



Our mission, as a statewide network, is to initiate, promote and support effective programs and to educate on public policy to enhance the responsible involvement of fathers in the lives of children, families and the community.

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Leading Minnesota's campaign for healthy fatherhood.

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Network Notes

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Boys Adrift: The Five Factors Driving the Growing Epidemic of Unmotivated Boys and Underachieving Young Men



Book Review

By Glen Palm, Ph.D.

Boys Adrift by Leonard Sax presents a novel analysis of what ails boys today. The concern about boys and their declining educational achievement over the past decade has been met with skepticism. Boys and young men as vulnerable persons is not an easy sell in American society, but there are signs that boys may be facing new challenges as they move into manhood. Dr. Sax, a family

physician and research psychologist introduces a unique set of factors to explain some of the concerns that have been expressed about boys.

The factors are not unfamiliar but he adds new research findings and details that are thought provoking. The five factors are: 1) Changes at School, 2) Video Games, 3) Medications for ADHD, 4) Endocrine Disruptors, and 5) The Devaluation of Masculinity. The end result of these five factors is a growing number of boys who are

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Conference to explore state of fatherhood, families

The fifth annual winter conference of the Minn. Fathers & Families Network will focus on the theme, "the state of fathers and families."

Conference sessions will highlight populations of fathers who may be under-served in family service programming or under-represented in areas of research and advocacy. Sessions will explore strategies for engaging more fathers in healthy families and in healthy childhood development.

State and national leaders are among the four keynote presenters. **Jacquelyn Boggess** from the respected Center for Family Policy and Practice, Madison, WI, will address issues of working with low-income fathers. **Bill Taverner**, from the national American Journal of Sexuality Education will focus on themes around educating young men about healthy relationships. **Senator Tarryl Clark**, the Minn. Senate's assistant majority leader, will speak about public policy issues around families and early child-

hood. **Dr. Glen Palm**, St. Cloud State University, will open and close the conference with broad themes about indicators of father well-being and action steps for advancing positive father-child relationships.



It's an exciting agenda. We hope you'll join us!

**5th annual
Minnesota Fatherhood Summit**
Monday—Tuesday
January 14-15, 2008
Saint Cloud Civic Center
Saint Cloud, Minnesota

Registration details:
www.mnfathers.org/summit.html or
call (651) 222-7432.

Boys adrift

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unmotivated, not engaged in school, and young men who are underachieving and adrift.

The examples that Sax presents are boys from his practice and tend to be from middle to upper middle class families. The concerns he raises center around the declining number of boys who choose to go to college and the increasing number of young men (1/3) between 22 and 34 who still live at home with their parents. This is described as a “Failure to Launch” syndrome that has increased 100% over the past 20 years.

The five factors present an interesting collection of potential explanations for the current problems with boys. I found the discussion about teaching methods and the emphasis on early academics in kindergarten to be an accurate description of current educational trends that may handicap boys whose developmental pace often lags behind girls by 1 ½ years at age 5. It has been fascinating to watch gender as a variable in education disappear in our analysis of problems with schools where the primary focus has been on race and social class. Gender differences in development clearly have an important influence on boys during the early years and even if they may catch up on test scores in fourth grade they are behind again by 12th grade. While many factors combine to explain an individual’s success in school, gender (i.e., male vulnerability) has been discounted as a factor.

The use of medication to address boys’ high level of activity is addressed in a convincing manner by Sax who takes a balanced approach

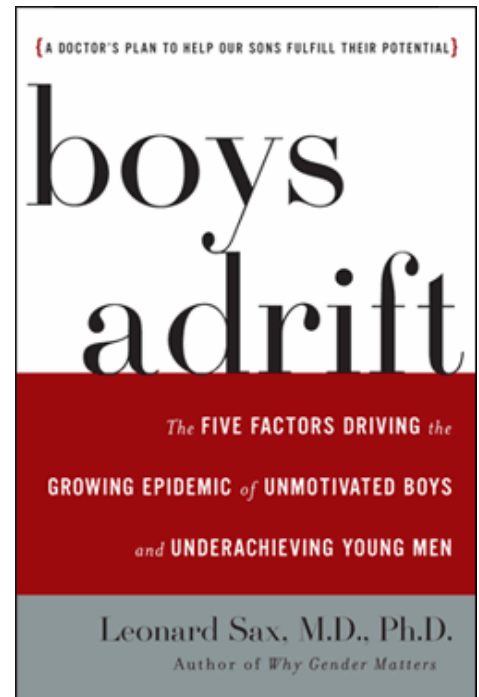
Sax catches himself a number of times to make sure that he does not discount girls and their challenges while maintaining his focus on boys and young men.

as a doctor and psychologist. He connects certain ADHD medications to slower development in the motivational center of the brain and reports on the positive impacts on educational achievement of some medications for children with and without ADHD diagnosis. Do the drugs that provide boys with assistance in focusing on learning also have negative side effects of weakening the development of motivation? He concludes that we may be too eager to diagnose boys with ADHD and medicate them for short-term gains with no awareness of long-term negative consequences on motivation.

Video games are an easy target as a factor for understanding problems with boys and certainly take boys away from other types of activities. Sax takes a closer look at some of the problems with video games in terms of pushing boys to be more violent and disengaging them from the “real world”. Sax questions the positive ‘learning gains’ that come from video games and provides suggestions for limiting the types and amount of video game activity for boys.

I was unfamiliar with the information about endocrine disrupters. The results of environmental estrogens through the use of plastics and how these are disrupting boys’ development in terms of increasing rates of ADHD, obesity, bone fragility, and sexual development were interesting but seem less than convincing at times. We have so many competing environmental changes that it is hard to target plastics as the only culprit; yet the connections that were described are a cause for concern and further investigation.

The discussion about the devaluation of masculinity also resonated with my experiences. The role and value of the traditional male-breadwinner and father-knows-best man has changed and there may be a void in images and role models of ‘healthy masculinity’. Instead of a void we have multiple competing



views of masculinity. This can cause confusion about evolving masculinities versus an essentialist image of a masculinity that needs to be restored. I would add that many boys don’t have their fathers in their lives and that this is part of this fifth factor. This factor is about complex cultural changes and is less concrete than the other four factors, making it more difficult to validate with research evidence.

Sax offers advice for parents who are concerned about their sons in a final chapter entitled detox. His solutions are interesting: single sex schools, monitoring video game use, limiting use of drugs for ADHD, avoiding harmful chemicals, and promoting real heroes/role models for boys. The book focuses attention on some important factors that are shaping the development of boys and how these factors influence and impede the progress of boys growing into independent men.

It is difficult to talk about boys and their problems without comparing these to the current state of girls in our culture. Sax catches himself a number of times to make sure that he does not discount girls and their chal-

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Failure to launch

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allenges while maintaining his focus on boys and young men.

I share the concern about the healthy development of boys in the US that Sax describes, but I believe that his analysis is limited. He

misses some key factors that should be connected to his failure to launch theme. What about the role of economics and limited opportunities for young men with limited education to

gain economic independence? What about boys who grow up in poor families and boys who don't know their fathers? While some attention is

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paid to the role of fathers, the example of Homer Simpson as a TV father representing the decline of masculinity discounts the real effects of father absence. Not only are boys impacted by this absence but fathers are deprived of the interaction with their sons that could make them better, more mature and motivated adults (aka positive role models). Sax identifies important cultural changes that influence male development but misses the opportunity to connect these issues to the larger social problems of poverty, racism, and changing economic realities that interface with the "five factors". The development of boys into productive and caring human beings is at risk until male socialization processes are addressed and aligned with positive images of manhood for all boys.

About the book: Leonard Sax, M.D., Ph.D. *Boys Adrift: The Five Factors Driving the Growing Epidemic of Unmotivated Boys and Underachieving Young Men*. New York: Basic Books, 2007. Online at www.boysadrift.com.

Working with Divorced Parents

Although post-divorce parenting often presents challenges for mothers and fathers, a variety of resources exists to make the process more cooperative.

Use a Parenting Plan

In Minnesota, separated parents can now use parenting plans to spell out the details about the care of their children. The University of Minnesota Extension offers "We Agree", a useful tool that helps parents who are parenting apart create a plan that describes living arrangements, parenting time, custody and other day to day and long term issues. In addition, parenting plans require parents to address how they will change the plan and deal with disagreements.

A 10-minute narrated PowerPoint presentation about parenting plans is available to view online: <https://breeze5.umn.edu/p34109499/>.

Avoid These Parenting Mistakes

To help parents recognize and avoid post-divorce parenting mistakes, Dr. Phil's book, "Family First", presents a list of common mistakes. Some parenting mistakes include:

- Depending too much on your children for companionship.
- Treating your child like an adult.
- Sabotaging your child's relationship with the other parent.
- Transferring frustrations toward your ex onto your child.
- Forcing your child to choose a side when there's a scheduling conflict.

Besides making a commitment to avoid these mistakes, parents should commit to a family and parenting strategy that will help their child flourish in a divorced home.

Many of Dr. Phil's recommendations for post-divorce parenting are online: www.drphil.com/articles/article/242.

Now accepting nominations for "Excellence in Fatherhood" 2008 awards

The Minnesota Fathers & Families Network annually recognizes outstanding contributions to fatherhood policy and practice in Minnesota by presenting a series of "Excellence in Fatherhood" awards.

Please consider nominating an individual, agency policy maker or program that deserves to be recognized by their peers. With your help, we can honor the remarkable efforts going on throughout the state.

Awards will be presented on January 15, 2008, at the fifth annual Minnesota Fatherhood Summit in St. Cloud. Nominations are due December 3, 2007.

Nomination instructions are online: www.mnfathers.org/awards2008.pdf or contact MFFN at (651) 222-7432 to receive a copy of the nomination form by mail or fax.

Past award recipients are listed online at www.mnfathers.org/awards.html.





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The Minnesota Fathers & Families Network is committed to hearing the voices of fatherhood practitioners from throughout Minnesota.



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Research Roundup: Recent news about fathers

Men's Pregnancy Intentions and Prenatal Behaviors: A man's attitudes about a partner's pregnancy and his actions during the pregnancy can tell a lot about what kind of father he will be. Child Trends presents data on resident fathers, online: www.childtrends.org/Files//Child_Trends-2007_06_11_RB_Prenatal.pdf (June '07).

Men Want to End Abuse: A study from the Family Violence Prevention Fund finds that most men are willing to get involved in efforts to prevent domestic violence and sexual assault. "Two in three fathers (68 percent) have talked to their sons about the importance of healthy, violence-free relationships, and 63 percent have talked to their daughters." Online: <http://endabuse.org/press/releases.php3?Search=Article&ID=205> (June '07).

Strategies for Supporting Working Families: Six papers from the Urban Institute examine ways the private and public sectors can support working families while still encouraging productivity and organizational competitiveness. The papers address such topics as the characteristics of low-income workers, access to health insurance, and the role of regional economic development policies in supporting employers and low-income workers. Online: www.urban.org/projects/liwf-roundtable/index.cfm (May '07).

Antipoverty Policies for Young Men: More progress is needed in focusing antipoverty efforts on men. Two sets of public policies – wage subsidies and work requirements – hold promise for helping young men increase their employment and earnings and thereby reduce poverty and its associated social problems. Read the transcript of a discussion hosted by the Brookings Institution and the Woodrow Wilson School, online: www.brookings.edu/events/2007/0920poverty.aspx (September '07).

Double Jeopardy: Repeat Births to Teens: Twenty percent of births to female teens ages 15-19 in 2004 were to teens who were already mothers. A research brief from Child Trends highlights state-level data on second and higher order births. Teen mothers and their children face educational, economic, health, and developmental challenges, and a second teen birth compounds these problems. Online: www.childtrends.org/Files/Child_Trends-2007_10_25_RB_Repeat.pdf (October 2007).