



The State of America's Boys: An Urgent Case for a More Connected Boyhood

A Report for the Global Boyhood Initiative



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About Promundo:

Founded in Brazil in 1997, Promundo works to promote gender equality and create a world free from violence by engaging men and boys in partnership with women, girls, and individuals of all gender identities. Promundo is a global consortium with members in the United States, Brazil, Portugal, the Democratic Republic of the Congo, and Chile that collaborate to achieve this mission by conducting cutting-edge research that builds the knowledge base on masculinities and gender equality; developing, evaluating, and scaling up high-impact interventions and programs; and carrying out national and international campaigns and advocacy initiatives to prevent violence and promote gender equality. For more information, see www.promundoglobal.org.



Boyhood Index

United States

Adjectives most commonly used by 8- to 15-year-old boys to describe themselves: helpful, kind, smart, outgoing

Adjectives they used to describe a “good man”: helpful, nice, caring

Percentage of parents of boys who think boys **feel comfortable** sharing:

When they feel happy: 87

When they feel love: 54

When they feel weak: 28

Proportion of boys aged 14 to 19 who say **society expects them** to be aggressive or violent when they feel angry:

2 in 5

Who say they feel pressure to be strong: 3 in 4

Proportion of US adults who feel boys should be encouraged more to **talk about their feelings** when they’re sad or upset: 3 in 5

The most important thing boys say they **want from their parents**: willingness to listen and understand

Most promising message from interviews with 10- to 19-year-old boys: “Don’t be afraid to be yourself.”

Proportion of boys in one study whose **father shares difficult feelings**: 1 in 16

Most common fear keeping boys from sharing feelings with their friends: “It’ll be used against me.”

Percentage of 10- to 19-year-old boys who feel **pressure**:

To play sports: 61

To be physically strong: 72

Average proportion of all high school athletes who will experience a concussion in their sports seasons: 1 in 5

In a study of 7- to 8-year-old boys playing youth tackle football, **average number of head impacts** per player in a single season: 107

Concussion rates for boys aged 5 to 14 in youth football: 5% each season

Percentage of bachelor’s **degrees** awarded to:

Male students: 42

Female students: 58

Percentage of bachelor’s **degrees in STEM fields** awarded to:

Male students: 64

Female students: 36

Proportion of California children aged 12 to 17 in one study who identify as **gender-nonconforming**: 1 in 4

Rate of these children experiencing psychological distress compared to those who do not share this identity: twice as likely

Number of **leading roles** for LGBTQIA+ characters or characters with disabilities in the top 25 Nielsen-rated television shows for boys aged 7 to 13: 0

Percentage of ninth-grade boys in the United States who'd **ever had sexual intercourse**:

In 2005: 39

In 2015: 27

In a different study, percentage of boys who'd had **sex before 13 years old** who said they had "mixed feelings" about it: 45

Percentage of boys who hear other boys making **sexual comments or jokes** about girls:

At least once a week: 62

At least once a day: 36

Percentage of Black boys among male preschoolers: 19

Among male preschoolers receiving one or more **out-of-school suspensions**: 45

Percentage of US neighborhoods in which Black boys and white boys who **grew up next to each other in homes of similar income** have similar wealth as adults: 1

In which Black boys fare worse as adults than white boys: 99

Estimated percentage of neighborhoods in which this is also true for girls: 0

The sons of Black families from the **top 1% of income earners** have about the same chance of being incarcerated on a given day as the sons of white families earning: \$36,000 per year
Chance of a son of a Black family earning \$36,000 per year being incarcerated compared to a white family with the same income: over 3 times as likely

Beyond teaching style or academic outcomes, the two **highest priorities expressed by Black boys** about their teachers: care and being seen beyond stereotypes of Black masculinity

Percentage of US teens aged 13 to 17 who have a smartphone or access to one: 95

Who say that **social media** has a mostly positive effect on people their own age: 31

Minimum estimated amount that could be saved by the US economy per year **if harmful masculine norms ceased to exist** among young men: \$15,771,790,000

Minimum number of countries with a gross domestic product lower than this figure: 70

View of a "good man" offered by a recently interviewed 16-year-old male: *"A good man will always show their love. Because if others don't show love, then you don't feel like they love you. Or they don't care about you."*

Sources for the Boyhood Index are presented in the appendix to this report.

The State of America's Boys: An Urgent Case for a More Connected Boyhood

A report produced as part of the Global Boyhood Initiative

Why This Report?

Parents are worried about their sons. Educators are worried about male students, and public health professionals lament lifestyle choices that endanger young men's lives. Whether about violence, educational achievement, unwise risk-taking, or ignoring COVID-related health mandates, there are real concerns about boys. The unprecedented reckoning sparked by #MeToo and new Title IX rules on campuses simply raises the stakes, adding new urgency to the question of how to raise boys who support the full rights and humanity of women. In the same way, the Black Lives Matter movement draws attention to the disproportionate challenges faced by boys of color and casts new light on racist and entitled attitudes embedded in traditional definitions of masculinity.

At root, these modern social movements reveal a central question about boyhood as it has greeted generation after generation of young males: why hasn't it been better at fostering boys' well-being, virtue, and citizenship? Those who care for boys have been on their own to wonder how to help boys achieve their fullest potential as connected, caring, engaged, and productive men, dependable allies in the progressive arc of history. Fortunately, this progressive trend is catching up with boys, and the reinvention of boyhood based on rigorous developmental science is at hand.

This report was produced by Promundo, the Kering Foundation, and Plan International as part of the Global Boyhood Initiative. It seeks to provide an overview of the state of boys in the United States, looking at both the challenges facing them and the promise of their futures. The report discusses boyhood in an ecological context, examining the relationships, communities, and larger social norms that shape their lives. Each section concludes with key recommendations to support sons, alongside efforts to support girls, so they have a real shot at reaching their full human potential.

About the Global Boyhood Initiative

The Global Boyhood Initiative (GBI) is a new collaboration of Promundo-US, the Kering Foundation, and Plan International, along with other partners. GBI combines research, programming, and public campaigns to guide boys aged 4 to 13 to share emotions in healthy ways, accept and connect with others, stand up and speak out against bullying and inequality, and break free from gender stereotypes. This *State of America's Boys* report is a foundational report to support the launch of the initiative in the U.S. More information about GBI is available at www.boyhoodinitiative.org



Introduction: The Ecology of Boyhood

Boys do not raise themselves. How they are nurtured and the relationships available to them shape how they act, what they believe, and which paths they follow. What they are taught about manhood matters tremendously. Research on male development consistently finds that the more completely a man subscribes to conventional norms for masculinity, the less healthy and civil he is. In Promundo's 2017 "Man Box" study, for example, researchers concluded:

The majority of men who adhere to the rules of the Man Box are more likely to put their health and well-being at risk, to cut themselves off from intimate friendships, to resist seeking help when they need it, to experience depression, and to think frequently about ending their own life.¹

Losses associated with masculine norms are not restricted to the boys and men who submit to them. In a 2019 follow-up study, Promundo put a cost to outcomes like traffic and other accidents due to unwise behaviors, suicide, violence, and mental health crises that impact the broader community. The annual price tag: \$15.8 billion.²



What is the "Man Box"?

The Man Box refers to a set of beliefs, communicated by parents, families, the media, peers, and other members of society, that place pressure on men and boys to act a certain way. These pressures tell men to be self-sufficient, to act tough, to be physically attractive in a certain way, to stick to rigid gender roles, to be heterosexual, to demonstrate sexual prowess, and to use aggression to resolve conflicts. Research overwhelmingly suggests that adherence to these messages and pressures is linked with perpetrating and experiencing many forms of violence, as well as many other destructive behaviors. The use of the Man Box concept is inspired by work dating to the early 1980s in the United States by Paul Kivel, Allan Creighton, and others at the Oakland Men's Project, who used the term to describe how labels and pressures associated with mainstream masculinity have the effect of entrapping and isolating men who, inevitably, fall short of these idealized, rigid notions of manhood. The term and concept is widely used by many key voices working to promote healthy masculinity, including the GBI partners, and a Call to Men, among others.³



Pessimism about men's lives has swelled in recent years in response to #MeToo revelations, the surge in quarantine-related domestic violence by men against women, a rise in suicide and other deaths of despair, and very public acts of violence like the police killing of George Floyd. Terms like "toxic masculinity" entered the mainstream lexicon. But another way to think about these instances of men behaving badly is to see them as outcomes and to ask, "Why?" What is it about boyhood that too often plants the seed for such destructive and self-defeating behavior?

GBI partner Plan International coordinated a survey in 2018 to gauge progress among 10- to 19-year-olds on gender equality. Girls said they thought physical attractiveness was the trait most valued by society, while boys said it was physical strength and toughness. A third of the boys said they felt pressure “to dominate or be in charge of others,” and four of five had heard someone tell another boy he was “acting like a girl” when he was emotional or seemed weak.⁴ As a *New York Times* writer summarized the report, there are “many ways to be a girl, but one way to be a boy.”⁵

Where boys live – in their families, schools, sports programs, neighborhoods, media, and digital worlds – often pressures them to fit into a narrow set of masculine norms. As Stanford psychologist Judy Chu put it, boys become “boys” in response to the incentives, prohibitions, and encouragements of their worlds.⁶ Cultural anthropologist David Gilmore conducted a global inventory and found what he called “pressured masculinity” to be the norm everywhere: Boys must prove their masculinity against an unyielding set of standards or risk failing, being targeted, or being marginalized.⁷

Of course, boyhood is not simply a matter of what is forced upon boys. A child’s hand in his own development is also in play. Boys influence their relationships using “signals sent by the child that are directly perceived, understood and responded to.”⁸ How a boy leans into, resists, or rejects his caregivers is an expression of his personal agency. Under the greatest pressures, research shows that a boy can still fight on his own behalf, *when he finds support*.

It is in the environments and relationships of boyhood, not in boys themselves, that the routine losses and casualties of male development originate, and it is in understanding the ecology of these relationships that societies grasp how to offer each boy a shot at full human development.

The problem is that the impact of how boys are treated produces a characteristic result: the “traumatic abrogation of their early holding environments.”⁹ Guided by cultural myths and stereotypes, parents, teachers, and other caregivers back away from boys, leaving them on their own. Support withers for individual boys as their caregivers react to stereotypes and peer performances.¹⁰

Insecure bonds beginning in early childhood underlie boyhood. Both mothers and fathers urge boys from the nest out of concern that they might otherwise undermine their masculinity. New York University’s Niobe Way identified a “crisis of connection” at the heart of boyhood, stripping boys of their intimate connections and emotional voices early in their lives. Her research details how boys are pressured to detach from their own emotions, from their parents, and even from close male friends as they grow older. Once their primary connections are lost, boys become vulnerable to the temptations of the times and lose touch with their sense of who they are.¹¹

From every walk of life, especially when the pressures of masculinity are compounded by stresses like racism and poverty, many boys do not pass successfully into manhood. In the 2009 report *The State of American Boyhood*, Judith Kleinfeld of the University of Alaska was particularly concerned about “disconnected” youth without any real investments in relationships, ambitions, or communities, a group twice as likely to be male as female and more likely to be of color than white. Disconnected males show up at the wrong end of gender gaps in education,





employment, and civic participation, and many carry their disconnectedness into lives as adult men.¹²

That their experience as males makes an independent contribution to boys' development is clear from a recent analysis of income and demographic data by researchers at the Census Bureau, Stanford University, and Harvard University. Differences in earnings between Black and white children from similar circumstances show up among boys but not among girls, reinforcing the finding of other studies that family disadvantage affects boys more negatively than girls.¹³ "It's not just being Black but being male that has been hyper-stereotyped in this negative way," according to University of Virginia psychologist Noelle Hurd.¹⁴ For boys of color, being hyper-stereotyped means being seen as a potential delinquent in the making, or a potential sexual predator, or doomed to fail in school.

Princeton University ethicist Martha Nussbaum suggests the goal of "what people are actually able to do and to be" as the proper moral standard for human development.¹⁵ What defines an ethical society is its creation of conditions – resources and relationships – that allow children to translate their innate capabilities into actual abilities. Applying this standard to male development, one can ask: What sort of boyhood might allow boys, in all their diversity, to realize their full human capacities?



Converging lines of research point in a single direction. According to Way, "What makes us human is our relational and emotional skills and we must figure out ways to strengthen these critical life skills."¹⁶ Harvard University psychiatrist Amy Banks argues that how independence and individuality are generally conceived, at the heart of boyhood's value system, violates the design of their human anatomy. Four separate neurobiological systems, she points out, ensure that each person is in sync with others. Every person, male as well as female, is "built to operate within a network of caring human relationships."¹⁷ In short, teaching boys to go it alone, toughen up, and hide their need for others goes against what all humans need to thrive.

Neuroscientist Daniel Siegel has detailed how a child's mind develops in response to attachment experience. Challenging the traditional view that biology sets a frame for behavior and personality – that boys develop as "boys" because of their biological inheritance – Siegel and coauthor Mary Hartzell instead assert, "Experience is biology. How we treat our children changes who they are and how they will develop."¹⁸ To the common "boys will be boys" refrain whenever a boy goes astray, Siegel counters, "Interactions with the environment, especially

relationships with other people, directly shape the development of the brain's structure and function."¹⁹

In each of six domains of the ecological model below, we describe the conditions, pressures, and outcomes historically baked into boyhood. What stands out is the role of strong relationships as the best way to protect boys from conditions that otherwise can compromise their development. Boys cannot fix themselves by themselves. It will be in relationship to caring others – parents, teachers, educators, coaches, friends – that healthy boyhood is to be found, recovered and reinvented.

1. Family Life

Boys begin their training in masculinity practically from the moment they are born. Early gender researchers like Sandra Bem established that boys are more rigidly held to gender norms than girls.²⁰ It is one thing for a girl to be a "tomboy," another altogether for a boy to be a "sissy." Therapist and writer Olga Silverstein cited a research study in which an infant, dressed in white, and its mother waited in a doctor's waiting room while a hidden camera ran. When the nurse called for the mother, she politely asked others in the waiting room if they would mind holding "my daughter" or "my son" while she briefly consulted the doctor. When identified as female, the infant was held close, talked to, played with; when identified as male, the child often wound up on the carpet playing with a set of keys.²¹

The Promundo "Man Box" study mentioned earlier asked the young men about different sources of pressure to conform to masculine norms. Nearly two-thirds of US respondents agreed with the statement, "My parents taught me that a 'real man' should act strong even if he feels nervous or scared." Seventy-five percent of US respondents agreed, "Guys should act strong even if they feel scared or nervous inside," and 68 percent agreed, "A guy who doesn't fight back when others push him around is weak."²² Fathers, in particular, felt responsible for passing along traditional masculine scripts to their sons.

In addition to fathers, mothers also play a part in the over-masculinizing drama. Journalist Kate Stone Lombardi interviewed mothers of sons to explore how cultural pressures affect their relationships and learned there are strong prejudices urging them to push their sons away. She wrote, "For at least a century, the common wisdom about mothers and sons has been something like this: a mother who stays emotionally close to her son after he reaches, say, the tender age of five, is acting inappropriately. She's that smothering mother destined to prevent her boy from growing up to be a strong, independent man."²³

These tragic misconceptions about strength and emotional health show up early in a boy's life, shaping and skewing how even the best-intentioned parents think about them. In her intensive study of 4- to 5-year-old boys, Chu observed parents limiting "how it is possible for boys to be." In response, she observed a hardening of identity in some of the boys, a closing-off of options, and an "over-compromise" with cultural norms. Over her two-year study, open and authentic boys became more guarded and less spontaneous. Chu wrote, "What is often perceived and described as natural to boys is in fact not a manifestation of their nature but an adaptation to cultures that require boys to be emotionally stoic, aggressive, and competitive, if they are to be perceived and accepted as 'real boys.'"²⁴

Parents of boys often feel anxious. Their son is behaving a certain way – lackadaisical in school, self-centered at home, defeated by his peer group, unkind toward his sister or brother, insufficiently aggressive on the sports field, anxious or angry or shy – and parents cannot take it anymore. They intervene with a hand heavy with worry or irritation. They try to give advice and become even more frustrated or alarmed when their sons cannot hear them. What drives their worry is a great uncertainty about boys, particularly today. There seems to be so many ways things can go wrong with a son. A 2012 paper on the sex preferences of adoptive parents found that girls were favored nearly 30 percent more often than boys; girls were seen as "less risky."²⁵

But what if the riskiness of raising a son simply reflects the poor fit of a model of boyhood that reinforces mistaken and damaging ideas about manhood? Boys are not mere robots, reflexively donning the badges of boyhood, but make choices from options that are limited, sometimes severely limited, and often foreign to their own values. When contexts are harsh and masculine norms are rigid and unyielding, when peer groups of boys police each other, ever-ready to jump on the one who deviates from the norm, boys feel alone, overmatched, and hopeless. There is often a disconnect from what they want in their hearts and what the world tells them to be.

In relationships where they feel known and loved, equality, authenticity, and virtue blossom as boys grow into their visions for themselves as men. When a boy finds sufficient support that he can keep his own mind and hold onto his heart, he is more likely to take a healthier, more adaptive stance when those circumstances change. The best way to prepare boys for the world ahead is not to train them to follow outdated standards of manhood but to permit their humanity to flourish, and this work necessarily begins in the family.

University of California, Berkeley psychologist Alison Gopnik objects to approaches to raising children that overmanage them. She argues that parents and others have too often been drawn to the wrong metaphor. For many, parenting is seen as more like carpentry, taking a piece of wood and fashioning it into something predetermined, like a table or chair. But in reality, parenting has more in common with gardening: "When we garden, on the other hand, we create a protected and nurturing space for plants to flourish."²⁶ In this analogy, children are not projects at all and parenting becomes less about outcomes than about relationships. "To be a parent – to care for a child – is to be part of a profound and unique human relationship, to engage in a particular kind of love," Gopnik writes.²⁷

In Sum

It is in families that boys are first shaped by ideas about gender and manhood, modeling themselves on the examples they see – or do not see – of caring men around them, and absorbing experiences of harsh discipline and unchecked masculine violence. Recent research Promundo and Kering carried out for the Global Boyhood Initiative affirms that most parents want healthy masculinity for their sons. Problem is, they also worry that if their sons show vulnerability, talk about love, show fear, imagine anything other than heterosexual identities, they will be targeted and policed by their peer groups. Parents need guidance and support to help their sons affirm a healthier vision of manhood and resist harmful pressures they will encounter ahead.

2. Education

A boy's training in restrictive masculinity, often begun in his family, then accelerates in school. The social dynamics of the school community reinforce what they've learned from their parents, relatives, and siblings. Embedded in instructional practices and materials, relationships, and reward and recognition systems, the "hidden curriculum" of schools conveys explicit and tacit lessons about how he must be as a male.²⁸ Usually this means being rigidly heterosexual, demonstrably athletic and dominating (of girls and of other boys), emotionally stoic, bold, and aggressive. Boys who fit these stereotypes receive the rewards of peer acceptance and popularity, adult approval, respect; those who deviate are corrected, threatened, even bullied.

Messages about masculinity are woven into virtually every aspect of schools' social relations. Though they may vary by history and culture, masculinity practices typically include a high degree of hierarchy, competition, and relations of domination and subordination. The preferred masculine identity can be formal or informal, highly visible or more subtle, aligned with school authority or defiant of it; it is the most influential identity even if it is not the most common and is usually organized around physical size and skill, affluence, emotional control, social dominance, and the ever-present threat, sometimes enacted, of violence.²⁹ Any school setting typically has its "tribes" of boys – the jocks, the nerds, the preps, the geeks, the skaters, and the gamers. While these peer groups may provide positive experiences of being accepted, the price of membership too often hides behind a mask and vehement boundary-policing.

In this normative world, boys find there is little room for their own versions of themselves. Steadily, each boy learns to separate private thoughts and feelings from his public self. Following her group of -preschool and kindergarten boys, Chu furthermore witnessed how they transitioned from being direct, articulate, attentive, and present in their relationships to pretending and keeping things to themselves. They became "cynical" and "sober," less "exuberant," and more "discontented." Boys' development, Chu concluded, proceeds from "presence to

pretense via posturing” as boys realize it is not who they are but how they play the part that matters.³⁰

The harm to boys from these reinforced norms shapes how they approach learning and extends well beyond. Exaggerated ideas about masculinity, pervasive in media images, games, and television, goad boys to behaviors that may be far from their own values. In Chu’s study, the boys formed a “Mean Team” and set out “to bother people”—particularly the girls in the class. Whatever feelings of empathy individual boys might have harbored were overridden in their groupthink, even as young as 6 years old.³¹

Among a host of losses, the impact on boys’ learning is one of the most consequential. When pretense trumps authenticity and a “cool pose” beats sincerity, academic disengagement can undermine any impulse to partner with a teacher in a learning relationship.³² Whatever parents try to teach their sons about aspiration and hard work can be undermined in a “bro culture” of bravado and peer performance. In many school cultures, boys perceive they get more respect and are left alone by those who would bully them when they project an identity that is anti-academic.

The necessary advancement of equality for girls and women at all levels of the educational system in the United States has shone a bright light on the sorry state of boys’ academic achievement. Over the last several decades, concern has grown that boys are “falling behind.”³³ But there are two problems with the popular narrative of a “boy crisis”: First, underperforming boys and their troubling, sometimes tragic, losses of educational possibility are nothing new. Noted educational researchers Thomas DiPrete and Claudia Buchmann have shown that a gender achievement gap has existed in the United States for over a century. Even before they enter kindergarten, many boys have fallen behind in the development of “soft” skills essential for success.³⁴ One should also note that even if boys have been faring worse than girls at many levels of the US educational system, men’s incomes on aggregate and their predominance in the top roles of corporations, politics, media, sports, and so many other spaces undermine the notion of a “crisis” of American masculinity or manhood. Instead, this reality suggests the complex mix of both privilege and cost that manhood often means.

These issues are also clearly intersectional. Evidence shows that educational underachievement and the gender achievement gap is most pronounced when “Man Box” pressures are compounded by other social stresses like racism and poverty. One study examined outcomes for children from low-socioeconomic status households, matching birth certificates and health, disciplinary, academic, and high school graduation records for more than 1 million children, which included brothers and sisters born in Florida between 1992 and 2002. Researchers found that compared to their sisters, the boys had a higher incidence of truancy and behavioral problems throughout elementary and middle school, higher rates of behavioral and cognitive disability, worse performance on standardized tests, lower likelihood of graduating high school, and greater likelihood of committing serious crimes as juveniles.³⁵

Fortunately, the answer to boys’ underachievement, even as it manifests among disadvantaged boys, is actually under educators’ noses. Contrary to conventional stereotypes about boys who don’t “do school,” a series of global studies showed that when they are relationally engaged, paid attention, known, and understood

as they know and understand themselves, boys *will and do try*. When they are effectively reached, boys who are failing and underperforming become engaged, improve, and excel. Boys who are distracting and oppositional in class become attentive, respectful contributors. Attentive, caring relationships *transform* boys—especially boys struggling or in peril.

In 2008–10 and again in 2010–12, from surveys and interviews with 2,500 adolescent boys and 2,000 of their teachers, studies by Michael Reichert and Richard Hawley identified the key conditions underlying the successful engagement of boys in their learning. In their resounding validation of teachers who inspired, helped, and uplifted them, boys led the investigators to the conclusion that “relationship is the very *medium* through which successful teaching and learning is performed.”³⁶

When a learning relationship is struck, teachers make a tremendous difference for boys. In addition to the practical benefit of acquiring skills or mastering subject matter well enough to pass required tests, there are also transformational and even existential benefits from these learning partnerships. When boys develop new abilities, their self-concepts grow as they come to see possibilities they could not imagine previously. Even more profoundly, the life-altering lesson boys absorb from teachers who care for them and who demonstrate a willingness to go the extra mile on their behalf influences their orientation to the world: They discover that there is help, that they can expect their needs to be met, that they are cared for.

Exploring how well this relational teaching framework applies to boys of color from low-income communities, Joseph Derrick Nelson conducted interviews, observations, and open-ended surveys with 50 Black and Latino boys attending a single-sex middle school for boys of color in New York City. His research validated the relational teaching framework and showed how race and gender stereotypes, as well as class background, can shape and inform teacher perceptions of Black boys. For these boys, more important than subject and pedagogical mastery was care, especially when they were “being seen” beyond negative stereotypes attributed to Black masculinity (e.g., hyperaggressive, anti-intellectual, and hypersexual).³⁷

Similarly, Marvin Berkowitz of the University of Missouri-St. Louis summarized the “science of character education” and proposed seven rules of thumb for effective programs. “First, it is clear that the primary influence on a child’s character development is how people treat the child,” he wrote.³⁸ Stanford University’s Nel Noddings agreed, writing, “We learn first how to be cared for, how to respond to loving efforts at care in a way that supports those efforts.”³⁹

In Sum

For boys of all kinds, the real magic of a strong learning relationship lies in how it is internalized, actually woven into their minds and hearts. Schools can put this insight into practice by teacher training in relational pedagogy, curricular content that builds relationships, professional development in racial justice and anti-racism, and extracurricular activities that strengthen boys’ relationships with girls, as well as between boys and others in their lives. Parents’ part in this is to support the learning partnerships that teachers attempt to build with their sons.



3. Health and Well-Being

Whether formed in families or schools, a boy's identity begins with his body. From the time a child is identified as male or female, the path forward is differentiated. Boys learn to be "boys" following a cultural script for how they should dress, eat, exercise, take risks, sleep, care for themselves, and so forth. However, what is rarely acknowledged is how writing masculinity onto a boy's body is likely to compromise his health.

Many of the assumptions about a boy's body – what it is, what it needs – are steeped in myth and misconception. In service to the myth of "the stronger sex" – robust, tough, and self-reliant – boys adopt attitudes and make lifestyle choices that place them at risk. They use more substances like alcohol and tobacco, drive more recklessly, and engage in unsafe sex and other dangerous activities more frequently than girls. These behaviors are not biologically driven but are about performing an exaggerated version of masculinity for their peer groups and the world around them.

Psychologist Will Courtenay illustrates how masculine myths compromise male health with the example of sunscreen. According to the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, males have a skin cancer death rate twice that of females. Making sure they apply sunscreen would seem a logical response. But instead, young men heed louder, more pressing calls to demonstrate toughness. As Courtenay writes, "Masculine men are unconcerned about health matters; masculine men are invulnerable to disease; the application of lotions to the body is a feminine pastime; masculine men don't 'pamper' or 'fuss' over their bodies."⁴⁰

Another example is seatbelts. According to the National Highway Traffic Safety Administration (NHTSA), which launched a special campaign in 2018 aimed at males, 10,418 unrestrained passengers were killed in 2016; of these, 44 percent were men aged 18 to 34. Of total road fatalities, NHTSA estimates that 2,500 lives could have been saved by seatbelts.⁴¹

The age group with the greatest gender health gap is 15- to 24-year-olds: 75 percent of deaths in this group are male. Males are three times more likely than females to die from injuries occurring in motor vehicles or bicycles, in sports, in falls, or as a result of spinal cord and traumatic brain injuries. Males are also four times as likely to die from suicide than females.⁴² A recent review of adolescent male health led by Columbia University pediatrician David Bell found, "Compared with females, adolescent males have higher mortality, less engagement with primary care, and high levels of unmet needs." They also found that a young man is more likely to follow poor health practices the more he adheres to traditional masculine norms.⁴³

Those norms prescribe what it means, physically, to be male. Boys are urged to think of their bodies in instrumental rather than connected ways, as tools and means to an end. In rough play, unbridled competition, and military games, boys act as if it is not their body, or the person inside them, but the role they play that matters. Risk-taking, personal care, accident, and death rates reflect how faithfully boys play their part.



Promundo's "Man Box" study with young men aged 18 to 30 in the United States affirmed an overwhelming association between harmful, restrictive masculine norms and poor health-related behaviors. The study found that young men "in the Man Box," meaning beyond the median in their adherence to stereotypical masculine norms, were more than twice as likely to have thought about suicide in the past month, three times more likely to report binge-drinking, and more likely to have been in a traffic accident and to report depressive symptoms. These findings were echoed in new guidelines by the American Psychological Association for practitioners working with men and boys.⁴⁴

Boys' experience with boyhood is consequential not just for themselves but also for broader society. Routine casualties and losses stemming from the present model of boyhood extend from individual boys to their families and into their communities.

Each young man sacrifices something – his heart, his relationships, his dreams – to play his part in the masculine script. The boy caught up in performing for his buddies actually leans into the group's norms at the expense of moral considerations – until, sometimes, they become his own. Chu witnessed a hardening of identity in some of the boys in her study, a closing-off of options, and an "over-compromise" with, as she put it, "cultures that require boys to be emotionally stoic, aggressive, and competitive if they are to be perceived and accepted as 'real boys.'"⁴⁵

When it comes to difficult feelings, most boys learn to keep them private, suppressing and overriding them. What results, according to James O'Neil of the University of Connecticut, is "emotional restrictedness" associated with a long list of unhealthy outcomes: "negative psychological attitudes towards women and gay men, violent attitudes towards women, dangerous risk-taking in regard to sex and health issues, substance use and abuse, psychological stress and strain, negative attitudes towards help-seeking, delinquent behavior, low self-esteem, hostility and aggression, higher blood pressure levels, depression, anxiety, and marital and family problems."⁴⁶



Unfortunately, this pattern of suppressing feelings is an especially poor fit for today's interconnected, relational, "high-touch," and highly competitive world. Millennial and younger men express concerns about their mental health with unprecedented openness. A majority of first-year college students now rate their mental health as "below average." San Diego State University sociologist Jean Twenge reported a spike in rates of loneliness, depression, anxiety, and dissatisfaction with life since 2011 and warned of an "epidemic of anguish," "the most severe mental health crisis for young people in decades."⁴⁷

Sports is another arena where masculine norms rule, where they are both created and reinforced. Clearly sports can be a space for meaningful friendships, learning to work collectively and sheer enjoyment as well, but as engaging as they can be, competitive sports were in general designed to train young men to play "through pain" and sacrifice "for the team." Sports sociologist Don Sabo speaks of a "pain principle" in which a player's willingness to "suck it up" is a measure of his masculinity.⁴⁸ Teaching boys to repress vulnerable feelings, reduce success to winning, inflict injury on others as part of the game, stoically endure their own



injuries, and generally strive to dominate opponents are all ways sports frequently convey the fundamental tenets of masculinity.

But these tenets are often at odds with the actual realities of a boy's body. One area that has generated concern is head injuries. That contact sports produce, have always produced, shockingly high rates of brain injury has begun to make the headlines. According to researchers at the University of California, San Francisco, concussion rates grew 60 percent between 2007 and 2014, most prominently among male adolescents, who represented 55 percent of the total increase.⁴⁹ One in five high school athletes will get a concussion during their sports seasons, and a third of those concussed will suffer more than one in the same year.⁵⁰ Football accounts for more than half of all sports-related concussions. Hockey, soccer, wrestling, and lacrosse also produce relatively high rates. In football, "some players on the field experience a head impact on every play."⁵¹

In an alarming study, acceleration monitors were installed in the helmets of 7- to 8-year-old youth football players and registered an average of 107 head impacts per player over the course of a season. When accelerations reach threshold velocity, studies show "white matter damage" that can last as long as a year. Advances in preventive technology notwithstanding, there is still no "concussion-proof helmet." In fact, there is evidence that damage to brain tissue is cumulative and that even non-concussive impacts have an effect.⁵²

Another topic drawing new attention to boys' health is body image disorders, long thought to be the province of girls and women. Whereas for girls the concern is generally being thinner, for boys, it is usually the opposite. Sometimes called "bigorexia," muscle dysmorphia is the opposite of anorexia nervosa. Researchers have found that the number of teen males dissatisfied with their bodies has tripled over the last 25 years. For young men experiencing this version of body discomfort, the goal is practically unattainable: to be both more muscular and leaner.⁵³

One more topic that skews in a negative direction for boys is substance use. According to a federal survey of drug use and health, adolescent males abuse substances at higher rates than girls. In a 2013 report, 40 percent of high school males reported that they used alcohol in the last month, with nearly 25 percent consuming more than five drinks. Nearly 25 percent drink alcohol and 10 percent use marijuana by age 13.⁵⁴

There have been many theories to explain gender differences in substance use, but advertising by beverage companies clearly plays a part. Beer company ads have created a masculine brand – relaxed, fun-loving, romantic, sexually attractive – that influences boys' self-concepts and their aspirations. A 2012 study published by the American Academy of Pediatrics followed 4,000 teenagers from grades 7 to 10 and found that boys used "significantly more alcohol" than girls, experienced more negative consequences from their use, and showed signs that their drinking was influenced by beer ads.⁵⁵

Finally, the COVID pandemic era has underscored the many ways in which restrictive masculinities are exacerbating health risk and community vulnerability,



as explored in depth in Promundo-US's *Masculinities and COVID-19: Making the Connections*.⁵⁶ It is important to note that boys as well as young and adult men have in general been less responsive to recommended health practices to slow the spread of COVID-19 – social distancing, handwashing, and mask-wearing – than women and girls. Some politicians have deliberately exploited stereotypes of male toughness to politicize COVID health practices, particularly mask-wearing. Given research suggesting that men are more biologically vulnerable to this novel coronavirus, encouraging boys to practice self-care and care of others should be reinforced with effective policy and action.

In Sum

When boys think of their bodies in purely instrumental – rather than connected and caring – ways, and when they are socialized and pressured into stereotypical, restrictive ideas of manhood, they are more likely to act in ways that are harmful to their health and the health of others. Parents, educators, coaches, and other influencers must help boys develop caring relationships with their bodies and resist cultural norms that erode the integrity of their commitment to well-being. As with learning and their participation in loving relationships in general, boys have an inborn instinct for self-preservation that must be supported and strengthened. When it is undercut by cultural conditioning, a boy's connection to himself at the most fundamental level is weakened.

4. Violence and Aggression

For centuries, harmful male behavior has been naturalized as coded in genes or driven by hormones. One result is that when a boy behaves badly, the discussion becomes a judgment of his character rather than an analysis of the conditions eroding his moral grounding. But instead of sorting boys into good ones and bad ones, a more logical way to explain bad behavior is to consider the context of their lives. What developmental resources do they have? What healthy relationships? What stresses operate on them? What pressures are they under?

In addition to pressures conveyed by their families, schools, and sports programs, two additional elements of normative masculinity make it more likely that boys will act in uncivil ways: “emotion rules” requiring them to suppress vulnerable feelings while encouraging expression of anger, and exposure to violence that makes them prone to bully, commit other forms of interpersonal violation, and perpetrate



violence themselves.⁵⁷ Pennsylvania State University psychologist Stephanie Shields writes, “The question of anger is the fundamental paradox in the emotional female/unemotional male stereotype. The stereotype of emotionality is female, but the stereotype of anger, a prototypic emotion, is male.”⁵⁸

That hostility and anger acted out against others has a uniquely male dimension does not mean it is based in some kind of biological drive. Rather, violence and maltreatment develop from the ways boys are socialized. In an in-depth study of high school boys, Brett Stoudt of City University of New York found that their lives involved constant put-downs, experiences of being measured and found wanting, and hierarchies reinforced by no-holds-barred competition and overt threats. He wrote, “Violence might be considered the most visible and infrequent end of a continuum that also includes the normalized forms of male violence occurring inside schools every day.”⁵⁹

As Stoudt’s research affirms, violence of all kinds is the background noise of boyhood. In the 2011 National Survey of Children’s Exposure to Violence, by age 17 seven of ten youth had experienced assaults, mostly at the hands of other youth.⁶⁰ Boys had higher rates of assault overall (45 percent compared to 37 percent for girls) and reported greater rates of injury from assault. Physical intimidation rates (one in four before age 17) and relational aggression rates (one in three in the last year and half by age 17) indicate just how common it is.⁶¹

Bullying has a starring role in a boy’s life. Not only are boys physically bullied twice as often as girls but their physical maltreatment takes a more serious form. School is ground zero for bullying. According to a Kaiser Family Foundation study, 80 percent of 12- to 18-year-olds who reported that they were bullied said it happened at school (<http://www.kff.org>). Bigger, meaner, and more aggressive boys dominate in the dynamics of school peer groups. As shown in a 2018 Promundo-US study in the United States, young men with more restrictive gender attitudes are significantly more likely to use bullying behaviors – both online and offline – while those who demonstrate the most empathic attitudes are more likely to intervene to stop bullying when they see it happen.⁶²

Boys who are bullied have lower self-esteem, have fewer friends, and are perceived as quiet or different. Victims of bullying are also at higher risk for psychosomatic complaints, depression, anxiety, sleep disturbances, and increased academic problems. Public shaming of boys often involves anti-gay slurs. Longer-term bullying leads to chronic problems like delinquency, relational and employment difficulties, and substance abuse. On the victim’s side, to not fight back when threatened often places a boy at greater risk. Researchers have found that where a culture of bullying exists, Darwinian rules apply: If a boy appears weak, others will try to victimize him; if he shows himself to be strong, he is more likely to be safe. The most common reaction to being bullied is to fight.⁶³

To Canadian activist and scholar Michael Kaufman, three types of male violence are mutually reinforcing: violence against girls and women, violence against other males, and violence against themselves. The boy does not so much learn these dynamics as they become a part of him, a patterned set of reactions. Tensions that

build up as boys submit to this reality, suppressing their true emotions to pull it off, find an outlet in violence.⁶⁴

The link between masculinity and violence was the subject of a 2018 report issued by Promundo-US. The report identified eight forms of violence: intimate partner violence, physical violence directed against children in families, child sexual abuse, bullying, homicide and violent crime, non-partner sexual violence, suicide, and conflict/war. In each form, males are disproportionately represented and a link with dominant norms of masculinity is manifest.⁶⁵

A growing body of evidence on the effects of children's exposure to violence indicates that these experiences are often traumatizing and affect boys and girls differently. Disrupted attachments and developmental processes; a host of emotional, educational, and behavioral reactions; and accelerated trajectories toward delinquency were common outcomes of children's exposure to community and school violence. As co-authors Sandra Bloom, former president of the International Society for Traumatic Stress Studies, and psychologist Michael Reichert argue, "hurt people hurt people" in the spiral of traumatic reenactment.⁶⁶ Numerous studies have confirmed that witnessing violence committed by their fathers or other men against their mothers makes boys more likely to use violence against female partners as adults.⁶⁷

Studies of young men who use violence, like those by psychologist James Garbarino of Loyola University Chicago, conclude that violent boys are "lost," unmoored from their empathic connections. To recover their caring, connected humanity, Garbarino recommends locating "anchors" in their lives: "These values and relationships...protect them from the influences of social toxicity, negative peer groups, mass media violence, and the crass materialism of our culture." Top of the list of potential anchors are "adults who commit themselves unconditionally to meeting the developmental needs of kids."⁶⁸

In Sum

Cultural and social norms about masculinity, particularly those that restrict emotional expression and cause social isolation, undermine boys' and men's mental and physical health and are a root cause of violence. In the name of greater emotional connection and public health, these norms must be changed. In partnership with media, educators, and policymakers, parents must intervene when boys act out difficult feelings at another's expense. As seen in the next section, violence prevention with boys and young men too often focuses on punishment or preventing harm and not enough on the primary prevention strategy of promoting pro-social connections. Positive relationships enable boys to be fully connected, empathetic, and pro-social.

5. Crime and Punishment

Underlying these data points – that boys are subjected to more frequent, often physical punishment in families, that in school they receive far more disciplinary actions and are referred for psychiatric intervention more often, and that the world’s most elaborate carceral system operates in the United States largely to police males and particularly males of color – are a set of ideas about being male. In the view of psychologists Dan Kindlon and Michael Thompson, the presumed need to exercise firm control over boys and men is based on the archetype of the “feral” male, “out of control and incapable of responsible behavior or intelligent thought.”⁶⁹ The message to boys is “behave or else,” a threat-based approach that builds neither virtue nor self-control.

In fact, because these systems disproportionately impact boys and men who are already disadvantaged by race or class, their effect is to uphold and reinforce existing inequities. Sadly, being perceived as a potential threat affects boys who are already disadvantaged by class and race. University of Pennsylvania psychologist Howard Stevenson speaks of the “hypervulnerability” of boys of color who, not seen as boys at all, respond to the stereotype by adopting poses of exaggerated defiance.⁷⁰

In any year, over 2.1 million youth under 18 are arrested. Overall, 48,000 youth are incarcerated on any given day in the United States, two-thirds of whom are 16 or older, 99.7 percent “restricted by locked doors, gates, or fences.”⁷¹ While these trends are changing, “data continues to suggest that girls are less likely to be detained and committed than boys for most categories of delinquent offenses.”⁷² Across all crime categories except prostitution, girls have lower arrest rates, representing less than 20 percent of arrests for most crime categories.⁷³

The mythology about boys, crime, and punishment begins in their families. A host of studies, including a seminal review of gender differences by Eleanor Maccoby and Carol Nagy Jacklin, found that corporal punishment is meted out by parents most commonly to boys.⁷⁴ This disproportion has been attributed both to boys’ behavior – aggression, defiance – that elicits more severe reactions as well as to the idea that parents must “toughen up” their sons.⁷⁵ This finding is consistent with the broader one that “boys are more rigidly socialized to gender norms and allowed less crossover behavior than girls”⁷⁶ – as though the feral boy must be tamed or else he will become even more violent.

In schools, the disproportion can be staggering: One high school that used a demerit system to regulate student behavior recorded ten times more demerits for boys than girls. In a 2016 study conducted with 4- and 5-year-old children matched for the level of their behavioral problems, the researcher found “the same behavior problems in boys and girls were penalized a lot more in boys than girls.”⁷⁷

A school-to-prison pipeline, channeling boys in general and boys of color in particular from mainstream education into the carceral system, is based on marked disparities in more severe disciplinary consequences. In a 2017 review, sociologist Simone Ispa-Landa reported that “males are suspended in greater numbers than



females, and black males are suspended more than three times as often as white males.”⁷⁸ Sociologist Ann Arnett Ferguson conducted a three-year study in an urban elementary school and described how a group of young males was identified by school personnel as “bound for jail.”⁷⁹

Pedro Noguera, dean of the University of Southern California’s School of Education, argues that of schools’ three primary functions – to sort, socialize, and control children – the third, maintaining “a relatively orderly environment where the authority of adults is respected and rules are followed,” makes the other two possible.⁸⁰ Disadvantaged students, particularly Black and brown boys, who are sorted off the opportunity track are generally less willing to submit to school authority. What results in schools that serve disproportionate numbers of students of color is that “such schools operate more like prisons than schools. They are more likely to rely on guards, metal detectors, and surveillance cameras to monitor and control students, restrict access to bathrooms, and attempt to regiment behavior by adopting an assortment of rules and restrictions.”⁸¹

The disproportion in who is punished in school is also the case in the larger community. For over four decades, “get tough on crime” policies have created a public safety system that relies on mass incarceration.⁸² Almost 2.3 million people are now held in 1,833 state prisons, 110 federal prisons, 1,772 juvenile correctional facilities, 3,134 local jails, 218 immigration detention facilities, and 80 Indian Country jails, as well as in military prisons, civil commitment centers, state psychiatric hospitals, and prisons in US territories.⁸³ Those under correctional supervision are overwhelmingly male and disproportionately of color.

Black males are most likely to be arrested by city police, convicted of their alleged crimes, and eventually incarcerated with lengthy sentences. Approximately a third of Black males are currently under police supervision, including parole or house arrest. Life course studies indicate that one in three Black males will be imprisoned for some portion of their young adulthood.⁸⁴

Suspension, expulsion, and incarceration in many forms are one way to deal with the bad behavior of boys and men. Unfortunately, these approaches make little pretense of rehabilitation. There is growing recognition that punitive school-based punishment and incarceration for adults and juveniles are ineffective, costly, and grossly unfair.⁸⁵ Fewer prisoners than ever participate in any rehabilitation programs. A majority of those released from incarceration are likely to be rearrested and reincarcerated, and those punished at school are more likely to drop out of school and face higher rates of incarceration.

The larger question of correcting men and boys continues to search for a better strategy than retribution, an eye for an eye, to respond to the misconduct of boys and men. Restorative justice poses a popular alternative being taken up in schools and communities. In this approach, those who hurt someone must make amends to their victims and redeem themselves in their communities. According to the Center for Restorative Justice at Suffolk University, “Restorative resolutions engage those who are harmed, wrongdoers and their affected communities in search of solutions that promote repair, reconciliation and the rebuilding of relationships.”⁸⁶



In families, schools, and communities, in fact, as ancient archetypes give way to evidence-based insights about boys, more relational strategies for dealing with their misbehavior offer promise. The moral influence of parents with whom boys establish secure attachments is persuasive and implies that parents must first try to deepen their connection when their son acts badly.⁸⁷ In schools, a relational teaching model based on research showing boys depend on a connection with a teacher or a coach to engage and maintain focus is also gaining traction.⁸⁸

In Sum

The same cultural shifts necessary to change how schools view boys – as relational and not as lone, stoic wolves – must also inform how their misbehavior is responded to in general. So long as schools emphasize command and control over connection and relationships, certain boys – particularly those of color and others the deck is stacked against – will continue to disrupt and act out. Research is clear that restorative justice approaches premised on reconnection to communities, alternative discipline approaches, and strengthening connections to pro-social peers and mentors are the most promising correctional strategies.

6. Digital Life

In a time of COVID-19 disruption and online schooling, 2021 may be the year that the realities of screen fatigue finally register for boys. But because the digital world has become such an integral dimension of boyhood, reaching into and shaping each boy's life, there is no escaping its reach. Screens create new opportunities for boys and compound existing problems associated with their development. Parents tend to make cell phones and video games their bogeymen without seeing how their sons' misuse of connective technologies is less a personal failing than an overdetermined outcome. Powerful forces enlist every boy into the new digital framework of boyhood.

When the Pew Research Center first began tracking social media use in 2005, only 5 percent of those 18 or older visited social networking sites. By 2019, that had increased to 72 percent.⁸⁹ In the 18-to-29 age group, 88 percent had Facebook accounts. Mobile use has witnessed even more rapid change: In 2011, 35 percent of adults generally had a smartphone; in 2017, that number was 77 percent overall and 92 percent among 18- to 29-year-olds.⁹⁰ The largest and most rapid increase was with teenagers; among 13- to 17-year-olds, social media use was "nearly universal," according to a 2018 survey.⁹¹



A child's mind develops in an intimate, highly attuned dialogue with both their interpersonal and physical environments. As they grew to be ubiquitous, communication devices became extensions of each developing child. From their invention as tools of communication, smartphones became avatars, online profiles became identities, and text messages became equivalent to "talking." The digital sphere is the medium through which a growing boy communicates with the world.

A large majority of teens say social media "helps strengthen friendships and provides emotional support."⁹² But despite claims of wholesome effects, almost half of parents worry that their children spend too much time online – a concern that is more acute for parents of boys. One study clocked a 300 percent male disproportion in gaming time. Boys and young men spent an average of 13 hours more per week playing games than girls and young women (43 hours versus 30 hours).⁹³ The gamer stereotype grows out of this disproportion.⁹⁴ In fact, when male bias in the video game industry was publicly challenged – #GamerGate – a backlash sprang up among young male gamers, asserting, "Video games are created by men for men."⁹⁵

Particular kinds of games are certainly designed with boys in mind. One researcher classified games as "hard-core" or "casual," where dark or violent plots are pitched more to males. Hard-core games lack female characters in general, and when they are included, these characters are hypersexualized and stereotyped.⁹⁶ Fortnite quickly became the world's most popular game practically from its debut in 2017. The game appeals particularly to preteen and teenage males, who are drawn to its emphasis on teamwork, construction, and action.⁹⁷

Experts have offered wildly different opinions about technology's impact on young minds generally. Sherry Turkle of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology's Initiative on Technology and Self identified a new phenomenon – the tethered self – which emerged as technology use became pervasive. But coming to rely on new ways to connect involved a loss, she argues: "If you're spending three, four, and five hours a day in an online game or virtual world (a time commitment that is not unusual), there's got to be someplace you're not. And that someplace you're not is often with your family and friends."⁹⁸

Technology writer Steven Johnson makes a more positive case, claiming that digital media have been designed "explicitly to train the cognitive muscles" and help players exercise executive-level skills of seeking, deciding, prioritizing, collaborating, multitasking, and so on.⁹⁹ His emphasis on the skill-building effects of tech use represents an effort to balance the sensationalized worries of nondigital generations.

Harvard psychologist Howard Gardner and co-author, Katie Davis attempted a more objective response by studying the "thought processes, personalities, imaginations, and behaviors" of the "App Generation." Their research identified three developmental domains – identity, intimacy, and imagination – being "reconfigured" by digital life. Young people are more "externally oriented," they concluded, holding that it is both a blessing and a curse. Fashioning selves before wider and more attentive audiences than ever, they believe, there is a natural





tendency for young people to play things safe and prematurely close off identity options. Gardner and Davis also see a greater emphasis on how young people package themselves, at the expense of personal exploration, and warn of a greater danger of self-absorption.¹⁰⁰

Concerns about how technology impacts boys' development are particularly acute in relation to social media and video games. Huge global industries, the six largest social media companies were worth about \$600 billion at the end of 2017. As they deploy top neuroscientists, game designers, and behavioral economics and marketing specialists, these companies offer products to help users deal with negative feelings. New York University professor Adam Alter points to what happened when Facebook, by far the largest company, introduced a "like" button to its interface. With that simple innovation, Facebook became highly interactive, offering the unpredictable but alluring reward of social approval. Facebook tripled the size of its user community over the next three years, approaching 2 billion users by 2017.¹⁰¹

As games and social media became more and more engaging, concerns about their addictive power grew.¹⁰² In the 2013 update of the American Psychiatric Association's *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, internet gaming disorder was added for further study.¹⁰³ However, Christopher Ferguson of Stetson University and Patrick Markey of Villanova University, co-authors of *Mortal Combat: Why the War on Video Games Is Wrong*, challenged the notion of screen addiction. They argue that the rewards of social media and games are equivalent to any mild pleasure, like eating. While they acknowledge that some boys can get lost, they suggest that "games are not really the root of the problem, but rather something else is."¹⁰⁴

Though these media are specifically designed to be irresistible, problems associated with technology likely lie less with screens and more with their viewers. When a boy's overall skill at managing stress is weak, he is prone to depend on extrinsic strategies – chemicals, activities, experiences – to change the way he feels. The more uncomfortable the feeling, the more urgent the need to distract himself from it. Stanford psychologist Philip Zimbardo believes boys' overexposure to high-stimulation content, the "hook" built into popular games and social media, can lead to what he calls "arousal addiction." A vicious cycle results from boys' efforts to distract themselves: educational malaise, obesity, heightened social anxiety, and overreliance on stimulant and recreational drugs.¹⁰⁵

In Promundo-US's 2018 *The Bullying Crisis* study, 62 percent of young men respondents reported having witnessed someone post negative comments about someone else online, and 51 percent reported having seen someone post a photo or video to make fun of someone based on their appearance.¹⁰⁶ Some 57 percent said they had witnessed negative posts about someone's sexual orientation. Young men who rated highest on a separate scale of empathetic attitudes were also the ones most likely to have intervened to stop this kind of online bullying behavior. Many young men in the same study feared intervening because of the likelihood that they would become the next target of the online bullying behavior.¹⁰⁷

Whether technology deliberately exploits male vulnerabilities, the conditions of boyhood certainly influence how boys respond to cyberlife. In fact, social media, online pornography, and video games have added new wrinkles to historic patterns in male development. More connected than ever, new generations of young men report epidemic levels of loneliness.¹⁰⁸ But trying to address the problems of technology use by regulating products seems less promising than making sure boys are less susceptible to their seductions.

The American Academy of Pediatrics proposed a simple solution in new cyber use guidelines issued in 2016. Perhaps recognizing the futility of trying to limit overall screen time, the guidelines recommend families ensure that children are not alone as they message or watch: "Co-view with your children, help children understand what they are seeing, and help them apply what they learn to the world around them."¹⁰⁹ This new guideline essentially asks parents and other caregivers to go where the boys are. Anya Kamenetz, digital education correspondent for NPR, put it in simpler terms: "Enjoy screens; not too much; mostly together."¹¹⁰

In addition to how much time boys spend watching TV or playing games, there is the question of what they see and play when they do so. A recent gender analysis of the top 25 Nielsen-rated TV shows for young boys in the United States showed some positives and negatives. According to that research, boys do see increasing numbers of leading roles for women and girls in these shows but at the same time see male characters portrayed as less involved in care work, more likely to be incompetent fathers, and more likely to be violent than female characters.¹¹¹

In Sum

Video games, TV, and social media are not the sources of boys' bad behavior or of harmful masculinity. Rather, existing forms of masculinity can be exacerbated and new forms of violence manifested in these media. These forms of media have the potential to help boys find connections and to affirm pro-social identities. The challenge for parents and teachers is to understand what boys discover in social media, TV, and games and to help them to be critical media consumers. As in the physical realm, boys should also be encouraged to speak out against violence online.

Conclusion: Toward A New Boyhood

Today's boys need parents to recognize their human natures, schools to acknowledge their potential, and communities to celebrate their diversity. Despite the persistence and press of Man Box norms, a new boyhood is more likely than not. In the view of sociologist Michael Kimmel, "The data are persuasive that most American men have quietly, and without much ideological fanfare, accommodated themselves to greater gender equality in both their personal and their workplace relationships than any generation before them."¹¹²

The challenge is that this generation of women and girls is not satisfied with greater gender equality, nor should it be. Women and girls rightly demand full equality. There is more information, more documentation, and more metrics than ever validating the realities of historical gender inequality. The hundreds of thousands of women marching across the country at The 2017 National Women's March are right to chant: "What do we want? Equality! When do we want it? Now!"

Young men find themselves at a crossroads at which the movement for equality has rendered inherited expectations obsolete and a "little more equality" is not enough. However, some have trouble reading the writing on the wall. Sociologists Joanna Pepin and David Cotter find that panic about "men's place in society" has prompted high school males to retreat to "symbolic masculinity," writing, "After becoming more egalitarian for almost twenty years, high school seniors' thinking about a husband's authority and divisions of labor at home has since become substantially more traditional."¹¹³

Still, relationships between males and females have unalterably shifted. Economists report that men who are ill-prepared for the knowledge economy are less desirable as life partners, pointing to out-of-wedlock births at an all-time high and an overall decline in both marriage and fertility.¹¹⁴ Younger women are plotting very different life trajectories than earlier generations.

Despite ambivalence and "gender vertigo," there's also encouraging news from younger men.¹¹⁵ The University of California, Los Angeles' California Health Interview Survey, for example, found that more than a quarter of California teenagers saw themselves as gender-nonconforming in 2015-16, with boys seeing themselves as more feminine and girls more masculine. One writer explained: "There are so few positive variations on what a 'real man' can look like, that when the youngest generations show signs of reshaping masculinity, the only word that exists for them is nonconforming. The term highlights that nobody knows what to call these variations on maleness."¹¹⁶

However they bend, work around, retreat, and reinvent their masculine identities, boys will draw on what they find most adaptive about being male. The force of human development drives each boy toward wholeness and connection. There is "unconstrained creativity" in how boys imagine their lives, according to Australian sociologist Raewyn Connell.¹¹⁷ Across the full ecology of institutions, beliefs, practices, and stereotypes constituting boyhood, the good news is that there is more support than ever for individual boys to resist the Man Box: to not just move

a little toward equality or step part of the way out of the box, but to bust out completely.

To grow this support into a movement, to the point that the losses and casualties of boyhood are truly aberrant instead of normal, its real costs must be faced. As detailed in this report, each boy is met with a remarkably thorough and too-often-restrictive socialization, from which no boy escapes undiminished. The routine losses and casualties of boyhood are most severe when a boy is on his own, unable to find any relationship in which to be himself, or when the overall press of boyhood is compounded by other pressures and overwhelms his will to fight. If he faces limited economic and educational opportunities, not to mention a legacy of white supremacy in the United States, the stakes become even higher. As one young man in a Promundo program mentioned: "For white guys, toxic masculinity is like a cold or the flu. For a boy of color, it's full-blown pneumonia."

Either people in boys' lives – parents, teachers, educators, coaches, policymakers, and media makers – create a boyhood that nurtures the qualities boys need to flourish – to attach, to develop their emotional and relational capacities, to engage in learning and living out their values – or boys will continue to be pressed into throwback identities that succeed less and less. Decades of brave women demanding equality have changed the United States and the world, demanding gender equality now. Harmful ideas of manhood and of boyhood are being called out every day. Change in the direction of a healthier, more egalitarian version of manhood is inevitable – the question is how quickly it comes and how many more generations of boys, girls, and others will be sacrificed.



Resources for the Boyhood Index

“good man”

PerryUndem. (2019). *Informing a campaign on healthy masculinity: Report on insights from in-depth interviews with boys ages 8-16*. PerryUndem Research/Communications.

feel comfortable

Barker, G., Heilman, B., & Reichert, M. (2020). *Staying at home with our sons: Fostering healthy masculinity in challenging times*. Promundo-US & Kering Foundation.

<https://promundoglobal.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/05/Fostering-Healthy-Masculinity-in-Challenging-Times.pdf>

society expects them

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