



April 2023 News and Notes

The Boy Crisis and What We Can do About It

By Robin Joy Berenson, PhD, LMFT

“Is there really a boy crisis?” Warren Farrell, PhD, asked at the outset of his presentation. “If there is, why don’t we know, and why aren’t we doing anything about it?”

The evidence of such a crisis is significant: Boys are falling behind girls in every academic subject in all 53 of the largest developed nations. Boys and men are 98% of the mass shooters. Male IQs are dropping, and sperm counts declining by 60%. Boys commit suicide at five times the rate of girls, despite the fact that girls have the same upbringing and access to the same education, and more.

“Given that this evidence is so amazing,” he asks, “why aren’t we drawn to it?”

Dr. Farrell pointed to two reasons for this crisis: Throughout history, young men have been asked to be the hero, to sacrifice themselves for the good of others. This includes fighting wars and undertaking such dangerous jobs as coal mining. In doing so, we ask them to suppress feelings of fear and vulnerability.

A second reason is, given the rise in divorce and single-mother households, American families are “Dad deprived.” This is unfair to everyone, including women struggling to raise their boys alone. Among the most at risk are homeless children, who in addition to losing father



involvement, feel rejected and lack social skills, resulting in difficulty interacting with peers.

The high rate of male suicide, Dr. Farrell stated, “is a reflection of how we fail boys on their way to manhood.” Lack of “dad involvement” is the biggest factor in suicide.

Differences Between Mom-Parenting and Dad-Parenting

Fathers engage in more rough housing and teasing. They often offer more activities out of doors, especially overnight, and encourage more risk taking. Dads are better at boundary setting and leveraging consequences for behavior, allowing both for failure and success.

It’s vital that boys have male role models in their lives. Parents should strive to get boys involved in situations where they are with other boys, such as boy’s clubs and sports, especially with male coaches. Team sports teach both discipline and social skills, through interaction with peers.

Faith-based communities offer good opportunities for interacting with responsible male figures. Dr. Farrell gave the example of the priest who holds weekly meetings with 7 to 8 boys to talk about what happened during the week, whether it was homework, bullying, or other topics.

Important to See “Behind the Mask”

Through regular contact and communication with peers in such settings, boys come to see that others have fears and feelings just as they do. It provides the opportunity for them to see “behind the mask” that society requires of males in particular.



The important goal is to allow boys to recognize their feelings and the feelings of others, and to allow them to express themselves. This, in turn, promotes the development of compassion for both themselves and others. The development of compassion empowers youth, both daughters and sons, to be their real selves, and represents the biggest gift parents can provide.

Suggestions

As to what parents can do to overcome these challenges, the presenter offered specific suggestions.

Outside activities Dr. Farrell stressed again the importance of spending time out of doors, especially overnight. “There is something magical about being outside.”

Hang out time Scheduled times for family members, especially son and dad, where it feels safe to share feelings, to let those feelings be heard. “Allow the boy to be self-criticizing,” he advises.

Family dinner nights It’s very important that the family come together to listen to one another. Children need to hear their parents’ needs and concerns, and receive multiple perspectives.

Communication with peers Parents should encourage their boys to reach out to fellow classmates, teammates, and so on.

Help daughters understand Parents can suggest that their daughter imagine her father and grandfather as boys. What were their dreams and hopes? This helps her identify with them, and understand the sacrifices



they made in becoming adults. Encourage her to follow up with them to talk about it.

The Goal

The ultimate goal, Dr. Farrell maintains, is “gender liberation,” that is, more flexibility within our expectations of boys and men, women and girls, allowing both sons and daughters to experience the power of being, and expressing, their true selves.

This will be the “next evolutionary shift” in our society: “To do for our sons what we’ve done for our daughters.”