

Q&A: Michael Gurian says boys need societal nurturing, too

By Sharon Jayson, USA Today, usatoday.com, April 2009

Author Michael Gurian is the father of two daughters, but he says society has paid too much attention to girls, and now it's the boys' turn. He says some boys lose interest in school, have behavior problems or turn to violence and need direction. Gurian's latest book — which he says completes his trilogy on boys — is called *The Purpose of Boys*. Gurian, who is also a family therapist, spoke with USA TODAY about his ideas.

Q: Let's begin with the title of your book: *The Purpose of Boys*. In your mind, what is male purpose?

A: I'm using male "purpose" as a replacement word for male "role." Purpose means this boy is directed toward a healthy development of self that serves family, community and world.

Q: Why do you believe boys have lost their sense of purpose and don't understand what their social roles should be?

A: There are three primary causes, not in any particular order. One is the breakdown of the nuclear family, especially highlighting the loss of the father. At a certain point — puberty and beyond — males do naturally need to look to other males to try to understand how they're supposed to be loving, wise and responsible men. No. 2 — the extended family system taught by grandpas and uncles and community mentors. Those systems have been breaking down. For those boys, they could have no contact with the nuclear family and they also don't have the fail-safe of the extended family. Category three is a set of social causes that boys can't control. Poverty is one of those.

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Q: You are a believer in single-gender education. Can you explain how such schooling benefits boys?

A: I don't promote or not promote it. What I do is train teachers and parents in how boys and girls learn and some people do single-sex classes. What we find is there are certain targeted areas in the culture where single-sex can work terribly well — in the inner city where boys are being raised without dads. Our theory is that boys raised without fathers are hungry for male influence. But, if we can arrest that and get them into healthy boy environments, they learn better, go to school more and get better grades. It's the same for girls, especially in the learning of science. Often three or four boys very smart in science dominate a classroom. There are areas where single-sex can work well. There is no single way to educate.

Q: Is the American education system failing boys?

A: A lot of boys are succeeding very well, so if we could say failing a lot of boys, I'd feel it's more accurate. There are a number of ways in which specific schools do fail boys. Most teachers are not trained in how boys and girls learn differently. After awhile, they realize everyone doesn't, and by then, a number of boys are being lost. Secondly,

schools are not set up as well as they should be to teach males how to develop purpose. What specifically I mean is a lot of the learning is not relevant, so the boys check out. If we want boys to succeed, we need to bring them back to education by making education relevant to them and bring in more service learning and vocational education.

Q: Many educators say your position that boys do better in a classroom without girls is a return to the Dark Ages, and it's a disservice to boys. How do you respond to those critics?

A: They're in that old model — a feminist model. For them, the vision is that segregating or separating is in some ways like racial segregation and in some ways harms children. There is no proof on the gender side. There's no proof separating boys and girls harms boys or girls. It's just an old model, and the new millennium needs something post-patriarchal and post-feminist. That's true of co-ed and single sex. Most of my work is in co-education.

Q: Much of your argument about boy psychology, you say, is based on the idea of hard-wired brain differences between boys and girls. I'm not a neurologist, and from your bio — family therapist, corporate consultant, lecturer and author — you aren't either. So why should anyone believe your interpretation over those of your critics?

A: Most people find what I say intuitive. What I do is study the brain science and immediately move to practical application. I'm not purporting to be the scientist. I'm a philosopher and taking what I understand is the science and saying that might explain why boys do such and such. I don't think anyone disagrees that male and female brains work differently. I'm laying out a piece of the science, making an interpretation that's practical.

Q: Where is society to blame for some of the problems you see with boys?

A: We are in a natural human evolution regarding both women and men, and I think that now we are entering the decade of the boy. We have been in the decade of the girl. We have studied, understood and continued to value what girls need in the new millennium. We now need to ratchet up what boys and men need so we can have a whole new society.

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