

The Psychology of Young Men

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How testosterone, upbringing and education methods disadvantage young men
article by Jon Gifford from 'the Pelican' - 'The Trouble with Testes'

Australian men and boys are struggling. They have, on average, less academic success than women at all levels. There are higher levels of suicide. Men make up around 70% of the prison population. They have higher levels of drug and alcohol abuse. And they are overwhelmingly involved in and the perpetrators of physical and psychological violence; violence that is often aimed at their partners and children. Why is this so?

The first response is, of course, that women are better. They have freed themselves from the constraints that men had constructed - societal, psychological and in some cases physical - and are simply proving why men had to constrain women for so long. Because women are superior. But if so, why? Are male children raised incorrectly? Are the societal constraints and expectations on men and male children too great? Are boys being taught the wrong way at school? Or is it simply that testosterone rots the brain?

"I don't think that it's a generational thing," responds psychologist Di Thompson, "there are probably similarities and there are probably differences (between generations of men) but it's the similarities that are important." That men today, in fact, have the same problems as they've always had, it's just that the times have changed.

According to Thompson, the problem is that "boys are being brought up differently (than girls), it's a different culture that reinforces and endorses spontaneous and high stimulation activity". Popular culture aimed at a young male audience stands as an example of this, computer games, films and television all reinforces this high stimulation, low concentration pattern. Look at the film *Showgirls* - nothing more needs to be said. The result is that concentration levels drop and young males get bored very quickly.

"Impulse control and sustained concentration have changed," Thompson continues, "a type of dependence on (passively received) stimulation occurs." And this adversely affects the developmental and learning process because there is very little of that type of stimulation in a conventional classroom, especially if it is an overcrowded or under-resourced one. It also sets a pattern contrary to another key aspect of the developmental process, the ability to defer gratification: the concept of having or gaining "something good after something hard", Thompson explains. "But there's something that has subverted it. Men are being taught to potentiate their testosterone to the absolute maximum." And the combined media, to complete the circle, exploits it.

But according to Wesley College headmaster and authority on young male education John Bednall the problem is not a new one, more a general issue of our generation rather than a gender one. "I wouldn't have really thought that (the teaching of delayed gratification) is specific to gender at all, I think that it applies to young people generally." But men are having more problems than women in this, Bednall agrees. "I believe that I am seeing less confident boys than I was seeing twenty years ago." Less confident and less successful; "there does seem to be internationally a phenomenon whereby the academic performance and sense of purpose of boys is deteriorating, but the reason for this is by no means clear."

Bednall, understandably, believes that education is one such reason. "We also know that very early childhood teaching strategies have been inclined to be 'feminine' in style", and therefore, the argument follows, males develop less successfully at a very early educational level. Language skills of young males are an example of this. "One of the earliest indicators is that boys appear to learn to read later than girls, and that's then translated into boys being less mature than girls. We actually use that derogatory language very early in the lives of boys and I think we say it so often now that many of them are beginning to believe us, that they're not supposed to learn as well as girls, and that they are in fact immature, unstable and volatile." And that language easily translates to being less motivated, badly behaved and disruptive. So it's the language and educational process that causes slower and, overall, weaker performance. Not that male children can't concentrate, because of the "high stimulation, low concentration" societal condition of male children that Thompson suggests.

But surely young males do not simply suffer from a lack of learning at school age. "Mothers are wiping their bums" suggests Thompson, "driven by a fear of their (male child's) delinquency and pushed by their husbands." Mothers are further driven by "an implicit power that male children have, a power that they don't even conceptualise". It is based on the inherent physical power of males, that they can "overpower (women) and remove their freedom." Because of this combined pressure mothers tend to overcompensate.

The result is that mothers end up handicapping their sons. They produce an individual who "can only ever juggle with one ball in the air". But many more balls are needed to survive. Needless to say, men seek out another woman to fill the role of their mother. They turn women into a function. But increasingly women are unwilling to simply become a function, and rightly so. So men are increasingly finding themselves unable to compete, and unable to cope without a woman performing a purely functional role. In effect they're getting their bottoms wiped and arses kicked. But can anything be

done about it?

Thompson responds that "in a paternalistic and misogynistic society women will be blamed, rather than the society, and nothing will change." But that is really the worst case scenario. Thompson also calls on male children to "be empowered by their mothers, morally and ethically". Bednall's solution too is based on ethical learning, this time at a school level. It involves establishing a "very, very determined policy whereby boys come to understand that gender is a social construct and not sex-based uniqueness, and that essentially social constructs pose ethical questions. In other words a sexist boy is not sexist because he is male but rather because he has an unethical understanding of the gender construct that says that males should behave in certain ways".

So essentially it is ethical enquiry which will provide at least some of the major solutions. It will place the predicament in which men find themselves in a societal context, further it will assist men in making decisions appropriate to this. But further still, it can stop men from blaming women, whether they are their competitors, colleagues, mothers or partners.

In other words the pitch has been moved and the goal posts bent, the ball's been let go flat and Trent's mum has forgotten the oranges. But the game is the same.