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## **EDUCATING BOYS IN AMERICA: READING, WRITING, AND RAPID FIRE**

**Young men today are the primary victims of a proliferating gun culture, changing standards for acceptable behavior, educational neglect, intolerance, rampant incarceration and violence perpetrated by the adults who are supposed to be protecting them.**

**By Aaron Kipnis**

First, the steel hammer strikes a gleaming brass crucible. Click. It concentrates mechanical energy into a single point, sparking a chemical reaction. A Chinese sorcerer's brew explodes, expelling a bullet with Herculean force. Kapow. Smells of the devil. Like the spew of a star's afterbirth, a rapidly expanding, fiery, gaseous stream gives wings to sodden lead. Zing. It crosses the liminal space between self and other with mercurial speed. Thunk. Consent or no, it penetrates the tender veil of skin, muscle, heart, and bone. It rapes. No gold, no philosophers' stone, but transformation just the same. "Happiness is a warm gun," sang John Lennon before one took him down, forever.

During the televised live news coverage of the Columbine shootings, the frequent cutaways to the concurrent aerial bombing of Kosovo struck me as sadly ironic. A newscaster shook her head and said, "How could boys from good families have such a callous disregard for life?" Cut to a military leader referring to the deaths of hundreds of civilians as "collateral damage." Then we

are back to the reporter who asks a violence expert: “Why are so many boys fascinated with guns and explosives?” Cut to the general gushing about “the long range accuracy and superior kill power of our latest laser-guided ‘smart’ bombs and cruise missiles.” Cut to the university expert, who has never worked face-to-face with a violent boy in his life, saying, “Violent video games and movies are a big influence.” Cut to the Chinese Embassy erupting into flames: an “unfortunate mistake,” more collateral damage the general says. Cut to the newscaster talking about senseless school violence as SWAT teams inch their way toward Columbine High.

Violence, however, is rarely senseless. People use violence to produce specific external and internal reactions. People often act violently in an attempt to create homeostasis in an unbalanced system. Violence is energetic. It has force, direction, and flow. It also has quasi-biological and psychological aspects that, in many ways, manifest like a drug. Violence has numinous, intoxicating, and archetypal dimensions. Many people report that they felt powerful, even godlike during their commission of a violent act. Violent behavior is also a normal response to certain types of dysfunctional situations and is especially virulent in environments where people lack opportunities to assure their self-worth, economic security, and physical safety. History shows us that the more inhumane a culture becomes, the more violence it generates, either internally or externally. The same is true in a community, family system, personal relationship, or institution . . . like a school.

When I was a boy in seventh through ninth grades, I usually went to school armed with a switchblade. So did my immediate friends—the members of my first gang—the 100's, so named for those of us who had received more than 100 swats from the vice-principal of my junior high in the San Fernando Valley of Southern California. Assaults along the three-mile walk to school were not uncommon. Sometimes, when I felt particularly threatened, I would also carry a bicycle chain in my coat pocket. I never actually used these weapons against another kid; however, I threatened to do so on several occasions. These threats caused both violent kids and my violent stepfather to back down. Guns today are as easy to acquire as switchblades were in my era. Had gun access been so easy then, I would have bought one without hesitation. Given the steady stream of violence I grew up with, chances are quite high that I would have eventually shot someone and become a burden on the state, instead of the taxpayer I am today.

Guns are appealing to boys who legitimately feel threatened by violence. They are the great equalizer in a land that promises equal opportunity to all but only delivers power to the few. When a boy has a gun, he is suddenly as big and tall and threatening as the most dangerous adult in his environment. That's one reason why many non-nuclear nations today still want the bomb. Considering the inordinate amount of weapons carried by students, however, the death and injury rate at school is remarkably low. Most students still respect schools as sanctuaries.

In my interviews with so-called at-risk boys, the majority say they carry weapons to school because they feel threatened. Angry young men will rarely openly admit that they are afraid. That's just not a manly thing to do. But when we get them alone, in groups with supportive men, they frequently confess that they literally live their lives "under the gun." A local fifteen-year-old boy, Ramón, puts it this way: "You need to be 'strapped' [carry a gun]. If someone 'draws down' [pulls a gun] on me, I've gotta pull my 'gat' [gun], too. Otherwise, wind up in the wrong place, you wind up dead, too."

Many of us may have once thought of gun carrying as an urban, street-gang related problem; Columbine and Jonesborough changed all that. The Justice Department reports that one in five suburban, adolescent boys now owns a gun, and even more say they have been threatened with a gun on the way to or from school. And tragically, as we now all know, affluent suburban students are quite capable of horrendous gun-related school crimes. Although the economic and cultural gulf is wide between them, many suburban and inner-city boys have something in common—a profound feeling of isolation, alienation, anger, and a perceived lack of protection from others who attack their emotional self-esteem or physical safety. Another thing all these boys have in common is easy access to handguns and, more disastrously, high-powered assault weaponry.

Typically, boys carry weapons four times more often than girls do. Weapons include guns, razors, knives, chains, and clubs. A U.S. Department of Justice study of inner-city schools shows one in three boys shot at, stabbed, or

otherwise injured by a weapon in transit to or from school in recent years. Forty percent of them say their adult male relatives carry guns on the street. Many weapons-toting boys are simply emulating the adult-male culture where they live. Paradoxically, in any community, schools are still the safest places for boys to be. The majority of violence toward boys is from adults outside the schools, not the other kids inside. Adolescents are 14 percent of the overall population yet represent 30 percent of all violent crime victims. The fact that boys and young men, in particular, are primary victims of violence is seldom as highlighted in our social commentaries as our concern about their behavior. But the fact remains that adults kill more children every week than are killed in an entire year at U.S. schools by other children.

Under the federal Gun-Free Schools Act of 1994, public schools are required to expel for a full year any student carrying a firearm to school or lose their federal funding. Of course, any weapons on campus are of serious concern to us all. I want my own daughter to be perfectly safe on her campus. Instead of education, counseling, or other support to prevent violence, the most common antiviolence strategy used by schools over the last few years has been suspension (78 percent) and expulsion (72 percent). Guns, however, represent the smallest percentage of weapons-related expulsions. According to the Department of Education, in 1997 about 16,000 students were suspended, expelled, or transferred to continuation school for having guns. This was out of 74,000 suspensions and expulsions for weapons and more than 600,000 such actions for all other causes.

Increasingly, traditional “boy toys” such as slingshots, peashooters, yo-yos, pocketknives, and pocket folding tools, are being classed as weapons under zero-tolerance regulations. In our local school district in Santa Barbara, these lower-level incidents have increased more than 700 percent in the last decade. They now account for about 80 percent of all expulsions. Although they may improve school safety, zero-tolerance regulations are also having a severe negative impact on our youth. All too often boys are now suddenly transported from school, safety, and hope to the streets, danger, and despair.

Parents find few educational alternatives for a student expelled from school because of truancy, drugs, tobacco, alcohol, weapons, bad language, fighting, acting out, or sexual harassment. Even five- and six-year-old boys have been suspended for kissing a girl on the cheek as boys’ behavior becomes subject to ever-greater degrees of scrutiny, intolerance, and punishment. Since adults, not kids, commit the vast majority of drug abuse, sex crimes, weapons carrying, and violence, we are now holding schoolboys to higher standards of behavior, greater surveillance, harsher punishment, and lower standards of legal protection than we do adults.

In 1999 at least 15 percent of eighth-grade boys nationwide were suspended or expelled from school. For African American boys this rate jumps as high as one third in many middle schools and high schools. In fact, African American males are significantly more likely to be suspended or expelled at all grade levels than Asian, white, or Latino students. Unfortunately, for those boys, only about two percent of their teachers are African American men, who,

as Jessie Jackson so clearly models, may often display more compassionate authority in their dealings with these boys. Even fewer Latino-male role models are present in our schools. Coincidentally, Latino boys, who fail to see their own faces reflected in their teachers, also have the highest dropout rates in the nation. Students from lower socioeconomic backgrounds of all ages are two and one-half times more likely to be suspended or expelled from school than economically advantaged students.

In a nation where there are now more guns than people, gun control could be a good idea. Trying to force gun control through the schools, however, singles out the primary victims of gun proliferation—children—instead of focusing on the primary perpetrators of violence and gun culture—adults. Increasingly, our youth seem to be the scapegoats for an adult culture possessed by a narcissistic cult of youth, which steadfastly refuses to mature or take responsibility for its excesses and blind spots.

A capacity for introspection, self-awareness, and the taking of personal responsibility are some of the hallmarks of a mature, individuated person. But there is a ubiquitous tendency in the immature psyche for people to locate the source of their ills outside themselves. From era to era the withered finger of demonization casts its horrific shadow upon diverse segments of human culture—witches, women, Jews, immigrants, dark-skinned people, the poor. Today the name of that dark spot on the glittering social landscape of America is

--boys with guns.

As I read the various profiles of boys likely to commit violent acts that are being disseminated to teachers and parents by victim-protection advocates, I am increasingly alarmed by the steadily widening scope of the dark, pathologized lens through which boys in America are being viewed. Much of what was once thought of as normal guy stuff, now is being interpreted more as symptoms of mental illness or even moral deficiencies of some sort that foreshadow potentials for violence. The fact that boys and young men are also the primary objects of violence, however, is seldom as highlighted in our social commentaries.

Today, in the half of our states that still permit it, boys receive two-to three-million applications of corporal punishment a year at school. The majority of these events occur in southern states, where, coincidentally, there are also higher incidences of gun violence at school. In fact, states in which teachers are allowed to hit children have the most student violence and higher overall murder rates as well.

The ecology of neglect toward boys at school is evident in many other arenas: For instance, when boys and girls misbehave equally, boys receive more frequent and severe penalties. Boys receive 71 percent of school suspensions, an even greater share of severe penalties, and are referred to special education four-to-one over girls; the same ratio for boys' drop-out rate. Boys receive more F's, have lower grade-point averages, repeat grade levels and fail to graduate more often than girls. Boys are in fewer clubs, student governments, and school newspapers than girls. Boys now represent a

minority of valedictorians, academic scholarship winners, new college students, and those going on to graduate school. One common fallacy in gender equity philosophy is the belief that any identified disadvantage for girls corresponds to an unfair advantage for boys. When, however, gender equity programs emphasize girls' math or sports deficits without equally spotlighting boys' reading and writing deficits, it's spurious for them to claim that schools are only failing at fairness toward girls.

In higher education today, there is a paucity of research on male psychology, sociology, and learning theory. In the United States, there are more than 15,000 courses focusing on women's issues and needs— classes that are needed and valuable—yet there are fewer than 300 men's studies courses that similarly examine the specific needs of boys and men in our rapidly changing world. These inequities aggravate an already difficult situation for boys and young men in school. Nationwide, males now number only 44 percent of college admissions and 41 percent of graduate students. In sociology, counseling psychology, and education men rarely exceed 25 percent of the graduate students in a classroom, seminar, or professional training.

There is a clear, causal link between academic failure in boys and their involvement in the disruptive, violent, and criminal activities that channel them out of educational institutions and into the criminal justice system. Failure in reading tops the list of self-esteem-busting events in schoolboys' lives. About 70 percent of boys in juvenile institutions suffer from learning disabilities. Even

more disturbing, 80 to 90 percent of all convicted felons are high school dropouts.

Contrary to past studies, recent surveys indicate that greater numbers of girls than boys today report receiving positive feedback from teachers. The girls reporting the highest levels of teacher attention also have the highest levels of college participation. Minority boys, however, who report the lowest positive attention rates from teachers, have significantly lower college participation.

Economically disadvantaged schools also have the highest male drop-out rates and the lowest male reading scores—as much as four whole grade levels/years below affluent schools. Classism and racism readily compound the gender issues that cause many schools to underserve boys. Failing schools reflect a failure of our culture. Many schools are crumbling and out of date, often lacking adequate textbooks or even basic teaching supplies. In California, one-third of our boys fail to graduate with their class.

Boys stutter about six to one over girls, comparable to their higher incidence of dyslexia and other learning disorders. A higher percentage of American boys now score in the lower ranks of literacy than in any other industrialized nation. Of the various language disadvantages that boys suffer, the gravest social consequences follow their failures in reading. Language-skill deficits for boys are closely tied to failure in all academic, economic, and social arenas.

By middle school, most girls are developmentally twelve to eighteen months ahead of boys. Their language skills generally exceed same-aged

boys by far. When boys fail at verbal skills, in the presence of girls whom they often want to impress, the embarrassment can be unbearable. Bad boys in particular often feel very sensitive about their language-skill deficits. Rather than feel the shame, the way many boys deal with not being able to perform well in one arena is to act out in other ways that display their strength and self-confidence—particularly to the girls who are outperforming them.

Of course, wild boys have to be taken out of classrooms at times. They distract other students and sidetrack teachers. If suspended from campus, however, their punishment is often more a vacation. They are free to roam the streets and are motivated to talk friends into cutting class to join them. With in-school suspension, however, boys get up, go to school, and get their class work. There, in set-aside areas of a campus, they can work in smaller classes, receive one-on-one tutoring and get counseling, something many failing boys need in order to succeed.

Stillness, neatness, conformity, quietness, politeness, attentiveness, and verbal skills—historically regarded as more feminine virtues—are highly emphasized in most classrooms. But boys, whether by nature or nurture, are often active, challenging, disorderly, assertive, irreverent, questioning, boundary testing, and, perhaps, a little more physical and visual in their learning style. Consequently, teachers tend to perceive boys as having more personality and behavior problems than girls. Instead of regarding spirited boys as disruptive, defiant, or deviant, a male-responsive view sees them as full of energy that needs firm direction.

For many boys, the persona called for in the classroom is not in accord with their traditional identity. It may even be, at times, both developmentally appropriate and completely normal for adolescent boys to challenge the environment of today's coeducational classroom. Developmental psychologist Jean Piaget wrote that it is the duty of a boy "to revolt against all imposed truth and to build up his intellectual and moral ideas as freely as he can." Competition and confrontation are healthy, normal ways of testing the worth of new knowledge. We desperately need more teachers who welcome confrontation and who can work effectively with the assertive energy of challenging boys and increasing numbers of nonconforming girls.

Many boys respond well to a strong classroom presence that can contain and direct their aggression with caring firmness. Highly spirited boys need one-on-one periods or small-group instruction, realistic expectations, clear behavioral limits, frequent changes in activity, and opportunities to burn off excess energy. In many schools today, academic demands have become so great that physical recreation is reduced to fifteen minutes a day. Many other schools have no functioning outdoor equipment for fear of litigation for permitting its use. Consequently, some schools now host no physical activity at all. In my experience, however, when boys are allowed to let their feelings and physicality stay connected with their mental learning process, they are never bored or restless.

Rather than educators' taking a hard look at teaching style, values, and the structure of today's classroom, various drugs are increasingly being used

to quiet “overly active” boys. The current assumption in education today appears to be that if girls fail, the fault is with the institution, but if boys fail, the fault is in the boy’s character.

By various estimates, more than 8 percent of American boys now regularly receive behavior modification drugs to help them conform to what could be interpreted as a more girl-normed school environment. And increasing numbers of assertive girls—those who do not conform to traditional, quiet, and cooperative female role expectations—are given drugs. If current rates continue, we will be drugging one in ten students by 2002.

As schools increasingly fail to meet the needs of spirited boys, professionals keep widening the diagnostic criteria for attention deficit disorder (ADD) and attention deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD). These “mental illnesses” are now the number one childhood psychiatric disorder in America, affecting more than two million children. Other industrialized nations, however—with better schools, lower child poverty, and, subsequently, higher student achievement than ours—do not diagnose remotely near our incidence of learning disorders.

It is ironic that in a nation trying to teach children to “just say no” we medicate ever-larger numbers of boys to bring their behavior into accord with classroom norms. The U.S. now annually consumes five times more Ritalin than the rest of the entire world combined. Many of the criteria used to determine a diagnosis of ADD are actually typical behaviors for many boys. The “symptoms” include rambunctiousness, contrariness, poor impulse control,

trouble staying on one task, fidgeting, noisy play, difficulty waiting one's turn, interrupting teachers, leaving one's desk without permission, talkativeness, trouble finishing schoolwork or chores, and oversight of small details. In fact, this is exactly the way many highly creative people act when forced to perform repetitive and boring tasks. It also describes me well and, come to think of it, several of my most successful and engaging friends.

Ritalin, which is pharmaceutically quite similar to cocaine, treats adults' need for control more than it does the educational, mental health, or social needs of children. For example, we don't give passive children drugs to make them more assertive in the classroom. Nor should we. We don't give unimaginative children marijuana even though some artists have claimed it enhances their creativity. No, we drug spirited boys to control their behavior in schools and institutions that have forgotten how to reach boys and how to teach them without chemical binds and gags. Many school shooters were known to have been previously taking powerful behavior-altering medications. There is much debate still, however, as to whether or not there are causal links between the two. What we do know is that mania can be a side effect for about 4 percent of medicated boys. And mania can produce psychotic features leading to the very types of monstrous events from which we are now recoiling.

Beyond teaching students how to succeed in the new world order, we need to more consciously tend to the cultivation of their hearts and souls. Ideally, our youth would feel that they are regarded as our most important capital resource and treated with the same intensity of investment we focus on

the stock market, politics, professional sports, and the entertainment industry. Indifference and neglect are regarded by many therapists as some of the most devastating forms of abuse toward the unseen and unheard. School violence, in part, could be seen as a response to the soulless materialism found in much of today's American culture. Violence is largely a learned behavior, which for the marginalized can become the only way some people know how to feel powerful or be seen. In my work with angry young men, it appears that many perceive a culture in which no one seems to really care about them.

For such kids, violence could be a provocative response to a seemingly indifferent world, an attempt to get a reaction, any reaction, from distracted or indifferent adults. If we want boys to behave humanely, someone in their world must model that humanity for them to imitate. Drug-sniffing dogs, metal detectors, armed police in the halls, closed campuses, mandatory drug-testing, electronic and video surveillance, warrantless searches of lockers, backpacks, and persons, corporal punishment, zero tolerance, indiscriminate dispensing of powerful drugs, profiling "dangerous" kids, rampant expulsions, and increased incarcerations just do not model the quality of life we hope they will embrace. We need to look more deeply at ourselves to better understand the social and imaginal matrix from which our culture's violence emerges. Most recent media and legislative responses merely advocate changing laws to try more teenaged boys as adults so they can be sent to adult prisons for longer and harsher sentences. Now, in New York, a fourteen-year-old who takes a gun

to school can be sentenced to prison for four to seven years. No such laws affect adults, however, who may bring a gun to school or work.

Guns have become one of the most prominent symbols of contemporary American culture. We have more safety guidelines regulating toy guns for children than we do for the lethal weapons that all too often wind up in their hands. Gun sellers shamelessly exploit unfounded fears, as evidenced by widely advertised Y2K specials that helped fuel a huge sales increase in military assault-type weapons and other guns in the final days of the twentieth century.

Arms designing, manufacture, and sales are a major force in our economy. We are the world's largest arms exporters by far. We torpedoed the nuclear test ban treaty and, to the consternation of the rest of the world, steadfastly refuse to limit the proliferation of land mines. Years after wars have ended, land mines still kill and maim considerably more children around the world than boys do at school. While we imprison increasing numbers of children for weapons carrying, arms manufactures go to the bank with record peacetime sales. What our boys often see is that a talent for ruthlessness gains many people wealth and power. Children model what they learn from us. If we don't like what they are learning, then instead of merely profiling boys who might go "bad" someday, perhaps we should look more closely at the psychopathic elements of our economy and our cultural drift away from the more fundamental values of our society.

Today's youth are less naïve than any previous generation. They are exposed to just about everything through the media and the “net.” One of the reasons most adult-initiated “just say no” programs fail to reach them is because the majority of kids read right through propaganda about drugs, sex, and other risky behavior. They want to be treated with respect: that means giving them straight talk and good data that can help them make their own informed choices. Our kids know we are now spending more to build new prisons than for universities. They know we have shamelessly exploited the environment and squandered the rightful heritage of their generation. They know that they are being held to higher standards of responsible behavior than our political, social, economic, and even many religious leaders are able to model in their own lives. From this perspective, the casualties of school shootings could also be understood as collateral damage—victims caught in the crossfire of a blind war of unarticulated frustration against a soulless culture. Violence is vivid. That’s why film producers display so much violent material in their movies. School violence captures our attention and returns it to our youth. They are saying: “See us, we are here, we matter.” As any parent knows, when we don’t give children the attention they need, they just keep turning up the volume till we do. We should probably count ourselves lucky that our kids have shot up so few schools to date.

The current generation of American youth shows a great deal of promise. They have a heightened ecological awareness, not just of the environment but of their own paradoxical culture of alienated relatedness. They

are less polarized about gender, volunteer more, and are in many ways more tolerant of racial, cultural, and sexual differences. Youths possess a vital capacity to create healthy, mutually supportive communities, given the opportunity to do so.

It will take a major investment in teacher training, mentoring and the creation of boy-friendly curricula to change current trends. Education, however, is cheaper by far than incarceration. When, through suspension, expulsion, school failure, or dropping out, boys fall through the safety net of the schools, they often wind up on the pathway to prison.

In our seemingly desperate need find someone to blame for our cultural shadow and then somehow quarantine it, the United States now has a higher percentage of boys and young men incarcerated in juvenile halls, jails, conservation camps, boot camps, psychiatric hospitals, recovery hospitals, youth corrections, and adult prisons than any other nation in the world. The majority of these boys are nonviolent or low-level offenders, at least when first encountering these institutions. Any one who still believes in the founding vision of this nation—the principles of liberty, justice, equality, and freedom—will do well to reach out to one young man in trouble and help him find his way to a productive life.

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Handguns are instrumental in the majority of all homicides and suicides in America. This link is particularly acute among youth.

- Homicide is now the second leading cause of death for all young people aged fifteen to twenty-four.
- Homicide is the leading cause of death for African American and Hispanic youth in this age group.
- One out of four homicide victims is younger than twenty-four.
- Eighty percent of all homicide victims are male, as are more than seventy percent of all other assault victims.
- Largely influenced by their familiarity with and access to guns, boys complete suicide attempts about five-to-one over girls.
- The rate of death by homicide for fifteen to twenty-four-year-old males in the United States is ten times that of Canada, fifteen times that of Australia, twenty-eight times that of France or Germany, and fifty times that of Japan.

- Handguns kill thirteen children a day in the United States (equivalent to one jumbo jetliner full of children crashing every month).
- Handguns kill thirteen people a year in Sweden.