

Helping boys become men

Author says an older male must coach, mentor and lend a hand

Michael Gurian remembers well his stormy adolescence.

"I was hyperactive and got in a lot of trouble," he says. "I shoplifted, got lots of speeding tickets. I recall my family and my society not really knowing what to do with me."

Today, Gurian, a long-time family therapist and author who lives in Spokane, Wash., is working to change the way we raise our sons—and to keep them out of the kind of trouble he himself went through.

In a number of books, most recently "The Good Son: Shaping the Moral Development of Our Boys and Young Men" (Putnam, 1999), Gurian, 41, draws on biology, anthropology, literature and his own experience to explain why young males in modern society are often impulsive at best and violent at worst. He offers a blueprint for how parents, grandparents, educators and mentors can help boys get through adolescence and become responsible, caring men.

Since the start of the women's movement in the 1960s, inequities faced by girls have received considerable attention. But by many measures, boys are in far worse shape, according to Gurian.

The vast majority of children who commit crimes, are murdered, wind up in prison, suffer physical abuse, kill themselves, go homeless, need foster care, or are drug- or alcohol-addicted are males. They are also far more likely to be put in special-education classes or diagnosed with attention-deficit disorder and prescribed the drug Ritalin—as Gurian himself was as a teen-ager.

"My work is about helping boys belong," he tells a Bulletin reporter in the living room of his home. "I'm really into a boy having an extended family. Boys need more personnel in their lives. There's kind of an emergency when boys don't get enough mentoring and enough direction."

This is especially important for boys, Gurian argues, because they tend to be more impulsive than girls and less able to form close personal relationships.

The wildness of Gurian's youth is nowhere to be seen in the relaxed man he has become. Although

he's now something of a celebrity, having appeared on dozens of TV and radio talk shows, he retains an easy-going manner.

He dresses on this day in sneakers, khakis and pullover. Later his wife, Gail, also a family therapist, appears with tea and muffins.

That the couple have two daughters and no sons was fate, jokes Gurian. "If I'd had boys I would have experimented on them!" he says.

Gurian's conversation ranges easily from a defense of women's rights to Eastern religions to the role the military can play in teaching young men

which he considers the most fragile time in a boy's moral development.

"[Boys] need people of their own biology to help them control and cope with their inherent urges and drives. They need men to help them understand by example how a man is different from a boy." [See box at right detailing Gurian's views on the role of fathers.]

With so many single-mother families prevalent today, the role of grandparents, uncles, neighbors and other men in the community is critical. Contrary to what some might think, single moms are common in many societies, he points out. In Turkey, for example, where Gurian and his wife spent two years, fathers frequently emigrate to another country to find work. But in their absence, grandparents and extended family members step up to help the mothers and fill the gap.

"Has humanity ever abandoned a single mom to raise her sons alone? No," he says. "But we're doing it now."

He says single mothers must enlist the help of adults, whether it's seeking a male in her church or temple to act as a mentor, requesting a Big Brother or asking a male teacher or coach to become more involved with her son. "Not only does the mother need to reach out, but the culture needs to reach back to help her," Gurian says.

Grandparents who live far away can still form deep bonds that will serve their grandchildren well, he says, through weekly phone calls to their grandkids, regular visits back and forth and e-mail. Godparents can also be chosen to act as children's "mentors, friends and moral and emotional allies," he believes.

Gurian's own childhood was spent moving from town to town, as his father—"a professor with wanderlust," according to Gurian—took on new assignments. Time spent with extended family was rare. Occasionally, though, his grandfather would visit and take Gurian and his brother fishing at the beaver ponds near their home in Laramie, Wyo.

"Those are incredible memories for me," he says. "There is an osmosis

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Gurian's theories are winning increasing recognition, especially in education.

that takes place that ... can't really be studied between young males and elder males. The boy's self fills up with the energy of this elder male, even though you're sitting in a fishing boat silently for three hours."

The Gurians are determined that there will be close ties between their daughters and the children's grandparents. When Gurian's parents retired, he urged them to settle in Spokane.

"I helped my parents move here specifically for my children," he says. "We opened up our community to them. I think people need to make sacrifices to get our extended families back together."

Gurian's strategies for raising boys are now being tested through the Michael Gurian Institute, created last year by the Missouri Center for Safe Schools at the University of Missouri—Kansas City. The idea for the institute came from a federal judge who serves on the center's board.

"He was carrying around 'The Wonder of Boys' [Gurian's first book] and using it as a manual for rearing his own children," says Patricia Henley, executive director of the center, which, as its name implies, fosters safe, disruption-free schools. "He thought it had some of the answers we needed."

Seven school districts are participating in the institute's two-year pilot project, which includes intensive teacher training as well as periodic on-site visits by Gurian.

"We thought it would take a couple of years before we'd know if his ap-

Fathers and sons

HERE, ADAPTED FROM his book, "The Good Son," is Michael Gurian's view of the role of fathers during a boy's adolescence:

- If the father has been distant—either physically or emotionally—during a boy's younger years, now is the time for him to become an active parent. If the father is unavailable, finding father substitutes is essential.

- The boy needs more time alone with his dad, such as going on one-on-one outings.

- The father should help guide his son toward other adult male mentors.

- The father should begin challenging his son to achieve personal success and teaching him the rules of life from a male point of view.

- Father and son should have discussions about values, ethics and decision-making, and about masculine stereotypes that the father feels are not helpful to a developing man.

proach would make a difference," says Henley. "We're only halfway through the first year, and already it's successful." She says the journals of teachers involved in the project are full of success stories.

For example, a young male teacher in a middle school now makes time to develop relationships with some of his troubled students. "He even vis-

its them in other classrooms to show them that what they are doing is important to him," says Henley. When the teacher saw one of his young charges misbehaving in another class, he pulled him aside and told him he expected better behavior from him. The boy's conduct improved.

One participating school is Edison Elementary in St. Joseph, Mo., where 80 percent of the children live below poverty level and most are being raised by single mothers. "Boys clearly behave differently in school than girls," says Dan Colgan, superintendent of St. Joseph public schools. "There's a higher number who are in our special education classrooms, particularly those being assigned to behavior-management classes."

Through the institute, teachers at Edison are learning methods for helping boys deal with frustration and anger. In addition, volunteers, many of them older people, have been actively recruited and trained to mentor students. Colgan says, "We find that children really respond to someone that they might see as Grandma or Grandpa."

Coming regularly to Kansas City to train teachers accounts for only some of the 60 or so trips Gurian makes in a year. He's active on the lecture circuit, delivering speeches to education, religious and criminal justice conferences, as well as making many book tours.

To keep up with his speaking and writing, Gurian gave up his therapy practice. A prolific writer with a dozen books to his credit, he recently completed a guide to character-building books and movies for boys and is at work on a book for educators.

His next project: a book on girls that will examine the biological and cultural particularities of females. Ultimately, Gurian maintains, females would benefit as much as males if his theories were put into practice.

"Every time you raise a loving, wise and responsible man, you have created a better world for women," he says. "Women are having to bond with half-men, with boys who were not fully raised to manhood, don't know how to bond, don't know what their responsibilities are to humanity and don't have a strong sense of service. All of those are what manhood is."