I

The Current Crisis

Because of the risks boys naturally take, a mom is ready to face a lot of little daily crises. But the crisis in my son's education—that took me completely by surprise.

—KATHY STEVENS

THE SIGN OUTSIDE THE PRESCHOOL READS, "ALL CHILDREN WELCOME." A mother, father, and three-year-old son drive into the small parking lot. The parents have chosen this preschool among many others available in their neighborhood. Now their hearts are pounding, for this is their son's first day of school. They step out of the car, unbuckle their son from the car seat, lift him out, and walk with him to the front door.

A young woman comes to them and greets her new student and his parents. For a second the boy trembles, realizing that his parents are going to leave him here. He hugs them, cries a little, but then goes off with his new teacher, a kind young woman who holds his hand and introduces him to other kids. The boy turns, waves to Mommy and Daddy. They wave back, and leave silently.

This little boy can't fully understand his parents' hopes and dreams. He can't know how much they want not only this school but also the other schools their son will attend to inspire him and enrich his mind. These parents trust their educational system to be filled with teachers and staff who are trained to teach boys. As they turn away from the

preschool, this mother and father already imagine the way their boy's mind will grow, the good grades their son will get, the teachers he'll have, and the knowledge, love of life, and wisdom he'll gain in twelve or more years of education. These parents have given their son to an educational system that they believe has shown, historically, great promise.

And for their son, it may fulfill that promise.

But it's just as likely that it will not. This may be the beginning of an educational crisis in this family. And this family will not be the only one experiencing such a crisis.

Is There Really a Crisis?

Because the word *crisis* gets thrown around a great deal these days, it deserves to be treated with suspicion. In fact, Kathy and I have tried not to use it, thinking, "But so many boys are getting by just fine. Can we really call the situation a crisis?" We've said, "Yes, the Gurian and Stevens families endured, struggled, and overcame their problems, but is it really a national or international crisis?" We've looked back on the months after Columbine, during which the Gurian Institute staff, along with many professionals, were asked by the media to comment and to offer our analysis of what happened and why. We learned then how using the word *crisis* can generate unwarranted fear about children's lives, a sensationalism that can wound schools and families, that can spread hopelessness and *hinder* necessary changes and healing.

Yet after all this we have ended up using the term. Yes, we're sorry to say, there really is a crisis. And in this chapter we hope to convince you to use the word not just as a negative alarm, but rather as an inspiration for positive change. Here are some of the things parents and educators are saying about the situation boys face in education today.

Laurie Hoff, a mother of three from Neenah, Wisconsin, wrote us: "I have a 13 year old boy. The middle school he attends is what I can only call 'anti-boy.' The assignments, the discipline, the structure of the day make him flounder in a system that works against him."

Netty Cruscan, a professional from Marion, Kentucky, wrote, "I'm a Developmental Interventionist, assessing and working on developmental delays. I'm noticing that the majority of the children on my client list are boys."

Linda Sullivan, a mother of two from Virginia, wrote, "I am becoming increasingly alarmed at the amount of boys being told they have processing problems, ADHD, LD, adjustment disorder, anxiety, and focus problems. By chance I happened to uncover today a new parochial school in our area in which 8 out of 20 in a third grade class are on Ritalin."

The Awful Truth

These parents and professionals are frightened. They have reason to be. Their communities are living out some painful statistics, as shown in the Did You Know? box.[1]

The issues boys face in school cross economic and ethnic groups. Although it might be politically tempting to say that upper-income white males must be doing well, that is in fact not a given. The Gurian Institute was just asked to assist a prestigious private boys' high school, populated by a majority of white males of high economic status, in which 50 percent of the boys in the school, across all grade levels, are receiving a D or an F in at least one subject. Even among white males there is a problem.

African American males are another group in which crisis is distinguishable. African American boys are more likely than other males (1) to be identified as learning-disabled and to end up in special education classes, (2) not to participate in advanced placement courses, (3) not to perform as well as other boys in math and science, and (4) to perform below grade level on standardized tests.

Pedro Noguera, professor in the Graduate School of Education at Harvard, has studied the academic performance of African American males and has reported that whereas 90 percent of black males surveyed "strongly agree" that they would like to succeed in school, only 22 percent responded that they "work hard to achieve good grades," and 42

??? Did You Know? ???

- Boys get the majority of the D's and F's in most schools—in some, as high as 70 percent.
- Boys make up 80 percent of our discipline problems.
- Of children diagnosed with learning disabilities, 70 percent are boys.
- Of children diagnosed with behavioral disorders, 80 percent are boys.
- Over 80 percent of schoolchildren on Ritalin or similar drugs are boys. As of 2004, the number of boys on Ritalin approached five million. (The United States consumes 80 percent of the world's supply of Ritalin.)
- According to the U.S. Department of Education, our sons are an average of a year to a year and a half behind girls in reading and writing skills. (Girls are behind boys in math and science but to a lesser degree.)
- Of high school dropouts, 80 percent are young males.
- Young men now make up less than 44 percent of our college population.

percent "strongly disagreed that their teachers supported them or cared about their success in school."[2]

The crisis in male education is not unique to the United States. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) implemented a three-year study of the knowledge and skills of fifteen-year-olds around the world using an assessment test called the Program for International Student Assessment (PISA).[3] The assessment measured reading, mathematical, and scientific literacy. In the United States, England, Canada, Australia, Germany, France, and Japan—indeed, in thirty-five developed countries—girls outperformed boys in overall educational

markers, the male test results skewing the overall statistics most dramatically in the basic areas of reading and writing.

Canada's cyclical School Achievement Indicator Program was implemented in 1993; it assesses math, reading, writing, and science competency. In the 2002 cycle, there were significant differences between males and females in writing achievement.[4] Consistent with PISA results, girls outperformed boys at almost all levels.

In October 2002 the Commonwealth of Australia published a report titled *Boys: Getting It Right.* This report, focusing on the education of boys in Australia, was the result of a large national effort by the House of Representatives to identify the factors behind the declining educational performance by boys in their country. Hearings were held around the country, and more than two hundred witnesses presented research findings and information, leading to a series of conclusions and recommendations. In general, this study found that the existing gender equity framework was not adequately addressing the social and educational needs of Australia's boys.[5]

Likewise, England has been studying its data, which show that boys are being outperformed by girls in "most subjects and at most ages." The gender gap documented among English students was identified across all ethnic minority groups, and researchers argued that "it is not boys who are the problem but schools."[6] Interestingly, most of the significant findings in Canada, Australia, and England were not reported by the U.S. press.

Many of our sons can indeed learn in nearly any environment: they are gifted; they win spelling bees and debate contests; they read the newest Harry Potter book in a week. Nevertheless, the vast majority of children who are not succeeding, in class after class, are boys. The struggling, dysfunctional, and failing students for whom parents and teachers request extra academic help are mainly boys.

The children who bring down the state and federal test scores are mainly boys. The children who lash out against the educational system are mainly boys. The children with whom our teachers feel the least trained to deal are our sons.

What the Experts Have Found

Kathy and I are not the only ones who are deeply disturbed about the crisis in educating and developing the minds of boys. About elementary education, Harvard researcher Dan Kindlon and school psychologist Michael Thompson have written in *Raising Cain:* "From kindergarten through sixth grade, a boy spends more than a thousand hours a year in school. . . . there the average boy faces a special struggle to meet the developmental and academic expectations of an elementary school curriculum. . . . Some boys are ahead of the others on that developmental curve, and some girls lag behind, but when we compare the average boy with the average girl, the average boy is developmentally disadvantaged in the early school environment."[7]

Harvard psychologist William Pollack, author of *Real Boys,* studied the learning self-esteem of middle and high school boys, and he reports, "Recent studies show that not only is boys' self esteem more fragile than that of girls and that boys' confidence as learners is impaired but also that boys are substantially more likely to endure disciplinary problems, be suspended from classes or actually drop out of school."[8]

In her book *The War Against Boys,* Christina Hoff Sommers notes a recent MetLife study, one of the largest of its kind, which found that in our educational system today girls are more likely than boys to want a good education, and more boys than girls (31 percent versus 19 percent) feel teachers do not listen to what they have to say.[9]

Sommers also points to studies conducted by the U.S. Department of Education. When eighth- and twelfth-grade students were subjects of professional research on expectations, the girls in both grades held higher professional expectations than the boys—more schoolgirls than schoolboys envisioned themselves completing high school, college, then graduate or professional training.

Government researcher Diane Ravitch has summed up the situation in our educational system this way: "In the view of elementary and high school students, the young people who sit in the classroom year after year and observe what is going on, both boys and girls agree: Schools favor girls."[10]

Gurian Institute Research

Gurian Institute research corroborates the findings of these other researchers: after twenty years of study and countless pilot programs in school districts in nearly all the United States, as well as in Canada and Australia, we have concluded that whether the boy in your life is high performing or low performing, he is at risk of being taught, managed, and guided in a system that may find him defective and may not know how to fix either him or itself.

This pattern of difficulty creates a problem for boys that will afflict our civilization with increasing discomfort over many decades to come, unless we confront it immediately. Parents bringing their sons to their first days of preschool will increasingly find that at least one of these sons could eventually face an educational crisis.

Terry Culpepper, a mother in Arizona wrote us: "My son and three of his friends have been skipping school a lot since they got to middle school. I'm doing my best, but I don't know what to do."

Isaiah Olson, a father in Detroit wrote, "I see a big problem with our African American boys in school. They don't fit. It's not just about race. It's something else. The drop out rate for black males is now twice what it is for black females. It's about gender in our community, too."

Trace, a high school freshman in Oregon, told his school counselor, "I'm a failure as a student. I know it, my parents know it, and my teachers know it. There's nothing I can do."

These people are definitely in crisis. At some level, their trust in education is being destroyed. And these emails and letters are just a few of the thousands of messages that we and other researchers are receiving constantly.

The Boys You Know

Statistics, personal stories, a sense of a crisis—these are still far away unless you know boys, schools, and families who are suffering needlessly. What is the situation in your school, home, and community?

As a parent:

- Do you know boys who are bright but underperforming in school?
- Do you know boys quite capable of task success in the home or elsewhere, but unmotivated at school?
- Do you know boys who are getting weak or low grades, are falling behind, are unable or unwilling to fulfill the assignments given to them?
- Are there sons who are good at one thing, perhaps math, but disproportionately behind in another, perhaps reading?
- How many of the boys in your child's school are on Ritalin or Adderal? Have these boys been scientifically tested for ADD/ADHD, or is the medication a response to a general problem the boys are having in the school?
- Do you know boys and families for whom educational distress is going on year after year?
- Do you know adolescent boys who are not being prepared adequately to get a good job or—even more painful—to flourish in a healthy, happy life?

As a teacher or educational professional:

- Do more boys than girls in your classes chronically underperform?
- Are boys in your school receiving a disproportionate number of lower grades, especially in reading, writing, and language arts?
- Is medication becoming a first or second resort for far more boys than actually need it?
- Are boys in your classrooms giving up on learning, becoming labeled, getting in more trouble than they should be?
- Have you noticed how many bright boys are deciding not to go to college?

Our educational system does many things very well, yet nearly every classroom has one or more young Michael Gurians or Karl Michaels in

it. They act out against other boys, against adults, and against girls. When they withdraw, they may take another boy or girl with them. When they fail, they "turn off" their minds, seeing nothing of interest in school and thus, quite often, in society. Some of these boys turn anger at school and life into violence that is played out with guns or fists in school cafeterias or classrooms. More often, these boys just fall behind and "check out." They end up in special education or diagnosed with a learning disability or put on medication. Some of them drop out of school. Many do not succeed in life. They become the boys, and the men, we try so hard to make sure our sons don't become.

Our Young Men and College

For the first time in history, males make up less than 44 percent of our college students in many of our nation's institutions.[11] Females were underrepresented for centuries, but now the pendulum has swung in the opposite direction. Since the mid-1990s, the number of boys entering and graduating from college has dropped to less than the 50 percent one would wish for gender parity. This would not be a problem if college were "not worth very much," but in fact, a new study has confirmed what many of us intuit, not only that college is often essential for adult success but also that a disproportionate number of our males are not finding a home in college.

A new longitudinal study by the Center for Labor Market Studies at Northeastern University in Boston reveals the long-term effects of disenfranchising large groups of young males from educational success.[12] According to the study, if present educational trends continue, our young males will be graduating from high school and attending college in ever declining numbers, with those numbers going down to a 30 percent college attendance rate.

Must a boy go to college to succeed? Not always. Bill Gates didn't finish college, and he is known to be a good father, a business success, and an effective public servant. Calling attention to the college problem for males is not to decry an individual's particular qualities, nor to

??? Did You Know? ???

According to the study by the Center for Labor Market Studies, even at the present 44 percent college attendance rate, this generation of young men will

- Be increasingly unemployed or underemployed
- Earn significantly lower lifetime earnings than their peers
- Pay less Social Security, state, and federal income taxes over their lifetime, with the size of these tax revenue streams steadily decreasing commensurate with lower levels of education
- Depend more on in-kind benefits (food stamps, Medicaid, rental housing subsidies) than their better-educated counterparts
- Be more likely to father children out of wedlock and not live with or support their offspring
- Be less likely to accomplish personal and social goals for success in a competitive society

lament women's successes in increasing their college attendance, wages, and financial independence from males. Rather, it is to say that college is still the best average indicator of personal and social success for adults in the industrial and postindustrial world, and it is becoming less and less available to our sons.

Understanding and Fixing the Crisis

Something has gone wrong in the way we educate our boys. Studies are noting it in early education, elementary school, middle school, high school, and even college. What is that something? Can we define the problem? Can we root it out? Can it then be fixed?

As you'll see throughout this book, our Gurian Institute research indicates that the crisis is systemic, with no single person or group to blame: not teachers, not parents, not girls, not boys. Blame is like ice—it freezes an issue without changing it. The problem goes deeper than blame.

At the same time, we can identify the "something," we can define the problem, we can root it out, and we can fix it. The first step in this process is an act of collective memory: let's go back for a moment to where all this began, to the way we once brought up our young men, so that we can see how the roles of parents, children, and schools in educating the minds of boys have changed.

How Did This Happen?

If you think back to how your ancestors were educated, you'll notice that until about a hundred years ago, in all parts of the world, our sons' primary teachers were not lone individuals in schoolrooms but families, tribes, and natural environments. Whether your people came from Europe, Africa, Asia, or anywhere else, the boys and men in your ancestry mainly hunted, protected their families, farmed, worked intertribally, and mentored adolescent males into manhood. When the first schools opened in urban centers a few thousand years ago, the broad backs of males were needed for work within ever larger economic hierarchies, work for which they needed better intellectual and logistical training. They got some of that in newly built schools, but most boys did not spend much time inside a schoolhouse. After a few years of "schooling," they moved in late childhood into fields or workplaces.

Right up into the nineteenth century, most boys still learned what they needed to know mainly from their mothers, fathers, mentors, and hands-on work. They imitated their elders, they practiced, they learned by doing. Not until about two hundred years ago did printing and the written word become a major part of a boy's educational life. It was at that point that the Industrial Revolution was upon us.

Margaret Gayle, executive director of the American Association for Gifted Children at Duke University, and Hugh Osborn, an educational consultant, wrote a starkly titled article for the *Los Angeles Times:* "Let's

Get Rid of Learning Factories." In tracking the roots of many of the issues we now face in our schools, they described the rationale for the development of the "industrial schooling" we have today. "Economic foundations set up by industrialists helped design our schools to prepare children for factory lives. Kids were to live by the bell, move through schools as if on conveyor belts and, especially, learn to follow instructions so they could work in the rapidly proliferating factories."[13]

The industrial model of educating children had a certain logic to it. Population growth and nation building required all children to go to school.

The industrialization of the classroom and the school occurred within a few rapid decades. Parents, grandparents, and tribal mentors became somewhat obsolete in the institutional education process. Children were educated far less frequently in environments that relied on family leadership and tribal apprenticeship. Learning became less hands-on, less physical, less experiential. The trend of educating kids through reading, writing, and sitting in one's seat became the "acceptable standard" for huge numbers of children who entered school year after year.

Over these decades, our boys by the millions tried (and often succeeded) to adapt. Often, however, they did not. The boys who learned what they needed to know by hunting with their relatives, managing a farm, fixing machinery, or devising a new invention for everyone in their tribe to use—these boys now found themselves in boxlike rooms. For most boys in public schools, gone were the classical academic models of verbal debate between young thinkers on issues of vital importance to the polis.

Gone too were many of the family members who understood the minds of their own sons and protégés: the parents, extended families, and tribes who had led the child's education by providing his early learning experiences in the family or larger community, then by managing his later apprenticeships. Now there were a lot of kids—peers—and one teacher per classroom, who was supposed to be the parent, mentor, grandparent, instructor, and everything else to all these young minds. The juggernaut of industrialization in schools moved so quickly toward this model of teaching and learning that not until now have we

begun to realize its possible flaws—beginning with what it lacks in human terms.

Who Is Responsible for a Boy's Education?

A former professor of mine, referring to the words of the philosopher Bertrand Russell, said to me, "No life experience compares to family love. There is nothing I have done that rewards me as much as being a parent." Each of us who has children has probably expressed a similar idea to someone during our child's upbringing. These words touch our hearts. My professor, who was very involved in his kids' lives, went on to say, "Especially rewarding was my attention to my children's education. I considered it my responsibility." This sentiment might also ring true for the rest of us—but most of us are not trained teachers so it runs counter to how we educate our children today.

Are parents today ultimately responsible for their children's education? Is it even realistic to answer yes, when we are not "teachers"? In fact, isn't it more accurate to say that yes, we sense how important we are to our children's education, but also that we must trust—through paying taxes or tuition and holding high expectations of our schools, whether public or private—that our contemporary systems of education will prepare our children for the technologies and skills of modern adulthood?

Most of us do indeed send our children away from their homes and families into square rooms with desks and books, where they learn reading, writing, math, science, computer programming, and many other subjects they need for success. At the end of the school day, they return to our homes, to our parenting. Perhaps we've been working away from home all day just as our kids have. As parents, as family members, as grandparents, as neighbors, as family friends, we've spent little time in our work or retirement day thinking about our responsibilities for our boys' education. Neither we nor our schools have conspired to do harm in all this—it is simply "the way things are."

But must it be this way? Is it possible that the family's general abdication of a son's (or daughter's) education to an industrialized system

may constitute, without our realizing it, a major reason for the current crisis? Is it possible that through this abdication we have broken a promise to our children, a promise made in the commitment to loving and caring for offspring?

The Lost Role of the Family in Education

If you look back at your family's distant past, you'll notice that whether your ancient ancestry derives from Viking, Teutonic, African, Roman, East Indian, Japanese, or Chinese roots—on all continents, no matter the race, your human ancestors relied on *extended family teams* who were *intimate with the child* to educate offspring in the technologies and values of life and work.

No matter where they lived, your biological ancestors relied on teams of educators, led by parents, matriarchs, and patriarchs in tribes, who considered themselves as ultimately responsible for the boy's learning. There were very few strangers in a boy's schooling. Because the child was considered an extension of parents, grandparents, and tribe, his education was an extension of his blood relationships. When someone outside his tribe was given control of his education, it was not done at three, four, or five years old, but only much later, during late childhood and adolescence, if he was apprenticed to a faraway mentor in a trade.

Konrad Lorenz, the noted biologist and anthropologist of the last century, explored the protection that families of all species offer their offspring. His work later joined others in anthropological studies of human dependency. This biological approach to the human family served ultimately to show how crucial the human family is in the education of children, and to warn of the crisis that can result when the family drifts from its attachments and responsibilities.

What is intuitive to most parents was clarified by biological research: *families matter.* In the last two decades, scientists in the area of attachment research have shown just how dependent children are on the parents and close extended family for life success. In their book, *The Dependency Tendency,* Dr. Jay P. and Julia Gurian (my own parents, a sociologist and anthropologist, respectively) brought the work of Lorenz

and other biologists together with anthropological evidence. They note that in a biology-based view of family, "The human family is more than a collection of interlocking emotional needs. . . . families are interlocking life-units in which the well being of one is inherent in the well being of another. From a dependency point of view (and contrary to popular myth), parents do not make themselves dispensable, and the children never fully outgrow being the children of the previous generation. Nor do grandparents or others of their generation ever 'disengage' from their responsibilities or privileges within the family circle."[14]

This is a bioanthropological model of family, rather than an industrial one. It is the model with which Kathy and I begin this book because it is the model that seems to work very well in communities and schools around the country. This model does not diminish the importance of the school—the school is responsible for the education of the child—but the child's family is *equally* responsible: the child's mind is connected always to the family's mind, and family is responsible for its care. In this model, the family considers itself less than adequate if it gives up leadership of the care of that mind to a massive structure of society, an institution, which does not really know the child. Families and schools are coteachers of the child's mind.

This ancient and universal model of family was set aside during the Industrial Revolution. In our sons' case, we have systematically relinquished the responsibility for their education to institutional systems that are not malicious—that are, in fact, filled with some of the finest people our children will ever meet—but are not biosocially responsible for each individual child's success and often are not set up to care intimately about that individual success.

Is part of the crisis we face with boys and school rooted in human parents' giving away too much when we gave our children's minds to institutions? Is it possible to begin fixing the crisis in male education by taking back some of the responsibility we once had for our sons?

Kathy and I believe the answer is a resounding yes. The first practical step toward dealing with the crisis in boys' education is to understand our lost role as parents and families.

Reviving the Role of Family in Education

In asking you, as parents and teachers, to begin our journey out of low grades, discipline problems, and male malaise by rethinking the role of the family in our educational history, we are not asking parents and extended family to deny the role of schools and teachers in helping our boys develop. We are as supportive of teachers as we are of parents. Our hope is that the family's role will be revived to become *the leadership team* that takes a profound rather than distant responsibility for a boy's educational success.

The remaining chapters in this book provide equal amounts of advice to parents and teachers in hopes of helping revive the important partnership between the child's first and second schools, the home and the formal classroom.

Because fathers and mothers are now working away from families; because industrial mobility has moved many families away from grandparents, tribe, and family groups; because divorce and changing family values have created additional stress on family cohesion, our children do indeed need the best of the industrial model—they do indeed require increased supervision away from mom, dad, grandparents, aunts, uncles, mentors—they are "school reliant" in ways they were not a thousand years ago. We clearly can't go back to the small tribes in which our ancestors were brought up and educated.

And yet, in the shadow of educational distress and malaise, we can revise and update what we call the *parent-led team* that once helped educate a boy (and also a girl). Let's define this team more carefully. A child's parents will generally lead this effort, and the team may consist of

- Parents
- Grandparents
- Other relatives, such as aunts and uncles, cousins, in-laws
- Tutors
- Coaches
- Neighbors
- Friends
- Service agencies

- Clergy and mentors in faith communities
- Siblings
- Other peer mentors

In this parent-led team, each person and organization is asked to join an educational team, built by parents with children at its center, whose job it is to educate the child. If this team moves into place, no matter what crisis the boy now faces (and even if he faces none), his chances of being lost to educational crisis diminish significantly. He now has ten or so trusted individuals to help him outside the school system.

Building Your Parent-Led Team: The First Step Against Crisis

This parent-led team, this first step against crisis, can be put together out of what is available around you. It is enhanced by your blood relatives, but not dependent on them.

Here are some ways it can work organically in your home or neighborhood.

- Grandpa George is a retired engineer, who lives in Florida. Your son, who lives in California, is having trouble in math or science. You can contact Grandpa George and set up a weekly tutorial for your son via phone and the Internet.
- Grandma Estelle, who lives a few hours away, is an avid reader. Your son is having trouble with his language arts curriculum. Once a week, Grandma Estelle can come over to help your son with his reading and writing.
- Your son has a best friend, Max, who lives a few neighborhoods away. Max's father is a computer designer. Once or twice a week, your son and Max can spend time with this father at the computer, learning what they need to know.
- You are a single mother, perhaps raising two or three sons, one of whom is having trouble in school. Perhaps you have another son or daughter, already grown, who is away at college. You can arrange for the boy having trouble to connect with his older sibling on the Internet at least once a week, so the older sibling can check out his

homework, keep him focused on papers that are due, and give him tutoring on tough subjects.

Healing the crisis that faces our boys today begins with a parent-led team. As this book progresses, you'll get help in making sure that your family learning team is ultimately responsible for making sure that boys are provided what they have always needed in order to learn: close, intimate mentors and advocates throughout the journey of institutional education.

Sandra, a mother in Deer Park, Washington, is developing a parent-led team. She wrote:

> I have five sons. I realized after my fifth was born that I had to take time off work in order to help them get the best upbringing and education they could. Their schools were doing their best, but the boys needed me to shepherd them, too.
>
> Now, a lot of my time is spent tutoring them. A lot is also spent driving them here and there. A lot of it is spent listening to them, trying to help them. And when I don't know an answer, a lot of it is spent finding someone who does.

This last sentence is especially compelling—Sandra has constructed a parent-led *team* that can help her sons through the difficulties (and the successes) of institutional education.

Whether you as a parent take time off work or simply make the child's education a primary focus, the effective use of a parent-led team will probably require you or your spouse to focus, at least for a time, on creating it, networking it, and mastering its design. The rewards are well worth the extra effort.

Once you have established your team, it's important not to wait until there's a problem to call on members. You might find it fun and rewarding to have periodic gatherings to celebrate milestones in your son's life.

Parent-led teams can work wonderfully for girls. There is actually nothing that makes teams inherently better for boys than girls. We are calling attention to the parent-led team in the context of male learning because while our nation's girls gained much educational equity in the last two decades, now statistics show that our sons are failing to learn.

Try This
Assessing Team Members' Suitability

The following are questions to think about as you evaluate the appropriateness of individuals you are considering for your team:

- Does this person seem to really like kids? (Just because a person is related doesn't mean he or she enjoys spending time with youngsters.)
- Does this person have some basic understanding of developmentally appropriate ways to deal with my child?
- Does my child seem to enjoy being around this person?
- Does this person seem likely to make participation on my child's team a priority when necessary?

Kathy and I have taught families and communities how to develop this team for their sons' learning. We've been honored to become a part of families' sense of reward, responsibility, and joy as boys' learning improves and their life success becomes more ensured. A parent group in Georgia shared these results with us:

> We are a group of five families, all of which have boys. In three of the families, our boys were having trouble. In one of them, one of the girls was having trouble in school. In the fifth family, the kids are already grown. We all became friends ten years ago when our kids became friends in the same elementary school.
>
> When we decided to work with this "parent-team" concept, we had a meeting of parents and kids, we talked about what the team was (we called it our "learning tribe"), and we divided up labor based on people's abilities. Luckily, within the five families, there was always some adult who knew something that could help one of the kids.
>
> Our children are now moving through high school. This parent-team has made all the difference. We even created a rite of passage for our graduating seniors. Other friends from our church have

> noticed how much better our kids are doing in school and we've sat down with them and talked about how it has worked. I think the word about this is definitely spreading.

These five families, like Sandra, have refreshed the role of learning teams for the youth in their lives. They have done this none too soon, answering the call of a crisis in male education with a first practical step forward.

Facing the challenge of working and advocating for change within a large, often bureaucratic institutional system like a school can be a daunting task for a parent. Sometimes parents (and even educators themselves) feel powerless, overwhelmed, stressed out. Often they feel frustrated by an institution's inability to change. In Chapter Six we'll be talking more about how parents can advocate and work collectively to change their schools.

Meanwhile, though, Sandra and others like her who have built these parent-led teams are already dealing with institutional difficulties in two powerful ways: they are making sure each family has allies who can help ease the intimidation of sometimes feeling like a very small fish in a very large pond. And they are providing their children with learning buddies who can help them persevere even when the institutions in their district or neighborhood just won't change. The educational loneliness that one parent or child can feel is alleviated as now the family becomes more than one fish—indeed, becomes a "minischool" of fish that can cohesively make some serious waves when necessary.

No matter what situation you face in your school district or neighborhood, creating a parent-led learning team for your son constitutes a crucial first step in protecting the education of your child.

The Next Step

In our next chapter, we'll take a next step: we'll take a close and multifaceted look at how boys actually learn—what's happening inside the minds of boys—in order to discover our boys' *natural* learning style. This

discovery helps both parents and teachers alter teaching and mentoring methods to meet boys' specific needs.

As we move to this next step, it seems clear that avoiding the word *crisis* regarding our boys does no good. Research in the 1990s clarified ways in which our schools fail our girls, especially in areas of math and science, the dynamics of self-esteem in the classrooms, and computer design instruction. Because our culture recognized a girls' crisis, it has addressed those problems and to a great extent has changed things for the better as far as teaching girls is concerned.

Now we are called by a crisis in education to take care of our sons in our schools. If we don't, the future success of our young men, our community, and our society is at stake. Our boys simply can no longer get the vast majority of our D's and F's without our doing something about it.

When the mother, father, and three-year-old boy walked up to that preschool door, they had the highest of hopes and aspirations. Certainly, one thing they assumed was that the teachers in that preschool—and in all schools thereafter through college—would know how their son's mind works, so that they could teach directly and effectively not just to "kids," but to boys.

Do teachers know how boys actually learn? Do parents know? What if everyone did know? Would this knowledge make things better for our sons?

Let's find out.