

THE BOY PROBLEM: FATHERS OF THE WORLD UNITE

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The latest figures on the college gender gap have triggered a flurry of media stories about the “boy problem”. On nearly every educational measure, we’re told, boys are doing worse than girls. More to the point, we’re also told, the news of the gender gap is an urgent call to the society to take action to improve the life prospects of low-achieving boys.

What the stories don’t say is that we’ve been through this before. Alarms about boys have been raised more than once in the recent past. Op-ed columnists, boy-rearing experts, and researchers have chewed over the problem. Proposals for action have been put forth. Yet once the buzz subsides and media attention drifts away, nothing much happens.

If we look at what has propelled girls into higher education, however, we get a better idea of what it will take to launch an effort to boost boys’ achievement. After all, it’s not that the boys of today are lagging behind the boys of yesterday. It’s that the girls of today have surpassed the girls of yesterday-and outdistanced the boys of today as well. Girls didn’t make their great leap forward into college dominance because of a new program or two. It took much more than that. Today’s girls are achieving at high levels because they are the beneficiaries of a sweeping popular reform movement that began more than thirty years ago and continues into the present. This movement transformed girl-rearing practices. It revised the social curriculum for girlhood. It created a fast-track path to early success in school and later work. This massive effort to improve the prospects of girls has been one of

the most remarkable, if yet unacknowledged, social accomplishments of our times.

Much of the success of the “Girl Project” is attributable to two key factors. One is the early formation of a broad consensus in support of a new goal for girl-rearing. In the 1970s and ‘80s, the soaring divorce rate conveyed an indelible message to all those who were involved in preparing girls for successful lives: namely, that marriage was unreliable as an economic partnership and therefore precarious as a life vocation for women. The old goal-preparing girls for a future life as wife and mother-was scrapped. A new goal was advanced. Its purpose was to armor girls against the fragility of marriage by giving them the educational means to achieve economic self-sufficiency and social independence.

This led to a massive overhaul of girl-rearing practices. The old model for the education of girls encouraged the development of skills and disciplines that would mesh with future family life. The new model emphasized precocious performance and achievement. It promoted early exposure to the habits and disciplines of the work world such as time management, goal setting, and teamwork. It urged girls into AP math courses and summer science programs. It pressed them to seek admission to highly rated colleges. No domain of girls’ lives—from the games they played to the books they read, to the dreams they pursued—remained untouched.

The other success factor was the presence of a large and sympathetic grassroots base for the Girl Project. Mothers were a big part of the natural base. Many mothers regretted their

limited schooling and work experiences. They wanted their daughters to go beyond what they had been able to achieve. As a mother raising daughters in the 1970s and '80s, I remember the heady sense of possibility that accompanied the start-up years of the Girl Project. There was a whole new spirit and approach to raising girls. We tossed out the pink blankets, frilly dresses, and patent-leather shoes. Our daughters wore bib overalls, high-top sneakers, and baseball caps. What we wanted was to give our daughters access to some of the pleasures and freedoms of traditional boyhood, recast as progressive girlhood.

Mothers were not alone though in embracing the new girl-rearing goal and practices. The building of a better girl was also a cause for women in general. Early on, a small band of feminists led a campaign to expand Title IX rights to girls' schooling and sports. And many other women who did not necessarily see themselves as feminist activists-teachers,

librarians, soccer coaches, Girl Scout leaders-carried forth the Title IX spirit into their disciplines.

If there is to be a successful Boy Project, it will have to include some of the same factors that helped the Girl Project achieve liftoff. If society wants to build a better boy, will it be able to reach a consensus on what he will look like? Should he be sensitive, the better to deal with a more feminized culture? Should he be stoic, the better to survive in a tough global economy?

At the grassroots, the natural base of support presumably would be fathers. But many of the low-achieving boys do not have involved fathers. Without a large and engaged contingent of fathers, it will be hard to turn the fitful concern over boys into a more sustained reform effort, much less to enlist the larger community of men in making successful boy rearing their common cause.

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