

Must boys be boys?

We expect boys to step outside the family too abruptly, with too little preparation for what lies in store, too little emotional support, not enough opportunity to express their feelings'

BY JANICE TURNER
LIFE WRITER

Boys are in deep trouble, and society's beliefs and expectations have put them there.

Not all boys, of course; but many of them — too many of them, argues Harvard Medical School psychologist William Pollack.

Society places boys in a "gender straightjacket," judging their behavior against dated ideas about masculinity and what it takes for a boy to become a man.

The biggest mistake we make, Pollack says, is pushing sons to separate from their mothers prematurely — as early as age 5 or 6 — expecting them to be independent in school, at camp, in all sorts of situations they may or may not be ready to handle.

Boys get a "second shove" in early adolescence — into new schools, sports competitions, jobs and dating.

The problem is not that we introduce our boys to the adult world, but how we do it.

"We expect them to step outside the family too abruptly, with too little preparation for what lies in store, too little emotional support, no option of going back or changing course," Pollack writes in *Real Boys: Rescuing Our Sons From The Myths of Boyhood* (Random House, \$32.95).

The results have been evident for many years.

Because we don't encourage boys to cry tears, some cry bullets

There are the public displays, the harrowing cases of school boys who've gone on killing sprees. And then there's what Pollack calls the silent crisis of the "boys next door" — the untold number of young males who are depressed, lonely and unable to express the way they feel.

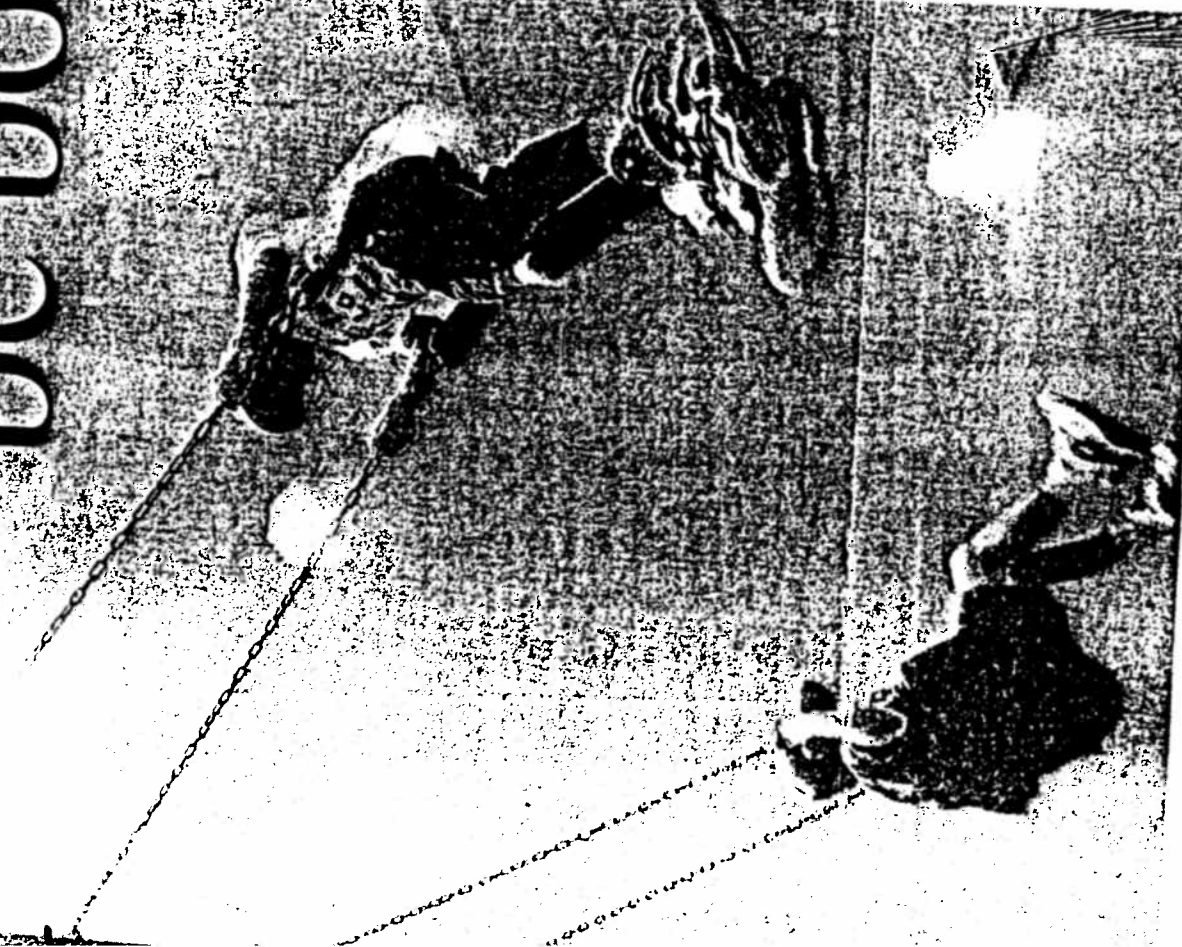
"We create our own nightmares — unwittingly," Pollack said in a recent interview.

"Boys are so cut off from being able to express vulnerable emotions, such as sadness, disappointment and fear, that it all comes out through the angry funnel," he says — anger that often exhibits itself as reckless or risk-taking behaviour.

There is violence all around us, an influence he readily acknowledges. However, all but the most disturbed boys wouldn't use it if they were raised in other ways, he says.

Because we don't encourage boys to cry tears, some cry bullets, he says.

And rather than trying to understand the pain that would make boys act out in violent ways, lawmakers instead talk about ways to be even



PETER POWERS/TORONTO STAR

JOY ON BOY: Society sees boys in a "gender straightjacket," says William Pollack, Ph.D. The Harvard Medical School psychologist says boys should be nurtured, rather than toughened up.

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BOBIS SPINNAK/ONTARIO STAR

Boys often denied own need for love

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gether on boys.

Boys have as much need for telling, learning and role-playing as girls, agrees Dr. Frey Armstrong, a Toronto children's psychiatrist. But too often they are denied their own needs for love, support and tendence.

He forced separation that lack of affection can actually hurt in infancy, in cases where baby boys are left to "cry it out," to cry themselves to sleep.

Research shows that male infants are more emotionally expressive than female infants, lack says. But in many instances, by the time they're in grade 2 their natural expressiveness — including their ability to express distress or hurt — has been socialized out of them.

The Boy Code, as Pollack says, is society's definition of what it means to be a boy and it demands that young males express or hide their emotions. Adhering to the code denies a boy until, ultimately, he loses touch with a spectrum of feelings.

Path to healthy adulthood is not tough solitude

When mothers and fathers tell their sons to separate from them, it is not usually because they wish to harm them. They believe it to be necessary. You're not going to get your boys into sisters and brothers going to ostracize early adolescence; society says that it's "good" to push away from the family, especially the nurturing mother. But I believe the opposite is true, Pollack says. "A boy will be the least when he is ready to be with you, better if he is there is someone there to help him if he falls."

Boys' path to healthy adulthood is not through self-reliance, autonomy and solitude, Pollack maintains. Boys need close relationships as much as girls do. When you treat a boy as a "man" you impact on who he becomes. Pollack insists. Boys are not products of nurturing; they are of nature.

He strongly believes that a boy's behaviour can be shaped by natural need for affection. He encourages and guides and any impulses toward aggression can be channelled into positive directions. He is an assistant clinical professor at the Harvard Medical School. He has done research with boys for almost 20 years. He predicts a future of energy in boys, a way in which that energy is channelled and expressed in our hands.

"All boys are not biologically destined to be more aggressive than girls," he adds. "Biology creates tendencies for boys and girls to behave differently, but it is not an absolute. All the qualities we traditionally associate with girls — such as empathy, sensitivity and compassion — are also basic male traits."

Pollack is a founding member of the Society for the Psychological Study of Men and Masculinity of the American Psychological Association. Much of the book is derived from his recent study called "Listening to Boys' Voices," in which he researches colleagues and Pollack are studying hundreds of young and adolescent boys, through testing, by observing them in various situations and by talking with their parents.

His work is part of what is being dubbed as an emerging boys' movement, spawned by researchers who are highlighting the difficulties of being a young male in North American culture. Many adolescent boys — just like girls — suffer from a crisis of self-confidence and identity, they say.

The movement raises the red flag when it comes to depression and related behaviours (irritable, confrontational, substance abuse, etc.), learning disabilities and suicide risks. But it also seeks to help parents and teachers understand what makes boys tick. Rather than minimize them as "aggressive," the authors note in this spring issue of The New York Times.

Some sociologists suggest that boys end up in trouble because society tries to punish and control their much more so than girls. The boys, in turn, resent it and strike back against authority.

What generalizations about boys, do they hold, according to Pollack? "Boys, for the most part, enjoy play that is competitive, physically rough, and forceful. They like games that involve interaction in large groups, and take place in large spaces, that follow rules and have a hierarchy of authority. Many girls prefer to learn by watching, not listening. Boys prefer to learn by doing. Many are interested in sports, are not geared to the way boys learn and when a boy acts up out of boredom or restlessness, the tendency is to believe he has behavioural problems."

Parents' and education should understand that boys have a need to push the envelope. As one commentator put it: "Boys can be pushed, but they can't be pushed too far, but they can't prevent them from pushing." Boys tend to develop their own style of showing love, affection and empathy that is generally quite different from that of girls. "Boys, especially, may wish to share feelings with their sons by doing things for them, rather than talking them down and talk

Across the board, we need do a better job of reading signs, Pollack says. We need give them the opportunity signal that they want to connect.

A girl who has been taunted or ridiculed may come back from school and run into her mother's arms. A boy in pain will often be silent and retreat to his room.

Don't run after him, but do give up on him either, Pollack advises. "Give him some space to collect himself and look for the indirect signal that he's ready to connect," he says.

That signal may be in the form of a question, something as general as "Is dinner ready yet?" or "Is so-and-so coming home soon?"

Recognizing that moment is critical because it may be a parent's one chance to find out what's wrong. Rather than probe, simply state that you realize that he's feeling sad.

In a two-parent situation when a boy seeks comfort from his mother, his father should be fully supportive. And if he chooses to enjoy some rough play with his father, his mother should view it as a valid way of communicating and blowing off steam.

"How important are dads' empathy and his involvement with his son during infancy and early childhood days, especially through a boy's life — notably during the turbulent years of adolescence."

When fathers are actively involved in their sons' lives, the boys turn out to be less aggressive, less overly competitive and better able to express feelings of vulnerability and sadness, Pollack says.

I think boys are becoming less tied to the macho image

An 11-year study that followed boys from the age of 7 to 22 showed the more shared activities a boy had with his father, the more confident he became. The closer the emotional bond between the two, the lower the incidence of social delinquency.

Toronto's Armstrong, who has worked with parents of troubled teens for more than 20 years, says that boys are becoming less tied to the macho image.

There are lots of places where male anger is just not accepted anymore, he says. "I don't think boys are becoming more expressive and less tied to the macho image. I think many of them are more sensitive, caring and verbal than a whole bunch of girls. But you can't generalize, because there are many different kinds of boys," he says.

Growing Pains by Louise Brown

Book offers advice on raising 'real boys'

Dr. William Pollack gives the following advice in his book *Real Boys*:

At least once a day, give your son your undivided attention. While he may not want to talk — he may just want to play a game or get some help on his homework — you're providing an opportunity for him to share things with you.

It's not important that he always unload heavy emotions. He may signal that he wants to talk about something, but at some later point.

What is essential is that he feels your regular loving presence.

Encourage the expression of a full range of emotions. Use a broad range of words — sad, disappointed, scared, nervous. Limiting the discussion of negative feelings to "anger" causes boys to channel the gamut of their feelings into one word and one emotion.

When a boy expresses vulnerable feelings, avoid teasing or taunting him. Don't cut off painful emotions. Empathy helps boys to learn how to express and cope with a broad range of sentiments.

Avoid using shaming language. Rather than asking, for example, "How could you do that?" instead ask "What's go-

ing on?" or "What happened?"

- Look behind anger, aggression and rambunctiousness. In many cases, a boy who is angry, displays a lot of aggression, or is constantly rambunctious is indirectly asking to help. Try your best to get a sense of what he is feeling. What's motivating his behaviour?

- Express your love and enjoy it openly and generously. Cutting off your affection and your support to let him "stand on his own two feet" can traumatize him.

Tell your son that you love him as often as you like. Give him plenty of hugs.

- Let boys know that the don't need to be "sturdy oaks." No boy should be called upon to be the tough one. Talk to him honestly about your own fear and vulnerabilities and encourage him to do the same.

The more genuine he feels he can be with you, the more he'll be free to express his vulnerability and the stronger he'll become.

- Create a model of masculinity that is wide and inclusive. When you give your son a sense that there is no single way of being manly, you're helping him develop confidence about who he really is.