



21st Century Boys – Stone Age male nature meets high-tech, quick-fix, sexually-equal culture

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In my book *Toxic Childhood: how the modern world is damaging our children and what we can do about it* (2006), I made connections between our growing understanding of child development and contemporary research on diet, exercise, sleep, communication, parenting, childcare and education.

The aim was to uncover links between 21st century children's lifestyles and reports from UK teachers that their pupils had increasing problems in focusing attention, controlling behaviour and social interactions with peers, but the research (which took around eight years and involved interviews with scores of experts in a wide range of disciplines) made me increasingly interested in the effects of lifestyle changes on young children's self-concept.

As an educator, I had spent my career believing that gender is a social construct and am personally committed to sexual equality. However, despite global concern to close the gender gap, screen-based consumer culture seems to be actively widening it. A combination of screen saturation and aggressive marketing techniques means children are exposed from birth to highly specific (and generally negative) gender stereotypes.

Nature, nurture and gender

In 2007 I began research for *21st Century Boys*, followed in 2010 by *21st Century Girls*, researching the boys book first because it was by now well-established that boys were doing less well at school than girls. In the UK, where a pupil profile is compiled when children are five, they lag behind girls in all areas of the early years curriculum (especially, in 2007, 'Communication, language and literacy') and this attainment gap continues throughout the educational system, with female graduates now significantly outnumbering males.

Boys are also more likely than girls to suffer from the various developmental conditions that have mushroomed over the last forty years. ADHD (attention deficit hyperactivity disorder), dyslexia, dyspraxia and other specific learning disorders are three or four times more common in the male of the species than the female, and boys are nine times more likely to be diagnosed with ASD (autistic spectrum disorder). In 2007, teenage boys in the UK were also outnumbering girls in terms of mental health problems. So, while my original research interest was in cultural influences on children's identities, I now found myself researching the effects of biological inheritance on male development ... and thus wandering into the nature-nurture debate ... and thus into the terrible quagmire of gender politics!

This took me well out of my comfort zone, but the literature on developmental psychopathology (Kraemer's *The fragile male*), evolutionary biology (Pinker et al) and Professor Simon Baron-Cohen's work on male and female thinking patterns (see *The Essential Difference*, 2004) convinced me that nature is involved in the way boys and girls respond to schooling. The differences in terms of developmental psychology are small and intricately involved with aspects of nurture. If we are to achieve a sexually equal society, there's plenty of evidence to suggest that – on the whole – boys need a slightly different emphasis from girls in terms of early nurture: more attention to attachment and communication skills, and plenty of opportunities for active play, including activities that are often frowned upon in nursery settings, such as 'play fighting'.

In educational terms, boys are more likely to flourish if formal schooling does not begin until six or seven years of age. In the wealthy west, the educational gender gap is particularly problematic in countries where an early school starting age is accompanied by political pressure to achieve on standardised tests of literacy and numeracy. For 'less-academically able' boys, early pressure to achieve in formal school work can affect the disposition to learn, leading to disaffection and continued failure.

Baron-Cohen (a specialist in ASD) claims that males are slightly more inclined towards what he calls S-type thought (systemising) and girls towards E-type thought (empathising). My conclusion is that boys whose early nurture encourages 'school readiness' are more likely to thrive in an early-start, high pressure system than girls. Since this is often connected with their families' socio-economic status, a worrying educational gender gap in wealthy countries is also often associated with an increasing gap between rich and poor.

School versus cool

Alongside the impact of nature and nurture on boys' development, there is also the pernicious 21st century influence of screen-saturation and gender-specific marketing. TV, DVD, baby apps on handheld devices and other technological toys can now be used as 'electronic babysitters' from children's earliest months on earth. These consumer products – and others aimed at male babies and toddlers – emphasise traditional male stereotypes from the beginning so boys learn at a very early age that their sex should aspire to be superheroes/macho-men, interested in things rather than people, and that caring for others is 'girly'.

Screen-based activity is naturally attractive to S-type thinkers, so it has always been easier for marketers to interest boys in computer gaming. Companies such as Nintendo rapidly hijacked the language of play for their products ('Life's a game – play more!') and, no matter what their personal neurological make-up, there are many ways in which boys can substitute screen-based activity for the 'real play' ('freely-chosen, personally-directed, intrinsically-motivated behaviour that actively engages the child') which has underpinned healthy development for countless millennia. The sooner techno-play becomes children's default activity, the less likely they are to develop other interests. As a literacy specialist, I'm particularly concerned about the effects of too-early exposure to screen-based technology on reading development.

In the absence of regulation (which I believe will eventually become essential) it's up to parents and teachers to protect 21st century boys from the damaging effects of these socio-cultural factors. For parents, the key advice I've gathered from my research is:

- be aware of the long-term dangers of market pressure on young children
- as children grow older, discuss marketing techniques and strategies with them
- limit screen-time (see recommendations from the American Academy of Paediatrics)
- monitor and mediate young children's screen use
- ensure plenty of access to real play (especially outdoor play)
- encourage them to read for pleasure.

Schools can support parents in these steps, while also providing a learning environment that supports boys' strengths while minimising the effects of gender-stereotypical weaknesses.