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opening extract from

21st Century Boys:

How Modern Life is Driving Them Off the Rails and How We Can Get Them Back on Track

written by

Sue Palmer

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21ST CENTURY BOYS

SUE PALMER



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Introduction

MEET THE BOYS

Why a man-made world is making boys' lives toxic … and how we can raise boys fit to meet the challenges of a new century

Meet **Dylan**. Five years old and in a state of perpetual motion. Happiest when outdoors – running, tumbling, climbing, fighting. Indoors he squirms and jostles, limbs flailing all over the place. According to his mum, he only ever seems at peace in front of the TV (although perhaps peace is the wrong word – more a sort of zombie-like trance). According to his teacher, Dylan is a real handful, always getting into fights and mischief and already having problems in class: she worries for his future. And she's finding more and more little lads with Dylan-like behaviour arrive in her class every year.

Perhaps you'd rather meet **Ozzy**. Eight-and-a-half, going on 30. He'll engage you in very serious conversation, and would love to show you his remarkable collection of fossils. Ozzy's parents hope he'll eventually make it to Cambridge, but realise that his immediate problem is to find some way of relating to his classmates. They're worried that the relentless teasing might soon turn into something worse. Ozzy's teacher, on the other hand, isn't so sure it's all the other kids' fault. She too finds Ozzy extremely annoying: if a subject takes his fancy, he'll work like a Trojan, but if it doesn't, he's a menace and can be very disruptive …

You'd probably prefer to avoid **Leo**. He's 14 and really pissed off with school. He just about coped at primary, but since starting secondary it's been downhill all the way. He's now such a handful that his teachers are secretly grateful when he bunks off, but his mum is terrified. Leo is hanging out with a very disreputable-looking crowd and she fears he might be taking drugs. He's definitely smoking and drinking, messing around with girls he calls 'bitches' and 'hos', and out on the streets with his new mates till all hours. The police have been round a few times, and told her she has to keep him under control. But what can she do? – he's bigger than her now …

Still, you're unlikely to bump into **Kevin**, 16. He disappeared into his black-painted bedroom many moons ago and nobody's seen much of him since. His parents hear the door slam as he leaves for school, then again when he returns – but apart from brief encounters for the exchange of food and washing, they've given up trying to communicate. He's supposed to be revising for his GCSEs, but he might be hacking into the White House computer for all they know, or racking up a nightly death toll on Grand Theft Auto IV. Kevin's always been a bit difficult to talk to … and far too keen on computer games. Now his parents fear he's given up on this world and taken up virtual residence somewhere else.

Boys have always been boys – restless, impulsive, excitable, obsessive, aggressive, inscrutable – but in an overcrowded, over-heated, 21st century world their boyishness seems to be more of a problem. These four are fairly extreme examples, of course, but many parents I meet see echoes of behaviour from one or more of them in their own sons – not to mention their son's friends, and the boys they see out on the streets and in the malls. So maybe we need to talk about Kevin, Leo, Ozzy and Dylan ...

Do we need to talk about boys?

During the last few years, there's been what newspapers call a 'moral

panic' about childhood – every day seems to bring more stories of disturbed children or disaffected teenagers. A couple of years ago UNICEF reported that, on a range of measures of well-being, British children were the unhappiest in the developed world, while a think tank found that the UK had the worst behaved teenagers in Europe – at, or near the top of, the poll for drug abuse, binge drinking, underage sex and youth crime.

None of this came as a surprise to British teachers, who'd noticed a steady deterioration in children's behaviour and capacity to settle at school over at least two decades. It was their concern that led me – as a literacy specialist – to spend three years interviewing experts from a range of disciplines to find out what was going on. In *Toxic Childhood*, published shortly before the official reports began to appear, I collated research showing how junk food, poor sleeping patterns, a screen-based sedentary lifestyle, the wrong sort of childcare and educational experiences, family fragmentation and the effects of consumer culture can affect children's development. Many youngsters now suffer from a combination of these factors – a dangerous cocktail that's bound to have an effect. So as well as fuelling childhood obesity, 'toxic childhood syndrome' damages the brains of a growing number of children.

As I ferreted about among the statistics, it became depressingly obvious that boys were particularly affected. In terms of school work, they'd begun to lag behind girls in the 1980s, gone into free fall in the 1990s and – although government threw money and initiatives at them for over ten years – are still languishing in their sisters' shadow. Girls now out-perform boys in every subject of the curriculum except maths and science, with almost 50% going on to university or college, as opposed to fewer than 40% of boys. Considering that, less than a century ago, the chances of a girl even being allowed near a university were negligible, this is a remarkable reversal of fortunes.

Part of the reason is boys' greater chance of suffering from one of the 'developmental disorders', rarely heard of 30 years ago, but now affecting around one in ten children. These include ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder) and dyspraxia (problems with physical co-ordination), both four times more likely to affect boys than girls,

and Asperger Syndrome (a form of autism which causes problems with social relationships) which is *nine* times as common in males. Academics are at the moment locked in dispute over whether more boys than girls are dyslexic but – whatever the finer points of their argument – they're at least twice as likely as girls to have problems with reading at school.

Boys come out worst in terms of mental health too. The British Medical Association reported in 2006 that boys in the five to ten age group were twice as likely as girls to have an emotional, behavioural or mental health problem, while among 10 to 15-year-olds 11% of boys had diagnosable conditions, as opposed to 8% of girls. They also found that young men in the 15 to 24 age range were the group most at risk of committing suicide. Indeed, in this age group, suicide is the second most common cause of death.

So yes, I think we should recognise that all is by no means well with children and young people in contemporary Britain, and that boys in particular are getting a pretty raw deal. What's more, if boys aren't reasonably civilised, confident and able to exercise self-control by the time they reach their teens, they can become a problem for society: four out of five criminal offences are committed by males. In the words of psychologist Sammi Timimi, who has written widely on the subject: *'The big difference is that boys externalise their problems and it comes out as bad behaviour – girls tend to internalise it, as sadness. Boys' issues are therefore issues for others, not just themselves.'*

There have always been disaffected young men – scamps, scoundrels, hooligans and 'juvenile delinquents' litter the pages of social history – but the fact that youth crime has always been with us doesn't excuse it. As we learn more about the workings of the human mind, it should be possible to make life and learning easier for boys, so they grow up balanced, happy and able to make their own contribution to society. But at present, more and more 21st century boys seem to fall victim to the toxicity of modern childhood. And if we close our eyes to the problem, hoping it'll go away, these lost boys' plight will become an ever greater threat, not just to themselves but to society as a whole.