The Boys Are All Right

We've been fretting about them for a decade. But young men are better off, socially and academically, than ever

BY DAVID VON DREHLE

PHOTOGRAPHY FOR TIME BY DAVID BURNETT
book has been at or near the top of the New York Times best-seller list since late spring. *The Dangerous Book*, bound in an Edwarclam red cover with marbled endpapers, has many of the time-honored qualities of an ideal young man: curiosity, bravery and respectfulness; just enough rogue to keaven the stoic; an appetite for any challenge, from hunting small game to mastering the rules of grammar. It celebrates trial and error, vindicates the noble failure. Rudyard Kipling would have loved it.

These charms alone can’t explain the popularity of an amalgam of coin tricks, constellations and homemade magnets, however. Clearly, *The Dangerous Book* has tapped into a larger anxiety about how we’re raising young men. This is a subject worth digging into, because it reflects not just on our sons but also on their sisters, on the kind of world these kids might make together—and on the adults who love them, however imperfect we prove to be. With fresh eyes on fresh facts, we might find that an upbeat message to a newborn boy is not so misguided after all.

**THE MYTH OF THE BOY CRISIS**

"I don’t think anyone will deny that girls are academically superior as a group. Girls are more academically powerful. They make the grades, they run the student activities, they are the valedictorians."

Christina Hoff Sommers, a fellow at the American Enterprise Institute, was explaining how she came to worry deeply about boys. In the book-lined parlor of her suburban Washington home, she ticked through a familiar but disturbing indictment: More boys than girls are in special-education classes. More boys than girls are..."
abusing drugs, committing violent crimes, and engaging in promiscuous sex. Young males were found by many behavioral indi-
cators at some point in the 1980s and 1990s—sharp changes on some scales, long emotions on others. I was forced to confront a fact that I had secretly known all along: that teens of 10 years ago—my generation—were the leading edge of an epidemic of drugs, dood, and so on.

No wonder so many writers began call-
ing for change in the late 1990s. Reliable social science data often lag a couple of years behind the calendar; it takes time to gather and compile a nation’s worth of numbers. Stories about social trends that you read to-
day may be describing the reality of 2004 or 2005. The groundbreaking book boys were a response to realities portraying the worst of a physical, mental and moral health crisis.

There’s more to the story, however. That downward slide has leveled off—and in many cases, turned around. Boys today look pretty good compared with their dads and older cousins. By some measures, our boys are doing better than ever.

The juvenile crime rate in 2005 (the most recent year cited in the report) was down by two-thirds from its peak in 1993. Other Justice Department statistics show that the population of juvenile males in prison is only half of its historic high. The number of high school senior boys using illegal drugs has fallen by almost half compared with the numbers in 1986. And the percentage of high school boys drinking heavily is now the lowest on record. When I was in high school, more than half of all senior boys told researchers they had dozed off or more drinks in a row within the previous two weeks—a number that I have no trouble believing. By last year, that figure was fewer than 3 in 10.

Today’s girls are also doing well by these measures, but their successes in no way di-
niminish the progress of the boys. In fact, to-
gether our kids are reversing one of the dire trends of the previous generation: the teen pregnancy epidemic. According to the new report, fewer than half of all high school boys and girls in 2005 were sexually active. For the boys, that’s a decrease of 10 percentage points from the early 1990s. Boys who are having sex report that they are more responsible about it; 7 in 10 are using con-
don, compared with about half in 1993. As a result, teen pregnancy and abortion rates are now at their lowest recorded levels.

What about school boys? In the sixth, eighth and 11th grades all score better—though not dramatically better—on math tests than did the comparable boys of 1990. Reading, however, is a problem. The stan-
dardized SAT test, known as the nation’s report card, indicates that by the senior year of high school, boys have fallen nearly 20
The boys of my era in the bathroom scale. When I was in high school in the late 1970s, roughly 70% of my male classmates were in weight classes of 160 lbs or heavier. Today, a boy is 5 ft 10 in. My favorite statistic seemed to sum up all the others: fewer boys today are dead-beats. The percentage of young men between 16 and 19 who neither attend school nor attend school and have not earned a high school diploma is less than half the figure for young black men ages 16 and 19. The greatest gains in this category have been made by black youths. In 1971, 31% of 16- to 19-year-old black men had not earned a high school diploma; today, that proportion has been cut almost in half, to fewer than 1 in 3.

Today's boys may wear their pants too damned baggy and go around with iPods in their ears. They know everything about video games and nothing about paper routes. I doubt that they slog to school through deep snow as I recall doing back in 1940, when the snow piled up to the hubcaps. But judging from the numbers, they are pulling themselves up from the hard sofa to the bell.

SO WHERE DO WE GO RIGHT?

Unfortunately, it's one thing to observe human behavior—count the crime reports and the teen births and the diplomas awarded—and quite another to explain it. Popular science and the best-seller lists skip eagerly from one theory to the next, lingering with delight on the most provocative if not always the most plausible. A recent paper suggested that falling crime rates can be explained almost entirely by reduced lead exposure in childhood. Which was odd, because last year economist Steven Levitt's best-seller Freakonomics chalked up the improvement to legalized abortion, which he theorized, cut the number of unwanted children prone to wind up as criminals.

Or take the teen-pregnancy numbers. It's not enough to credit the virtues of responsibility and better sex education. Something ruder is desired. According to some writers, fewer teen girls are getting pregnant because they're all switched on to a razor. Or maybe the phenomenon is due to a still unexplained decline in sperm counts.

But high on our list of lowly concerns, let's pull out Occam's razor and consider a simple possibility: maybe our boys are doing better simply because we're paying them more attention. We're providing for them better; the proportion of children living in poverty is down roughly 5% from a spike in 1993. And we're giving them more time. Parents—both fathers and mothers—are reordering their priorities to focus on caring for their kids. Several studies confirm this. Sociologists at the University of Michigan have tracked a sharp increase in the amount of time men spend with their children since the 1970s.

Another long-range survey, reported by University of Maryland researchers, has
asked parents since the 1960s to keep detailed diaries of their daily activities. In 1995, child-focused care occupied about 23 hours per week, the vast majority of it done by moms. By 1999, that had dropped to 15 hours per week as moms entered the workforce. The study found parents spending 20 hours a week focused on their kids—by far the highest number in the history of the survey. Both moms and dads had dramatically shifted their energies toward their kids.

Are there risks of overparenting boys? Sure. And here’s where the success of The Dangerous Book gets interesting, because it suggests that as parents spend more time with their sons, we may be reconnecting with the fact that the differences between boys and girls need not be threatening and that not all the lore of the past about how to raise boys was wrong.

Gregory Hodge is a good example of this return to tradition. He is principal at the Frederick Douglass Academy, a public school in Harlem. His school was one of three recently honored by the Schert Foundation for excellence in educating black male students—the most troubled cohort but also the group making the greatest progress in many areas. Hodge told me that when he arrived at the combination middle school and high school 11 years ago, the academy was already a great success—but the student body was 80% female. The new principal made it his business to recruit more boys. Today, of the academy’s 1,250 mostly poor and minority students, half are male. Yet the dropout rate remains virtually zero, and this year (like most years), most members of the senior class graduated and went on to college.

Hodge says the secret is to reach boys before they get into trouble. He uses the academy’s basketball facilities to lure youngsters still in grade school. Once you have their attention, you must show them a world of possibilities that you genuinely believe they can achieve. “You must make kids look for validation,” he says. “You are important. You will be successful. We don’t talk about it, you go to college. Around here it’s when you go to college.”

Frederick Douglass Academy students

**SIMPLE SPLASH** Society casts a skeptical eye on fire play—play driven by a boy’s curiosity rather than the latest schedule or the folks at Nintendo. Adhere to a strict dress code and accept rigid discipline. Many of them virtually live at the school, even on Saturdays, doing hours of homework, attending required tutorials if they lag behind, participating in dozens of sports and activities, from basketball to lacrosse and ballet to botany. “Everything a private school would offer a rich kid,” Hodge explains. But within this highly structured setting, the school recognizes that many boys need room to learn in their own way. “Some of the kids are headstrong,” Hodge says in a gravelly Bronx rasp. “That’s what makes a boy. They’ve gotta experiment, learn the hard way that his head won’t break concrete. Male students tend to want to find things out for themselves—so why don’t you use that as a teacher?”

“I once had about 15 boys very close to dropping out,” the principal continues. “They weren’t into sports. I had to find something for them to get into. Finally I made a recording studio for the little meatheads, and they ran with that. All of them made it through to graduation. I’ll try anything—dance, chess, hydroponics, robotics—anything to let these kids know that this is a world they can fit into, where they can be successful.”

**THE BASICS OF BOYHOOD**

Nothing hodge says is remotely ground-breaking or experimental—and that’s precisely the point. Only in recent decades have societies seriously begun to unlock the full potential of girls, but the cultivation of boys has been an obsession for thousands of years. “How shall we find a gentle nature which also has a great spirit!” Socrates asked some 2,300 years ago—essentially the same question parents ask today. Ours is far from the first society to fear for its sons. Leo Brady of the University of Southern California, in his 2003 book From Chivalry to Terror, noted recurring waves of anxiety. Europeans of the 18th century imagined that free trade and the death of
The development of activities at the camp is exciting, from soccer to blacksmithing, from kayaking to watercolor, but the most popular is more traditional: building rafts of fallen tree limbs and pooling at sunset on the creek. Leave your cell phones, laptops, and iPads at home.

There’s no Margaret Anderson, a principal’s wife from Nashville and member of the faculty at Vanderbilt University. She works in the infirmary while her 12-year-old sister Gage discovers the woods on half-day pack trips. “I call this place Boy Heaven.”

Falling Creek subscribes to a philosophy of structured freedom, “which is essential and the same philosophy paying dividends among boys, as at the opposite end of the economic ladder at the Rocky Mountain Academy. It works across the board, says Anderson, and she wishes more of the boys she sends to Nashville practice their lives of structured freedom too.

“Whether it’s urban kids who can’t go outside because it’s too dangerous or the overscheduled, overparented kids at the other end of the spectrum—I’m worried that boys have lost the chance to play and to explore,” Anderson told me. Our society takes a dim view of idle time and casts a skeptical eye on free play—play driven by a boy’s curiosity rather than the league schedule or the neighborhood trendy as she lists the virtues of letting boys run themselves occasionally.

When they are finishing one thing over another, they begin making choices of their own,” she says. “They discover consequences, and learn to take responsibility for themselves and their emotions. They start learning self-discipline. Self-confidence. Team building. If we don’t let kids work through their own problems, we get a generation of whiners.”

That made sense to me. As I watched the boys at Falling Creek do things that would scare me to death if my own sons were doing them—hymenoptering white-hot pieces of metal, clinging to a zip line two stories above a lake, examining native rattlesnakes—I didn’t notice many whining boys. Yates Train, director of Falling Creek, seemed to read my mind. “For the parents who have the anxieties nowadays, far more than the boys,” he said. “We’ve started posting photographs of our kids on our website, but still I get complaints if we don’t have a picture of every camping every day.”

Worrying about our boys—reading and writing books about them, wringing our hands over diet trends and especially taking more time to parent them—is paying off. The next step is to let them really blossom, and for that we have to trust them, give them room. The time for seeing what won’t work, or fearing for their futures, is behind us. The challenge now is to believe in them.
"The Boys Are Back in Town" is the sixth episode of Season 5. It aired on November 6, 2003. The girls encounter the return of their old male enemies, the Rowdyruff Boys, courtesy of HIM. HIM is angrily watching videos of the Powerpuff Girls defeating different villains. He gets excited when he sees something on one of the videos. The next day, the girls are fighting monsters and have just defeated them when a large outcropping emerges from the ground and on it are the Rowdyruff Boys! The girls are 10. Mother told the boy that if he watched TV for a long time he would get tired. 11. He ordered to hurry up and find my hockey stick. He added he would be waiting for me outside because it was too hot there. 9. She looked sadly at me and turned away. 10. Everything is all right with the little girl; she looks gay and cheerful again. Ex. 133, p. 503.