

Understanding Differential Young Male Resilience in the Face of Trauma and Loss

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Co-Author: Threat Assessment in Schools; Principal Author: Bystander Study, United States Secret Service
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**NORTH AMERICAN CENTER
FOR THREAT ASSESSMENT
AND TRAUMA RESPONSE**

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Given our traditional socialization models for boys and young males in Western industrialized countries and especially North America, specifically what I have referred to elsewhere (Pollack, 1998, 2006) as the “boy code”, the ‘gender straitjacket’ and “the masks of masculinity’ and their increasingly failing outcome (see Pollack, 1998), classic models of resilience need to be modified, or at least viewed through a new, gender-specific lens in order to have their greatest applicability for young males in our society. When innovatively approached in this manner, the concept of resilience as a new hallmark of emotional well-being for boys and young males comes into significant focus, especially during times of acute loss and trauma.

Classic models of resiliency in children (and adults) define it as encompassing capacities to “bounce back from disappointments,” to “develop clear and realistic goals,” and so forth (Brooks & Goldstein, 2001). Although I take no issue with such concepts, and indeed find them central to emotional well-being and the capacity to deal with the pain life brings us all, at some point, they can too easily be misconstrued when applied to the surface expression of typical “boy/adolescent male behavior.” Then we are actual viewing *pseudo resilience* in males, which fools both adults and the children themselves into believing that what appears on the surface is healthy response to trauma; rather than what is actually an overly stoic facade or *a mask for deeper, hidden pain*.

This psychologically subterranean process, when finally stripped away, gives an opportunity for intense emotional vulnerability to emerge and with it the capacity for genuine or “real” boy/male resilience to coalesce. In other words, given the

data researchers have found about boys' lives, the capacity to feel, experience, and be free to express vulnerability, at appropriate moments and within a context of connections (especially to supportive adult caretakers) is actually the greatest strength for a truly resilient mind-set in boys and young males.

THE BURDENS OF THE "BOY CODE"

Traditional North American psychological models of strength and healthy development for boys have emphasized the development of autonomy, separation, and individualistic coping styles, especially enforcing premature separation from nurture and an early silencing of boys' genuine expression of interdependent, humanly vulnerable self or "voice"—often beginning as early as ages 3 to 5 (Pollack, 1995a, 1995b). Representing the values of the dominant Caucasian Euro-American culture, this creates a "boy code" (Pollack, 1998, 2000), which shames young males toward extremes of self-containment, toughness, stoicism, and separation. It is a pervasive socialization system that too often permeates traditional approaches to psychological assessments and treatment of young males. In turn, it shames our young males away from their emotional vulnerability, interdependence, and basic need for human connection, just when they need it most.

This pervasive male-based socialization code creates what I have referred to as gender straitjacketing and what has shown to be an almost normatively induced male-based trauma of attachment separation which often remains deeply embedded in the developing psyche of boys and adolescent males, but leaves them at greater risk of overt trauma and angry enactment when affected by real life traumas—internal and external during the trajectory of their development into mature manhood—and beyond. Through an all too well-known series of "boy code" admonitions to young males (especially as they enter into organized settings of growth such as schools and sports at approximately the ages of 4 or 5) such as "Stand on your own two feet"; "Be a little man"; "Don't be a mamma's boy"; "Big boys don't cry!" "Don't act like a sissy" . . . "a wimp", we diminish the expression of their genuine emotional voices. By these standards, therefore, too many boys self-critically judge themselves (and are judged) as immature, undeveloped, or deficient in intellectual/ emotional skills and as failing the impossible test of masculinity.

Boys are shamed away from exhibiting their species-normative characteristics of vulnerability, and thereby disconnected from healthy relations with one another, with potentially supportive adults and from a full range of emotions within their own selves. Consequently, we need to promulgate and support new models that define what a "real boy" is, ones that include "mentoring," a new sense of courage, and "heroism" that is connection-based and will allow young males to resist the demands of stereotypical and shaming gender stereotyping. This will bring boys back into connection with adult role models (of both genders) who emanate

emotional flexibility, true friendship with other boys as well as girls, and the capacity to express vulnerability and pain, without fear of being shamed, connecting through “voices” deep within their souls.

It is this new model that will eventually create a new perspective on genuine resilience in boys. Yet what are the consequences presently experienced by boys as a result of these normative traumas of premature separation (Pollack, 1995a, 1995b) and disconnections from emotionally connected psychological nurture, as a means to fit in with the shame induced code of boyhood? Many boys today are in serious trouble, including those who seem “normal” and to be doing “just fine.” The question of boy resilience is not just one for at-risk youth but is equally meaningful for the apparently adjusted (but silently suffering and resiliency compromised) boys next door. Confused by society’s mixed messages about what is expected of them as boys, and later as men, pushed prematurely to separate from the bonded and connected love their “sisters” rely upon for psychological sustenance, many feel a sadness and disconnection they cannot even name. Research (Pollack, 1998, 1999, 2001) has begun to show that boys are faring less well in school than they did in the past and, in comparison to girls, that many boys have remarkably fragile self-esteem and that the rates of both depression and suicide in boys are rapidly on the rise.

Indeed, many of our sons are currently in a desperate crisis, albeit at times a silent crisis. The boys whom we love, much like the girls we cherish, frequently experience intense sadness, vulnerability, and a troubling sense of isolation, disconnection, and despair (Pollack, 1998, 1999, 2000). While many of our boys are in deep emotional pain, their suffering often remains difficult to detect, sometimes invisible. On the outside a boy may seem cheerful, playful, and resilient. But on the inside, he may actually feel lonely, afraid, and desperate. Because of the pressure society places on our boys to act tough, follow a strict code of masculinity, and hide their emotions at all costs, it is often terribly hard for us to notice when boys are actually faring poorly at school, when their friendships are not working out, when they are feeling depressed or even suicidal. We are too often fooled by the cheerfulness, the rambunctiousness, and the ruggedness boys project on the outside. As a society, we have a unique set of expectations placed on boys that calls upon them to brave life’s ups and downs independently (autonomously), stoically cover their pain, and above all, avoid doing anything that might shame either themselves or their parents.

These rigid gender guidelines, or gender straitjackets as I call them, push many boys to repress their yearnings for love and connection, build an invisible, impenetrable wall of toughness around themselves, a “cool pose” (Majors & Billson, 1992), hidden by an emotional “mask” of masculine bravado or invulnerability, leaving them to experience a gamut of lonely, painful problems in isolation—problems that range from academic failure to drug abuse, from struggles with friends to clinical

depression, from attention deficit disorder to suicide and murder. Behind their masks of pseudo invulnerability and the drama of action, and the one full emotion they are “allowed” to express within the narrow bandwidth of developing masculinity, “anger”, it is often hard to hear boys’ stifled but genuine voices--of pain and struggle, their devastating senses of loss and trauma their yearning for connection. Indeed, the same kind of shame that silences girls from expressing their “voice” as adolescents takes a toll on boys at even a much earlier age and continues throughout their developmental journey.

Consequently it becomes increasingly important, while not stereotyping the genders to be “on the lookout” for the fact that young girls and adolescent females may respond to the losses and traumas of the pandemic through overt expressions of pain and sadness, young males may deny any hurt through a misunderstood form of false resilience [“I’m fine] or increasingly angry, aggressive or sometimes dubbed ‘anti-social’ activities which are the overt expressions of the undigested and often inner disconnected senses of pain and loss that their female counterparts are showing more directly. Therefore, it behooves us as teachers, parents and communities to not respond to such stereotypical male-based expressions of inner loss and trauma as in a punitive manner, seeing it as “misbehavior”; but, rather, more empathically understanding the tears behind the angry actions. Only in this way will we avoid misperceiving unhealthy stoicism to pandemic response as “resilience’, or increased “aggression’ as merely misbehavior, as such ‘misdiagnosis will at best lead to young males failure to adapt-- and at worst to undiagnosed (and therefore untreated) depression, suicidal enactment and in extremes to homicidally desperate acts meant to harm their selves and others simultaneously.