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CHAPTER ONE**Real Boys**

Rescuing Our Sons From the Myths of Boyhood

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PART ONE

REAL BOYS

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INSIDE THE WORLD OF BOYS:
BEHIND THE MASK OF

MASCULINITY

"I get a little down," Adam confessed, "but I'm very good at hiding it. It's like I wear a mask. Even when the kids call me names or taunt me, I never show them how much it crushes me inside. I keep it all in."

THE BOY CODE: "EVERYTHING'S JUST FINE"

Adam is a fourteen-year-old boy whose mother sought me out after a workshop I was leading on the subject of boys and families. Adam, she told me, had been performing very well in school, but now she felt something was wrong.

Adam had shown such promise that he had been selected to join a special program for talented students, and the program was available only at a different--and more academically prestigious--school than the one Adam had attended. The new school was located in a well-to-do section of town, more affluent than Adam's own neighborhood. Adam's mother had been pleased when her son had qualified for the program and even more delighted that he would be given a scholarship to pay for it. And so Adam had set off on this new life.

At the time we talked, Mrs. Harrison's delight had turned to worry. Adam was not doing well at the new school. His grades were mediocre, and at midterm he had been

given a warning that he might fail algebra. Yet Adam continued to insist, "I'm fine. Everything's just fine." He said this both at home and at school. Adam's mother was perplexed, as was the guidance counselor at his new school. "Adam seems cheerful and has no complaints," the counselor told her. "But something must be wrong." His mother tried to talk to Adam, hoping to find out what was troubling him and causing him to do so poorly in school. "But the more I questioned him about what was going on," she said, "the more he continued to deny any problems."

Adam was a quiet and rather shy boy, small for his age. In his bright blue eyes I detected an inner pain, a malaise whose cause I could not easily fathom. I had seen a similar look on the faces of a number of boys of different ages, including many boys in the "Listening to Boys' Voices" study. Adam looked wary, hurt, closed-in, self-protective. Most of all, he looked alone.

One day, his mother continued, Adam came home with a black eye. She asked him what had happened. "Just an accident," Adam had mumbled. He'd kept his eyes cast down, she remembered, as if he felt guilty or ashamed. His mother probed more deeply. She told him that she knew something was wrong, something upsetting was going on, and that--whatever it was--they could deal with it, they could face it together. Suddenly, Adam erupted in tears, and the story he had been holding inside came pouring out.

Adam was being picked on at school, heckled on the bus, goaded into fights in the schoolyard. "Hey, White Trash!" the other boys shouted at him. "You don't belong here with us!" taunted a twelfth-grade bully. "Why don't you go back to your own side of town!" The taunts often led to physical attacks, and Adam found himself having to fight back in order to defend himself. "But I never throw the first punch," Adam explained to his mother. "I don't show them they can hurt me. I don't want to embarrass myself in front of everybody."

I turned to Adam. "How do you feel about all this?" I asked. "How do you handle your feelings of anger and frustration?" His answer was, I'm sad to say, a refrain I hear often when I am able to connect to the inner lives of boys.

"I get a little down," Adam confessed, "but I'm very good at hiding it. It's like I wear a mask. Even when the kids call me names or taunt me, I never show them how much it crushes me inside. I keep it all in."

"What do you do with the sadness?" I asked.

"I tend to let it boil inside until I can't hold it any longer, and then it explodes. It's like I have a breakdown, screaming and yelling. But I only do it inside my own room at home, where nobody can hear. Where nobody will know about it." He paused a moment. "I think I got this from my dad, unfortunately."

Adam was doing what I find so many boys do: he was hiding behind a mask, and using it to hide his deepest thoughts and feelings--his real self--from everyone, even the people closest to him. This mask of masculinity enabled Adam to make a bold (if

inaccurate) statement to the world: "I can handle it. Everything's fine. I am invincible."

Adam, like other boys, wore this mask as an invisible shield, a persona to show the outside world a feigned self-confidence and bravado, and to hide the shame he felt at his feelings of vulnerability, powerlessness, and isolation. He couldn't handle the school situation alone--very few boys or girls of fourteen could--and he didn't know how to ask for help, even from people he knew loved him. As a result, Adam was unhappy and was falling behind in his academic performance.

Many of the boys I see today are like Adam, living behind a mask of masculine bravado that hides the genuine self to conform to our society's expectations; they feel it is necessary to cut themselves off from any feelings that society teaches them are unacceptable for men and boys--fear, uncertainty, feelings of loneliness and need.

Many boys, like Adam, also think it's necessary that they handle their problems alone. A boy is not expected to reach out--to his family, his friends, his counselors, or coaches--for help, comfort, understanding, and support. And so he is simply not as close as he could be to the people who love him and yearn to give him the human connections of love, caring, and affection every person needs.

The problem for those of us who want to help is that, on the outside, the boy who is having problems may seem cheerful and resilient while keeping inside the feelings that don't fit the male model--being troubled, lonely, afraid, desperate. Boys learn to wear the mask so skillfully--in fact, they don't even know they're doing it--that it can be difficult to detect what is really going on when they are suffering at school, when their friendships are not working out, when they are being bullied, becoming depressed, even dangerously so, to the point of feeling suicidal. The problems below the surface become obvious only when boys go "over the edge" and get into trouble at school, start to fight with friends, take drugs or abuse alcohol, are diagnosed with clinical depression or attention deficit disorder, erupt into physical violence, or come home with a black eye, as Adam did. Adam's mother, for example, did not know from her son that anything was wrong until Adam came home with an eye swollen shut; all she knew was that he had those perplexingly poor grades.

THE GENDER STRAITJACKET

Many years ago, when I began my research into boys, I had assumed that since America was revising its ideas about girls and women, it must have also been reevaluating its traditional ideas about boys, men, and masculinity. But over the years my research findings have shown that as far as boys today are concerned, the old Boy Code--the outdated and constricting assumptions, models, and rules about boys that our society has used since the nineteenth century--is still operating in force. I have been surprised to find that even in the most progressive schools and the most politically correct communities in every part of the country and in families of all types, the Boy Code continues to affect the behavior of all of us--the boys themselves, their parents, their teachers, and society as a whole. None of us is

immune--it is so ingrained. I have caught myself behaving in accordance with the code, despite my awareness of its falseness--denying sometimes that I'm emotionally in pain when in fact I am; insisting that everything is all right, when it is not.

The Boy Code puts boys and men into a gender straitjacket that constrains not only them but everyone else, reducing us all as human beings, and eventually making us strangers to ourselves and to one another--or, at least, not as strongly connected to one another as we long to be.

OPHELIA'S BROTHERS

In Shakespeare's *Hamlet*, Ophelia is lover to the young prince of Denmark. Despondent over the death of his father, Hamlet turns away from Ophelia. She, in turn, is devastated and she eventually commits suicide. In recent years, Mary Pipher's book on adolescent girls, *Reviving Ophelia*, has made Ophelia a symbolic figure for troubled, voiceless adolescent girls. But what of Hamlet? What of Ophelia's brothers?

For Hamlet fared little better than Ophelia. Alienated from himself, as well as from his mother and father, he was plagued by doubt and erupted in uncontrolled outbursts. He grew increasingly isolated, desolate, and alone, and those who loved him were never able to get through to him. In the end, he died a tragic and unnecessary death.

The boys we care for, much like the girls we cherish, often seem to feel they must live semi-inauthentic lives, lives that conceal much of their true selves and feelings, and studies show they do so in order to fit in and be loved. The boys I see--in the "Listening to Boys' Voices" study, in schools, and in private practice--often are hiding not only a wide range of their feelings but also some of their creativity and originality, showing in effect only a handful of primary colors rather than a broad spectrum of colors and hues of the self.

The Boy Code is so strong, yet so subtle, in its influence that boys may not even know they are living their lives in accordance with it. In fact, they may not realize there is such a thing until they violate the code in some way or try to ignore it. When they do, however, society tends to let them know--swiftly and forcefully--in the form of a taunt by a sibling, a rebuke by a parent or a teacher, or ostracism by classmates.

But, it doesn't have to be this way. I know that Adam could have been saved a great deal of pain if his parents and the well-meaning school authorities had known how to help him, how to make him feel safe to express his real feelings, beginning with the entirely natural anxiety about starting at a new school. This could have eased the transition from one school to a new one, rather than leaving Adam to tough it out by himself--even though Adam would have said, "Everything's all right."

HOW TO GET BEHIND THE MASK

As we'll discuss throughout this book, there are many ways that we can learn how to understand a boy's deepest feelings and experience, to come to know who he *really* is, and to help him love and feel comfortable with his genuine self. The starting place for parents--as well as for teachers and other mentors of our boys--is to become sensitive to the early signs of the masking of feelings. These signs include everything from bad grades to rowdy behavior, from "seeming quiet" to manifesting symptoms of depression, from using drugs or alcohol to becoming a perpetrator or victim of violence; and sometimes, as in the case of Adam, the mask may accompany the mantra that "everything is fine."

The second step to getting behind the mask is learning a new way to talk to boys so that they don't feel afraid or ashamed to share their true feelings. For example, when a boy like Adam comes home with a black eye, rather than saying "Oh my God! Just *what* is happening to you at school?" or "What the heck happened to you?" less intimidating language can be used, such as "What is going on--can you tell me?" or "I've noticed things seem a little different for you lately--now I can see something's wrong. Let's talk about it."

The third step is to learn how to accept a boy's own *emotional schedule*. As we'll discuss more in this book, boys who do share their feelings often take longer to do so than girls do. Whereas a girl might share her feelings as soon as she's asked what's going wrong, a boy will often refuse (or ignore us) the first time he's approached. We have to learn how to give the boy the time he needs and how to recognize in his words and actions the signals that he is ready to talk.

A boy's need to be silent--and then his subsequent readiness to share what he is feeling--is what we will call the *timed silence syndrome*. It's the boy who usually needs to set the clock himself--to determine how much time he needs to remain silent before opening up to share his feelings. If we learn to become sensitive to each boy's unique timing, we become better at respecting how he copes with emotions and make it more possible for him to be honest about the feelings behind the mask.

The fourth step involves what I call *connection through action*. This means that rather than nudging a boy to sit down and share his feelings with us, we begin by simply joining him in an activity that he enjoys. Often by simply *doing* something with the boy--playing a game with him, joining him for a duet on the piano, taking him to an amusement park--we forge a connection that then enables him to open up. In the middle of the game, the duet, or the Ferris wheel ride, a boy may often feel close and safe enough to share the feelings he'd otherwise keep hidden.

Finally, we can often help boys take off their masks by telling them stories about our own experiences. We can tell them "war stories" about when we were young and had to deal with life's ups and downs, or we can share recent experiences that challenged us. Even if our boy groans or rolls his eyes when we begin to share our story, he almost always benefits from the empathy that telling the story inevitably conveys. By discovering that, yes, we too have felt scared, embarrassed, or disappointed, the boy begins to feel less ashamed of his own vulnerable feelings. He feels our empathy and discovers that we understand, love, and respect the real boy in

him.

For schools, getting behind the mask to help a boy like Adam requires several specific additional steps. First, as we'll learn throughout this book, teachers, school administrators, guidance counselors, and others all need to learn about how the Boy Code operates. They need to be actually trained to understand how this code restricts boys from being their true selves and how it pushes them to put on the mask. Second, I often suggest that schools assign to each boy an adult mentor who is sensitive and empathic to that boy's unique personality and interests. For example, the mentor for a boy who loves sports might be one of the gym teachers, whereas the mentor for the boy who loves poetry might be the English teacher. By assigning a mentor whose interests mirror those of the boy, the boy gains an adult friend with whom he can talk, somebody with whom he might feel comfortable sharing his deepest feelings and thoughts. Third, schools need to monitor closely those areas where the Boy Code operates most intensely. These include bus rides (where boys are often completely unsupervised), gym class, recess, and extracurricular sports. In such situations, teachers and other supervisors need to be especially vigilant about making sure that each boy is doing all right. Fourth, when teachers or others do intervene to help a boy who seems to be hurting behind the mask, it's important that they use the kind of nonshaming approach I discussed above. For example, when a boy seems to be the victim of a lot of teasing, rather than intervening suddenly by saying "Hey, what's going on here? Cut that out!" the adult supervisor might take aside the boys involved, individually and at separate times, and investigate what's happening in the particular situation. Finally, as I'll discuss more in this book, schools need to give boys a "report card" that covers not only their academic progress and classroom conduct but also their social life. By keeping an eye on a boy's social adjustment, schools are much better able to stay in touch with a boy's genuine emotional experience.

PREPARING A BOY FOR CHANGE

In addition to learning how to get to know the real boy, it's important for us as adults to anticipate situations such as important life changes--a move, a divorce, the birth of a new sibling--that are likely to bring up the kinds of painful feelings that force many boys to retreat behind the mask. For example, a new school, knowing that a boy like Adam was coming there from a less advantaged neighborhood, might have anticipated difficulties, assigned a buddy or mentor to Adam, an older boy who could teach him the ropes, introduce him to other boys, help him to become an insider rather than remain an outsider, and be a friend to ease him through the first weeks of school. The school counselors might have been in contact with Adam's mother from the first sign of an academic dip. Adam's teachers, too, might have been encouraged to help him get acquainted. Adam's parents might have spent more time with Adam during the first few weeks, and also prepared him in advance for his new experience, talking with him about what to expect, meeting with other parents and boys who had been involved in the same program, looking for another parent with a boy in the new school who might befriend Adam or talk with that parent about the school, visiting the school with Adam before his first day, and exploring the new

neighborhood so he could adjust to the scene. Once he began to experience academic difficulties, which was the first indication to them that something was amiss, his parents might have tried to create safe spaces or activities to do together in which Adam might have felt able to open up and share his feelings; they might also have talked about their own memories of going away to college or feeling alone in a new experience.

A MOTHER'S INSTINCTS

One of the things I especially noticed in Adam's story is a hallmark of other boys' stories too--the mother's instincts were accurate; she *knew* in her heart that something was wrong. But she distrusted her own knowledge, and went along with the Boy Code and with Adam's saying, "Everything is all right." In her denial of what she in fact knew, and in her acceptance of society's code for boys, she disconnected from her own instincts, not realizing she knew better; she didn't feel empowered to listen to her own intuitions about her son or take action that might have been outside the code but could have helped Adam before the situation came to a crisis. With the very best of intentions, everyone involved--the parents and authorities at both schools--had pushed Adam away from help and connection, from the full range of expressing himself. Everyone believed that the special school program represented a great opportunity for him, as indeed it did; but they failed to realize that it also represented a change in his social setting that needed to be handled for and with the boy.

Adam tried to tough it out on his own, the way boys do. It's part of the code.

BEHIND THE MASK OF MASCULINITY: SHAME AND THE TRAUMA OF SEPARATION

Just as Adam and his parents unwittingly adhered to the Boy Code, most parents and schools do the same. It has been ingrained in our society for so long, we're unaware of it. One educational expert recently suggested that the way to achieve equality in schooling would be by "teaching girls to raise their voices and boys to develop their ears." Of course boys should learn to listen. They should also speak clearly, in their own personal voices. I believe, however, that it's not boys who cannot hear us--it is we who are unable to hear them.

Researchers have found that at birth, and for several months afterward, *male infants are actually more emotionally expressive than female babies*. But by the time boys reach elementary school much of their emotional expressiveness has been lost or has gone underground. Boys at five or six become less likely than girls to express hurt or distress, either to their teachers or to their own parents. Many parents have asked me what triggers this remarkable transformation, this squelching of a boy's natural emotional expressiveness. What makes a boy who was open and exuberant unwilling to show the whole range of his emotions?

Recent research points to two primary causes for this change, and both of them grow out of assumptions about and attitudes toward boys that are deeply ingrained

in the codes of our society.

The first reason is the use of shame in the toughening-up process by which it's assumed boys need to be raised. Little boys are made to feel ashamed of their feelings, guilty especially about feelings of weakness, vulnerability, fear, and despair.

The second reason is the separation process as it applies to boys, the emphasis society places on a boy's separating emotionally from his mother at an unnecessarily early age, usually by the time the boys are six years old and then again in adolescence.

The use of shame to "control" boys is pervasive; it is so corrosive I will devote a whole chapter to it in this book. Boys are made to feel shame over and over, in the midst of growing up, through what I call society's shame-hardening process. The idea is that a boy needs to be disciplined, toughened up, made to act like a "real man," be independent, keep the emotions in check. A boy is told that "big boys don't cry," that he shouldn't be "a mama's boy." If these things aren't said directly, these messages dominate in subtle ways in how boys are treated--and therefore how boys come to think of themselves. Shame is at the heart of how others behave toward boys on our playing fields, in schoolrooms, summer camps, and in our homes. A number of other societal factors contribute to this old-fashioned process of shame-hardening boys, and I'll have more to say about shame in the next chapter.

The second reason we lose sight of the real boy behind a mask of masculinity, and ultimately lose the boy himself, is the premature separation of a boy from his mother and all things maternal at the beginning of school. Mothers are encouraged to separate from their sons, and the act of forced separation is so common that it is generally considered to be "normal." But I have come to understand that this forcing of early separation is so acutely hurtful to boys that it can only be called a trauma--an emotional blow of damaging proportions. I also believe that it is an unnecessary trauma. Boys, like girls, will separate very naturally from their mothers, if allowed to do so at their own pace.

As if the trauma of separation at age six were not wrenching enough, boys often suffer a second separation trauma when they reach sexual maturity. As a boy enters adolescence, our society becomes concerned and confused about the mother-son relationship. We feel unsure about how intimate a mother should be with her sexually mature son. We worry that an intense and loving relationship between the two will somehow get in the way of the boy's ability to form friendships with girls his own age. As a result, parents--encouraged by the society around them--may once again push the boy away from the family and, in particular, the nurturing female realm. Our society tells us this is "good" for the boy, that he needs to be pushed out of the nest or he will never fly. But I believe that the opposite is true--that a boy will make the leap when he is ready, and he will do it better if he feels that there is someone there to catch him if he falls.

This double trauma of boyhood contributes to the creation in boys of a deep

wellspring of grief and sadness that may last throughout their lives.

MIXED MESSAGES: SOCIETY'S NEW EXPECTATIONS FOR BOYS

But there is another problem too: society's new expectations for boys today are in direct conflict with the teachings of the Boy Code--and we have done little to resolve the contradiction. We now say that we want boys to share their vulnerable feelings, but at the same time we expect them to cover their need for dependency and *hide* their natural feelings of love and caring behind the mask of masculine autonomy and strength. It's an impossible assignment for any boy, or, for that matter, any human being.

THE SILENCE OF LOST BOYS

Often, the result of all this conflation of signals is that the boys decide to be silent. They learn to suffer quietly, in retreat behind the mask of masculinity. They cannot speak, and we cannot hear. It's this silence that is often confusing to those of us concerned about the well-being of boys because it fools us into thinking that all is well, when much may be awry--that a boy doesn't need us, when in fact he needs us very much.

The good news is that we now know of many ways that we can help boys, and they are based on various patterns we now understand about typical boy behavior. Understanding these patterns, these ways of a real boy's life, will, I believe, help us raise boys of all ages in more successful and authentic ways. For the truth is that once we help boys shed the straitjacket of gender--once we hear and understand what a real boy says, feels, and sees--the silence is broken and replaced by a lively roar of communication. The disconnection quickly becomes reconnection. And once we reconnect with one boy, it can lead to stronger bonds with all the males in our lives--our brothers and fathers and husbands and sons. It can also help boys to connect again with their deepest feelings, their true selves.

LIVING WITH HALF A SELF--THE "HEROIC" HALF

Until now, many boys have been able to live out and express only *half* of their emotional lives--they feel free to show their "heroic," tough, action-oriented side, their physical prowess, as well as their anger and rage. What the Boy Code dictates is that they should suppress all other emotions and cover up the more gentle, caring, vulnerable sides of themselves. In the "Listening to Boys' Voices" study, many boys told me that they feel frightened and yearn to make a connection but can't. "At school, and even most times with my parents," one boy explained, "you can't act like you're a weakling. If you start acting scared or freaking out like a crybaby, my parents get mad, other kids punch you out or just tell you to shut up and cut it out." One mother told me what she expected of her nine-year-old son. "I don't mind it when Tony complains a little bit," she said, "but if he starts getting really teary-eyed and whiny I tell him to just put a lid on it. It's for his own good because if the other boys in the area hear him crying, they'll make it tough for him. Plus, his father really hates that kind of thing!" Boys suppress feelings of rejection and loss also. One

sixteen-year-old boy was told by his first girlfriend, after months of going together, that she didn't love him anymore. "You feel sick," confessed Cam. "But you just keep it inside. You don't tell anybody about it. And, then, maybe after a while, it just sort of goes away."

"It must feel like such a terrible burden, though, being so alone with it," I remarked.

"Yep," Cam sighed, fighting off tears. "But that's what a guy has to do, isn't it?"

Jason, age fifteen, recently wrote the following in an essay about expressing feelings:

If something happens to you, you have to say: "Yeah, no big deal," even when you're really hurting.... When it's a tragedy--like my friend's father died--you can go up to a guy and give him a hug. But if it's anything less ... you have to punch things and brush it off. I've punched so many lockers in my life, it's not even funny. When I get home, I'll cry about it.

I believe, and my studies indicate, that many boys are eager to be heard and that we, as parents and professionals, must use all our resources to reach out and help them. As adults, we have both the power and perspective to see through the boys' false front of machismo, especially when we know enough to expect it and to understand it for what it is--a way to look in-charge and cool.

A four-year-old boy shrugs and tries to smile after he is hit in the eye with a baseball, while blinking back tears of pain. A ten-year-old boy whose parents have just divorced behaves so boisterously and entertainingly in class he's branded the "class clown," but underneath that bravado is a lot of suffering; he longs for the days when his parents were together and he didn't need that kind of attention. A fourteen-year-old flips listlessly through a sports magazine while his school counselor discusses the boy's poor conduct. When the counselor warns the boy that his behavior may well lead to failure and suspension from school--trying to discipline through shame, through a threat of rejection--the boy retorts, "So what?"

Unfortunately, at times we all believe the mask because it fits so well and is worn so often it becomes more than just a barrier to genuine communication or intimacy. The tragedy is that the mask can actually become impossible to remove, leaving boys emotionally hollowed out and vulnerable to failure at school, depression, substance abuse, violence, even suicide.

BOYS TODAY ARE FALLING BEHIND

While it may seem as if we live in a "man's world," at least in relation to power and wealth in adult society we do not live in a "boy's world." Boys on the whole are not faring well in our schools, especially in our public schools. It is in the classroom that we see some of the most destructive effects of society's misunderstanding of boys. Thrust into competition with their peers, some boys invest so much energy into

keeping up their emotional guard and disguising their deepest and most vulnerable feelings, they often have little or no energy left to apply themselves to their schoolwork. No doubt boys still show up as small minorities at the top of a few academic lists, playing starring roles as some teachers' best students. But, most often, boys form the majority of the bottom of the class. Over the last decade we've been forced to confront some staggering statistics. From elementary grades through high school, boys receive lower grades than girls. Eighth-grade boys are held back 50 percent more often than girls. By high school, boys account for two thirds of the students in special education classes. Fewer boys than girls now attend and graduate from college. Fifty-nine percent of all master's degree candidates are now women, and the percentage of men in graduate-level professional education is shrinking each year.

So, there is a gender gap in academic performance, and boys are falling to the bottom of the heap. The problem stems as much from boys' lack of confidence in their ability to perform at school as from their actual inability to perform.

When eighth-grade students are asked about their futures, girls are now twice as likely as boys to say they want to pursue a career in management, the professions, or business. Boys experience more difficulty adjusting to school, are up to ten times more likely to suffer from "hyperactivity" than girls, and account for 71 percent of all school suspensions. In recent years, girls have been making great strides in math and science. In the same period, boys have been severely lagging behind in reading and writing.

BOYS' SELF-ESTEEM--AND BRAGGING

The fact is that *boys' self-esteem as learners is far more fragile than that of most girls*. A recent North Carolina study of students in grades six to eight concluded that "Boys have a much lower image of themselves as students than girls do." Conducted by Dr. William Purkey, this study contradicts the myth that adolescent boys are more likely than girls to see themselves as smart enough to succeed in society. Boys tend to brag, according to Purkey, as a "shield to hide deep-seated lack of confidence." It is the mask at work once again, a facade of confidence and bravado that boys erect to hide what they perceive as a shameful sense of vulnerability. Girls, on the other hand, brag less and do better in school. It is probably no surprise that a recent U.S. Department of Education study found that among high school seniors fewer boys than girls expect to pursue graduate studies, work toward a law degree, or go to medical school.

What we really need for boys is the same upswing in self-esteem as learners that we have begun to achieve for girls--to recognize the specialized academic needs of boys and girls in order to turn us into a more gender-savvy society.

Overwhelmingly, recent research indicates that girls not only outperform boys academically but also feel far more confident and capable. Indeed the boys in my study reported, over and over again, how it was not "cool" to be too smart in class, for it could lead to being labeled a nerd, dork, wimp, or fag. As one boy put it, "I'm

not stupid enough to sit in the front row and act like some sort of teacher's pet. If I did, I'd end up with a head full of spitballs and then get my butt kicked in." Just as girls in coeducational environments have been forced to suppress their voices of certainty and truth, boys feel pressured to hide their yearnings for genuine relationships and their thirst for knowledge. To garner acceptance among their peers and protect themselves from being shamed, boys often focus on maintaining their masks and on doing whatever they can to avoid seeming interested in things creative or intellectual. To distance themselves from the things that the stereotype identifies as "feminine," many boys sit through classes without contributing and tease other boys who speak up and participate. Others pull pranks during class, start fights, skip classes, or even drop out of school entirely.

SCHOOLS AND THE NEED FOR GENDER UNDERSTANDING

Regrettably, instead of working with boys to convince them it is desirable and even "cool" to perform well at school, teachers, too, are often fooled by the mask and believe the stereotype; and this helps to make the lack of achievement self-fulfilling. If a teacher believes that boys who are not doing well are simply uninterested, incapable, or delinquent, and signals this, it helps to make it so. Indeed when boys feel pain at school, they sometimes put on the mask and then "act out." Teachers, rather than exploring the emotional reasons behind a boy's misconduct, may instead apply behavioral control techniques that are intended somehow to better "civilize" boys.

Sal, a third-grader, arrived home with a note from his teacher. "Sal had to be disciplined today for his disruptive behavior," the teacher had written. "Usually he is a very cooperative student, and I hope this behavior does not repeat itself."

Sal's mother, Audrey, asked her son what he had done.

"I was talking out of turn in class," he said.

"That's it?" she asked. "And how did your teacher discipline you?"

"She made me stay in during recess. She made me write an essay about why talking in class is disruptive and inconsiderate." Sal hung his head.

"I was appalled," recalls Audrey. "If the teacher had spent one minute with my child, trying to figure out why he was behaving badly, this whole thing could have been avoided." The teacher had known Sal to be "a very cooperative student." It seems that, the night before, Sal had learned that a favorite uncle had been killed in a car crash. "I told my son that I understood that he was having a really hard day because of his uncle, but that, even so, it's wrong to disrupt class. He was very relieved that I wasn't mad," Audrey said. "The episode made me think about how boys get treated in school. I think the teacher assumed that Sal was just 'being a boy.' And so, although what he really needed was a little understanding and extra attention instead she humiliated him. It reminded me to think about how Sal must be feeling when something like this happens, because he often won't talk about what's

bothering him unless we prompt him to."

As a frequent guest in schools across the country, I have observed a practice I consider to be inappropriate, even dangerous--and based on a misunderstanding of boys. Elementary school teachers will offer the boys in their class a special "reward"--such as a better grade, an early recess, or an extra star on their good-behavior tally sheet--if the boys will *not* raise their hand more than once per class period. They find that some boys are so eager to talk and so boisterous in clamoring to be called on that their behavior disrupts the order of the classroom.

High school teachers sometimes adopt the same practice with their adolescent boy students, particularly those who act up or talk out of turn in class. The teachers will let the boys leave early or take a short break from class if they demonstrate that they can keep quiet and "behave." In other words, instead of trying to look behind the behavior to the real boy, to what is going on inside him, teachers assume a negative, and ask these boys to make themselves even *more* invisible and to suppress their genuine selves further. Ironically, they're asking boys to act more like the old stereotype of the passive, "feminine" girl. The teachers may get what they want--a quiet classroom--but at what cost? Such approaches silence boys' voices of resistance and struggle and individuality, and serve to perpetuate boys' attention-seeking acts of irreverence.

We need to develop a new code for real boys, gender-informed schools, and a more gender-savvy society where both boys and girls are drawn out to be themselves.

If we want boys to become more empathic, we must be more empathic toward them.

THE POTENCY OF CONNECTION--A NEW CODE FOR BOYS AND GIRLS

Growing up as a boy brings its own special difficulties, but the good news is that boys can and do overcome them when and if they feel connected to their families, friends, and communities. My research demonstrates that despite society's traumatizing pressure on boys to disconnect from their vulnerable inner selves, many, if not most, boys maintain an inner wellspring of emotional connectedness, a resilience, that helps to sustain them. Sometimes these affective ties are formed with special male friends--boys' "chumships." Boys may also forge empathic and meaningful friendships with girls and young women, relationships that are often platonic.

The fact is that boys experience deep subliminal yearnings for connection--a *hidden yearning for relationship*--that makes them long to be close to parents, teachers, coaches, friends, and family. Boys are full of love and empathy for others and long to stay "attached" to their parents and closest mentors. These yearnings, in turn, can empower parents and professionals to become more deeply connected to the boys in their lives, much as Professor Carol Gilligan at Harvard and researchers at the Stone Center Group at Wellesley College have so eloquently advocated we do

for girls. This intense power to connect of parents and others is part of the "potency of connection" that needs to be at the heart of a revised real-boy code. Through the potency of connection a boy can be helped to become himself, to grow into manhood in his own individual way--to be fully the "real boy" we know he is.

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