

## The Loss of Purpose in American Boyhood

How are our boys needed in the world? They need to be needed, but these days they aren't sure how to be needed. That's not only sad—it's potentially dangerous.

—JUDITH KLEINFELD, PROFESSOR OF PSYCHOLOGY AND  
DIRECTOR OF THE BOYS PROJECT

AS YOU READ THIS BOOK, I hope you'll find it joyful and filled with hope about the future. Yet it can't be an honest book—nor can we be fully honest parents and caregivers of our sons—if we don't take a moment to look at what is happening to boys, men, and male development in our culture.

A mother of three children recently put it this way:

I have a son, fifteen, and two daughters, thirteen and nineteen. All of us try to help my son focus, but he just doesn't seem to care about anything. He's a great kid, there's nothing wrong with him morally or personally, but he just doesn't seem to go anywhere. He's getting Cs and Ds in school (his sisters do much better), and he skips a lot of classes. He does like Lacrosse, but mainly because he's good at it, and he likes his friends. Other than that, he plays video games, chats online, and listens to his iPod. He isn't disrespectful to me or any of us in his family, except when we try to prod him to go out and DO something. That just makes him mad.

After a talk I gave recently, a father told me,

I think boys and girls are very different. My daughter will do whatever is right in front of her, and try to do it well. A birth defect keeps her from being athletic, but that doesn't stop her—she works hard in school, and she started working in a Baskin-Robbins when she was sixteen. So it's not like life is easy for my daughter, but for my son, it's like he thinks life should be easy. He thinks stuff should come to him, and if it doesn't come easy, to heck with it. And he's really pie-in-the-sky. He thinks way ahead—I'm gonna be Bill Gates, he says—but he can't see right now. I think maybe I was like that too, at his age, but my work ethic was stronger.

Both of these parents are sensing a similar undercurrent in boys' cultural lives today by observing their own sons.

Another parent's email began,

I am the mother of three sons. They are twenty-one, nineteen, and seventeen. My youngest has struggled with school since the sixth grade. He went into the special education process in seventh grade. He gave up on school in his junior year of high school, and we got him in the alternative school. He dropped out of that and left home and now works at the beach. He has no plans to come back home or go back to school. Our whole family has been in and out of counseling with him for years, but still we can't figure out what to do. He just doesn't seem to find himself.

I have received thousands of messages like this over the last decade, and I have talked with thousands of parents of boys and girls. In 2005, after publishing an article in the *Washington Post* called “Disappearing Act” (which asked the public to wonder why so many boys in culture-rich America were “disappearing” from positive, motivated, and directed life paths), I received more than a thousand emails in one week. Parents, teachers, and policymakers wrote to express their love of boys and young men, as well as their fear of losing them; their desire to help them, as well as their lack of clarity on how to do so; and their sense that school and life were feeling irrelevant and purposeless to many of their own sons. The writers all expressed their feeling that easy fixes are not available.

## Why Parents Want to Provide Purpose for Boys

In nearly every email of this kind that I've received, I hear a hidden song, one of great hunger that I've been listening to for decades, and one that I believe a whole culture is beginning to sing loudly: Parents realize that boys and young men need a purpose in life, and that far too many don't have one. Parents sense that a boy's lack of purpose—his lack of a drive toward a reason for being, important role, and sense of being needed—and society's gradual diminishing of its focus on providing what males need are the foundation of so many other issues that we face with boys and young men.

The following are some of the core issues of male purposelessness as noted by parents:

- Schools filled with caring teachers and staff, but schools *not* set up to care for and motivate boys in the ways many of them need
- Media imagery and social dialogues that attack males as defective and dangerous (and, quite often, just plain stupid) without also providing a variety of strong role models
- Single moms hungry to raise adolescent sons, but lacking a full range of resources to help them, especially when the boys are going through puberty
- Families in which men may be available, but where the men don't fully understand their crucial and specific role in bringing purpose to their sons' lives
- Grandparents and other mentors who care deeply, but are not fully embraced in their role as carriers of purpose, lineage, and high expectations for boys
- A culture that does not understand what an important role the whole community and neighborhood play in caring for a son
- Workplaces helping young women secure employment, but assuming young men will do just fine at landing a job, even though millions are not finding useful work
- The society as a whole pursuing child development issues without understanding how important are the naturally different issues that boys and girls face

## The Impact That a Lack of Purpose Can Have on Boys

Ultimately, the parental message and voices I've encountered over the past ten years reveal an awakening across the country to the fact that boys are indeed struggling. Dr. Tom Mortenson of the Pell Institute, a founding member of the Boys Project and an expert in the changing state of males, has collected findings regarding boys' mental, emotional, physical, and economic health in a number of reports, including *The State of American Manhood*. (References for the Project and this very important report are provided for you in the Notes and References to this book.) Following are some of Dr. Mortenson's stunning statistics:

- For every 100 girls suspended from public elementary and secondary schools, 250 boys are suspended. For every 100 girls expelled, 335 boys are expelled.
- For every 100 girls diagnosed with a learning disability, 276 boys are so diagnosed.
- For every 100 girls diagnosed with emotional disturbance, 324 boys are so diagnosed.
- For every 100 girls ages 15–19 who commit suicide, 549 boys in the same range kill themselves.
- For every 100 women ages 20–24 who commit suicide, 624 men of the same age kill themselves.
- For every 100 girls ages 15–17 in correctional facilities, there are 837 boys behind bars.
- For every 100 women ages 18–21 in correctional facilities, there are 1,430 men behind bars.
- For every 100 women enrolled in college, there are 77 men enrolled.
- For every 100 American women who earn an associate's degree, 67 American men earn the same degree.
- For every 100 American women who earn a bachelor's degree, 73 American men earn the same degree.

- For every 100 American women who earn a master's degree, 62 American men earn the same degree.

## The Dark Side of Males Without Purpose

It is crucial to remember that the statistics don't just grow from issues in one socioeconomic group. As Judith Kleinfeld, director of the Boys Project, has pointed out, "Even white males of high earning college educated parents are increasingly falling behind equivalent females." She is joined by Jacqueline King of the American Council on Education, whose research showed that just in the last ten years, even this group of privileged boys and young men are "checking out" of school—either not going or not finishing—at rates much higher than girls. And Boys Project researcher Melana Zyla Vickers points out, "White boys are the only demographic group whose high school drop-out rate has risen since 2000." Literacy researcher Richard Whitmire has collected findings on boys and education in his work at *USA Today*. He points out, "There are ten million women in college this year versus 7.4 million men."

Our sons are not only losing a sense of educational purpose in school and college. They are also losing a sense of social purpose in their behavior—filling our juvenile justice system and prisons. They are losing a sense of purpose in their hearts and souls—committing suicide and harming others at alarming rates. In each of these areas, they are increasingly falling behind or failing at life.

According to a new Justice Department study, seven million Americans are now in the criminal justice system. This is a fivefold increase over the last two decades. Ninety-three percent of American inmates are males. Among African American males, the loss of purpose is stunning. Between 40 and 50 percent of African American boys and young men will enter the criminal justice system sometime in their lives. Violent crime and violent death rates for this population of young males is now epidemic.



## THE JOY OF PURPOSE

*It Is Not Far, It Is Within Reach*

Dear son, not I, not anyone else can travel the road for you,  
 You must travel it for yourself,  
 But it is not far, it is within reach,  
 Perhaps you have been on it since you were born and did  
     not know,  
 Perhaps it is everywhere on water and on land.  
 O sit a while dear son,  
 Here are biscuits to eat, here is milk to drink,  
 But as soon as you renew yourself in sweet clothes,  
 Wash the gum from your eyes,  
 Habit yourself to the dazzle of the light and every moment  
     of your life.  
 Long have you timidly waded holding a plank by the shore,  
 Now I will you to be a bold swimmer,  
 To jump off in the midst of the sea, rise again, shout  
     and laughingly dash with your hair!

—Walt Whitman, adapted from *Leaves of Grass, Song of Myself*

### The Breakdown of Male Purpose Development

In the past, young men learned strategies for success through concentrated efforts of parents, grandparents and other extended family, schools, faith communities, and role development (by “role” I mean “a sense of being needed, a reason for being, a purpose in life”) in their culture. All of these formerly positive influences are in flux or breaking down. And though it has been important to overcome the limiting

and oppressive male and female roles of the past, it is also crucial to note that each role change has ramifications for men, women, children, and society. We have looked carefully at the female side of the role changes of the last forty years. The following are a few of the crucial male issues in the breakdown of roles:

- The relationship between boys and their fathers is deteriorating. According to the Center for Media and the Family in Minneapolis, boys now relate directly to their fathers, on average, one-half hour per week, but spend over forty hours a week in front of screens (video games, TV, movies, Internet). As families break down and boys spend less and less time with either or both parents, their development of conversations and a sense of role modeling and purpose can be profoundly affected.

Decades and centuries ago, boys often had absent fathers—this is not a new phenomenon—but when the father was away in another city to work, or to fight a war, or was dead, boys had grandfathers and other men to teach them how to be men, including what ideals a man should sacrifice himself for, and how a man remains motivated to succeed and set goals.

- Schoolboys, mismatched in school systems that are not set up for male energy, are being medicated for behavioral issues at alarming rates. Eighty-five percent of the world's Ritalin is used on boys in the United States. The use of antipsychotic drugs on children in general, and boys in particular, has gone up 500 percent since 1993. For some boys, medication is crucial for well-balanced living. But for many, it's a device to stifle their natural behavior, smother and prevent them from fully comprehending and utilizing their own natural assets, many of which are simply no longer understood in our culture.
- A century ago, the schooling of boys would have involved more debates, more competition, more outdoor learning, more hands-on apprenticeship, more coaching in purpose and meaning. Now, many boys cannot find relevance or the male learning style in their schooling.

- Boys are increasingly unsure of their roles as men, to the extent that they mature into adulthood one to two decades later than they did just one hundred years ago. The number of young men in their twenties living at home and unemployed increases every year in Western cultures—not only in the United States, but throughout Europe, Australia, and the industrialized world. Even in countries where you wouldn't expect this to be an issue, it is. In Jordan, for instance, which is modernizing quickly, many boys are growing up lacking college or life skills and without clear social roles. A new study shows that Jordanian women are “marrying down,” that is, having to become both the major money earner and child-care provider in the new marriages.



## UNDERSTANDING PURPOSE

### The Impact That Boys' Lack of Purpose Has on Women

On the surface, the fact that males mature late, go to college at lower rates than women, and don't develop a clear sense of an educational or social role would seem to be empowering to women. But the difficulty with this view becomes clear when a woman wants to marry and have a family (and most women do). Now the children's mother no longer has broad options for mothering her infants and toddlers. In our changing economy, her husband often cannot earn enough money to support the family (just a college education alone increases one's earning power by over one-third). The man is also a less mature prospect for long-term marriage. Because over 95 percent of early child care worldwide is provided by mothers and women, the lack of male maturity, sense of purpose, and earning power become significant issues for women.



- Boys are increasingly eating and drinking without purpose. According to the American Medical Association, 40 percent of boys are now overweight or obese. Their food intake, and their lack of exercise and time in nature show a disconnection in their growing minds between the reality of their body's needs and a natural sense of purpose for that body's development and action.

Simultaneously, boys are increasingly binge drinking. And though boys have, of course, always engaged in drinking and binge drinking, the rate at which they escape life through binge drinking continues to increase, despite educational and public service programs that aim to help boys stop this dangerous behavior. These boys are often lost, self-medicating through food and drink.

- Increasingly, boys are randomly raging against, beating, and killing people. Across the United States, teenagers are finding baseball bats, golf clubs, paintball guns, knives, bricks, and other weapons and trolling the streets for homeless individuals to beat up. In Ft. Lauderdale, Florida, three young males beat up a homeless man while he slept, murdering him.
- This kind of purposeless violence—different in character from the kind of violence that young men like Grandpa Dean were conscripted into or volunteered for during wartime—is just one example of the new lack of male role and social purpose in male violence. For the young male perpetrators of today, thrill-seeking, dominance behavior, and initiation into gangs are not occurring in search of a life purpose that cares for family and society's survival, but quite often, and quite simply, to destroy society while gaining a temporary group success for which there is a high mortality rate. Ultimately, the gang becomes the role modeling agency, creating its own special kind of defensive self-protective “family” for boys tossed out by the larger society and culture; it also becomes the place in which the boys will die young.



## *The Wisdom of Purpose*

### THE ULTIMATE SPLENDID TRIUMPH

I wish to preach, not the doctrine of ignoble ease, but the doctrine of the strenuous life, the life of toil and effort, of labor and strife; to preach that highest form of success which comes, not to the man who desires mere easy peace, but to the man who does not shrink from danger, from hardship, or from bitter toil, and who out of these wins the ultimate splendid triumph. . . . In the last analysis a healthy state can exist only when the men and women who make it up lead clean, vigorous, healthy lives; when the children are so trained that they shall endeavor, not to shirk difficulties, but to overcome them; not to seek ease, but to know how to wrest triumph from toil and task. The man must be glad to do a man's work, to dare, endure and labor; to keep himself, and to keep those dependent upon him.

—Theodore Roosevelt, *No Man Is Happy If He Does Not Work*

There is a perfect storm brewing in the culture of boyhood. It is really three storms in one:

1. Males not knowing what their social roles should be
2. Families deteriorating around boys
3. Communities and schools not understanding boys' natural needs

We'll keep exploring these things as this book continues, and in each discussion we'll move immediately toward practical questions, answers, issues, and solutions.

## Moving Forward with New Vision

The rest of this book will show how to help your son develop purpose—the “how to” begins in understanding how boys develop purpose and roles differently from girls, the subject of Chapter Two. Boys share many



## Questions of Purpose

### Son, Do You Know That You Are Important?

I hope you'll consider asking your son the following questions not once, but over a period of weeks or months. Ask one or two at a time while you and your son are doing something together, such as a household chore or a trip to the store, or enjoying a family vacation. Some boys enjoy keeping a journal, even if on a computer or iPhone, in which to express themselves, and ponder these questions.

- What is the most important thing you did today?
- What will be the most important things you do when you are a man?
- What kind of work do you want to do when you grow up?
- What is the role of a man in today's world?
- When does a boy become a man?
- What are the ways a man loves his family?
- Who are your heroes? Why?
- Is your school a good place for you as a growing boy? In what ways? In what ways is it hard for you?
- What do TV shows tell you about what defines a good man?
- What do your friends say a good man is? Can you ask them?

Discuss one or more of these issues by engaging your son in dialogue about grandparents, uncles, and aunts. Ask your son what he knows about what the men did with their lives "back in the old country." In every family, there are male and female role models equivalent to Grandpa Dean and Margaret in my wife's family, or my own parents in mine.

qualities with girls, but they also need us to recognize their differences in a fresh and exciting way.

A mother who is also a social worker brought up a crucial point about this dialogue in a parent workshop: “I get how important it is to talk about role and role models when you talk about boys, but as a feminist, I want you to know I’m wary of the word ‘role.’ If you are saying something new about the purpose of boys, that’s fine with me—but I’d hate to see us end up in a place where men get to have a role that depends on women being weak. That would be just more of the same stuff that has been killing boys and girls, and oppressing women, for thousands of years.”

This is an important point of view. Indeed, you’ll notice in this book and in my work I use the word “purpose” much more than role, because the word “role” is laden with the kind of negative connotation that this mother was pointing out.

*The Purpose of Boys* presents a synthesis of two previous views of boys and men in what I hope is an uplifting, progressive vision. The traditionalist religious and biblical approach was the cultural “thesis” for the lives of boys and men. The feminist movement provided the “antithesis.” For the sake of boys, it is time to absorb the best of the past in a synthesis, a combination and compromise that takes the best from both of these points of view.

In presenting a science-based vision of boys and men, this book combines the wisdom of the past, including our religious and ancestral lore, and the feminist deconstruction of conventional stereotypes of male entitlements, into a new vision of boys and purpose through both a scientific and common-sense lens.

I hope that, wherever you fall on the political spectrum, you will find theory and practical insight in the next seven chapters that resonate with your own experience of the boys around you. The vision of this book is based on my desire to help everyone gain a common language and find universal tools for caring for boys by understanding who they are and who we need them to be: men who know how to love, men who know how to “earn it,” men whose role it is to be motivated by a deep commitment to service, success, empathy, and the common good.