

Learning to live with ‘boy energy’

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“Well, if it had to be a boy, at least you guys will raise him okay.”

This was the response of a female relative upon the birth of my son almost two decades ago. My wife and I were silent. The implication was clear: it was unfortunate that our beautiful newborn happened to be male. Solely owing to his gender, he was an inherently negative presence on the planet. There was hope, though, that with enlightened parenting, he might be prevented from being a total bust in the calculus the common good.



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According to educator Michael Reist, such negative attitudes toward boys have permeated not only our imaginations, but also our public education system. Reist, whose recent book is called *Raising Boys in a New Kind of World*, has struck both a chord and a nerve among many Canadians.

A high school educator for over 30 years, Reist has noticed that both our culture and curricula have been tintured by the notion that “boys and men are problems.”

“We need to stop pathologizing male behaviour,” he said in a recent conversation.

Reist claims that with the “common sense revolution” of former Ontario Premier Mike Harris, the educational landscape of Ontario has shifted away from a child-centred focus to a curriculum-based approach. With an emphasis on “outcomes” and “rubrics,” this model is big on measuring and quantifying success. “If it can’t be qualified or measured,” Reist notes, “it is of no value.” This renders our students “commodities” to be produced rather than citizens to be educated.

Noting that “boy energy” is often perceived as something “innately disruptive,” Reist has observed that boys, in particular, are seen as threats to the “institutional decorum” of schools, expressed in three terse rules: “sit still, be quiet, and do what you’re told.”

Building on recent research in psychology and cognitive studies, he points out that many boys learn kinetically, and that their tendencies to fidget, tap and move while in the classroom is not only normal, but also often advantageous for their learning processes.

Suggesting that there is often a year-and-a-half difference in biological and cognitive development between girls and boys, he claims this often slides into the mindset that “girls are smarter than boys.” In fact, Reist claims, they are simply at different developmental levels. The fact that girls now outnumber

boys in many university undergraduate and graduate programs, he continues, is suggestive that such negative attitudes toward boys are having lasting effects.

Reist argues that as “the strap” and other forms of corporal punishment have faded from the classroom, educators have had to search for other forms of maintain order. One of the newer tools of classroom control has come in the form of medications such as Ritalin, sometimes used to help students with attention deficit disorder and other psychological issues, but increasingly prescribed on the advice of teachers to help certain students, especially boys, behave.

While Reist has seen certain cases where the use of such medications has been helpful, he is concerned about the over-prescribing of such drugs chiefly to maintain order.

Influenced by Richard Louv, whose book, *Last Child in the Woods*, talks about “nature deficit disorder” and how children diagnosed with attention deficit disorder are often greatly helped and cured by exposure to nature, Reist claims that climbing a tree for a child is one of the best activities for overall physical and cognitive development.

“Nature is the great therapy of the future.”

For Reist, one of the most important steps in dealing with boy energy is not to tranquilize, but to empathize. He invites educators to try and place themselves in a 10-year-old boy’s shoes, and build their lesson plans from there.

Though paying special attention to boys, Reist’s critique is perhaps equally germane to girls who also learn kinetically, and suffer from educational systems that privilege conformity over creativity.

A fidgeting boy at his desk, or a girl who likes to chat with the friend beside her, might be an occasional annoyance; they may also form part of the stuff of which vital societies are made.

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