

BOYS WILL BE MEN

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Angela Phillips

One motherhood, economic deprivation, poor living conditions; we can argue all around the houses about the relative effects of these three factors on the behaviour and development of young people. But there is one obvious fact which cannot be explained away as a statistical anomaly, nor put down to the effects of using incompatible data. Men are responsible for 90% of indictable offences. There are sixty young men incarcerated for every one young woman. Why does nobody ever ask why it is that so few young women, suffering the same circumstances of bad housing and unemployment, cared for by the same lone mothers as their male peers, end up in prison? Clearly the gender of the young person brought up in these conditions is the most important differentiating factor. Perhaps it is time we considered the possibility that, in our society, there is something pathological about the way in which boys are raised.

Role Models for Girls and Boys

Let us reflect for a moment on what girls are raised to become. For a girl, the future



is not far away. She is brought up by women, surrounded by women, women care for her and she watches them about their daily work: it is women (not necessarily mothers) who clean, cook and care for her and her siblings. She may also see women leaving for some other work, but it is the work that she can watch and learn herself that she will copy in her play.

So little girls know by the age of three that they will grow up to become mothers and to run a home, and if their mothers have jobs they may include that too. From an adult point of view, this obsession with homemaking may seem limited, but from the point of view of a three-year-old the role of mother is a rich one, full of material to practise on. A girl can be a mother plus something else.

Angela Phillips is a writer and broadcaster, mother of two, and head of Journalism at Goldsmith's College. This article first appeared in Everywoman magazine, and is reprinted here with permission.

For a male toddler, however, that early picture is a very different one. Few men are closely involved with him. He rarely sees a man do anything he can relate to. He doesn't see his father working, talking to his friends, cleaning the floor. A male child learns most of the early lessons in masculinity from snatches and pictures and glimpses of the male world. Father may swoop down and throw him into the air, but he isn't there to show him how a man does whatever men do. It is not only the boys of lone mothers I am talking about. I doubt whether the sons of cabinet ministers see as much of their fathers as the sons of many divorced parents.

You have only to spend a short time in a nursery to see that, by the age of three, most little girls are already behaving like women: they are simply practising being grown-up. Most little boys have no idea what it is they are supposed to be. So they try out being like Mummy and the girls tell them that boys don't behave like that. They try crying and asking to go home and they are told that boys don't behave like that.

But what is a boy supposed to grow up to be? Batman, Captain Planet? Where does a father go when he closes the door in the morning? Perhaps the reason why so many boys run around and shout a lot is because they don't know what else to do. They don't have a complex role to inhabit, or a shared understanding of an imaginary world in which to play together. The only thing they know about the masculine role is that it isn't like being a girl. They start to define their whole sense of themselves in a negative way. They aim to be unlike the people who surround them — mothers, teachers,

childminders and all those competent, organised little girls. Very soon, one of the worst taunts a male child can use to his peers is to call him 'a girl'.

Learning Masculinity

However, nobody can survive with a vacuum in the place where they are supposed to keep their identity. Boys have to learn how to be boys. They have to find out what it is that they should be, which is not just different from girls but uniquely masculine. In the absence of close multi-dimensional male figures to learn from, they are obliged to learn from their peers. By the time they are seven, the coercive process of masculinisation is well under way. Boys mercilessly tease those who do not conform to the group idea of masculinity.

Some will take these lessons home and be able to check and adjust what they have learned against the real live figures of their fathers or grandfathers. If the shapes fit, they will move on more confidently. So, a boy who play-fights at school and comes home to a father who wrestles with him in the garden, will feel an inner sense of confidence that he is doing something that men do and he will do more of it. Perhaps this is why, in studies quoted in *The Role of Fathers in Child Development*, edited by Michael Lamb, fatherless boys, or boys whose fathers left before they turned five, seem less aggressive than other boys.

Fathers' Influence

I am not saying that the wrestling father is a bad thing. However, a father's presence, though usually influential, is not necessarily benign — a fact that the 'back

to basics' campaign seems keen to ignore. As one lone mother confided to me recently: 'The thing that really worries me is his Dad. He's in prison and I'm so afraid my son will be like him. He's already started walking with a swagger and getting into trouble at school. His Dad tells him to stand up for himself, to hit back. I am afraid he may be becoming a bit of a bully.' This woman left her husband because he is a thief and she wanted to protect her children from his influence. She may be too late. Her son, now eleven, dotes on his Dad. Twice he's been returned to her by the police — picked up when his father did a runner, leaving him behind. Now that his father has been locked up, the boy misses no opportunity to visit him in prison. To his son, this man is a swash-buckling hero. To his ex-wife, he is a source of chaos and unhappiness. She's right to worry. Having a parent who is a criminal is one of the factors which most clearly correlates with future criminality in the child. Of course there are many fathers who teach their sons that fighting is bad. The boy then has to work out who is right: the boys at school or his Dad. Where is the real man? A lot will depend on how he feels about his father. A child who feels happy with the person he is at home, and who is secure in the love of his parents, may simply adapt to the requirements of school by having a 'school persona' and a gentler 'home persona'. He will have learned that masculinity is not one-dimensional.

Home/School Divide

But the school world can be overpowering. Some children find it impossible to bridge the two. One boy told me of his pri-

mary school: 'My parents taught me not to fight but I had to deal with kids who were used to being rougher than I was. I got teased because I didn't fight and if someone teased me I would just cry. Adults said I should learn not to react to the teasing, but my first reaction was to cry. I hated it there. I never did fight so people took the piss. Now, looking back I think it would have been different if I had done it. I mean there were some kids whom everyone thought were puny but if they fought back once it was OK. No one would mess with them again.'

The contradictions between the expectations of his parents and the demands of the boys at school were almost too much for him. He did what his parents expected of him, but underneath his studied teenage indifference lurks intense anger at the unfairness of it all. As he himself put it: 'You have to kick someone when they are down so that you can stay up.' He is most unlikely to end up in prison but that is mainly because, with his middle-class background, he has acquired the academic qualifications to succeed another way. Nevertheless, the lessons he has learned about being a man are not that different from a kid who peddles drugs at the corner.

Vulnerability Factors

The most vulnerable boys, those most at risk of offending, are those who have difficulty with their school work; those whose parents teach them to be trouble-makers by their own example; those whose parents are unable or unwilling to spend time with their children and those who have experienced family conflict. Girls are also likely to be adversely affected

by these factors, but they are far less likely to demonstrate their unease by getting into trouble with the law.

The Effects of Divorce

American psychologist Professor Mavis Heatherington heads a team which researches the effects of divorce. One study focuses on children whose parents separated when they were four years old and traces the effect on their social relationships. Initially both girls and boys reacted to the disruption by behaving badly. This affected their ability to make friends at school. Within a year the girls had adjusted. By the end of two years their behaviour and social interaction did not differ from that of their peers. The boys' behaviour had also adjusted by the end of the second year (according to teachers and parents). However, there was a crucial difference. The boys continued to be ostracised by their peers. Boys are remarkably unforgiving when a child's behaviour does not conform.

Heatherington describes how these boys, rocked by the loss of a parent, were then pushed to the margins of their peer groups, forced to resort to playing with younger children or (when they were allowed) with girls. Most commentators 'blame' this failure to conform to expected patterns of masculine behaviour on the lack of fathers in the lives of most children after divorce, but Heatherington's research seems to suggest that the problem lies in the attitude of their peers.

Boys, in the years between five and ten, desperately need to forge a common understanding of male behaviour, a collective male identity to shore up from the outside the lack of a confident masculin-

lity on the inside. To consort with a child whose behaviour does not conform to the accepted standard is risky. Those who do not fit will be edged out in order to protect the group's image of what it means to be a proper boy.

The evidence for this behaviour was so strong that Heatherington was moved to step outside her role of impartial academic commentator and give advice to the separated parents of sons. She recommended that they move their boys to new schools in order to give them opportunities to start afresh.

Even by secondary school age a significant minority of such boys have not regained confidence or been allowed 'back in' by their peers. These boys will do just about anything to be accepted as 'one of the lads'. It is little wonder that they are less likely than their more confident peers to be able to say 'no' to trouble. It is these boys who will get sucked into attention-seeking behaviour which screams out: 'I am a boy — notice me!'

The Toughening Process

Toughening up is a characteristic experience of boys across society from the top public school to the inner city comprehensives. Though there are certainly some boys who manage to negotiate the school system by using charm and wit to stay out of trouble, few go through the experience without an awareness of the violence which lurks just a glance away. To an uncertain 12-year-old the streets are filled with menace. One of the early lessons a boy needs to learn is how to walk the street without ever looking an older boy in the eye. To make eye contact is to invite conflict.

A 17-year-old living in Manchester said to me: 'I found out by the second year that if you see a group of people you don't know then you walk another way home.' Lately he has stopped worrying so much because, he told me: 'By the fifth year most of the people who cause the trouble are your age and they are picking on younger kids.'

Those at the top of the education tree will use this acquired toughness to succeed in business. Those at the bottom are more likely to use the same toughness to succeed on the street. Parents bringing up children in an environment in which crime is the only apparent way out of the poverty of means-tested benefits will have a particularly hard time keeping their sons safe from negative peer group influence.

One Single Mother's Story

A lone parent, coping with loss and probably anger as well as poverty, may have particular difficulty finding the strength to keep her children safe: One mother I know told me how her beloved, gentle son had become first a skinhead and then a member of a fascist organisation. Terrified of the big bullies in his huge secondary school this child decided that, if he couldn't beat them, he would join them. He started to dress in skinhead gear and before long had been taken up by an older group of skins. He had their protection. It was just a matter of time before he would be obliged to join in their bullying. Having learned how to be tough he now found that hurting others wasn't so hard, and that if he got the first kick in he might not be kicked back.

His mother, preoccupied with a new job, had no idea what was going on at

school. His father, preoccupied with a new marriage, did not seem to be available to him. His teachers refused to acknowledge that there was a problem. So he was thrown on the mercy of his peers. In this world, boys who were gentle, thoughtful and responsible were looked down upon. The boy his mother wanted him to be was not man enough for the world he was forced to inhabit. Without anyone in the family to turn to for support, he had to look outside for people whose swaggering aggression he could emulate.

This boy needed a supportive counterweight to the tough image of masculinity presented at school. Those who advocate a return to family values would no doubt suggest that this should have been provided by his father. However, it is not just any father, but an effective father, whose presence in the family will help to guard him against criminality. Even Dennis and Erdos, whose pamphlet *Families without Fatherhood* started the whole debate about lone mothers and criminal sons, are aware of this fact, although they rarely mention it.

Perpetuating Bad Behaviour

A man who gets drunk and beats up his wife is going to teach his son that this is normal masculine behaviour. It is worth noting here that a study by Jane Mooney from the Middlesex University Department of Criminology revealed that only 37% of the men questioned would refrain from using violence against their partners, if they felt that it was deserved.

A man who steals, lies and gets into fights is going to teach his son the same tricks — and let us not forget that the young men who fill our institutions for

young offenders are not just naughty boys, they are also potential, or actual, fathers. Are these the young men whom Halsey and Michael Howard are so anxious to reunite with the women for whose lone motherhood they are responsible? Will they then steer their sons along a more useful path to manhood? It seems unlikely.

A New Image of Masculinity

Men who measure their personal worth only by the money they earn will be devastated by unemployment. And they will be unable to inculcate a sense of worth in their sons. Industrial and economic change and the changing role of women have had a devastating effect on male morale. There are adjustments to be made, but to make those changes our boys need to have men around them who are not cardboard cut-out figures like Captain Planet or Superman. Nor do they need

those strong silent men who leave the house every morning and shut the door on their families. They need fathers who will teach their sons that family life is something that they can participate in, on equal terms with women. It will take a long time to produce a generation of fathers like that. In the meantime something has to be done to provide today's boys with a new image of masculinity to capture their imagination at the crucial point when they realise that they are not going to grow up to be like Mum.

The mother whose son joined the Nazis told me: 'When I realised what was happening I was desperate, crying out for advice from anyone — doctors, teachers, psychiatrists, therapists, friends or family. I went everywhere, obsessively asking for help to stop the nightmare getting worse.' She did not get that help then, and probably would not get it now; and that is the problem which we need to address.

Men and Porn

Peter Baker

Pornography is one of the most divisive issues in contemporary sexual politics. While the manufacturers of top-shelf magazines continue to sell some 27 million copies of over 200 titles a year in the UK alone, feminists, civil rights' activists, media pundits and even therapists argue over the definitions, causes and conse-

quences of this multi-million pound trade in sexually explicit words and images.

Some of the bitterest controversy concerns the so-called 'evidence of harm': whether men's use of pornography affects their behaviour, particularly towards women and children. Some have no doubt that repeated exposure to pornographic

Peter Baker is a co-founder of The Men and Porn Group, a writer and, until recently, honorary visiting research fellow at Bradford University, where he assisted with an investigation into men's use of pornography.