

Leonard Sax
"Boys Adrift"
Sunday Nov 2, 2008
Mountain View High School Auditorium

Leonard Sax, M.D., Ph.D. spoke to a full auditorium about his most recent book, **Boys Adrift: The Five Factors Driving the Growing Epidemic of Unmotivated Boys and Underachieving Young Men.**

Dr. Sax explained, citing scientific research and drawing on his 20+ years of clinical experience, why American boys are less resilient and less ambitious than they were twenty years ago, why they are failing in school and disengaged at home, and why the gender gap in college attendance and graduation rates has widened so dramatically. He described how social, cultural, and biological factors have created an environment that is toxic to boys, and he presented some solutions/suggestions for parents.

To begin, he cited several articles in Business Week, US News, New York Times, etc. that document a widening gender gap between girls and boys with respect to their engagement in school and life. Statistics such as these:

- In a 25-year-study, only 1/10 of boys are reading even one hour a week for fun. This is much lower than for girls and for boys of 25 years ago.
- The percentage of men attending college is declining at a steady linear rate. If the rate continues, there will be no more men attending college in the US by 2070!
- Girls are increasingly more qualified to attend college. In fact those colleges with gender blind admissions say that if they were not trying to maintain gender balance, and were just admitting students on their merits, over 70% of admits would be women.
- 80% of summa cum laude college graduates are women. Among the men who do receive top honors, they are predominantly Asian and South Asian.
- 40 years ago boys dominated yearbook and newspaper activities at school; now these activities are female-dominated.
- An amazing 20% of young men now are not working and NOT LOOKING for work! This was very rare 40 years ago.

Why?

In our culture it's unmasculine to work hard. Starting as early as 1st grade, it's not cool for boys to care.

Contrast this with Sam Cooke's famous song, "Don't know much about history" where he sang that if he could only get an A in geometry quiz, he might win his woman's love. Singers today don't write songs with lyrics like these!

Leonard Sax described the FIVE FACTORS causing this epidemic among boys.

FACTOR #1: Changes in education in the past 30 years, such as the acceleration of kindergarten

Studies in brain development show that overall girls' brains reach their inflection point (half-way growth point) at age 11, but boys not until age 15. But although boys' brains develop later, they're being expected to learn at younger and younger ages. Kindergarten today is very different today than it was 30 years ago. It's about literacy and numeracy, not socialization. Boys are expected to sit quietly for long periods although many are not yet developmentally ready to do so. Plus, research shows that most boys learn better standing or moving around than sitting! (In fact sitting puts the brains of many boys to sleep!)

The Dean of Education at Stanford did a study where she interviewed 5-year-old boys in two different groups – the "smart" group and the "dumb" group -- and asked them: "Do you think you're smart?" "Do you think the teacher likes you?" "Do you like school?" Kids in the dumb group answered, "I'm not smart," "the teacher hates me," and "I hate school." So these kids' attitudes about school were being formed at a young age, and research shows that these kinds of attitudes are global, stable, and non-contingent, i.e. unlikely to change even several years later.

Another study looked at results of an international test taken at age 15 and found that the country in which boys consistently do the best in the world is Finland. But in Finland, formal education doesn't start until age 7! So clearly there's not advantage to pushing the learning earlier and earlier.

FACTOR #2 – Video games

The average US boy today spends 13 hours/week playing video games (compared to 4 hours/week for girls). Research shows that when boys watch up to 6 hours/week, there's no negative impact on academic achievement. Beyond 6 hours/week, there's a dramatic impact. Boys' brains develop differently! Boys who play a lot of video games may increase their hand-eye coordination, but they lose their ability to read other peoples' emotions, i.e. distinguish sad from tired faces. There's a shift in these boys' motivation from the real world to the virtual world, and away from sports and physical activity.

Today's boys would rather make it to the Kilimanjaro round in Halo – for which their friends will bow down in awe and respect – than study for a Spanish final.

FACTOR #3 – Medications (i.e. several variations on speed and Ritalin)

Today, boys who fidget, don't pay attention, talk back, and forget their homework, are often classified as having "oppositional defiant disorder." 30 years ago we would have just said to their parents, "Your kid's a brat. Do something about it." But now we do kids a disservice by medicalizing their behavior. Once it's classified as a disorder, people expect it to be curable with medication. Today one third of all 13-year-olds in some US communities are on drugs.

A study was done in which Adderall was given to normal kids and withheld from severe ADD

kids. Researchers found that the Adderall helped normal kids learn better even more than they helped the ADD kids! These types of drugs do a lot to improve kids' moods, focus, attention, etc.

Studies have also shown that teenagers need 9 hours of sleep per night, and that their IQ goes down by 8 points per hour of sleep loss. Yet many teens today don't get enough sleep. So no wonder they feel better when they take these meds!

But studies have found that these meds damage the nucleus accumbens, which is the part of the brain that translates motivation into action. So taking these medications over time produces lazy boys.

Even boys' motivation to date real girls is diminished. Many 15 year old boys today subscribe to porn sites, saying they would rather masturbate to pretty girls for \$12.95/month than be with real girls (and claiming that real girls are fat, for example).

FACTOR #4 – Environmental Toxins (PET and BPA)

Plastic bottles contain Polyethylene Terephthalate (PET), which leeches into water. In fact the amount of the chemical in two water bottles left out in the sun is the equivalent of that in one birth control pill. Studies show that the increased level of this chemical in the Potomac River is feminizing/emasculating the fish.

The sperm count of boys today is less than half of their grandfathers. The testosterone level of boys today is less than half of their fathers. Today in some communities more Viagra is being prescribed for the under-30 crowd than the over-40 crowd!

Studies of college athletes show that highly motivated men have higher levels of testosterone, so there's no question that men's hormones (testosterone, specifically) drive their motivation levels -- This is not true for women. The causal link between chemicals, hormones, and motivation in men is clearly documented now.

FACTOR #5 – The Decline and Disintegration of the Masculine Ideal

30-40 years ago, the most popular TV shows were Father Knows Best and My Three Sons, which showed strong masculine fathers. (Real fathers may not have been much like the TV fathers of that era, but at least there were ideals in the popular culture.) 20 years ago, it was the Cosby Show. Today it's the Simpsons!

Movies like 'A Man for All Seasons' about the life of Sir Thomas Moore (which won Best Picture in 1966) don't win Academy awards today, and do not reach the same level of popularity.

Today, instead of listening to men like Sam Cooke sing about doing better in geometry, or the 1972 hit song "Danny's Song," boys are listening to 50 Cent's song Candy Shop, which was #1 for 9 weeks. (And the lyrics, "lick the lollipop" are not about lollipops!!!) These songs are topping not only the rap charts but the pop charts. Today's top singers wear shirts that

say, "Ask me about my penis."

Being a gentleman means USING YOUR STRENGTH IN THE SERVICE OF OTHERS. Boys need to be taught how to be gentlemen, and yet US culture today doesn't teach them. US culture is toxic to boys.

The last chapter of Leonard's book is about DETOX – What to do, how to educate boys and "detox" them from our culture.

Research shows that one good way to do this is to offer single-six programs for groups of boys with strong male leaders serving as role models, engaged in meaningful work.

Unfortunately I ran out of paper and my notes don't go beyond this near-tail-end of the evening's discussion, sorry! So if you're interested in more solutions, go out and buy the book ... It'll be going to a great cause.