

Time to move beyond 'boys will be boys'

One of the most alarming things about modern Britain is that when it comes to male adolescents, we have lost the plot. Things are not ideal for girls, either, but the symptoms and remedies are different. So discard for a while the last tiresome shreds of 1970s sex-neutral political correctness, and let us consider boys.

It is a good moment to do so. For one thing, there is the culture revealed by the case of Amy Gehring, the sexpot teacher; there are the 10,000 teenagers "missing" from the school system; and there are the hard words of Sir John Stevens, Commissioner of the Metropolitan Police, about mugging and car-jacking by children, mainly boys. "They have not got any respect for authority," he says. "To them it's all just a huge joke. They know exactly how to play the system... intimidating witnesses, delaying identity parades, finding ways to postpone court hearings... They have no fear of the law, no fear of the police, no fear at the prospect of prison." In other words, they are not stupid or incompetent, just calamitously dislocated from society. They join gangs at eight, he says, to protect themselves; they progress from thieving to violence, even murder.

That is the terrifying minority. But change the scene, now, to those law-abiding schoolboys whose supply teacher was Amy Gehring. In her first school she admits sleeping with a boy aged 16. In the second she became so stinking drunk at a party that she was unable to remember next morning whether or not she had had sex with a pupil in the lavatory. She took a morning-after pill on the principle that she probably had. Challenged on the youth of her fellow-bacchanals, she said vaguely: "Fifteen-year-olds are different these days." She thought that they knew what they were doing, and the law might appear to concur: a man having sex with a willing 15-year-old girl is in bad trouble, but that does not seem to be the case when an adult woman sleeps with a boy of that age.

Teenage boys are commonly assumed to be "up for it" by reason of their raging hormones. Those who timidly venture to suggest that a seduced boy may feel guilty, embarrassed and miserable are brushed aside as prudes. Laddish commentators reminisce about their priapic teens and invoke boring old Mrs

Robinson. The latest — I am sorry to ruin your breakfast — is Gyles Brandreth, claiming in *The Sunday Telegraph* that his school nurse had her way with him when he was 14. As is usual in the genre, he reckons it did him no harm.

It may seem a long way from street crime to seductive teachers, but I think not. Both mark our confusion about adolescent boys. In media imagery it is observable that as soon as they stop being angelic tots we categorise them as dangerous, oversexed young thugs, spotty shambling jokes, or else "promising students": in other words, virtual adults processing obediently through a feminised education system and giving us no trouble. We ignore their insecurities and cannot even be bothered to give them space to run about. Not only do school playing fields continue to be sold, but a BBC investigation discloses that after three years, the £125 million Green Spaces and Sustainable Communities Initiative has yet to produce a single public space.

It is no accident that throughout history most cultures have built formal gateways into manhood. From medieval knighthood to bar mitzvah, from the first suit to the jungle initiation, societies welcomed boy-children into the world of action while their sisters entered the domestic sphere. Feminism put a stop to that, but in acknowledging women's abilities and individuality we were sidetracked into pretending that there is no difference. This is nonsense. Generalisation is risky, but bear with me.

Broadly, small boys have more explosive energy and less acute social antennae. A little girl will primly demote those who irk her to "only my third best friend"; a boy will push them over.

Wise primary schools allow for the differences and let the boys rampage for ten minutes before the day starts, while the girls stand around chatting, comparing satchels and (to the boys' revolted horror) testing one another on their times tables.

While girls are more likely to be teacher-pleasers, boys will test the limits.

In adolescence more differences emerge. Boys hunger for "respect" while girls are calmed by their friendships and keep the visible adoration of their parents, which with boys often tails off once they become huge, clumping, monosyllabic Harry Enfield Kevins. I am constantly amazed by the casual cruelty of parents who, in print or in person, berate their sons' clumsiness, destructiveness, music and friends. It is clearly easier to lose parental communication with a son than with a daughter. And we are talking here about stable families: among the wild children Sir John Stevens speaks of, family life is fragmented, neglectful or cruel.

We worry about how girls in such families throw themselves into teenage motherhood. We should worry equally about the boys. Once there were youth clubs and boxing clubs and boys' teams in every neighbourhood, manual jobs for the school rebel and ready employment at weekends. Once, society thought them a useful commodity and put up signs saying "Smart Boy Wanted". Now only the crack dealers seem interested.

How can the sons of 21st-century Britain feel their way to manhood? Sex is one way, but without tenderness it is a blind alley with no reward except fleeting pleasure, disease and child support bills. Crime is another way, offering an Artful Dodger professionalism. The third way is fantasy: live your life through the screen; sign up to its worship of violence and elitist sex-for-the-beautiful, and feel your envy curdle. Meanwhile the headlines shout: "Girls beat boys at school! Girls are more employable! Who needs men?" This does not reflect the real adult world, but how is a boy of 14 to know that? No wonder suicide among young males is on the increase.

Boys need reality. They need physical challenge and adventure. The denial of these impoverishes boys

and girls alike, but for the former it is a catastrophe. A boy, given from early years the chance to canoe, trek or climb, is likely to be happier. He also learns boundaries and discipline. Watch a group of 11-year-old boys putting on lifejackets and helmets, nodding at instructions, and you see twin needs being fed: the need to use their strength and the need for order.

Boys also need men. With fathers invisible at one end of the social scale and super-busy at the other, we need more male teachers, coaches and youth leaders. We have cavalierly allowed men to be scared off these jobs by our prurient obsession with abuse and our frighteningly wide definition of it (these days, when the "Captain's hand on his shoulder smote", the young hero of Newbolt's poem would not be urged to "play the game" but to lodge a formal complaint). We have lost good men from classroom, games field and Scout hut. For thousands of boys the only role models are mothers' boyfriends, neighbourhood Fagins, unattainable gods such as Beckham, or movie thugs. If Sir John's proposed fast-track system sweeps them off the streets, we have to make sure that it takes them somewhere designed to civilise. If they are to be thrown out of school, we need more pupil referral units.

Finally, boys need love. Hard to remember this one, perhaps, but the son who grunts and winces away from a hug actually needs as much affection and praise as the cuddly, smiling daughter who shares her feelings. It might take more effort to show love to a boy, but it cannot be skimmed. Again the spirit of the age is against it. In a rushed lifestyle the delusion of "quality time" and the worship of emotional artifice make it easier to communicate with daughters. Boys prefer the old system, with mother in the kitchen where they can find her, delivering their views in gnomish one-liners, and any scoldings being punctuated by comforting sandwiches.

It is almost too obvious to write. But if we let the Lost Boys proliferate, their wasted lives and sadness will haunt us all. They will drag down girls and smaller boys, fill the prisons, father the next sad generation and hand on pointless misery. Berating them as thugs or tittering at them as sex maniacs is not the answer.



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