

Rethinking what's going wrong with our boys

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First lady Laura Bush said recently she is concerned about boys lagging behind in education and turning to drugs and gangs. It's something she plans to focus on during the next four years.

More and more I hear people saying that we've been so worried about giving girls a leg up that we let boys slide backward. You'd think we'd be able to juggle two balls at once, but apparently we are having trouble with that. The school-dropout rate for boys is 30 percent higher than the rate for girls. Prisons bulge with boys who didn't get what they needed in school or at home.

There are more young women getting bachelor's and master's degrees than young men, an amazing turnaround in just one generation. In 1970 girls were 40 percent of undergraduates. In 2000 that rose to 56 percent.

About two-thirds of referrals to special-education programs are boys. In secondary school, boys are three-fourths of students diagnosed with emotional or learning problems. Boys are 71 percent of suspended students.

Clearly something has gone wrong, but we won't fix it by looking at it as a contest for our attention and resources.

Boys or girls, men or women, please choose one.

We have always thought that if males and females are different, one has to be better. We are addicted to hierarchy.

Last month the president of Harvard University, Lawrence Summers, gave a group of highly accomplished women his version of why few women make it into the upper ranks of the sciences, which set off weeks of condemnation and confirmation.

Some folks pulled out research that shows men and women are different, others argued that the differences have been over-hyped, and even a few said there really are no differences.

Our species spends an awful lot of time slobbering over itself for having (or at least believing it has) the planet's best brain. Yet for all the many things we understand, that lump of cogitating cells remains a mystery.

We haven't figured it out, but that doesn't stop us from fighting over who has the smartest brain.

Men and women are biologically different, and that includes our brains. Male and female brains have some structural differences and process information differently. That's what we know for sure, but our elegant brains can't leave it at that: We have to decide which is better.

With men doing more than their share of the deciding, it's not too surprising that women's brains have been belittled for centuries.

We are still trying to overcome that legacy. Since the 1970s we've been trying to make room for girls in schools and for women in workplaces. We haven't gotten anywhere close to erasing that long legacy of discrimination against women, something Harvard's president didn't take into account in his remarks.

Men still run the government, run the corporations, make the most money.

But something is going wrong for boys, and it's not good for girls either.

Amy Baker Williamson runs Baker Language and Learning Center on Jackson Street in Seattle. She tutors kids, and she's worried about what she sees.

Lots more boys need her help. She sees them struggling with assignments. Sometimes they work late at night on homework and don't have time to make friends.

They're expected to sit still and be quiet, something many girls tolerate better. There's no recess anymore, so they can't get their squiggles out on the playground. "Boys need to be active," Williamson said. But if they don't manage their behavior, they're told something is wrong with them.

"It's surprising to me how many boys who used to love school get to about fourth or fifth grade and it gets on a very slippery slope for them. They don't want to write anymore and they don't know how to process math anymore." They get easily distracted, which is a particular

problem in large classrooms.

“There is a whole system that needs to be re-evaluated,” she said. She sees seventh- and eighth-grade boys who would rather drop out than brave another day in school.

“I consider myself somewhat of a feminist, but I think it’s safe to say that not giving boys their space is probably making society a more dangerous place for girls.”

Years ago, black folks started worrying about imbalances that are now affecting the entire society. There were many more black women excelling in school and graduating from college than black men. Magazines were churning out articles about the dearth of marriageable men for accomplished black women.

People talked about black boys being squashed in school and giving up, about black men being absent from the workplace and too present in prisons. Now the rest of society is catching up.

And not just men. The National Endowment for the Arts says reading has become less a part of life since 1992 for Americans of both genders, every race and class. Men are falling behind faster, but something in our society has gone wrong.

Children are playing video games, watching TV, playing at their computers. Classes are big, and too many children lack physical outlets for their energy. We are obsessed with safety and discipline, but we don’t teach manners.

There is a whole lot we need to rethink, for the sake of both genders.

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