Boys will be Boys

Developmental research has been focused on girls; now it’s their brothers’ turn. Boys need help, too, but first they need to be understood.

BY BARBARA KANTROWITZ AND CLAUDIA KALB

IT WAS A CLASSIC MARS-VENUS ENCOUNTER. Only in this case, the woman was from Harvard and the man—well, boy—was a 4-year-old at a suburban Boston nursery school. Graduate student Judy Chu was in his classroom last fall to gather observations for her doctoral dissertation on human development. His greeting was startling: he held up his finger as if it were a gun and pretended to shoot her. “I felt bad,” Chu recalls. “I felt as if he didn’t like me.” Months later and much more boy-savvy, Chu has a different interpretation: the gunplay wasn’t hostile—it was just a way for him to say hello. “They don’t mean it to have harsh consequences. It’s a way for them to connect.”

The Wonder (and Worry) Years

There may be no such thing as child development anymore. Instead, researchers are now studying each gender’s development separately and discovering that boys and girls face very different sorts of challenges. Here is a rough guide to the major phases in their development.

Boys

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<tr>
<td>Boys</td>
<td>0–3 years</td>
<td>At birth, boys have brains that are 5% larger than girls’ (size doesn’t affect intelligence) and proportionately larger bodies—disparities that increase with age.</td>
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<td>4–6 years</td>
<td>The start of school is a tough time as boys must curb aggressive impulses. They lag behind girls in reading skills, and hyperactivity may be a problem.</td>
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Girls

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<td>Girls</td>
<td>0–3 years</td>
<td>Girls are born with a higher proportion of nerve cells to process information. More brain regions are involved in language production and recognition.</td>
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<td>4–6 years</td>
<td>Girls are well suited to school. They are calm, get along with others, pick up on social cues, and reading and writing come easily to them.</td>
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7–10 years

While good at gross motor skills, boys trail girls in finer control. Many of the best students but also nearly all of the poorest ones are boys.

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<td>8–10 years</td>
<td>Very good years for girls. On average, they outperform boys at school, excelling in verbal skills while holding their own in math.</td>
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11–13 years

A mixed bag. Dropout rates begin to climb, but good students start pulling ahead of girls in math skills and catching up some in verbal ones.

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<td>11–13 years</td>
<td>The start of puberty and girls’ most vulnerable time. Many experience depression; as many as 15% may try to kill themselves.</td>
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14–16 years

Entering adolescence, boys hit another rough patch. Indulging in drugs, alcohol and aggressive behavior are common forms of rebellion.

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<td>14–16 years</td>
<td>Eating disorders are a major concern. Although anorexia can manifest itself as early as 8, it typically afflicts girls starting at 11 or 12; bulimia at 15.</td>
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SOURCES: DR. MICHAEL THOMPSON, BARNEY BRAWER. RESEARCH BY BILL YOURVOULIAS—NEWSWEEK
Researchers like Chu are discovering new meaning in lots of things boys have done for ages. In fact, they’re dissecting just about every aspect of the developing male psyche and creating a hot new field of inquiry: the study of boys. They’re also producing a slew of books with titles like “Real Boys: Rescuing Our Sons From the Myths of Boyhood” and “Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys” that will hit the stores in the next few months.

What some researchers are finding is that boys and girls really are from two different planets. But since the two sexes have to live together here on Earth, they should be raised with special consideration for their distinct needs. Boys and girls have different “crisis points,” stages in their emotional and social development where things can go very wrong. Until recently, girls got all the attention. But boys need help, too. They’re much more likely than girls to have discipline problems at school and to be diagnosed with attention deficit disorder (ADD). Boys far outnumber girls in special-education classes. They’re also more likely to commit violent crimes and end up in jail. Consider the headlines: Jonesboro, Ark.; Paducah, Ky.; Pearl, Miss. In all these school shootings, the perpetrators were young adolescent boys.

While girls’ horizons have been expanding, boys’ have narrowed, confined to rigid ideas of acceptable male behavior no matter how hard their parents tried to avoid stereotypes. The macho ideal still rules. “We gave boys dolls and they used them as guns,” says Gurian. “For 15 years, all we heard was that [gender differences] were all about socialization. Parents who raised their kids through that period said in the end, ‘That’s not true. Boys and girls can be awfully different.’ I think we’re awakening to the biological realities and the sociological realities.”

But what exactly is the essential nature of boys? Even as infants, boys and girls behave differently. In fact, they’re dissecting just about every aspect of the developing male psyche and creating a hot new field of inquiry: the study of boys. They’re also producing a slew of books with titles like “Real Boys: Rescuing Our Sons From the Myths of Boyhood” and “Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys” that will hit the stores in the next few months.

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Even normal boy behavior has come to be considered pathological in the wake of the feminist movement. An abundance of physical energy and the urge to conquer—these are normal male characteristics, and in an earlier age they were good things, even essential to survival. “If Huck Finn or Tom Sawyer were alive today,” says Michael Gurian, author of “The Wonder of Boys,” “we’d say they had ADD or a conduct disorder.” He says one of the new insights we’re gaining about boys is a very old one: boys will be boys. “They are who they are,” says Gurian, “and we need to love them for who they are. Let’s not try to rewire them.”

Indirectly, boys are benefiting from all the research done on girls, especially the landmark work by Harvard University’s Carol Gilligan. Her 1982 book, “In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women’s Development,” inspired Take Our Daughters to Work Day, along with best-selling spinoffs like Mary Pipher’s “Reviving Ophelia.” The traditional, unisex way of looking at child development was profoundly flawed, Gilligan says: “It was like having a one-dimensional perspective on a two-dimensional scene.” At Harvard, where she chairs the gender-studies department, Gilligan is now supervising work on males, including Chu’s project. Other researchers are studying mental illness and violence in boys.

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But what exactly is the essential nature of boys? Even as infants, boys and girls behave differently. A recent study at Children’s Hospital in Boston found that boy babies are more emotionally expressive; girls are more reflective. (That means boy babies tend to cry when they’re unhappy; girl babies suck their thumbs.) This could indicate that girls are innately more able to control their emotions. Boys have higher levels of testosterone and lower levels of the neurotransmitter serotonin, which inhibits aggression and impulsivity. That may help explain why more males than females carry through with suicide, become alcoholics and are diagnosed with ADD.

The developmental research on the impact of these physiological differences is still in the embryonic stage, but psychologists are drawing some interesting comparisons between girls and boys (chart). For girls, the first crisis point often comes in early adolescence. Until then, Gilligan and others found, girls have an enormous capacity for establishing relationships and interpreting emotions. But in their early teens, girls clamp down, squash their emotions, blunt their insight. Their self-esteem plummets. The first crisis point for boys comes much earlier, researchers now say. “There’s an outbreak of symptoms at age 5, 6, 7, just like you see in girls at 11, 12, 13,” says Gilligan. Problems at this age include bed-wetting and separation anxiety. “They don’t have the language or experience” to articulate it fully, she says, “but
the feelings are no less intense.” That’s why Gilligan’s student Chu is studying preschoolers. For girls at this age, Chu says, hugging a parent goodbye “is almost a nonissue.” But little boys, who display a great deal of tenderness, soon begin to bury it with “big boy” behavior to avoid being called sissies. “When their parents drop them off, they want to be close and want to be held, but not in front of other people,” says Chu. “Even as early as 4, they’re already aware of those masculine stereotypes and are negotiating their way around them.”

It’s a phenomenon that parents, especially mothers, know well. One morning last month, Lori Dube, a 37-year-old mother of three from Evanston, Ill., visited her oldest son, Abe, almost 5, at his nursery school, where he was having lunch with his friends. She kissed him, prompting another boy to comment scornfully: “Do you know what your mom just did? She kissed you!” Dube acknowledges, with some sadness, that she’ll have to be more sensitive to Abe’s new reactions to future public displays of affection. “Even if he loves it, he’s getting these messages that it’s not good.”

There’s a struggle—a desire and need for warmth on the one hand and a pull toward independence on the other. Boys like Abe are going through what psychologists long ago declared an integral part of growing up: individualization and disconnection from parents, especially mothers. But now some researchers think that process is too abrupt. When boys repress normal feelings like love because of social pressure, says William Pollack, head of the Center for Men at Boston’s McLean Hospital and author of the forthcoming “Real Boys,” “nontypical boy: he’s very sensitive and caring and creative and artistic.” Not surprisingly, he had the most difficulty growing up, she says. “We’ve got a long way to go to help boys… to have a sense that they can be anything they want to be.”

A second crisis point for boys occurs around the same time their sisters are stumbling, in early adolescence. By then, says Thompson and Kindlon, boys go one step further in their drive to be “real guys.” They partake in a “culture of cruelty,” enforcing male stereotypes on one another. “Anything tender, anything compassionate or too artistic is labeled gay,” says Thompson. “The homophobia of boys in the 11, 12, 13 range is a stronger force than gravity.”

Boys who refuse to fit the mold suffer. Glo Wellman of the California Parenting Institute in Santa Rosa has three sons, 22, 19 and 12. One of her boys, she says, is a “nontypical boy: he’s very sensitive and caring and creative and artistic.” Not surprisingly, he had the most difficulty growing up, she says. “We’ve got a long way to go to help boys… to have a sense that they can be anything they want to be.”

In later adolescence, the once affectionate toddler has been replaced by a sullen stranger who often acts as though torture would be preferable to a brief exchange of words with Mom or Dad. Parents have to try even harder to keep in touch. Boys want and need the attention, but often just don’t know how to ask for it. In a recent national poll, teenagers named their parents as their No. 1 heroes. Researchers say a strong parental bond is the most important protection against everything from smoking to suicide.

For San Francisco Chronicle columnist Adnr Lara, that message sank in when she was traveling to New York a few years ago with her son, then 15. She sat next to a woman who told her that until recently she would have had to change seats because she would not have been able to bear the pain of seeing a teenage son and mother together. The woman’s son was 17 when his girlfriend dumped him; he went into the garage and killed himself. “This story made me aware that with a boy especially, you have to keep talking because they don’t come and talk to you,” she says. Lara’s son is now 17; she also has a 19-year-old daughter. “My daughter stalked me. She followed me from room to room. She was yelling, but she was in touch. Boys don’t do that. They leave the room and you don’t know what they’re feeling.”

Her son is now 6 feet 3. “He’s a man. There are barriers. You have to reach through that and remember to ruffle his hair.”

With the high rate of divorce, many boys are growing up without any adult men in their lives at all. Don Ellin, coauthor of the best-selling 1992 book “Raising a Son,” says that with troubled boys, there’s often a common theme: distant, uninvolved fathers, and mothers who have taken on more responsibility to fill the gap. That was the case with Raymundo Infante Jr., a 16-year-old high-school junior, who lives with his mother, Mildred, 38, a hospital administrative assistant in Chicago, and his sister, Vanessa, 19. His parents divorced when he was a baby and he had little contact with his father until a year ago. The hurt built up—in sixth grade, Raymundo was so depressed that he told a classmate he wanted to kill himself. The classmate told the teacher, who told a counselor, and Raymundo saw a psychiatrist for a year. “I felt that I just wasn’t good enough, or he just didn’t want me,” Raymundo says. Last year Raymundo finally confronted his dad, who works two jobs—in an office and on a construction crew—and accused him of caring more about work than about his son. Now the two spend time together on weekends and sometimes go shopping, but there is still a huge gap of lost years.

Black boys are especially vulnerable, since they are more likely than whites to grow up in homes without fathers. They’re often on their own much sooner than whites. Black leaders are looking for alternatives. In Atlanta, the Rev. Tim McDonald’s First Iconium Baptist Church
just chartered a Boy Scout troop. “Gangs are so prevalent because guys want to belong to something,” says McDonald. “We’ve got to give them something positive to belong to.” Black educators like Chicagoan Jawanza Kunjufu think mentoring programs will overcome the bias against academic success as “too white.” Some cities are also experimenting with all-boy classrooms in predominantly black schools.

Researchers hope that in the next few years, they’ll come up with strategies that will help boys the way the work of Gilligan and others helped girls. In the meantime, experts say, there are some guidelines. Parents can channel their sons’ energy into constructive activities, like team sports. They should also look for “teachable moments” to encourage qualities such as empathy. When Diane Fisher, a Cincinnati-area psychologist, hears her 8- and 10-year-old boys talking about “finishing somebody,” she knows she has mistakenly rented a violent videogame. She pulls the plug and tells them: “In our house, killing people is not entertainment, even if it’s just pretend.”

Parents can also teach by example. New Yorkers Dana and Frank Minaya say they’ve never disciplined their 16-year-old son Walter in anger. They insist on resolving all disputes calmly and reasonably, without yelling. If there is a problem, they call an official family meeting “and we never leave without a big hug,” says Frank. Walter tries to be open with his parents. “I don’t want to miss out on any advice,” he says.

Most of all, wise parents of boys should go with the flow. Cindy Lang, 36, a full-time mother in Woodside, Calif., is continually amazed by the relentless energy of her sons, Roger Lloyd, 12, and Chris, 9. “You accept the fact that they’re going to involve themselves in risky behavior, like skateboarding down a flight of stairs. As a girl, I certainly wasn’t skateboarding down a flight of stairs.” Just last week, she got a phone call from school telling her that Roger Lloyd was in the emergency room because he had fallen backward while playing basketball and school officials thought he might have a concussion. He’s fine now, but she’s prepared for the next emergency: “I have a cell phone so I can be on alert.” Boys will be boys. And we have to let them.