

Cracking the Boy Code

by: William S. Pollack, PhD

For at least the last two decades, we have rightfully focused on how girls were once misled and mis-taught into believing they could not achieve equal academic success with boys, especially in the sciences and math. We have worked to change such negative and misguided attitudes with very robust results—more positive academic self-esteem for the girls we love and cherish and clear improvement in test scores and grades, as well as greater numbers graduating high school and many going on to excellent colleges and fulfilling careers in many fields.. Education equality for girls and young women should and **must** continue to be a central focus for teachers and parents.

But what about the boys? Because I've been criticized for speaking about a "boy crisis" in our schools, I'll stick to the emotionally upsetting real data. Boys' literacy rates and ability to read and write at grade level sadly lag behind their female peers. Their grades from elementary school through high school are points behind girls in almost every subject. They are less likely to feel engaged with their school work or comfortable and emotionally connected with their teachers. They have much higher dropout rates, substantially greater disciplinary problems, and dramatically higher placement in so-called "special education," along with a variety of diagnoses that add up to boys being seen and labeled as *dysfunctional failures* within our schools.

Certainly ethnicity, race, economic circumstances, rural or urban environments, and family life affect just how well or poorly a boy may do in school. But it still remains that the strongest predictor for disliking school, failure to achieve, failing academically, feeling that school is an unfriendly place to be, and dropping out is to be a boy or young male between the ages of 5 and 18. And if that weren't bad enough, boys and young males in this age group are significantly more likely to experience injuries, premature death rates, and juvenile arrests, often linked to increased, dangerous risk taking behavior, than their female peers. Yet sadly to demonstrate that we are not seeing a growing number of "bad boys" in our homes and schools; but too often "sad boys", young males 12–19 years old are four to six times more likely to complete a suicide attempt, to die by their own hands, than girls of the same age. Yet, while girls generally also continue to have significant difficulties both in school and at home during these years, perhaps the most salient issue is that these pressing problems affecting our boys and young males tend to go unseen, with remedies sorely neglected.



Am I suggesting that there is, a war on boys being waged in our schools? Absolutely not. Am I meaning to criticize parents and teachers for purposely disliking and mistreating boys at school or at home? Definitely not. But, nor am I willing to fall back on one of the dangerous

myths we uncovered in researching *Real Boys' Voices* and our [Listening to Real Boys' Voices Project](#) that *boys will be boys*—and therefore their biology or hormones doom them to a behavioral pattern inexorably leading to school failure.

The "Gender Straitjacket" and the "Boy Code"

One important reason schools, teachers, and even parents miss the warning signs of boys' emotional and academic disconnection is that our society sends a strong message to boys: no matter how much they feel they are losing contact with teachers and parents and no matter how sad and confused they are becoming, a *real boy* must never show vulnerability: "the boy code."

As a society, we still expect boys to brave life's ups and downs independently, stoically cover their pain, and above all, avoid doing anything "unmanly" that might shame either themselves or their parents. These gender straitjackets push many boys to repress their yearnings for love and connection and build an invisible, impenetrable wall of toughness around them, constructing a false face of bravado—the mask of masculinity—to hide their all too human pain.

The boy code is communicated through such phrases as "Stand on your own two feet," "Be a little man," "Don't be a mamma's boy," "Big boys don't cry." Such messages begin around the ages of four and five and are reinforced in adolescence. Because we diminish the expression of boys' genuine emotional voices, too many boys believe they are failing to achieve what has become a truly impossible test of masculinity. Since the expression of their natural love and empathy violate such a restrictive code of masculinity and, indeed, are considered *feminine*, boys are prodded into a homophobic stance, with softness considered acting "gay," their worst fear; and angry emotions accompanied by "bullying" actions may be their only means to express their feelings and still protect their fragile sense of remaining a "real boy."

In our research, we found myths about boys, created and reinforced by the boy code, that become self-fulfilling prophecies:

- Violence is biologically inevitable for boys.
- Boys are less empathic than girls.
- The expression of caring and love by young males is "unnatural" or "feminine."

While there are biological differences between the genders, we know from modern neuroscience that the way we nurture our boys is an equal, perhaps more powerful predictor of behavior than most biologically based tendencies. So although boys may be more "rough and tumble" and need large spaces for play and movement, at birth, boy babies are also more emotive, connected, and responsive to their female caretakers than girl babies are; yet by 5th grade, they have 50 percent fewer words for emotions, except those connected with anger, hurt, and aggression. It is social pressure via the boys code, not biological destiny, that creates this gap.

In addition, boys are bathed in "boy culture"—much of it created by adult definitions of

masculinity—with action-oriented and violent media, toys, and games. Hiding behind that mask of masculine bravado, boys experience a range of problems *alone*: academic failure, drug abuse, struggles with friends, clinical depression, attention deficit disorder, suicide, and murder. It becomes very hard to hear boys' stifled, but genuine voices of pain and struggle, their yearning for connection. Indeed, we have found that the same kind of *shame* that silences many girls from expressing themselves at adolescence takes a toll on boys at a much earlier age.

Strategies for boys' classroom success

Some boys fail at school because teachers may not recognize that many boys have a different behavioral tempo and learning style, particularly in elementary and middle school. Educators must be open to a wider range of learning techniques and acceptable behavior to keep boys involved and learning, while we remain affirmative of girls' ways of knowing as well. It is important, however, for teachers and parents to guard against popular, oversimplified "neuroscience" by people unqualified to make "diagnoses," as well as those who would make positive changes for boys a *zero sum game* that pits the needs of boys against girls. We are perfectly capable of giving both the environments they need to grow and prosper at home and at school. We must also remember that a certain percentage of boys will have more classic "girl" style learning needs and vice versa. So we must be careful not to stereotype *all* boys' and girls' needs.

Consider the following strategies for working with boys:

Active learning. A majority of boys learn and connect better through action or activity. At school, that means boys need more freedom to move around in the classroom (especially in the early years), more recesses, no punishments that take away recess or physical activity, "gadgets" boys can manipulate while they attempt to listen, and the incorporation of video-based and computer learning, even during traditional instruction.

Literacy. The typical boy will learn to read and write approximately 12 months later than the typical girl. Many boys prefer nonfiction stories involving action (violence not required). Reading and writing materials that cater to boys' learning curve and tastes will help boys get excited by and stay engaged in learning.

Communicating with your boy

If your boy isn't very comfortable talking with you about his day or his feelings, use our practical research model of **Action Talk**:

- **Timed silence.** First, although we always helped boys to express a wide range of feelings, we recognized that the "boy code" often made it hard for them to express their painful emotions in words and overcome their hidden feelings of shame. Thus, we allowed for "timed silence," not pressuring them before they were ready and giving them some time to connect
- **Shame-free and safety zones.** We created safety or shame-free zones with adults where boys knew they were safe from teasing, shaming, blaming, and lectures. We

also monitored our own attitudes and prejudices.

- **Communicate by doing.** Since action was still their preference, we did not force words upon the boys. First, we engaged in an activity of their choosing, such as a game, a walk, or a car ride. Only then did we make a very brief statement, and waited patiently for their unique responses, resisting the temptation to lecture.
- **Share experiences.** In an attempt to diminish boys' loneliness and disconnection, we shared a few of our own experiences of boy-code pain. When such sharing comes from a father or father figure, a boy learns in the deepest sense that real men have pain and can share it. When a mother or maternal figure shares an experience, a boy learns that women respect boys and men who can be openly vulnerable. Importantly, she also communicates that for all our apparent gender differences, we really do come from ONE planet.
- **Express love.** We sometimes hesitate to tell boys and young men not only how much we admire their hard work, but also how much we really do love them. As they grow older, boys hear that word from the caring adults in their lives 10 times less than the girls we cherish. Ignore the friends and relatives with tough-love advice, or the principal who doesn't understand that boys need emotional support at school, or even your son's own fears about turning into a "sissy." You really can't express your genuine feelings of love for your son too much.

A soul-satisfying boyhood and manhood

The solution to boys' failures at school and disconnection at home not only will turn around a negative and dangerous trend for your son and our society, but it also will allow him to become the kind of boy who respects and cares about girls. In our research, we found that underneath their masks, many boys had a sense best described as "soulfulness." Certainly some were old enough to "action talk" about religion or faith. But this was something different. It showed a deep sense of respect and caring for self and others. In this less than perfect world, we all must help to make life better for all—and many boys want to engage in just such a task.

The Talmudic scholar Hillel, challenged to put the essence of what was to become Judeo-Christian philosophy into only three sentences, spoke of a balance we can apply to boys, girls, and parents. Hillel taught: *If I am not for myself, who will be for me? But if I am for myself alone, then what am I? If not now, when?* Healthy self-esteem, coupled with equal and compassionate regard for the emotional potential of both boys and girls **now** will set our children on the road to true and meaningful fulfillment.

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