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## **ARTICLE REPRINT**

### **Are We Afraid of Our Boys?**

**by Michael Thompson,  
psychologist and author**

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Raising boys in America can be scary. Though young male violence in the U.S. has diminished somewhat from the epidemic levels of the late 1980's and early 1990's, the United States remains the most violent country in the industrialized world and ninety-five percent of violent crimes are committed by men, most of it by young men who were themselves boys – even little boys – just a few years earlier.

The fact that a small but significant minority of young men turn violent weighs heavily on all concerned parents. Recently, the mother of a boy said to me, “Whenever I watch the news and I see a young man led away in handcuffs, I think, ‘That boy has a mother, and that mother screwed up somehow. That boy didn’t get what he needed.’” She continued, “I always wonder what it was that his parents should have done.” Like many mothers, she wants to be sure that she is doing the right things for her son.

Well-intentioned but fearful concern about doing the right thing for boys, or containing boys, has led to some fundamentally misguided preventive measures by many parents and teachers. I have seen mothers, especially, vigilantly engaged in what they consider “violence prevention.” “Oh, my six-year-old wants toy guns, but we don’t allow them,” a mother assures me proudly, and then she admits: “But he chewed his toast into the shape of a pistol and shot his brother at the breakfast table.” I try not to smile, remembering how many times my older brother “shot” me and I “shot” him back. Interfering with boys’ normal fantasy play is just silly. Play violence is not violence, it is play. When you are afraid of your five-year-old son’s play, it confuses him; he doesn’t know how to reassure you.

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Fathers ought to remember how they played when they were boys, and many do, but some forget and are unnerved by their sons' high activity levels. This can lead to control battles or harsh discipline. A state trooper once told me, "My four-year-old son was jumping from couch to couch

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in the den, knocking things over. I told him a couple of times to cut it out, but he didn't stop. Sometimes, aren't boys just asking to be hit?" I told him that his son's lack of control suggests that the boy might sometimes need to be restrained, but that no boy is ever asking to be hit by his father. If he is "asking" for anything, it may be for his father's attention. A boy who is sad or angry – or even happy – and agitated by emotions he can't handle, needs his father's help. What this father couldn't admit was that he felt a need to hit his son because he was unnerved by his son's impulsivity and by his own feelings of helplessness.

Teachers also have marched into the violence protection arena, prohibiting boys from writing "violent" stories in school, overreacting to comic books, super-hero play and stories that boys love. (I'm glad no one told Shakespeare he couldn't write violent stories.) Once, when I had been extolling the virtues of the "Captain Underpants" books for boys who dislike reading, a teacher came up and said, "Oh yes, I had a third-grade boy who struggled with a language disability, but he loved "Captain Underpants." "Did he read the whole series?" I asked. "No," she said, "I thought that one of those was enough. I steered him back to more appropriate reading." What? Why fire Captain Underpants just as this reading-disabled third-grade boy was learning to read and enjoy a book?

Parents and teachers who overreact to ordinary, playful things in boys often tell me it's because they are concerned about what boys might do when they're older. We become afraid inside. When we do that, we lose credibility with boys. Why? Because we are showing them that we don't trust them to differentiate reality from fantasy, or that we don't like what they like. If we continuously ridicule the things that boys love, eventually they experience us as not liking them. They are confused by our fear and disheartened by our dissatisfaction. No one who is afraid of boys can be of any use to them.

Boys in the United States face serious problems. Forty percent of them are growing up in a household without a biological father; they are falling farther and farther behind girls in school performance and are less involved in extra-curricular activities other than athletics. Many of them experience undiagnosed depressions in their adolescent years which adults rationalize as a "rebellious phase." But regardless of age and developmental phases, all boys yearn for strong role models; they yearn to be useful.

### We need to provide them with teachers who genuinely like and understand boys.

If we are going to be of help to boys we need to acknowledge their psychological struggles and work to understand them. We need to provide them with intact families if we can, and if not, with emotionally available and supportive male role models. We need to provide them with safe schools and teachers who genuinely like and understand boys.

If we want to defuse boy violence in our society, we need to make special efforts to reach boys who have experienced violence at home, humiliation at school or intimidation in their neighborhoods. Criminologists and social workers know very well that it is brutalization, fear and humiliation that make boys violent, not video games or toy guns.

Boys won't make it easy for us. They aren't likely to "share their feelings" or talk about what's scaring or hurting them. Most of them just don't know how. They will often start out by showing us only their frustrated, angry sides. When they do, boys need us to acknowledge their struggle, refuse to be frightened by their pain or negativity, and muster some courage in dealing with them. If we can let go of our fear and engage boys with the confidence that they can and will turn out to be wonderful men, that's what they'll do.

*Michael Thompson, Ph.D., is a psychologist, school consultant and author or co-author of seven books, including Raising Cain: Protecting the Emotional Life of Boys, Speaking of Boys: Answers to the Most-Asked Questions about Raising Sons and Best Friends, Worst Enemies: Understanding the Social Lives of Children. He is working on a new book entitled It's a Boy!*