The Feminization of American Schools

There is growing recognition that American school-age boys are not doing well. In fact, many of our sons are experiencing significant problems both inside and outside of the classroom. This is ironic since educators have been concerned primarily about girls since a 1990 report released by the American Association of University Women claimed that girls are the ones being shortchanged in school.

However, recent statistics reveal that from the elementary years and beyond, girls get better grades than boys and generally fare better in school.{1} Although girls have all but eliminated the much-discussed math and science gap with boys, boys' scores in reading and writing have been on the decline for years. At the end of eighth grade, boys are held back 50 percent more often, and girls are twice as likely to say that they want to pursue a professional career.{2} Boys are twice as likely to be labeled "learning disabled" and in some schools are ten times more likely to be diagnosed with learning disorders such as ADD. Boys now make up two thirds of our special education classes and account for 71 percent of all school suspensions.{3} There is also evidence that boys suffer from low self-esteem and lack confidence as learners.{4}

As high school seniors, girls have higher educational goals than boys, are more likely to enroll in college, and once there, are more likely to complete a bachelor's degree in five years.{5} The majority of those receiving master's degrees are now women and the percentage of males seeking professional degrees is declining every year.{6} Boys are not faring much better outside the classroom either. Boys are three times more likely to be a victim of a violent crime and between four to six times more likely to commit suicide.{7}

While there is little controversy that a problem exists, widely divergent causes and solutions are being offered. Dr. William Pollack, who among other things is a faculty member of the Harvard Medical School and a founding member of the Society for the Psychological Study of Men and Masculinity of the American Psychological Association, has written a book titled *Real Boys: Rescuing Our Sons from the Myths of Boyhood*. He argues that a false masculinity is being forced on our boys, one that disconnects them from themselves. In a very general sense, our boys need to get back in touch with who they really are. Christina Hoff Sommers, a W. H. Brady Fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, takes an opposing view. She believes that our boys suffer from a school environment that favors feminine traits and that attempts to squeeze boys into an androgynous mold from which they naturally rebel.

Although both of these authors could be wrong, they most certainly cannot both be right. In this article we will consider the arguments and attempt to discover what needs to be done to help our boys.

Losing the Inner Boy

One popular viewpoint among feminists contends that boys are suffering from masculinity myths which, when enforced, work to squeeze them into a gender straightjacket. According to this theory, outmoded notions about masculinity cause parents to push boys away from their mothers too soon, resulting in a life long sense of anxiety and permanent damage to self-esteem. This is the viewpoint of Harvard professor William Pollack in his book *Real Boys: Rescuing Our Sons from the Myths of Boyhood*.

What are these masculine myths that Dr. Pollack feels are so dangerous? The first myth is that nature wins out over nurture, in other words, that boys will be boys. The assumption here is that testosterone is more powerful in shaping behavior than relationships and training are. The

second myth is that boys *should* be boys. This dangerous myth supports the idea that boys should learn to be tough and never exhibit feminine traits. Myth number three is that boys are toxic. Where girls have a civilizing effect on the environment, boys are by nature dangerous and potentially damaging to those around them.

When these myths are used as a guide to raising boys, Dr. Pollack believes that we damage our children. In our desire to make boys into tough, competitive men, they lose touch with who they really are, their "inner boy," and as a result they become angry, dysfunctional adult males likely to abuse their wives and neglect their children.

Much of what Dr. Pollack says about boys rings true. He wants us to raise boys who are able to be empathetic, compassionate, and to appreciate the full spectrum of human behavior. Unfortunately, he defines gender roles so broadly that he leaves us with few discernable boundaries. It appears that Dr. Pollack would agree with feminist Gloria Steinem who recently advocated that "we need to raise boys like we raise girls."{8}

According to Dr. Pollack homosexuality is no longer controversial. It is normal. And much of the damage done to young boys is the result of homophobia. Unfortunately, what he considers to be the strongest scientific evidence for the biological roots of homosexuality is a study done in the 1950's.{9} He ignores recent research that greatly reduces the strength of his argument.

The only guideline that seems to matter to professor Pollack is whether or not a specific behavior makes a boy happy. Happiness is all that counts, even if a boy feels that happiness lies in the homosexual lifestyle, or in a promiscuous heterosexual one. Humanistic psychology really doesn't have much else to go on. The biblical concept that a holy God might have created male and female with distinct roles in mind does not enter into the picture.

Therefore, let us consider a response to the popular ideas of Dr. Pollack.

The Androgynous Zone

The 1990's brought to bear a number of powerful ideas on the way schools look at and treat boys. Carol Gilligan, Harvard's first professor of gender studies, wrote a book in the early '80s that described how young girls lose their self-esteem when they reach adolescence. The American Association of University Women built on her work in the early 90s by releasing a survey that announced that girls were victims of a "male-voiced" culture and, as a result, lose self-esteem when they reach the age of twelve or thirteen. Successful lobbying of Congress resulted in passage of the Gender Equity Act in 1994 that categorized girls as an under-served population, placing them on par with other oppressed minorities.

Since then teachers and administrators have been deluged with gender equity materials and conferences sponsored by the Department of Education. However, what really panicked school administrators was a 1999 Supreme Court decision that applied sexual harassment laws to school children. The decision resulted from a lawsuit by the family of a ten-year-old Monroe, Georgia, girl because of the school's failure to prevent her harassment by a ten-year-old boy. With the threat of expensive lawsuits over their heads, principals could not refuse to inject gender politics into their schools.

An example of the kind of information being disseminated can be gleaned from statements made by the director of the Women's Educational Equity Act Publishing Center, Katherine Hanson. Hanson has argued that four million women are beaten to death every year in America, that violence is the leading cause of death among women, and that the leading cause of injury among women is being beaten by a man at home.{10} These would be shocking statistics if they were true. Actually, one million women die in this country each year with the leading cause of

death being heart disease, followed by cancer.{11} Homicide is far down the list, after suicide.{12}

Why do gender equity leaders feel the need to exaggerate the abuse of women in our society? It is because they want to establish a radical retraining of America's boys. Feminists like Dr. Nancy Marshall of the Wellesley College Center for Research on Women believe that gender is a totally learned concept. She states that "when babies are born, they do not know about gender."{13} In other words, little boys have to learn what it means to be a boy. She believes that this happens between the ages of two to seven. In a slide show presented by Ms. Marshall, she explained that "a young mind is like Jell-O: you learn to fill it up with all the good stuff before it sets."{14} The good stuff constitutes the feminization of boys. To make her point, she returned several times to the image of a pre-school boy dressed up in high heels and a dress.

Gender Politics in the Classroom

Gender crusaders believe that if they can influence little boys early enough, they can make them more like little girls. Feminist philosopher Sandra Lee Bartky writes that human beings are born bisexual and through conditioning are "transformed into male and female gender personalities."{15} William Pollack, a Harvard psychologist, argues that by doing away with traditional male stereotypes the next generation of boys "will be able to safely stay in the doll corner as long as they wish, without being taunted."{16} Age appropriate doll playing by boys is not a problem. Yet it becomes one when it is the center of an attempt to redefine what it means to be male.

The Department of Education supported the writing of a model curriculum for day care providers called *Creating Sex-Fair Family Day Care*.{17} It seems that the main goal of the curriculum is, again, to get boys to play with dolls. Of its

ten photographs, two are of boys with dolls. Instructors are warned to "avoid highly feminine dolls such as Barbie or highly masculine dolls such as G.I. Joe."{18} They also urge instructors to monitor the children's fantasy play. If gender stereotypes are acted out, adults should be ready to intervene. According to the authors, without gender neutral child rearing, "we cannot fulfill our dreams of equality for all people."{19}

A teacher in San Francisco is going one step further. She has transformed her classroom into a woman-centered community of learners. All the images in the classroom are of women, and as one feminist noted "perhaps for the first time, boys are the ones looking through the window."{20} While each student is required toperform a dramatic dialogue in the author's voice, the boys are forced to do works by women. One little boy attempts to lip-synch a song by blues singer Etta James, and when the other boys giggle they are chastised for their insensitivity.{21} During a history class the girls are encouraged to discuss how boys are sexual predators. The teacher is excited to see how angry the girls are getting. Although one boy tries to defend his gender, another admits to an interviewer, "I couldn't really defend myself, because it's true. Men are pigs, you know?"{22}

Schools are denying the very behavior that makes little boys boys. In Southern California, a mother was stunned to find out that her son was disciplined for running and jumping over a bench at recess.{23} Studies in England have shown that boys benefit from competition in school. However, in deference to the female tendency to learn more in cooperative groups, competition of all types is being purged from the schoolhouse. Sixty percent of American high schools no longer use class rankings or announce valedictorians.{24} Referring to the hostility towards honor rolls, one principal has stated, "It flies in the face of the philosophy of not making it so competitive for those little kids…We even frown on spelling

bees."{25}

Biblical Masculinity

Feminists argue that we only have two models of masculinity to pick from. On the one hand, we have the self-centered, win-at-all-costs, barbaric, macho mentality portrayed by the stereotypical high school football coach. They contend that this model produces boys who beat, rape, and generally oppress women. It is also blamed for the bloodshed on high school campuses in Colorado, Arkansas, and elsewhere. The other model, the one offered by feminists, calls for a "profound revolution," one that will change the way society constructs young males.{26} It hopes to eliminate stereotypical boyish behavior such as roughhousing and aggressive competition. In fact, they hope the future will look more like the Philadelphia school which has "replaced the traditional recess with 'socialized recesses,' in which children are assigned structured activities and carefully monitored" so that gender stereotypes are extinguished.{27}

I would like to endorse a third model of masculinity. This biblical model defines mature masculinity as "a sense of benevolent responsibility to lead, provide for and protect women in ways appropriate to a man's differing relationships" with the opposite sex.{28} This biblical model assumes a number of things to be true about gender. First of all, God created men and women to complement each other. Both are equally valuable to God and His kingdom, but each have different God-given roles. Second, it looks to the servant leadership model depicted by Christ's role as head of the church, for which He suffered and died.

Boys who embrace this ideal of mature masculinity would not stand by and allow women to be abused physically or sexually, as has recently occurred in a Central Park celebration. Nor would they personally take advantage of a woman without violating their own definition of what it means to be a man.

This picture of masculinity allows men to be nurturing and sensitive. It doesn't prohibit them from being chefs or nurses. It does define, in an ultimate sense, how a man is to perceive a woman. He is to treat all women, starting with his mother, as worthy of being honored and protected. When men's competitive, physically active natures are focused on this purpose, women will find our society a much safer place in which to dwell.

It will be an uphill battle to restore this kind of thinking in our schools, especially when the trend is going in the opposite direction. However, as parents we have considerable influence on our boys and young men. A biblical ethic should be communicated clearly and often as our boys grow older, and specifically when they begin to have significant relationships with girls. To allow the feminist model to dominate will result in frustrated boys who are stymied in their God-given role to lead, provide for, and protect the women in their lives.

Re-engineering boys in the name of egalitarianism will not only fail, but do damage to countless normal children in our schools.

Notes

1. William Pollack, *Real Boys: Rescuing Our Sons from the Myths of Boyhood*, (New York: Henry Holt and Company, 1998), 15.
2. Ibid.
3. Ibid.
4. Ibid., xxiii
5. "Education Week" (Vol. XIX, #34, May 3, 2000), 1.
6. Pollack, 15.
7. Ibid.
8. Christina Hoff Sommers, *The War Against Boys*, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999), 44.
9. Pollack, 214.

10. Ibid., 48.
11. Ibid., 49.
12. Ibid.
13. bid., 74.
14. Ibid.
15. Ibid., 86.
16.Ibid.
17. Ibid., 76.
18. Ibid., 77.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid., 81.
21. Ibid., 82.
22. Ibid., 83.
23. Ibid., 94.
24. Ibid., 169.
25. Ibid.
26. Ibid., 85.
27. Ibid., 95.
28.John Piper and Wayne Grudem, *Recovering Biblical Manhood & Womanhood*, (Wheaton, IL: Crossway Books, 1991), 36.

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