Boys will be boys

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Are boys in trouble today? Their situation is desperate, according to a coalition of clinical and academic psychologists. The alarming news has been trumpeted in scholarly journals as well as in several bestselling books, most notably William Pollack’s *Real Boys* and Michael Gurian’s *The Wonder of Boys* and *A Fine Young Man*. Both Pollack, codirector of the Center for Men at McLean Hospital of Harvard Medical School, and Gurian, a Washington-based family therapist, want to persuade us that we are in the midst of a boy crisis of epidemic proportion.

According to Pollack and Gurian, boys today are plagued by depression, isolation, despair, and fragile self-esteem. Boys are performing poorly in school compared with their sisters, who are now thriving. Diagnoses of attention-deficit disorder in male children are escalating, as are disciplinary problems, school drop-out rates, psychiatric disorders, and suicide. In the words of Pollack, “Many feel a sadness and disconnection they cannot even name.” “Millions of our adolescent boys have
experienced a trauma of some kind,” asserts Gurian, and they haven’t got the emotional resources, or support from others, to cope with the pain. Our boys are “like soldiers traumatized in wartime,” and they are showing symptoms of “posttraumatic stress.” Boys have also become dangerously aggressive, committing more and more crimes. The number of violent criminals among our adolescent boys is “incredible.” And these males, in turn, pose a danger to the rest of us. Warns Gurian: “Trauma-causing adolescent males are everywhere.”

Pollack, Gurian, and other psychologists raising the “boy problem” are not concerned about a small group of disadvantaged youngsters who might truly be in danger. They are talking about all boys, even those who seem to be “normal.” We should not be fooled, says Gurian, by the “I’m fine” mask. When a boy says, “I’m fine,” he actually means “things are not really fine.” Boys who seem to have high self-esteem are, in fact, hiding a deep-seated lack of confidence. Many boys who seem to be doing well are actually living lives of quiet desperation. You or I may unwittingly be the parents of just such a boy.

**Girls aren’t O.K., boys aren’t O.K.**

What do alarmist psychologists blame for boys’ traumas and disorders? In the 1960s, everyone worried about the condition of girls. Back then, feminists argued that girls and women were victimized by the traditional sex roles depicted in “Father Knows Best” and many children’s books. Sex-role stereotypes were thought to encourage independence, assertiveness, and ambition in men while mandating dependence and docility in women. Moreover, society supposedly preferred male traits to female ones, viewing the latter as unhealthy. Feminists complained that these stereotypes were not only confining but also degrading to girls. Carol Gilligan saw sex-role stereotypes as most damaging in adolescence, when girls first came to understand that their “different voice,” which emphasized interconnection and harmony instead of individuality and competition, was not appreciated by a male-dominated world.

Feminists had a solution to this “girl problem”: Raise both little girls and boys to be androgynous. Androgyny, a grab bag of masculine and feminine traits, would liberate not only females but also males from the tyranny of sex roles. The an-
A drogynous person would exhibit a blend of desirable male and female characteristics—for instance, assertiveness and nurturing. In an androgynous world, females would be assertive and males sensitive, and everyone would be better off, for equality between the sexes could only be achieved when females acquired masculine traits and when males softened their rough edges.

Enter today's problem. Psychologists who now believe that our boys are in trouble attribute their current trauma to both the traditional sex-role stereotypes attacked by feminists and to the androgynous society proposed to rectify them.

For starters, they claim that our sons themselves are the victims of these stifling traditional sex stereotypes. According to the boy advocates, the traditional male-sex roles that feminists regarded as empowering and entitling men are actually harming males by forcing them to deny their inner selves. And to add insult to injury, society simultaneously endorses traditional male roles while insisting that males reject those stereotypes and embrace the new androgynous look. We want today's boys to become "new men," sensitive and vulnerable New Age guys who respect women and shun macho attitudes about power, responsibility, and sex. We send our boys to schools that encourage, at least for them, the passive and obedient style of girls and punish the more rambunctious ways of boys. But, at the same time, we still want our sons to be cool dudes—the sort of "real men" portrayed in traditional stereotypes.

**Cutting the apron strings**

Pollack, Gurian, and others also claim that by trying to turn little boys into cool dudes, we insist that they become men far too soon. Boys, they say, are separated from their mothers long before they are ready. We fail to give them the emotional support that they need—which we are willing and eager to provide for our daughters. We do not encourage boys to express their feelings, and we do not provide them with the necessary support for emotional growth. Gilligan, in particular, claims that just as we have been stifling female development, beginning at adolescence, so we are undermining the emotional development of four- and five-year-old boys by insisting
that they let go of the apron strings at too tender an age. Pollack issues the same warning. Even as adults, he warns, males “still unconsciously long for connection with the mother and the nurturing ‘holding’ environment she once provided.”

Gurian’s claim is more extreme. He warns that boys are, by nature, more fragile than girls and less able to withstand a hostile world. Evolved over the millennia to be hunters, not lovers or nurturers, males are less capable of emotion and of forming deep personal relationships without persistent tutoring. We should not be lulled into the illusion that boys have it made or, as feminists have claimed, that this culture is run by, and made for, males. Men who, as adults, are preoccupied with the pursuit of money, status, or some other real or illusory power, are only trying to fill the empty void inside themselves that is the result of our cruel demands that a little boy should just shape up and “take it like a man.”

**Just the facts**

If our boys are in a terrible state, this is indeed news that we must hear. But are they really in dire straits? Are we witnessing an emotional and behavioral epidemic among young males? The evidence suggests, not surprisingly, that some boys are in trouble. But the proportion of boys actually suffering from a recognized disorder is small. And boys do not have a monopoly on growing pains. Girls are more likely than boys to display several of the problems cited by the boy advocates, as well as others.

Is it primarily male children who are suffering from low self-esteem? In fact, both males and females experience fluctuations in self-esteem according to questionnaires, interviews, and children’s spontaneous conversation with peers. Children’s self-esteem is high in kindergarten, then falls during the first few years of primary school, after which it recovers. Another dip in self-esteem occurs in seventh and eighth grades, when puberty, coupled with a burst of cognitive development, causes young teen-agers to become especially sensitive to how they measure up against their peers and how they are perceived by people generally. These dips in self-esteem are only temporary and are part of growing up.

Sex differences in self-esteem have been reported. But it is
males who tend to have slightly higher self-esteem than females. Boys and girls also evaluate themselves differently. For instance, boys are more confident in mathematics and sports while girls rate themselves as more competent in reading and music. Men's self-esteem usually depends upon whether they believe they have achieved distinction in their lives, whereas women's self-esteem is more closely related to fulfillment in their personal relationships.

Another way of gauging children's self-esteem is to determine whether a child is anxious about how he compares with others. The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders (DSM-IV) describes a group of children who worry chronically about how others evaluate them in academic, athletic, and social activities. Approximately 2 percent to 3 percent of children exhibit this kind of anxiety, and the syndrome is more common in girls. Thus there is no evidence that boys or men suffer from low self-esteem en masse. If there is a self-esteem problem, it is mainly found among girls, as many feminists have pointed out.

Do today's boys undergo emotional upheaval because their mothers distance themselves from their sons too soon? According to the DSM-IV, "separation anxiety"—in which a child shows signs of distress at the parents' departure—is experienced by only 1 percent to 4 percent of children. Such youngsters typically come from close-knit, warm families that encourage dependency. So there is no epidemic of separation anxiety brought on by heartless, cold mothers.

Nor are hordes of young boys sleepwalking through life in a depressed state. According to the DSM-IV, only 2 percent of boys show signs of depression. There is no pattern of sex difference in rates of depression in children. So, again, if we have a boy problem, then we have a girl problem too. Levels of depression do increase considerably in adolescence: 3 percent to 8 percent of adolescents suffer from clinical depression. But these are mostly girls.

Boys are more likely than girls to be diagnosed with a variety of behavioral problems. For instance, the DSM-IV reports that from 2 percent to 16 percent of children consistently "act out"—that is, obstinately oppose authority figures. This behavioral problem surfaces at eight years of age and is
more prevalent in males before puberty. In adolescence, the rates are equal for boys and girls. But boys are more confrontational than girls, and boys persistently display the symptoms. Similarly, 6 percent to 16 percent of boys, and 2 percent to 9 percent of girls, under the age of 18, are diagnosed with "conduct disorder." Such behavior includes fighting, stealing, vandalism, and general aggression.

Furthermore, in adolescence, boys are responsible for more delinquent behavior than are girls. It is also a truism that regardless of culture, time, or species, males are more aggressive than females. Males are predominantly responsible for criminal activity, no matter where one looks. Thus aggression in males is not a new development; rather, it is typical of males. If boys are in trouble because they are aggressive, then they have always been, by definition, in trouble.

It is also true that boys are four to five times more likely to die following a suicide attempt; but 80 percent to 90 percent of attempts are made by girls. The different success rates result from the different methods that are employed by boys and girls who try to commit suicide. Boys are more likely to use guns while girls take overdoses or employ other less efficient methods. In a study by psychologist Peter Lewinsohn, 10 percent of adolescent girls and 4 percent of boys reported making a suicide attempt. These are, of course, horrifying figures. But once again, it is clear that suicide, like so many other behavioral problems among youth, is not peculiar to males alone.

What should we make of these statistics? Each of the problems described by the boy advocates is exhibited by some boys. But so do girls display these behaviors, and often in equal or greater numbers. And girls have troubles of their own, as reflected in higher rates of eating disorders that rarely turn up in boys, higher rates of depression and attempted suicide, lagging performance in math and science in school, and greater willingness to give up in the face of failure. The moral: Boys and girls face somewhat different life challenges.

The insignificance of gender

There is no evidence of an emotional or behavioral epidemic for either sex. Only a small minority of boys and girls is
afflicted by the kinds of problems described by the boy advocates. Where reliable statistics are available, the proportion of children displaying such behavioral and emotional difficulties typically ranges from 1 percent to 4 percent. The exceptions during childhood are various kinds of aggressive behavior in boys. The numbers increase for adolescents, although even here, only a small minority of young people is involved. Nor is it obvious that adolescent behavioral and emotional disruptions are a contemporary anomaly. Anna Freud observed over 50 years ago that adolescents behave in ways that, if exhibited by adults, would be classified as pathological.

Indeed, the dire warnings of the boy advocates are powerfully contradicted by Ed Diener of the University of Illinois, who finds that most people, males and females, are actually pretty happy with their lives. Further, Diener concludes that gender differences account for only 1 percent of the variation in people’s sense of well-being. These findings remain consistent throughout the world. Eighty percent of men and women representing 55 nations say they are at least fairly satisfied with their lives. In North America, 90 percent of men and women view themselves as “pretty happy.” Neither does age influence happiness. Fifteen-year-olds, the youngest subjects in the study, are as likely to be happy as 65-year-olds, or anyone in between. If we are witnessing an epidemic of boy trouble, it is not showing up in the subjective experience of adolescent and adult males.

The fact that, regardless of age, sex, nationality, ethnicity, or social status, most people are satisfied with their lives is a testimonial to human resilience. To proclaim that boys are too fragile to face, and triumph over, such challenges as heading off to kindergarten is suspect. But if we buy into the fantasy that boys are china dolls, we risk eventually making them into just that.

In the final analysis, the failure of gender to account for happiness should not surprise us. We make such a fuss about the differences between males and females that we forget an important fact: Gender accounts for between 2 percent and 5 percent of the differences between people with regard to virtually every emotional, behavioral, and cognitive trait. Even with respect to aggression—where the most robust sex differ-
ences are reported—a person’s gender is responsible for only 5 percent of the difference. This means that general human variation is usually the result of such factors as genetic heritage, temperament, child-rearing experience, personal values, attitudes toward life, and so forth and so on. Sex, in the final tally, just doesn’t count for much.

Yet, even if there is no epidemic of boy trouble, we should not ignore boy—or girl—problems or endorse antisocial or destructive behavior in males simply because, as the adage would have it, “boys will be boys.” But are the boy advocates right? Are traditional sex roles, emotional neglect by mothers, and psychic frailty hurting at least some of our boys?

**Sex-role stereotypes**

For both boy advocates and feminists worried about the state of our girls, sex-role stereotypes have been a perennial target. Both believe that traditional sex roles are stifling. Feminists lobbied for androgyny as the solution and tried to persuade parents to raise their sons and daughters in a gender-neutral manner, encouraging a child to adopt the best traits from both the traditional male and female stereotypes.

The evidence, however, does not support these suppositions regarding the relation between sex roles and personal well-being. It is traditionally masculine traits, such as independence, mastery, task accomplishment, and assertiveness, and not the feminine traits of nurturing, cooperation, emotional openness, and sensitivity to others’ needs, that predict good mental health. To the degree that androgynous people are behaviorally well adjusted, this appears to be because of the masculine component of the androgynous profile. So androgyny would not seem to be the solution to boys’ (or girls’) troubles.

What is more, both males and females constantly display both masculine and feminine traits in the real world. Each sex calls on the trait appropriate to the particular situation. That is why sex is so unimportant in accounting for the differences that we observe among people. Males can be cool dudes and sensitive New Agers, and so can females. There is no reason to think that we can effectively treat boys in trouble by purging them of traditional masculine traits.
Mamma’s boy?

Boy advocates also claim that where we find boys in trouble, at least some of the blame rests with the way in which mothers raise their sons. They contend that parents treat their male and female children differently, and that it is this inconsistency that causes differences in the behavior of boys and girls. It is true that when adults do not know a particular infant or child, they tend to respond to the youngster on the basis of sex. This makes good sense. Adults are relying on their knowledge about what boys and girls are typically like in the absence of information about the particular child they encounter. But two major reviews summarizing the results of 195 studies found little evidence in support of the idea that boys and girls are treated differently by their parents. Whatever the category—amount of interaction between parent and child, degree of warmth and nurturing directed toward the child, encouragement given in regard to achievement or dependency, level of disciplinary strictures, and clarity of communication with the child—boys and girls are treated pretty much alike. The demands of caring for infants and young children are such that this should surprise us.

Are mothers somehow stifling the emotional growth of their sons, as Pollack, Gurian, and Gilligan claim? The evidence indicates otherwise. For instance, mothers respond differently to expressions of emotion in their sons and daughters. But the difference seems to indicate that mothers are more sensitive to the feelings of their sons. In particular, mothers respond reciprocally to their sons’ emotional expressions. For instance, if her son is smiling, the mother usually smiles in response. Mothers often do the opposite with their daughters. Mothers also respond reciprocally to their sons’ expressions of anger while frequently ignoring similar expressions in their daughters. If anything, such responsiveness should encourage emotional expressiveness in males. Nevertheless, by adulthood, males are less expressive than females.

There is reason to believe that we are witnessing here an inborn difference between males and females which persists regardless of parental behavior. In cases where the mother treats her children differently, it is often in response to sex-based differences between children. For example, as early as
six months of age, girls are already much more responsive to their mothers than boys, in spite of the fact that nothing in the mother's behavior seems to evoke such a difference. It is evidence of this sort that Gurian relies upon to support his claim that males are emotionally disadvantaged at birth. This is a subjective judgment, to say the least. Males and females tend to express emotions differently. It is just as easy to claim that females are emotionally disadvantaged because they are too expressive as it is to claim that males have emotional problems because they are less expressive. What we need is a standard for judging the desirability of traits such as emotional expressiveness. The standard most relevant for this debate is whether particular traits interfere with the individual's health and happiness. And we know that differences in sex have virtually no effect on a person's happiness and sense of well-being. So the theory that the emotional reserve of males is an unhealthy trait has no concrete support.

Mothers do not neglect their sons' emotions. Rather, parents tailor their behavior to the particular traits of the individual child with whom they are interacting. Where we do find differences in treatment by mothers, these differences, if anything, encourage emotional expressiveness in boys, not girls. Boys and girls, nevertheless, appear to respond differently to the people around them. Why these differences lead the boy advocates to assert that boys are emotionally disadvantaged is a mystery.

**Bad boys**

If there is any truth to the claim that our boys are in trouble, it is owing to their aggressive tendencies. Boys who seriously misbehave in school frequently commit crimes out of school. Aggressive behavior is also a precursor and predictor of school drop-out rates, antisocial behavior, delinquency and criminality, and suicides. So, while there is no evidence of an aggression epidemic in today's boys, it is clearly in the interest of boys themselves, and of the rest of us who must deal with them, to address destructive aggression early.

No one disputes that there is a male-female disparity in levels of aggression. This difference remains constant across time, cultures, and species. Evolutionary psychologists trace
the difference to the male role of hunter and protector. We see this difference acted out in the universal fondness that boys, but not girls, have for rough-and-tumble play. Adults often try to discourage this kind of play, but boys nevertheless persist in it when not being monitored.

While substantial male-female differences exist in levels of activity and aggression, it is also true that certain kinds of family environments can exaggerate aggressive behavior in boys. Gerald R. Patterson of the Oregon Social Learning Center has studied disruptive aggression in boys for four decades and finds that aggressive boys tend to come from a certain kind of family environment. Parents of aggressive boys tend not to take an interest in their sons’ friends and do not keep track of their activities. Aggressive boys tend to have parents who use halfhearted and inept disciplinary techniques. They threaten, scold, and nag without backing up their threats with effective action. Families of aggressive boys employ confrontation instead of negotiation to resolve conflicts. As a result of this disciplinary approach, aggressive boys tend to interpret the intentions of others as malicious, when in fact they are not.

Once a pattern of aggression is established, it often leads to other problems. Parenting practices per se are not the best predictor of adolescent and adult problems, such as delinquency, criminality, and drop-out rates. Rather, it is the level of childhood aggression that predicts these outcomes. Early styles of parenting can reinforce a pattern of aggression in childhood which, in turn, encourages later forms of destructive behavior.

Parents of aggressive boys may practice their particular style of child rearing, in part, because their sons are temperamentally difficult. Patterson notes that aggressive boys tend to be coercive, obstinate, less responsive to positive reinforcement, and more impulsive, and there is evidence that these traits precede any child-rearing techniques employed by adults. Thus it may be that parents, faced with problematic children, become ineffective socializers. It is possible to improve the behavior of such children, by establishing firm, rule-oriented parental control. When parents begin to consciously adopt such tactics, confrontations among family members may decrease, and more effective conflict resolution and problem-solving prac-
Practices become possible. Relations between parents and children then can become more affectionate.

Interestingly, Patterson finds that a parental emphasis on rule following works for boys but not for girls. Boys appear to need structure more than girls. Thus discipline and monitoring help to minimize disruptive aggression in males but not females. Girls, on the other hand, are more affected than boys by a lack of positive reinforcement, especially from their mothers. To the extent, then, that parents lay down the law for boys more than for girls, it's a good thing.

It would also be a good thing if we took more seriously the need boys have for a father. Male children are typically less compliant than their sisters, and women have trouble controlling them. Hence the familiar refrain of mothers everywhere: "Wait 'til your father gets home." Across cultures, in families where fathers are absent, boys are more likely to display aggressive, antisocial behaviors. It is principally men, not women, who moderate the aggressive impulses of boys. Thus feminists who argue that there are no real male-female differences, and who encourage women to raise children without males in the house, are courting disaster. The probable result is that the most disruptive of sex-linked male traits, destructive aggression, is exacerbated.

**Nature vs. nurture**

There is a driving ideology behind the boy advocate's movement. It is that children can be molded, for good or evil, by the people and world around them. So, if we only modify those nasty sex-role stereotypes, or persuade parents to treat their children in a particular way, we can alter the emotional and behavioral repertoire of boys in desirable ways. Parenting styles do influence children in important ways. But the notion that children can be trained to display this or that trait is news to most developmental psychologists and, I would bet, to most parents. Children do not passively suck up whatever the world has to offer, blindly adopting any behavior that is encouraged by parents or teachers. Rather, they respond uniquely to the same outside stimuli, filtering the input from their surroundings in sex-linked ways.

What is more, parents do not try to encourage sex-linked
behavior to the degree that people often assume. Indeed, on occasion, we find that parents try to pressure children to behave in one way, but the children persist in acting in the exact opposite fashion. For instance, adults in America spend more effort punishing aggression in boys than in girls, but males remain the more aggressive sex.

The fact is that, contrary to the assumption of the boy advocates, sex differences appear to be a fact of life. They persist over time and across cultures. It is always possible that all cultures are sexist, and in precisely the same way. But to many observers of human behavior, this cross-cultural uniformity is taken to say something about human nature. Furthermore, the striking similarity between the sex-linked behavior of humans and other primates is prima facie evidence that human sex differences cannot be a function of culture alone.

The maxim that "boys will be boys" reflects this reality. Extreme sex-linked behavioral problems, such as disruptive aggression in males, can cause trouble, and clearly there is wisdom in wishing to clamp down on such behavioral abnormalities. But there is only so much that parents and others can do to influence the behavior of children. The boy advocates, who are disturbed by the differences between males and females, want to persuade us that normal male traits are personality disorders. This is clearly wrong. We should acknowledge that the sexes are different and work with what nature has provided.

Raising Hamlet and Ophelia

Let me end on a personal note. As a mother of a teen-age son, and as a professor who has been teaching, and conducting research in, developmental psychology for over 20 years, I am appalled by the message being spread by the boy advocates. The cause that they are promoting seems to me to be motivated by an unholy alliance of psycho-babble, victim advocacy, and an insidious mutation of recovered-memory propaganda. Our boys are in trouble, say the advocates, even if we don't realize it. And if our boys don't realize what terrible shape they're in, well, they're just in denial!

I am not arguing that every boy or girl is a happy child. Clearly, we should help particular children who are having a
hard time. But here is why the boy advocates worry me. They are in danger of causing good parents of healthy boys to have nagging doubts about their own competence and about the well-being of their sons. And they are in danger of seducing us into interpreting sex differences as personal deficiencies. In a twisted kind of way, the boy advocates have taken us full circle in the competition between the sexes for victim status. Once upon a time, as feminists say, society viewed the feminine traits of nurturing, dependence, compliance, and emotional expressiveness as not only different from but inferior to masculine traits. Now it is the boys who are disadvantaged. When we find differences between males and females in how they meet life’s opportunities and challenges, why can’t we simply accept them as differences and make the necessary accommodations?

The boy advocates scare me for a final reason. Adults who buy into the notion that children, of either sex, are fragile will be more likely to deprive youngsters of the chance to face and overcome life’s challenges. Clearly, we should not throw children out into the cold, cruel world to sink or swim. Emotional support—what developmental psychologists like to call “warmth”—matters. But children who never meet a challenge will never feel the satisfaction of accomplishment. Maybe the hole that Gurian finds inside of boys is the result of our depriving them of the opportunity to overcome the problems that confront them. Children who never get to do anything hard are likely to grow into adults who cannot manage life’s tougher moments, which call for emotional strength and discipline. No wonder we have become a society of victims!

Are children capable of facing challenges and living to tell the tale? Of course they are. Across time and place, youngsters have triumphed in the face of hardships that are difficult for most of us to imagine today. Children have lived through war; they have survived abject poverty; they have worked 18 hour days at the age of five or six in the foulest conditions. Am I advocating that we build more of this kind of experience into the lives of our children today? No. But I do think that it is instructive to remind ourselves of what children have endured. Sending an apprehensive child off to kindergarten is rather innocuous by comparison.
My advice to the boy advocates is to read less Freud and more history. They would gain more respect for children’s resiliency. They might even learn to appreciate the difference between raising boys and raising girls.