

The fragile state of boyhood

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KANSAS CITY, Mo. - Here, sadly, is where boys rule: Learning disorders. Dropout rates. Violence. Stuttering. Obesity. Gambling and video game fixations. School suspensions. Hyperactivity. D's and F's and general disengagement, despite medication to sharpen attention. In the above matters, boys outnumber girls 2-to-1, at least. Within the swelling ranks of kids deemed autistic or dyslexic, it's 4-to-1. Suicide, 5-to-1.

As for violence, the numbers have always been boy-crazy: Males make up about 90 percent of all juvenile arrests for violent crimes, and boys are 10 times more likely than girls to be the victims.

To be sure, a mostly healthy sea of young males still shimmers with honor students, scholarship athletes, great artists, writers, musicians and champs at chess and science fairs. They're happy, eager for the future. And unless career trends radically shift, our sons likely will benefit from economic inequities that tend to turn against our daughters when they grow up.

Yet boys, girls, parents, teachers, counselors, principals, psychologists and juvenile court workers voiced common concern to The Kansas City Star: It's not always so awesome being a boy, beyond age 9 or so. They're moodier and more breakable than we once thought.

"Boys are in trouble," says Harvard clinical psychologist William Pollack, who co-directs McLean Hospital's Center for Men in Belmont, Mass. "And it's not just boys with AK-47s out on the streets who are dropping out, struggling, angry at the world.

"We're talking about the boy next door."
Gender gaps in achievement are widest, and growing wider, in low-income and minority communities, where girls now double boys heading to college. But even in plush suburbs, the worry about boys arises daily.

Many more girls than boys tell pollsters they think they're overweight. But federal health surveys show many more boys really are.

This year first lady Laura Bush, mother of two daughters, flagged boys as a demographic in crisis. At a recent White House conference, she highlighted their struggles and the need for involved fathers.

She and others pointing out problems also see hopeful signs. For boys as well as girls, rates of teen suicide, violent crime, drug use and dropping out have fallen in the past 15 years. Test scores on most subjects are climbing. Community programs to promote better fathering sprout nationwide.

Where such progress has been charted, however, gains tend to be more dramatic for girls, while boys seem stuck in place, especially in education. On college campuses, female Americans have outnumbered males for the last quarter-century.

Johnny's troubles - and how to fix them - spread across a cultural minefield. Even the adage "boys will be boys" is charged: Can't we "soften" them, as the latest books on boyhood urge - or do we harm them by messing with their nature?

At least one guide for teachers, "101 Ways to Empower a Girl," suggests making no excuses for unruliness among boys: "Get 'boys will be boys' out of your vocabulary."

Feminist groups such as the Ms. Foundation are calling on society to "reconstruct masculinity." They say tough, traditional codes compel too many boys to turn to aggression, hide their feelings, reject school as uncool and race through childhood.

"Every boy has heard it: 'Be a man!'" says eighth-grader Jonathan Routh in his English class in Kansas, where a discussion of gender issues fills an hour. "Am I right, guys?" and they agree.

Others argue that boys have fallen prey to those forces bent on "vilifying masculinity." "Just let our boys be boys," says Gwyn Hunley, whose son agonized for years over his studies before graduating from high school in 2004. "Let them make all the mistakes they want, you know?"

Surveys show that today's boys, maybe as a result of restrictive environments, are less apt than girls to take leadership roles in school governments or newspapers. "I'd never given it much thought, but I'm the student body president and the vice president is female, too," says Simone Henry, a senior at a formerly all-boy school in Kansas City. "Even the popular and strongest athletes at Pembroke, I'd say, are female."

Boys who don't cluster at the top of academic and societal pecking orders - and plenty still do - often sink to the bottom.

"It seems clear that females get better grades than males in school in every subject," writes psychologist Diane Halpern in "Sex Differences in Cognitive Abilities." "Paradoxically, girls get better grades than boys even in (subjects) in which boys score higher on ability tests," such as advanced math.

In other scoring, national data reveal Johnny tends not to read as well as Jessica, or as much. He lags in language skills in most developed nations of the world.

Even boys doing well admit being confused about where they will land in a world of ever-shifting gender roles and low-paying McJobs. Some mourn for dads who left or never were around.

"I've never seen a picture of my father or anything," says Christian Spray, 17, a talented artist spending study hour in the cafeteria sketching the image of a woman with flaming hair. "I can't easily express my emotions; my troubles are too deep. I hold so many things in." Later, in an essay, Christian urges fathers to take responsibility for the sons they bring into the world.

Many other boys seem almost physically unable to meet schools' mounting expectations to multitask, read a lot, sit still, juggle daily planners and squeeze into their nights of video gaming enough homework to stay afloat.

Local adults who work with boys are increasingly familiar with those like Nate, 16. That's his name on Xanga, an Internet sounding board popular among teens willing to bare all to anyone who logs on.

Just another kid from a crowded high school, Nate recently introduced himself in his online journal as follows: "To those who live outside of the inner Nate, i seem truly stressless, but . . . between school, homework, work and keeping everything sane in the household, i feel as though i should be 40 now."

Conrad writes: "I like to draw and generally be a loser."
David, a wrestler: "Dear God. Make everyone die. Amen."
In more than 20 years of working with grade-schoolers, "you see from time to time those boys who look so angry that, immediately, you feel sorry for them," says third-grade teacher Linda Horton. "I don't think I've ever seen that look in the girls."

Lawyer Arthur Benson, who for decades represented children in the desegregation lawsuit against Kansas City public schools, says, "Perhaps in building up girls these last several years, we took our eye off the boys."

Public anxieties about boys have shot up and down forever.
Sociologists cite the Industrial Revolution of the late 19th century as a tipping point for concerns that would build through later generations. Factory jobs took boys from family farms and trades, where they had worked closely with fathers.

The slur "sissy" dates to the start of the 20th century. A culture fearing for the future of masculinity gave rise to the Boy Scouts of America in 1905. A popular advice book of the era quickened the drumbeat to save the naturally scrappy lad: At school, only "if he fights more than, let us say, a half-dozen times a week (is he) probably over-quarrelsome."

When the hand-wringing wasn't over gender stereotypes, it was over political order.
The Depression fueled fears about small-town boys searching for work in the cities, where they might drift toward socialism or worse. "There was real concern we might get our own version of Hitler youth," says Stephen Mintz, author of "Huck's Raft: A History of American Childhood."

Davy Crockett caps of the 1950s symbolized broad efforts "to instill a male hero-worship in boys - done quite consciously," he says. G.I. Joe figures hit shelves in 1964. But then came an unraveling - a distrust of institutions of any kind - as young, stringy-haired men set fire to draft cards.

Boys got high with girls. Polls of the 1970s and 1980s showed most having sex in high school. Their parents drifted apart, however, as divorce reached new highs.

"Anything goes" gave way to an era of zero tolerance, warning stickers on raunchy albums and abstinence taught in class.

By century's end, those schoolyard fistfights allowed in the early 1900s seemed almost quaint. Urban gang warfare and suburban school shootings in the 1990s laid bare new mutations of boy rage.

The new century finds millions of schoolchildren stepping through metal detectors or subjected to random locker searches. And about 10 percent of boys age 12 are medicated for hyperactivity, the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention estimates.

Some blame a vacuum of strong role models in a boy's orbit. Some blame bad parenting. Some blame violence in entertainment. Some blame schools that are too large, underfunded and failing to teach skills that really matter in life and work.

Some blame a culture of control.
"We've created social environments not very tolerant of (impulsive) behavior," says Mintz. "We demand more discipline. We're making kids sit in school for longer hours, with shorter summer breaks. We've cut recess 40 percent. You want a recipe for boys bouncing off the walls? That's it."

The eighth-graders in Martha Howard's English classes are about 13, too young to know a different time.

Indian Hills Middle School in Prairie Village, Kan., produces some of the highest scores of public schools in the region. Last spring, 22 percent of students scored "exemplary" in reading - nearly double the Kansas average. But a gender breakdown reveals that of those in the exemplary range, the number of girls was twice the number of boys.

Twice as many boys as girls scored "basic" or below.

The boys posted top scores, however, in social studies and science at Indian Hills. It is the sought-after suburban school on a rolling lawn, winner of a national award for its 2004 mock elections.

Yet even here, the kids agree: Something's eating at boys. One has "HATE" written in black marker on his knuckles.

A girl can't believe "my stepbrother wrote a report on Warcraft!" the video game.

Another boy, Kaevan Tavakolinia, speaks thoughtfully about his peers wrapping themselves in a macho cool, dismissing any desire to impress teachers.

"I can't even say I enjoy the company of a lot of boys - we operate on ego so much."

And impulse.

By 13, psychologists say, a boy's self-identity is well rooted. But the frontal lobe of his brain still needs another decade of development, perhaps two decades, to ward off immature impulses.

In Howard's class, impulse makes "guys blurt out answers whether they're called on or not," says Beck Johnson from his desk. "The girls want to be called on."

Impulse also draws more boys than girls to Texas Hold `Em, a popular poker game outside of class.

Asked how many in the class had put down a money bet, 11 of the 12 boys raise their hands, eliciting slight gasps from adults. Only three girls put their hands up. One boy jokes of losing \$175 on the Super Bowl and "seeing the shock on my mom's face. Priceless."

That's the impulsive part of a boy's brain firing - taking risks as a means "to escape, to relieve boredom, to diminish sadness, to feel in control and less shy," says California psychologist Durand Jacobs, a pioneer in the emerging study of youth gambling.

In fact, neurologists see parallels between the serotonin rushes that excite problem gamblers - an out-of-body sensation where time seems to shrink - and the brain impulses of boys (and girls) playing long hours on video games.

"Video games are just so cool," says a new voice, usually quiet - a good student - from the center of class.

His hands curl into fists: "You don't know how often I come home angry.

"And maybe I want to hit my brother because of something that happened at school. I'll go into the basement and play video games for an hour or two and be so completely relieved of all that stress and anger."

Some of the boys nod. One girl nods, too.

"Then I hit my brother," he says, and everybody laughs.