

# Must boys be boys?

We expect boys 'to step outside the family too abruptly, with too little preparation for what lies in store, too little emotional support, not enough opportunity to express their feelings'

By JANICE TURNER  
LIFE WRITER

Boys are in deep trouble, and society's beliefs and expectations have put them there.

"Not all boys, of course, but many of them — too many of them, argues Harvard Medical School psychologist William Pollack.

Society places boys in a "gender straightjacket," judging their behaviour against dated ideas about masculinity and what it takes for a boy to become a man.

The biggest mistake we make, Pollack says, is pushing sons to separate from their mothers prematurely — as early as age 5 or 6 — expecting them to be independent in school, at camp, in all sorts of situations they may or may not be ready to handle.

Boys get a "second shove" in early adolescence — into new schools, sports competitions, jobs and dating.

The problem is not that we introduce our boys to the adult world, but how we do it.

"We expect them to step outside the family too abruptly, with too little preparation for what lies in store, too little emotional support, not enough opportunity to express their feelings, and often with no option of going back or changing course," Pollack writes in *Real Boys: Rescuing Our Sons From The Myths of Boyhood* (Random House, \$32.95). The results have been evident for many years.

Because we don't encourage boys to cry tears, some cry bullets

**Inside**

**TODAY'S HOROSCOPE:** Financial windfall is forthcoming. Capricorn / D8

**ANN LANDERS:** Express concern to anorexic woman / D8

**DAILY RECIPE:** Zucchini and tomatoes make tasty pasta sauce / D8

**HOESTRING SHOPPING:** Beat the heat with a little air-conditioned shopping / D8

PETER POWER/TORONTO STAR



BORIS SPREMO.COM/TORONTO STAR

**BOY OH BOY:** Society places boys in a "gender straightjacket," says William Pollack, right. The Harvard Medical School psychologist says boys should be nurtured, rather than toughened up.



# Own need for love

Continued from D6

tougher on boys.

Boys have as much need for nurturing, learning and role-modelling as girls, agrees Dr. Harvey Armstrong, a Toronto children's psychiatrist. But too often they are denied their own needs for love, support and dependence.

The forced separation that Pollack bemoans can actually occur in infancy, in cases where baby boys are left to "tough it out," to cry themselves to sleep.

Research shows that male infants are more emotionally expressive than female infants, Pollack says. But in many instances, by the time they're in Grade 2 their natural expressiveness — including their ability to express distress or hurt — has been socialized out of them.

The Boy Code, as Pollack calls it, is society's definition of what it means to be a boy and it demands that young males suppress or hide their emotions. Adhering to the code hardens a boy until, ultimately, he loses touch with a spectrum of feelings.

## Path to healthy adult masculinity is not through solitude

When mothers and fathers push their sons to separate from them, it is not usually because they wish to harm them. They believe it to be necessary. "Hold on to them," Pollack implores. "You're not going to make your boys into sissies and you're not going to ostracize them."

In early adolescence, society tells us that it's "good" to push boys away from the family, especially the nurturing mom.

"But I believe the opposite is true," Pollack says. "A boy will make the leap when he is ready and he will do it better if he feels there is someone there to catch him if he falls."

A boy's path to healthy adult masculinity is not through self-reliance, autonomy and solitude, Pollack maintains. Boys yearn for close relationships just as much as girls do.

How you treat a boy has a powerful impact on who he becomes, Pollack insists. Boys are as much products of nurturing as they are of nature.

"I strongly believe that a boy's behaviour can be shaped, that any natural need for action can be encouraged and satisfied, and any impulses toward violence and aggression can be discouraged and channelled in creative, positive directions," writes the assistant clinical professor of psychiatry at Harvard Medical School. He has done research with boys for almost 20 years.

Testosterone may predict a certain type of energy in boys, but the way in which that energy is funnelled and expressed

"All boys are not biologically destined to be more aggressive than girls," he adds. "Biology creates tendencies for boys and girls to behave differently, but it is not an absolute. All the qualities we traditionally associate with girls — such as empathy, sensitivity and compassion — are also basic male traits."

Pollack is a founding member of the Society for the Psychological Study of Men and Masculinity of the American Psychological Association.

Much of the book is derived from his recent study called Listening to Boys' Voices, in which research colleagues and Pollack are studying hundreds of young and adolescent boys, through testing, by observing them in various situations and by talking with their parents.

His work is part of what is being dubbed as an emerging boys' movement, spawned by researchers who are highlighting the difficulties of being a young male in North American culture.

Many adolescent boys — just like girls — suffer from a crisis of self-confidence and identity, they say.

The movement raises the red flag when it comes to depression and related behaviours (irritable conduct, substance abuse, etc.), learning disabilities and suicide rates. But it also "seeks to help parents and teachers understand what makes boys tick rather than demonize them as aggressive," noted an article this spring in The New York Times.

Some advocates suggest that boys end up in trouble because society tries to punish and control them much more so than girls. The boys, in turn, resent it and strike back against authority.

What generalizations about boys do hold, according to Pollack?

Boys, for the most part, enjoy play that is competitive, physically rough, and forceful. They like games that involve interaction in large groups and take place in large spaces, that follow rules and have a hierarchy of authority.

Many girls prefer to learn by watching or listening. Boys prefer to learn by doing. (Many classrooms, he notes, are not geared to the way boys learn and when a boy acts up out of boredom or restlessness, the tendency is to believe he has a behavioural problem.)

Parents and educators should understand that boys have a need to push the envelope. As one commentator put it: Adults can help boys learn how far is too far, but they can't prevent them from pushing. Boys tend to develop their own style of showing love, affection and empathy that is generally quite different from that of girls.

Mothers, especially, may wish to share feelings with their sons by doing things together or just hanging out, rather than insisting they sit

Across the board, we need to do a better job of reading our sons, Pollack says. We must give them the opportunity to signal that they want to open up.

A girl who has been taunted or ridiculed may come home from school and run into her mother's arms. A boy in pain will often be silent and retreat to his room.

Don't run after him, but don't give up on him either, Pollack advises.

"Give him some space to collect himself and look for that indirect signal that he's ready to connect," he says.

That signal may be in the form of a question, something as general as "Is dinner ready yet?" or "Is so-and-so coming home soon?"

Recognizing that moment is critical because it may be a parent's one chance to find out what's wrong. Rather than probe, simply state that you realize that he's feeling sad.

In a two-parent situation, when a boy seeks comfort from his mother, his father should be fully supportive. And if he chooses to enjoy some rough play with his father, his mother should view it as a valid way of communicating and blowing off steam.

How important are dads?

Studies show that a father's empathy and his involvement with his son during infancy and early childhood pays off all through a boy's life — notably during the turbulent years of adolescence.

When fathers are actively involved in their sons' lives, the boys turn out to be less aggressive, less overly competitive and better able to express feelings of vulnerability and sadness, Pollack says.

## I think boys are becoming less tied to the macho image

An 11-year study that followed boys from the age of 7 to 22 showed the more shared activities a boy had with his father, the more education he completed. The closer the emotional bond between the two, the lower the incidence of social delinquency.

Toronto's Armstrong, who has worked with parents of troubled teens for more than two decades, says he is seeing some change for the better.

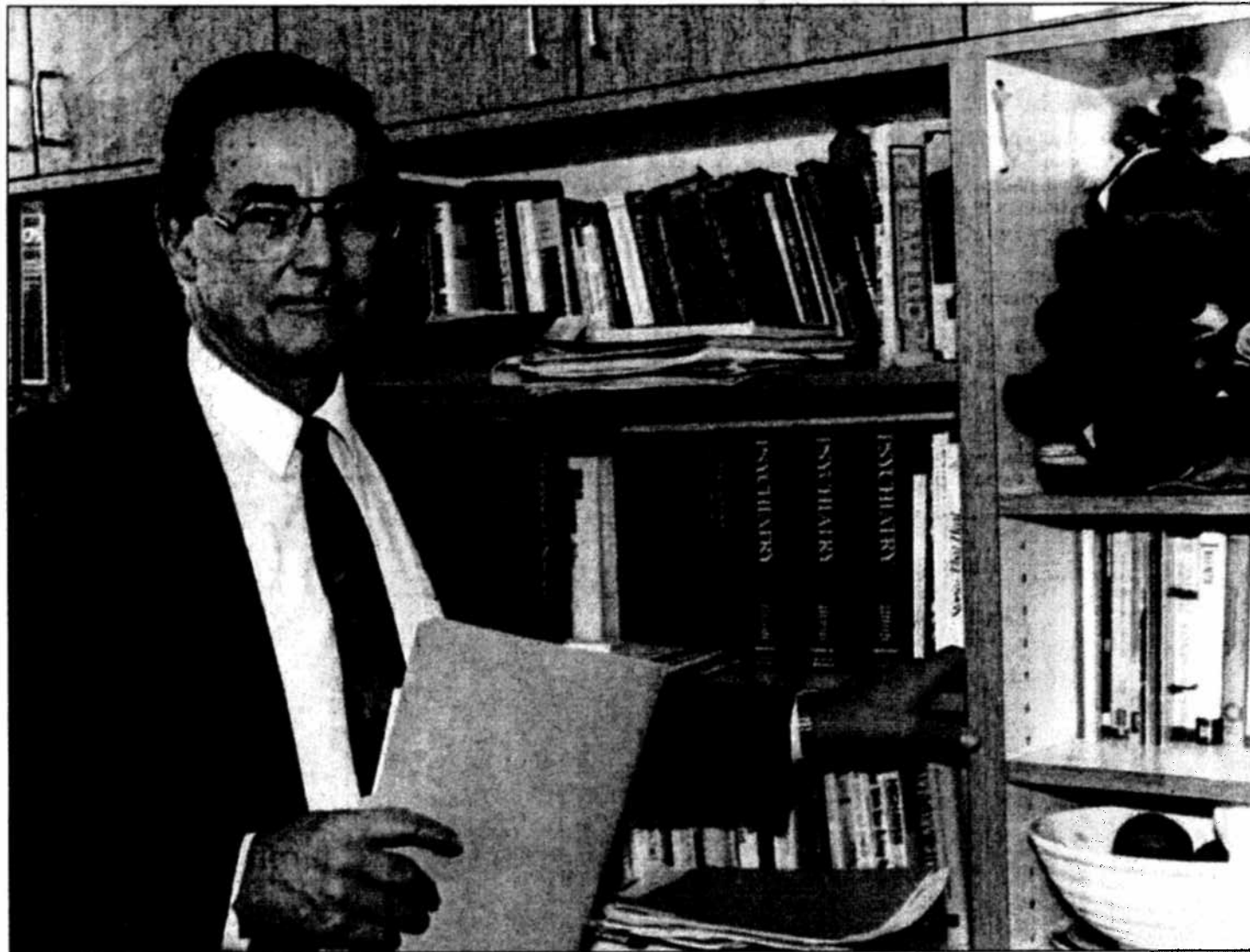
"There are lots of places where male anger is just not accepted anymore," he says.

"And I think boys are becoming more expressive and less tied to the macho image. I can think of many who are more sensitive, caring and verbal than a whole bunch of girls."

But you can't generalize, he cautions.

"There are many different kinds of guys," he says.

Growing Pains by Louise Brown



**CHANGE FOR THE BETTER:** Toronto children's psychiatrist Dr. Harvey Armstrong, who has worked with parents of young boys.

## Book offers advice on raising 'real boys'

Dr. William Pollack gives the following advice in his book *Real Boys*:

■ At least once a day, give your son your undivided attention. While he may not want to talk — he may just want to play a game or get some help on his homework — you're providing an opportunity for him to share things with you.

It's not important that he always unload heavy emotions. He may signal that he wants to talk about something, but at some later point.

What is essential is that he feels your regular loving presence.

■ Encourage the expression of a full range of emotions. Use a broad range of words — sad, disappointed, scared, nervous. Limiting the discussion of negative feelings to "anger" causes boys to channel the gamut of their feelings into one word and one emotion.

■ When a boy expresses vulnerable feelings, avoid teasing or taunting him. Don't cut off painful emotions. Empathy helps boys to learn how to express and cope with a broad range of sentiments.

■ Avoid using shaming language. Rather than asking, for example, "How could you do that?" instead ask "What's go-

ing on?" or "What happened?"

■ Look behind anger, aggression and rambunctiousness. In many cases, a boy who is angry, displays a lot of aggression, or is constantly rambunctious is indirectly asking for help. Try your best to get a sense of what he is feeling. What's motivating his behaviour?

■ Express your love and empathy openly and generously.

Cutting off your affection and your support to let him "stand on his own two feet" can traumatize him.

Tell your son that you love him as often as you like. Give him plenty of hugs.

■ Let boys know that they don't need to be "sturdy oak." No boy should be called up to be the tough one. Talk to him honestly about your own fears and vulnerabilities and encourage him to do the same.

The more genuine he feels he can be with you, the more he will be free to express his vulnerability and the stronger he will become.

■ Create a model of masculinity that is wide and inclusive. When you give your son a sense that there is no sin in being manly, you are helping him develop confidence about who he really is.

FILE PHOTO

**Article: Must Boys be Boys ?**  
from The Toronto Star, July 1998  
HSC  
Mr. Chard

**Instructions:** Read the article “Must Boys be Boys ?”. As you will see, it says that in our society boys are often expected to step outside the family too abruptly with little preparation or emotional support, and that they are not given the chance to express their feelings (express anger constructively, or cry.) Some researchers say that this causes many boys to become depressed, or in a worst case scenario, to turn to violence.

Answer the following regarding the article:

1. Do you agree with the points made in the summary of the article above ? Why or why not? Try and give a personal example or an example about someone you know to support your answer.
2. Do boys have as much need for nurturing, learning and role modeling as girls ?
3. Do they get this ?
4. Why do many parents “push their boys away ?”
5. Are these fears the parents have justified ?
6. What is the “macho image” ? Why can it be dangerous ?
7. Read the side article “Book Offers Advice on Raising Real Boys.” Write down 5 pieces of advice that Dr. Pollack gives on how to raise boys to be healthy, happy human beings.