

GOT BOYS?

By Rebecca Tree

I love little boys. Not more than little girls but I love boys. I love watching them wrestling on the ground as they develop friendships with one another. I love watching them as they run all over the place yelling and whooping and stretching their skills as they become more competent social beings and stronger human beings. I really don't know what all the recent fuss is about. Boys are noisy. Boys are naturally rowdy. They take up more space when they play. Not that some girls do or don't, but typically, boys just have a larger presence when they play. Unfortunately in the last decade, society and schools in particular have been trying to 'rework' the nature of boys.

We have done remarkably well with our girls since we learned that they were lagging behind in math and science. In the last two decades we have worked extremely hard on 'leveling the playing field' for our girls. But somewhere in all this we forgot about our boys. There's been a great deal of literature written in just the past 5 years regarding the social and emotional development of boys and how this gender difference impacts how they learn and interact. Much of the current literature focuses on statistics; boys are lagging girls in academic achievement and enrollment in colleges. They are ahead of girls though...in drop-out rates, are more likely to commit suicide, and use cocaine. Although there has been recent emphasis to pay closer attention to male development and needs it will take several years for statistics to catch up with current efforts.

Approximately one in eight American children is prescribed Ritalin. Most of them are boys. In fact most of the world's Ritalin consumption, 85% of it, is here in the United States. The United States holds only about 5% of the entire world's population. I find this staggering especially when we realize that the increase of Ritalin in children now stands at around 200%. Do we suddenly have an epidemic of hyperactive children, mostly boys, or do we have an epidemic of cultural and social intolerance to what used to be considered typical development?

Boys are not girls. So, get over it. We are in a time when most teachers and care givers are women and we now have a large population of single moms raising boys alone. So, having said that, we now need to educate ourselves regarding these male/female differences and provide the appropriate support for each.

Here's a reality check...boys are cuddled less than girls as babies, mortality rates for boys is higher and are victims of violent homes at a 2 to 1 rate.

Brain scans and DNA tests show actual physiological and chemical differences between male and female brains. Boy's brains are larger as a whole but with a smaller bundle of nerves that connect the right and left hemispheres. Girl's brains are just the opposite. It doesn't mean one is smarter than the other it means that we are wired differently. Girl's brains cross talk more frequently between the two hemispheres while boy's brains are wired for delayed response time. That means that boys think a little longer before they respond, either in words or action. Unfortunately, our hurried life style demands immediate responses and action in many cases. When overwhelmed the male brain goes into a panic

state making the brain pause or rest. I've seen boys simply shrug their shoulders and say, "I don't know," or reply with something that they think we want to hear, just to buy time or get us off their backs. The more we yell or pressure them for a response the more their brains tune out. Boys need to *hear less* and *do more* physical activity around instruction in order for their brains to 'make it real'.

Boys express their feelings differently than girls. Their feelings are expressed more physically than are girl's feelings. They punch each other, wrestle with one another, and try to lift each other off the ground. All these things are a part of male bonding rituals. When my boys were growing up I can't tell you how many times I had to tell husband and sons to "take it outside or buy me new furniture!" Bonding and attachment for all children must occur before age 5.

Boys engage in more aggressive play than do girls. There is a difference between aggression and violence. Sword and similar play, kicking games, etc. are not indicators that a child will be violent once in adult hood. In fact, new research is showing that violence can actually increase when we try and implement a 'zero tolerance' attitude towards this kind of play. Roughhousing is essential for bonding and friend shipping among boys. There is convincing evidence that this kind of physical activity not only completes some neurological needs but actually helps them academically. All kids need to feel powerful but especially boys. By providing toys that can be moved around in space such as wagons, small wheel barrows, buckets, short garden shovels and piles and piles of dirt, children can find real meaning, purpose and power. Boys need more space when they learn and need to move more objects around as they learn. Computer and electronic toys, although intriguing, only create vicarious experiences for our children. They do not provide real life, full body experiences that actually push information into the brain.

Boys need at least 3 strong male role models in their lives. I am talking about real live male role models not the TV variety. They need firm and loving adults to show them the way. Remember, firm is not the same as mean. Boys respond better to a firmer voice but certainly not to a shrieking one. Boys need time to solve problems. When they become overwhelmed they go into a 'cave' state. I will never forget my oldest son at age 20 as he struggled with a difficult decision. He and I had never had a serious argument before. Don't misunderstand, it wasn't a perfect relationship, I had to learn a lot along the way. It's just that up until that point he never bothered to vocalize his feelings around any issues. He just put up with me, I suppose. In the midst of this very heated discussion he threw his hands up in the air and stomped off. The next day we were able to sit and talk about it. He told me that he had visited all of the military branches that morning, carefully considered all the options (which is what I wanted him to do), and then enlisted. And it was not with his original choice.

My oldest son, Mike, has been in the military now for almost 8 years and has recently told us that he intends to stay the duration till he can retire. This would not be my first choice for my son but I had to get over it a long time ago. I have 2 sons. Mike and Andrew are both in their 20's, very different from one another but simply amazing. I cannot tell you how much I love and respect them. Have I been a perfect mom? Hardly. Most of this stuff I didn't know about while they were growing up. But amazingly, it's all turned out OK.

(Rebecca Tree is Founder/Director of Roots & Wings Child Development in Medford, Oregon. She holds a Bachelor's Degree in Education with an emphasis in Early Childhood Education and classroom Management. She lives in Eagle Point with her husband and their 11 year old daughter, Cora, who is nothing like her brothers. For more information regarding boys; "The Wonder of Boys" by Michael Gurian, and "Boys Play" by Barb Wilson)