



THE EFFECTS ON BOYS' WELL-BEING OF CHANGING FAMILY DYNAMICS

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ABSTRACT

Children have been affected by recent changes in the fundamental childrearing institution, the nuclear family. Boys are in a precarious position as a result of these changes. This paper first assesses the current condition of the nuclear family. Next, some of the features of the new boyhood in Western culture are discussed. Finally, the impact of the missing father on the well-being of boys' lives is examined; father hunger is a critical consequence of the destabilization of the nuclear family. Mentoring remains crucial to raising healthy males. Those who have sons or who work with boys and young men must let them speak; doing so does not preclude standing up for them, something we must do without any further delay.

Keywords: boys, family, males, men, the new boyhood

INTRODUCTION

In recent years, all children have been affected by changes in the structure, dynamics and status of the fundamental childrearing institution, the nuclear family. Boys are in a more precarious position than girls as a result of these changes. I will explain why. First, I will assess the current condition of the nuclear family. Next, I will sketch some of the features of what I term the new boyhood in Western culture, a phenomenon that has come into prominence during the past 20-25 years alongside related trends in third-wave feminism. Finally, I will discuss the impact of the missing father on the well-being of boys' lives, since this is the most onerous consequence of the destabilization of the nuclear family. Most of what I have to say is based on first-hand familiarity with the American scene, but as I have learned, the situation both for the nuclear family and for boys is in every essential the same wherever westernization has reached.

THE NUCLEAR FAMILY

The nuclear family may only be transmuting, as some claim, but I believe it is in its last days and soon will be an anachronism. In only a few years—perhaps two generations—the criteria for casting its *dramatis personae* have been radically revised, and the rules of parenting have been rewritten as the roles of mother and father have been dramatically redefined to adapt to the need for both parents to work full-time. The notions of wife, husband, mother, father, and child are now contested and, for some, are even politically incorrect constructs. Many in positions of authoritative influence speak the language of “partner” and “civil union”; “mothering figure,” “surrogate mother,” “sperm donor” and “fathering figure”; and the dreadful locution “childcare provider.” We hear of two moms or two dads responsible for a household and the nurturing of infants and children. Formal and informal liaisons, legal and religious unions are as easily dissolved as they were formed. Chemical contraception has taken away from the natural father parity in the “say” of whether a fertilized ovum shall move on through the stages of mammalian maturation in the womb. Other technologies modify the sequence of sexual intercourse, pregnancy, and parturition.

Much has changed for the parent. He or she now works outside of the home the better part of most days of the week. In the States, two of three families are now of the single-parent sort. The parent is usually the natural mother, who is usually employed full-time. A parent is

often seen talking to other family members or business associates on mobile phones while the child begs for conversation. Given the demands of work, some parenting is routinely turned over to a changing cast of daycare workers, who are strangers to the children they are paid to oversee. This is a form of child neglect *in loco parentis*. Beginning with day care, schools have been called upon to serve as second homes for children through the late teen years, a task for which they were not designed. Schools are legally charged to act in the place of the parent, but teachers working in their classrooms are now positioned not only temporarily *in the place of* the parent but often serve *instead of* parents. Insofar as we have become what Robert Bly termed a “sibling society,” actively parenting adults often lack the confidence in their own authority that parents traditionally have had and that children (although they might not admit it) need and desire. Some parents themselves remain in a state of interminable adolescence alongside their teenage offspring. It’s a strange sight of would-be parents in the world of the vanishing adult.

And what of the children? Boys and girls have television and internet access to representations of adults and adult situations that are *irreal* with respect to what real-life people do. Designed as entertainment after all, what children see on the tube and online is often mistakenly understood as equivalent to what grown-up human beings may be expected to do at home.

Given these changes in parenting, many children must now try to raise themselves and each other (and sometimes even a parent or two), something they are not capable of doing. They are also maturing physically much earlier than even three generations ago, while recognition of them as being competent human beings and full citizens is deferred ever longer. Our children are awash in an endless flow of information and novelty is brought to them with the click of a mouse, but they lack the skills to read and judge the meaning and quality of what they see and hear in the faces of others; they lack the skills to relate it to the public reality of their household and to their own private psychological reality. The recent confusion about gender identity children hear about is further disorienting.

The nuclear family is passing away. Something different—another living social institution—will and must soon replace it. The problem is, we haven’t yet invented it. Perhaps it will turn out to be like Dr. Frankenstein’s creature, alive but dangerous, humanoid in appearance and body parts but lacking a soul. With any luck, it will be a beneficent institution, but I am

doubtful. As we all know, cultural changes now occur with great rapidity. The predecessors of the nuclear family—the village and the extended family—were slow to develop, however, and were gradually replaced by the nuclear family as the fundamental institution of parenting. By contrast, whatever is to replace the nuclear family will have to be hastily devised and ready for occupancy before it is habitable. Each of the earlier institutions worked well for a period and under certain circumstances. A major problem for us is that the time of the nuclear family has nearly ended and the circumstances of the era after it are far from clear to us.

I suspect that the new parenting institution will resemble nothing that we are now familiar with. It will not be the village again or an elaborate kinship system such as anthropologists have found in pre-Western cultures. Such groupings are small. The nuclear family worked in the context of large social groups such as densely populated urban centers and sprawling networks of small cities and towns. So must the new parenting institution, but like the nuclear family it must work on the small scale of a few people—mother, father and several children.

What will be its features? What is to succeed the nuclear family, I believe, will have to be intergenerational. Experience still counts for a great deal, especially when the period of a young person's relative social helplessness and economic dependency is longer now than at any other time in history. I believe its fundamental relational model will be *mentorship*. Relationships between the young and the older will be similar in some respects to what goes on between a student and his teacher, a young athlete and his coach, or even a client and her therapist. These relationships will preserve certain elements of traditional father-child and mother-child relationships, but the mentor will likely combine features of both the traditional Mom and Dad.

Is the nuclear family merely in ailing, but not about to expire and instead only in need of shoring up and repair in order to adjust to changing times? While we wait to find out the answer to the question, there are consequences of its undeniable weakening as a social institution that we must attend to without delay.

Children who dwell in the household of the fundamental childrearing institution of our time are experiencing significant levels of unease. It is no longer an emotionally and psychologically safe place to be for many of them, even if it is equipped with five bedrooms, six

bathrooms, and an in-house fitness room and entertainment center. Boys are more dramatically affected by the ongoing transformation. Why?

BOYHOOD

Children come in two basic flavors: boys and girls. And how different they are—in anatomy and physiology, initial sensitivities and tendencies, inclinations and tastes, ways of using space, and styles of relating and playing. Males have evolved to be distinctive, as unmistakable in their basic way of self-presentation as females are. Their unique way of being implies a very different *experience* of the world. That they will *behave* differently follows. This predicts that young males—boys—will react differently than girls to the enervation of the nuclear family.

The picture of boys that follows is a bit of a caricature and playful, but as such, I hope, it will be evocative in showing that boys are more vulnerable to the changes in the dynamics of the family.

Boys are like cats. Let's call one of them Felix. Felix is never fully socialized by the time he is driven into manhood, something he resists but is taught to vaunt and pretend to want. As cats have done with human beings in general, Felix domesticates us, seducing us to participate in his somewhat feral world on his terms. We have never quite found a place for the boy in civilized society. His marginal status is legendary in the States, from Huck Finn to Holden Caulfield. Felix likes to play—a lot. His games always seem to have something of the chase-and-capture theme about them. He prefers jumping from place to place to walking about. This is a consequence of his innate hyperkineticism. Felix is inclined to seek high perches from which to observe us. He thereby gives the impression of wanting to dominate the scene, but, in fact, he moves to higher ground because it's a safer place to be for a creature of his temperament and vulnerabilities.

Some of his anatomical peculiarities are assertive, others prompt defensiveness in him. Felix has a caudal-like appendage—his penis—which he often enough forgets is part of his body much as a cat forgets it has a tail. He senses it will have an important part to play in his life later on, since he is taught to overvalue it early in life. But he is also told early on, to hide it. To Felix, this means it is something to be ashamed of. Felix is discouraged from displaying his penis. Sometimes it seems to have a life of its own. He often plays with it. Sometimes it seems to

trouble him, but it rarely fails to get him into trouble. That seems to be the extent of what is reliable and predictable about it.

Another part of his anatomy prompts defensiveness. Like his eyes, his testes are really internal organs exposed to the outside world and susceptible to painful injury. Being so equipped, Felix becomes a master of what psychologists call compensation and reaction formation. This consequence of his anatomical distinctiveness has been vastly underappreciated. Felix tries to appear that nothing can hurt him.

Felix has claws tucked under soft paws. Which feature better symbolizes his true nature? Neither, really. When threatened—which seems to happen often—he displays his claws, but much of the time it is only for bluff and show, and they are withdrawn as quickly as they were displayed and deployed. Like a cat, Felix sleeps a lot when he is understimulated, yet he is hypervigilant. He feigns boredom, but is always alert. He comes alive at night just when everyone else is ready to go to bed. Research has demonstrated that a boy's inner alarm clock is set to go off about an hour later in the morning than the one found in girls. In those evening hours, Felix often has what owners of real felines know as nocturnal “cat attacks,” during which, without warning, he runs about as if inspired by hallucinations of danger. He makes noisy adventure where there is no need for it, but this is because his imagination is overactive. As a result, he is, one might say, compulsively creative, perhaps compensating for the inability to create new life in his body, a capability that his sisters sense in their bodies. This is often mistakenly read as lack of focus on the real.

Felix does not seem to take anything seriously, except his play. He works at things playfully. We see this in his fondness for sports, skateboarding, making music, and heatedly fiddling at video games. You usually cannot interest Felix in anything toward which his curiosity is not already inclined. Learning and squirming, however, are not mutually exclusive for him. This is not much appreciated in the formal classroom setting.

Clearly, being Felix is a mixed blessing. Clinicians and social psychologists have confirmed the presence of these features in real boys and you may read the developmental psychology research that has been published on the topic.

To move now from caricature to character and personality, I remind you that cross-cultural studies confirm that boys are different in disposition and vulnerabilities from girls from the start of life. Their unique way of being in the world—their experience—causes them to behave differently than girls. Boyhood is a stage discontinuous with infancy and in need of a leap in order to land anywhere near manhood. More emotionally volatile and physically active than girls from the start, developmentally boys undergo a series of challenging separations—from the womb, the breast, the mother of infancy, and the mother as female. While there is an essential continuity for girls from the female as mother to the female as woman, a boy must be separated from his mother and taken up by his father, adopted by him for purposes of identifying with him as a male and as a man. While the girl is integrated into the woman, the boy must be jettisoned as a young male and catapulted—always reluctantly—toward manhood.

A post-pubescent male must again and again convince those around him that he has put away the boy, even as the boy continues to live on in him. Here he is then: intensely active, centrifugal, chronically disoriented, marginally social, hard to tame, defensive in a compensatory way, acquainted more with disconnects than continuities, ludic, prone to the imaginary, fond of reverie, and allergic to manhood—what the American Fox Indians call “the big impossible.”

In the absence of clear *rites de passage* now, male adolescence has faded into a lingering, somewhat indeterminate period of protracted boyhood. The new boy of the last few decades is as young as four and as old as twenty-four. The familiar boy-man on college campuses is iconic of such extended boyhood. But let us recall that most young males still do not attend college. Do we see the same phenomena in them—the lads, the blokes, the ordinary guys? Yes. They include the shockingly increasing numbers of young males in the criminal justice system, which is for many of them a more stable household than they have ever known. Those who stay in their parents’ house (if not in the household) sometimes into their 30s, the home in which they were supposed to have grown up, and those who increasingly pass years laboring in meaningless part-time jobs (if there are any to be found) are now common. Sometimes, it seems, the music they share in common is all that unites them in spirit with other young males, even as classifications of race, class, ethnicity or sexual orientation still seem to work to divide them. When they go out, they meet at the same venues: rock concerts and team sports events where they are spectators. When they stay at home, we find them in the basement or garage or a small untidy

room. They now also meet in the pseudo-communal virtual reality of the internet, texting, twittering, floating in Myspace, posting to YouTube, and randomly commenting on each other on Facebook. Finally, whether in college (though fewer are there than ever before—only 35% of college attendees are male) waiting to be employable or looking for employment, with or without a post-secondary degree, older boys meet in a world of stereotypes about what it is to be a man.

HOW BOYS HAVE BEEN AFFECTED BY CHANGES IN THE DYNAMICS OF THE NUCLEAR FAMILY

As a psychologist, I am interested in the effects of the social changes just described on young males at the level of their experience. Without understanding what motivates behavior, that is, without understanding experience, talk about behavior lacks context and we learn nothing about what the behavior means.

Here I will point out only one area of concern to me as a clinician and teacher who has spent more than forty years working with boys and young men. Against the backdrop of three myths—the myth of gender non-difference, the myth of male emotional inexpressiveness, and the myth of male power—myths that prevail in society in general and have special impact on parenting in the collapsing nuclear family, I will look at what I believe is the single most important change in the nuclear family that has especially affected boys. That is the disappearance of the father. If you have guessed that the disappearance of the father and of the nuclear family seem to entail each other, you understand me well.

For generations leading up to and including the baby boomers, a father was on the scene unless he had died in war, on the job, or from illness. Absence following divorce was rare. He rarely abandoned the household. As a consequence of easier opportunities for divorce, two-thirds of our boys are now being parented without a man—the same man—in their household for the first two decades of life. This means a boy will miss the presence of a consistent model for manhood and masculinity. Recall that, like cats, Felix likes sameness and routine. He thrives on the expectable voice and smell. He becomes ill at ease when there are too many surprises. He is wary of strangers and when he feels threatened may hide inside, in his room or in the virtuality of a video game. I attribute this response in great part to lacking a father to turn to as a predictable, stabilizing presence.

A missing father is of great consequence to a boy, especially when he is learning how to love, that is, to take the initiative for the first time to form a deep relationship with another human being. This, I believe, occurs in his relationship with his father. Here we have an overlooked developmental milestone in male psychology. A boy learns he is lovable from his mother and, so, he learns how to be loved in his experience with her, but he learns how to love someone—to be loving—in the relationship with his father. A boy must first love someone in order to like and to want to be like, that is, in order to identify with that person. And in human societies this has been the father. The boy's much discussed rivalry with his dad is, I am convinced, a secondary phenomenon.

What a boy returns to his mother in the closeness of their relationship is at first not love but gratitude. He will eventually enter a phase of loving her, too, but this relationship will be modeled on the son-father relationship.

Two fundamental aspects of a boy's life as a male human being, then, are at stake here: his identification with one of the sexes and his capacity to initiate a loving relationship in another human being. Both, I suggest, depend on the presence in his life of a man—the same man—during boyhood. This is what a father provides.

If a boy's love for his father is returned, the process of identification proceeds more or less smoothly. He likes what he sees himself to be much as he likes the model for himself he has in his father. If a father's response is sensed as lukewarm or the father does not love his son in return, there can be no real sonhood. If a boy's father is there physically but not emotionally, however, the boy still has a better chance of learning how to love another human being than if the father is missing. The tragic situation of a vicious father presents a special problem for us to consider, since children usually remain attached to even abusive parents during the first five years of life.

The consequences of not having a father on the scene are also serious for little girls, but they are more extensive for a boy than for his sister. This follows from other features of his development outlined earlier, including especially his need to identify with one of the sexes.

Consider in more detail the series of a boy's experiences of separation that the presence of a father helps buffer. The most important of these is the rift that occurs when his mother

releases him from the dyadic bond in which the pair have been enmeshed since birth (and before, if she is the natural mother). No boy welcomes this psychological weaning, of course, and the break is never really complete, yet it must occur if he is to move on developmentally. For a brief but crucial time the boy is psychologically homeless as he tries to understand why his mother no longer encourages him to cling to her. Detachment, separation and individuation are liberating and necessary for a boy's independent existence, but cutting the threads of continuity with his mother, which are as tough and durable as the umbilical connection was, is experienced as rejection. The boy temporarily feels at sea and alone. But it is precisely at this moment that the father must be prepared to move toward his son and claim him as his own. The sense of abandonment a boy experiences, then, seems to be inevitable, but in the nuclear family the father steps into the breach and is perceived as prepared and willing to claim a mother's boy as the father's son. Luigi Zoja has described this beautifully as "Hector's gesture," in which the father elevates the boy and says: "He is mine. I will look after him—even if I am not the biological father!"

If the father is not there, a boy must improvise. Will he turn back to his mother and resume a quasi-symbiotic relationship with her? He will feel secure again if he does, but at the price of having lost some of his autonomy. A woman will also then be the object of his first act of loving, but his own identity in the relationship will not be clear to him. He may also identify with aspects of his mother's role as a female, woman or mother. He may adopt some of the features of her habitus as a female. He will learn styles of relating to males that are like his mother's. Most boys, however, find such a relationship to be emotionally conflicted and they will look around for someone else to turn to. That individual may be another female (a grandmother or older sister) or, more often, it is another male. He might approach a grandfather, an uncle, older brother, or a male outside of the household—a male teacher, a coach, or even a stranger—to be a father surrogate.

There are also many choices among virtual fathering figures to be found on television. Sports heroes, the very popular hypermasculine males of cartoon superheroes and rock stars are popular options. The surrogate father is no longer likely to be a mythic figure, leader, or spiritual leader of the kind found in the great world religions.

Or he may be sent to a counselor or psychotherapist who has been assigned to the boy by his mother. The common “symptoms” of disturbed boyhood are anxiety, hyperactivity, depression, inability to concentrate. In nearly all cases of the missing father, they are signs of father hunger. Depression (often disguised as irritability) is certainly the most prominent sign, but father hunger is also well known to manifest as problems with impulse control, generalized lack of engagement in social life, difficulty in forming new relationships, wariness about intimacy with another person, aversion to being touched, an overall sense of fearfulness and resulting absence of initiative, lack of assertiveness (perhaps compensated for by bullying, aggressive behavior), lack of a sense of competence, difficulty cooperating with authority figures, and a lack of a sense of the numinous. Today the counselor is most likely to be a woman since the profession has trained fewer and fewer men in recent years. A male counselor is usually better for a boy.

Boys are eager to tell us about their experience of father hunger, but they require a special kind of listener. They want to tell anyone—but especially another, older male—about their disappointment in not having had a father to love and be loved by in return in order to like, emulate, and identify with him. Here an age-mate won’t do. Nor will a so-called “female father.” Boys also want to tell of their anger about the silence of men. So far, few have spoken up on behalf of boys loudly enough or long enough to get the attention of society. Boys are enraged by this, but with no one real to be angry with (again, the missing father), the rage is diffuse. It may be vaguely directed at society as a whole (that is, anyone they encounter), or occasionally with deadly accuracy at individuals perceived as complicit in having abandoned them—or at themselves. The suicides of boys now occur at a rate four to six times greater than among girls. The killing of others in school shootings are fortunately a rare occurrence but are exemplary of unexpected, seemingly unpredictable acts by otherwise quiet but “normal” boys (“He was such a nice boy!”). I have the impression that the real psychological target of homicidal acts in young males is the boy in himself. Most young male suicides occur in the teen years, when boyhood is supposed to be left behind and put to death psychologically. It is also possible that the target of such shootings is masculinity itself.

If learning to love is a son-father transaction that in fact defines the males involved as son and father, respectively, and if this experience serves as the template for a male’s way of

loving in general (and this will include loving women and not merely desiring them sexually), when a boy has missed having a father, he will want to tell us about how he is unable to feel anything at all for anyone. This carries over to love for ideas, work, and even causes. It is more than curiosity that draws a boy to “love” to do things. To passionately love doing something and to be committed to working at it includes relating to it as though it were a person. Consider some boys’ loving relationship with their skateboard, guitar, or electronic device. Observe the panic of some boys when they have misplaced or lost their mobile phone or gaming gadget.

Boys are dying to tell us about their insecurity in not having been welcomed by someone whom they want to love and be like, and be loved by in return. This is an ancient practice that has been carried out by fathers with their sons (even when the boys were not their biological offspring) since time immemorial, but it is one that cannot take place when there is no father. It is an easily understood truth that just as parents do not choose the children born to them, we do not choose our natural parents. But what if there is no father to choose?

Boys feel safer when they know there is someone present to moderate their excesses of emotion and movement. In the nuclear family, this is another job of the father. Of course, a boy may rebel at any attempt to contain his behavior, but later in life he will let us know that he felt better and more secure in knowing that someone was supporting his efforts at self-control. This, too, is one of the functions of fathering.

In times like ours in the Euro-American West when the genders are reportedly losing their distinctiveness, a boy is nevertheless expected to act as a male with intimate female partners—at least for now, until technology may make something else possible and advertising makes it desirable. For now, however, reproduction still works the way it has since before we graduated from being only animals to life in culture with animal needs and desires.

CONCLUSIONS AND PROSPECTS

I have painted a grim picture of the situation of boys in a time of the collapse of the nuclear family. I have looked at the situation from the perspective of the missing father. There are, of course, other angles from which to view the topic that we must leave for another time.

Is my picture overdrawn? I strongly believe it is not. The precarious situation so many boys and young men find themselves in is reflected in it exactly. These young males are found in all

racess and ethnic groups. I have not spoken of a crisis because that implies a turning point. We have yet to bring the situation of boys' lives to such a pass where things might change direction. But why the delay among psychologists, sociologists, and public policy makers in addressing the problem? That, too, requires another time for careful consideration.

Those of us who have sons or work with boys and young men in the classroom, consulting room, or a social service agency must let them speak. We should not presume to speak for them. Rather than standing in for them and speaking for them, we must make way for them to say what they are experiencing—thoughts and feelings and impulses. This is the form of concerned looking after boys that I recommend. It does not preclude standing up for them, something we must do without any further delay, but we should recall that these two stances reflect two very different sorts of caring for our boys. Making way is liberating. Standing in for someone is merely custodial and effectively proscribes boys' freedom to tell us about their experience without having to worry about our expectations for them. This is especially important during a time such as ours when boys so often have been deprived of an opportunity to learn how to love and, in the process, discern what they like and whom they want to be like. That is, as I have argued, the current era of the missing father.

Part of bringing matters to a crisis and turning point will be admitting the imminent collapse of the nuclear family as a viable institution, even if its legal structure is preserved and its pastimes continue to be observed in a mechanical way. Envisioning what will replace it and who will have parts to play in the new institution will be a labor of love. Recently elsewhere (2011), I wrote that boys are all men's sons. This suggests that men will be the protagonists in the tragedy of the missing father. What will we have to say? Our silence must be broken if we expect our boys to speak.

Men must have speaking parts once again. The not-so-great male silence must end. Before men can talk to their sons and other boys, they must speak to each other again. Men used to talk to each other and still do in many cultures, without the benefit of large amounts of alcohol or the background noise of a crowd at a baseball game. Men must also talk to the women in their lives, especially the mothers of their sons. Men must be willing to take the time to sit and wait with boys, and listen to them when they are ready to speak.

Encourage boys to seek you out. Usually, they will do this only when they need you, so you must be ready to drop things to give them some of your time. Eventually, they will tell you of their appreciation for your understanding—that you stood by them during long periods of their monosyllabic replies and feigned disinterest in your concern. When they do feel at home with you, however, expect to see a voracious appetite for the father. Mentors are surrogate fathers in a time of the missing father in the nuclear family.

Boys are all men's sons. The companion idea is that every man is a boy's father, if the boy needs him to be. This would be in the spirit of the first Mentor, who was charged by Odysseus to care for his son, Telemachus, when Odysseus had to leave Ithaca to fight in the Trojan War. Men now leave home for different reasons, but boys remain behind alone all the same.

FOR FURTHER READING

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