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'Hip' boys under great pressure

Risks of teenage fragility exposed

BRIGID O'CONNELL

A GENERATION of boys is at risk of being drawn into violence, early sexualisation and having dangerously low self-esteem.

Adolescent health experts say pervasive technology and bombardment by hyper-sexualised images has produced a "new fragility" among boys, with judgments based on looks and possessions.

In her new book, *What's happening to our boys?* Maggie Hamilton refers to a "secret world" of teenage boys. Through interviews with 70 experts and 50 teenage boys, the book argues they are more anxious to look the part, their addiction to gaming is growing, they are brand-savvy beyond belief, the influence of porn is all-pervasive and the rise of risky underage sex is growing rapidly.

The increasing pressure to dress the "right" way and have the "right" body are no longer just pervading the psyche of girls; it's driving many boys to over-exercise, to

take steroids, and others to "manorexia", she writes.

One teacher interviewed says many boys spend lunch breaks doing weights and stomach crunches to get "film star abs", with many exercising through injury and shunning relaxation and social activities to work out.

Head of Adolescent Medicine at Monash Medical Centre, Dr Jacinta Coleman, says her service has seen a big increase in the number of boys being treated for eating disorders and anxiety.

"We've lost respect for childhood. We bombard them with mixed messages about sexuality and that perfect body they should aspire to; the more vulnerable kids who feel like they don't belong are more susceptible," she says.

"We're seeing 12 to 13 year-olds who tell that they need to be sexually active to be cool and accepted; but they're not ready for this."

Society's obsession with "things" worries Ms Hamilton.

"Boys are taught that self-

worth grows from respecting yourself and generous actions, and yet, from their first bib and booties they are pasted with brand names, creating a life-long lust for the in thing.

"The thousands of expertly crafted messages that bombard our kids daily encourage them to believe that such essentials as happiness, friendship and security can be bought," she writes.

A recent study shows that by age 10 most children can remember 300 to 400 brands, but struggle to name plants and animals around them.

Monash University clinical psychologist Dr Simon Crisp says boys need support to test the boundaries; to let off steam and define their limits.

"We need to be a bit more relaxed about boys taking risks — it's a natural, healthy part of development in the teenage years," he says.

"If the only risks they are taking are to drive a car in a video game, boys will have poor judgment in assessing



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consequences away from the computer screen.”

Most parents who walked kilometres on their own to school will now not consider letting their children walk.

Yet they allow their children access to strangers online.

Easy access to pornography fuels expectations that sex is a given once a guy likes a girl.

Taking cues from music video clips and lyrics, and surrounded by girls their age dressed as Bratz dolls, it's no wonder boys are confused, writes Ms Hamilton.

Joe Tucci, chief executive of the Australian Childhood Foundation, says boys get many mixed and dangerous messages about their identity, where to find self-worth and how to relate to others.

And the online fantasy world of pornography is fast becoming a teaching manual.

“We're giving them a diet based on hyper-sexuality, that says sex rules and you have to

have sex to be popular,” he says. “But we've given them nowhere near enough information about respect and caring for people.

“We see seven to eight year-olds who have been involved sexually with other children, and for 30 per cent of those they have no history of sexual abuse; they're learning these things elsewhere.

“They're playing out the messages they're consuming every day, because they don't understand what it means.”

Ms Hamilton's book reminds parents reputations are not the only thing on the line when a girl and guy “hook up”.

Criminal convictions are real possibilities that can shatter career or travel plans.

And yet society often devalues traits that could help young boys succeed, says Dr Simon Crisp.

“We put so much emphasis on pursuing tertiary edu-

cation that there aren't well defined pathways and careers that celebrate the strengths of young men. They often end up feeling their choices are not good ones.”

Ms Hamilton agrees, saying society should no longer make boys apologise for being boys, and not to always see them as a “problem” or “disaster waiting to happen”.

“It's sad testosterone gets such a bad rap — it's just one more thing boys are made to feel bad about,” she writes.

“When I talk in schools, they love it when we talk about the ways men are heroic. They get excited to think they too have a role to play in the community.”

Prof Susan Sawyer, director of Centre for Adolescent Health at Royal Children's Hospital, says ways to nurture teenagers are the same as they were 50 years ago.

“The importance of family and parents spending time

with their children hasn't changed,” Prof Sawyer says.

“Families have less disposable time, so it's about ensuring young men spend time as a family. It's important they spend time with their father to work out how to be a man in contemporary society.”

“ We need to be a bit more relaxed about boys taking risks - it's a natural, healthy part of development in the teenage years

CLINICAL PSYCHOLOGIST
Dr SIMON CRISP

WHAT'S WRONG WITH OUR BOYS?

THE RISKS

1 Boys build up “sleep debts” because of the time spent using computers or watching TV, which reduces the amount of exercise they are doing.

2 Boys are “walking wallets” from the moment they're born; having brand name bibs and shoes as babies, being pressured to follow the fashion stakes as “tweens”.

3 Smothering mothers or those who distance themselves so their boys “toughen up” are equally likely to fail in producing resilient and capable boys.

4 TV series such as *Jackass* ensure boys see entertainment as setting mates on fire, kicks to the groin and lunchtime “fight clubs”. And yet they often forget they can be vulnerable to violence and on the other end of that mobile phone video clip.

5 Boys learn so many lessons about behaviour, morals and respect by

being around their dad, but fathers often no longer have time to hang out to keep the communication lines open.

6 Often parents forget there is pressure for boys to look a certain way. Over-exercising, dieting and protein powders are common tools in a boy's armoury and parents assume boys know how to eat well.

7 Boys are seen as trouble makers when they let off steam physically or test the boundaries, but crowded inner-city living and stranger-danger fears have curtailed the spaces left for them to explore, be active and challenge themselves.

THE SOLUTIONS

1 The bedroom should be a restful place, so encourage a “chill out” time before bed when computers and TVs are turned off.

2 Educate boys about trick advertising; learn that self-worth isn't about possessions.

3 Mothers are important, and they should make space for one-on-one casual time over chats in the car or while doing other activities. Boys don't respond well to being put on the spot about emotional issues or face-to-face talks sitting at a table.

4 Good male role models are vital to ensure boys know how to behave, as well as getting them involved in activities that stretch their boundaries and challenge them physically.

5 This generation wants to express their emotions, they need to be praised and listened to and a father should teach that masculinity and feelings can go hand in hand.

6 Be mindful about airing concerns about your body and image, also be careful of comments about weight and what makes someone attractive.

7 Boys need to take responsibility and feel valued. Talk about how to deal with failure and disappointment.