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The Myth About Boys

By David Von Drehle

My son was born nearly 10 years ago, and I remember telling him that morning that he was one lucky baby. Forget Dr. Spock or Dr. Brazelton--I took my cue from Dr. Pangloss. If this was not the best of all possible worlds, it was certainly the best time and best place to be starting out healthy and free in a land of vast possibilities. In the months and years that followed, however, there came a steady stream of books and essays warning that I had missed something ominous: our little guy had entered a soul-crushing world of anti-boy influences.

There was, for example, Harvard psychologist William Pollack's Real Boys (1998), which asserted that contemporary boys are "scared and disconnected," "severely lagging" behind girls in both achievement and self-confidence. The following year, journalist Susan Faludi argued in Stiffed that the cold calculus of global economics was emasculating American men. In 2000 philosopher Christina Hoff Sommers blamed off-the-rails feminism for sparking The War Against Boys, and two years later writer Elizabeth Gilbert found The Last American Man living in a teepee in the Appalachian Mountains. By the time our boy was headed to third grade, magazine editors were grinding out cover headlines like BOY TROUBLE and THE BOY CRISIS, and I was getting worried. The voyage to manhood had come to seem as perilous and flummoxing as the future of Iraq.

It's enough to make people long for the good old days. Sure enough, one of the hot books of the summer is a zestfully nostalgic celebration of boyhood past. The Dangerous Book for Boys, by brothers Hal and Conn Iggulden, flits from fossils to tree houses, from secret codes to go-carts, from the Battle of Gettysburg to the last voyage of Robert Falcon Scott. A sensation last year in Britain, the book has been at or near the top of the New York Times best-seller list since late spring.

The Dangerous Book, bound in an Edwardian red cover with marbled endpapers, has many of the timeless qualities of an ideal young man: curiosity, bravery and respectfulness; just enough rogue to leaven the stoic; an appetite for any challenge, from hunting small game to mastering the rules of grammar. It celebrates trial and error, vindicates the noble failure. Rudyard Kipling would have loved it.

These charms alone can't explain the popularity of an amalgam of coin tricks, constellations and homemade magnets, however. Clearly, The Dangerous Book has tapped into a larger anxiety about how we're raising young men. This is a subject worth digging into, because it reflects not just on our sons but also on their sisters, on the kind of world these kids might make together--and on the adults who love them, however imperfect we prove to be. With fresh eyes on fresh facts, we might find that an upbeat message to a newborn boy is not so misguided after all.

THE MYTH OF THE BOY CRISIS

"I don't think anyone will deny that girls are academically superior as a group. Girls are more academically powerful. They make the grades, they run the student activities, they are the valedictorians."

Christina Hoff Sommers, a fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, was explaining how she came to worry deeply about boys. In the book-lined parlor of her suburban Washington home, she ticked through a familiar but disturbing indictment: More boys than girls are in special-education classes. More boys than girls are prescribed mood-managing drugs. This suggests to her (and others) that today's schools are built for girls, and boys are becoming misfits. As a result, more boys than girls drop out of high school. Boys don't read as well as girls. And America's prisons are packed with boys and former boys.

Meanwhile, fewer boys than girls take the SAT. Fewer boys than girls apply to college. Fewer boys than girls, in annual surveys of college freshmen, express a passion for learning. And fewer boys than girls are earning college degrees. Even sperm counts are falling. "It's true at every level of society" that boys are stumbling behind, Sommers continued.

Observers of the boy crisis contend that families, schools and popular culture are failing our boys, leaving them restless bundles of anxiety--misfits in the classroom and video-game junkies at home. They suffer from an epidemic of "anomie," as Harvard psychologist William Pollack told me, adrift in a world of change without the help they need to find their way. Even in the youngest grades, test-oriented teachers focus energy on conventional exercises in reading, writing and other seatwork, areas in which girls tend to excel. At the same time, schools are cutting science labs, physical education and recess, where the experiential learning styles of boys come into play. No wonder, the theory goes, our boys get jittery, grow disruptive and eventually tune out. "A boy will get a reputation as hell on wheels that follows him from one teacher to the next, and soon they're coming down on him even before he screws up. So he learns to hate school," says Mike Miller, an elementary school teacher in North Carolina. Miller's principal has ordered every faculty member to read a book this summer titled Hear Our Cry: Boys in Crisis.

In short, society treats "boyhood as toxic, as a pathology," says Sommers--who may have been guilty of this herself when she wrote several years ago that the Columbine killers were emblematic of turn-of-the-century boyhood. But she's right that it's not girls who are shooting up their classrooms--and boys are at least five times

as likely as girls to die by suicide.

There are statistics to back up every point in that sad litany, but I also found people eager to flay nearly every statistic. For instance: Is it bad that more boys are in special education, or should we be pleased that they are getting extra help from specially trained teachers? And haven't boys always tended to be more restless than girls under the discipline of high school and more likely to wind up in jail? A growing congregation of writers have begun to argue that the trouble with boys is mostly a myth. Sara Mead is one; she was until recently a senior policy analyst at Education Sector, a Washington think tank largely funded by the Gates Foundation. Intrigued by the wave of books and articles about failing boys, Mead crunched some numbers, focusing narrowly on the question of school performance. The former Clinton Administration official concluded that "with a few exceptions, American boys are scoring higher and achieving more than they ever have before."

In particular, Mead decided that boys from middle- and upper-income families--especially white families--are doing just fine. "The biggest issue is not a gender gap. It is these gaps for minority and disadvantaged boys," she told me recently in the think tank's conference room. Boys overall are holding their own or even improving on standardized tests, she said; they're just not improving as quickly as girls. And their total numbers in college are rising, albeit not as sharply as the numbers of girls. To Mead, a good-news story about the achievements of girls and young women has been turned into a bad-news story about laggard boys and young men.

The more I probed, the more I realized that the subject of boys is a bog of sociology in which a clever researcher, given a little time, can unearth evidence to support almost any point of view. I also came to the sad realization that this field, like so many others, has been infiltrated by our left-right political noise machine. Our boys have become cannon fodder in the unresolved culture wars waged by their parents and grandparents. On one side, concern for boys is waved off as a mere "backlash against the women's movement," as two writers declared dismissively in the Washington Post last year. The opposing side views any divergence from the crisis theme as male-bashing feminism.

Then I came across a new report from the Federal Government: Uncle Sam's annual attempt to paint a broad statistical portrait of the nation's young people. In long rows of little numbers printed on page after page of tables, this report told a different story from that of either the woe bearers or the myth busters.

WHAT THE NUMBERS SAY

"America's Children: Key National Indicators of Well-Being, 2007" is the work of many agencies, from the Department of Justice to the Department of Education to the Bureau of the Census and beyond. It gathers a trove of data, and as I made my way through it, I concluded that there's real substance to the boy crisis, and there have been good-faith reasons for sounding an alarm.

Statistics collected over two decades show an alarming decline in the performance of America's boys--in some respects, a virtual free fall. Boys were doing poorly in school, abusing drugs, committing violent crimes and

engaging in promiscuous sex. Young males lost ground by many behavioral indicators at some point in the 1980s and '90s: sharp plunges on some scales, long erosions on others. I was forced to confront a fact that I had secretly known all along: that teens of 30 years ago--my generation--were the leading edge of an epidemic of thugs, dolts and cads.

No wonder so many writers began calling for change in the late 1990s. Reliable social-science data often lag a couple of years behind the calendar; it takes time to gather and compile a nation's worth of numbers. Stories about social trends that you read today may be describing the reality of 2004 or 2005. The groundbreaking boy books were a response to statistics portraying the worst of a physical, mental and moral health crisis.

There's more to the story, however. That downward slide has leveled off--and in many cases, turned around. Boys today look pretty good compared with their dads and older cousins. By some measures, our boys are doing better than ever.

The juvenile crime rate in 2005 (the most recent year cited in the report) was down by two-thirds from its peak in 1993. Other Justice Department statistics show that the population of juvenile males in prison is only half of its historic high. The number of high school senior boys using illegal drugs has fallen by almost half compared with the number in 1980. And the percentage of high school boys drinking heavily is now the lowest on record. When I was in high school, more than half of all senior boys told researchers they had downed five or more drinks in a row within the previous two weeks--a number that I have no trouble believing. By last year, that figure was fewer than 3 in 10.

Today's girls are also doing well by these measures, but their successes in no way diminish the progress of the boys. In fact, together our kids are reversing one of the direst problems of the previous generation: the teen-pregnancy epidemic. According to the new report, fewer than half of all high school boys and girls in 2005 were sexually active. For the boys, that's a decrease of 10 percentage points from the early 1990s. Boys who are having sex report that they are more responsible about it: 7 in 10 are using condoms, compared with about half in 1993. As a result, teen pregnancy and abortion rates are now at their lowest recorded levels.

What about school? Boys in the fourth, eighth and 12th grades all score better--though not dramatically better--on math tests than did the comparable boys of 1990. Reading, however, is a problem. The standardized NAEP test, known as the nation's report card, indicates that by the senior year of high school, boys have fallen nearly 20 points behind their female peers. That's bad, not because girls are ahead but because too many boys are leaving school functionally illiterate. Pollack told me of one study that found even the sons of college-educated parents had a 1 in 4 chance of leaving school without becoming proficient readers. In an economy increasingly geared toward processing information, an inability to read becomes an inability to earn. "You have to be literate in today's world," says Sommers. "We're not going to get away with not teaching boys to read."

Even here, though, there may be grounds for a hopeful outlook. Boys at the fourth- and eighth-grade levels are showing modest improvement in reading and now trail their female classmates by slightly smaller margins than

before. If that's a sign of improved teaching and parental focus on reading, then we ought to expect gains in the higher grades soon.

"I think it would be an error not to be optimistic," says Michael Gurian, author of several books about raising boys. "But at the same time there is reason to worry." He sketches the sinking trajectory of undereducated males as blue-collar jobs move to low-wage countries. Though definitive data on the dropout rate are as elusive as Bigfoot, there's little question that a worrisome gap is opening between boys who finish high school and those who don't. Boys with diplomas are now far more likely to go immediately to college than the boys of my era were. Solution: we need more boys with diplomas.

And that can be done. A generation of enlightened teaching and robust encouragement has awakened American girls to the need for higher education. Women now outnumber men in college by a ratio of 4 to 3, and admissions officers at liberal-arts colleges are struggling to find enough males to keep their classes close to gender parity. "We've done wonderfully with girls. Now let's do the same for boys," says Gurian. One way to start might be to gear advanced training to male-dominated occupations--already the case in many female-oriented fields. Schoolteachers and librarians (roughly 70% female) must go to college, but firefighters and police officers (pushing 90% male)? Not necessarily. Top executive secretaries are college educated; top carpenters may not be.

About the only scale on which today's boys are faring dramatically worse than the boys of my era is the bathroom scale. When I was in high school in the late 1970s, roughly 1 boy in 20 was obese; today 1 boy in 5 is.

My favorite statistic seemed to sum up all the others: fewer boys today are deadbeats. The percentage of young men between 16 and 19 who neither work nor attend school has fallen by about a quarter since 1984. The greatest gains in this category have been made by black youths. In 1984, 1 out of 3 young black men ages 18 and 19 were neither in school nor working. That proportion has been cut almost in half, to fewer than 1 in 5.

Today's boys may wear their pants too damned baggy and go around with iPod buds in their ears. They know everything about Xbox 360 and nothing about paper routes. I doubt that they slog to school through deep snow as I recall doing back before the globe warmed up. But judging from the numbers, they are pulling themselves up from the handbasket to hell.

SO WHERE DID WE GO RIGHT?

Unfortunately, it's one thing to observe human behavior--count the crime reports and the teen births and the diplomas awarded and so on--but quite another to explain it. Popular science and the best-seller lists skip eagerly from one theory to the next, lingering with delight on the most provocative if not always the most plausible. A recent paper suggested that falling crime rates can be explained almost entirely by reduced lead exposure in childhood. Which was odd, because last year economist Steven Levitt's best seller Freakonomics chalked up the improvement to legalized abortion, which, he theorized, cut the number of unwanted children

prone to wind up as criminals.

Or take the teen-pregnancy numbers. It's not enough to credit the virtues of responsibility and better sex education. Something racier is desired. According to some writers, fewer teens are getting pregnant because they've all switched to oral sex. Or maybe the phenomenon is due to a still unexplained decline in sperm counts.

But before we go dizzy on cleverness, let's pull out Occam's razor and consider a simple possibility: maybe our boys are doing better because we're paying them more attention. We're providing for them better; the proportion of children living in poverty is down roughly 2% from a spike in 1993. And we're giving them more time. Parents--both fathers and mothers--are reordering their priorities to focus on caring for their kids. Several studies confirm this. Sociologists at the University of Michigan have tracked a sharp increase in the amount of time men spend with their children since the 1970s. Another long-range survey, reported by University of Maryland researchers, has asked parents since the 1960s to keep detailed diaries of their daily activities. In 1965 child-focused care occupied about 13 hours per week, the vast majority of it done by moms. By 1985 that had dropped to 11 hours per week as moms entered the workforce. The 2005 study found parents spending 20 hours a week focused on their kids--by far the highest number in the history of the survey. Both moms and dads had dramatically shifted their energies toward their kids.

Are there risks of overparenting boys? Sure. And here's where the success of The Dangerous Book gets interesting, because it suggests that as parents spend more time with their sons, we may be reconnecting with the fact that the differences between boys and girls need not be threatening and that not all the lore of the past about how to raise boys was wrong.

Gregory Hodge is a good example of this return to tradition. He is principal at the Frederick Douglass Academy, a public school in Harlem. His school was one of three recently honored by the Schott Foundation for excellence in educating black male students--the most troubled cohort but also the group making the greatest progress in many areas. Hodge told me that when he arrived at the combination middle school and high school 11 years ago, the academy was already a great success--but the student body was 80% female. The new principal made it his business to recruit more boys. Today, of the academy's 1,450 mostly poor and minority students, half are male. Yet the dropout rate remains virtually zero, and this year (like most years) every member of the senior class graduated and was college-bound. Every one.

Hodge says the secret is to reach boys before they get into trouble--he uses the academy's basketball facilities to lure youngsters still in grade school. Once you have their attention, you must show them a world of possibilities that you genuinely believe they can achieve. "Young people are looking for validation," he says. "You are important. You will be successful. We don't talk about 'if' you go to college. Around here it's 'when' you go to college."

Frederick Douglass Academy students adhere to a strict dress code and accept rigid discipline. Many of them

virtually live at the school, even on Saturdays, doing hours of homework, attending required tutorials if they lag behind, participating in dozens of sports and activities, from basketball to lacrosse and ballet to botany. "Everything a private school would offer a rich kid," Hodge explains. But within this highly structured setting, the school recognizes that many boys need room to learn in their own way. "Some of the kids are hardheaded," Hodge says in a gravelly Bronx roar. "That's what makes a boy. They've gotta experiment, learn the hard way that his head won't break concrete. Male students tend to want to find things out for themselves--so why don't you use that as a teacher?

"I once had about 15 boys very close to dropping out," the principal continues. "They weren't into sports. I had to find something for them to get into. Finally I made a recording studio for the little meatheads, and they ran with that. All of them made it through to graduation. I'll try anything--dance, chess, hydroponics, robotics--anything to let these kids know that this is a world they can fit into, where they can be successful."

THE BASICS OF BOYHOOD

Nothing Hodge says is remotely ground-breaking or experimental--and that's precisely the point. Only in recent decades have societies seriously begun to unlock the full potential of girls, but the cultivation of boys has been an obsession for thousands of years. "How shall we find a gentle nature which also has a great spirit?" Socrates asked some 2,500 years ago--essentially the same question parents ask today.

Ours is far from the first society to fear for its sons. Leo Braudy of the University of Southern California, in his 2003 book From Chivalry to Terrorism, noted recurring waves of anxiety. Europeans of the 18th century imagined that free trade and the death of feudalism would spell the end of honor and chivalry. Then, with the dawn of the Industrial Age, writers like John Stuart Mill worried that progress itself--with its speed and stress and short attention spans--would cause a sort of "moral effeminacy" and "inaptitude for every kind of struggle." By the end of the 19th century, a manhood malaise permeated the entire Western world: in France it inspired Pierre de Coubertin to create the Olympic movement; in Britain it moved Robert Baden-Powell to found the Boy Scouts; in the U.S. it fueled a passion for the new sport of football and helped make a hero of rough-riding Theodore Roosevelt.

All these reforms shared a common impulse to return to the basics of boyhood--quests, competitions, tribal brotherhoods and self-discovery. There was a recognition that the keys to building a successful boy have remained remarkably consistent, whether a tribal chieftain is preparing a young warrior or a knight is training a squire or a craftsman is guiding an apprentice--or Gregory Hodge is teaching his students. Boys need mentors and structure but also some freedom to experiment. They need a group to belong to and an opponent to confront. As Gurian put it in The Wonder of Boys, they must "compete and perform well to feel worthy."

The success of The Dangerous Book for Boys is one sign of a society getting in touch with these venerable truths. Nothing in the book suggests that boys are better than girls, nor does the book license destructive aggression. But it does exude the confidence of ages past that boys are to be treasured, not cured. "Is it old-

fashioned?" the authors ask themselves about their book. "Well, that depends. Men and boys today are the same as they always were ... You want to be self-sufficient and find your way by the stars."

A TRIP TO BOY HEAVEN

If The Dangerous Book were a place, it would look like the Falling Creek Camp for Boys in North Carolina--a rustic paradise complete with a rifle range, nearby mountains to climb and a lake complete with swimming dock and rope swing. The choice of activities at the camp is dizzying, from soccer to blacksmithing, from kayaking to watercolors, but no pastime is more popular than building forts of fallen tree limbs and poking at turtles in the creek. Leave your cell phones, laptops and iPods at home.

There I met Margaret Anderson, a pediatric nurse from Nashville and a member of the faculty at Vanderbilt University. She works in the infirmary while her 11-year-old son Gage discovers the woods on multi-day pack trips. "I call this place Boy Heaven," she says.

Falling Creek subscribes to a philosophy of "structured freedom," which is essentially the same philosophy paying dividends among boys at the opposite end of the economic ladder at the Frederick Douglass Academy. It works across the board, says Anderson, and she wishes more of the boys she sees in her busy Nashville practice lived lives of structured freedom too.

"Whether it's urban kids who can't go outside because it's too dangerous or the overscheduled, overparented kids at the other end of the spectrum--I'm worried that boys have lost the chance to play and to explore," Anderson told me. Our society takes a dim view of idle time and casts a skeptical eye on free play--play driven by a boy's curiosity rather than the league schedule or the folks at Nintendo. But listen to Anderson as she lists the virtues of letting boys run themselves occasionally.

"When no one's looming over them, they begin making choices of their own," she says. "They discover consequences and learn to take responsibility for themselves and their emotions. They start learning self-discipline, self-confidence, team building. If we don't let kids work through their own problems, we get a generation of whiners."

That made sense to me. As I watched the boys at Falling Creek do things that would scare me to death if my own son were doing them--hammering white-hot pieces of metal, clinging to a zip line two stories above a lake, examining native rattlesnakes--I didn't notice many whining boys. Yates Pharr, director of Falling Creek, seemed to read my mind. "It's the parents who have the anxieties nowadays, far more than the boys," he said. "We've started posting photographs of each day's activity on our website, and still I'll get complaints if we don't have a picture of every camper every day."

Worrying about our boys--reading and writing books about them, wringing our hands over dire trends and especially taking more time to parent them--is paying off. The next step is to let them really blossom, and for

that we have to trust them, give them room. The time for fearing our sons, or fearing for their futures, is behind us. The challenge now is to believe in them. [This article contains charts. Please see hardcopy or pdf.]

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