired guys who prefer to disengage from careers, relationships, and any sort of responsibility.

Whether you believe that sex differences are hardwired at birth, learned, or a combination of both, we can all agree that we want boys and girls to reach their fullest potential. For American boys, there are some disturbing trends that parents and adults that work with youth need get a grip on.

- More boys today report not liking school, even in early elementary school
- For many boys, reading for fun and academic excellence are understood to be unmasculine pursuits¹
- Boys are more likely to be referred to clinics for behavior problems, which most likely leads to the fact that they are three times more likely than girls to be diagnosed with ADHD²
- American boys are the most violent in the industrialized world³
- High school graduation rates are worse for boys (65%) than girls (72%) and the gap widens even more for ethnic minority students. For African American youth, 48% of boys graduate compared with 59% of girls, and for Latino youth, the rates are 49% and 58%, respectively⁴



Gender is a provocative topic, and it's not surprising that many people fall into one of two philosophical camps: sex differences are hardwired and are with us from birth; or, environment shapes

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our gender identities. What we can draw from both perspectives is that we need to understand both sexes better for the sake of boys and girls.

New research on brain development indicates we know less about sex differences and the teenage brain than we ever expected. Parents may be shocked to learn about the influence of pop culture on boys' attitudes about school, relationships, relationships, and their own masculinity. As parents and concerned adults, we need to understand what impact we can have on boys' emotional development, propensity to take risks, relationships with peers and partners, and resiliency in the face of cultural messages that pollute journeys into manhood.



The good news is that adults do make a difference. Really talking about masculinity with boys is a positive start. Without guidance, there are basically two cultural models, the wimp and the barbarian. These images are powerful and are reinforced in video games, professional wrestling, and on the playground. To raise a resilient boy, masculinity must be discussed in its

entirety. Kevin Davern, Headmaster at The Avalon (all-boys) School raises this topic with his students through frank discussions, movies, and literature. He uses the term “authentic masculinity” to describe what boys ought to be striving for. *Strength* used for the service of others, *defender* of good, *builder* of meaningful and worthwhile things, and *creator* of beauty, define masculine character.⁵

Use practical examples in your discussions. For example in a bullying situation, who is the real man? The one who tortures a victim or the one who has the courage to defy his peers and do the right thing?

This fall, the Family Resource Center and UW-Extension are offering two interactive classes that focus on boys. Parents will have the chance to discuss their concerns and tap into resources available to help raise healthy boys. Look for offerings starting in November in both Augusta and Eau Claire.

¹ Leonard Sax, M.D. PhD, presentation at Boys at Risk conference, UW-Madison, June 12, 2006.

² Denise Witmer, Parenting of Adolescents, http://parentingteens.about.com/cs/addadhd/a/add_stats.htm. July 18, 2006.

³ Referenced in PBS documentary, Raising Cain. <http://www.pbs.org/opb/raisingcain/>. July 18, 2006.

⁴ Leaving Boys Behind: Public High School Graduation Rates. April 2006. http://www.manhattan-institute.org/html/cr_48.htm

⁵ Kevin Davern, presentation at Boys at Risk conference, UW-Madison, June 12, 2006