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the hearts of boys

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Boys are interesting creatures in the American public imagination. They start off all “slugs and snails and puppy-dogs’ tails”—cute!—but then they hit puberty and become lazy, sexual, carefree, violent, detached, and irresponsible. They become scary. We fear teenage boys, in part because they are in-between—neither children, nor adults—and they seem to be beyond our control.

boys as human

by niobe way

The popular stereotype is that boys are emotionally illiterate and shallow, they don't want intimate relationships or close friendships. In my research with boys over the past two decades, however, I have discovered that not only are these stereotypes false, they are actively hurting boys and leading them to engage in self destructive behaviors. The African American, Latino, Asian American and White teenage boys in my studies indicate that what they want and need most are close relationships—friendships, in particular—in which they can share their “deep secrets.” These friendships, they tell us, are critical for their mental health. But, according to the boys, they live in a culture that considers such intimacy “girly” and “gay” and thus they are discouraged

from having the very relationships that are critical for their wellbeing.

My longitudinal studies of hundreds of boys from early to late adolescence indicate that a central dilemma for boys growing up in the United States is how to get the intimacy they want while still maintaining their manliness. Boys want to be able to freely express their emotions, including their feelings of vulnerability; they want others to be sensitive to their feelings without being teased or harassed for having such desires. They want genuine friendships in which they are free to be themselves rather than conform to rigid masculine stereotypes. As Carlos said: “It might be nice to be a girl because then you wouldn't have to be emotionless.”

During early and middle adolescence most boys, according to my research, do have close male friendships in which they can share their “deep secrets.” It is only in late adolescence—a time when, according to national data, suicides and violence among boys soar—that boys disconnect from other boys. The boys in my studies begin, in late adolescence, to use the phrase “no homo” when discussing their male friendships, expressing the fear that if they seek out close friendships, they will be

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perceived as “gay” or “girly.” As a consequence, they pull away from their male peers and experience sadness over the loss of their formerly close friends.

Michael, a participant in one of our studies, told his interviewer that friendships are important because, “if you don’t have friends, you have no one to tell your secrets to. Then it’s like, I always think bad stuff in my brain ‘cause like no one’s helping me and I just need to keep all the secrets to myself.” Asked why friends are important, Danny said to his interviewer, “you need someone to talk to, like you have problems with something, you go talk to him. You know, if you keep it all to yourself, you will go crazy. Try to take it out on someone else.” Kai implicitly concurred in his interview: “without friends you will go crazy or mad or you’ll be lonely all of the time, be depressed. . . . You would go wacko.” Asked by the interviewer why his friends are important, Justin said, “‘cause you need a friend or else, you would be depressed, you won’t be happy, you would try to kill yourself, ‘cause then you’ll be all alone and no one to talk to.’ Faced with the prospect of having no close friends, Anthony said to his interviewer, “who you gonna talk to? Might as well be dead or something. I don’t mean to put it in a negative way, but I am just saying—it’s like not a good feeling to be alone.”

Over the past three decades, studies, such as those done by epidemiologists Wilkinson and Pickett, have found that adults without close friendships are more likely to experience poor mental and physical health and live shorter lives than those with close friendships. Despite the growing body of data that underscores the importance of close friendships for everyone, harmful stereotypes that ignore boys’ social and emotional needs and capacities abound. According to the boys themselves, these stereotypes significantly contribute to their isolation, loneliness, and depression. As they get older, boys get stripped of their humanity. They learn that they are not supposed to have hearts, except in relation to a girl, and then it should be a stoic heart and not too vulnerable.

We must allow boys to be boys in the most human sense of the word, nurture their natural emotional and social capacities, and foster their close friendships. We need to make relational and emotionally literacy an inherent part of being human, rather than only a “girl thing” or a “gay thing.” The boys and young men in my studies know that what makes us human is our ability to deeply connect with each other. We must figure out how to help boys and young men strengthen rather than lose these critical life skills. Only then we will be able to address the psychological and sociological roots of this crisis of connection and the negative consequences associated with it.

homophobia in boys’ friendships

by c.j. pascoe

According to media reports, we are in the midst of a bullying epidemic whose primary victims are gay kids. But young people’s homophobia is more complex than such popular views suggest. Much of it is perpetuated by and directed at straight-identified boys. As the school resource website Teach Safe Schools, documents, 80 percent of those on the receiving end of homophobic epithets identify as heterosexual. While GLBQ youth are certainly harassed in school settings, these homophobic insults also play a complex role in heterosexual boys’ friendships.

Researching teenage boys over the past decade, what I found is that boys’ homophobia is not *only* about sexuality, or about pathological bullies going after gay boys; their homophobia is as much about making sure that boys act like “guys” as it is about fear of actual gay people. Through homophobic banter, jokes and harassment, straight boys define their masculinity in ways that are hostile both to gay boys and to straight boys who don’t measure up to a particular masculine ideal. Insulting each other for being un-masculine, even for a moment, reinforces expectations of masculinity and also provides space for straight boys to forge intimate ties with one another, while affirming to themselves, and to each other, that they are not gay.

Homophobic insults, talk, and jokes—or what I call “fag discourse”—permeates boys’ relationships. Different behaviors or attitudes, such as being too touchy, too emotional, dancing, and caring too much about clothing, can trigger this “fag discourse.” Boys try fervently to escape the label of “fag” by avoiding these behaviors or directing the epithet toward someone else. “Fag” is likely to be the most serious insult one boy can level at another. As Jeremy, a high school junior, remarked, “To call someone gay or fag is like the lowest thing you can call someone. Because that’s like saying that you’re nothing.”

For many boys, calling someone a “fag” does not necessarily mean that they are gay. As J.L., a high school sophomore, explained, “Fag, seriously, it has nothing to do with sexual preference at all. You could just be calling somebody an idiot, you know?” Furthermore

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young men who engage in fag discourse often simultaneously support the civil rights of actual gay men, and condemn those who would harass them. Jabes, a senior, said, “I actually say fag quite a lot, except for when I’m in the company of an actual homosexual person. Then I try not to say it at all. But when I’m just hanging out with my friends I’ll be like, ‘Shut up, I don’t want to hear you any more you stupid fag.’” Simple homophobia is too crude a concept for characterizing what is going here, because these insults seem to coexist with rising support for gay rights.

If these epithets are simultaneously reducing boys to “nothing,” and are not necessarily about homosexuality, what are these boys talking about? The answer lies in high school senior David’s statement: “Being gay is just a lifestyle. It’s someone you choose to sleep with. You can still throw a football around and be gay.” In other words, a gay man can still be masculine. What boys are doing as they lob these epithets

is reminding one other that to be acceptably masculine is to be dominant, powerful, and unemotional. Violating those expectations can trigger a round of “fag discourse.”

Thus, homophobia in boys’ friendships is not only about some global fear of same-sex desire (though certainly, for all of the protestations about equality, fear, disgust, or loathing of same-sex desire between men still exists), it is also a way in which boys define themselves and others as masculine. When we call these interactions between boys homophobic bullying and ignore the messages about masculinity in these insults, we risk divorcing these interactions from the way they perpetuate restrictive and sexist definitions of manhood. We also fail to appreciate how boys carve out moments of intimacy, and that complexity, beauty and complicated ideas about masculinity lay at the heart of many of their friendships.

embracing intimacy

by mark mccormack

When we think of boys’ friendships, we tend to think of rough and tumble physical energy. But research conducted over the past three decades warns that rough and tumble play often leads to aggression and violence, and that shallow friendships have resulted in boys being emotionally stunted. Another pernicious element

of boys’ friendships has been virulent homophobia. Given the cultural conflation of masculinity with heterosexuality, where acting feminine is perceived as being gay, boys go to great lengths to act “manly” and avoid homosexual suspicion. Homophobia prevents boys from expressing emotion, and makes them keep considerable physical distance from each other.

The centrality of homophobia to this damaging dynamic of friendship implies that as attitudes toward homosexuality change, so will the ways boys interact. I found this to be the case in ethnographic research that I conducted in high schools in England. Several studies indicate that homophobia has decreased at a greater rate in England than in the United States. For example, the most recent data from the British Social Attitudes survey show that only 29 percent of adults think same-sex relationships are wrong, down from 46 percent in the year 2000. Research from 2007 also finds that 86 percent of the population would be comfortable if a close friend was gay. Comparing BSA data with the American General Social Survey, in his book *Inclusive Masculinity*, Eric Anderson showed that American attitudes are approximately 20 percentage points less favorable than British ones, and that young people have the most progressive attitudes toward homosexuality.

In the three government-run schools I studied, heterosexual male students—aged 16 to 18—espoused pro-gay attitudes and condemned homophobia. They often had openly gay friends; some criticized their schools for their lack of openly gay role models. This inclusive culture has led teenage boys to redefine masculinity; as a result, their understanding of friendship is quite different than what one might expect.

The male students at these schools were proud of their close friendships and frequently demonstrated that publicly. For example, Jack had been away for the weekend and upon seeing his best friend Tim, he shouted, “Timmo, where were you all weekend, I missed ya!”, and exuberantly kissed Tim on the top of his head. Then they talked about their weekend in a style best described as gossiping.

More frequent than this kind of boisterous demonstration of friendship, though, were the touching behaviors that occurred during quiet conversations. Here, boys used physical touch as a sign of friendship. Ben and Eli, for example, stood in a corner of the common room, casually holding hands as they spoke, their fingers gently touching one another. Halfway through the exchange, Ben changed his embrace, placing an arm around Eli’s waist and a hand on his stomach. This kind of behavior was commonplace among the majority of boys; hugging was a routine form of greeting in these schools.

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The boys also valued emotional support. Tim said, “I talk to my best friends about everything, if I’ve got girlfriend trouble, or when I’m upset or stressed. It’s really important for me to be able to do that.” Boys also openly recognized the closeness of their friendships, sometimes addressing each other as “boyfriend” or “lover” as a way of demonstrating emotional intimacy. Phil said, “Yeah, I call him boyfriend and stuff, but that’s just a way of saying he’s my best mate.” Similarly, Dave commented, “I’ll sometimes call my best mates ‘lover’ or something similar. It’s just a way of saying, ‘I love you,’ really.”

The friendships and social dynamics of the boys from my research are also evident in popular culture. Youth TV shows in the UK, such as *Skins* and *Hollyoaks*, show similar displays of physical and emotional intimacy between boys, and the latest boy band sensation, One Direction, models this new youth masculinity. While there are variations according to class, ethnicity, geography and other factors, the friendships I documented signify that a profound social change is occurring. Teenage boys are embracing once feminized traits of emotional openness and physical intimacy, rejecting the homophobia and violence that once characterized male friendship. This is directly related to a decline in homophobia, and boys no longer caring if they are socially perceived as gay. This has enabled them to redefine masculinity and friendship for their generation. It is something we should celebrate.

love wanting

by amy schalet

Michael, a high-school senior, is not a fan of commitment. His ideal is “more than one girl, basically.” Proud of his own sexual experience, he’s excited that his current girlfriend is a virgin: “It’s cool to be the first one . . . it probably feels better too.”

Tall, athletic and a “little rowdy,” Michael would appear to epitomize the American teenage male.

Except that he doesn’t. In my research on attitudes and experiences of sex and romance among high-school aged White middle-class American and Dutch boys, I found most American boys, like Dutch boys, want more than just sex; they want meaningful intimate relationships.

My findings are echoed in other studies that have surprised researchers. For instance, the *National Campaign to End Teen and Unplanned Pregnancies* found that when asked to choose between having a girlfriend and no sex, or sex but no girlfriend, two-thirds of American boys and young men surveyed choose the girlfriend over sex. A large-scale study published in the *American Sociological Review* in 2006 found that American boys are

as likely as girls to be emotionally invested in romantic relationships—but feel less confident navigating them.

Boys in the United States and the Netherlands face very different cultural environments in which to make sense of their romantic feelings. For Dutch boys, falling in love is normal—something everyone experiences while growing up. In the Netherlands, the notion that everyone falls in love is so taken for granted that in a 2005 national survey on youth and sex, researchers thought nothing of asking boys, ages 12 to 14, whether they’d been in love—finding that 90 percent said yes.

But in the United States, even if most boys do want romantic relationships, their romantic stirrings are culturally coded as feminine. Boys are seen as motivated by “raging hormones,” not by a desire for intimacy. As one American father puts it, “teenage boys want to get laid at all times at any cost.”

The popular stereotype of boys as acting only from hormones eclipses their desire for emotional intimacy as a normal part of maturation and masculinity. When boys do want or feel love, they think they’re alone. Sixteen-year-old Jesse says his first priority in life is being in love with his girlfriend and “giving her everything I can.” But he imagines these feelings make him very different from “most teenage boys” who “are pretty much in it for the sex.”

To counteract stereotypes about them, American boys sometimes distance themselves not only from other boys, but also from their own sexual desires. Patrick, for instance, says, “if you really care about someone, you don’t really care if you have sex or not,” echoing a theme from American sex education curricula that teach youth to separate love from lust.

Unlike American culture and sex education, Dutch sex education curricula, with titles like “Long Live Love,” encourage boys to view love and lust as intertwined. The Dutch boys I interviewed readily acknowledged being interested in sex, but they also connected physical pleasure closely to emotions and relationships. About the excitement he felt going through puberty, Gert-Jan says: “It also has to do with having feelings for someone. . . . You’re really in love.”

It’s not just in school that cultures diverge, it’s also at home. American boys are typically taught to view their sexuality as something symbolizing and threatening their freedom—for instance with an unintended pregnancy. While boys may receive tacit approval to pursue sexual interests away from home,

“**Teenage boys are embracing once-feminized traits of emotional openness and physical intimacy.**”

most parents draw firm boundaries between the family and the exploration of sexuality, and rarely permit high-school aged boys to spend the night with their romantic partners at home.

Dutch culture, by contrast, places a premium on “*gezelligheid*” or “cozy togetherness,” which validates their enjoyment of platonic and sexual relationships. In the Netherlands, teen boys and girls are typically allowed to have sleepovers in their parents’ house.

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This interweaving of sexuality and domestic life teaches boys that physical pleasure and emotional intimacy—familial and romantic—are not at odds. As eighteen-year-old Ben

says about his girlfriend sleeping over in his room, “if my mother thinks it’s *gezellig*, then why not?”

Still, Dutch masculinity does constrain boys in some familiar respects. For instance, national surveys of youth show that Dutch boys face, and engage in, more strictures against same-sex sexual behavior than do Dutch girls. But Dutch boys receive more support at school and home to integrate different aspects of themselves that American boys are often encouraged to separate—love, lust, participation in family life and sexual exploration.

Much of the debate around teenagers and sexuality in the United States focuses on what we should teach them about their bodies. Access to accurate information about anatomy, pleasure, and contraception—the usual hot-button topics—is critical. But just as important are the conversations about intimacy and emotions, and the question of how we can define and model manhood so those on its cusp might feel more empowered and equipped to love.

time to bloom

by freeden oeur

In the United States today, single-sex classrooms and schools are increasingly making their way into public schools. Nationally, about 560 K-12 public schools offer some single-sex academic classrooms, and about 80 more are entirely separated by sex.

Debates over single-sex schooling usually center on questions of gender equity. Supporters claim that they accommodate boys’ and girls’ different learning styles; critics charge that they perpetuate gender stereotypes. My own ethnographic research shows that in schools

that serve predominantly poor young Black men, the relationships boys have with one another, and with adult male staff members are key. A school I call Perry High—one of the schools in an East Coast city where I conducted my research—serves a predominantly poor and Black student population, grades 7 through 12. Led by an administration made up of nearly all Black men, the staff has made it a priority to cultivate more positive notions of manhood among the students.

Perry administrators believe that a school where Black men care for Black boys can be empowering. At Perry High, some of the boys assumed that being “put with other boys,” as seventh grader Lenny told me, meant they were in trouble. Mass incarceration of African Americans led these boys to fear all-male institutions—prisons, along with the city’s disciplinary schools, where boys who commit major offenses are sent. Administrators and teachers focused on earning the trust of their students, and on strengthening relationships among men and boys.

A common stereotype of young Black men is that they resist authority. But at Perry High, many boys were open to having close relationships with men, especially if the men first opened up to them. The boys believed they needed those relationships in order to thrive in school. Referring to the adults in the building, Dante, a 12th grader, told me: “We need you. You don’t need us.” The youngest boys, from 12 to 14 years old, particularly doted on male teachers, shadowing them throughout the building and sticking around after school just to hang out. Groups of young boys were eager to connect with teachers who were willing to teach them a new hobby like playing the guitar, or spoken word poetry.

Mr. Westbrook, an administrator, remarked, “I see a lot of kids, especially the younger kids, who really cling onto certain adults for attention, and you become that surrogate father that so many of them are looking for.” Male staff members used this as an opportunity to share visions of responsible adulthood. Gerald, an eighth grader, observed that what it meant to be a man was “to have a job and to be able to do important stuff like taking care of a family.”

To instill a sense of responsible adulthood, a new mentoring program matched male adult professionals in the community with ninth graders. The organizers targeted this group because of the high dropout rates among Black boys after ninth grade. At a meeting of mentors and mentees, Raymond spoke eloquently about how the program had impacted him and his peers. Usually when male visitors came to the school, they aggressively relayed the message that the boys should avoid heading down a “dead-end street,” he said. But Raymond appreciated that the mentors were not trying to scare the boys. Instead, they helped the boys to create positive visions of

themselves: going to college or vocational school, contributing to the community instead of being a threat to it. Speaking directly to the male mentors in the room, he asked for their continued guidance and patience. “We’re still learning how to be men and we need your help,” he said. “Give us some time to bloom.”

The mix of boys, encompassing six grades, meant that younger and older boys had opportunities to interact that they may not have had outside of school. The older boys felt the need to respond to seventh and eighth graders who were aching for male guidance. The younger boys tried to “play off,” or imitate, older boys. Just as they did with male teachers, groups of young boys followed boys much older than them around the school. The older students took the younger students under their wing, looking after them as though they were their own siblings.

At this unique all-boys public school, rather than forge relationships of fear, older boys and men took responsibility for and invested in the lives of the younger boys. In this environment, young Black boys are able to envision themselves, in turn, as responsible men who will one day hold steady jobs and care for boys who need them. Should more of these single-sex schools open, we’re likely to find that it’s for reasons that go beyond that of gender equity, reasons such as the opportunity to foster caring, mentoring relationships.

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