

What We Are Not Teaching Boys About Being Human

The New York Times
Aug. 6, 2021

By Ruth Whippman

A while back, at the bookstore with my three sons, I started flicking through a kids' magazine that had the kind of hyper-pink sparkly cover that screams: "Boys! Even glancing in this direction will threaten your masculinity!"

In between the friendship-bracelet tutorials and the "What Type of Hamster Are You, Really?" quizzes, the magazine featured a story about a 'tween girl who had



Credit...Sam Island

been invited to two birthday parties scheduled for the same time. Not wanting to disappoint either friend, she came up with an elaborate scheme to shuttle, unnoticed, between the parties, joining in the games at one before racing off to arrive just in time for the same games at the other, then repeating the sprint for cake at each house and so on. This was a tale of high-stakes emotional labor and I related to it strongly — if not the actual scenario itself, then at least the nerve-frazzling, people-pleasing compulsions driving it.

This birthday party stressfest is a pretty standard-issue story for female childhood. The girls in my sons' classes will likely have read or watched hundreds like it — stories framed around people, their friendships, relationships and emotions, their internal dramas and the competing emotional needs of others. These were my stories as a young girl, too — the movies and TV shows I watched, the books and comics I read, the narratives I internalized about what was important.

But reading the magazine now, as the mother of three boys, this type of people-driven story felt oddly alien. I realized that, despite my liberal vanities about raising my sons in a relatively gender-neutral way, they had most likely never read a story like this, let

alone experienced a similar situation in real life. It turns out that there is a bizarre absence of fully realized human beings in my sons' fictional worlds.

As male toddlers, they were quickly funneled into a vehicle-only narrative reality. Apparently, preschool masculinity norms stipulate that human dilemmas may be explored through the emotional lives of only bulldozers, fire trucks, busy backhoes and the occasional stegosaurus.

As they aged out of the digger demographic, they transitioned seamlessly into one dominated by battles, fighting, heroes, villains and a whole lot of "saving the day." Now, they are 10, 7 and 3, and virtually every story they read, TV show they watch or video game they play is essentially a story with two men (or male-identifying nonhuman creatures) pitted against each other in some form of combat, which inevitably ends with one crowned a hero and the other brutally defeated. This narrative world contains almost zero emotional complexity — no interiority, no negotiating or nurturing or friendship dilemmas or internal conflict. None of the mess of being a real human in constant relationship with other humans.

An exception to the "no real humans" rule: The small subgenre of realistic fiction aimed at elementary and middle schoolboys is actually wildly popular. Jeff Kinney's beloved "Diary of a Wimpy Kid" series, for example, has sold more than 250 million copies while the middle school graphic novel series "Big Nate" has sold over 20 million. My sons and their friends gobble up these books, hungry for something that reflects their own lives. They gain a lot from them too — a jumping off point to think about their own real-world challenges and relationships, and a way to open up discussions about the emotional dilemmas they face.

But the main characters in this genre tend to be slightly depressing antiheroes, middle school nihilists who are almost defiantly mediocre. Their driving narrative motivation is often a kind of contempt — for school, teachers, annoying siblings and nagging parents. This background sense of grievance can sometimes be casually misogynistic, in the "stupid, dumb girls" vein. Although later examples of these books have dialed this back, if we follow these characters' trajectory of resentment and self-loathing to its most extreme conclusion, it's not a huge stretch to imagine one of them in 10 years' time, trolling feminists online from his parents' basement.

The lack of positive people-focused stories for boys has consequences both for them and girls. In the narratives they consume, as well as the broader cultural landscape in which they operate, girls get a huge head start on relational skills, in the day-to-day thorniness and complexity of emotional life. Story by story, girls are getting the message that other people's feelings are their concern and their responsibility. Boys are learning that these things have nothing to do with them.

We have barely even registered this lack of an emotional and relational education as a worrying loss for boys. We tend to dismiss and trivialize teenage girls' preoccupation with the intricacies of relationships as "girl-drama." But as Niobe Way, a professor of psychology at New York University and the author of "Deep Secrets, Boys' Friendships

and the Crisis of Connection” says, “When we devalue things associated with femininity — such as emotions and relationships — boys miss out.”

The imbalance doesn’t just put exhausting pressure on girls and women to bear the social and emotional load of life — to remember the birthdays and wipe the tears and understand that Grandma’s increasingly aggressive eyebrow twitch means that she needs to be separated from Aunt Susan — it harms boys and men, too. They are missing out on internalizing concepts and learning skills crucial to a connected, moral, psychologically healthy life.

Probably because of this difference in socialization, boys [score lower](#) than girls of the same age on virtually all measures of empathy and social skills, a gap [that grows](#) throughout childhood and adolescence. This has implications across the board. Among first graders, social emotional ability, including the skills to form and maintain friendships, is a [greater predictor](#) of academic success than either family background or cognitive skills. Boys are now lagging behind girls academically at every grade level through college, so providing them with a more nuanced and people-focused emotional world — in what they read and watch, and in the conversations we have with them — might go some way toward closing that gap.

The impact on boys’ mental health is also likely to be significant. From a young age, girls’ friendships tend to be more intimate, deeper and more emotionally focused, providing a support structure that is often sorely lacking for boys. According to the [American Psychological Association](#), this lack of support, and the masculinity norms that underpin it, can contribute to a range of serious mental health problems. Adolescent boys are also at almost [twice the risk](#) for death by suicide than girls — so this is an urgent problem.

We talk about toxic masculinity as an extreme scenario — the #metoo monster, the school shooter — but it is more like a spectrum. We have normalized a kind of workaday sub-toxic masculinity, which is as much about what we don’t expose boys to as what we do.

The stories we tell become our emotional blueprints, what we come to expect of ourselves and others and how we engage with our lives. And in the vast majority of situations we are likely to encounter in the course of a lifetime, there is no hero or villain, no death and no glory, but rather just a bunch of needy humans kvetching over who said what. Understanding how to navigate that with grace and skill is the beating heart of human connection.

So let’s work toward a brave new world, in which a boy can proudly shuttle between two birthday parties, sweating with compulsive people-pleasing. Let’s give boys some girl drama, teach them the dark arts of emotional labor and likability. We might all be healthier for it.

Ms. Whippman, the author of “America the Anxious,” is writing a book about raising boys.