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**INQUIRY INTO THE EDUCATION OF BOYS**

**by**

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## **PUBLIC CONCERN ABOUT ‘BOY TROUBLES’**

Jennifer Buckingham’s book, *Boy Troubles - understanding rising suicide, rising crime and educational failure* (The Centre for Independent Studies, St Leonards NSW, June 2000) seems to have struck a chord with the general public. A number of major media articles (eg John Stapleton, *The trouble with boys*, The Australian, 19/6/00, p 17) have followed its publication.

The book also struck a chord with Festival of Light. Our research of scientific literature has shown clear evidence for innate brain differences between men and women - debunking current educational policies which treat boys and girls as if they were essentially the same.

The Maccoby and Jacklin book, *The Psychology of Sex Differences* (Stanford University Press, 1974), notes the following:

- \* girls have greater verbal ability than boys;
- \* boys excel in visuo-spatial ability;
- \* boys excel in mathematical ability;
- \* males are more aggressive than females.

To these may be added:

- \* males have greater physical strength than females;
- \* females excel in tasks requiring fine motor skills.

Anyone who observes a group of young children at play can see these general differences, some of them observable in the first months of life.

Diane McGuiness and K Pribram (*The origins of sensory bias in the development of gender differences in perception and cognition*, ed M Borthers, Cognitive Growth and Development, Brunner/Mazel, 1979) have done extensive behavioural studies of boys and girls, from birth onwards. They have observed that newborn boys are significantly more active than girls. Boys are awake more and show more low-intensity movements and more facial grimacing than girls.

McGuiness and Pribram also noted that as children grow, rough-and-tumble play remains exclusively male, as it does in other primates. The male’s larger muscle mass (mature males have 40% of body tissue as muscle, whereas females have only 23%) and superior integration of sight and motor skills produce male superiority in gross-motor action.

However McGuiness and Pribram confirm that females excel in fine motor control, as do female apes and other primates. Female apes spend more time and care in grooming than males.

The evidence is clear. There are distinct general differences in boys’ and girls’ aptitudes and behaviours, and most parents recognise them. The question is, do modern educational methods take these differences into account?

## **READING PROBLEMS**

Festival of Light is a community group promoting Christian family values. We discovered early on that communicating those values is difficult where adults and children cannot read - or not read well enough to understand ideas in a typical newspaper. Such people cannot read the Bible either, even in the new simplified versions.

So we held a seminar on teaching reading in 1990. It was the best-attended in our history - parents and teachers were desperate to hear US educator Samuel Blumenfeld explain his *Alpha-Phonics* approach.

The phonics teaching method is based on the fact that the 26 letters in our alphabet represent 44 sounds. Reading becomes straightforward once children realise that almost all words can be

“decoded” from left to right. After learning to blend the short vowels with a range of consonants, they proceed to learn the few exceptional vowels, and how to blend more complex combinations, until they can master all words.

This systematic, structured approach is very different from the modern “whole word” method which relies on children having a retentive visual memory. Those not so blessed often flounder, and our experience has been that more boys than girls have serious problems. Jennifer Buckingham says (pp 35-6) that differences in male and female brain “wiring” could explain why boys respond best to a more structured, focused approach to teaching.

John (not his real name) was one example. His SA primary school in the mid 1970s taught reading by the “whole word” method, but after two years John had made very little progress. His father then intervened and taught John to read at home in the evenings, using the step-by step, “sounding out” phonics method his father learned at school in the late 1940s (when class sizes averaged 45-50). This “old fashioned” method worked, and John went on to achieve an honours degree at Adelaide University.

Jennifer Buckingham notes (p 33) that literacy scores for girls have declined from 75% in 1975 to 73% in 1995, and for boys from 70% to 65% over the same period - ie that overall, literacy scores have declined, but boys’ scores have declined more than girls’. Buckingham says (p 40) that the gender gap is lowest for children of high socio-economic status (SES) and greatest for those of low SES - ie boys from poor families fare worst of all.

Reasons for this trend could include our observation that private schools catering for high SES children have tended to retain more “traditional phonics” in their teaching programs. In addition, parents from higher socio-economic backgrounds tend to be more willing and able to pay for remedial teaching, or to teach their children at home using more traditional phonics methods, when school methods prove unsatisfactory.

Our 1990 *Alpha-Phonics* seminar was recorded on video, and we would be happy to send a copy to the Standing Committee’s Inquiry. The seminar feedback was amazing. The most remarkable testimony came from a TAFE teacher who had been experiencing great difficulty with her class of adults who were unemployable because of their illiteracy. She had tried all variations of the “whole word” approaches to reading without success, and used the *Alpha-Phonics* workbook she bought at the seminar as a last resort. It achieved what she described as a “miracle” - a middle-aged Italian male migrant who had never been able to read suddenly “clicked” - as did the rest of her (mainly male) class. However the “miracle book” was a no-no in official educational circles which condemned it as “archaic”. The teacher said it was more than her job was worth to put a testimonial to *Alpha-Phonics* in writing.

The phonics approach to teaching reading was universal in Australia until the latter half of the 20th century. In South Australia, the new “whole word” approach was progressively enforced in primary schools in the 1960s. In the 1980s, one teacher told us that she taught phonics in secret - stopping if she saw the school principal entering the (open plan) teaching area.

A lecturer in special education at Flinders University told us some six years ago that *Alpha-Phonics* was the best book of its kind he had come across. However he told us not to expect that SA educational authorities would take it on board. He had applied for a modest grant from the federal government under its literacy program in the early 1990s, to train some junior primary teachers in the phonics method. His application was refused.

Since it is our experience that boys are more disadvantaged than girls by the “whole word” reading method, we believe the change to this policy in the mid 60s - 70s could be one reason why boys are now achieving at much lower educational levels than previously, even including mathematics. Reading is a fundamental skill upon which all other educational outcomes depend. Festival of Light continues to stock *Alpha-Phonics* in our resource centre, and it remains our best seller, mainly promoted by personal recommendations from satisfied customers.

## **SINGLE SEX SCHOOLS**

One of our supporters told us that she had decided to remove Sam (not his real name), her nine year

old son, from his local state primary school a couple of years ago. She told us that all the teachers at the school had been female, with an aggressive “feminist” agenda. “They seemed to be always ‘putting the boys down’ and praising the girls. They tended to pay far more attention to the girls in the class,” she said.

“The effect on Sam was to shrink into his shell and be almost ashamed of being a boy. He was not performing to his potential academically. Finally his father and I felt we had to pull him out, and make the financial sacrifice to send him to an all-boys private school.

“The change in Sam has been wonderful to behold. He has a male teacher, and the day’s program is broken up with periods of physical activity to ‘get the wriggles out’ of the boys. He is very happy, and his grades have improved out of sight,” the mother said.

In the past 15 years, “affirmative action” programs for girls have been introduced into SA schools to redress the perceived past injustices to girls, when boys, being more boisterous and aggressive, were said to demand more than their fair share of the teacher’s time and attention. Teachers have been trained to ignore boys’ demands and to pay special attention to girls. Sports have been made “unisex”, and boys have been ordered to “tone down” their rough play to accommodate the gentler girls.

At younger ages in childcare centres, federal government guidelines insist the girls and boys be treated exactly the same, with staff required to urge boys to play “girls’ games” and vice versa. Principle 5 of the guidelines revised in 1999 insists that child care staff “actively and consistently encourage and assist children to enter activities that have traditionally been thought appropriate only for ‘some children’” (the guideline writers seem unable to utter the words “boys” or “girls”!). The implication of Principle 5 is that staff should continually suggest to boys who are happily playing with trucks that they should play with dolls instead, and vice versa. Whatever happened to freedom of choice?

## **BOYS WILL BE BOYS**

Kerry Cue, weekly columnist with *The Advertiser*, writes humorous articles which sometimes have a subtle social message. On 14 August 2000 (p 18) the message was not so subtle, and was headlined: ***You can take a boy to school, but you can’t keep him still.***

Kerry Cue said:

*The big issue in education these days is boys. It should be, because the education system doesn’t suit all boys. And I can tell you why. It has a lot to do with Newton’s First Law of Motion: a body will remain at rest (boys asleep) or in a state of uniform motion (boys awake) in a straight line unless acted upon by an external force (school).*

*Many boys arrive at school with the energy levels of compact Jackie Chans, yet they are meant to spend most of their days “silent and seated”.*

*It’s like trying to calm a tornado. And it’s expected that boys will remain becalmed for their entire education.*

*The nature of some boys becomes obvious at kinder. Whereas many girls stand at easels and paint “mummy in a hat”, some boys produce one stroke on a sheet of butcher’s paper, painted mid-battle with the paint brush doubling as a Jedi sword. When these boys first arrive at school, they’re usually put at the end of the queue for a reason - to prevent the whole line disintegrating on the way into class. A group of focused little Maggie Thatchers often leads the line into class in strict formation. Meanwhile, trailing behind are the energetic boys, karate kicking and elbowing each other and generally disrupting the process. Once in the classroom, these boys cannot sit on a mat on the floor without falling off. It’s just too hard to sit still. While these boys would rather be outside swinging from trees, the dictates of education demand that they sit still and learn to read. It would be like asking any of us to sit still for two hours a day and do macrame. It would be torture. Yet teachers do manage, despite the odds, to get most of them reading.*

*By late primary school another warrior trait emerges in these boys. Competitiveness. They chase one another with tennis balls and throw them really hard. They try daring feats on the monkey bars. They have water-spitting competitions. By secondary school when the hormones hit, these boys are truly the young warriors of the tribe. And school doesn’t suit them. School suits the accountants of*

*the tribe. The young warriors spend lunch time wrestling, getting each other in head locks and dragging each other round the oval by their shirt tails.*

*Their eating habits are atrocious. I've seen boys playing cricket with hot dogs under their armpits. But they're too busy to eat. They start eating on their way into class. Just entering the classroom after lunch is a major drama. They push each other in the door, bellow at any friend passing in the corridor and karate chop each other's rulers. Even at their finest moment they cannot sit still. They have to nudge someone.*

*At the same age in another era, these boys would have been elsewhere. My father left school at 13. A friend's grandfather had been to World War I and returned before he was 18. Boys were warriors once. Not that we want to send these boys to war. But the young warriors of the tribe don't want to sit and write and talk. They want to do something. There is a saying, "Boys will be boys." We know what it means.*

*Unfortunately, we ignore this saying in education. Boys can't be boys. We want them to sit still and communicate like girls. But it doesn't always work.*

Kerry Cue confirms the experience of Sam's mother, reported on pages 2-3, not to mention the findings of researchers reported on page 1. She points out the failure of modern education theory with its false premise that boys and girls are essentially the same, physically, mentally and emotionally, and should be treated the same - ie as if they were all girls.

### **DR JOHN MONEY'S FALSE THEORY**

And as Jennifer Buckingham's monograph documents so clearly, boys are the losers from educational policies based on these theories, now shown to be false. Dr John Money of Johns Hopkins University, who misled a whole generation of doctors, psychologists, sociologists, educationists and others with his deceptive reporting of the famous "twins case", has done untold damage.

In 1967, Money persuaded the parents of identical twin boys Bruce and Brian Reimer, to have Bruce castrated and raised as a girl after his circumcision went horribly wrong at just over one year of age. Money saw that this experiment would be an ideal opportunity to "prove" that gender identity is a cultural construct, learned after birth. Money advised the parents on how to raise Bruce (renamed Brenda) and the family visited Money every year for extensive interviews.

It was obvious from the start that Brenda was not happy with her new role. She hated the beautiful dress her mother made her for her second birthday; she insisted on urinating standing up. Money however reported that Brenda was serenely sailing through a feminine childhood - perhaps a little on the tomboy side, but that was all. After Brenda's distress became too much to bear at 15, she was finally told the truth - and immediately began living as a male. After a painful mastectomy (Money had ordered oestrogen treatment for many years previously) and plastic surgery to construct a new penis, Brenda (who renamed himself David, as in David vs Goliath) married a single mother with young children and allowed his story to be told so that the lies could be corrected. The full story is told by John Colapinto in his recently published book, *As nature made him: the boy who was raised as a girl*, Harper Collins, New York, 2000.

Money fell into the trap which is all too tempting for scientists who want to prove "their" theory. He saw only what he wanted to see. In the process his 1972 book, *Man & Woman, Boy & Girl*, became a best seller which deceived the Western world, and damaging educational policies have been based on his false assumptions.

### **RETHINK NEEDED**

The evidence is now in that current educational policies are damaging boys, and a serious rethink is needed. New directions could include:

- \* separate boy's and girls' schools, enabling them to cater for sex differences more easily;
- \* a return to phonics as the initial basis for reading instruction in early primary school years;
- \* more structured teaching of mathematics and other subjects;
- \* more recruiting of male teachers, particularly for primary schools;

- \* extra physical activity throughout the day, particularly for boys who need it;
- \* amendment of federal and state sex discrimination legislation, to allow for different treatment of different sexes, in the best interests of all concerned.